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Childbearing in Italy and Spain: postponement narratives

Adele Lebano and Lynn Jamieson[1]

Abstract

Italy and Spain are extreme cases of low fertility linked to postponement of childbearing. Demographers continue to debate causes of postponement. This qualitative study was designed to contribute, by purposively selecting Italian and Spanish women in different socio-economic circumstances who are partnered, childless and aged 30 to 35. Most want children but "not now" or are deferring the decision whether to have children. Their different circumstances inflect explanations of postponement in a language of choice, either "taking time" to achieve other goals or "holding on" for conditions to change. They are encouraged to postpone by optimism about their capacity to conceive, flexible norms about "the right age," prolonged dependence on their parents, the normative salience of "total motherhood," and family-unfriendly, gender-unequal workplaces. Elements of competing demographic theories often coexist in interviewees' accounts. The 'desire-intentions-behaviour gap' does not always capture their flow or complexity.

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Introduction

Everywhere in Europe, couples who know they want children postpone and, yet, in some countries, the phenomenon is more extreme. A divide can be drawn between European countries with fertility rates close to and well below the replacement level of 2.1. Italy and Spain rank among the lowest fertility rates (1.34 against the EU average of 1.6) and the highest mean age of women at birth of the first child (31 in Italy and 30.8 years in Spain, against the EU average of 29). They also have among the highest percentage of births to first-time mothers age 40 and over (7.2 percent in Italy and 6.6 percent in Spain, against the EU average of 3.2 percent) (Eurostat 2018).

This paper considers why Italian and Spanish women who want to have children, have a suitable male partner, and are 30-35 years of age continue to postpone. Demographers have primarily addressed postponement by scrutinising individuals' fertility ideals or desires and intentions looking at associations between these and their socio-economic characteristics and circumstances, as well as the welfare regimes and cultural context of their societies. In much of the previous research, access to the voices of those who are postponing has often been limited to a small number of survey items, although there are notable exceptions (Randall and Koppenhaver 2004; White, Judd, and Poliandri 2012; Bernardi, Klärner, and Von 2008; Brinton et al. 2018) and renewed interest in combining qualitative research with quantitative demographic analysis (Randall and Koppenhaver 2004). Here, we take a different approach and analyze women's accounts derived from semi-structured qualitative interviews with Italian and Spanish women aged 30-35 in well-established heterosexual relationships who are either sure that they want children but "not yet" or who are ambivalent and oscillate within their accounts between futures with and without children.

The paper is organised in five sections. The first is an overview of consolidated theories about postponement and low fertility and provides background information of the Italian and Spanish contexts. The second describes the data and methods. The third part describes three paradigmatic stories. The fourth discusses major recurrent themes in the 24 Italian and Spanish stories of postponement. The fifth and final section draws some conclusions and highlight the relevance of the results with reference to the recent discussions of persistent low fertility.

Postponement and low fertility in Europe

Demographers identify delay in having a first child as a major cause of low fertility rates (Sobotka and Beaujouan 2018). While births to older mothers approaching age 40 were more common in the past, more women now become mothers for the first time at higher reproductive ages. This reduces their chances of having more than 1 or 2 children, and may lead to involuntary childlessness (Berrington 2004; Tough et al. 2007). Among women today the mean age at first birth is over 30 in several European countries, including Italy and Spain (Sobotka and Beaujouan 2018).

The term "postponement transition," was introduced by Kohler et al. (2002) to describe this "shift in family formation from younger to higher reproductive ages." This shift can be regarded as one of the defining traits of the changes in family and relationships known as the "second demographic transition" (van de Kaa 2001) . This is intertwined with "gender revolutions" whose stalled and uneven characteristics feminist scholars seek to understand (Crompton 2006; England 2010, 2011; Lewis 2009; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). The almost universal extension of higher education is an element of the package of changes associated with enhanced gender equality and prolonged transitions to adulthood. Demographers often single out particular factors as key drivers of change (Esping-Anderson and Billari 2015). Some emphasise the spread of "post-materialist" or "post-modern" values focused on quality of life, identity, self-development and individual fulfilment (Inglehart 1971) as leading to the preference for "less family" (Esping-Anderson and Billari 2015; van de Kaa, 2001; Goldin, 2006). Others emphasize economic or institutional constraints that work against desired ways of being and becoming a family. For example, McDonald (2016) argues that persistently low fertility is a feature of societies where women have to make stark choices between employment and family in ways that men do not and Coltrane (2007) asserted "workplace supports not 'family values' are key to getting men more involved in family life." The corollary to these argument is that when welfare regimes support reconciliation of gender equality, employment and family life, a preference for "more family" can be realized and fertility is higher (Mills et al. 2011).

Italy and Spain are societies in which parents make up for the lack of state investment in the younger generations (Dalla Zuanna 2004; Boeri and Galasso 2009; Rosina 2013). Limited welfare regimes provide little assistance in combining work and family life and strong family ties support a particularly long delayed transition to adulthood. On average, Italian and Spanish youth are more likely to remain in their parents' household at older ages than in other parts of Europe[2] (Eurostat 2018) and age norms encourage postponement of co-residential partnering and parenting. The link between delayed adulthood and postponement of children was sometimes made explicitly in interviews ("We cannot be adults" or "We do not want to be adults").

