

# **Family ideals in Italy and Spain: Towards the end of the traditional Southern European family model?**

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## **1. Introduction**

Since the 1960s, families in Western societies have undergone significant transformations. Demographic trends have come to be characterized by declining fertility rates, an increase in cohabitation and single-person households, higher rates of separation and divorce, re-partnering, and a growing proportion of children born to unmarried couples and single parents (Lesthaeghe, 2014). These changes reflected a broader shift away from traditional family roles toward individualism, materialism, personal growth, and fulfillment, which have gained importance at the expense of traditional group solidarity (Lesthaeghe, 1991; Van de Kaa, 2002). Deeper intimacy, open communication, and shared emotional disclosures have become increasingly crucial for successful relationships (Giddens, 1992). This period also witnessed significant changes in gender and generational dynamics, with the pursuit of gender equality emerging as a prominent societal goal (Roussel, 1992). While this transition has gradually spread across most Western societies, Southern European countries, including Italy and Spain, initially exhibited slower and more modest changes than others (Sobotka, 2008; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004).

The unique aspects of family culture and social policies in Italy and Spain have been considered important barriers to the de-traditionalization of family dynamics in these societies (Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1996; Lomazzi, 2017). Indeed, Italy and Spain are generally classified within the “Southern European family model” (González et al., 1999; Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1996; Mínguez & Crespi, 2017; Roussel, 1992) due to shared cultural and socio-economic characteristics. The main features of this family model include a strong institutionalization of marriage, traditional gender roles, a high degree of cross-generational cohabitation, frequent social contacts and assistance within kinship networks, widespread family-oriented attitudes, and a high value placed on children (Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1996; Karamessini, 2008).

Nevertheless, although Italy and Spain are still perceived as family-oriented with distinctly traditional structures, family dynamics in these countries are undergoing significant changes and now share fundamental characteristics with other European countries (Aassve et al., 2024<sup>b</sup>). Fertility rates have been persistently low for over four decades, and recent demographic trends indicate that both countries are experiencing an accelerated transition in other family behaviors, with significant increases in rates of divorce, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births (Eurostat, 2023). Likewise, gender roles within families and society are rapidly evolving (EIGE, 2024). While these changes appear radical in both countries, Spain seems to be more advanced in this transition than Italy, highlighting emerging divergences between the two Southern European countries.

The evolving landscape of family demographics in Italy and Spain points to an ongoing process of de-traditionalization of family behaviors in both countries, suggesting a likely shift in the concept of what constitutes an 'ideal' family, departing from the traditional Southern European family model. Thus, this study endeavors to determine whether Italy and Spain continue to adhere to traditional family ideals, challenging the prevailing assumption that they are homogeneous, traditional, family-oriented countries (i). Furthermore, this study investigates whether family ideals in Italy and Spain are evolving in parallel or diverging from each other (ii). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that while certain demographic behaviors may continue to be predominant among specific societal groups, they may simultaneously weaken in other segments of the population (Cherlin, 2018, 2020). Therefore, this study also aims to unravel differences in family ideals across gender and education (iii).

Family ideals are multidimensional, encompassing various attributes of family life such as partnership dynamics, childbearing and child-rearing practices, economic constraints, the division of household responsibilities, as well as balancing family and career commitments. Thus, to study and capture these different dimensions, we designed a factorial survey experiment (FSE) that presented respondents with different family scenarios they had to evaluate (see general results in Aassve et al., 2024<sup>a</sup>). FSEs allow to integrate various family characteristics into a comprehensive conceptual framework, providing a deeper understanding of the importance attributed to different family characteristics (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; McDonald, 2019). This analytical approach allows to discern the relative importance of the various elements that collectively shape the overall

perception of an ideal family, enabling us to evaluate whether the notion of a successful family remains anchored to the features of the Southern European family model, or tends to align with post-modern family ideals. Additionally, it allows us to discern whether these perceptions vary across Italy and Spain, as well as across gender and educational levels.

