

The Last Bastion is Falling: Survey Evidence of the New Family Reality in Italy

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The study makes use of the 2016 Household Multipurpose Survey of Family, Social Subjects, and Life Cycle to demonstrate that family-related behavior is now rapidly changing in Italy. The country is often taken as a stronghold of traditionalism. We, instead, highlight recent and substantial changes in cohabitation, dissolution, and nonmarital fertility in the country. In doing so, we carefully assess the predictions made by the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) and show that trends in Italy are monotonically moving in the direction of the SDT. There are, though, important differences across educational groups and regions, that is, family-related behavior is also changing in the South of Italy in much the same way but not at the same speed as in the rest of the country.

Introduction

The Second Demographic Transition (SDT) remains a key conceptual framework for explaining the diffusion of new family demographic behavior in almost all developed countries. Drawing on seminal work by Inglehart (1971), in a Dutch language article Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa (1986) argued that a new pattern was emerging. Cohabitation was replacing marriage, fertility was being postponed, and more children were being born out-of-wedlock. This, it was suggested, might be the result of the process of individualization permeating the Western world. In other words, through value change, progressive independence of individuals made self-realization, psychological well-being, and personal freedom

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of expression increasingly important. The family ceased to be as central as it had previously been (Van de Kaa 1987). Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa pointed to secularization, age structure, and urbanization as the key drivers for these new patterns of family-related behavior. Later, it was also acknowledged that certain structural changes played a role. Women's empowerment arising from educational expansion and their increased participation in the labor force gradually improved gender equality, which also undoubtedly accelerated the process of individualization and its associated value changes. The SDT is presented as a diffusion process (Casterline 2001) where new behavior was first implemented by "forerunners." It was only then gradually adopted by the general population.

One important SDT prediction is that there will eventually be convergence with the new behavior spreading across all Western countries. The idea of convergence has prompted much debate about the validity of the SDT: not least because the empirical evidence for convergence has been uneven. In particular, some Western countries appear to be lagging behind in SDT terms. Within a debate about whether the SDT is a useful concept for demography, published in the 2004 *Vienna Yearbook for Population Research*, Micheli underlined that the SDT is taking place within longstanding territorial cleavages. Convergence, argued Micheli, was a long way off. He reflected, for instance, on how Southern Europe particularly challenges this convergence process:

Generally (even in the era of globalisation) groups tend to be rooted in a territorial niche and in a subculture or 'folklore': they act on 'telluric' principles. Their demographic behaviour is thus embedded in the local anthropological structures and practises, as the outcome of a gradual sedimentation along time. (Micheli 2004, 30)

Within Southern Europe, Italy is often given as an argument against SDT trends. The family has remained pivotal, and traditional attitudes toward family-related behavior have prevailed. Being part of the "Mediterranean model," characterized by weak social protection and strong family ties (e.g., Reher 1998; Viazzo 2003; Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004), Italy is typically classified as "traditional" in terms of value orientations, a result not least of the influence of the Catholic Church (Caltabiano, Dalla Zuanna, and Rosina 2006; Vignoli and Salvini 2014). In light of these characteristics, some have argued that the adoption of "innovative" family behaviors, as observed in so many other countries, may not materialize in Italy, or at least not reach the same levels as seen elsewhere (e.g., Reher 1998; Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; De Rose, Racioppi, and Zanatta 2008). The only indicator strongly inconsistent with Italian traditionalism would be its 40-year history of low fertility. Indeed, Italy is for many a conundrum: a highly traditional society, where fertility declined precociously and to unprecedented levels, giving rise to the term *lowest-low fertility* (Kohler, Billari, and Ortega 2002), a pattern

accompanied by extraordinary childbearing postponement. Today the mean age of childbearing among Italian women stands at 32 years and the total fertility rate is now below 1.3 (1.24 in 2022; ISTAT 2023). The contrast is striking with the Nordic countries, where new family-related behavior has been accompanied by “healthy” fertility rates, at least until the recent fertility drop from 2010 onwards (Comolli et al. 2021).

The present study contests the widely held view that Italy is a homogeneous family-oriented country. After showing period family demographic macro-trends, this study delves into cohort changes in family-related behaviors as well as their social and geographical gradient. We use microlevel event history analyses on the most recent survey data for the country to do so.

SDT, a debated concept

In my view it is really impossible to understand the demographic changes that have occurred in Europe, and in many other industrialised countries as well, since the mid-1960s, without accepting the idea that the many and very varied changes we have observed in a whole series of demographic variables are interrelated and may in their totality be indicative of, and represent, the manifestation of a change in demographic regime. (van de Kaa 2004, 4)

These words were used by van de Kaa to describe the very essence of the SDT narrative at the 2003 European Population Conference in Warsaw in a debate around the usefulness of the concept of the SDT for demography (Billari and Liefbroer 2004; van de Kaa 2004; Bernhardt 2004; Coleman 2004; Micheli 2004). The quote is indicative of the foundation of the SDT, which posits that new freedom in sexual behavior, the diversity in forms of sexual partnership, and the relaxation of traditional norms and constraints observed in many wealthy countries since the 1960s, are part of a common process. The SDT is facilitated by parallel trends in economic growth, emancipation through education and paid work (especially among women), and the concomitant ease of diffusion of ideas. The SDT is likely to be irreversible and will progressively involve all wealthy societies.