Like Berrington and Parrato (2014), some commenters have built on the Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behaviour model of fertility developed by Miller (1994). This theorizes fertility as, in part, "planned behaviour" (Ajzen 1991), in which intentions precede action but are influenced by "traits" or the individual's situation such as partnership, housing, financial circumstances (Régnier-Loilier et al. 2011; Aizen and Klobas 2013). Desires or wants are also acknowledged as important and since these are less conscious than intentions, this complicates the idea that behavior is "planned." Indeed, fertility intentions are often not the best predictor of fertility behaviours (Toulemon and Testa 2005). The theory is further modified by the addition of intervening factors that result in people revising plans, for example in response to fertility problems or competing desires that depress fertility and may explain the gap between intended and achieved fertility (Bongaarts 2001; Miller and Pasta 1995). Our interviewees expressed vague desires to have children more frequently than intentions and "plans" were projected in a removed future.

Persistent low fertility, (McDonald 2007) below the 1.5 level, leads some scholars to talk of a "low fertility trap" (Lutz, Skirbekk, and Testa 2008). Fertility trends in Italy and Spain have been in a steady decline for forty years, shown by the birth cohorts from 1935 to 1975, albeit there is also some evidence of efforts to "catch up" after age 30 (Caltabiano 2016). Lutz and colleagues suggest that the "trap" is due to a combination of demographic,[3] and, more relevant to our argument, sociological and economic mechanisms. The "sociological mechanism" is the claim that ideal or intended family size is slower to change than behaviors producing actual family size, which adapt more rapidly; for example, to changed socio-economic circumstances; but, when that behavior persists, ideals will shift more in line with direct experience and observation of what others are doing (see also Kuhnt et al. 2017). Therefore, the preference people still express for an ideal family size of two or more children might, nevertheless, portend a consolidation of the downward trend in fertility. The economic mechanism is a reworked version of a theory known as the relative income hypothesis (Easterlin 1980) which claims that people evaluate the suitability of their income for having a child against the standard of living they were used to in their childhood or youth. Austerity, the threat of downward social mobility and economic hardship affecting young adults of both middle class and working-class backgrounds creates a sense of inability to reproduce their parents' standard of living. This results in unwillingness to actually have children, while at the same time they express a preference for a family size not so different from that of their parents, and above the actual fertility rate observed in low-fertility countries. Both dimensions of the “fertility trap” explanation fit accounts given by our interviewees. However, we also note the suggestion in the literature that “trap” may be a misnomer, since the international picture of trends in fertility rates suggests that there is no low fertility threshold beyond which recovery is impossible (Sobotka 2017)

Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) read the evidence of “surprisingly stable” fertility preferences regarding marriage, motherhood and the number of children (McDonald 2007, 2013; Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014) optimistically. They point to a set of countries where once low fertility rates are on track to recovery to replacement levels suggesting the possibility of societies such as Spain and Italy becoming “recovery societies” as “gender egalitarianism gains increasingly normative status” (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015, p.3). In their view, normative uncertainty about “women’s roles” and gender roles in the family suppresses fertility; realization of fertility preferences will follow once a critical mass of gender egalitarianism enables the general presumption that reconciliation of gender equity, employment and family life will be facilitated by institutions, including work places, and by men-as-partners. They do not discuss much of the extensive research on gender attitudes and practices in family households in the “recovery societies” of the USA and the UK showing the elusiveness of equality. National attitude surveys repeated over time show dramatic shift towards gender egalitarianism in views about who is responsible for domestic work and earning. However, surveys show much less dramatic shifts in who does what in divisions of household labor (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Bianchi et al. 2012; Evertsson, 2014), and qualitative work documents heterosexual couples reverting to traditional gender roles after children are born despite a desire to share tasks equally. This illustrates the complexity of the normative status of gender egalitarianism and raises questions about when normative shifts that are not translated into actions suppress childbearing and what aspects of the gender equality relevant to fertility may require actions rather words.

Demographic evidence corroborating that more gender-equal countries exhibit higer fertility is often contradictory. A recent individual-level study shows, for example, the higher likelihood of “egalitarian” men in Sweden to remain childless (Bernhardt, Goldscheider, and Turunen 2016). The relation between gender equality, individual preferences and fertility behaviors may be less straightforward than anticipated by Esping-Andersen and Billari. The gap between declared preferences, vague desires and actual behaviour can be the result of a wide array of factors. Unresolved tensions between choice and freedom and puzzling paradoxes mark individual agency (Berlin 1969; Pettit 1993; Schwartz 2014). When more options are available, futures can become harder to envision. In a world of choices where having a family, becoming a mother, is no longer the default option, freedom may impose pressure to make the best choice. It seems both responsible and evading responsibility to be tentative, prolonging the decision process into an endless exercise of comparing and evaluating options. In this paper we address these issues by examining the life stories of women who want children (express a preference for children) but do not want them now (do not act upon that preference and postpone).

The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and its economic aftermath inevitably played out differently in different national, regional and socio-economic contexts. Studies of trends in employment show that both Italy and Spain had, prior to the 2008 recession, a well-established division between the protected employment of labor-market "insiders" and the precarity of newcomer "outsiders" (Boeri & Galasso 2006; Golsch 2003). Radical restructuring of the labor market followed the end of dictatorship in Spain relegated young people to insecure work and high unemployment (Golsch 2003). In Italy, the flexibilization of the labor market started later (Boeri & Galasso 2006). The two countries now have similar concentrations of young people who are not in employment, education or training. The age of leaving the parental home is very high in comparison to Northern Europe in both countries, with the proportion of young adults living with parents at ages 18-34 highest in Italy. Between 2007 and 2012, the decline in the proportion of young adult owner-occupiers was more marked in Spain and counterbalanced by an increase in renting rather than living with parents (Lennartz et al 2015, Table 1). The national picture in both countries masks regional variations in fertility, difficulties in achieving secure employment and housing (Caltabiano 2016; Graham, Sabater, and Fiori 2016), and population composition due to in- and out-migration. It is clear that in both countries, after 2008, young people's life chances became even more dependent upon the social and economic status of the family of origins (OECD-Better Life Initiative 2017; Barbieri et al. 2015; Schizzerotto et al. 2011; Barbagli et al. 2004).