## **2. Background**

### **Southern European families in transition**

Until recent decades, the most notable shift observed in Italian and Spanish families was a progressive delay in childbearing and a sharp decline in fertility rates, beginning at the end of the 1970s. Although there was a small rebound in the early 2000s, fertility rates have remained persistently very low over the past forty years. By 2022, the total fertility rate (TFR) had dropped to 1.24 in Italy and 1.16 in Spain, with the average age at first birth for women reaching 31.6 years in both countries (Ine, 2023; Istat, 2023). Despite these persistently low fertility rates, Italy and Spain had, until the onset of the century, witnessed slower and modest changes in other family behaviors—such as cohabitation, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births—compared to their Western European counterparts (Lesthaeghe, 2014; Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004). Likewise, gender roles within families largely remained anchored to the traditional male breadwinner model, and familialism and family solidarity continued to be crucial sources of family welfare (Ferrera, 1996; González et al., 1999; Lomazzi, 2017; Naldini & Saraceno, 2008).

The delayed and initially more modest transition in family behaviors and values in Italy and Spain, compared to most Western countries, has commonly been attributed to entrenched cultural norms, the authoritarian political legacy, the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church, and specific economic conditions that have historically shaped familial structures in these countries (Dominguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martin, 2013; Naldini & Jurado Guerrero, 2013; Reher, 1998; Vignoli & Salvini, 2014). Indeed, Italy and Spain share a history of strong influence from the Catholic Church and far-right authoritarian regimes in the 20th century, which delayed modernization in both countries (Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1996). Italy's fascist and post-fascist era, led by the Christian Democratic Party alongside a powerful Catholic Church, prolonged

traditional family structures codified during fascism, thereby impeding family law reforms (Ginsborg, 1989). The 1970s marked a period of modernization and secularization in Italy, characterized by significant legal milestones such as the legalization of divorce (1970), family law reform (1975), enactment of work equality legislation (1977) and abortion legalization (1978). Similarly, Spain, under a fascist dictatorship supported by the Catholic Church, resisted changes in family legislation until the late 1970s. The post-dictatorship transition from 1975 saw a shift to a pluralistic democracy in Spain, culminating in the 1981 reform of the Civil Code, which introduced civil marriage and transferred marital dissolution jurisdiction from the Church to the state (Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1996). Further crucial legal changes included the recognition of cohabiting and same-sex unions, in 2005 in Spain and only in 2016 in Italy (Caprinali et al., 2023; Ferrari, 2017). In Spain, new generations coming of age during the transition to democracy experienced a strong backlash against conservative social norms and traditional gender roles prevalent during the authoritarian regime. Their desire to be “modern” accelerated the rejection of previous norms and the adoption of new forms of behavior that had already emerged in other European countries (Alonso et al., 2023).

Both in Italy and in Spain, new family demographic patterns began to spread first across more secularized individuals, those with the highest socioeconomic profiles, and predominantly among those living in the most urbanized areas of the country (Adsera, 2006; Caltabiano et al., 2019; Naldini & Jurado Guerrero, 2013; Pirani & Vignoli, 2022). Notably, Italy lags behind in tertiary education, with only 29% of individuals aged 25-34 completing tertiary education (35.5% women and 23.1% men), compared to 50.5% in Spain (57% women and 44.1% men) (Eurostat, 2023). The dramatic increase in educational levels, particularly among women starting from lower levels, favored a quicker diffusion of new family models in Spain than in Italy (Adsera, 2005). The sharp increase in education fostered high labor market aspirations among young women, which however, collided with poor labor market conditions and institutions (Adsera, 2005).

Both countries faced high and persistent unemployment starting in the mid-1990s, coupled with limited access to part-time work for those seeking to balance work and family responsibilities, making it difficult for young women to enter the workforce and consider motherhood. Unemployment has been cyclical but remained relatively high in both countries compared to other European countries. The Italian and Spanish labor markets are characterized by a dual labor market

and an insider-outsider divide (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009; Bentolila et al., 2012). Employment instability for youth has been prevalent in recent decades, whether through self-employment or temporary jobs. Furthermore, both countries were strongly affected by the negative consequences of the Great Recession, including an increase in unemployment, precarious forms of employment, and the general spreading of uncertainty, all of which contributed to the postponement of family formation (Comolli, 2017; Comolli & Vignoli, 2021; Sobotka et al., 2011). Recent data show that as of 2022, employment rates in both countries were among the lowest in the EU (Eurostat, 2023). Moreover, despite women being more educated than men in both countries, there are notable gender differences in labor market participation. This is especially the case in Italy, where in 2022, labor force participation among 15-64-year-olds was only 56.4% for women, compared to 74.6% for men. In Spain, instead, labor force participation rates were 71.1% for women and 79.6% for men (Eurostat, 2023).

