



Does education affect the timing or probability of family formation? An analysis of educational attainment and first union in Italy



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ABSTRACT

Research has always considered education to be an important factor behind family formation. Nevertheless, it is not clear if education primarily affects the *acceleration* in the timing of marriage or the *ultimate probability* of union formation. This work aims to fill this gap and to contribute to the theoretical discussion that opposes economic (New Home Economics) and socio-demographic approaches, studying if educational attainment affects the timing or the overall probability of marriage in Italy. Our findings show that high-educated men and women delay entry into first union, because they stay longer in the educational system, face longer transitions between the completion of studies and labour market entry, etc. However, some gender differences emerge concerning the final probability of getting married, confirming that Italy provides a social context under which NHE predictions can be at work. High-educated men spend long time in finding the first job after school, but once they enter and become established in the labour market, they totally catch up with low-educated people. Opportunity costs of high-educated women, instead, do not decrease over time and still persist later in the life course and prevent them from totally catching up with low-educated ones. This pattern is especially true among younger cohorts of women, who do not only increasingly postpone transition to adulthood and family formation, but also decrease their ultimate probability of starting a family.

1. Introduction

Education has always been considered one of the main determinants of family formation. More specifically, education might influence either the *timing* or the *ultimate probability* of family formation. In recent decades, this distinction has dominated the theoretical and empirical debate on the topic. The New Home Economics (NHE, hereafter) (Becker, 1981) – the most important theory focusing on the association between education and family formation until the 1980s – has started to be considered too simplistic since it does not take into account differences across life courses (Liefbroer and Corijn, 1999), helping to interpret why high-educated people marry less than low-educated people, rather than why they marry later (Oppenheimer, 1997; Oppenheimer, 1988; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997). In that respect, several empirical studies have questioned the predictions of NHE and shown that high-educated men and women are more likely to delay family formation (Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan, 2012; Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991), but they do not have lower propensity to marry (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001) and become parents (Andersson et al., 2009) than low educated ones.

However, few empirical works have methodologically sought to disentangle whether education primarily affects the *acceleration* in the timing of first union (and parenthood), as suggested by the research criticizing NHE, or the *ultimate probability* of union formation.¹ In fact, most studies have used event history analysis techniques that model the association between education and transition rate to family formation but do not make it possible to distinguish the timing and the probability effects (Bernardi, 2001). The first – methodological – contribution of this work is to develop an empirical strategy that considers and statistically models this distinction.

In order to achieve the aim we focus on Italy, an interesting context in which to deepen this topic. In recent decades, Italian men and women have increasingly postponed the transition to adulthood as a result of educational expansion (Ballarino, Bernardi, Requena, & Schadee, 2009), longer time taken to find the first job and get established in the labour market (Barbieri and Scherer, 2009; Bernardi, Gangl, & Van de Werfhorst, 2004), lack of housing benefits, and increasing home ownership rates (Bernardi and Poggio, 2004). However, Italy is still a typical example of a male-breadwinner context, dominated by a strong gender-specific division

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¹ In the paper we use terms such as ‘effect’, ‘affect’, ‘influence’, ‘impact’ and so on. This is because we are primarily interested in the association whereby education is the independent variable and family formation the dependent process. Nevertheless, we are aware that our results (as well as those found in the literature reviewed in the paper) do not imply any causal link between education and family formation, since there exist some unobservable characteristics that simultaneously affect both processes (for a study that deals with this argument in regard to Italy, see Coppola, 2004).

of labour between partners (Esping-Andersen, 2009; McDonald, 2000). There women – especially, mothers –, despite the substantial disappearance of gender inequalities in education, are still under-represented in the labour market, with very low occupation rates (Del Boca and Vuri, 2007).

By studying the Italian case, hence, our second – theoretical – contribution is to investigate the social circumstances in which education can shape family formation, going beyond suggestions of “general” patterns about this association. Moreover, given the institutional and social specificities in that country, the findings from this study can help us to understand under which conditions education might lead to a lower probability of marriage and if the socio-economic and cultural context can make the predictions of NHE to be at work.

Finally, the third contribution of this paper is to study if and how the impact of education on the timing and probability of union formation has changed across cohorts. Since Italy witnessed important structural and cultural transformations in the last decades (e.g. educational expansion, increasing female labour-market participation, labour-market flexibilization, rising home ownership rates, etc.), that affected cohorts and their family formation behaviours in different ways, there are several reasons to expect a change in the association of interest over time.

The paper is structured as follows. After this brief introduction, Section 2 provides the theoretical background, describes the Italian context and outlines the main research hypotheses on the distinction between timing and probability effects of education. Section 3 describes the data, variables and methods used. Section 4 shows the main empirical results, and Section 5 concludes.

