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Channels of social influence on reproduction

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Abstract

The article investigates the different types of social mechanisms responsible for the interdependence of couples' reproductive preferences predicted by diffusion models of fertility and family behavior. We analyse the transcripts of in-depth interviews carried out with 54 women in the northern part of Italy. The rich information on observations and conversations about fertility and family choices with relatives and peers enables us to distinguish four different ways in which social interaction influences reproductive preferences, namely social learning, social pressure, subjective obligation and contagion. Second, we show how the efficacy of each mechanism affecting fertility behavior depends on the kind and the structure of personal relationships involved in the interaction. Finally, we discuss the ways in which individual attitudes and values associated to the transition to parenthood are produced and negotiated in face to face interactions, and the importance of focusing on the process of preference-formation and modification for understanding fertility behavior.

Keywords

Low fertility, transition to parenthood, qualitative methods, social interaction, Italy

1. Introduction

This paper addresses some questions that are best presented through the story of a woman who happened to fall in the sample of 54 women I interviewed during my fieldwork in Lombardy, Northern Italy:

Anna and Alberto are 31 and 37 years old, respectively. They are highly educated and both work full time. They have been married for seven years and live in the small town where Alberto was born, and where they own a house. They currently do not have children. Though they married with the intention to have two children, they agreed on waiting until they ‘felt mature as a couple’.

On the one hand, their choice to marry, but waiting for years before having children, is uncommon for many people in their environment. Anna’s parents often remind the couple about their expectations. Anna tries to avoid the topic with them. Alberto’s clients often ask him about when he will have children. He downplays the topic with them, because of their “traditional mentality”. The previous year, nine women were pregnant at Anna’s workplace. Anna figuratively expressed her feelings about it as a ‘syndrome of encirclement-by-pregnancies’. She elaborates on the ‘danger’ of feeling compelled to do what everybody else does when trying to explain her choice.

On the other hand, their choice of postponing parenthood is common among their closest friends. Anna and Alberto spend their free time with three other couples, all of whom are married with no children. They all will, they say to each other, but not yet. They rarely talk about it. These couples are composed of Alberto’s childhood friends and their wives.

The story of Anna and Alberto nicely introduces the potential sources of social influence on couples’ fertility decisions. The couple considers childbearing a private matter. However, their reproductive attitudes and behavior are confronted with the attitudes, behavior, and comments of a world of others, kin and non-kin. Their social relationships include contacts with neighbors, work mates, family members, and their group of close friends. These relationships expose them to different models of parenthood, and they provoke different responses to social pressure by the couple.

Thus, my questions follow. In which ways might face to face interaction in personal relationships influence couples’ decisions about reproduction? Which are the potential influential relationships? How does social interaction convey change in dominant values and norms about reproduction? The larger ambition for this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the role that social interaction may play in demographic models of behavioral change.

Consistent with these aims, the paper is organized into three parts. In the first part, I briefly introduce the study by placing it within the body of the demographic literature on the role of social mechanisms on fertility behavior, and I introduce my data and the method of analysis. In the second part, I show these different mechanisms through which couples' reproductive decisions may be interdependent. I illustrate four different ways in which social influence may occur, and how the kind and the structure of personal relationships may affect such influence. In the third part, I elaborate on how social influence mechanisms may be related to the delayed yet still almost universal transition to parenthood in Italy. I conclude this section by showing how attitudes and values associated to childbearing and family are negotiated in face to face interactions. Finally, I explore some implications as well as some limitations of the paper.

1.1 Rationale for focusing on social interaction

The attention to the role of social influence on reproductive behavior is relatively recent in demography. This role has been discussed by others (Pollack & Watkins 1993), yet it is beyond the scope of this paper to present more than a reminder. Social interaction and social effects entered demographic explanations of the change in reproductive preferences during the first demographic transition, as it took place in historical Europe. The onset and the pace of the transition were attributed to the diffusion of cultural preferences for small families due to social learning and social influence mechanisms (Watkins 1986, Cleland & Wilson 1987, Bocquet-Appel & Jakobi 1998). Increasing calls for attention to the "attitudes and sanctions addressed towards ... people's behavior" (Preston 1986) and to "an approach that explicitly treats individuals and families as members of social collectivities" (Watkins 1987), signal the growing relevance of the social relationships' dimension in the explanations of fertility behavior. A similar cultural argument has been made to account for the diffusion of values, beliefs and norms, about the use of modern contraception, and the desirability of the "modern" family in areas where fertility decline started only recently (Knodel 1984, Montgomery & Casterline 1993). Currently, demographers apply diffusion models to explain the spread of the innovative unmarried cohabitation rates in post transitional societies (Nazio & Blossfeld 2002). Demographers who focus on the role of social interaction in the diffusion of a certain fertility behavior show how the interdependence between individual reproductive preferences and behavior can lead to changes in fertility regimes (Kohler 2001).

Demographic applications of the mentioned diffusion models almost invariably imply that the behavior or attitude object of diffusion is not altered during the process. Either the attitude or behavior is appraised and adopted, or it is not. The final state can only be the diffusion or the absence of diffusion of a certain attitude or practice (Palloni 1998). However, recent empirical findings seem to indicate that the diffusion is more than a yes-or-no process, since it may imply the emergence of totally new patterns of behavior and this possibility is not contemplated by the above-mentioned models. An indication that social

mechanisms may have more complex consequences than simply acting as social multipliers (positive or negative) of existing values and attitudes comes from Europe. Family formation patterns in Southern European countries diverge from the prediction of the second demographic transition. In these countries, the importance of the family institution is maintained other socio-economic changes ,and at the same time fertility levels are much lower than what they would have been expected to be (Billari & Wilson 2001). For a better understanding of the process of diffusion of attitudes, behavior, and their mutual relationship, we have looked at the research of a demographic anthropologist in Africa. Gambian women adopt modern family planning consistently with their understanding of the physiology of reproduction, and they use it with different aims than family size limitation (Bledsoe 1998, p. 17, Bledsoe 2002). The important consequence of such a local variation is that the very different aims associated with the adoption of modern contraception produce different patterns of use from the expected ones.

