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Fertility and Agency: Reproductive Decisions in Modern Day Rome

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative ethnographic study examines the motivations and influences effecting Italian women’s reproductive decisions. Using a narrative inquiry approach, it focuses on the interviews of ten women from Rome, Italy. This study benefits from the fieldwork and in-person interviews personally gathered in Rome in May 2014. I undertook this project because I was interested in understanding why Italy’s birth rate has declined so dramatically in the past two decades, focusing specifically on women’s perceptions. Though the current research has been approached from the quantitative demographic viewpoint, I hoped to approach my research question from the narrative, descriptive perspective. By speaking to women directly, I was able to discern some specific considerations women take into account when deciding whether to have children. Women’s principle concern was financial stability, which was related to other concerns such as the cost of living, level of workplace support, and changing family structures. I then used these concerns to suggest specific public policy measures to Italy’s National Health Services in the hopes of increasing birth rates and avoiding economic tragedies.
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INTRODUCTION

I engaged in this research because I was interested in learning why the Italian birth rate has been dropping in recent decades, specifically from the female viewpoint. The bulk of literature pertaining to this trend is in the form of demographic and international studies research, which is rooted in quantitative inquiry through the compiling of statistics. By participating in interview-based qualitative research, I hope to understand women’s perceptions and understandings surrounding the fertility decision making process. I will present my data in the form of a narrative in order to convey the storied nature of one’s life and acknowledge my own situational interpretations of those stories. In the end, I hope to apply this data in the form of suggestions to the Italian National Health Service and to inform public policy in order to encourage birth rates in ways that are reflective of women’s wants and needs.
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review section is divided into three main sections. The first part outlines the theoretical framing of the thesis; the second part provides context to the study through reviewing other studies regarding women’s reproductive decisions and declining fertility that are relevant to Rome, Italy; and the third part reviews examples of the ways in which family production has been constructed in demographic and international studies literature focusing on women in Italy.

Part One: theoretical framework, agency

Women’s agency is examined throughout this paper in terms of its relationship to the decision making process. The decreasing birth rates in Italy suggest that women are deciding to have fewer children, but are these decisions based on personal decisions or external influences? Therefore, it is essential to understand Italian women’s reproductive agency as a context-specific “form of social action”, meaning that agency can take on different meanings and definitions based upon its social, cultural and historical context (Ahearn 2001:110). A critical context for studying agency, which I will be focusing on, is that of gender dynamics. According to Ortner, it is necessary to examine the definition of agency given a specific context through three criteria:

“The issues involved in defining agency are perhaps best approached by sorting out a series of components: 1. the question of whether or not agency inherently involves ‘intentions’; 2. the simultaneous universality and cultural constructedness of agency; and 3. the relationship between agency and ‘power’” (Ortner 2006:134).

In order to further define agency, Parker (2005) asserts that while agency can be a form of action, it is never “independently conceived aims, individual motivation, independent action and imperviousness to possible effects”. Rather, agency can only be fully realized through the “capacity” of an agent in
combination with the “effects” of interactions between the agent and their environment (Bebbington et al. 2006:1962). However, the “capacity” of a person to exercise agency is a relational quality directly impacted by that person’s social capital, and while in my particular research women in Italy have well-developed networks of social capital, agency among women from all countries regarding fertility decisions is ultimately a “relational form of empowerment” (Nolan 2013:10).

According to Carter (1995), there are two main concepts relating to cultural and human agency over fertility. The passive concept envisions people as blindly following cultural rules and norms, while the active concept portrays people as rational decision makers who deliberately choose their levels of fertility (Carter 1995:55). These concepts are important in understanding where control lies in fertility choices, either within the individual or with society at large. While the passive concept views human conduct as narrowly confined to by cultural and social norms and institutions, the active concept sees people as employing tools of rationality to purposefully make decisions.

Notestein’s (1945) version of the demographic transition theory assumed that wherever people exercise active decision-making with regard to family size, they inevitably “impose sharp limits on their fertility” (Carter 1995:55). However, this effect is only thought to occur in certain society where forces of modernization, industrialization, and education have allowed for a reduction in the mortality rate, thereby “freeing individuals from the weight of tradition”. Therefore, this model also asserts that in the societies which can be considered pre modern or transitional, decision making is still a passive choice, mainly due to the constraints to produce many children (Carter 1995). While today, many social scientists agree that humans are able to behave rationally in societies at all stages in the demographic model, it is important to observe how women perceive their locus of control and influencing factors in the reproductive decision making process.
Harvey Leibenstein (1981), describes the notion that humans are directly impacted, and therefore, restrained by the environment in which they live. He questions the general assumption of instrumental rationality in contemporary societies experiencing changes in fertility. He describes an approach that he calls *passive decision making* or *non-decision decisions*, in some ways fusing both the passive and active roles into one (Leibenstein 1981:381). He argues that economic, social and institutional forces have a subconscious effect on individual’s perceptions, thereby simplifying and influencing the “complex and time-consuming” decisions they make in their specific environment and resulting in fertility choices made on the basis of little or no rational decision making process. These decisions are, then, made passively but with regards to the cultural conventions.

Leibenstein’s contribution to the concept of agency is a particularly relevant framework for my analysis due to how he specifically defines active vs. passive decision making. While the author asserts that passive decision making is a process that happens multiple times a day, involving a great deal of “routine behavior”, if an event imparts a profound impact on the way an individual views their decision, then he or she will become conscious of the decisions making process and become active in that process (Leibenstein 1981:382). In this respect, we can think of the concerns women express such as financial instability and lack of support in the workplace as relating to the decision making process by triggering a switch from a routine passive decision to a “non-decision decision” in which women take into consideration their environment before formulating a decision.

Another useful theory to examine pertaining to agency over the fertility decision making process is Gary Becker and Jacob Mincer’s 1960 theory of New Home Economics. In a paper regarding household models of economics and decision making, Shoshana Grossbard (2010) describes why this
model is not useful for applying to fertility decisions. She describes this theory as a unitary model “in which households act as monolithic blocs”, assuming that multi-person household decisions are made concordantly and harmoniously as one unit (Grossbard 2010:2-17). Grossbard (2010), however, asserts that this denies the possibility that in multi-person households decisions “are made by individuals who have their own preferences and own constraints”. This unitarian model, and its critiques, examines where agency lies when making fertility decisions: in the control of the household as a single unit, or in the control of the individual, such as the woman acting as a partner and mother. While it is important to acknowledge women’s roles as a part in the functioning household, this theory is most useful for my research by unpacking the theory’s critiques in support of agency resting within the individual.

Unitarian models, such as Becker and Mincer’s New Home Economic theory, are problematic because they assume that multi-person households act as if they were one unit. Such models disregard discrepancies in income and other factors that influence each member of the household in very different, and often conflicting ways (Grossbard 2010:4). During my interviews I was very interested in ascertaining with whom women consult when making important fertility and reproductive decisions: do women involve their entire families and friends, or do they consider these decisions to be very private and reserved only for the individual? I expect to find through my interviews that while many women consult their partners and family members, ultimately the final word rests within the woman, herself. According to Grossbard’s critique of Becker and Mincer’s assertion, households do function as one unit, however, individuals within each household function independently from one another, although they may sometimes base decisions on the “resources and prior decisions made by their spouses or other household co-members” (Grossbard 2011:11).

In a paper by Rodolfo Bulatao (1984), he frames the issue of agency around the determinants and constraints of fertility, while attempting to reach conclusions with respect to fertility reduction policies
in developing countries. While constraining fertility behavior such as later marriage, longer breastfeeding, and fertility regulation through contraception and abortion are useful for determining a way in which to decrease birth rates, it is Bulatao’s research on socio-economics that is most valuable for my thesis. He asserts that the socio-economic environment can have limiting effects on the number of children a woman wants to have, though his argument is used specifically to model changes in developing countries (Bulatao 1984). He describes that as nations develop, their socio-economic environment becomes more stable and allows women to have fewer children due to less economic pressure to produce children to bolster family income. Bulatao’s theory helps to inform my research in Italy because it demonstrates the socio-economic environment (e.g., education level, economic power in relation to partners, job market) as a limiting factor for birth rate, which could be evident in developed nations like Italy and lead to influences that encourage or discourage child birth. Many other scholars cite socio-economic elements such as the labor market, household income, male’s confidence in ability to financially support family and shifting career goals as limiting factors for birth rates (Easterlin 1976, Easterlin and Crimmins 1991, Mincer 1963). Bulatao’s theory might predict a similar finding in Italy, however, since Italy is not a developing country I predict that the the financial environment can also act as a limiting factor for birth rate, discouraging women from having children that can present a drain on existing economic resources. This theory will become increasingly important to keep in mind as I explore the applications of my research in public policy during the last section of my discussion.

These theories all relate back to the overarching framework of agency, whether they do so by emphasizing the lack of control available to women or by emphasizing the presence of control available to women when making reproductive and fertility decisions. Not only do these theories explain the different ways in which women perceive their own agency or lack thereof, but they also affirm the fact that women are active participants in making these decisions. If, indeed, women are active agents in
making fertility and reproductive decisions, it would be especially relevant to both governments and non-governmental organizations trying to effect an increase or decrease in birth rates in Italy to understand how women perceive their level of control. Understanding if and how women are agents in the decision making process and how women perceive themselves as agents would be relevant to and could inform government and nongovernmental organizations’ decisions effecting the increase or decrease in birth rates throughout Italy.

Part Two: foundations of constructions of gender and fertility in Italy

Much research has been done in the fields of demography and international studies regarding Italy’s current “lowest low” fertility levels, it’s declining rates of fertility, and the population replacement statistics (Kertzer et al. 2008). This trend is important to researchers because it marks a change in Italy’s previous population trends and because it could have negative consequences for the country’s future. Some problems that result from several decades of fertility rates consistently below replacement levels include economic strains and large dependency on the labor force, problems associated with aging populations, and an eventual stagnation of the economy (Yew 2012:1). The seriousness of the repercussions of the decline in fertility rates in Italy and other regions of Southern Europe has led to scholarly research in the aforementioned fields regarding why these changes have occurred. While some scholars see this as an economic shift through examples of delayed departure from parental homes, increased female labor force participation (FLFP) rates, and increased levels of female education, others mark this as a cultural shift visible through changing attitudes and contingent upon personal choices.