Italy and Spain belong to the Mediterranean welfare models, characterised by low level of "de-familialization"(family remains the main carer and provider), as opposed to Northern countries' higher levels of state provision (Lebano 2018; Dalla Zuanna 2004). The weak support for combining employment paying a living wage with raising children which characterizes the Mediterranean welfare model is widely acknowledged by demographers as an important part of the context of postponement, along with the associated weak promotion of equality between men and women. However, the material presented in the final parts of this paper suggests the Southern European style of postponement is animated by a more complex interplay between local regional agents and structures, conflicting social norms, individualized and relational life plans.

Methodology

The data presented are part of a larger body of qualitative work seeking to explain low-low fertility and complementing existing quantitative data.[4] The research design purposively recruited respondents in equivalent age groups that reflected different combinations of theoretically significant circumstances across contrasting cities and national localities. Research participants are aged 30-35, a theoretically purposive narrow age group; for women who have passed their thirtieth birthday without having a child, there is still time left to have children, but awareness of biological limits is likely to be high. Potential interviewees had to have a heterosexual partner with whom they had been together for at least six months. Almost all had been together for years and anticipated remaining together; therefore, they had a partner with whom they could have children.[5] The research sites of Milan and Naples in Italy, Barcelona and Seville in Spain, reflect a deliberate strategy of identifying two cities in each low fertility country with above and below average levels of fertility and economic prosperity, since such contextual factors are known to be relevant to fertility (Bernardi and Klaerner 2014). Because personal socio-economic circumstances, particularly employment opportunities and constraints, security or insecurity, are also known to be significant, in each city, we have deliberately recruited matched numbers of women with high and low education, stable and unstable employment (Berrington and Pattaro 2014; Bernardi et al. 2008; Caltabiano 2016; Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2012). This design enabled us to capture biographical interviews affording opportunities for comparison that maximize our chances of identifying key factors in the struggles, trade-offs and tension that are suggested in the literature between the ideal of wanting two or three children and the reality of postponing childbearing at risk of waiting too long.

Researchers with connections in the localities used networks of acquaintances and opportunities for contact with relevant strangers to identify multiple independently selected starting points for recruitment combined with a modest element of “snowballing.” This procedure has been described as “complex indirect snowball sampling” and is effective in preventing unwanted “clustering” (White, Judd, and Poliandri 2012). Of 35 childless women interviewed, 26 were defined as postponing having children - 3 were sure that they did not want children and 6 were trying to become pregnant. In this paper we focus on the 26 whose account is of postponing having children; that is, either they definitely want children but “not now” or they are deferring a decision about whether they want children or not (see supplementary material in the online Appendix for a full enumeration of the sample; all names have been changed). This definition of postponement emerged from the techniques of data collection and analysis.

Interviews were semi-structured with the emphasis on open questions which encouraged biographical narrative. The first question asked participants to speak about how they saw their future, if necessary explicitly asking about their future in terms of family and children.[6] Although an interview guide suggested probes and prompts to encourage elaboration and clarification, leading questions were avoided, and interviewers encouraged accounts in interviewees’ own terms (Ritchie et al. 2014). Consequently, concepts such as “desires,” “ideals,” and “intentions” were not elicited by inviting responses to standard wordings seeking to operationalize these terms but were allowed to emerge from analysis of answers to more open-ended questions about aspects of the future. Interviews lasted between 45 and 210 minutes,[7] were recorded, transcribed in the language in which they were conducted, summarized and partially translated in English. They were stored and coded using Nvivo11 with each interviewee as a “case.” The program was a means to facilitate conventional coding and thematic analysis techniques (Ritchie et al. 2014). rather than create analytical shortcuts. Each member of a two-person team independently read and re-read material, case by case, labelling, and defining codes and themes, then debating and revisiting the categorizations as a team.

Demographers generally define the preference for having children as the intention to have them in the next 2 to 4 years (Billari and Kohler 2004). Most interviewees used “want” and “would like” to express a desire to have children but it was not unusual for participants to present alternative or unclear timescales. Timescales are often also receding. For example, an interviewee acknowledged thinking that she will have children in the next two years for almost a decade. Hence, our initial definition of postponers was women who want children but “not now.” A small number of interviewees explicitly articulated ambivalence or uncertainty about having children or seemed to express this through their changing and contradictory views. These are boundary cases that cannot be classified as either having a definite desire to have children or having clearly decided not to have children. The initial definition of postponement was extended to include women who were ambivalent and deferring the decision about whether they would have children or not.

Three stories of postponement

The three stories that follow are, each in its own right, paradigmatic of the main dilemmas facing childless women in their thirties in Italy and Spain. All the names have been changed. Two women have relatively privileged middle-class backgrounds and university qualifications; one is from a less affluent family and withdrew from a university degree. All enjoy aspects of their employment despite a range of circumstances in terms of remuneration, job security and control over their working conditions. Natalia from Barcelona and Alberta from Naples both have low-wage jobs. Alberta has no security as her employment is in the informal sector. Natalia's confidence in her job security and pleasure in her work is reduced by the discriminatory attitudes of her manager. In the third case, Irene from Milan has better paid, secure employment in the private sector but is unable to control her erratic working hours, which are dictated by commercial deadlines.