2. Educational attainment and family formation in Italy: theory and hypotheses

2.1. Education and timing of family formation

Sociological and demographic research has suggested several explanations concerning the impact of education on timing of family formation. Some scholars have argued that both high-educated men and women delay first union and parenthood simply because they stay longer in the educational system, postponing the transition to adulthood (Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan, 2012; Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991; Hoem, 1995; Lappegård and Rønsen, 2005; Leridon and Toulemon, 1995). Indeed, when individuals are attending school or university, they are usually economically dependent on their parents and not ready to start a family. Furthermore, there are social norms according to which people at school are “not at risk” of entering marriage and parenthood, and the roles of student and parent are hardly compatible, especially for women (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Swicegood, 1988).

The gradual increase in the time spent in the educational system is one of the main reasons behind the postponement of the transition to adulthood also in Italy. Among those born in the 1930s, only 23% and 6% of the total population attained at least an upper-secondary or a tertiary degree, respectively; among those born thirty years later, the proportions became 60% and 12%, respectively (OECD). The educational expansion has involved the entire Italian population, but it has mainly affected women, strongly decreasing the gender inequalities of educational opportunities (Ballarino and Schadee, 2010). The proportion of individuals born in the 1930s who went to university was 10% among men and 4% among women, whereas it was 32% and 43% for men and women born in the 1970s, respectively.

Other explanations behind the postponement of family formation for high-educated men and women refer to factors related to their future work careers (Liefbroer and Corijn, 1999). Some authors have pointed out that career and earnings patterns differ across educational levels. For the low-educated, careers are usually characterized by a steep increase in wages in the very first years after labour-market entry and a relative stability thereafter, whereas the earnings of the high-educated increase more gradually over time, as a function of age and

work experience (Härkönen and Bihagen, 2011; Mincer, 1974). Although this argument seems to suggest that early marriage and parenthood affect low-educated people more, there are several reasons to expect the opposite scenario. Indeed, for women early family formation would not only reduce earnings immediately after the event, given the higher likelihood of withdrawing temporarily from the labour market for childcare, but it would also jeopardise their future earnings and cumulative income by preventing them from entering the career tracks typical of higher-educated people and as a result of employer discrimination against married women and, especially, mothers. The decision to postpone family formation would therefore enable them to reach a relatively high occupational position earlier, and to reduce the risk of family events being considered as signals of less effort and career orientation by employers. For men, family formation should not influence current earnings, but it may endanger their future careers if they choose to invest a great deal of time and energy in family formation which would otherwise have been invested in their careers. Similarly, high-educated men may want to accumulate a certain amount of human capital before marriage and parenthood in order to support a wife and children better.

Mechanisms related to labour market and careers are crucial in explaining why highly educated postpone family formation in Italy, especially if we consider that transition to adulthood still follows the “traditional” steps in that country: before getting married and have children, Italians need to finish their studies and find the first job (Pisati, 2002). In recent decades Italian young people, especially if high-educated, have faced increasing difficulties of labour-market entry. Employment growth has been almost null, and the insider/outsider division that characterises the Italian labour market has further penalised young school leavers in search of the first job, dramatically increasing the unemployment rate among the young population. Furthermore, in 1997 and 2003 two reforms introduced flexibilization criteria into the Italian labour market. They especially affected young workers, reducing both their job quality and economic stability (Barbieri and Scherer, 2009). Moreover, the relatively high incidence of small/medium-sized firms, concentrated in specialised suppliers (e.g. specialized machinery industry) and suppliers dominated (textiles and apparel industry) industries, with little research and development and low technical and organizational complexity, has limited the demand for highly-qualified school leavers (Moscati and Rostan, 2000). Bernardi et al. (2004) described the transition from school to work of high-educated Italian individuals as ‘slow but good’, showing that they are disadvantaged in the timing of entry into the labour market with respect to low-educated individuals, but they are able to find better-quality first jobs. This ‘slowness’ can also be explained by the fact that high-educated school leavers wait for a job that matches their educational level, usually postponing exit from the parental home, where they are economically supported by their parents.

Moreover, occupational careers are quite flat in Italy, at least after the very first years after labour market entry. Collective bargaining and bureaucratic regulations strictly connect career advancement to seniority, limiting both downward and upward mobility over the life course (Barone, Lucchini, & Schizzerotto, 2011). As a result, family background and education have a strong impact on the first occupation, but they do not affect further occupational success. Therefore, it is crucial for Italian young people to enter the labour market with the best occupation available, in order to place themselves on a successful occupational path. This characteristic also contributes to the slow transition from school to work of high-educated people, who prefer to wait for the best job as their first one.

All these features help to explain the increasing delay in family formation among Italians over recent decades. For instance, after the median age at first marriage decreased among the cohorts born in the 1940s, which were the main drivers of the marriage and baby boom of the 1960s, it gradually increased from 26.7 for men (23.1 for women) born in the early 1950s to 29.3 for men (25.2 for women) born in the

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