Apart from concluding that the term *revolution*, rather than *transition*, fits the SDT narrative better, opponents have argued that the SDT concept only works for north-western Europe, since elsewhere there is weaker evidence of the SDT (e.g., Coleman 2004; Micheli 2004; De Rose, Racioppi, and Zanatta 2008). As the SDT stresses the importance of ideational changes in bringing about certain demographic behaviors, it also prescribes a process in which family and fertility behavior will *converge* to a common “standard.” This standard is the one set by societies that are considered to be most advanced in the SDT, that is, the Scandinavian countries. However, the convergence argument has been questioned by the persistent divide between the “new” family patterns of north-western Europe and the more

traditional family behaviors in southern European societies. Still, a new population-wide behavior never appears instantaneously; rather, it initially emerges among certain population subgroups—the so-called trendsetters, or forerunners—who are usually to be found at the upper end of the socioeconomic strata. Their ideas, if “appealing,” spread across all strata, much as happened with the first demographic transition in Europe (Livi Bacci 1986). This argument also lies at the heart of Goode’s (1962, 1963, 1993) studies: initially, only couples from the highest social strata would have the intellectual and economic means to go through with divorce. But as the acceptability of divorce becomes more widespread, and the legal and economic barriers fall away, the socioeconomic gradient of divorce weakens, and could even reverse its sign. Goode thus argued that marriage dissolution would, in all likelihood, eventually become more common among those placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Women’s economic empowerment—most often expressed by women’s education—has been considered an important factor in the emergence of new patterns of family behavior by advocates of the SDT framework (e.g., Bumpass 1990; Lesthaeghe 2010). We might, therefore, expect to find that highly educated individuals are at the forefront of the shift in family formation and dissolution. They are more likely than their less educated counterparts to hold liberal values, and they are, therefore, more likely to challenge prevailing social norms. The foundation of this view is clear in Lesthaeghe’s more recent words in presenting the SDT narrative:

We [i.e. Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa] were convinced that below replacement fertility was going to be a lasting feature, and that pre-marital cohabitation was going to expand in Europe. We had both lived through the cultural changes of the 1960s that questioned all forms of authority. And we based our argument on the fact that an era of much more individual discretion and autonomy was in the making, spurred on by a newly expanding educated ‘post-materialist’ elite (Inglehart 1977). We were not the only ones who thought along similar lines: in France Philippe Ariès (1980) and Louis Roussel (1983) were equally convinced that a page had been turned. (Lesthaeghe 2020, 2)

Nonetheless, a critique advanced against the SDT concerns the *engine* of its diffusion after 1970 (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Sobotka 2008): the idea that more highly educated individuals pioneered the diffusion of new family life courses does not always align with empirical evidence. In many societies, women with lower levels of education are more likely to have children while cohabiting. Evidence of this pattern is found not only in the United States (Rindfuss, Morgan, and Offutt 1996; Upchurch, Lillard, and Panis 2002; Ventura 2009) but also in some European countries (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). A negative educational gradient is also reported for the diffusion of cohabitation in a large number of Latin American countries (Esteve, Lesthaeghe, and López-Gay 2012). These empirical findings have been used to advance the “Pattern Of Disadvantage” (POD) hypothesis (Perelli-Harris

et al. 2010). According to this thesis, the rise in cohabitation, and childbearing within it, was due to a worsening in living conditions among poorer segments of the population. It was not, as the SDT argues, driven by a “cultural revolution” led by the young, the secular, and the educated. Individuals facing poor economic opportunities (who, therefore, felt economic uncertainty more strongly), might opt for cohabitation over marriage because the former union type requires a lower level of commitment. Alternatively, they might decide to postpone marriage until they feel less uncertain about their future income opportunities (see also Oppenheimer 1994; Kalmijn 2011).

The peculiarity of the Italian case

The present paper follows up on the SDT debate by focusing on Italy, a country that has been a prime example of the so-called “Southern or Mediterranean model”, with a low level of social protection but very strong family ties (e.g., Reher 1998) and classified as “traditional” because of the Catholic influence. Moreover, weak state support for the family is also a peculiarity of Southern countries (Domínguez-Folgueras, Castro Martín, and Mencarini 2007). The Catholic Church has maintained a strong presence in the socialization of young people, and this is more marked in Italy compared to other European contexts such as, for example, France or even Spain (Caltabiano, Dalla Zuanna, and Rosina 2006; Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín 2013). At the same time, parents tend to discourage nonnormative behavior in their offspring and even their adult children feel themselves to be under pressure when making their own choices (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina 2007; Vignoli and Salvini 2014; Guetto et al. 2016). In light of these structural and cultural specificities, some scholars suggest that the adoption of cohabitation and marital dissolution among Italians may not materialize in Italy, or at least remain at lower levels than in the rest of Europe (e.g., Reher 1998).

Indeed, when in the second half of the 1970s, new family formation behaviors were already widespread in Nordic and Western countries, Italy showed only faint indications of change (e.g., De Rose, Racioppi, and Zanatta 2008). Until 1980, traditional marriage was pretty much the only way for new couples to begin their lives together—with less than 10% of women born in the early 1950s remaining unmarried by the age of 35 during that period (Bonarini 2017). The proportion of individuals choosing nonmarital cohabitation was minimal, at 1.3 percent (ISTAT 2014), a feature explained in terms of conflict avoidance with the parental generation (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007). Concurrently, births outside of marriage were also rare; it was around 2–3 percent in the late 1970s, similar to the United Kingdom or the Netherlands, but considerably lower compared to the Nordic countries or France, where nonmarital births were beginning to exceed 10 percent during the same period (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010).

Despite the enactment of the divorce law in 1970, the centrality of marriage was confirmed as divorce remained low in those years, on average 4.3 per 100 marriages over the decade, slightly less than Portugal and Greece, and far from the 40–50 percent observed in Denmark or Sweden (European average around 15 in the period, Eurostat data).