Natalia (30, Barcelona) – "You're not stable, having a child is a huge mess, so I think the ideal age is delaying."

Natalia is 30 years old. Her family's social class background could be described as "cross-class": her father is an assembly line worker, her mother is a primary school teacher. She has a stable but low-paid job as an animal caretaker, lives with her long-term partner in their owner-occupied flat, and is the main earner. Natalia's parents encouraged her to go to university, where she met her partner of twelve years. In her first year, she withdrew from university to find paid work and become financially independent of her parents. Although never comfortable asking her parents for money, she more recently accepted their financial help to buy their flat. Money has always been a problem and careful management is needed to pay the mortgage.

Natalia's remarks about her future combine lack of confidence in any particular outcome, resigned acceptance, and openness to change.

> *I'm opened to changes because I know nothing can assure you a future, not even a contract of indefinite duration, not even a stable job, what is that? It doesn't exist any longer. So, when we talk about the future, whatever it comes. I don't know. Am I going to stay with this job? I don't know.*

As if thinking aloud, she describes tension between excitement at the idea of the joint project of having children and the impossibility of achieving the economic security she believes necessary in order to live up to parenting responsibilities.

> *I would like to have a child. It's been something, with my partner we've been together for a long time, and we always said it'll be awesome to have someone in common, to teach him, to transfer our shared values to him, so it's always been a thrill.*

This is followed by a counter-assertion of the possibility of remaining childless.

> *We used to have the excitement, I say used to because, as time goes and I get to the age [of having children], I see it's a "no," nowadays it's a "no."* [a no to have a child]

The first reason she gives for this "no" is that they lack the financial security she regards as necessary for the stable conditions of responsible parenting

> [a child] *It's all expenses, it's huge for what I can afford, I think you have to take responsibility and if you can't, then don't try it.*

Natalia had reason to believe that her job would be threatened by having a child. She has been confronted with biases against women since the beginning:

> *I know my boss didn't want me at the beginning. It was a guy who they wanted to hire, because, "You need a stable person for this job and a woman sooner or later gets pregnant."*
>
> *Because I'm in the age of fertility my boss always puts me in an uncomfortable situation, and to me, it's like, "I told you many times. I'll let you know if it happens. Please stop asking."*

Because her partner is not in stable employment, loss of her job would undermine their precarious economic security. Balanced against this fear, she knows that her partner has offered to take the main role in child care to enable her to continue working. However, she worries that maternity leave could lead to demotion and loss of the relationship she enjoys with the animals she currently cares for.

Because their whole time together has been lived on a low income, Natalia feels that she and her partner have never had the opportunity to enjoy aspects of a "normal" relationship as a young couple, a theme that speaks to post-materialist/post-modernist values:

> *In all these many years of our relationship, and we never, I don't know. If we eat out one night, or we go out a night, the rest of the month, we stay at home, and so we watch money very closely. We haven't lived as couple really. We didn't travel, well we did but making our own sandwiches, and, which is fine, we haven't been bad, but a really nice trip, Africa is really appealing to us.*

Hence, "if they won a lottery" rather than having a child, she would first do all the things they weren't able to do as a couple, starting with a trip to Africa.

She does not share her thoughts about children with family or friends and acknowledges that this may be in order to avoid social pressure to have children, particularly from her mother-in-law. Unlike some interviewees insulated from social pressure by a circle of childless friends, she feels strongly that not having children in her social world is simply not an option:

> *And it's a topic I try to avoid, I always avoid it, because there's too much social pressure that I don't want to face.*

Although Natalia thinks that reproductive technology would allow her to have a child "when she is forty", at age 30, she knows that she would not want a child that late but is not worried about postponing. Delaying having children is an ethical decision as it involves waiting for the stable life necessary for responsible parenting, but it is also a hedonistic one, as it keeps open the chance to first enjoy life as a normal couple.

> *As I see thing going, you're not stable, having a child is a huge mess, so I think the ideal age is delaying. The ideal age is when your life is stable.*

Alberta (35, Naples) – "We are not having children, we are still the children of our parents"

Alberta, with a higher degree in humanities, has, since she graduated 7 years ago, worked with no contract or only irregular contracts for low pay in her disciplinary field. Both her parents, now retired, had secure middle-class jobs while she grew up in countryside outside Naples. Her childhood was peopled by cousins, aunts and grandparents who looked after her while her parents were at work. She has been with her partner for over 10 years. After a short breakup, they reunited two years ago but are not living together at the moment. Alberta shares a cheap apartment with friends in Naples. Her parents help whenever she is short of money, as they have always done. They would help her buy a house if she asked, but she does not know if she is going to stay in Naples or move to Rome where her partner lives. Right now Alberta travels to visit her partner and her parents in the province.

Alberta begins the interview by talking about how she and her friends are more like children than ready to have children because they still do not own their own homes. They do talk about having children but "with embarrassment." She is clear that she does not have the money to have a family, but she also tells us that she goes to concerts and pubs all the time and lives as if she were in her twenties. The same dominant themes expressed by Natalia are also expressed in Alberta's interview but with stronger emphasis on post-materialist or post-modern values, stressing the importance of her own personal development. At the same time, she mentions insecurity that blocks the possibility of parenting . She repeats that, up to now, she has been chasing her passion –and laments how people her age in Naples are "stuck," "free not to commit," "not to take responsibilities," "not to close any door."