Furthermore, despite the sharp increase in women's education and labor market participation, in both countries women are still responsible for the bulk of domestic work, and gender equality at home remains incomplete (Anxo et al. 2011, Dotti Sani, 2014, 2018; González et al., 1999; Naldini & Jurado Guerrero, 2013). This is particularly evident in Italy, which is the EU country where women spend the most time on unpaid activities and where gender differences in the time dedicated to unpaid work are the highest (Anxo et al. 2011; Campaña et al., 2023). However, in Spain as well, research using both in-depth interviews and time-use data highlights the presence of the "second shift" for Spanish women (González & Jurado-Guerrero, 2009). Recent ethnographic work shows that Spanish women cite this perceived burden of domestic tasks as one of the most important reasons for not having more children (Bueno & Brinton, 2019).

Italy and Spain were both traditionally characterized by a high degree of familialism and strong family ties (Reher, 1998; Leon & Migliavacca, 2013). Familialism emphasizes the family as the primary provider of welfare through family solidarity and mutual aid across generations (Estévez-Abe et al., 2016). Indeed, traditionally, families served as buffers from socio-economic hardships or special needs, while the state's role in family welfare was primarily focused on protecting family heads (Ferrera, 1996; Marí-Klose & Moreno-Fuentes, 2013). The Catholic Church's social doctrine further reinforced this familistic culture, exerting significant influence on culture and social policy (Marí-Klose & Moreno-Fuentes, 2013; Saraceno, 2016; Vignoli & Salvini, 2014). Despite the

strong emphasis on the family's role, social policies have not effectively supported families or enhanced their caregiving abilities. Instead, the emphasis on family responsibility has justified limited social services and political inaction in these policy areas (Naldini & Saraceno, 2008; Leon & Migliavacca 2013). In a study conducted about a decade ago, Naldini and Jurado (2013) analyzed whether Italy and Spain still adhered to a traditional familistic welfare system or if they were transitioning toward a dual-earner family model. The study examined both the division between the State and the family and the division within the family. Their findings suggested significant changes in families and social policies over the preceding two decades, with Spain experiencing more pronounced shifts compared to Italy. Italy was identified as maintaining a family/kinship-oriented welfare system, while Spain showed greater movement towards a dual-earner family model.