Compared to the theoretical advances based on models and simulations of diffusion processes, empirical research is underdeveloped. Scholars engaged in this modeling and simulation effort admit that, “little is known about learning mechanisms and the formation of perceptions in respect to demographic behavior.”(Montgomery & Casterline 19926: 159). The aim of this paper is an attempt to explore, empirically, this domain of learning and perception formation. I focus on the informal conversations and observations on reproductive behavior, and on the role they may play in reproductive choices, according to the experience of a group of women in Northern Italy.

1.2 Empirical base and methods

The analyses are based on the text transcripts of 54 unstructured interviews collected in the northern Italian region of Lombardy, between November 2000 and April 2001. The interviews were conducted with women who were residents of the region of Lombardy for at least 10 years, who were living in a stable union at the time of the interview (2000), and their ages ranged between 30 and 39. The characteristics of the women were known beforehand, since the interviewees are a sub sample of the 2700 women of the *Indagine Sociale Lombarda 2000* (ISL 2000), a multi-purpose social survey that had been performed four months prior to the qualitative follow-up took place. In this paper we discuss the analysis on the qualitative part of the study.

Given their characteristics, all the women interviewed were likely to have considered becoming mothers, and had possibly experienced parenthood of others close to them. The interviews were all transcribed, coded and interpreted, first as separate documents, and then in relation to each other. Initial coding of the interviews consisted in labeling and categorizing the different forms of social interaction involving reference to family formation behavior, attitudes, and values (conversations, observations, and feelings). Interviews were fragmented into extracts, answering simple questions about the “what,” “where,” “who,” and “when” of the described event. Subsequently, extracts were compared and similar

incidents grouped together under the same conceptual label (for instance, the kind of perceived social influence and type of influential relationships). On a more abstract level, concepts were again joined into categories associating the processes of influence described and their implications (see Bernardi 2002 for a detailed description of the method of analysis)

The women did not express themselves in terms of having experienced social influence. They would often be reluctant to give a positive answer to a direct question like, “do you feel you have been influenced by anybody in your decision?”. The general answer is rather similar to the one given by Anna and Alberto, that is, reproductive decisions are the responsibility of the couple (sometimes of the woman in particular). Despite that, the interviews are full of rich descriptions of occasions, settings, and actors that constitute a background for social influence at work. In recollecting casual conversations and the significant experiences of others, women commented on the ways they reacted to what was said or seen and explained the reasons why they felt some people were more influential than others. Anna’s motivation for her choice to wait before having children stems from her comparison with her sister. Anna says she does not want to take the risk to end up like her sister, who she perceives as someone having a difficult union as a consequence of her early marriage and motherhood:

“My sister had babies and a horrible couple relationship, and I felt this situation in her relationship after the children were born. ... Seeing this within the family has really been very painful for me”
(Anna)

The open and unstructured format of the interviews allowed the respondent to go back to points that had already been touched upon, and to enrich with further considerations what had been said. The weight of indirect experiences on couples’ decisions regarding childbearing, as Anna’s sister’s marriage, would have been otherwise difficult to learn.

The overall range of relationships that are mentioned as influential is quite large. It includes members of the family of origin, friends, work mates or neighbors, ‘special others’ (priest, doctor), and the woman’s own perception of her social environment. In this paper, the analysis is limited to the group of relationships mentioned, with the exclusion of the partner. In doing so, I am far from suggesting that negotiating between partners is not an important aspect of the timing of union and births. Rather, the partner’s special position asks for keeping the analysis of couple-negotiating separate from the analysis of others’ influences. The partner takes part in the process from the inside, which makes his influence ‘too endogenous’ to the attitudes and behavior I am trying to explain. Moreover, a partner’s characteristics, desires, opinions and attitudes are increasingly included in large surveys. These data provide some estimation of the partner’s contribution to reproductive decisions at the couple level. On the contrary, many more voices that have input in shaping the context of reproductive decisions are still currently left out of the picture. They constitute the local social

context of individuals and couples, their family members, their friends, their colleagues, and their neighbors. They might not be officially recognized as having “a say” in actual decisions, but they participate in defining the context for such a decision, as I will show. I am interested in how this collective ‘buzz’ (Rutemberg & Watkins 1997) around family formation process shapes the interpretation of costs and benefits of reproductive alternatives, and defines their appropriateness and convenience. As well, I do not consider the potential social influence coming from mass media or from institutional sources as churches and public policies, since the interactive process is limited when institutions and media are the source of influence. It is worth noting that none of the women interviewed spontaneously mentioned other forms of mediated interaction as “conversations” via the internet.

1.3 Fertility in Northern Italy.

In Italy, both periods and cohort measures of fertility indicate a remarkable change in a generation’s time. From 1975 to 2000 the TFR went from 2.21 to 1.23 (Council of Europe 2001), while the completed family size attained by the generation of Italian women born in 1960 is the lowest among European Union countries, with 1.64 children per woman (Pearce & Bovagnet 2001). The drop of fertility was not anticipated by a crisis of the family institution. The role of marriage for reproductive behavior remains central in a context where virtually all women – more than 90% - become parents after marriage (Kiernan 1999a). In the ISL 2000, the percentage of childless women aged 40-50 at the time of the interview was 15.7 (N=294). If we consider only the ever-married women at the time of the interview, the percentage drops to 8.2 (N=269) and to 6.9% (N=232), if we exclude divorced, widowed and separated women. Marriage stays the “pre-eminent marker for entry into first union”, since unmarried cohabitation is rare (Kiernan 1999b). The proportion of definitive childlessness is around the threshold of 10%, still low compared to other European countries. While in other European countries the bi-polarized fertility by parity of highly educated women (where 0- or two-children families are most prevalent and one-child families are relatively rare) seems to indicate the co-occurrence of different life styles, this is not the case in Italy (Huinink 2001). In summation, individuals rarely become parents before marriage. Not becoming parents once they marry occurs as rarely.

The described trends are more pronounced in the northern part of the country. In Lombardy, beginning with the cohorts born after 1960, family formation behavior is characterized by both a remarkable postponement of first marriage and of first birth within marriage (Billari & Kohler 2000). From the point of view of fertility patterns, Lombardy belongs to the North-Center area of Italy, which, according to the Italian demographer Santini, coincides with the area where the choice is “one child regardless of costs, even if (or: better if) only one and at an older age” (Santini 1995). The combination of these three elements implies that the higher age at first marriage, and the higher interval between marriage and childbirth, has an additive effect that significantly accounts for the reduction of Italian fertility. The postponement of union formation and of first

birth within union affect the life course of individual men and women, as well as the fertility pattern at the population level, especially when combined with low extra-marital births and a little recuperation at later ages.