> *We want to chase after dreams and passions, do what we studied for and we risk being trapped in this ethernal youth. We want to go to concerts, we live in a utopian Naples that does not exist and even the salaries we get look more like pocket money given by uncles for Christmas than like adult salaries.*

Alberta "acts young," but knows that she is not young anymore. She says she is now ready to move on and, in two years, to have children; yet she also states that she has not given herself a precise timeframe, and fears her enthusiasm and energy will wane as she waits.

> *I think that when one is just about thirty there is a completely different energy. One [before 30] is less disenchanted, therefore… I do not know, how one copes with a child at a more intellectual level, which was not there before. Before, it would have been much more natural. There was an energy, a vitality. Also, one's body…*

Alberta wants to be an optimist about her future. She imagines herself moving ahead, feeling better about herself.

> *My future .... I am a bit optimistic, so I imagine that at a certain point I will manage to get some kind of tranquillity, because… … I have not played all the cards that I can play, the possibilities that I have… mmh… are not that favourable right now… unfortunately work…*

For Alberta, building a better future has meant having to face trade-offs between giving up Naples and Italy if she is to continue to follow her passion in a better job or giving up her passion by switching occupations in order to find a better job in Naples. Avoiding the trade-offs says Alberta, leads to a sort of "sleepiness"[8]; it is "infantilizing." While Alberta did not worry because of the financial crisis, she "did notice it"; she was busy writing her thesis and, she says, her parents insulated her from it. They used to tell her not to waste time doing "little jobs" ("*lavoretti*") but rather to finish soon and start having a real job. Today, seven years after her graduation, she has not found anything but insecure jobs. Nevertheless, her father discourages her from quitting her current job before she has a new one, while her mother sends out applications for jobs in the public administration and would like her to have a family.

Alberta thinks that if she got pregnant she would be fired. Her close friends tell her that this is what she should do; that she should become pregnant and finally get out of her job. Alberta would like two or three children and a crowded, noisy house like the one where she grew up. Her partner supports her in this, he would have had children already, 5 years ago. She imagines having fun bringing a lot of children in one car, just the way it was for her as a child. She imagines leaving the child with grandparents rather than in day care, because it is more important for children to be among people who care about them than to socialize with other children. Despite vivid images of the joys of having children and a sense of needing to change, she also remains ambivalent, makes no specific plans and continues to postpone.

Irene (31, Milan) “I do not want to force myself to envision a future”

Irene has a degree, is married, lives with her husband in an owner-occupied flat and has been in the same career job, regularly employed, for over 6 years. It is the job she studied for and is passionate about. She views her job and motherhood as wholly incompatible; her employment demands long hours with no prospect of going part-time, and her understanding of good mothering is time-intensive and hands-on.

She describes her family of origin as “a family with the great-grand parents,” a multigenerational family closely tied together. She has no siblings but many cousins and her parents’ home was always full of people. Irene’s parents insulated her from the crisis of 2008. They paid tuition for her degree in a private college in Milan and for her rent (over 20,000 euros per year). From the crisis, she says she learned unpredictability and the impossibility of making plans and the extent of her reliance on her parents.

> *Yes, because I feel the unpredictability from this point of view, and this is what the crisis taught us at a certain point, if it had not been for my parents, I would have not succeeded in doing anything.*

She does not feel confident that she will be equally capable to provide for her children.

Irene intends to have children one day, but not now. She believes that she would have to change her job first. By way of evidence, she cites colleagues who give no time to their children; she does not want to end up like them. She would feel guilty if she came home every night at 9 p.m. or left the child with babysitters and nannies all the time.

Irene has not always wanted children. “I have never seen it as a priority, never!” she says. Her personal realization through a job has always been important. Her husband chose a very different way of living. He works in a bank, has a regular schedule and cultivates his passion for cooking in his free time, while Irene talks of pursuing “personal realization beyond the pre-defined things, such as marriage, children and all the rest.” Now, however, she is thinking of reinventing herself— not becoming a housewife, but finding a job that leaves her more time to have a life that might include children. Her husband sees having children as a priority. In the last three years they have been arguing about this, because he would like to have children now. They have 5 or 6 couple-friends who have had children. “We are surrounded by new births,” Irene says, and this affects her husband although she does not identify with the parents, nor is she moved by their children. Recently, however, Irene is starting to worry about her age. She and her husband have always thought that they would have no problems having children, but now she feels that at 31 and 33 they need to allow themselves time to see if they can actually conceive. She is also concerned about being "too old" when the child is born. Yet, she also remains ambivalent about having children. When she imagines possible scenarios, she notes that what she sees is "not pleasant." She feels that she would perform badly as a woman, as a professional and as a mother.

> *I feel that I would not be able to be complete in anything, but maybe one should be resigned not to be complete.*

Her reference to being complete seems to reflect an aspiration to be what some have called the "total mother" (Wolf 2007), the impossible "super mother" -- mother, professional, wife. Irene seems to suggest she had not yet fully accepted that she will only be able to be a little of each and that this acceptance is necessary if she is to stop postponing.

When she thinks about the future domestic division of labor in raising a child, she knows that her husband would be very active, as he is now, but she also sees it as impossible without help from grandparents. For this and for other reasons, she is considering the possibility of going "back home," which for both her and her husband would mean changing jobs. She grew up in the countryside, the real countryside where her parents have no neighbors. When she moved to Milan, she wanted a more stimulating life, but as she grows older, she feels that she needs nature. At the opening of the interview, she tells us that she has decided that she is not going to force herself to envision a future.