### **Recent developments of demographic behaviors and gender values**

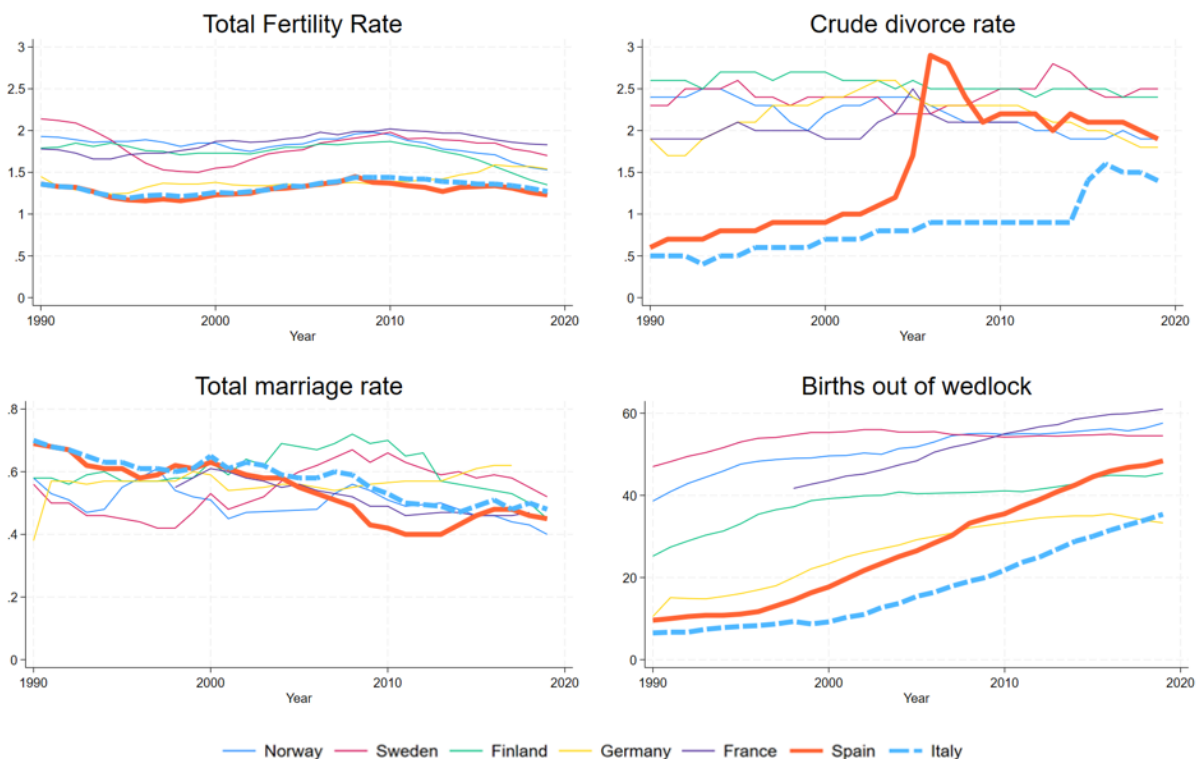
Undoubtedly, Italy and Spain initially exhibited resistance to changes in family dynamics compared to most European countries. However, the situation of families has changed enormously over the past couple of decades. Despite grappling with the legacies of their pasts, both countries are gradually aligning with broader European trends, with Spain showing particularly notable progress. Can Italy and Spain still be considered as belonging to the same distinct traditional family model?

Figure 1 illustrates the recent development of family demographic trends in Italy and Spain alongside other European countries. The share of births occurring out of wedlock surged in the late 1990s, tripling over the past three decades with a notable acceleration in the last decade. By 2022, the percentage of births outside marriage reached 41.5% in Italy and 50.1% in Spain (Ine, 2023; Istat, 2023), figures comparable to those of many other European countries. Marriage rates have been declining, and the age at marriage has been increasing. As of 2021, the average age at marriage reached 34.9 years for women in Italy and 36.6 years for women in Spain (Ine, 2023; Istat, 2023), among the oldest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2023). Dissolution rates have always been low in Italy and Spain compared to those in most developed countries (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). However, over the last two decades, divorce rates have surged in both countries, with Spain approaching the levels seen in many other European countries, and Italy following a similar trend. The spikes observed in divorce rates in Spain in 2005 and Italy in 2014 were a result

of significant changes in divorce legislation. In Spain, these reforms allowed direct access to divorce without a prior legal separation period and introduced marriage dissolution based on mutual consent and unilateral demand. Similarly, in Italy, the mandatory waiting period between separation and divorce was shortened, and the overall procedure was simplified (González-Val & Marcén, 2018; Istat, 2016).

Overall, looking at these demographic trends, post-modern family demographic patterns appear to be more widespread in Spain than Italy, but Italy seems to follow the exact path of Spain with a lag of about a decade.