While the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed clear signs of SDT diffusion in the majority of countries, Italy, despite some shifts, remained notably apart from its neighboring European counterparts. Among Italian women born in the late 1970s who moved out of their parental home before turning 30 to enter into a union, approximately 25 percent opted for (pre-)marital cohabitation (ISTAT 2014), but still in the late 1990s, out-of-wedlock child-bearing remained confined to a small proportion (around 5 percent). In the same period, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands had surged to around 25 percent, and France and Norway, after a rapid growth, were, respectively, just below and just above 50 percent (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). As for marital dissolution, a profound gap still separated Italy from the other countries: while the European average stood at 35 divorces per 100 marriages by the late 1990s, Italy remained at around one-third of that figure, with 12 divorces per 100 marriages (Eurostat data). The other Mediterranean countries registered values from 17 (i.e., Greece and Spain) to 22 (i.e., Portugal) divorces per 100 marriages, proving a substantial acceleration toward innovative family behaviors already at the end of the last century (Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín 2013).

The literature extensively documents an increase in marital instability among women of high socioeconomic status in the first half of the 1970s. De Sandre (1980) was one of the first to highlight this, followed by confirmations from De Rose (1992), Vignoli and Ferro (2009), and then by Di Giulio and Rosina (2007) and Rosina and Fraboni (2004) for nonmarital cohabitation, all using microdata. During these early stages of change, these “innovative” family behaviors were mainly seen among a small group of highly educated individuals, often in more progressive areas of the country. It was expected that these differences among social groups would continue over time, with the diffusion process among different social strata being slow (e.g., Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). By the start of the new century, many scholars remained doubtful about the spread of these changes in Italy.

As we are documenting in this study, over the last 20 years, Italy has made some progress in catching up with the “pioneer” Nordic and Western European countries in terms of social change (Castiglioni and Zuanna 1994). Cohabitation has slowly, but steadily, become part of family life, embraced by both young couples starting their first union and adults, especially after divorce. The divorce rate per 100 marriages reached 46 in 2019, matching the European average that had leveled off. Additionally, out-of-wedlock births have become more common, reaching 38 percent by the end of the 2020s, which is close to the ris-

ing European average of 42 percent. It is also important to note the decline in marriage rates, accompanied by a significant reduction in religious marriages (47.4 percent in 2021; ISTAT 2023). Contrary to initial predictions, this widespread adoption of new behaviors is no longer confined to certain segments of the population as was the case back in the 1970s and 1980s.

Salvini and Vignoli (2011) found evidence of a reversal in the educational gradient as the rate of separation was increasing more abruptly among the less educated while plateauing among the highly educated. As for the rise in cohabitation, educated women initiated its diffusion in Italy, but the educational gradient is becoming neutralized, or even negative, among the younger cohorts who are increasingly more likely to enter cohabitation as a first union (Guetto et al. 2016).

In the following, we show that, despite being all-too-often pitched as traditional in terms of family dynamics, Italy is currently undergoing a revolution (Bernhardt 2004; van de Kaa 2004) in family formation and dissolution patterns. Through an overview of period family demographic macrotrends, then confirmed by progressive trends across cohorts, this study demonstrates how a family-oriented society like the Italian one, a veritable latecomer in the SDT process, is changing the pace toward the diffusion of innovative family-related behaviors. We address key questions as to whether there are differences across regions—a highly relevant feature given the Italian long-standing north–south social divide—and the evolution of new family behavior with respect to education.

Data and analytical strategy

Using aggregated data from the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), we first show the recent trends in family-related behaviors, namely marriages, nonmarital cohabitations, out-of-wedlock births, and marital dissolutions. Though indicative of trends, they necessarily mask compositional changes. Conveniently, for a better understanding of the underlying drivers of the new emerging form of Italian family behavior, we thus base our subsequent analysis on the retrospective individual-level survey entitled “Families, Social Subjects, and Life Cycle” (FSS) implemented by ISTAT in 2016. The survey consists of 32,000 individuals aged 18 or more and is the most recent individual-level survey available. Each individual was randomly selected from municipal registry lists, according to a sampling design aimed at constituting a statistically representative sample of the resident population. The overall response rate of the survey was greater than 80 percent. The 2016 FSS survey contains a wealth of information about individuals’ and families’ daily lives, including fertility, partnership, education, and employment histories recorded with the precision of the month.

With this survey data, we are able to focus on three outcomes: (i) first union formation, distinguishing between marriage and cohabitation; (ii) first birth, distinguishing between marital and nonmarital childbearing (where union status is modeled at birth); and (iii) marital separation (considering the moment of legal separation). For each one of these outcomes, we estimate a discrete time event-history model to estimate the predicted probabilities for experiencing the event—that is, of entering marriage or cohabitation; of having the first child in marriage or in cohabitation; of dissolving a marital union. A competing risks specification is used in the models referring to union formation and union-type childbearing.