For its exceptional combination, Italian scores very low on a scale which ideally would position countries according to their conformity to the criteria of the second demographic transition for family behavior (Billari & Wilson 2000). There seems to be a paradox, since the institution of marriage maintains its importance while at the same time its pillar, reproduction, seems to be endangered (Esping-Andersen 1999, Micheli 2000). Following a “rational familistic framework”, Dalla Zuanna (1999) reads this paradox as economically rational for young Italians. Fertility decline would be the consequence of a mismatch of the strong family values and traditional gender roles, with the demands of flexibility requested by the modernization of the economy (Dalla Zuanna 1999). Both elements interact to discourage an early departure from the parental home and, consequently, affect fertility levels through the postponement effect (Scabini 1981). The argument is supported by interpretations from a life course perspective in which family functioning is seen as related to the family-environment. According to this view, families can “adapt” by changing their structure and their environment to successfully confront their needs and life demands (Bowen et al. 2000).

In the following I will concentrate on the mechanisms through which couples and families appraise the modified costs of childbearing, and how they regulate their value adaptations. The women interviewed in the qualitative study are the main performers of the changes we just described, since they belong to the cohorts born between 1961 and 1970. Among them, some have embraced a more traditional family formation pattern. They married young, bore children, and settled down to full time mothering, working outside the home only intermittently, if at all. Others have departed from this path, postponing motherhood, enrolling in higher education, and engaging in the labor market. Some of the women are still postponing motherhood, while a number of others have experienced motherhood and have consequently adjusted their life c, mostly combining the two “occupations”. Table 1 presents some descriptive information about the women and summarizes the outcomes of some of their choices. The table, however, does not convey any information about the process by which women came to these choices. In the following section I show how social interaction with kin and non-kin has an essential role in this process.

(TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE)

2. Social mechanisms

2.1 Perception of social influence

This section provides an overview of the women's perception of social influence experienced in their face to face interactions. Social influence in this paper is defined as the process by which attitudes, values or behavior of an individual are determined by the attitudes, values or behavior of others with whom he or she interacts. This relation is due to various causes which I have summarized in four main categories, slightly changing the way they are defined in the literature to remain closer to the language employed by the women themselves, throughout: social learning, social pressure, subjective obligation and social contagion.

Social learning

In actor-oriented rational decision-making models, used in most of the demographic literature on diffusion, other individuals are influential because they alter the actual balance of costs and benefits of the individual. They can do it by either modifying individual beliefs or by imposing rewards or sanctions to specific individual behavior or attitudes. Distinctions between the two processes are sharper in the theory than in the effects (Montgomery & Casterline 1996, van Knippenberg 2000). The exchange of information that happens in social interaction produces social learning when it provides additional pieces of information essential to the decision-making process. It does not need to be an exchange that takes place in conversation. The exposure to the experience of somebody else may affect individuals' perception of the difficulties to be faced. As Aruna, one of the respondents, described it:

“The desire to have a family was surely there, it has always been there. I could not imagine I would not have had one. I simply thought it was too far [...] Anyway, with these friends we have a very tight relationship. So we saw how the relationship between them was. More than talking about it, we can say it is like we experienced it in advance, what they were doing, how they did behave. I mean, how they behaved before with no children and then with children. Then I thought it was a natural thing”. (Aruna - 32, *married at 28, 2 children after 1 and 4 years*).

Parents' and siblings' family experiences are perceived as being known with a high degree of certainty and often they are emotionally loaded. Hence, the reliability and the strength of the examples make them an influential source of social learning

“Yes it is true that they are a duty... But even my mother - she had seven [children], but the first ones were self-sufficient... We were looking after each other; each was responsible for the other, ...so I would rather have them close [in age] so that they could help each

other” (Bea 33, *married for 3 years, no children, she would like to have ‘at least 3’*)

Often times, though, the generational gap and the recognized dissimilarities among siblings decrease the relevance of the information and therefore its influential power. The most salient source of learning is, rather, the larger group of peers. The relevance of peers’ choices, as in the case of friends, colleagues, neighbors or sport mates, is due to the fact that peers are assumed to face similar contingencies, as compared to the previous generations. The degree of similarity among close friends is generally higher, since the relationships are selected and not given as those with kin.

Besides strong ties with kin and non-kin, the larger context of occasional relationships provides an opportunity for women to observe “normal” behavioral patterns related to family building and to situate themselves *vis-à-vis* their social environment. In the following quote, Diana “normalizes” what she thought to be her late first pregnancy; in confronting the age of other first time mothers she met, and with what she perceives as being the general trend.

“Nowadays it is not too late to marry at 28. It is not late; on the contrary, the tendency is towards 30. I see friends and acquaintances, they all married late, because in part for their studies, in part life has changed, in part you are comfortable at home, in part life is more expensive and so you have to wait to have a good job ... and a little bit of money to build up a house, hence you marry late, and so even children arrive later. I went to a prenatal course last year and I was 30 ... I was the youngest, all the others were having their first child, and they were all 35 36 even 37, so you really wait a lot..., Myself, I had felt that having a child at 30 was late, but well, this is the general trend” (*Diana, 31 years old, married at 28, one child born two years after marriage, willing to have more*)

Social pressure

The structure of sanctions and rewards associated with behaviors produces social influence when the individual considers these social costs and benefits as relevant and behaves accordingly. To illustrate this kind of social pressure, I quote Elena’s interview where she explains to what extent her educational career has been subordinated to her parents’ will.

I liked studying, I wanted to do ‘big things’, but I did not. I wanted to go to work in Africa... I wanted to study Medicine, but my parents did not allow me to do this because they said that anyway, it was too

long a career for a woman... According to them, with medicine, I would have never married, I would have never finished

Elena was clearly under pressure as far as the sequence and the timing of important aspects of her life are concerned. In her case, a normative priority of marriage over professional aspiration defined the choices to be made: she will have an education, she will leave home to marry only after having completed her education, the duration of her education will be short enough to ensure that she can marry and have a child. In this case, the normative pressure has a powerful effect on union formation because of the salience of parents in controlling resources and emotional bonds with their daughter. While living with them during her studies, she could have overcome this restriction only with high personal costs, both material and psychological ones. Elena continues

.....