One cause of low fertility rates scholars point to in Italy is the high dependence of children upon their parents. The relationships between children and their parents have been closely examined by Massimo
Livi-Bacci’s. His article asserts that young people in Italy are staying at home and living with their parents for much longer than in the past, delaying many important milestones that encourage early fertility (Livi-Bacci 2001). Due to the fact that young people are spending an increased amount of time cohabitating with their parents, they are therefore transitioning into marriage and parenthood at a delayed stage in life. Livi-Bacci maintains that by leaving the parental home at a delayed stage in life, young Italians are putting off making any fertility decisions until they leave the parental home, effectively decreasing the total fertility rates of the country.

Many scholars of declining fertility rates in Italy point to the link between the increase in FLFP rates since the 1960s and the decrease in the number of children deemed practical or desired by women and families. Daniela Del Boca (2003) expresses that in the same four decades that Italy experienced a decline in fertility rate, the level of female higher education and FLFP rates both increased. She explains the many economic factors that discourage women in Italy from having children, citing that the nature of the Italian labor market contributes greatly to these factors. The fact that many jobs are become unavailable after an extended period of leave, most part-time employers do not grant a paid maternity leave, and childcare is extremely expensive makes the Italian labor market unconducive for working parents and for having multiple children (Del Boca 2003). Del Boca concludes by arguing that these discouraging factors of Italy’s labor market in combination with the increase in FLFP rates has led to a decrease in fertility rates.

Demographic researchers Marcantonio Caltabiano, Maria Castiglioni, and Alessandro Rosina also bring up the connection between education and FLFP rates to a decrease in fertility rates. Their study of birth cohorts across differing social groups connects high levels of female higher education with the desire and tendency of Italian women to not have any children and remain childless (Caltabiano et al. 2009).
The authors also associate the increases in female higher education rates to increases in FLFP rates, citing that the main reason many women in Italy decide to postpone pregnancy is because they desire to reach and sustain stable financial security before having children and bringing on an additional economic strain. As a result of this desire for a financially secure lifestyle, the authors argue that this postponement or complete forgoing of parenthood due to female education and financial freedom has led to lowered fertility for the nation.

Other scholars such as Maria Letizia Tanturri and Letizia Mencarini; and Ester Rizzi, Maya Judd, Michael White, Laura Bernardi, and David Kertzer highlight the cultural determinants involved in this decline in fertility. They emphasize the importance of choice involved in decision making as well as the gender norms that dictate the domestic and public spheres.

Tanturri and Mencarini (2008) assert that Italy’s decline in fertility rate is due to the voluntary choices of women to consciously and purposefully have fewer children or not have any children at all. They used surveys in the major urban regions of Italy and found that Italian women are having fewer or no children because they actively decide not to. The authors assert that this is an effect of a change in mentality and attitude in Italian women, where the women of urban areas behave in direct opposition to the traditional idea of Italian motherhood (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Some examples of this opposition is the urban women’s identification as less religious and more likely to live with partners before marriage.

Rizzi, Judd, White, Bernardi, and Kertzer (2008) use the Second Demographic Transition to explain the demographic changes that have occurred in Italy. They assert that the theory of the Second Demographic Transition is signified by a clear asymmetry in gender role obligations for husbands and...
wives (Rizzi et al. 2008). These scholars found that although women are increasing their participation in the workforce, they are still expected to maintain the traditional Italian roles of housekeeping and childbearing, placing the majority of the family care burden on the wife. Women find the occupation of both roles simultaneously to be extremely difficult, and often must choose to successfully occupy just one role and effectively leading to decreases in fertility rates. They conclude the study by suggesting that by increasing gender equality within the domestic sphere, fertility rates should increase in the future, when following along the trajectory of the demographic model proposed.

Now I will turn toward situating these studies within the context of Italian history and culture by providing an overview of the causes of fertility decline in the specific example of Italy such as the state of welfare in the country and gender regimes. I will also convey the timeline of fertility declines with respect to the various regions of Italy.

While now we can see that Italy’s low fertility rates are evident across the country, the decline of such rates occurred at different points of history and at different speeds in the various regions. When studying the differences among Italian provinces, which are smaller than regions, Livi Bacci notes that during the 19th and 20th centuries, the North exhibited declines in fertility before the Southern provinces (Bacci 1977). Bacci (1977:180-181) asserts that this due to the fact the Northern provinces expressed neo-Malthusian attitudes and “deep economic and social differences among various sectors of the population”, while the South the populations was “culturally less differentiated” and “neo-Malthusian attitudes was relatively slow and late” to develop.

By the 1910 birth cohort, replacement levels of fertility were reached in the North, later spreading to the South and only slipping below replacement level by the 1980s in Southern regions (Kertzer et al.
In the last two decades of the 20th century we begin to see a sharp decline in fertility rates in the South, while Northern regions maintained a stable level of fertility. In cities such as Sardinia, which in the 1960s had some of the highest levels of total fertility at 3.5, by the end of the century had Italy’s lowest fertility rate at 1.04. While Italy’s regions are marked by clear differences in dialects, religious observance, demographics, and social patterns that result in differing fertility patterns across regions, for the purposes of my research in the central and regionally magnetic metropolitan capital city of Rome I will focus on the trends of the nation, in general. I predict that the women I interview will have a multitude of regional backgrounds so it is important to recognize the differences of perspectives that could be present in Rome.

According to Billari (2008), Italy is a country that is characterized by “strong family ties”, or what he calls familistic attitudes and welfare. The emphasis on the quality of relationships within the family unit may actually drive the quantifiable number of children and subsequent fertility rates downward (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004). Familistic welfare states are defined by the key role that the family plays in the welfare system, “acting as the main provider of care and welfare for children and dependent individuals” (León and Migliavacca 2013:26). These states are characterized by scarce development of childcare and long-term care services and a lack of support through fiscal and social policies for the family unit (Saraceno 1994). In the familistic welfare states, like Italy, “the welfare lacks attention towards young adults and their children, and has a lower attention towards the compatibility of parenthood and other choices (i.e., education, work)” (Billari 2008:7). These specific category of welfare states subscribe to the idea that “welfare should not crowd out family relationships”, leading to a reduction in the number of children per family (Billari 2008:7).
Billari (2008) also describes Italy as a country exemplified by a gender regime. He defines this concept as a combination of a low level of gender equity in households and a high division in labor markets between the domestic and public spheres. McDonald (2000) describes the concept further by demonstrating that while Italy is experiencing growing gender equity in individual-oriented institutions, such as higher education and the workplace, it is also experiencing a low gender equity in family oriented institutions. In other words, although women are experiencing increasing equity in achieving higher education, traditional gender inequality in the family unit and domestic sphere “including child rearing, household chores and care for the elderly” has remained (Billari 2008:7-8).

It is also important to note the decreasing influence of the Catholic Church in Italy and the subsequent effects of this trend. While the strength of size of the Catholic institutions reached their peak in the 1950s, after the Second Vatican Council in 1962, a broad-based decline in religiosity in Catholicism was seen across the nation as a result of the reforms proposed and changes made to the religious organization (Iannaccone and Ragusa 2006:1-23). Iannaccone and Ragusa (2006) outline that with the Second Vatican Council came a resulting decline in clergy per Catholic, leading to a reduction in social services available to the community, which increased the cost of raising a child, thereby reducing fertility. It is therefore, contradictory to the much of the public’s beliefs that Catholics should have the highest fertility rates based on beliefs regarding birth control because this neglects both the level of religiosity present in a population and the individual.

The bulk of scholarly literature pertaining to Italy’s declining fertility rates are focused on producing quantitative evidence through the methods of surveying. These methods can neglect the emotional and personal aspects involved in the decision making process that can only be achieved through one-on-one ethnographic interviews and narrative style analysis, as will be further explained in the Methodology
section. By simply asking women how many children they would like to have (Shorto 2008), or by examining government produced statistics like the Italian Longitudinal Family Study (Kertzer et al. 2008), the interviewee cannot convey the feelings and pressures involved in making reproductive and fertility decisions.

The theories analyzed focusing on socio-economic constraints are helpful for understanding the challenges faced by women in developed countries, while some theories regarding the demographic transition model focus too heavily on the path to development and not on what happens once the country achieves such status. The demographic model theories fall short in illustrating the negative aspects involved in achieving development and instead paint a rosy picture of the future for countries in the fourth stage of the model. Socioeconomic theories concentrate on the individual’s or household’s experience and financial situation rather than the circumstances of the nation’s progress. Therefore, despite the ample research outlined above, there is still more insight to be generated through my specific methodology and research techniques regarding motivations and influences behind women’s fertility decisions.
METHODOLOGY

A Narrative of the Methodology

Part One – introduction to the story

In the fall of 2011, I began my studies in the Italian language. Though I initially chose to study this language because proficiency in a foreign language is a requirement for my graduation, after just a few weeks in the introductory course I knew that I had embarked on a long term fascination with the Italian language, peoples, culture, food, history, literature, and more. After completing the minimum language requirements of just a few semesters of language and grammar courses, I felt that I wanted to learn more about the cultural and historical aspects of the Italian people and decided to declare Italian as my minor.

Once I had exhausted all the course options available to me on campus, I knew the next logical step to advancing my studies was to go to Italy. I wanted to focus my research on the current problem of low fertility rates that was plaguing Italy and Southern Europe, yet I wanted to understand this problem from Italian women’s specific perspectives. By combining this specific regional interest with my area of specialization of cultural anthropology, I was able to examine a selective number of women’s decisions regarding fertility and their implications on evolving kinship patterns.

Part Two – planning

Initially wanting to comparatively explore regional differences within Italy, I soon realized that the monetary and time constraints of a college student could not afford this extensive research proposal and I had to scale down my plan to a much more modest geographic size and scope of inquiry. I went ahead
with making plans to be in Rome from May 14, 2014 to May 28, 2014, with all my travel plans, accommodations, and meals to be organized by the University’s Study Abroad Office and the Global Seminar planning team. As I was conducting research on a daily basis, I planned to also concurrently take a course on the culture of Rome with a CU Boulder Italian professor and live in dorm-like accommodations with other CU students.