> *Let's say that I have come to realize that I do not have to force myself to imagine a future, so I am trying to… plan, yes, because I did get married, so…I also moved here some years ago, I have some projects concerning my future, I also bought a house, but I am treating them as more short term projects… I mean that now I am here and I am doing this but tomorrow probably I could change my mind. This is the way I feel both at personal level and in the job I do. The long-term future plans do not have a real outlet ("sbocco"), if not in my really private life, with my husband.*

Irene's stable, well-paid employment is demanding of her time; a husband's willingness to contribute to household work is not enough to allow her to reconcile her current work and family life in a way she regards as ethical. She is ambivalent about the self-sacrifice of her work identity and the uprooting she regards as necessary to appropriately mother the children she says she wants. This is the background to her declaration that she has trouble imagining a future and she has decided not to force herself to imagine one.

An overview of seven common themes across 24 interviews

This section presents the dominant explanations of postponement given by research participants. As is the case whenever people are asked to explain their actions, research participants' accounts inevitably involve an element of presentation of self and draw on dominant discourses and vocabularies of motive. This, of course, does not make them false or dishonest. Moreover, in the course of long intensive interviews, interviewees often move beyond ready-made answers and enter into debate with themselves about their situation. We do not presume that their accounts expose all the causal processes involved in postponement of having children, since neither all socially structured opportunities and constraints are fully visible in everyday life, nor are all socio-psychological processes ever fully available to conscious thought. Nevertheless, the words of our research participants are unequivocally relevant to how they are orienting to their futures. Their accounts resonate with the academic discussions of processes implicated in the "postponement transition" and offer material to think with when considering academic explanations. The themes do not necessarily occur in every interview, but they recur across accounts among both Italian and Spanish research participants and map onto circumstances of more- or less security. Because we have deliberately sampled people with diverse circumstances within regions that express the internal socio-economic diversity of Italy and Spain, it is not surprising that we find similar diversity of themes across Spanish and Italian interviews.

1) A continuum between being unwilling and unable

Natalia adopts, as a moral principle, the widely held view that only those who can provide a stable life should have children; it would be morally irresponsible for her now because she lacks the necessary economic stability. However, she acknowledges that her first priority, should she suddenly have freedom from economic constraint, would be to enjoy a more carefree life as a couple. Being forced to wait to have children because of an absence of security melds into choosing to postpone. It cannot be assumed that people will be immediately willing to have children, if the economic constraints that make them unable to do so are removed; they may still wish to recuperate possibilities of pursuing other projects first. Alberta presents herself as choosing to postpone because she is chasing her dreams but also acknowledges that she has no choice given her insecure work, housing, and earnings so low as to amount to pocket money. Irene talks of having chosen to prioritize her career but also acknowledges feeling unable to have children because of the impossibility of reconciling motherhood with her work.

Not surprising, an emphasis on being unable to have children because of constraints is more common among those with less privileged backgrounds, low pay, and insecure employment. Irene is an example, however, of how institutional barriers to reconciling work and family life, a work culture specific to a local area (Milan) and a profession (media advertisement), can make women in well-paid, secure employment feel unable to have children without sacrificing their work.

2) Postponement as taking time and letting time pass.

When women emphasise that they are not yet willing or, in their mind, not yet ready to take on the responsibilities of parenting, they are claiming a need for more time for other purposes, hence, choosing to "take time" first. This may be very different from a feeling of enforced waiting or having no option but to let time pass with no sense of change, as if time itself was "on hold." Postponing as "letting time pass" because circumstances are hostile to responsible parenthood is a more reactive waiting than a purposive use of time - marking time, holding on or experiencing time as on hold until circumstances change. However, as Natalia's account shows, feeling forced to wait does not preclude also wishing to "take time." It is consistent with the possibility of a continuum between being unwilling and unable that elements of both "taking time" and "letting time pass" can be present in the same account, as in those of Natalia, Alberta and Irene. Alberta presents herself as taking time to chase her dreams but also acknowledges letting time pass when she sees no way out of her insecure work and pocket money wages. Irene's account of having taken time to do something beyond the norm of motherhood also makes it clear that she now feels she is letting time pass until she makes a move to refashion her life in ways that can be reconciled with motherhood.

A sense of time on hold is most likely when constraints loom large. It is possible to maintain hope, despite the extending absence of desired change as time passes. . The future that will bring change is kept far enough ahead to maintain a plausible distance from the present of unfavourable circumstances, albeit receding like a mirage.. For example, Giovanna, 35 from Milan, is deferring hope and children to an unknown and unknowable time yet to come, when she might have "a nest" that she can fill:

> *"Because unfortunately after so many years of work the condition is not stable, I have no security, therefore, in my opinion, if there is no nest you cannot fill it"* (Giovanna 35, Milan)

An account of "taking time" is most common when constraints are not significant, having children now seems possible and the risks of delay do not loom large enough to be invested with fear of regret. Taking time was stressed by Roberta, (31, Naples): "A child in

10 years, a child when I am 40, this sounds like a good plan" ["*Un figlio tra 10 anni, un figlio a 40 anni, e' un buon programma*"] and by 31 year old Julia from Barcelona. She and her husband have a stable financial situation, a place to live and could have children now. They choose to wait because they want time to enjoy the lifestyles they have at the moment and would like to travel, which they believe will not be possible once they have children. Just as "being unwilling" and "being unable" can blur in accounts of postponement, so too can the theme of wishing to claim or take time and being forced to put time on hold. The instability of the differences between taking time (an active choice) and waiting as letting time pass (less agentic) is likely when women are ambivalent. Time taken to negotiate among conflicting desires, to adjust to uncertainty and unpredictability may be experienced as actively taking time (for example, to achieve professional goals), or as merely waiting and marking time; for example, in the hope of a more stable or less family-hostile job.