I got my degree [in Humanities] and I had found a job in a private school and then we married... The condition my parents had imposed on me was the following: “first you get your degree and then you get married” ... And I kept the promise (*Elena- 36, married at 27, 1 child at 32, she would like to have another but she can't. She is thinking about adoption*)

The influential power of parents through social pressure is high. Parents have acknowledged claims on the consequence of reproductive choices of their children, as we shall see in the following section. Parents are often successful in exerting pressure for various reasons. They have acknowledged claims on grandchildren, often offering help as a counterpart. They can use the emotional bond purposefully to provoke compliance with their preference. They control some resources, the use of which they condition to their children's choices. They have close and frequent contact with their children – often cohabiting until the children marry, and then living close by after marriage.

Friends do not have acknowledged claims as parents do, and their relationship is of a more contingent nature. For these reasons the modes and the tones of pressure exerted by friends are generally different. Remarking upon the differences through teasing is one way to remind individuals what the ‘normal’ pattern of family formation is among the group of peers and where the ‘deviant’ couples are failing to be “normal”.

“Recently, this friend who was the witness at my marriage, was feeling out of place [*un pesce fuor d'acqua*]. She kept on telling me, “well, you know, now you all meet together, you are married with children. Only Mario and me, we are left out...a bit like the stupid ones [*i piccioni della situazione*], and all your jokes are always about us. Well... like, “hey, you two! Methuselah”, “now you will never make it [*arriverete alle calende greche*]”, it is always the same

joke”(Flora - 31, married at 26, 2 children born respectively 1 and 4 years after marriage).

Social pressure does not need to be understood exclusively as a “punishment” directed against deviant behavior. Positive sanctions, as the reinforcement of relationships with friends due to a similar experience, can be anticipated, as Gabriella does

“This friend of mine, who already has 2 children, I met her, she had always been a really good friend since school, then we lost contact with each other... now she called me, really happy, saying: `now you have entered the mothers’ clan!’. You know, those kind of things... I think that the [child’s] arrival has just improved social relationships, since afterwards our needs are going to be the same as those of all couples with children...” (Gabriella, 35, one child born when she was 35, one year after marriage).

Subjective obligation

Sanctions and rewards are not necessary in order to obtain individual conformity to others’ expectations. Subjective beliefs or, in other words, individual perception of what others may think are sometimes sufficient to affect behavior (Ajzen 1988, 1991), or at least intentions of behavior. Normative pressure, in this case, originates from the awareness of relevant others’ preferences, and the motivation to comply with others’ expectations.

The woman in the example, Giulia, said that after an initial period of small retaliation, her mother had fully accepted her unmarried cohabitation and never returned to the topic. After seven years and without planning to have children in the near future, they decided to marry to please her resigned mother in quite a dramatic situation:

“How did we pass from cohabiting to marriage? The reason is that my mother was quite ill ... And not being able to see any of her daughters with a white dress, for her, would have been a big sorrow... I said: “ok then, let us get married, let’s do this incredible thing, white dress, flowers, and everything else”... After marriage nothing really changed. But she had her party, and having seen at least me”. (Giulia - 33, married at 29 after 7 years of cohabitation, no children)

The consequence is a change in union status that would not have occurred without some external influence. There is no need for the mother to punish or praise her daughter any longer. Her preference is known from their past relationship. This kind of social influence survives the fact that in modern societies it may be less and less acceptable for parents to interfere in the life

choices of their children, or to expect them to conform to a more universal norm. Mostly, the relationships able to evoke a subjective norm about childbearing behavior are mostly the relationships extended to the future child as well: the child's grandparents, the child's siblings, and the child's father.

Contagion

Not only is it unnecessary to have a continually enforced structure of positive and negative sanctions in order to have social influence effects. It is not even necessary for influence to pass through the sphere of consciousness. Individual emotional reactions, such as a sense of inadequacy, guilt, embarrassment, or anxiety can induce individuals to comply with others' opinions on appropriate behavior, even when external punishment or rewards are not expected to follow. Various fundamental reasons have been suggested to explain drives towards conformity: defining one's own identity, and experiencing agreement with one's opinion are primary motivations for individuals, based on deeper cognitive or emotional factors (Festinger 1957, Homans 1961, Moscovici & Personnaz 1980, Barbalet 2000). If cognitive factors seem to be dominant, it may be due to the fact that emotional factors are sometimes more difficult to admit, or they are not necessarily always operating at the conscious level or acknowledged. The story told by Ines clarifies this point. Ines started considering having a second child with her husband only after having been exposed to her friend's baby's arrival.

"[...] I waited, but then there was a friend couple who had one [the child] and so the idea came about... when they had this little girl, I thought: "that's it!". We thought a bit about it, we took some time, and we decided

Do you remember any conversation, something that made it come about?

"Well... No, it started, yeah, we used to meet, we used to talk about it. I found out about it when she was 5 months pregnant. You could see the belly, and then we started to daydream about it, and then when she had it, then the baby was there, you could see her, you could see the baby at home, you could see how the house changes... Well... when you entered their home, you could see it. If you enter my house now...toys... things like that, the perfume, you could smell the newborn's smell. And, after all I have always wanted them, so I chose...two". (*Ines, 32 years old, married, 2 children, first at 27, second at 31*)

Ines values the physical and emotional impact of the birth as an important factor in making their decision. But there is no proper new information, nor specific normative pressure or subjective obligation to cause a change in behavior. I will use the term *contagion* for this type of evidence. The women did not rationalize what it was about the causes of such episodes that could be relevant, but unequivocally established a connection between the incidents and their choices.

When relationships are structurally connected in a close-knit group, there seems to be a sort of events cascade due to contagion influence. The women with closely tied peer relationships often have the impression that the timing of transition to parenthood of group members was somewhat interrelated. This perception is consistent with sociological wisdom: when networks are cohesive and homogeneous, social influence is likely to be more effective. For this reason I think it is appropriate to address the influence of these dense groups in which the members are in frequent interaction.