**Figure 1. Recent family demographic trends in Italy, Spain and other European countries**



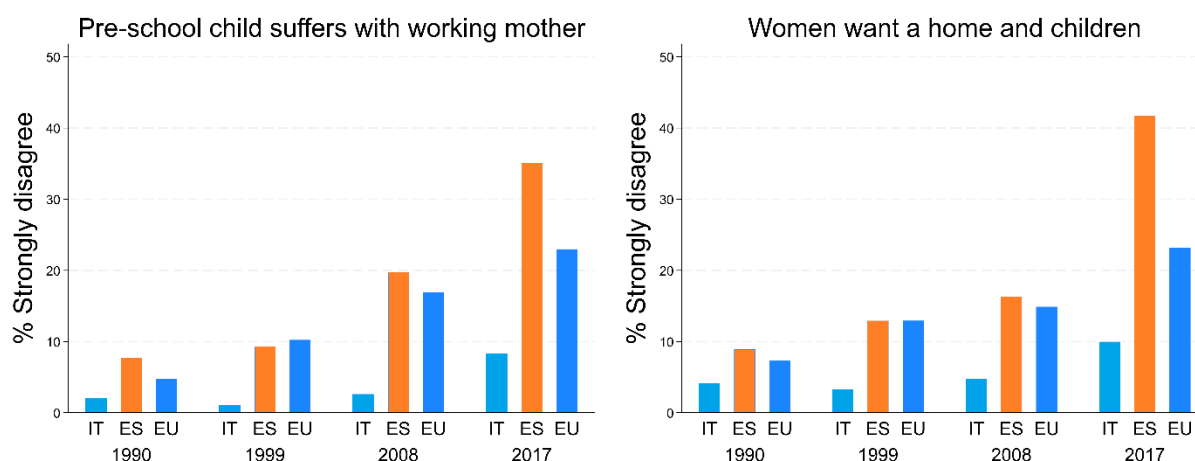
Note: Data retrieved from Eurostat and OECD databases.

When considering gender equality and gender values, differences between Italy and Spain are evident as well. In the Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute of Gender Equality, Italy scored 53.3 in 2013 and 68.2 in 2023 (the latest available data). Despite the considerable improvement over time, which marks the largest increase in overall score over this

period among all the Member States, Italy's current score still falls below the EU average (70.2). In contrast, Spain reported a much higher level of gender equality than Italy already in 2013, scoring 66.4, and 76.4 in the most recent evaluation, even exceeding the EU average (EIGE, 2024).

Analyzing a time series from the European Value Study (EVS) spanning from 1990 to 2017, a significant evolution in values related to family gender roles is evident both in Italy and Spain (Figure 2). As illustrated in Figure 2, the disagreement with the sentence “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works” considerably increased in both countries over time. However, while in Italy this increased from 1.1% in 1990 to 8.3% in 2017, in Spain the variation was from 7.7% to 35.1%. Similarly, in Spain, more than 40% of the respondents in 2017 strongly disagreed with the statement "A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children", whereas the percentage was approximately 10% in Italy and 22% on average in the EU-15. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that values related to gender equality in Spain surpassed the EU-15 average, resembling those of the most modern European countries. In contrast, Italy lags behind in this regard. The most recent data available in the EVS, however, is from 2017; thus, more recent data is necessary to thoroughly explore the ongoing evolution of values.

**Figure 2. Evolution of beliefs on gender roles in Italy and Spain over time**



Note: % Strongly disagree with sentence “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works” and “A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children”. Values for EU refers to EU15. Data retrieved from the European Value Study database.

Given the crucial changes observed in family demographic trends and beliefs on gender roles, we envisage that what is considered an ideal family in Italy and Spain could have shifted away from the traditional Southern European family model. We expect that the more pronounced change in family behavior in Spain, is reflected in a higher detraditionalization of family ideals in Spain. Moreover, given that post-modern family patterns in the two countries began to spread first among the highly educated, we expect a higher departure from the Southern European family model among this group. Finally, due to persistent gender inequalities within families, gender differences in family ideals are explored.

### **3. Data and methods**

In our investigation of family ideals, we designed a factorial survey experiment (FSE) involving family scenarios. Factorial survey experiments have become increasingly popular for gaining insights into the multidimensional aspects of individuals' values, goals, and decision-making processes as they combine the advantages of surveys and experimental design (Aassve et al., 2024; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; McDonald, 2019). Employing FSE to analyze family ideals provides several advantages. Firstly, the experimental design ensures that respondents' characteristics are independent of the dimensions of the vignette they evaluate. Consequently, the effects of varying family dimensions on individual ratings can be interpreted as causal. The complete control over vignette characteristics also guarantees a higher level of internal validity compared to traditional survey methods. Furthermore, respondents in FSE studies evaluate vignettes that vary along multiple dimensions, allowing the testing of various combinations, including some that are rare in reality. Finally, the multidimensionality of FSE minimizes concerns about respondents providing socially desirable answers because the variations across vignettes make it more challenging to discern the study's purpose (Aassve et al., 2024; Auspurg & Hinz, 2014; McDonald, 2019).