In addition to booking flights and travel arrangements, I spent extensive amounts of time planning out exactly where and when my interviews would be held, writing interview schedules and back up questions, and discussing with my team of advisors every possible scenario and situation in which I might find myself during the course of my research. Though I planned everything in extreme detail and as thoroughly as I possibly could, I was repeatedly told by fellow researchers to expect things to go wrong and that I would be able to accommodate those unexpected changes due to my extensive planning. Eventually, I had to accept that many factors were out of my control and hope for the best once I arrived in Rome.

After going through the Internal Review Board (IRB) process and applying for many scholarships and grants to help to afford my overseas research, I was ready to embark on my journey to Rome and start my first interview-based research in both a foreign language and country to which I had never traveled.

Part Three – researching in Rome

I arrived in Rome after two very long flights across the Atlantic Ocean and a stressful hour and a half waiting for my bags at baggage claim while hoping that my bags were not left somewhere in Charlotte, NC. Once we landed, the flight attendants began speaking in Italian and I exited the plane to see signs and advertisements written in Italian as well as many people speaking Italian all around me; it was at
this moment that I had to turn on my language skills and I saw a glimpse of what my next two weeks would be like. Though I was nervous about conducting anthropological research for the first time and living in a new city, I channeled this nervousness into excitement for my upcoming experience as a member of the Madonna dei Monti community, and of the greater Rome area.

In the taxi ride from the airport to the convent where I would be staying, the taxi driver pointed out famous landmarks, including the immensely ancient aqueducts that dot the perimeter of the city. This was a perfect time for my ear to adjust to the specific Roman dialect and begin to understand how Romans speak and interact with strangers.

Using my combined knowledge from past anthropology and sociology courses, as well as my introductory readings highlighted in the literary review section, I was familiar with the existing stereotypes of Italian familial patterns, the current economic downturn facing much of the country, and I knew something of the problems facing young women when making the decision to have children. I knew that financial constraints can discourage women from having children, I was aware of the fact that globally women were increasingly entering into the workforce, and I had heard about the state of familial support in the workplace. But what I knew very little about was what women thought about these ‘issues’ and how they perceived their current or past ‘situations’. I was interested in interpreting not only how women constructed their identities, but how they positioned themselves in relation to societal influences. I was also interested in whether their fertility decisions or kinship roles were featured in these personal constructions and what role (if any) family planning exhibited in the course of their lives. My main research question was: What factors influence Italian women’s reproductive decision making process?
I decided to employ qualitative methodologies because qualitative research allows the researcher to link observations “into a coherent story that adequately accounts for identities, perceptions and motivations” (Aitken and Herman 2009:5). Qualitative research is not concerned with revealing truths but is instead focused on creating representations of different aspects of the human experience (Denzin 1997). Howitt and Stevens (2000:30) describe that the multifaceted approach “involves respectful listening, difficult and challenging engagements, careful attention to nuances in the lives of ‘others,’ and a critical, long-term consideration of the implications of methods in the construction of meaning”. Given these aspects, generalizability is more difficult to achieve with qualitative rather than quantitative methods because the researcher is interested in understanding the life of the individual, as well as his or her interactions with the world around them (Aitken and Herman 2009). Reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative methodologies, as the researcher’s act of writing is actually a form of interpretation (Graue and Walsh 1998). The researcher’s field notes, observations, and interview questions produce a text that tells about the research process.

My choice to use narrative inquiry was based on my desire to learn about how individual women experience and perceive the decision making process and factors influencing such process. Narrative research, which “eschews certainty”, is based on the assumption that reality is constructed and rejects the neat, clean ways of describing the world through definite truths (Trahar 2008:262). Instead, it accepts that the social environment is multi-faceted and can be interpreted differently depending on the narrator. Spector-Mersel (2010) describes this as not only a form of qualitative methodology, but as a paradigm with which to view and experience the social world. Many narrative researchers share the worldview that narrative is reality and not just a representation, that our world is a storied world, and that narrative is the portal with which individuals enter the world and add personal meaning to it (Etherington 2004, Gergen and Gergen 1986, Sarbin 1986, Connelly and Clandinin 2006, Smith and
Josselson (2006:4) says that the focus of narrative research is on the meanings and connections people attribute to their experiences so as to demonstrate “the complexity of human lives”. Therefore, this method and paradigm allows me to focus on how Italian women interpret and situate themselves in the world around them.

I chose to focus this thesis on interviews from four women, rather than including the total number of ten interviews which I formally acquired. Deciding to include only a small number of women's stories was very intentional, and allows for the personal vignettes of the women to take center stage, rather than trying to generalize the minds of all Roman women. The women I interviewed came from a wide range of backgrounds including all different professions, ages, hometowns, and religious affiliations. Although I had no previous relationship with the women I interviewed, which at times made it difficult to initiate conversations, in some cases I think my unfamiliarity aided me by making the interview subject more at ease and comfortable to speak about such personal decisions, as they were confident they would never see me again.

While in upcoming sections I will further explore my research sample, first I will introduce these women with short backgrounds of their lives. In order to conceal their identities, I will refer to these women by pseudonyms. The first four women provide the largest contribution to my narrative analysis, however the last six women’s interviews will be referenced throughout, as well.

- Elena, an 80 year old Editor and mother of two, was originally from the Southern Italian region of Naples. Her highest educational degree completed was a Bachelor’s Degree, she had one sister, and she was not religiously observant.
- Having been born and raised in Rome, Maria was a 39 year old “impiegata” (office worker) with one child. Her highest educational degree completed was a Bachelor’s Degree, she had one sister, and she identified as a practicing Catholic.

- Susanna was a 32 year old teacher who grew up in general region of Lazio, in which Rome is located, and she did not have any children. A Bachelor’s Degree was the highest educational degree she completed, she had one brother, and she did not identify as religiously observant.

- Luisa was a young 25 year old graduate school student with no children who grew up in the area surrounding Rome. She had both one brother and one sister and did not consider herself to be religiously observant.

- Lina was a 27 year old event coordinator with no children. She grew up in Rome, did not have any brothers or sisters, and did not identify with any religion. She received a Bachelor’s degree from a local University.

- Alessandra was a 46 year old “casalinga” (housewife) who considered herself to be a very religious Orthodox Christian. She was born and raised in Rome with her two brothers and one sister, where she received a middle school education as her highest level of schooling. She had no children.

- Michela, a 31 year old artist, was originally from Milan but had lived in Rome for many years. She identified as a non-practicing Catholic and did not have any children at the time. She had one sister and completed high school as her highest level of education.

- Carla was a 26 year old physician who had just completed medical school in her hometown of Rome. She had one brother, no children, and considered herself a non-practicing Catholic.

- Franca was a 31 year old “impiegata” (office worker). She had completed grad school in Rome, though she was born and raised in Puglia with her three sisters. She did not have children at the time and considers herself a non-practicing Catholic.
• Lucia, a 59 year old store manager, was a non-practicing Catholic from Rome coming from a large family with two brothers and one sister. She had completed high school as her highest level of education and had one child.

Though I interviewed the last six women during the course of my research in Rome, I excluded them from my narrative analysis because they were either repetitive and expressed ideas that were touched upon in other interviews or because they were not specifically relevant to my research questions. However, I will reference and interweave these excluded interviews in order to support other interviews or my analysis and conclusions. I chose these specific women to show the variety of Roman women’s experiences across different demographics, yet I know that there is always the possibility that another story from another woman could have expressed privilege or oppression that differs from those who I decided to include. Therefore, this research does not intend to seek conclusive answers regarding the “Roman woman’s experience”, but rather to try to understand how these few specific women depict their unique personal experience in relation to other acting forces. These interviews reveal only a snapshot into the lives of these women, yet it was still necessary for me to act trustworthy and ethically in the relations that I shared and in the knowledge that I analyzed and produced through research. This was necessary regardless of the fact that the interviews do not reflect the women’s complete life stories.

In an effort to richly describe my every encounter with an interview subject, as well as my own personal experience in producing this research, I collected many different forms of data in addition to the women's narratives that are fundamental to my research. In order to acquire alternative forms of data I paid attention to different forms of media while I was in Rome, spoke with local women in off-the-record interviews, and recorded in my journal what I was observing all around me. I used my notes to record these off-the-record informal conversations that mostly occurred on the street or “on the
fly”, to map out the locations in which my interviews were conducted, and to document my particular feelings and emotions during my time as a member in the Madonna dei Monti neighborhood of Rome. I used my notes as a way to remain engaged with the interview process, rather than taking a distant or detached stance as a researcher.

Part Four – relational research in Rome

I knew before leaving for Rome that I would need some assistance from someone who spoke Italian fluently and was familiar with the local culture and geography of Rome. Thankfully, since I was combining my research with a Global Seminar Class, Professor Priscilla Craven of the Italian department was there with me every step of the way to assist me with my research. Though Priscilla helped me by showing me what salons to visit and ask to speak with their clients and which neighborhoods to look for interviewees, Priscilla did not set up the interviews for me. I had to locate women to interview by first trying in salons and then settling on using the piazza as my interview subject solicitation location, where I would approach women who were waiting to meet friends, waiting for appointments, or passing their time in by the beautiful fountain. She also helped me to understand the formalities involved in approaching a woman who is older than I am and how to casually and comfortably approach women in the piazza when my plans changed. Priscilla also helped me by allowing me to bounce ideas off of her and by helping me to develop new and relevant research questions while in the midst of my research. It was necessary to have her assistance when deciphering idiomatic expressions that I had jotted down during the interviews but couldn’t understand at the time. By showing me how to use the public transportation system and where to get the best espresso to give my research subjects to thank them for their time, Priscilla allowed me to focus on what was truly important, instead of worrying about many logistical problems that often eat up much time when in the field in a foreign country.
Although I took three and a half years of Italian language and grammar courses at the college level, I had never been able to put them to use in a setting where no one could stop and explain to me in English what they were saying. The language barrier became a major difficulty for me when conducting my research and I often didn’t realize half of what people said to me until I was able to come home and slow down the recordings, translating each sentence word-by-word. Even after translating the words, many times they had different meanings from the English form of the word, which were culturally specific to the Roman way of life. Before going to Rome, I was confident that my language skills would be up to par but when I got there I was shocked to find out that my slow cadence and lack of knowledge of the local accent were clear indicators of my novice skills. However difficult it was for me to understand the interviews in the moment, I found that my novice skills in the Italian language acted as an equalizer of power, as many subjects would often correct my grammar or pronunciation. I feel that this put the woman at ease, as I was not a rigid, robot-like scientific researcher, but was a real person going through a difficult struggle, which is extremely relatable on a human level.