Often, close-knit groups of friends are composed of some members of the former *compagnia* ('group' or 'company') to which the woman belonged. *La compagnia* is best described by the words of a social anthropologist who studied patterns of friendship networks in the neighboring region of Veneto: "the largest compaignie include some forty people of the same or very similar age. Most have fixed meeting places, like a bar or a specific corner of the main square, and a fixed time to meet daily or weekly. Having a compagnia generates a sense of belonging and social adequacy... when a couple belongs to different compaignie, normally the woman gives up hers" (*sic*, Filippucci 2000).

Close groups of friends are common experiences for women who live in small centers, where network density tends to be higher (Micheli 2000). The efficacy of the described social mechanisms is reinforced when social interaction is recurrent. When relationships form a close-knit group in frequent interaction, it is possible to hypothesize a tendency to a synchronization of the experience of transition events. The quote below shows how a cascade of events may be independent of other individual characteristics, such as age at birth. Loredana had been engaged for 5 years before marrying at the relatively young age of 22. She deliberately waited another five years to have her first child, which led me to asking her why they had decided to marry at that point. There was no particular reason but the fact that many in her group made the same decision:

"Yes, five of us!"

All together? (they both laugh)

"Well in between May and September"

Had you organized that beforehand or...?

"No, but they started saying 'we are going to get married soon' 'yes, we are too' 'why don't we?' and then...."

The interesting information comes from Loredana's mother. She was present during the whole interview, while ironing just on the other side of the room. The mother feels the need to specify that her daughter married young, in comparison with the others:

[the mother interrupts: "but they were older than you!" (in dialect)]
yes they were but anyway it was like that!

these were your husbands friends?

Yes, friends from the *compagnia*, older than me”.

(Loredana 35, married at 22, 3 children after 5, 7, and 13 year old)

Loredana’s early transition to marriage is triggered by the fact that she is embedded in a web of relationships with people older than herself, since they belong to her husband’s *compagnia*. The effect of social influence among individuals of similar ages is known. According to Hernes (1972), for example, social pressure to marry is proportional to the number of those already married in the same cohort. I suggest that it is important to underline that it is the specific close-knit group of interactions that conveys effective social influence¹, and not the generic belonging to the same cohort. One needs to remark that the relevant cohorts might be those of the husbands. Since I am dealing with perceptions, I consider as a significant piece of information the fact that the woman mentions the enchainment decisions as the relevant influencing process, and not, for instance the consideration of hers or her husband’s age. If age is relevant, it seems to be relevant in a relatively unconscious manner.

The four mechanisms are to be understood more as an heuristic tool to interpret the role of social interaction in preference formation than as rigid and exclusive categories. For instance, boundaries between contagious imitation and conformity due to social pressure in close-knit groups are difficult to assess. Deviancy can be involuntarily “punished” by the simple fact that life adjustments due to parenthood often mean re-adjustment of social activities according to child exigencies. Those individuals or couples whose life course events are not synchronized may experience the feeling of being cut out of the pack, and self select themselves out of the group. Nadia married at 32 and still has no children at age 38. She has been repetitively at odds with her peers in the *compagnia*, and was migrating from one *compagnia* to the other, living these changes as a handicap to face for her choice.

“Well, I often had to change *compagnia*. Often I happened to go out with much younger friends, 3 or 4 years [younger].

Why? Others were already married and had children?

Exactly, so that has been the handicap... “ *(Nadia - 38, married for 6 years, no children, she wanted to have one since age 37)*

In the next section, I suggest how social influence may play a role in the generalised experience of delayed first birth in Lombardy. Most interpretations of the low fertility regime in Italy take a cost-based approach and start from the assumption that what needs to be explained is why women have only one child and why so late. My approach is to examine, rather, one of the factors influencing the choice to become parents. In other words, I wonder why young Italians would marry and have one child at all, instead of foregoing parenthood *tout court*. Morgan & Berkowitz King’s 2001 review of these arguments lists at least three

sets of factors: biological predisposition to parenthood, social and institutional coercion, and individual rational choice. I focus on the set of social factors to suggest that in the particular context of Lombardy, informal social interactions promote the occurrence of first births. No such similar social force acts upon successive births.

2.2 Social influence on the transition to parenthood

Among the women I interviewed, as in the rest of Italy, marriage is mostly associated with the idea of a family, and the general “having children” is a part of this idea. The “packaging” of marriage and parenthood is a choice that is made jointly². While other elements may be included in the package deal – for instance house ownership, stable employment for one of the two partners, etc... - as is the case in other cultural settings (Townsend 2002), the decision to marry and have children seems to be made in one accord, and involves both consequences, whether this is done explicitly or not. During the interviews, the link between the two events was suggested either as self-evident, or instrumentally justified as a way of consolidating or completing the couple, of giving a sense to the previous event of marrying, and to the establishment of a new household. A confirmation of the “normality” of this association can be found in the fact that none of the interviewees considered foregoing motherhood forever, and only a few reported this to be the choice of anyone in their social network. Furthermore, of the seven women who were still childless in the sample, the only two who were still hesitant about trying to have a child with their current partner were also the only two women cohabiting in an unmarried union. Nevertheless, they expressed a desire to become mothers at some point. Of the 5 married childless couples, all were married for more than 3 years, and none of them were actively avoiding childbirth at the time of the interview. All children were born within marriage (though 7 out of the 47 women who were mothers had had a pre-marital conception).

Several elements in the analysis of the interviews lead to the conclusion that in Lombardy social influence significantly enforces this “parental imperative” (Campbell 1985, Rindfuss *et al.* 1988), but it does not systematically support a specific family size, as it seems to be the case elsewhere (Upton 2000, Kiernan 2000). A very straightforward example of this kind of selective social pressure is the fact that women perceive that their own parents’ pressure towards childbearing decreases once the first grandchild is born. The women explain this different attitude with the fact that their parents are already grandparents, and that the childcare burden may become an issue for them. In Italy, 50% of working mothers “use” their children’s grandmothers as the main childcare service (Del Boca 2002).

I elaborate on two other ways in which social influence works in favor of experiencing parenthood rather than not. First, I suggest that conversations about

the motivations for not having children are rarely initiated by those who made this choice, and by those who interact with them. As a consequence, opportunities for learning about positive reasons for childlessness are limited, compared with the opportunities to learn about why postponing decisions ended in foregone childbearing. Second, I observe that the childless women are in uneven positions in assessing the pros and cons of experiencing parenthood. Conversations between women, who are officially postponing, and new mothers, focus on the unique aspect of the experience of giving birth. The little authority and self confidence about the topic of those who have not had the experience ensure the efficacy of this source of influence.