We collected our data in December 2021 through an online survey including respondents between 25 and 50 years old, on quota samples by age and sex for Italy and Spain<sup>1</sup> with post-stratification weights developed for analysis (Aassve et al., 2024). The number of participants was 2760 for

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted in 8 countries, namely Italy, Spain, China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, USA, and Norway. In this paper, to address our research question, we use only the two national sub-samples of Italy and Spain.

Italy, and 2741 for Spain. Participants were exposed to several vignettes describing different families and were asked to rate whether they deem the described family successful. Moreover, the survey comprised a very rich set of variables on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents, which allowed to account for heterogeneity in family ideals.

Following the general recommendation of giving each participant 5-10 vignettes (Auspurg and Hinz 2015), all respondents were randomly exposed to six vignettes, each describing a different hetero-normative family characterized by random variations in the ten factors. We conducted two distinct experiments. Experiment A comprised vignettes depicting couples who were either married or cohabiting, with or without children. Conversely, Experiment B focused solely on families with at least one child, incorporating the possibility of the couple being divorced. Additionally, in Experiment B, where only families with children are included, we introduced additional dimensions concerning children's educational aspirations and financial support. This distinction between Experiment A and B is based on the implicit assumption that a divorced couple without mutual children no longer constitutes a family. Vignette factors and levels are summarized in Table 1.

The order of factors is randomized across participants, and kept the same for each participant. Participants were required to spend a minimum of 15 seconds on each vignette page before progressing, and the time they spent on each vignette was recorded. Respondents were then asked whether the vignette described a family they considered to be successful, with ratings on a scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). An example of a vignette can be found in figure A1 in the appendix. Crossing all vignette levels, there are 2304 different vignette profiles. Given the large universe, we use the %mktex and %mktblock macros in SAS (Kunfeld, 2002) to select a d-efficient subsample. The final subsample consists of 576 vignettes into 96 blocks of 6 vignettes. D-efficiency is 99.88, which exceed the commonly accepted D-efficiency value 90 (Auspurg and Hinz 2015), rendering sufficient statistical power to obtain unbiased estimates for each experiment.

In our analysis, we conducted several regression models to estimate the relative importance attributed to each family attribute presented in the vignettes, while accounting for certain characteristics of the respondents. The dependent variable measures the extent to which a respondent rates the specific family profile presented as “successful” on a scale from 0 to 10,

treated as a continuous variable. The independent variables consist of the experimental variables representing all the different family dimensions included in the vignette (as outlined in Table 1).

Since the six reported vignettes per respondent are nested within respondents, we fitted random intercept models with two levels to the data, separately for Italy and Spain. For each family attribute, we estimated how successful this attribute is deemed for an ideal family, comparing Italy and Spain. In subsequent models, we then disentangled differences across gender and educational levels of the respondents.

**Table 1: Vignettes' factors and levels for Experiment A and B**

Family attributes	Levels	
	Experiment A	Experiment B
Union status	Cohabiting	Cohabiting
	Married	Married
		Divorced
Fertility	No children	
	1 child	1 child
	2 children	2 children
	3 children	3 children
Household income	Lower than average	Lower than average
	Around average	Around average
	More than average	More than average
Family communication	Not open	Not open
	Open	Open
Gender share of paid and unpaid work	Traditional	Traditional
	Women double burden	Women double burden
	Egalitarian	Egalitarian
Work-life balance	Both conflicted	Both conflicted
	Only female conflicted	Only female conflicted
	Only male conflicted	Only male conflicted
	Neither conflicted	Neither conflicted
Community respect	Not well respected	Not well respected
	Well respected	Well respected
Extended family contact	Infrequent	Infrequent
	Frequent	Frequent
Financial support to children		Not saving
		Saving
Children educational outcome		High school
		Bachelor degree
		postgraduate

## 4. Results

### Descriptives of the two samples

For a descriptive purpose, Table 1 reports the main features of our survey respondents in Italy and Spain. The characteristics of our survey samples in both countries are reflective of the current situation.