Other than understanding the language, another challenge I faced was having to change how I solicit women to interview and where to hold my interviews. Though I had originally planned to interview women in hair salons while they were waiting for services, and spent weeks before arriving in Rome emailing local salons to set up connections, once I arrived in Rome this plan completely fell apart. First, no salons ever emailed me back, though I was prepared for this since Priscilla and other Italian professors had told me that Italians are notoriously unreliable by electronic communication. Secondly, once I finally did find salons that initially told me I could solicit women from and hold interviews in their salons, they would come up with many different excuses for why I should come back another day. I decided I could not rely on the salon owners to allow me to solicit and interview women from their
salons on a consistent basis that worked with my schedule so I settled on a different location. I chose
the piazza in the neighborhood of Madonna dei Monti because it was very close to my hostel, it was a
very lively location with people of all ages and backgrounds, and many people came to the piazza to
pass the time and enjoy the scenery of the beautiful fountain and lovely passerbies.

Throughout my interview process, I realized the importance of my gender identification as a female in
the context of the sometimes personal conversations of family planning. Not only could I personally
sympathize with this gender identity issue and the personal stories that the women shared with me, but
I believe my gender added a level of comfort for the women I was interviewing. Though some
questions were prompted, I wanted to allow the women to speak freely and flow uninterrupted
throughout the conversation. Some questions like “why?” or “how come?” allowed women to further
elaborate on their situation or explain it again using different words. Other questions were intended to
keep the conversation going and to assure that the women continued speaking about the subject of
family planning and fertility decisions, though sometimes the deviations were revealing. In order to
keep the conversation flowing, if there was any confusion or questions on my part, I would generally
save them until the very end of the interview. While I did have specific research questions, my aim was
for the subjects to tell specific stories and concrete life experiences from their past in order to describe
how they have been impacted by the family planning process.

As I will elaborate on the next chapter, the time spent with each woman varied. Most of the women
took anywhere from five to ten minutes to explain how they made or will make decisions pertaining to
family planning, however some women spoke very quickly, passionately and intensely about their
experiences and were able to tell their narrative quickly, while others took their time to slowly find the
specific words to correctly articulate their feelings. For example Maria spoke very fast as she got
excited about Italy’s poor financial state, while Elena spoke methodically and slowly, often going back to restate what she said in different words. In one interview with Elena, our conversation was briefly interrupted for her to take a phone call and check messages on her cell phone. It was important not to rush the women so I followed the local customs and acted courteously, buying an espresso or cappuccino for the woman I was interviewing at the time, yet I also didn’t want to bother each woman with too many questions and hold up their day or plans. This was a thin line that I had to constantly balance by paying attention to the body language of the interview subjects to determine if I should prompt more conversation or bring our conversation to a halt.

During our interviews I did not share my own personal life stories with the women because I did not think that my experience would help them to articulate their own stories, and it could even have led the conversations off track. While my stories weren’t shared with the women, I still believe that their stories are being “co-authored” by me because my specific understanding of their life experiences has helped me to construct meaning and analytic conclusions. The constructions of the stories are dependent upon my own personal research style, upbringing, education background, and may be told very differently if they were constructed by another researcher.

With the permission from each woman except for one, I took audio recordings of each of the interviews. I was unable to translate and transcribe the interviews until I returned back to the U.S. because I was busy with the school work that was required for the class I was taking as part of the Global Seminar. During the interviews I also took notes, highlighting timestamps at moments which I thought were important and jotting down words that I was unfamiliar with and which I would later ask my professor to help me understand. Taking notes was difficult because I wanted to actively engage with the subjects and keep eye contact with them, constantly questioning if I should jot down an
important note or listen fully to the interview subject. I also battled with the challenging environment of
the busy and loud piazza, which did not provide for much privacy. Though there was very little privacy
in the boisterous piazza, amidst the chaos there was almost a sense of peacefulness and confidentiality
as everyone in the piazza was preoccupied with just themselves, so no one was worried about what
anyone else was doing or saying. Sometimes the noise made it hard to focus on my research questions
and responses because I could hear a multitude of different conversations all occurring at the very same
time. This provided an extra challenge when I relistened to my recordings to find that there was much
muffling background noise, making some phrases from quiet speakers indiscernible.

Though at first I thought my interviews would take place in the more quiet environment of a beauty
salon, the plans unexpectedly changed and I had to adjust and adapt to these changes which ultimately
resulted in using the piazza as my principal location. I had to accept the fact that many of these
speedbumps were out of my control and I had to make the best out of the situation with what I had to
work with on such short notice. Due to the fact that I was only in Rome for two weeks to conduct my
research, it was necessary that I did not waste time on making decisions and rather I had to just go with
my next plan and hope for the best.

My original plan was to do two interviews every other day for the fourteen days that I would be living
in Rome. The days in between the interviews would allow me to review my notes and make any
necessary changes in planning for my future interviews. My plans changed drastically when my
previously “contracted” salons were not cooperative and I had to solicit women in the local piazza,
waiting for long stretches of time for someone to sit down in the piazza who not only had time to kill,
but who was also willing to speak with a researcher about her fertility decisions. This change in
environment, therefore, led to an increased amount of time spent on finding people to interview.
Sometimes this process was very frustrating and I sometimes thought that people were very rude for not wanting to talk to me. It was often at these times of lowest self-esteem and confidence, when I had been rejected by five women in a row, when I was just about to quit and return back to my hostel, that I would find a great interview subject and have a very thoughtful conversation about her life experiences.

Part Five – transcribing and translating

Upon returning from Rome, I began to work with Priscilla on the transcription and translation process. I faced some limitations in this task including time constraints, financial constraints, limited access to Priscilla’s aid due to her busy class schedule, and limited personal knowledge of the language, dialect and word usage. In my toolbox I had rough handwritten notes and electronic recordings from each of my interviews as well as a general understanding of what was said during the conversations because they were still very fresh in my mind from just one month ago. Therefore, I needed help from Priscilla to determine what exactly was said in each interview, especially regarding the idiomatic expressions and words that have different contexts in the Roman/Italian culture. With Priscilla I had to decide how I wanted to perform both the tasks of transcription and translation, as it would have implications on the rest of my analysis and my representation of the data.

We both decided to directly translate the Italian interviews on my voice recorder onto paper in English. I chose to transcribe phrases and sentences which I believed stood out in the interviews or that the woman clearly emphasized during her interview. First, by myself, I listened to the audio recordings, and translated directly onto a notebook, highlighting specific times when I could not understand what the woman was saying or when what they were saying was particularly confusing to me. Then, I sat down with Priscilla and we went through each interview, comparing it to my notes and making sure I had understood and written down exactly what each woman said. She also helped me to fill in the
blanks and convey the meanings of expressions and rarely used words. We listened to each interview multiple times, replaying sections up to five times in order to make sure we were translating the woman’s words correctly.

Priscilla and I engaged in long discussions about the words or expressions in order to contextualize their meanings and to better communicate its importance in the sentence and in the interview as a whole. This process took many hours and was very difficult, sometimes leading to the omission of a sentence over confusion or dispute over one or two words. The process of translation allowed me to maintain a very close relationship with the data and the stories both I and these women co-authored. By having to listen to the interviews multiple times over and to dissect each and every word, I was fully immersed in the conversations and reminded of the actions, body language, facial expressions and emotions that went behind those words.

*Part Six – Conclusions*

This chapter regarding methodological organization is intended to justify how and why I made specific research decisions from the beginning to the conclusion of my research inquiry. However, I must emphasize that the plan did not proceed from one step to the next as originally planned, but there were many missteps and much backtracking involved. The research questions which I formulated before going to Italy were changed many times before starting my interviews and they changed further once I had completed a couple interviews in Rome. This allowed me to understand the women through the stories as they chose to tell them, rather than coming in with defined hypotheses about how Italian women perceive their experience in the fertility decision making process.
The next chapter includes my narrative analysis of the interviews I had with each woman. This section intends to foreground the voices of the four women I interviewed in Rome, while also allowing the voices of six other women and the voice of the researcher to be present. This creates a multiplicity of voices and a layering effect of the story, as the narrator changes perspective throughout.
NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

 Arrival

As I exited my taxi cab and approached the hostel-style convent where I would be living for the next two weeks, I began to think about all the work and effort that had brought me to that point. After all the reading and planning, researching and organizing, fundraising and grant writing, packing and purchasing of tons of office supplies and things I knew I wouldn’t be able to find abroad, and generally agonizing over how the next couple of weeks were going to play out, I was finally in Rome and ready to embark on my first field assignment. I was nervous and a bit nauseous as I tried to adjust to the intense humidity and heat that hit my face the second I stepped off the plane. I focused on putting one foot in front of the other, then plopped down on a couch so I could mentally take in my last twenty hours of the non-stop chaos and confusion that characterize traveling abroad. After a few moments to collect my breath and check into my room, I began to realize the sounds of Italian voices and notice the extreme differences which I was too blindly nervous to realize just moments prior.

My first few days were very busy and hectic, as I set up my room in the convent, met the other girls who would be staying in my room as well as the other students in my Global Seminar program, began to make initial contact with salons in the area, and generally settled into life in Rome. After finding my local spot to get a daily capuccino, the newsstand where I could peruse Italian fashion magazines and news headlines, and orienting the location of my residence in relation to the major Roman landmarks, I was ready to focus on the research aspect of my trip and begin speaking to women about their life stories.
Elena’s story

Elena, an 80 year old woman from the South of Italy near Capri, was initially very confused about why I wanted to speak with her. Sitting at one of the four benches that surround the large fountain in the center of the Piazza, Elena was enjoying her midday coffee and seemed to be generally passing the time. Her all-black clothing and head scarf appeared to be very conservative, differing from the flashy and fashionable dress of most older Italian women I had seen so far. After I approached her and asked if she had some time to speak with me about her past fertility decisions, “Ha il tempo di parlare delle Sue decisioni di fertilità?” (Do you have time to talk about your fertility decisions?), she expressed to me that she didn’t understand why a researcher would want to waste their time speaking with such an old lady. After I assured her that I was interested in hearing from women of all ages and that her age was actually something that I thought would add a layer of richness and also act as a point of comparison for younger women’s stories, she reluctantly agreed to speak with me, eventually opening up to me with great detail and enthusiasm.

