

## **Pathways to Adulthood and Fertility: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Québec**

Simona Bignami-Van Assche (*Université de Montréal, Canada*)

Francesco C. Billari (*Università Bocconi, Milan, Italy*)

### Background

Individual choices during the period of early adulthood (the so-called ‘transition to adulthood’) might have long-lasting effects on total fertility. Indeed, differential fertility trends in Europe, and in particular the divergence between countries with low fertility (fertility moderately below replacement level) and countries with lowest-low fertility (defined as a level of total fertility at or below 1.3), have been shown to be closely related to cross-country differences in the processes of union formation and dissolution (Billari and Kohler, 2004). In particular, the emergence of lowest-low fertility in Southern Europe (Kohler et al., 2002) has been connected to the emergence of a “latest-late” pattern of transition to adulthood, that is, the peculiar pattern of late home-leaving, union formation, and transition to parenthood found in Italy and Spain, which can only be partially compared with the general postponement in the transition to parenthood typical of the second demographic transition (Billari et al., 2002). At the other extreme, “earliest-early” transitions to adulthood in Northern European countries (Billari, 2004) have been associated with increasing levels of fertility in the 1990s.

The emergence of lowest-low fertility has also been accompanied by a reversal of cross-country relationships between total fertility and the share of nonmarital births (Billari and Kohler, 2004). Births to cohabiting couples account for most of the observed trend, and European countries with the highest proportions of cohabiting couples and earlier ages at first union formation tend to have the highest levels of fertility (Kiernan, 1999; 2001). However, the pathways through which alternative types of unions, and especially nonmarital cohabitation, affect fertility are unclear and have been poorly studied. Comparative analyses have been particularly limited, although the need for comparative research on the transition to adulthood has been stressed upon in the literature by several authors (e.g. Billari, 2004; Baizan et al., 2002).

In this paper, we assess the extent to which late patterns of family formation are a necessary or sufficient condition for the emergence of low and lowest-low fertility, and whether the type of first union (cohabitation or marriage) affects the direction of this relationship, in Italy

and Québec. We motivate this choice because Italy and Québec have experienced similar declines in fertility and changes in the transition to adulthood but differ with respect to the proportion of cohabiting unions, which are widespread among Quebecois whereas remain a unpopular choice for Italians. Since 1980 fertility has sharply declined in Québec and, since 1995, stabilized below replacement levels, representing a dramatic reversal of its historically high fertility levels. The features of fertility decline in Québec have resembled Southern European patterns more than North American ones, with increasing ages at first marriage and first birth, and young adults (especially men) welcome to stay with their parents, not only until employed but until married (Boyd and Norris, 2000; Zenaida et al., 2002). One main exception to this trend has been the sharp increase in the proportion of nonmarital cohabitations and births in cohabiting unions among young adults, similar to earliest-early transitions to adulthood in Northern European countries, and markedly different from the experience of all other Canadian provinces.

We build on Billari and Rosina's (2003) exploratory analysis of the impact of fertility of the timing and sequencing of demographic events in the transition to adulthood in Italy, and we focus on the impact of leaving home prior to union formation and pre-marital cohabitation on fertility. Particularly, we investigate the possibility that fertility decline in Québec has been associated with a '*earliest-late*' pathway of transition to adulthood, characterized by an early transition to first non-marital cohabitation (as in Northern European countries) and by a late, or non-existent, transition to marriage and childbearing (as in Southern European countries). Our analysis provides evidence that allows more informed evaluations of the potential effect of policies aimed at modifying fertility levels.

### Data and methods

For Italy, we use data from two surveys. First, a cross-sectional survey on young adults (IDEA) gathered in 2003 information on a representative sample of Italians aged 23-27 and 33-37, with a total sample size of 3,000. The survey collected data on life course transitions, especially focusing on the relationship between respondents and their parents, and respondents and their partner. Second, data come from the multipurpose household survey on Family and Social Subjects conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2003. The sample, representative of the national population, includes for Italy 49,451 respondents of all age groups.

For Québec, we use data from the cross-sectional 2001 General Social Survey. The

General Social Survey (GSS) program gathers data on social subjects in order to monitor changes in the living conditions and well being of Canadians over time, and to provide immediate information on specific social policy issues of current or emerging interest. The 2001 GSS was the third survey to collect detailed information on the family in Canada (previous cycles of the GSS that collected family data were carried out in 1990 and 1995). The 2001 GSS collected data on family and marital history (marriage and cohabitation), family origins, fertility and fertility intentions, values and attitudes towards certain areas of family life. The survey collected data from a sample of 25,000 respondents from the general population 15 years of age and older, and it is representative at the national and province level. Supplementary data for the analysis will come from the 1998-2003 Longitudinal Study of Child Development in Québec (ÉLDEQ).

We use both exploratory analyses and methods based on event history analysis and matching on propensity scores on fertility outcomes, considering as main explanatory variable different pathways to adulthood.

## References

- BAIZÁN, P., A. AASSVE, F.C. BILLARI (2002). *Institutional arrangements and life course outcomes: The interrelations between cohabitation, marriage and first birth in Germany and Sweden*. MPIDR Working Paper 2002-026, Max Plank Institute for Demographic Research, Rostock (available at [www.demogr.mpg.de](http://www.demogr.mpg.de)).
- BILLARI, F.C. (2004). "Becoming and Adult in Europe: A macro(/Micro) Demographic Perspective," *Demographic Research* S3(2):15-44.
- BILLARI, F.C., M. CASTIGLIONI, T. CASTRO MARTÌN, F. MICHELIN, F. ONGARO (2002). "Household and Union Formation in a Mediterranean Fashion: Italy and Spain", in KLIJZING E., CORIJN M. (eds.), *Fertility and partnership in Europe: findings and lessons from comparative research. Volume II*, United Nations, Geneva/New York, 17-41.
- BILLARI F.C., A. ROSINA (2003). "Percorsi e tempi di transizione allo stato adulto e fecondità in ambito urbano", in BRESCHIM., LIVI BACCIM. (eds.), *La bassa fecondità italiana tra costrizioni economiche e cambio di valori*, Forum, Udine, pp.137-150.
- BILLARI, F.C., H.P. KOHLER (2004). "Patterns of Low and Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe," *Population Studies*, 58(2) : 161–176.
- BOYD, M., D. NORRIS (2000). "Demographic Change and Young Adults Living with Parents, 1981-1996," *Canadian Studies in Population* 27(1):267-281.
- KIERNAN, K. (1999). "Childbearing outside marriage in Western Europe," *Population Trends*, 98:11-20.
- KIERNAN, K. (2001). "The rise of cohabitation and childbearing outside marriage in Western Europe," *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 15 (1):1-21.
- KOHLER, H.P., F.C. BILLARI, J.O. ORTEGA. (2002). "The Emergence of the Lowest-Low Fertility in Europe in the 1990s," *Population and Development Review* 28(4): 641-680.
- ZENAIDA R., R.J. RAVANERA, T.K. BURCH, C. LE BOURDAIS (2002). "The Early Life Courses of Canadian Men: Analysis of Timing and Sequences of Events," *Canadian Studies in Population* 29(2).