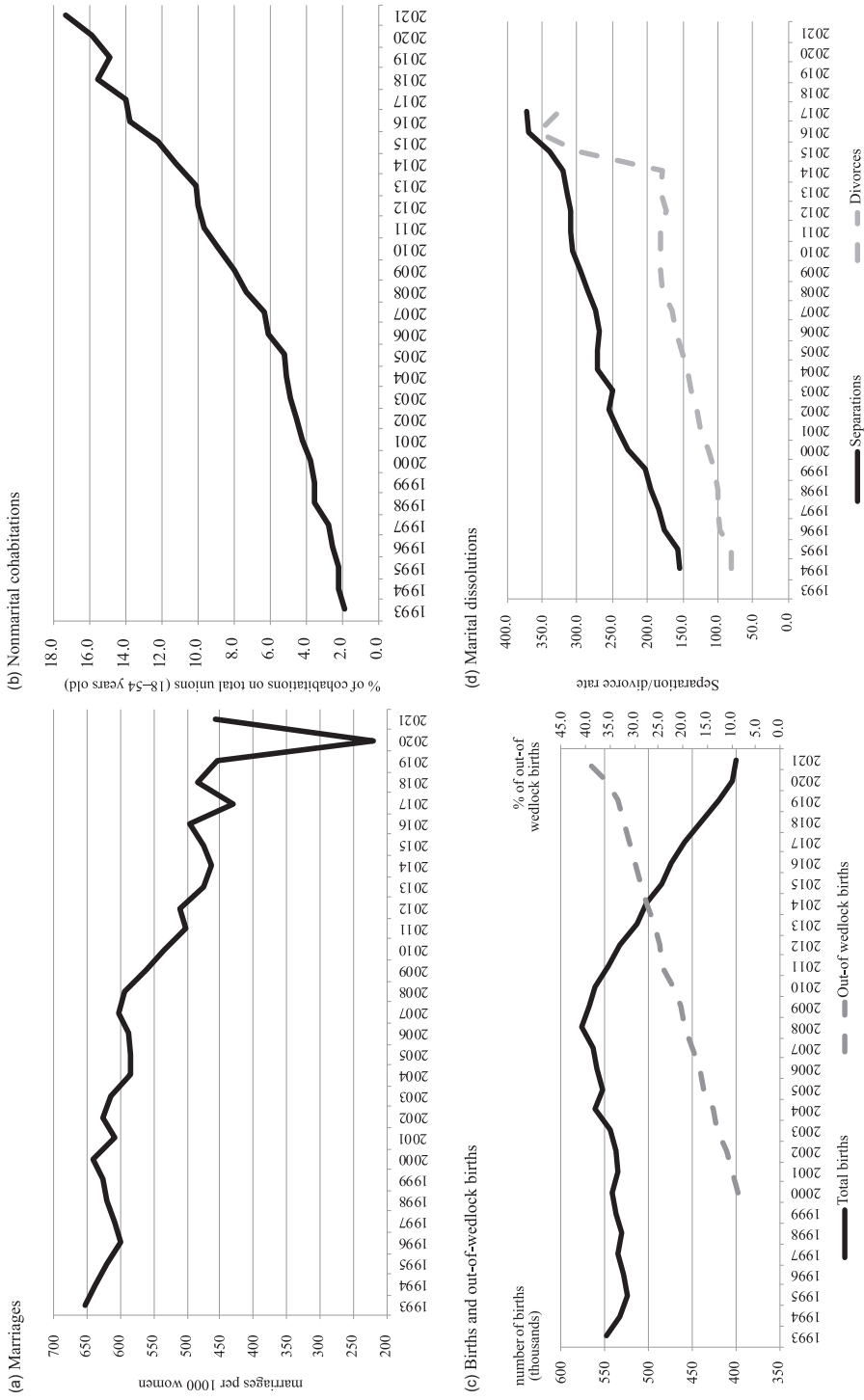
Our aim is to document the family-related trends over time as alluded to in The Peculiarity of the Italian Case section. Event-history models standardized for a set of sociodemographic factors (Hoem 1991, 1993) enable us to investigate underlying behavior as it accounts for compositional changes in the population over time. These are changes that may influence family-related trends, or in other words, estimate changes in the “force” of these behaviors across cohorts (Andersson 1998). Factors include gender; area of residence (at interview,¹ categorized into *north*, *center*, and *south-Isles*); and educational level (time-varying categorized into *lower-secondary*, *upper-secondary*, and *higher education* levels). Given the relevance that social origins play in Italian family life (Guetto, Vignoli, and Lachi 2022), we also include controls for parental separation (*no/yes*); parental education (differentiating between *lower-secondary* vs. *upper-secondary* or *higher education*); and mother’s occupational status (when the respondent was aged 15, categorized into: *employed* and *not employed*).

Finally, for each outcome, we estimated models including interactions between birth cohort and the individual’s educational level, parental education, and area of residence. Because the social gradient (and its change over time) differs between women and men (e.g., Matysiak, Styrac, and Vignoli 2014), we segment this analysis by gender.

Key trends in Italy

Starting with the aggregated ISTAT data, Figure 1 shows the trends in key family behaviors for the last quarter century. Although marriage continues to be central and popular among Italian couples, it is clearly no longer the only way to form a co-residential union. The decline began slowly and at an irregular pace in the late 1990s, but from 2008 onwards, the marriage rate started an unexpected and fast decline. This was likely intensified by the Great Recession (Figure 1a). From about 600 marriages for every 1000 women registered in 2008, Italy moved to fewer than 500 in 2018. In addition, during the last two decades, the proportion of marriages established with a civil ceremony increased from less than 20 percent to 50 percent of all marriages. This is an astounding development, since back in the early

FIGURE 1 Trends in family behaviors: Italy, 1993–2021



SOURCE: Own processing of Italian Institute of Statistics data.

1970s only 2 percent were civil marriages, and a clear confirmation of the secular wave, which has so often been argued to drive the SDT. This points to traditional attitudes and norms, in part imposed by the Catholic Church, now weakening.

At the same time, nonmarital unions are becoming increasingly popular (Figure 1b). Whereas the current level is still modest compared to that of Nordic countries, the trend is remarkable. These changes are closely mirrored by the trend in out-of-wedlock childbearing, which has tripled since the beginning of the 21st century (Figure 1c). Currently, above one-third of children are born in nonmarital unions. This increase is even more remarkable considering the steady reduction in the absolute number of newborn children, as reflected on the left-hand axis in Figure 1c. The softening of the institution of marriage is also visible through the rate of marital dissolution. Whereas about 80 marriages out of 1000 concluded with a divorce at the beginning of the 1990s, the divorce rate has passed 300 in recent years (Figure 1d). This value is somewhat overestimated due to a recent change in the divorce law that has reduced the time needed to file divorce proceedings after legal separation from three years to one year. There has been an anticipation, then, of the relevant quota of divorces which would have been recorded in subsequent years. But there is no question that data concerning the legal separation rate show a clear increasing trend in marital disruption during the last three decades. These macrotrends suggest that Italian family behaviors are changing substantially.