Do you have children? Elena told me that she has two children, having her first child unexpectedly at the age of 24, before having married her husband or landing a stable career. She shared with me the fact that she had not planned on having her first child and that his surprise arrival imparted consequences for the rest of her life, including restrictions on time and money. After a few years, she decided she was ready for another child and purposefully planned to get pregnant with her second, stating that after having two children, it was “basta” (enough for [her]).

What are the positives and negatives of having children? While she told me that she believed having children is an essential experience of life and this allows you to reminisce in old age on the shared
familial experiences, Elena then expressed to me that a negative aspect of parenting is that the parent must devote all his or her time to their children.

It was at this point in our conversation that I thought I had lost her. She answered her phone and stepped away for nearly five minutes and I didn’t know if I should sit there and patiently wait for Elena to finish our conversation, or if she was politely telling me that our conversation was over and she had more important people to talk to. I waited and waited, worried that one of my first interviews was going to end before it really even started. Thankfully after her phone call she was ready to sit down with me again and return to our conversation.

After her phone call, Elena returned to the subject of her first child, stating that even though she knew there would be consequences to having a child who was not planned, she chose not to abort that child, accrediting this decision to only her own personal instincts and that she “sentivo bene” (felt right). She seemed happy with her decision, flashing a small smile across half her face as I imagined she reminisced on fond memories of her first child. But beyond happiness, Elena described that the birth of her first son was “destinato” (destined), adding a spiritual element of completeness as she now looks back on her life decisions.

*How would you describe the “traditional Italian family”?* Elena described that due to the fact that the birth of her first child was unplanned and out of wedlock, her family would not be considered “traditional”, though she did not exactly describe the elements that do comprise the stereotypical model. She volunteered that she observed that the traditional family model is changing, as separations and divorces are becoming very frequent, again describing the traditional family model in terms of what it is not.
Are women deciding to have less children today? If so, why? Elena had many explanations to answer this question, mostly pertaining to economic influences shaping familial changes. She asserted that the main reason for the reduction in children born to parents today when compared to the past, is related to the job market. She said that it is much harder to find a job when you have children and there are fewer possibilities for work as a mother. Also, she continued to say that due to the fact that women’s jobs are not protected by a governing organization that ensures the rights of female employees, it can be difficult to maintain a job and mothers are often fired for a number of reasons.

Elena also hinted at the changing family structure when she described the phenomenon of having fewer people in each household than in past generations. She said that there used to be many family members around to help (grandparents, relatives, cousins), who were able to provide support for a young child. However, today there are fewer family members living under one roof and now a woman might only have the support of her partner or herself. While it was the Italian tradition to have many children, Elena said that a parent with fewer children can raise them much better, as having a big family today is just “impensabile” (unthinkable). She ended our conversation by telling me that her decisions about having children were completely her own and that any such decision should rest outside of religion and government, reflecting only one’s personal feelings.

Personal Reflections

I left my interview with Elena feeling happy that I was able to connect with someone that was so much older than I, allowing her to share an extremely personal piece of her life story with me. I was not expecting an interview subject to divulge such an intimate detail, such as their decision about whether to have an abortion, with me after only six minutes of speaking with them. Though I had no similar
story to share with her, and since I had decided to leave my personal life out of my interviews, I could only sit there and listen as she shared what I could only imagine to be, a very painful and emotional instance from her past. Thinking about this personal decision made me consider how I would feel if I were in the same situation: filled with confusion, pain and feelings of isolation. How would one ever know if they made the right decision? This made me wonder how many other people she had shared this with and at that very moment I realized the importance of my role as a researcher. Though it was the first time I heard the term “abortion” being used in Italian, I could just tell from the hushed and mournful timbre of her voice and retracting body movements exactly what it meant in that context. Speaking about the intimate decision of abortion might have made me feel uncomfortable for a moment, but it actually comforted me to know that she was so trusting in me and open to sharing.

Maria’s Story

I greeted Maria, a 39 year old office worker from Rome, as she was reading a newspaper on the steps of the large fountain in the center of the Piazza. It was a very hot day and there were many children playing in the water, with their parents chasing closely behind them. I saw a baby carriage next to Maria and, correctly, assumed that the little baby inside the carriage belonged to her. She was very happy to speak with me and seemed very interested in my research, even giving me her email address so I could send her my finished thesis. However, she did let me know that she had an appointment 20 minutes later and could not chat for too long.

Do you have children? Maria told me that her daughter in the baby carriage was her only child, having had her this year at the age of 38. I happily smiled because I had already safely made that assumption, instead of mistaking her for a nanny or caring aunt figure.
How did you decide to have one child? Stating economics as the main reason for why she does not have more children, Maria expressed to me that children are extremely expensive in Italy. She said that the expenses of having a child go far beyond the costs of supplying clothing, food and schooling for a child. Maria told me that in Italy women can easily be fired for having a child, but then she retracted that statement and corrected herself by explaining that women can be sanctioned or disciplined at work when they have children. She also says that her home is not big enough for another child, alluding to the high cost of housing in Rome and subsequent small living arrangements most people have in the city.

Are women deciding to have fewer children today? If so, why? Maria quickly and bluntly replied “yes” to this question and offered me a lengthy explanation regarding the current economic state in Italy. Maria mainly stressed the fact that right now there is very little security in the job market and that it is very easy for one to lose their job. Though Maria did not elaborate much on the reasons for why one can lose their job easily today, she then switched focus to the cost of early childhood education. She asserted that if one has a small child but has to or wants to work then he or she must put their child in “il nido” (preschool), which can cost up to $250 Euro/month. This is extremely expensive for a young mother who has many other expenses and can discourage women from having children before they can assure that they make a decent, sustainable salary or are financially comfortable. Maria then remarked on her current situation with an air of frustration and a bit of sadness by telling me that it is difficult to provide the best level of care for her daughter because she works far from the city, often relying on her sister for help in caring for her child.

How did you decide to have children? She explained to me that this was a “decisione commune” (communal decision), made in conjunction with both her partner and her family members, though she
did not signify whether her partner was male or female. Maria then backed up her assertion by saying that it is very important to include your loved ones and those that matter most to you in important life decisions, as it affects their lives as well. With a very stern and serious voice, yet at the very same time with an air of humor, Maria told me that all men in Italy are “un disastro” (a disaster) and that a woman does not need a husband or need to be married to have a child. At this moment I was worried that she was upset I had assumed her marital status, but now I realize she was probably calling upon personal memories rather than chastising me. She ended our conversation with some words of wisdom by telling me that good men are difficult to come by and I walked away with a big smirk plastered on my face for the rest of the afternoon.

*Personal Reflections*

I enjoyed Maria’s confidence in her answers and her spunk as she definitively told me her feelings and opinions. I could sense frustration as she described the difficulties faced by many women today and I wondered how this interview impacted the rest of her day and possibly week. Did she go about her day as she normally did? Or did she recognize her role in society as a mother and consciously understand the tribulations she must go through that she just articulated to me? I bet she knew the economic problems she and many other women face today, but did she really understand how she fit into that larger picture before our conversation? I was starting to see how these conversations could benefit the women I spoke to and how these conversations could be incorporated into their ever-evolving visions of personal identity.

*Susanna’s Story*

Susanna was just finishing up a phone call and enjoying a cone of gelato when I approached her on the steps of the fountain in the center of the piazza. She was a little frightened and startled when I started
speaking to her, as many people in the piazza are used to just minding their own business and not being bothered by passerbies or entertainers. However, after she realized I was an American student just looking to speak with her about fertility decisions, she was happy to speak with me and share some of her life experiences. Susanna was a 32 year old teacher from Rome and requested to do part of this interview in English in order to assist her in her English practice. We agreed to half of the interview in Italian to assist me with my Italian practice and conform to my research protocol and half of the interview in English so she could practice her English language skills. I noticed Susanna’s distinctive look, with skinny jeans, skateboard shoes, and thick septum piercing that reminded me of a bull. Before I could even ask Susanna a question, she had already volunteered to me the fact that times are changing in terms of job opportunities and rising expenses.

Do you have children? Susanna adamantly expressed to me that although she did not have children at the moment, she would really like to have children in the future but needs financial stability first. She said that money is the most important motivation affecting her decisions to have children, which is very difficult to acquire in today’s poor financial climate. She pointed to the fact that rent is extremely high in Rome and women do not make enough money at their jobs.

Are women deciding to have fewer children today? If so, why? In clear agreement with this question, Susanna vehemently shook her head and began describing the many reasons why having children is less appealing today than it was in the past. She told me that because women are becoming more independent by going to school to get degrees and then continuing on to become professionals, women are subsequently pushing off having children and having children much later in life. She went on to say that there has been a “cambiamento di mentalità” (change in mentality): in past generations women stayed at home and did not go to school, but today it is normal for women to study and go to work so
everything is delayed. She then told me that this change in mentality is good because studying opens
the mind and allows women to have the same rights and opportunities as men.

Susanna expressed to me that this mentality change has encouraged women to become more
independent by following their own personal goals and aspirations, which she asserts is an important
quality for all women to possess. She told me that is important for women to share the financial burden
with men by working and contributing to the family if they are able to do so. By being financially
independent, Susanna said, women can be in a safe position in the event of a divorce or separation and
they do not have to be dependent on the earnings of their husband or partner. Susanna even went as far
as to say that to be a woman and work is to be independent in society today. She also expressed that
there are many more divorces and separations today than in the past, making it very hard for children to
grow up in single parent households. Couples must come together, she said, and make decisions about
having children or it can lead to divorce and separation.

Personal Reflections

Susanna’s final remarks on divorce and financial independence made me think about my own
upbringing and how my mother’s narrative would sound. As a child of a divorce and being raised by a
single mother, I experienced Susanna’s words precisely. I identified with her explanations and found
myself stifling my voice as I wanted to share my own stories with her, but knew it wasn’t the right time
or place. It also encouraged me to wonder if this was, in fact, a part of Susanna’s past that she couldn’t
explicitly express in those terms. I believe Susanna was telling me her narrative through her analysis of
the current societal situation and that she could identify personally with her description of divorce and
financial responsibility. Maybe by verbally distancing herself from her own analysis, it was easier for
her to understand the reasons for her current situation and opinions.
Luisa’s Story

Luisa, a 25 year old graduate school student at the local University, Sapienza, was reading a book on the steps of the fountain in the center of the piazza when I approached her to ask about her fertility decisions. She looked very trendy to me, wearing large dark rimmed glasses and heavy lipstick, as she followed the Italian trends perfectly. She seemed just like the multitude of women I saw every day promenading down the streets of Rome: extremely put together in a head-to-toe fashionable outfit and with a veil of confidence. She was considerably younger than most of the women I had interviewed thus far and she was closest to my own age, making her very easy to relate to and speak with, as in Italy it is necessary to be very respectful and speak using formal words and phrases when engaging with someone who is older than you. I was able to relax and use informal words and phrases, making our conversation much more enjoyable for me and likely more comfortable for her.

