Living in Couple and Partnership Formation at middle and older age:

A Portrait of Italy

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Introduction

Advancements in life expectancy have heightened the importance of understanding the familial dynamics and social connections among older adults. The ability to experience love, engage in meaningful work, and actively participate in society is not exhausted in adulthood. In today's ageing societies, older individuals lead rich and diverse family and social lives.

As well known, the last 50 years have testified dramatic changes in family demography in the majority of middle- and high-income countries: marriage slowly but constantly lost its centrality, whereas marital dissolutions, re-partnering, cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation have become common life-course events (e.g., Aassve et al. 2024; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010; Lestaeghe, 2020). Research on changing family dynamics is vast, and it generally focuses on young individuals, namely those in their reproductive age, the typical age to enter a union and form a family (i.e., having children). As the vanguard of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) process, the baby boom generation has been the object of study for their family-related behaviours at young or adult age, focusing on changing family dynamics in the '60s and '70s. Baby boomers are ageing nowadays, however, and decades of changes in family behaviours, together with the recent extraordinary advancements in life expectancy, have probably transformed their family dynamics as never before (Lichter et al., 2022). Marriage rates have registered a substantial reduction in the past decades for this big generation, only partially replaced by an increase in non-marital cohabitation; marital dissolutions have increased, and grey divorces are now on the rise (e.g., Alderotti et al. 2022; Brown & Lin, 2012); re-partnering is becoming increasingly common, especially in old age. All this makes the living arrangements of older people increasingly complex and heterogeneous (e.g., Lin and Brown, 2012), but we still know little about family configurations and union formation patterns in old age, as well as about the assortative mating processes specific to this age (Lichter et al., 2022; Sassler, 2010).

Among the scanty available literature, we locate some interesting findings, however. A large proportion of midlife Americans are unmarried, the vast majority of them never married or passed through a marital dissolution (Lin & Brown, 2012), and a similar picture is detected for French people in their fifties (Solaz, 2021). Cohabitation seems not largely diffused among older women, especially in comparison with their male counterparts, at least in the US context, and older couples exhibit substantial heterogamy (Lichter et al., 2022). Women display a comparative disadvantage in the marriage market relative to men, both in forming co-residential unions and in finding a partner matching their profiles. Factors driving decisions to form a union in later life have been shown to be different from those influencing partnering at earlier stages of life (Brown et al., 2019), and differences in the opportunities in the marriage market linked to age-related sex ratio imbalances contribute to a wide gender gap in (re-)partnering (Lichter et al., 2022; Schimmele & Wu, 2016). Besides, a new way of living an intimate relationship – the Living-Apart Together (LAT) arrangement – has been found gaining importance in later life although seldom investigated apart for some exceptions (e.g., Benson and Coleman 2016; Mauritz & Wagner, 2021).

This study aims to fill this knowledge gap in the Italian context. Italy is recognized worldwide as a traditional country, at least a latecomer in the Second Demographic Transition process. With some delay in comparison to other European countries, SDT family-related behaviours started to diffuse, slowly but continuously, in the mid-70s in Italy. At first, the innovative behaviours were adopted mainly by a restricted social vanguard – the highly educated, of high social class, living in the north of the country. Later, they permeated to other social groups. Nowadays, re-marriage, separation, and non-marital cohabitation are diffused throughout the Italian territories and subgroups, although some heterogeneity still persists (e.g., Aassve et al., 2024; Pirani et al., 2021;

Pirani & Vignoli, 2023). However, apart from some specific studies on grey divorces (e.g., Alderotti et al. 2022), we know little about these patterns for middle-aged and older people. The existing studies on re-partnering are outdated or do not specifically address the older population (e.g., Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2008; Gałęzewska et al., 2017). To the best of our knowledge, research on assortative mating patterns is limited, if not missing.

The aim of this study is to offer an up-to-date demographic portrait of living arrangements and union formation dynamics in middle and older age in Italy besides investigating patterns of assortative mating and by contrasting men and women situations.

Data & Methods

To draw our portrait, we refer to the Families and Social Subjects (FSS) survey, carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2016, the most updated nationally representative study available. FSS is a cross-sectional retrospective survey based on private households living in Italy, which collects information on a range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics of all family members. As a retrospective survey, it allows us to construct individuals' family careers.

Our analytical sample refers to individuals aged 50 and over at the time of the survey, for a total of 6,238 men and 6,912 women. We first provide an overview of their living arrangement, differentiating between currently unpartnered people, those living in a married couple, in a cohabiting couple, and those in a Living Apart Together (LAT) relationship, also considering the marital history of individuals. Then, for those in couple, we document the patterns of assortative mating, focusing on age, citizenship, and educational level.

We present here preliminary weighted descriptive findings, referring to the Italian population aged 50 and over. All the analyses are conducted separately for men and women, in order to shed light on the possible sex differences in partnership and assortative mating dynamics.