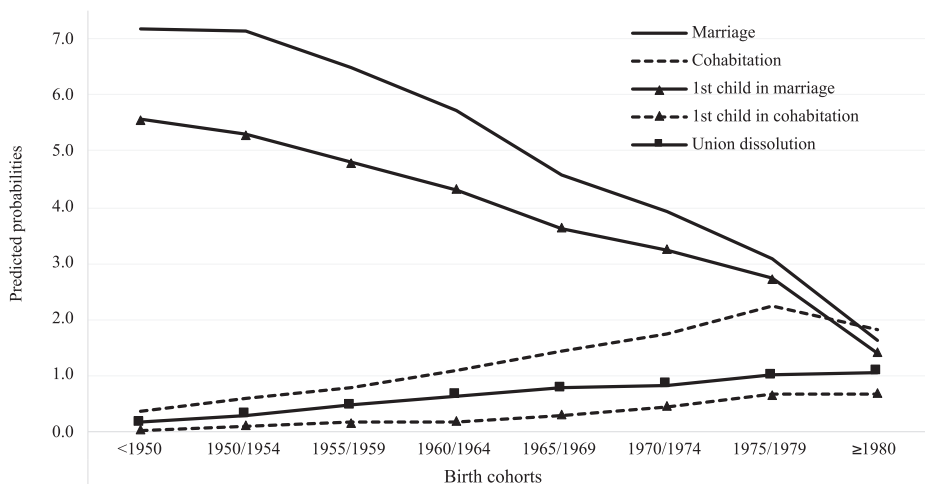
Social gradient of the Italian SDT

Cohort differences

The macrotrends presented above are reflected by cohort differences coming from the event-history analysis described in the Data and Analytical Strategy section. All models control for several sociodemographic factors, and those for union formation and childbearing account for competing risks (Figure 2). The full set of parameter estimates is presented in the online Appendix (Tables A1–A3).

Starting with union formation (Figure 2), for the oldest cohort (those born before 1950), the probability of entering a first union through cohabitation was close to zero, but from this cohort onwards, the pattern is dramatic. The probability of marrying rapidly falls for Italians born in the late 1950s and 1960s, and, then, although less intensely, the decrease continues for the following cohorts. Simultaneously, the trend for cohabitation goes in the opposite direction, with the probability of cohabitation slowly increasing cohort by cohort.

When looking at the first birth event (again, Figure 2), we see that, for the older cohort, children tended to be born exclusively within marriage,

FIGURE 2 Estimated predicted probabilities of marriage, cohabitation, first child in marriage and cohabitation, and union dissolution, by cohort of birth

SOURCE: Authors' elaborations on Italian FSS data, 2016.

and the probability of having children out-of-wedlock was virtually zero. But again, we see a tremendous shift across cohorts, and for the youngest ones the first child is considerably less likely to be born within marriage.

The pattern of union dissolution shows a similar trend (again Figure 2). Though we are having a small number of events for the youngest cohort, we see that union dissolution is becoming commonplace among the younger cohort.

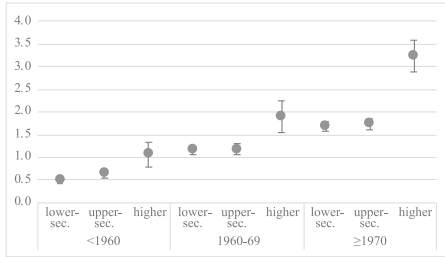
The role of education and geographical differences

In order to understand the existence of specific forerunner groups, once background characteristics are controlled for, we consider the effects of (respondents' and their parents') education and area of residence (Figures 3–5). The area of residence is divided into the north, center, and the south-Isles. Regions are important in Italy since there has always been a substantial north–south divide in a range of indicators—not least economically and in terms of social norms. The specific interest here lies in whether the observed macrochanges are taking place mainly in the north, or happening on a broader scale across the country. In this case, we consider broader birth cohorts to gain more robust estimates. In addition, models are estimated separately for men and women to depict potential gendered effects.

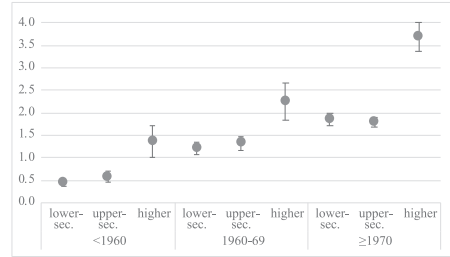
We first focus on union formation, considering the effect of education, at the individual and parental level. From Figure 3, we observe the “innovative” behavior of nonmarital cohabitation, and whereas the probability to cohabit increases across cohorts, the effects of education also change.

FIGURE 3 Cohabitation: Predicted probabilities, among men and women, of cohabiting by birth cohort, educational level, parental education, and geographical area of residence

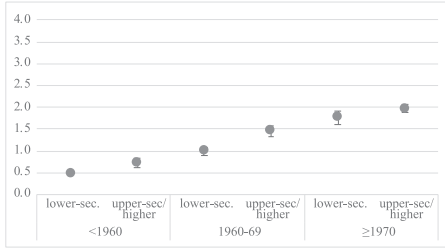
MEN – by education



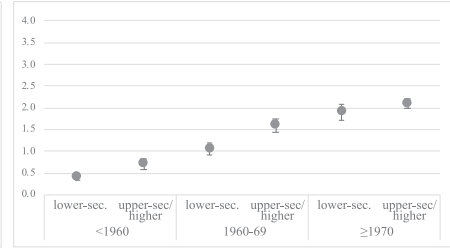
WOMEN – by education



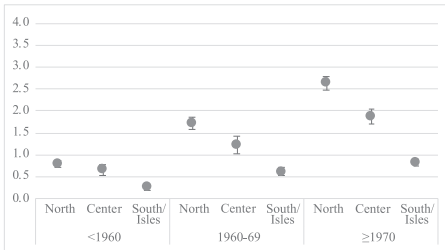
MEN – by parental education



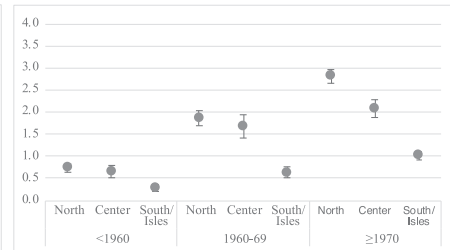
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MEN – by area of residence