Do you have children? Luisa told me she was much too young to have a child now; besides she was very busy working on her own projects in school and finding a career path. She continued by telling me that she would like to have children in the future, however, because having children is an essential part of one’s life and it is a beautiful experience. Two to three years from now, she said, will probably be the perfect time for her to have children, around the age of 29.

Why would you like to have children? Having a family is the basis for all life, Luisa told me, allowing a parent to see the world in a different way. She said that when you give love to someone else, everything else changes in your life and becomes better.
Does religion or the economy influence your fertility decisions? Luisa explained to me that she was born into a family of mixed religions; her father is Muslim and her mother is Christian. She said that she was not brought up religiously and was not even baptized, making religion a force that has not affected any of her past and will not affect any of her future decisions. She went on to say that due to this mixture of religions in her family upbringing, she has never based any of her decisions on religious beliefs and has always been free to make decisions by herself. Lightly touching on the tough economic situation, Luisa said she cannot realistically have a child until she has a stable financial situation and is able to take care of herself economically.

Are women deciding to have fewer children today? If so, why? Luisa quickly agreed with my question, nodding her head vigorously before I could even finish asking it. She explained to me that in the past, women had children at a very young age, mostly before the age of 20. If one was not starting a family by the age of 20, she was considered to be a “zitella” (spinster). She continued by saying that the stigmas have changed and today women are not considered spinsters by putting off having children and focusing on their education or careers. Luisa changed focus quickly and ended our conversation by mentioning that “il governo non aiuta” (the Italian government does not help) women to work while having children and that there should be government programs that assist women who have children with their many burdens.

Personal Reflections

After speaking with Luisa I began to think how I would answer these questions I was asking day in and day out. For someone as young as Luisa, it could seem strange to start thinking about decisions pertaining to fertility, especially if they had never given motherhood any thought. I got the sense from Luisa’s enthusiasm for her focus on her studies that she really had not considered the answers to these
questions seriously before and that she was formulating her own opinions as her responses exited her mouth. It was interesting to see her thought process as she took long pauses, frequently touched her chin and hair, and made “hmmm” noises in between questions in order to answer thoughtfully to each charged inquiry.

After speaking with these four women, it was clear to me that they all shared similar frustrations and considerations when discussing current fertility decisions. None of my interviews were particularly happy and all addressed specific problems and issues that make the fertility decision making process very difficult or even dissuade women from having children at all. This led me to believe that the women’s expressed frustrations were linked to and evident by the low birth rates in Italy. The next section will analyze the specific considerations women have when making fertility decisions that become evident from my interviews, and make suggestions for the application of this research in terms of public policy.
DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the main concepts that emerged from a synthesis of the narratives presented by the ten women I interviewed. The first section will present the concerns and challenges the women faced when making decisions regarding their fertility. These concerns reflect the perceptions of the women’s experiences in making fertility decisions and range from risk of divorce and separation, lack of support from the government, decreased familial aid due to changing kinship patterns, high expenses in the city and with a child, and changing mentalities as generations progress. While some of these concerns presented difficulties for the women and may have made fertility decisions harder to render, others helped women to make tough fertility decisions by either discouraging or encouraging childbirth. The second section will raise questions in respect to Italian public policy and how it responds to the aforementioned needs and concerns of women and mothers. This section will present questions which were generated and honed through my specific approach, which could be directed to both scholars and policy-makers, alike.

Part One: Considerations

Divorce and Separation

Having never mentioned the topic of divorce and separation, it was interesting to me that both Elena and Susanna voluntarily brought up the subject during the course of our conversations, alluding to the challenges that families incur in the face of a divorce or separation and their effects on the decision-making process. Out of all the interviews I conducted, these were the only women that brought up this subject, both indicating divorce and separation as concerns and matters for consideration when making fertility decisions. Though both women had never been divorced or
separated, I did not ask if either of their parents had been divorced and it is unclear if Elena or Susanna had any personal connection to any specific divorce or separation.

Due to the fact that Italy has a remarkably low divorce rate when compared to other European nations (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008), it was very interesting to hear the perspective of women who perceive that this rate is currently increasing. According to the Eurostat Yearbook (2002), there are 0.8 annual divorces per thousand people in Italy, compared to 3.6 in the United States, while 65% of Italians agree that divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can't seem to work out their marriage problems. The low divorce rate coupled with the strong agreement that divorce is the best solution for marriage troubles signifies a break between practice and belief systems.

Both Elena and Susanna thought that it was important for women to consider the possibility of separation and/or divorce when making matrimonial and fertility decisions. Additionally, Susanna went on to imply that the increased probability of divorce should lead women to choose to have fewer or no children.

Susanna spent much time describing the effects of divorce and separation on the decision-making process itself, implying generally that both actions add a layer of concern when deciding to have or not to have children for a woman. Because she perceived that there is an increase in separations and divorces today, she said it is especially important for women and their partners to “pensare attentamente” (think carefully) about their fertility decisions. This makes sense because if women are at a greater risk for separation or divorce, then they might want to think if they would be happy with their decision if in the future they find themselves single or in a new relationship. Susanna linked this argument to her views on women's independence, especially financial independence. In the face of
increasing divorce rates, women must now consider the fact that they cannot depend on their husband or partner to provide for them or their children.

In past generations, women did not have to consider financial independence or generate a plan to monetarily provide for their families (excluding in the event of a death) before having children. This thoughtful examination of finance dynamics between partners emerged as a new step in the fertility decision-making process. Susanna referred to this new step as part of a “cambio di mentalità” (change in mentality) for all men and women in Italy today. Susanna also mentioned that due to the massive difficulties that children face in the event of a divorce, women and parents must now consider the emotions of children involved. In the event that a divorce or separation actually does occur, many more changes affecting the family structure follow, such as the creation of two households.

Elena touched on the subject of divorce and separation by noting that they are “frequentissimi” (very frequent). The use of the -issimi ending suggests that the frequency is extremely often and stresses the importance of this adjective in a sentence. She then continued on to say that this frequency shows that the family structure in Italy is fundamentally changing. When Elena told me that divorce “sta facendo cambiamenti per la struttura della famiglia tradizionale” (is changing the traditional Italian family structure), I believe she was implying that when there is a divorce or separation, a mother and father often live in two different homes, forcing the children to either choose a home to live in and parent to live with permanently or to go back and forth between both parents’ homes for an allotted amount of time. Though she skirted around actually defining what is the traditional Italian family structure by saying that her “famiglia non è molto tradizionale” (family is not very traditional) due to the “circostanze della nascita del mio primo figlio” (circumstances of the birth of her first son), she demonstrated to me that divorce and separation are one cause of the disintegration of this traditional
model. Later in our conversation, Elena told me that this disintegration of the traditional model is leading to a new family structure, where there is less familial support for childcare in the home. The reduced familial support, which I will discuss in the next section, discourages women from having many children or having any children at all.

 Changing Family Structure

Each woman was prompted with the question: *What is the traditional Italian family?* Three of the women commented on not only the descriptions of the traditional family model, but they used this to compare it to modern family models present in Italy.

Anttonen and Sipila (1996) categorize Italy as a Southern European welfare state, where the family, as opposed to public social care, is identified as the main institution for providing child care. Therefore, the bulk of the care is delegated to the family members living in the households and is not compensated financially.

While I did not explicitly ask about any changes regarding this model, Elena offered her opinion regarding how a change in this model has been reflected in women’s decision to have fewer/no children today when compared to the past. Elena’s perspective was especially interesting because she is 80 years old and she has personally seen these changes progress throughout the generations. Elena said that, while it was the traditional model for Italian women to have many children, she believed women are having fewer children today due to decreasing support available in the home. She told me that in the past there were many family members living in the home together, including “*nonne, zie e parenti*” (grandmothers, aunts, and relatives), who were able to assist the mother in caring for her child by
feeding, bathing, and clothing them. Now, that support is nonexistent and, according to Elena, it is “impensabile” (unthinkable) to try to raise a large family without that familial support.

In a different interview, Maria mentioned to me that she needs “l'aiuto di mia sorella” (the help of her sister) to pick up her daughter from daycare, further demonstrating the importance of familial support when raising a child. Michela, another interviewee, also mentioned that while in the past and in some parts of Southern Italy today the tradition was to have many family members living together, in Rome this is less accepted. This change in kinship structure within the home forces women to evaluate how they will care for their children and adds a layer of difficulty when making fertility decisions.

*High Cost of Living*

The high cost of living in Rome is similar to the high costs associated with living in large metropolitan cities all over Europe and the United States. Rome’s Consumer Price Index (CPI), a relative indicator of consumer goods pricing, (“Consumer Price Index” 2001), is currently 87.97 (“Cost of Living in Rome” 2014). The Rent Index for Rome is set at 50, which measures the estimation of prices of renting apartments in the city. Both of these measurements are considered index values, and reflect comparisons in consumer goods pricing and rental costs when compared to the costs in New York City. Therefore, consumer goods in Rome are priced at about 12% less than those in New York City and rent costs are about 50% less than those in New York City. While this may not seem to equate to a very high cost of living, the women I spoke to perceived that the cost of living was increasing and that it was very high when compared to other areas of Italy. This consideration is also related to the previous consideration of the changing kinship structure because as the number of people living in one home increases, so must house size and other variables which are increasingly expensive in the city of Rome.
While Maria was the only woman who directly identified this as a concern, many other concerns brought up by other women relate back to financial troubles or expectations. I asked Maria, a mother of one, why she decided to have just one child and not any more and why women are deciding to have fewer children compared to in the past. Maria explained to me the challenge of paying the high cost of living in the expensive city of Rome and raising a child anywhere in the world. Maria then explained that “i bambini sono costosi” (children are expensive) in Italy, especially due to the high cost of childcare. “Il nido” (the nest) is the term for preschool in Italy and Maria said it can cost up to 250 Euros per month so her child can have proper care and supervision while she is at work. She told me that this expense deterred her from having more than one child, along with the high cost of rent in Rome. Maria told me that she does not have a house large enough for another child and housing is too expensive to consider moving to a larger home.