3) *The dilemma between having a child or staying a child.*

Some women interviewed in this study argued that there was something infantile or narcissistic in their deferring childbearing so as not to limit their lives. They acknowledged themselves as lacking the maturity necessary to care for somebody else beyond their couple relationship.

> "*I am still a little too egotistic, I am afraid of unconditional love towards somebody else. I have myself as a point of reference" ["Io ho come riferimento me"]* (Roberta, 31, Naples)

> *"…something that I think I quite like, anchored to a never-ending adolescence that (she laughs) does not take an extra step."* (Aurelia, 31, Naples)

Sometime in the same biography of postponement, the decision to postpone ironically coexists with the fear that it may already be too late to have children, and that the best childbearing time was a childlike yesterday, because after 30, there is not the same way to face life and to connect to children; because, as Alberta notes, one grows tired and things become more cerebral.

However, alongside these views, there are also frequent acknowledgements of the possibility of a fulfilled future without children and an absence of labelling others without children as selfish or immature. Natalia is one of a small proportion of research participants who goes further and notes the potential selfishness of having children and the benefits to the planet of childlessness in the context of climate change:

> *Sometimes I feel selfish thinking that I don't want a child now, or that I want one later in life ... it seems selfish to me to have child and so I say, "Well, I won't have one" ... I think we are so many in this planet. We are more than enough. ... What you're doing today [in environmental impact] will have an effect on your children. It's like everybody wants children but nobody thinks about them.*

4) Tightly-knit families and traditional obligations.

Some research participants reported fear and regret that they will postpone having children so long that they will not give grandchildren to their parents. Alberta says "I cannot give anything back to my parents" when she describes the downward social mobility characterizing her generation. "I thought I was going to give them at least some grandchildren."

Caterina, who says she does not know whether to have children, comments that she would do it for her parents, to make them happy, and calls this the "social aspect" of having children:

> *"I want to share the experience of having children with my friends who have children too, and I'd like to share it with my parents, I'd like to give them a grandchild."*
> (Caterina 30, Barcelona)

Catrina links wanting to have children to her close relationship to her parents but, like others, she is postponing with no clear timetable.

Their stories, and many others, speak of the Southern European pattern of strong family ties discussed by demographers. Of course, not all experienced close-knit happy families or wish to replicate the circumstances of their childhood. There are also stories of family ruptures, of sadness, disappointment, and lack of emotional and material support. Nevertheless, family support was the norm. The economic crisis of 2008 and its repercussions are seldom mentioned openly as a reason for postponement, but as the wider literature suggests, they certainly reinforced dependency on the family of origin, as Irene and others acknowledged:

> *"The economic crisis did not affect my choices. I had just graduated. I have been living off the pension of the grandmothers.*" (Alberta 35, Naples)

Participants who talk of how closeness to and respect for parents has fostered the desire to give back grandchildren and how they wish to raise children according to the family values, nevertheless, also postpone having children. Their sense of obligation cannot be met by having a child in inappropriate circumstances, even when their parents are willing to help with childcare and with expenses. Some express frustration and resentment for being worse off than one's parents, for believing their parents' stories that hard work is rewarded.

5) The ideal of "total motherhood"

Accounts of delay often made reference to an ideal of motherhood as supplanting other identities, energies and capacities, thus becoming a woman's total identity. This conception of motherhood requires postponement of childbearing if time is to be given to any other projects. Irene is not alone in wanting to resist the idea of becoming a "total mother" and to at least delay the self-consuming responsibilities that this understanding of a future with children implies. Julia, 31, a lawyer from Barcelona, for example, articulated both the necessity of postponement in order to resist this version of motherhood and acceptance that this is what she may eventually become. She describes resistance through postponement as "a generational question" because women want to be more than, and to be seen as more than, "mother only." At the same time, she accepts "If you're a parent, you're a parent 100 percent" and that she would be unable to hand child-care over to others, not even to grandparents. The concept of "total motherhood" draws support from childhood memories and tropes of Southern European mothers at the hub of family networks, but it also resonates with widely circulating and persistent expert-endorsed ideals of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996; Wolf, 2007; Ennis, 2014). Total motherhood demands that other cherished desires and life projects, whether of self-realization or spending time together as a couple, happen before children if they are to happen at all or finding a way of accepting, as Irene put it, "being incomplete" in everything, both mothering and other life projects.

6) The optimism bias: the clock is ticking, but not for me

Among the women we interviewed, concerns about the biological limits of their capacity to conceive remain in the background; they were seldom mentioned. The idea that the best time to have children was yesterday was expressed, but more often to convey that being a good parent required being younger and more energetic than to register concern about declining fecundity. Fears about being an older parent also included the growing risks of illness or premature death reducing time with children. Such acknowledgements that the best time for having children might already be passed in the twenties could, nevertheless, coexist with a lack of urgency and the view that there was still time to take or hold on to.

7) The paradox of choice. Our interviewees are self-reflexive about the individualized and problematic link between choice and freedom. In a world of choice, people may become trapped; less free. Aurelia, 31, from Naples, sees choice as something that she must face in order to grow up, but she would rather stay in the suspension that precedes choice and action. She is concerned that choosing one path will result in disappointment and she pushes the moment of choice somewhere into the future. Interviewees reported feeling tentative, trapped in trade-offs and isolated in the sense of responsibility for "choice." Parents who otherwise help in many different material and emotional ways are not considered an appropriate source of help with this decision. Friends are often struggling with the same dilemma.