WOMEN – by area of residence



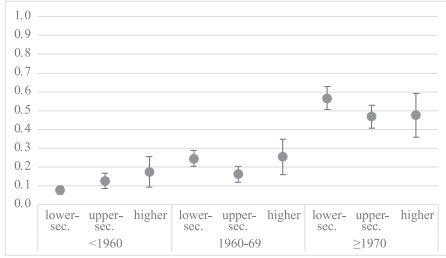
NOTE: Confidence Intervals for approximate 5 percent significance level for the comparison of pairs of predicted probabilities.

SOURCE: Authors' elaborations on Italian FSS data, 2016.

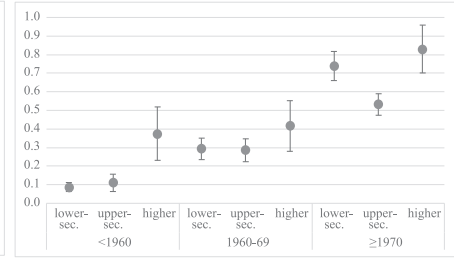
For the older cohort of men (those born before 1960), those with higher education appear to be more likely to cohabit, although the effect of education was minimal. For the two younger cohorts (born in the 1960s and in the 1970s and later), those with higher education are considerably more likely to enter unions through cohabitation. Among women, we find those with higher education to have a considerably higher risk of cohabitation than those with medium and low education. The educational gradient in nonmarital cohabitation was already present in the oldest cohorts, but it is especially the case for the youngest women (those born in 1970 and later).

FIGURE 4 First child out-of-wedlock: Predicted probabilities, among men and women, of having the first child in cohabitation by birth cohort, educational level, parental education, and geographical area of residence

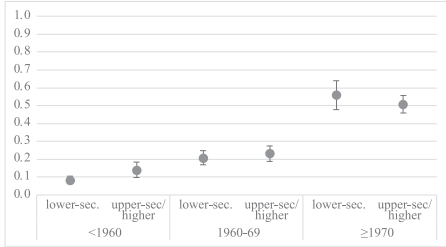
MEN – by education



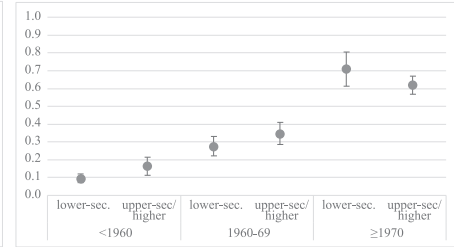
WOMEN – by education



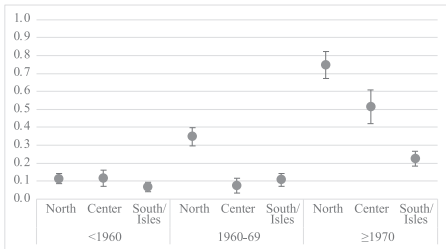
MEN – by parental education



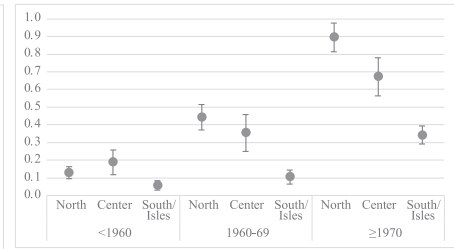
WOMEN – by parental education



MEN – by area of residence



WOMEN – by area of residence



NOTE: Confidence Intervals for approximate 5 percent significance level for the comparison of pairs of predicted probabilities.

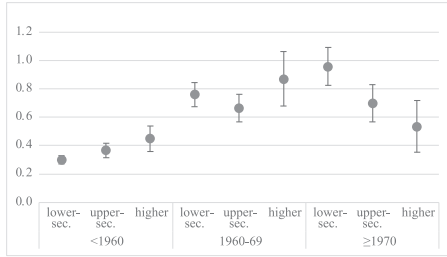
SOURCE: Authors' elaborations on Italian FSS data, 2016.

We also see that men and women with low and medium education have a similar likelihood of opting for cohabitation. These results on the effect of education by gender and generation are consistent with the SDT idea that those with higher education are the forerunners. The educational trend across cohorts is somewhat similar in terms of parental education (see again Figure 3). The educational gradient, though, is smaller, and it is reduced for the youngest cohort for both men and women.

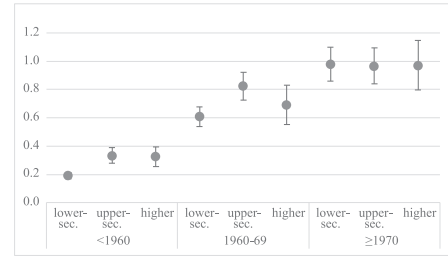
When we look at the regional patterns, the story is even more familiar. Both men and women living in the south-Isles have a much lower probability of cohabiting compared to those in the center and the north; how-

FIGURE 5 Union dissolution: Predicted probabilities, among men and women, of union dissolution by birth cohort, educational level, parental education, and geographical area of residence