Social learning about voluntary childlessness is bounded

Most women knew at least one childless couple, regardless of whether the childlessness was a voluntary or an involuntary choice. Questions about the reasons for those couples not having children elicited two different kinds of reactions. Either (a) respondents were sure about the cause lying behind the observed childlessness, because it had been a conversation topic with the couple in question, or (b) most commonly, they advanced their own hypotheses based on their general knowledge of the couple, since they had not gained knowledge of the reason directly from the couple. In this second case, there may be a systematic overestimation of the involuntary character of childlessness, which could affect learning about the advantages of a life without children, as we shall shortly argue. Others' childlessness is most often regarded by third persons as being the consequence of a difficulty, of a problem. These problems may be sterility or a negative characteristic of the person such as "selfishness".

Because of these two presumed problems, opinion- and experience-exchanges with childless couples may be limited. Because childless couples do not want to be exposed to criticism or pressure, they do not wish to raise the topic in conversation. The subsequent embarrassment and the fear of hurting possible infertile couples are sufficient reasons for avoiding the conversation by others.

If the reason for childlessness is not revealed by or known through somebody else (common relationships), the outcome is likely to be interpreted as a non-desired one. A high degree of reciprocal confidence and knowledge is required when inquiring about others' childlessness, and to trust their answers about such a sensitive topic. Respondents' ignorance of the cause behind others' current childlessness was accompanied by comments such as "I am not in such a deep relationship to ask such a thing, but I think/I have the sense that" or "I really hope it is by choice my sister-in-law does not have children", "I did not feel I could be so direct to ask why but...". Reasons for infertility is a difficult topic to touch upon, when the most-frequently suspected cause for it is infecundity. Childlessness is presumed to be involuntary, unless it has been ascertained otherwise, and infecundity is often a topic to avoid since it is associated with

others' possible suffering. The presence of physical problems seems to be inferred on the basis of marriage duration, or through the absence of preoccupations with financial, housing or job-related aspects. In a few instances, even explicit reasons advanced by the childless couple were suspected of being a way to conceal fecundity problems³. Campbell (1985) describes the complementary point of view, from the perspective of the voluntarily childless couple, for whom perceived mistrust about the voluntary nature of their "choice" seems to be a common experience. Two extracts are representative of this kind of inference. The women are both making reference to conversations with a childless friend, who has declared a lack of interest in having children.

"I met her recently, she was with a little child and I asked her: "is it yours?" She said, "No it is my brother's", but she said it in such a way... I mean ...because, you know, now it is some time since she has been married ... [...]it is 6 years" (*Ornella*)

"I do not know the real motivation, I know that they said they are fine like they are [...] she is a teacher and she says she is satisfied with her pupils. But I have a cousin who is also a teacher, and she is not satisfied by her pupils... she has a child and she would like another [...] even though she is a teacher...so I don't know if it is true, we are not in such a close relationship; she wanted it once, she got the house all sorted out and all the rest, and now she hasn't had a child"
Paola)

These limited exchanges on the causes of childlessness may select against the possibility of learning about the positive motivations of childless couples for remaining childless. The analysis of observations, conversations, and comments on childlessness reveals an additional element, which is likely to indirectly reinforce the "parental norm" : overestimation of the risk of infecundity and underestimation of the satisfaction of a childless marriage.

The unique experience of parenthood

The experience of becoming and being a mother is a common topic of conversation between parents and those who are not. Encouragement to try to become parents, description of the impressions and emotions surrounding parenthood, comments on the uniqueness of the experience and of the relationship with one's own child are often the answers to curiosity and doubts expressed by childless women. Nadia has started thinking about having a child only at age 37, after 5 years of marriage. Her brother, who has 3 children, has often tried to convince her through means of what she is missing:

“When I start with all my motivations, they say, Yes, sure, but it is also true that they [the children] give you so much, they are not only problems, such as freedom and so forth, they give you much...’ They tell me I am crazy, that I don’t know what I miss... for sure it changes your life ...for sure it must be beautiful, because you hear so many people saying that it is a marvelous experience...I don’t know, we will see!” (RS)... (*Nadia, 38, married at 32, childless*)

Nadia learns that there is ‘much’ and a ‘marvelous’ experience she might be missing, and which are exclusive prerogatives of parents. They cannot be easily substituted nor fully understood by vicarious parenthood (Morgan & King Berkowitz 2001). It can be known only through direct experience. As I mentioned earlier, none of the childless women in my sample were willing to forego parenthood. In survey research on the value of children, childless respondents often give very psychological and emotional rationales to explain their desire for first births (Bulatao 1981). These rationales are guessed by trusting the experience of others, as for Chiara, who reports a conversation with a good friend of hers:

“I have a friend who is like a sister to me, she is my age and she just had a baby. I was talking with her recently, we were talking about maternity. She had always been very similar to me - she had never been thinking about having babies before. When she made this choice, and she was happy about it, then we talked about it and she was advising me to try this experience...”

...

Well, I would like to have a child, because I feel that I miss it, I feel it today, I can’t say that I felt it when I was 20 or 25 or 30 years. Now I feel that the moment has arrived for an experience that I would really like to live.

What made you change your mind?

Well, most likely the birth of this child close to me.. He is six weeks old....” (*Chiara- 34 years old , in a cohabiting union for 4 years, no children*)

Social learning about the consequence of having a child is bounded in a different direction than the taboo surrounding the choice to stay childless. The asymmetry here is in favor of the positive aspects of the experience. The higher authority of parents versus non-parents in these exchanges is assumed by their experience. The imbalance in knowledge renders these interactions likely to influence in favor of the transition to parenthood

Both conversational asymmetries affect the occurrence of first births, and not of successive births. In fact, once the first child is born, matters related to childlessness no longer play a role. As well, once the transition to parenthood is made, parenthood is experienced and the new parents gain confidence in

discussing childbearing issues. It is reasonable to assume that in a context where having children represents a high economic cost, the effects of differential social influence on first and successive births may partially account for the delayed and universal transition to parenthood.