Conclusions

We have related the stories of women age 30-35 who know or think they might want children but "not now." Our sampling strategy focused on those whose partnership status might signal "ready to go" because all were in stable heterosexual partnerships, but included variation through country, regional and socio-economic differences. The same stories of postponement occur in Italy and Spain. Details reflect known regional differences. For example, informal work is common in Naples but not in Milan. However, the emergent themes cut across the regions. There were differences in emphasis that typically reflect socio-economic advantage and disadvantage rather than national context – differences between being unwilling to have children now, choosing to "take time," and being unable or discouraged by unfavourable circumstances; forced into "holding on," letting time pass. Those in less privileged circumstances were more likely to emphasize a sense of "holding on." -- waiting for circumstances that will better support a stable life of material and economic security. However, elements of both could appear within an interview. In either case, to have children now was to act prematurely by leaving unfinished business, closing options, and unfairly imposing on children parents who are child-like and ill-equipped, whether emotionally or materially.

Debate about the causes of low fertility sometimes frames post-materialist/post-modern values and economic or institutional constraints as if these are competing primary explanations. However, elements of both these explanations are often present in the experiences and views narrated here. Moreover, they are not necessarily experienced as discrete factors, and women's accounts can slide between being reluctant to take on the responsibilities of children until some more personal goal is realized and feeling discouraged or unable to have children because of unfavorable circumstances (poor employment, income and housing situations, institutional settings discriminating against mothers and/or unsupportive of work and family reconciliation, a shrinking economy and fading career opportunities).

Even when describing discouraging economic constraints, the interviewees invariably used the language of choice, often making comparisons with the lack of choice that had been afforded to their mothers' generation. However, the idiom of individualized choice does not obliterate the relationality of their decision making, which was acknowledged in multiple ways: worry about failing to gift grandchildren to their parents, modelling their desires for children on the relationships of their family childhood, negotiating with their partner concerning his family preferences, weighing up the likely stress of children on their relationship, and making comparisons with friends and siblings. Also, the idiom of choice does not obliterate the differences between those who were better resourced and actively taking time rather than holding on while waiting for their circumstances to improve; parenthood was generally seen as incompatible with the inadequacy of provision given insecure, low-paid work.

The sense of frustration with gender inequalities anticipated in the analysis of Billari and Esping-Andersen (2015) and others was rarely articulated with respect to imagined future divisions of childcare or domestic work. However, the impossibility of combining motherhood with their working life as lived now was typical among interviewees. There was a general lack of confidence concerning protection from gender discrimination, and low- or no expectation of family-friendliness in the workplace. Just as Alberta stated she might be dismissed if she became pregnant, so other women told stories that demonstrated the belief that their workplace would be unsympathetic should they take time out for children.

However, what makes the imagined combination of motherhood and work impossible is not only gender discrimination and family-unfriendly work practices; it is also these women's own moral understanding of motherhood. Like almost all the women interviewed, Alberta, Irene and Natalia assume that mothering is and should be an all-consuming responsibility; it is morally suspect to want to give less than 100 percent of yourself. This is not matched by an equivalent view of fathering and closes down strong expectations of gender equality in parenting. The sense of total responsibility remains despite being able to imagine support from family or a domestic work-sharing partner. Alberta, Irene and Natalia could envisage grandparental support for their own future children. Yet, this and the involvement of their partner did not make motherhood seem compatible with their current investment in employment. Improvements in protection for mothers in employment, support for career breaks and access to affordable childcare would clearly change the situation, but a radical transformation would also require such changes to either trigger or somehow be associated with more profound cultural shifts in understandings of the relative responsibilities of motherhood and fatherhood. Despite declaring they can choose their future in a way their mother could not, the ideal of motherhood that our Italian and Spanish research participants held remains incompatible with continued pursuit of a demanding career or, for that matter, just working long hours to make ends meet. The ‘desire-intentions-behaviour gap’ does not always capture the flow or complexity of interviewee’s accounts of being unwilling or unable to have children without taking time or letting time pass.

Notes

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[1] This article is the result of shared on-going discussions, evaluations, revisions; more specifically, **Adele Lebano** is mainly responsible for the structure, title, and first draft; **Lynn Jamieson** for the final draft and conclusions.

[2] According to the last Eurostat update, the estimate average age to leave the family in 2017 was 30.1 for Italy, 29.3 for Spain against 26.0 for European Union (Statistics Explained (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/) - 08/10/2018).

[3] The "demographic mechanism'"is the relationship, all other things being equal, between number of births and age structure of the population – fewer births between one year and the next mean the cohort born last year outnumber the cohort born this year, older generations outnumber younger generations, and, unless numbers of births per person increase, this trend will continue.

[4] The larger study included women with one child and a smaller sample of men, as well as the childless women, a subset of whom are the postponers whose accounts are presented in this paper. Between September 2016 and June 2017, 64 women 16 men were interviewed in Italy and Spain.

[5] In one case a couple have only been together for six months and a couple of over ten years' duration describe the relationship as "on and off.'

[6] New starter questions explored relevant aspects of the past and present as well as future, including family of origin, education, employment, partnership, housing and the extent to which climate change or other societal/global threats impinged on the future.

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[7] In some cases, more than one interview took place with the same persons. Follow ups by phone, Skype and email where used to gain more depth and collect missing information or further clarify inconsistencies. The interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed in the language in which they were conducted. A full translation was beyond budget and so detailed English summaries were produced peppered with translated extracts.

[8] He is referring to young Italians today facing the trade-off between staying put in their bedrooms or packing their things and leaving the country. The avoidance or inability to choose a course of action links to a combination of contextual constraints and individual agency.

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