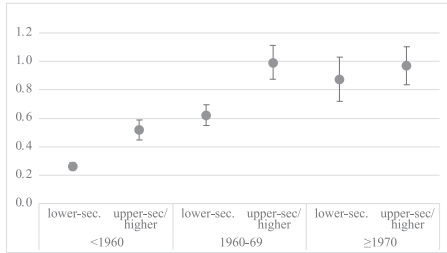
MEN – by education



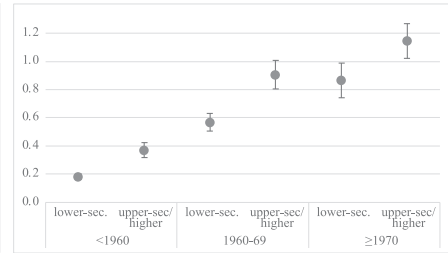
WOMEN – by education



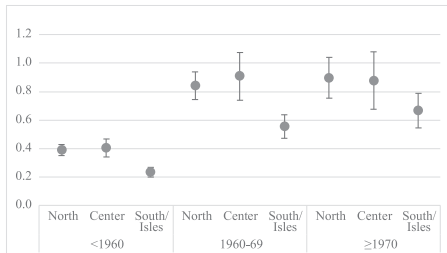
MEN – by parental education



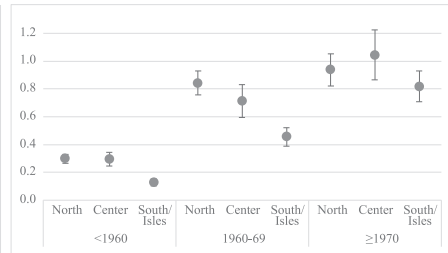
WOMEN – by parental education



MEN – by area of residence



WOMEN – by area of residence



NOTE: Confidence Intervals for approximate 5 percent significance level for the comparison of pairs of predicted probabilities.
SOURCE: Authors' elaborations on Italian FSS data, 2016.

ever, the increasing trend of cohabitation is evident across all the cohorts. Whereas the trend in the predicted probability of cohabitation is positive, again everywhere, we see a much sharper increase for those living in the north, regardless of gender.

Figure 4 shows the estimated probability of having the first child in a nonmarital union, and again we show estimates by (respondents' and their parents') educational groups and geographical areas. For men, the probability of having the first child within a cohabiting union is increasing cohort by cohort, but there is no strong difference across the educational levels. For women, instead, we see a particular peak among the highest educated

in the oldest cohort (born before 1960), where the probability of having a child outside the wedlock was considerably higher. For the youngest cohort, there is an indication that the probability is higher for groups with high and low education, giving support to both the SDT and the POD narratives. Educational differences are smaller when considering parental education, for both men and women.

The patterns across geographical areas are very similar to what we saw for union formation: those living in the northern regions have a higher probability of having the first child in a cohabiting union, with respect to the other two macroareas. Again, so far this reflects the higher speed in the north of the diffusion of the SDT.

Indeed, similarly and complementary, are the changes across cohorts in the more “traditional” behaviors, such as marriage as the form of first union and the birth of the first child within marriage (Figures A1 and A2 in the online Appendix). Besides a general decrease in the likelihood of marrying (without first cohabiting) and having the first child within marriage, education loses its relevance across cohorts, especially for men. However, the probability of marrying remains a bit higher in the southern regions, whereas in the likelihood of childbearing within marriage there is no discernible difference across Italy.

The last figure (Figure 5) shows the predicted probabilities of union dissolution, again distinguishing among educational groups and geographical areas. Consistently with the SDT scenario, union dissolution increases across the cohorts for both men and women, all areas and educational groups. The youngest cohort, born in 1970 and later, is however of particular interest here: that is, men with higher education have the lowest risk of union dissolution, whereas no differences are found when considering parental education. For women, instead, there is literally no difference across educational groups, though those with highly educated parents continue to have an increased probability of union dissolution.

As for the geographical differences, union dissolution is less prevalent in the south, though for the youngest cohort, the difference is much smaller, a sign of a stronger relative increase in union dissolution exactly in the south.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the Italian demographic landscape is undergoing a *revolution* (Bernhardt 2004; van de Kaa 2004) in family formation and dissolution patterns. Up until recently, the most noteworthy feature of Italian family demography was its long-running low fertility, an aspect that has been much covered in the social sciences. The conundrum was how a traditional society with strong family ties, apparently immune to the SDT, could end up with a persistently low fertility. We show that Italy is now

following suit in the new family behavior of many other countries, implying that the stereotypical view of Italy as an old-fashioned and traditional society is unlikely to survive. Recent data suggest that the main SDT indicators, that is, the prevalence of cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and divorce, are now changing rapidly. Young Italians are, indeed, on track to catch up with the behavior of their Nordic counterparts, creating a new demographic reality in Italy (Pirani and Vignoli 2016; Vignoli et al. 2018; Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2024). Looking across the cohorts, the trends are clearer: marriage is being replaced by cohabitation as the first union; non-marital childbearing is on the increase; and union dissolution is increasing even in the south. In addition, our findings showed that the usual-suspect trendsetters (i.e., the highly educated, of high social class, living in the north) are indeed those having initiated the new family patterns, providing clear support of an SDT-inspired interpretation of the engine of family change also in Italy. With individual-level survey data, we have shown here that education plays an important role in this revolution. Higher education not only leads to the postponement of key steps in the family formation, but it also brings about value change. More educated Italian men and women resulted, in fact, forerunners in terms of forming unions through cohabitation and also in terms of out-of-wedlock childbearing. The effects of these characteristics are weaker among the youngest cohorts, however. The positive educational gradient (i.e., the well-educated being more likely to make these choices than their counterparts) is vanishing. Based on our findings, we affirm that the new family behavior of marital dissolution and childbearing within cohabitation was initiated by the higher educated individuals, but then diffused across all social groups, including the more economically disadvantaged.