3. Responses to social pressure

In the final section of this paper, I focus on my second question: the role of social interaction in the change of dominant values and norms regarding reproduction. Women may accept or refuse the relevance of examples, advice, encouragement, and pressures stemming from their social environment. In section 2.1 I focused on examples where social influence occurred and social interaction did affect the woman's reproductive behavior. Here I will focus on the role of informal interaction on the social construction of what constitutes an appropriate choice.

I illustrate how the association between women's behavior and the meanings attributed to this behavior is gradually modified in informal conversations. Moreover, the examples I have chosen show how these transformations occur within the range of possibilities given by the persistence of dominant values. Dominant values define the ways in which differences can be expressed, and the departure from them is expected to be justified or explained in terms of other non-value factors (Townsend 2002). When women observe or talk about their opinions or behavior, they discover that others may consider problematic what they themselves did not think problematic, they evaluate their peers opinion about their own behavior, and they may experience the sort of pressures we described previously. Conversations are often a moment for reflecting and making sense of intentions as well as making new sense of past choices. I clarify this point with a number of examples.

“Having children is selfish”

As children are included in the concept of marriage a nest that has never been filled is perceived as senseless and in need of a justification. Selfishness was spontaneously quoted as the possible reason to postpone, or definitively forgo parenthood by social network members, by more than half of the women. Many women associated the word selfish to comment on others' (or sometimes their own) choices when these imply endlessly postponing or foregoing the transition to parenthood within marriage. With postponing being a more and more common experience though, the term is shifting its domain of applicability and its meaning.

Afra's statement reinforces the common view that it is selfish not to have children while, but making the age at first birth an irrelevant issue allows for a much more flexible aspect of transition to parenthood.

I heard somebody who said that if you go to work, if you look after a career and then you have a child when you are 40, this is a selfish act, because when the baby is 20 you are 60 and you are like his grandmother. I think it is good to have the courage to have it when you are 40 rather than giving it up completely (*Afra 35, married at 34, 1 child at 35, she would like to have a second*)

The intensity of the ongoing shifting of opinions- and redefinition of values- discussion is evident in the quotes of two other women, who reverse the interpretation of what has to be considered selfish. They indicate having children as a selfish choice when it is not consistent with an altruistic view of disinterested parenthood:

“In fact I was told I am very selfish, but I think you need to be as selfish to give birth to another person because one day you will get something in exchange from this child. My mother starts having some problems, I am there and I help her, and I am happy to do it, if she was alone it would be a problem but I do not think that she gave birth to me so that one day I would help her. You do it for love, not for having something in exchange. That is also selfishness! (*Betta, 38 years old, married for 6, no children*)

“Also having a child can be a selfish choice because ... anyway, one does it for oneself not for somebody else... whom for otherwise? I mean you do it because you have this desire to have a child... I guess we all have this desire, having them is maybe more selfish than not having them, I mean, you want to leave something as a reason for which you existed, don't you? Some sign that you passed by here. So, either you become Leonardo da Vinci and leave a sign forever, or you leave a little sign, a child, who can carry along” [Renata].

In the evaluation of reproductive choices, the dominant value system seems to read parenthood as an altruistic enterprise – not a self-interested one. While individual fulfillment and realization are increasingly accepted as motivation to actions, paradoxically this is not a morally acceptable motivation for having children. The ongoing negotiation seems to shift the appropriateness of reproductive choices from their outcome to their motivations. This negotiation occurs in informal conversations, as for instance, during a Sunday meal among friends:

From our side there are so many pressures, in every direction... A friend of mine who is not married, she is 40, she used to come and eat with us on Sunday. She used to say that having children is selfish, because one does it only not to be alone in old age... I do not know... I did not do it for that reason, and she said ‘you had it to gratify

yourself’... maybe, I mean sure I wanted him, but for me it is so important, and so engaging that it sounds a bit contradictory, maybe I am gratified in having a child, but certainly I did not do it for this reason, I do not think it is a selfish act (*Carla 36, married at 32, 1 child at 35 no other planned for the moment*)

What is a ‘good mother’?

The following examples illustrate how the same concept of good parenthood can be stretched to cover an emerging variety of behavioral choices. The double role of women, divided between family and work, is a recurrent topic in the interviews. I asked every interviewee about her opinion on the role of the woman in the family and the tension between the choice of caring for family members and the choice of having her own paid employment and work-related aspirations outside of it. The three women mentioned below are all highly educated, were all employed in a quite satisfying job before having a child, and had no intention to change their position at that time. In addition, they all implied that their husbands earned sufficient income to let them free to leave their job if they wished to. Despite the fact that the opportunity-costs of their time is somehow similar, they made three very different choices. One dropped out of the labor market, one reduced her working time, and the last one kept on working full time. No matter what kind of choice each of the woman made in her working life, each of them feels that a valuable justification of this choice has to be expressed in terms of being a good mother.

Daria left her job as a teacher after having had her second child. She and her husband planned to have at least an additional one afterwards, and she would like to have a fourth.

“I have this idea that it is better to do little but to do it right, rather than much and wrong, I prefer to be a good mother... I mean, not that those who go to work are bad mothers....but a day has 24 hours for everybody, so I can’t believe those who say we are optimal workers and optimal mothers” (*Daria, she left her job after the second child*)

The next quote belongs to Francesca, and can be considered as expressing a compromise choice with respect to the first two. When her first and only child was born, she switched to part time work.

“I have always been of the idea that you have babies to enjoy them... absolutely. These are not little packets to be created and put away... No way! That is why I searched for a part time job”... I love my child... but I care about my freedom and going out with my friends once in a while...I do not feel as if I am abandoning my daughter as

my sisters feel (*Francesca - she switched from full to part time after birth of the first and only child*)

This quote is interesting in two ways. First, there is an inference that a good mother subordinates her working role to her caring role, despite the change from full time employment to part time employment is costly in terms of her career opportunities (as she explained further in the interview). Second, there is a clear compatibility between being a good mother and occasionally letting someone else care for the child.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is Eva, who never changed her job after the birth of her child. She has only one child and is ambiguous about a second one due to the complications this might mean in terms of organization. Despite that, Eva's motivation is reflected in her choice of keeping her job as the best way to be a good mother.