Susanna offered a similar perspective, when she started our conversation without being prompted by any questions, and told me that rent in Rome is very high and there are many expenses associated with having children. Therefore, the high cost of space in Rome deters both extranuclear family members from living in the same home and women from deciding to have many children.

Lack of Workplace Support

When prompted with the question: Are women having fewer children today compared to the past?, Franca, Maria, Luisa, and Elena all mentioned challenges that women face at their workplace as a reason for why women are having fewer children. Four women from a variety of career paths and educational backgrounds including Franca, Maria, Luisa, and Elena all expressed a lack of support in the workplace setting.
The women each mentioned a clear lack of workplace support from either inside their professional setting or from the outside government policies that in turn affect the level of support available to them in the professional setting. Examples of workplace support to parents available in other countries include subsidies for childcare expenses, paid family leave time for new babies or sick family members, and on-site child care facilities (Ray et al. 2008). While Franca and Maria focused on the challenges women face inside the workplace when deciding to have children, Luisa and Elena addressed women’s need for workplace support from the government.

When I asked Franca if women are having fewer children today compared to the past, Franca emphasized that there is no “sicurezza del lavoro” (job security). She went on to tell me that women are at risk to have their “contratto terminato” (contract terminated) if they decide to have an additional child without consulting with their employer. This further clarifies that Italian women perceive there to be a threat to their job if they decide to have a child before speaking with their bosses. Maria had a similar response when I asked if she would like to have more children. She told me that although she would like to have another child, having another child would be a “rischio” (risk) to her job because when a woman becomes pregnant in Italy she can lose her job or receive sanctions. Though Maria did not further explain the sanctions a pregnant woman can face at her work, I assume these could mean reduced pay, docked hours, and discrimination. The threat of termination coupled with possible sanctions at work could deter women from deciding to have children or increase the difficulty of their decision-making process, as the wealth they accumulate from work is inextricably linked to the level of care that can then be provided to their child or children.

While there is no research stating the prevalence of women being fired after their employers found out they were pregnant due to the fact that this would be considered incriminating evidence, there is much
literature regarding the *white or blank resignations* evident in Italy, Croatia, Greece, and Portugal (Masselot et al. 2012). As a precondition for employment, employers make employees sign resignation letters to be used later in the event that the employee becomes pregnant. The national newspaper, *La Repubblica*, recently claimed that around 2 million women were affected by the white resignations. In turn, the government strengthened the rules surrounding employers use of white resignations, as the Italian Parliament adopted Act No. 92/2012 (Masselot et al. 2012).

Although Luisa did not have a full-time job because she was a graduate-level student, she seemed very aware and conscious of the challenges women in the workforce face when deciding to have children, perhaps thinking about her own future and how these challenges will affect her decision-making process as she enters the workforce after graduation. When asked if women are having fewer children today in respect to the past, Luisa told me that the Italian government doesn’t help a woman to both work and have children at the same time. She said that Italy needs “un'agenzia governativa per aiutare” (a government agency to help) women with the burdens associated with being a working mother. Though Luisa did not elaborate on the specific burdens faced by working mothers, because she decided to speak about the economic crisis, I believe she was referring to concerns like the need for daytime childcare, high stress load, and increased expenses. Elena, who, at the age of 80, has had much experience in the workforce as the editor of a news publication, spoke out in agreement when asked the same question that I asked Luisa. She explained to me that the jobs and work of women “non sono protetti da un'organizzazione” (are not protected by an organization) and therefore, “non ci sono possibilità” (there are no possibilities) for work when a woman has children. She said it is extremely difficult to maintain a job as a mother because of the increased stress and challenges that working mothers face. Due to the fact that there is no government organization representing the voices of working mothers, the rights of these women are not being protected or rightfully fought for, deterring
working women from deciding to have children or making women decide between having children and having a fulfilling career.

*Changing Gender Roles*

When asked a number of different questions, Lina, Michela, and Luisa mentioned the fact that the Italian women's roles are changing and are much different than in the past. All three interviewees touched on the fact that women used to be associated with the domestic sphere, but are now becoming increasingly associated with the public sphere. Whether they were asked about the traditional Italian family or decreasing birth rates, these women repeatedly revisited the idea of changing gender roles throughout our conversations.

Throughout most of Europe in general, there has been clear growth in the female activity rate as well as the female employment contracts in the last 20 years (Reyneri 2005). Specifically in Italy and Spain, these rates were 20% lower than rest of Western Europe, however female employment rate has experienced growth, increasing from 35% in 1992 to 46% in 2010 (Leon and Migliavacca 2003). This shows that while Italy may still trail behind the rest of Western Europe in terms of female participation in the workforce, women are still increasingly joining the workforce at rates previously unseen in this part of the continent.

Lina, a 27-year-old event coordinator with no children, used herself as an example and told me that women like her have jobs and earn the money, instead of staying home and relying on their husbands financially like in the past. She classified this change as a change in “ideali e valori” (ideas and values), marking this as a significant shift in how women navigate the world in the public sphere. Michela, a 31-year-old artist, had similar comments regarding the changing gender roles and said that women do
not have to stay at home with the children anymore and can enter the job market, demonstrating a clear “cambiamento psicologico ed economico” (psychological and economical change). These changes in gender roles were also reflected in my interview with Carla, who told me that now was not the right time to have children for her because she was in school and working at the same time. Although maybe 50 years ago Carla would have been at home taking care of her children, today she is able to take on both her education and a career. According to my interviewees these changes are empowering and benefit society in a number of ways, yet they also delay the entire decision-making process of having children and may even deter women from having children if they become very committed to their careers.

Luisa interpreted the changing gender roles differently from Lina and Michela, instead focusing on changing stigmas that once viewed mature single women as a taboo. Luisa, a 25-year-old graduate student, explained to me that in the past, if a woman did not start a family by the age of 20, she was considered to be a “zitella” (spinster). She continued to say that this stigma has changed, since women do not stay at home all day and actually have careers, and women are no longer viewed in a negative light if they do not have children even at the age of 35 or 40. This increasingly positive viewpoint of mature women without children can affect the decision-making process because it reduces the societal pressures to have children, allowing women to make this decision at their own pace, though possibly deterring women from having children at a young age or before they are professionally successful.

Financial Stability

Financial stability was the subject that was spoken about most during my interviews, with five out of the ten women signaling to me that this was the single most important factor when deciding to have or not to have children. Some women were prompted with the question: Does the economy influence your
decision?, while others voluntarily brought up the importance of financial stability or their struggle to obtain such stability. These answers were highly gendered and were often posed by comparing women’s struggles to the unspoken and standardized male experience. Lina, Elena, Carla, and Franca all traced their financial stability back to the job market, which at the time was, and still is, very unreliable. Susanna, Carla, Franca, and Luisa also highlighted the general poor state of the economy as a factor influencing their decisions.

I attribute the fact that this topic was so often discussed in my interviews to the current poor economic state in Italy. Italy is currently in a self-proclaimed recession, with their GDP dropping by 0.2% in the second quarter of 2014 (“Shrinking Again” 2014). With the current unemployment rate sitting at a staggering 12.3%, the job market is currently a topic of conversation among all Italians (“Italy Unemployment Rate” 2014).

Lina pointed out the differences in struggles for men and women in the job market when she said that, “le donne hanno meno soldi e meno accesso” (women have less money and less access) to jobs than men do. By grouping these two factors together in the sentence, I believe Lina was linking them as factors that reproduce each other and are inherently related. Elena told me that due to the current economic problems all Italians are facing, it can be difficult for anyone to maintain a job. When I asked Carla what the right age to have children is, she said, “Non ho molti soldi” (I don’t have much money). By not directly addressing my question and instead offering information describing her financial situation, Carla emphasized the importance of having a sufficient amount of money before starting a family. Carla also highlighted the importance of having a consistent job by telling me that she doesn’t have one right now and would need one before deciding to have children. Franca also mentioned the
job market when she told me that it was never the “momento giusto” (right time) to have children with regards to her job prospects.

Susanna clearly stated to me that the thing that is “il più importante è soldi” (the most important is money), but due to changing times and little economic stability, women do not make much money. Here, a woman stated the plight of all women by comparing it to the unspoken man’s financial stability. Carla expressed to me that 29 or 30 is the perfect age to have children because it is the “metà della vita” (middle of life) and she believed that by then she will be economically stable. Carla also brought up the fact that there has been a change in the decision-making process due to the poor financial state, adding that now women “programmano e progettano” (program and plan), whereas in the past women had children because it was just the natural thing to do and this did not include financial planning. When asked if the government influences her decision making process, Franca said that “se le condizioni [economiche] erano migliori” (if the [economic] conditions were better”), women would decide to have more children, assigning the responsibility of the country’s financial state to the ruling government. Luisa replied to the question: Do you want to have children in the future? by pointing out the hard facts of her current financial situation. She told me that although she would like to have children, at the current time she could not even maintain and take care of herself economically, let alone care for another life, ending her response by telling me that “non posso realisticamente avere un figlio” (I can’t realistically have a child).

Part Two: Applications

After analyzing my conversations with each of the ten women, I identified themes so strong among the ten women that they are worth considering as perhaps not only representative of a larger spectrum of
women in Italy, but that they can be addressed through social policies implemented at the national and local levels. Given Italian government’s desire to encourage childbirth in the current state of a decreasing birth rate, the specific wants and needs identified by each woman can inform the conversation about how the government and non-governmental organizations can work to encourage a higher birthrate with means that align with contemporary women’s concerns and requests. This strong desire is evident by the multitude of policies labeled *baby bonuses*, which provide financial rewards for the birth of a child, that have been proposed since the 1990s and are still in debate today (Krause and Marchesi 2007; Shorto 2008). My immense desire to bridge scholarship and civic engagement has led me to use the insights rendered from my research and present this concise analysis and recommendation to Italy’s National Health Service (Servizio Sanitario Nazionale/SSN). This section will highlight the current problem the Italian government faces, why it is important to address this problem, and my specific plan to address this problem through the implementation of social policy.