First results

Our analyses show that, on average, two out of three Italians aged 50 and over are in a married couple, and only 2% is living with a partner in a non-marital relationship; 3% is in a LAT relationship, and slightly less than 30% is not in an intimate relationship at the time of the survey. Important differences by sex and age appear, however (Table 1). Overall, the percentage of married men is higher than that of women (74.8 vs 57.5%), especially for the oldest old, due to the lower male life expectancy. Consequently, single women are more than the double of their male counterpart, with percentages almost raising 70% after the age of 75. Non-marital cohabiting unions do not seem largely diffused for adult and older Italians, although the prevalence decreases by age (over 5 and 4% respectively for younger men and women, but almost negligible after the age of 65). 5% of adult/older men are in a LAT partnerships, but the percentage is especially higher for the youngest age group. As for women, we detect a similar age pattern, although with lower percentages.

Table 1 – Percentages of Italian people aged 50 and over by age and partnership status, men and women. Row percentages, weighted values

	men				**women**			
	single	*married*	*cohabiting*	*LAT*	*single*	*married*	*cohabiting*	*LAT*
50-54	16.5	68.9	5.5	9.1	20.2	69.5	4.3	6.1
55-59	19.0	72.5	3.3	5.2	23.9	69.6	2.8	3.8
60-64	15.6	78.4	2.6	3.4	24.6	71.0	1.5	2.8
65-74	15.6	80.0	1.9	2.5	32.1	65.3	1.2	1.4
75+	25.9	72.6	0.6	1.0	68.9	30.4	0.0	0.6
Total	*18.6*	*74.8*	*2.6*	*4.0*	*38.3*	*57.5*	*1.7*	*2.6*

Source: authors' elaboration of 2016 FSS data.

Table 2 also takes into account the previous partnership history, and again interesting sex differences emerge. For instance, we can see that among single men, more than one-third have never been married, and the others have experienced marital dissolution or widowhood, in equal proportion. Conversely, two-thirds of women are widows, and less than 20% have never married. Noteworthy, among men the percentage of those who separated (and thus are not in their first marriage) surpasses 3%, and also among those who are cohabiting separated men are a large part (47.1%). Among women, these percentages are reduced (respectively 1.8 and 37.6%), testifying the reduced likelihood for women to enter a new partnership after a union dissolution.

Table 2 –Percentages of Italian people aged 50 and over by partnership status and previous partnership history, men and women. Row percentages, weighted values

	men				women			
	never married	*first marriage*	*separ./ divorced*	*widow*	*never married*	*first marriage*	*separ./ divorced*	*widow*
single	37.2	--	31.4	31.4	19.3	--	15.4	65.3
married	0.0	96.2	3.2	0.6	0.0	97.6	1.8	0.6
cohabiting	43.4	--	47.1	9.4	35.5	--	37.6	27.0
LAT	32.7	51.3	16.1	0.0	22.2	63.1	14.7	0.0
Total	*9.4*	*74.1*	*10.1*	*6.5*	*8.6*	*57.7*	*8.0*	*25.8*

Source: authors' elaboration of 2016 FSS data.

Finally, a brief look at the assortative mating patterns (Table 3). Without entering into details, we note that for all the characteristics considered (age class, education, citizenship), a large part of our couples share the same profile, although with differences depending on the characteristics considered. It is interesting to note a higher degree of heterogamy for cohabiting or LAT couples, an aspect that deserves further deepening.

Table 3 –Percentages of Italian people aged 50 and over by partnership status and assortative mating depending on age, education and citizenship. Row percentages, weighted values

	age			education			citizenzhip		
	same	*different*	*Total*	*same*	*different*	*Total*	*same*	*different*	*Total*
married	50.7	49.4	100.0	64.1	35.9	100.0	99.0	1.0	100.0
cohabiting	25.2	74.8	100.0	61.7	38.3	100.0	89.7	10.3	100.0
LAT	32.5	67.5	100.0	--	--	--	91.3	8.7	100.0
Total	*49.1*	*50.9*	*100.0*	*61.1*	*38.9*	*100.0*	*98.4*	*1.6*	*100.0*

Note: As for age, difference/similarity is assessed considering the classification of individuals in 5 age classes (50-54, 55-59, 60-64, 65-74,75+); for education, individuals are classified in low, medium, and high educational level, missing information about the partner for LAT relationships; for citizenship, data only allow the identification of Italian/foreign citizenship.
Source: authors' elaboration of 2016 FSS data.

Preliminary conclusions and further development

This study extensively documents partnership dynamics in middle and later life, namely for individuals aged 50 and over, focusing on Italy. Preliminary findings show that re-marriage, separation, and non-marital cohabitations start to become common life events also among middle-aged and older adults, leading to richer and varied family arrangements. Whether not so spread, the percentage of re-married or cohabiting older Italians is not negligible, especially for the youngest old, probably due to the slow and late diffusion process of the SDT in the country. Recent trends in changing family behaviours let however assume that this complexity will concern more and more midlife and older Italians in the years to come.

Further analyses are still needed to deepen some issues, like socio-demographic characteristics of people forming a union in later life or depending on the different partnership status and living

arrangements. Investigation is also needed for the assortative mating patterns, for instance, by analysing homogamy and heterogamy couples from a gender perspective.

Finally, we deem that understanding the ways of living in a couple and form a partnership in middle and older age is important not only *per se* but also for its possible interrelationships with well-being and the availability of support (Lewin, 2017). For this reason, future investigation will be devoted to deepening the existence of potential differences in well-being and social support among the different living arrangements of Italian adult and older people.

Acknowledgements

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