“Being always present and trying to raise your children with all the attention is one thing... another thing is managing to give, not so much quantity [of time], but quality, when you are with your children. I think if a woman is satisfied in her working and social life, she can also offer a different kind of motherhood, rather than a mother who is stressed or bored” (*Eva, she works full time and has a child*)

Conclusions

It is time to step back from the voices of the women, to draw a schematic summary of the previous sections, and to indicate directions for further research. Do women in Lombardy perceive that their relationships (other than with their partner) may affect their reproductive choices, and which are the potential influence sources? I have articulated the key processes and sources through which such influence is perceived and how social learning, social pressure, subjective obligation and contagious mechanisms are differentially effective, depending on the type of relationship and the structure in which relationships are embedded. A high density of relationships among peers seems to facilitate a synchronization of events related to family formation and fertility. I have not addressed in detail the differences in the level of education, employment status, or size of the place of residence of the single woman. These elements might have an effect on her exposure, her reception and her reaction to social influences, and on the kind of social relationships they are embedded in. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on the role of social influence in determining choices, redefining values and attitudes through the illustrations of empirically grounded examples provided. I have explored the way in which one of these mechanisms, social learning about the transition to parenthood may work as an incentive for married couples to have a child. I indicated two possibilities: there are limited occasions to learn about planned and chosen childlessness and there is an asymmetric position between parents and non-parent couples in exchanges regarding the benefits to be

expected from parenthood. The asymmetry that characterizes the learning processes related to the transition to parenthood in Italy is a clear example of the fact that the social processes may be inefficient in diffusing certain forms of behavior in specific cultural settings. This finding sheds light on one of the most often asked question in diffusion studies, that is why certain patterns of behavior do spread and others do not.

The second question posed at the beginning of this paper is about the way in which social interaction contributes to ideational and behavioral change. The detailed study of what is said and observed about reproduction in social interaction sheds light on the complexity of the relationship between behavior and the meaning associated with it. I outlined how responses to social influence may have as an emerging product a redefinition of the association of meanings and behavior. In Lombardy, apparently opposite choices are justified with reference to the same dominant value of parenthood, and the talk about what a good mother is seems to be very relevant to the decision-making process regarding childbearing. Motherhood may be a selfish act and “full-time moms” may be bad mothers. Because of this redefinition, social effects in diffusion models of behavioral change are not straightforward to predict. They may result in a change of what is being diffused either because the interpretation of the adopted behavior is different or because the behavior associated with a new idea is different. Any grand theory prediction based on a diffusion model across a diverse cultural setting has to discount for this recursive and reversible relationship between adoption, rejection and re-adaptation of values and behaviors.

Much needs to be done in order to investigate the complexity of social interaction and reproductive behavior. First, this paper discusses only what women say and not what they do. Hence, it can only account for the perception of social influence and not for social influence processes *per se*. The direct observation of what people omit to mention (consciously or not) in an interview setting is essential to have a sound interpretation of the process of social influence itself. In this paper the emphasis is on the subjects’ perception. An anthropological study would extend the research frame from individual reports of perceived social influence to the wider meaning of individual fertility and the way it is negotiated to match social pressure and specific circumstances. Regional differences are important in Italy: in southern regions, postponement of marriage and of first birth is remarkably lower than in the North. An ethnographic study would allow the identification of the dominant values about reproduction, against which different choices are measured and justified. An ethnographic study in different areas, selected to maximize variation in their reproductive patterns, would allow area comparisons where the failure of the family to reproduce is more extended, and areas where it is hardly perceived. Arguably, the former re-evaluation of familistic norms and normalization of different interpretations should be more intense and may indicate in which direction the peculiar Italian transition is pointing.

Second, this paper has selectively focused on women as its main informants. It is necessary to extend the analysis to include a gender perspective on social

influence by considering the role of partners in reproductive behavior. There are two possible approaches. One approach is to interview men. The overall gender balance in this paper is uneven as far as perceived influence due to conversations. Most of the spontaneously reported evidence of conversations has other women as protagonists. Brothers, fathers and male friends enter the picture most often indirectly. One cause could be selective conversations. Is reproduction a “gendered topic” or is it a female topic? In other words, if interactions were segregated by gender, we would expect men mentioning mainly other men. If it were a female topic, we would obtain the same gender imbalance in favor of women. even if we did interview men. A second cause could be selective influence. Are women more influential because they are believed to have better knowledge of the costs and benefits of childbearing, because they are the ones who make the larger number of sacrifices, or because they are more likely to exert pressure in one or the other direction? In this second case, men’s comments would be either forgotten or trivialized as irrelevant. A third possibility could be the presence of selective domains of influence. Would men report a totally different set of conversation topics, when thinking of the transition to parenthood? Would, for instance, job security be more important than age limit considerations? A second approach is to interview couples. Having both partners reporting on their choices would allow matching social influences coming from both sides and having both perspectives on its relevance for reproductive decisions. In addition to that, having both partners participate would allow for analysis of the process through which the couple redefines itself in relation to its reproductive choices (Berger & Kellner 1970).

Third, I argued that the influence of peer groups is in many respects more relevant than the influence of the family in reproductive behavior. I have suggested that for a close-knit group of friends, social influence mechanisms may lead to an event cascade as far as first birth is concerned. Influences of this kind are hidden by the absence of data on non-kin relationships, in connection with reproductive behavior in modern societies. A systematic study of social network variation, according to socio-economic characteristics and cultural enclaves, may illuminate differential paces of adaptation.

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Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

Number of children	
0	7
1	18
2	23
3	5
4	1
Age at first birth	
before 30	32
30 or after (included childless)	15
still childless	7
Interval between marriage and first birth	
child before marriage	7
1-2 years	15
3-5 years	18
more than 5	7
childless women (open interval from 4 to at least 8 years after marriage)	7
Education at the moment of the interview	
dropped intermediate school (from 10 to 13 years)	1
intermediate degree (from 14 to 19 years)	9
2 years professional school (from 14 to 16 years)	4
dropped at high school	5
high school degree	20
dropped University studies	4
currently enrolled in university studies	2
2 years specialization diploma	2
university degree	7
Place of residence size (number of residents)	
Big towns (>50.000)	14
medium size town (>20.000 <50.000)	7
small villages (<20.000)	33
Employment status	
full time	23
part time	13
not employed	18
Union status	
first marriage	51
second marriage (widow)	1
Cohabitation	2