*Problem Identification*

With the decline of birth rates occurring all over Western Europe, the importance of investigating public perspectives of Italian cultural and political factors causing these reproductive decisions has surfaced as an important theme. Italy has reached the "lowest-low fertility", as the country's population can be cut in half in approximately 45 years (Shorto 2008). After a 2002 report combining figures from all over Europe, scientists determined that not only were Southern and Eastern Europe’s fertility rates below the replacement of level of 2.1, but at 1.3 it was low enough to present a “falling off a cliff effect” where it would be impossible to recover from the significant drop in population (Shorto 2008).

The main issue identified by social scientists and economists that is causing women in Southern European countries, like Italy, to have fewer children than in the past, is the economic downturn in
recent decades (Shorto 2008). Throughout Europe, many countries, such as Scandinavian countries, with greater gender equality also have a greater social commitment to institutional support for working women. Institutional support can come in the form of accommodations such as at-work daycare, paid maternity leave, and flexible scheduling and gives women the possibility to have a first child or multiple children. Northern European countries and Southern European countries present stark differences in regards to the social services provided for women and the countries with the most vigorous social welfare systems in Europe, such as Norway, also have the highest fertility rates on the continent (Shorto 2008). In Norway, women are guaranteed about 54 weeks of maternity leave and are given a government payment of 4,000 euros per child born. The state also provides subsidies for childcare, decreasing the financial burden of having a child. According to Euraxess’s webpage outlining the family support services available to all European Union citizens, Italian women are granted up to five months maternity leave at 80% of their pay, which ranks among the very lowest in Western Europe. While, globally, women may not receive any pay during maternity leave like in the U.S., the women I spoke to in Rome perceive there to be a lack of support from their workplace, discouraging them from having children or from adding more children to their family.

Importance/Implications

It is important to address the issue of decreasing birth rates in Italy due to the immediate effects on economic institutions and due to the ideological effects on gender stereotypes. According to Shorto, declining birth rates in combination with an increasingly longer lifespan, present a perfect “demographic storm” that will affect the labor market and retirement population. These two combined factors will lead to a dramatic reduction in the number of working age Italians, as the people in their 80s and 90s continue to increase in huge numbers, resulting in not enough workers to pay for the pensions of this retiree population.
What does this mean for Italy’s future? This extreme decrease in birth rate could cause people who were planning on retiring to put it off for future years and continue working out of necessity. Additionally, with a smaller working population compared with other parts of Europe and the rest of the developed world, this will make Italy less attractive to foreign direct investment and leave employers looking for employees that do not exist. This will also have implications on the family structure and society as the predominance of one and two-child households might present changes to support for elderly parents, sibling relationships, and social cohesion in the household.

Beyond the immediate economic impacts that results from a below replacement level birth rate are the cultural and ideological impacts that emerge from a lack of gender equality. Parental leave policies and workplace support for women and mothers are related to gender equality because in the absence of these policies and support, women are incentivized to reduce their employment in order to take care of their children (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt 2008:1). In this scenario, women and men revert back to traditional gender roles where women are seen as the “caregiver” and men are seen as the “provider”, placing the burden of tending to the children disproportionately on the woman and perpetuating negative gender stereotypes. It is necessary to provide women with the necessary support, thereby helping to rectify the lack of gender equity in Italy and promote positive views of women that involve equal opportunities.

Recommendations for Action

I suggest that to encourage parenthood in Italy, the government should follow a plan similar to the one presented by Singapore in the early 2000s. This plan includes a wide variety of measures aimed at encouraging childbirth including “improved accessibility to quality child care, leave entitlements for
new mothers and parents of young children, and financial incentives to help defray the costs of raising children” (Yew 2012:1). In addition, the government of Singapore has set up a special savings account for each child where funds deposited by parents are matched dollar for dollar by the government. I believe this provides a great example for the Servizio Sanitario Nazionale because it focuses on how the workplace can help to encourage childbirth while providing necessary aid to working parents.

The SSN should work to set up regulations for all legal workplaces in the country, making sure that a certain level of child care and leave entitlements are present through yearly reviews. While many workplaces currently have child care and leave entitlements for parents, the SSN needs to assure that the employers are following through with their proposals and maintaining the same level of aid for all employees over a long period of time. This form of public policy will encourage both female work and childbearing by “easing the childcare burden for dual earner families” (Kertzer et al. 2008). Due to the labor market rigidity in Italy and an inadequate supply of public childcare, it is necessary that this be implemented through the workplace so as to ensure accessibility for Italian parents (Del Boca & Pasqua 2005:130).

This can be accomplished through the creation of a Workplace Standards and Review Committee. This committee will set standards for the levels of child care and leave entitlements for employers, creating graduated categories based on the number of people each employer employs and research from the government’s labor department. After the standards are set and disseminated to all employers, the SSN will then evaluate how employers are working to meet those standards, assigning them grades that correspond to financial rewards. That way, the companies that are working hardest to meet those standards or who are maintaining those standards will be rewarded with greater financial amounts than the companies who are not meeting those standards and are not working to eventually meet those
standards. After a preliminary three year transition period, those companies that are not working to meet the child care and leave entitlement standards will be penalized with fines that will increase incrementally for each year that there is no action to improve standards.

Through the financial incentives and fines implemented by the SSN, companies will be encouraged to provide high levels of aid for their employees who are also parents, alleviating burdens placed on working parents and thereby encouraging family planning and childbirth. By instituting these changes at the localized level of individual employers, it can be assured that all working parents will have access to these new benefits and no legally employed parent will be excluded from receiving these benefits.

These suggestions address Franca, Maria, Luisa, and Elena’s specific concerns regarding a lack of workplace support for mothers. While Franca and Maria’s main consideration was that their jobs could be at risk if they take too much time off to care for their newborns or children, Luisa and Elena were more concerned with having a government organization that protects their rights as women and mothers. Through the Workplace Standards and Review Committee’s implementation of my suggestions, these concerns could actually be addressed by a governing body made just for protecting working parents’ rights.
CONCLUSION

The final chapter of my thesis serves as a reflection on the entire process the significance of this endeavor. It returns to the theory referred to in my Literature Review and how it informed my research, considering the specific lens and tools with which I viewed my research questions and constructed of this study. It then returns to the narrative structure, contemplating my experience and how this undertaking has effected my life.

Theoretical Frameworks Revisited

Throughout this paper, I have suggested that women in Italy face a number of economic and social difficulties that are impacting their decision to have children. While sometimes, the current literature supports the suggestion that women face many difficulties that impact their fertility decision making process, other times this literature is contradictory. For example, though the divorce rates considered to be very low, women perceive there to be an increase these rates. I have decided to focus on women’s specific perceptions of their realities because women based their fertility decisions on these perceptions, and not based on the current literature and objective viewpoint of women’s challenges. Regardless of the current literature on divorce rates, the consumer price index and other quantitative measures, the concerns expressed by the women I interviewed are the realities faced by these women everyday that in turn affect the choices they make.

In the Methodology chapter, my main research question was introduced: What factors influence Italian women’s reproductive decision making process? Various theoretical frameworks were considered when addressing this question and other questions that arose in the process of conducting my research. In this
section, I will revisit and evaluate theories relating to the agency framework, assessing whether they aligned with my research findings.

Bulutao’s (1984) theory relating agency to determinants of fertility is helpful for explaining the economic constraints that women expressed to me. While his theory focuses on the limiting nature of the financial environment in developing countries, it is valuable to apply his theory to the developed country of Italy’s financial environment. Once women have achieved a certain level of financial success, children can present a drain on economic resources and can hinder further financial success for the parent.

Grossbard’s (2011) critique of Becker and Mincer’s New Home Economic theory proved to align with my prediction that while many women consult their partners and family members when making fertility decisions, ultimately the final word rests within the woman, herself. Most women that I interviewed either made their fertility decisions with their partners, their nuclear family members, or completely by themselves. However, in all interviews, the women underscored the fact that they made the final decision in consideration of the input from their partners and family members. Therefore, Becker and Mincer’s unitarian model which asserts that agency lies within the household as one functioning unit, is not applicable here.

Leibenstein’s (1981) theory examining the phenomenon of passive decisions and non-decision decisions oversimplifies the woman’s knowledge of her environment by suggesting that economic, social, and institutional forces are experienced merely subconsciously. However, my interviews revealed that women are very aware of the current external forces that influence their decision making process, identifying the poor economic state and labor market, lack of support in the workplace, and
changing family structures as factors that make the fertility decision making process as increasingly difficult. While he goes on to explain a switch from routine decision making to active decision making, I believe that reproductive decisions are always considered to be profound and would never involve passive, routine decision making conventions.

Therefore, I assert that the women’s decisions aligned more with Carter’s (1995) definition of active decision making, in which people consciously employ tools of rationality to purposefully make decisions. This definition implies that women consider many social, economic, and institutional factors before making important life decisions, such as reproductive and fertility choices.

Closing Reflections

My time in Rome extremely eye opening and allowed me to learn in new ways and experience things I had never experienced before. Living in a foreign country by myself and conducting fieldwork for the first time in Italian was something that I was not only fearful of, but also something I never thought was possible at this point in my life. After having completed all my interviews, yet before translating them into English, I was still completely unsure whether I had enough of the (right) material I would need to write a thesis. I couldn’t go back to Rome and I didn’t even have any contact information of the women I spoke to in order to continue our conversations. This process was filled with bouts of uncertainty that started right at its onset and continued until the very end.

Accomplishing these goals proved to myself that my months of planning, organizing, re-planning, contacting salons, applying for grants and scholarships, truly paid off. My Italian language skills improved enormously in just the few short weeks I was there and I grew more confident in my ability to speak to strangers about their lives. I truly enjoyed the interview process and found myself more
involved and engaged with each successive one, even missing the process once I found myself back in the United States. I was shocked that women opened to me, being much younger than most of the women I interviewed and having relatively fresh Italian language skills. Leaving the interviews, I felt empowered and special, knowing that strangers entrusted me with the information about making their most personal decisions.

I hope, someday soon, to return to Rome and other parts of Italy to continue studying womens’ decisions in regards to fertility and other kinship matters. By speaking to women directly, I look forward to understanding more about why they make the decisions they do and what factors motivate or influence those decisions, as this can then be used to inform public policy.

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