A reader less familiar with the Italian context might at this point rightfully question why there is now a sudden *revolution* in family patterns, especially after several decades of traditional stability. What are the pivotal factors that have expedited the spread of new family life courses? We propose two explanations grounded in Italian demography scholarship.

First, we know that in the diffusion of new family life courses, the influence of the older generations is crucial. A common perception is that Italian parents have had an iron grip on the younger generation, thereby discouraging them from nonnormative behaviors (such as cohabitation, childbearing within cohabitation, or union dissolution). It has meant that their adult children are confronted with strong pressure when making their own choices (Dalla Zuanna 2001; Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Schröder 2008). For instance, qualitative studies have clearly demonstrated that the widely prevailing parental pressure has discouraged cohabitation in a way that is more powerful than Catholic prescripts (Vignoli and Salvini 2014). As emphasized by Di Giulio and Rosina (2007), any diffusion of new family patterns in Italy would be “atypical” in the sense that it does not stem from the peers (*horizontal diffusion*) but instead would come from the parents

(*vertical diffusion*). How can this be the case? As new generations of parents are replacing older ones, those who have experienced or observed cohabitation, childbearing within cohabitation, or divorce over their life course, are increasingly more prevalent among them. They are now less likely to exert pressure in the form of their own children to marry, have children within marriage, or preserve unhappy marriages. From this perspective, new family patterns are now spreading rapidly in Italy through an accelerated vertical diffusion of family attitudes: the new generation of parents have a more tolerant attitude towards the new family life courses experienced by their offspring (Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina 2007).

Second, an increasing number of studies highlight the growing influence of global uncertainties on decisions regarding family life courses (e.g., Vignoli et al. 2020; Matysiak and Vignoli 2024). The future appears not only economically unpredictable, with changes in the labor market (i.e., Gatta et al. 2022; Bastianelli and Vignoli 2022), but also exhibits uncertainties in the social organization of contemporary nations and their political stability. Mills and Blossfeld (2013) were the first to link globalization-induced uncertainty to the SDT narrative. They posited that global uncertainties make it progressively challenging for individuals to envision their future, make choices among alternatives, and formulate strategies. Consequently, they may respond to more than just their actual objective economic situation and constraints; narratives of the future, socially conveyed as imagined futures, which now play a crucial role in people's lives (Vignoli et al. 2020). Amid this escalating uncertainty, new family life courses may serve as an adaptive strategy. For example, Vignoli and colleagues (2016) suggest that in Italy, when individuals confront uncertain prospects, they tend to prefer cohabitation over marriage due to its inherently more uncertain nature. Alternatively, they may opt to delay marriage until their outlook on life becomes more optimistic. A similar rationale can be applied to childbearing within cohabitation. Consequently, the potential acceleration in the diffusion of new family patterns may be driven by the systematic integration of the traditional SDT narrative with elements more characteristic of the POD hypothesis (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). This synthesis has the potential to accelerate the ongoing family revolution in Italy.

It is also important to consider the role of education. As recently discussed by Zilincikova and colleagues (2023), the weakening or the reversal in the educational gradient is mitigated by the declining proportion of individuals with lower levels of education—a direct result of the educational expansion among younger generations. Indeed, while new family-related trends diffused, there has also been a contemporary expansion in tertiary education. The younger cohort has a higher rate of tertiary education, especially among women, compared to the oldest cohort: 28 percent of those born in the late 1980s have tertiary education in 2020 (i.e., when aged 30–34, the key reproductive age interval), against 19 percent of those born dozens of years before (ISTAT 2021). However, in Italy, the current level of

tertiary education is the lowest in Europe and the process of expansion has been far slower and later than the other European countries: only one out of five people aged 25–64 has a tertiary education against one out of three of the European average (ISTAT 2021). This fact might explain the postponed spread of SDT in Italy. Further analysis is needed to confirm this intuition.

In light of the regional differences, our analyses show that Italy is potentially at a crossroads. The increase in new family behaviors is no longer stronger in the north and the center—at least in terms of union dissolution patterns. However, marriage—as the first form of co-residential union—remains central in southern Italy. One should also factor in that there is still a north–south divide in many other characteristics, including family services, cultural beliefs, female labor force participation, and economic prosperity (Aassve, Le Moglie, and Mencarini 2021; Scherer, Pavolini, and Brini 2023). It is yet an open question if the traditional “southern model” a *lá Reher* will survive in southern Italy.

Our overview helps set the agenda for future research, suggesting that new SDT behaviors in Italy might gain ground in the coming years, boosting family complexity. Nontraditional family forms, such as cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and disrupted and blended families, will become more prevalent among Italian families, soliciting considerations about the well-being of their members, intergenerational relationships, and social support networks. In line with prior research (e.g., Guetto et al. 2016; Matysiak, Styrac, and Vignoli 2014; Pirani and Vignoli 2023), we documented that the new family-related behaviors were initiated by the Italian “social vanguard,” for then to progress the other social groups. Based on our findings, notably divorce and nonmarital childbearing are increasingly experienced by the lower social strata of Italian society. Here there is a question of whether the institutional context can cope with these new developments. Although nontraditional behaviors and complex families are not new, even in Italy (Livi Bacci 1981; Breschi et al. 2008; Fornasin, Breschi, and Manfredini 2023), they currently do represent a great challenge to an archetypical familistic institutional arrangement. Detecting and understanding patterns of family change is crucial for the families formed through these processes. This involves examining the roles of education, economic uncertainty, cultural shifts, gender dynamics, and policy changes in influencing family transitions.

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Data availability statement

The datasets analyzed in the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and under the restrictions applied by the data provider (ISTAT).

Note

1 Italian internal mobility has been mainly confined to short distances in the last decades (De Rose and Strozza 2015). To limit the risk of “anticipatory analysis” (Hoem and Kreyenfeld 2006), we included a covariate describing the area of residence.

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