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INTRODUCTION

Transition to parenthood and fertility intentions in Europe. Family choices and child-birth challenges

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This special issue of the *International Review of Sociology* deals with a crucial problem in developed countries: the decrease of fertility rates below a threshold that can no longer ensure the substitution of generations and the stability of the population (Eurostat 2010). The contributions of this special issue give valuable information about reasons that may explain the phenomenon of birth-rate decreases and analyse some of its consequences. Obviously broad changes in society are involved. The massive entry of women in the work-place (INSEE 2008, INE 2009, Eurostat 2010), a tendency that does not seem to be in reversal, even in periods of crises, is associated with several societal changes. The labour-market can no longer include all the potential candidates, and both men and women are in competition to keep a job. In order to become more competitive, young people spend more years in academic training. Their investment in education and the difficulty to find a stable job afterwards are associated with the delay of economic independence from their family that prevents them from living on their own, creating their families, and becoming parents. At the same time, couples based on mutual affection rather than material interest are less stable. How can couples manage the desire to have a child with the responsibility to care for this child with an unstable job and unstable relationships? In such a context of uncertainty, a child-bearing delay may be seen as a rational choice.

The decision to become a parent and its consequences are very complex and cannot be analysed from a single framework or a single perspective.

This special issue brings together contributions of sociological and psychological perspectives, based on macro-analyses of demographic data at a cross-cultural level, and micro-analyses of women's narratives. They cover different periods of family life, the access to parenthood, or the decision to have a second child. As fertility choices are crucial factors for the future of the societies, in an economic and social perspective, some papers focus on identification of social factors that impact on the intention to have a child, while others are more focused on the identification of psychological factors or on the factors explaining the disagreement between partners about this decision, and other on the consequences of parenthood at family and personal levels (decision to return to work, development of emotional competences).

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Nowadays, dual-earning couples are quite normative. Changes in gender-related values will help to cope with the specific challenges of dual-earner couples. All contributions highlight the importance of values associated to gender role as guidelines for behaviour and potential explanation for emotional reactions. Modern societies demand more egalitarian values. Both men and women share instrumental and expressive roles; women assume professional roles, and men want more to involve themselves in child-care.

At least it is what individuals and society state, but some indicators show that it is not so easy to give up traditional values. An unequal division of household tasks remains (Fontaine *et al.* 2007a, 2007b), clearly showing that the traditional values are strong enough to define behaviour; researches have proved that the division of tasks becomes yet more traditional after the experience of parenthood (Baxter *et al.* 2008, Katz-Wise *et al.* 2010); most of the family-friendly policies in the work-place try to respond to mothers' needs and implicitly assume that child-care is a matter that concerns women.

Elisabeth Badinter (2010), a French author well known for her analyses of women's role in French society, adds one more element to understand birth-rate differences among European countries. France shows a higher birth-rate among the European countries, and more than 80% of women with one child younger than 3 are working full time in the labour-market (Thévenon 1999). She claims that the lower birth-rate is a consequence of the dissemination of a more demanding representation of motherhood than in the past. The movement that values the return to 'natural laws', originally from the States and progressively more popular in Europe, presents motherhood as a 'mission' that calls for absolute dedication: Before having a child, parents need to be aware that (1) babies need full-time energy, attention, and love from the caring adult; (2) this is so at least during the first 3 years of a baby's life, and not exclusively during maternity leave; (3) the mother naturally becomes the parent responsible for child-care, because breast-feeding is an obligation that is harder to be substituted by artificial milk; and (4) this absolute dedication is needed to ensure the healthy development of the child, both in physical and psychological terms according to this school of thought.

Belief in this absolute representation of motherhood is responsible, in the view of Badinter, for the decrease of fertility in European societies, because to have a child is far too demanding. According to Badinter, the reason why France is an exception (with an average of 2 children per couple, above the European mean which is 1.5) is because French women do not accept this ideology. Historically, French women never thought that motherhood was enough for women to feel complete. They will not renounce conjugal, social, or professional roles: so they have more children than most European countries, such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, etc., because they do not believe that being a mother is a full-time job.

Becoming a parent is one of the major life transitions, and the access to parenthood is frequently seen as a powerful experience that introduces major change into an individual's life. Even though subjective feelings of personal growth are frequently reported, and the development of parents' characteristics and competences are assumed by several theoretical frameworks, empirical results are inconsistent, as Sarah Galdiolo and Isabelle Roskam point out. Their study aims to test the positive impact of becoming parents on personality traits and emotional competencies, as well as the moderator effect of gender and socio-economic status in

these changes. To reach this goal they observe twice couples who do have a child (during pregnancy and 6 month after the birth), comparing them with childless couples. Results point out that becoming a parent has a different impact on the fathers' and mothers' development trajectories. Mothers' emotional competences seem to benefit more from parenthood than fathers' ones. However, these differences are only observed between genders and not when socio-economic statuses are compared, and exclusively in emotional competences and not in personality traits, supporting the assumption of the personality stability.

Are parents aware of the rewards of parenting before having a first child? How do parents take a decision to have more children? Is that decision consensual or not?

Laura Cavalli tries to analyse these questions in her paper, 'He wants, I don't'. As child-care remains essentially associated with the female role, balancing the family and work roles will be more challenging for women. It is not a surprise that the decision to have a child is not always consensual within the couple. The author highlights some determinants of women's discordance towards the desire of the partner to have a second child, based on the analysis of economic and demographic data of Italian society. A female's disagreement with her partner's intention for a second child-bearing is lower when the woman is more educated, but higher when she is unemployed or when she experiences less support for child-care. Nowadays, women do not seem ready to have a second child if they feel that their achievement in the professional domain is at risk. The author's recommendations at the end of the paper aim to help policy-makers in order to increase fertility rates, through the reduction of the opportunity costs of working mothers who decide to have a second child.

The option of studying mothers preferentially by the following papers highlights the strong social representation assuming that decisions of child-bearing are taken by mothers, as the cost of one more child impacts mainly on women's lives and projects.

Mothers are burdened, feel that the division of family tasks is not fair, and these feelings have an impact on the decision to have a second child, as Cláudia Andrade and Sally Bould have demonstrated. Indeed, women need to cope with the coexistence of opposite values: the explicit modern and individualistic ones, and the implicit traditional ones.

To have a child does not seem to impact on the family economy as a whole, but it has a stronger impact on women's wages, work status, and return to work after the child's birth, as Isabella Crespi, Sally Bould, and Gunther Schmaus have pointed out. They compared different European societies, with quite different welfare systems and family-friendly policies. Some societies seem to assume that children are part of a collective project, important for the society as a whole, and they give support to families in order to reduce the cost of motherhood in professional and personal terms, while others put on the individuals and their families the responsibility to care for children and balance roles: the cost of having a child will be higher. But sometimes, social policies will also have a negative impact on women's careers.

Are these factors enough to explain the fertility decrease in developed countries? Parenthood is also associated with rewards, to adult development as Sarah Galdiolo and Isabelle Roskam have proved; however, Miller's paper reports that mothers feel less free to express negative feelings about the period of baby caring than fathers do, and they feel guilty when they decide to return to work after child-birth.

As it clearly appears, the challenges to fertility in Europe are really demanding, and the possible solutions differ and could exclude or create new inequalities. The contribution of this special issue is to point out all these aspects in a newer and deeper perspective, combining qualitative and quantitative aspects and proposing an interdisciplinary approach.

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