The average number of children per respondent is very low in both countries (below one), with Spanish respondents having a slightly higher number of children (0.91 in Spain compared to 0.72 in Italy). A much higher share of Spanish respondents has ever experienced cohabitation (81% in Spain versus 54% in Italy). Furthermore, Spanish respondents exhibit higher levels of education, as do their parents. Interestingly, a lower percentage of Spanish respondents identify as Catholic (51% in Spain compared to 65% in Italy), and fewer practice the religion (29% versus 22%). Additionally, a larger proportion of Spanish respondents belong to the gender egalitarian couple category, where both partners work and share unpaid work equally (60% in Spain compared to 37% in Italy). This descriptive information suggests that Spanish respondents could be more inclined towards embracing postmodern behaviors compared to their Italian counterparts.

**Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of Italian and Spanish samples**

	ITALY			SPAIN		
	Mean	sd	N	Mean	sd	N
Number of children (0-5)	0.72	0.94	2760	0.91	0.96	2741
Ever cohabited	0.54	0.50	2760	0.81	0.39	2741
Education (ISCED 0-8)	3.74	1.89	2760	4.41	2.16	2741
Father education (ISCED 0-8)	2.37	1.51	2683	2.95	2.07	2654
Mother education (ISCED 0-8)	2.35	1.46	2676	2.64	1.90	2687
Catholic	0.65	0.48	2760	0.51	0.50	2741
Church attendance: at least once a month	0.29	0.45	2760	0.22	0.42	2741
Dual earner couples with same share of unpaid work	0.37	0.48	604	0.60	0.49	768

Note: the sample includes individuals between 25 and 50 years old. Weighted data.

## **Family ideals in Italy and Spain**

Figure 3 presents regression coefficients (relative to the reference category in each factor) illustrating the characteristics linked to a successful family in Italy and Spain, for experiments A and B.

Considering the perceived success of cohabiting couples compared to married ones, Experiment A and B report slightly different results. In Experiment A, which includes the possibility of childless couples, despite cohabitation having a negative coefficient in both Italy and Spain, on average differences between marriage and cohabitation are not statistically significant in either country. This suggests that cohabitation is not deemed less successful than marriage in this setting. However, when looking at Experiment B, which only includes couples with children, Italy associates marriage more strongly with a successful family compared to cohabitation. In contrast, in Spain, even in this setting, there are again no significant differences between the two union types. Hence, although cohabitation is becoming more prevalent in both countries, in Italy, within the context of families with children described in Experiment B, cohabitation is still perceived as a less favorable arrangement. Similarly, in Experiment B it can be noted that, while divorce is still perceived as indicative of an unsuccessful family in both countries, Italy holds a more negative view of it compared to Spain. For a correct interpretation of this finding, it is important to note that in the illustrated vignettes divorce is depicted within the context of a family with children, which may indeed contribute to its negative evaluation.

Experiment A, shows that the role of children for an ideal family is similar in the two countries. Childless families are considered less successful than families with at least one child. Additionally, it appears that families with two children are slightly preferred relative to those with only one child. However, families with three children are not valued more positively than families with only one child. This result seems to confirm the persistence of the traditional preference for the two-child family in both Italy and Spain. When looking at Experiment B, however, few differences between the two countries emerge. In Italy, a family with two children is considered more successful than one with only a single child. However, in Spain, there is no substantial difference in perception between families of one, two, or three children. Thus, in Experiment B it seems that in Spain, the introduction of additional dimensions, such as educational aspirations for children

and the related burden of financially supporting them, changes the relative importance of having more than one child.

A lower-than-average income is associated with the perception of a less successful family, while an income surpassing the average is positively evaluated, consistently in both Experiments A and B, and in both countries.

Similarly, effective communication among family members is significantly associated with a more successful family in both countries. However, in Experiment B, it appears to be more important in Spain than in Italy.

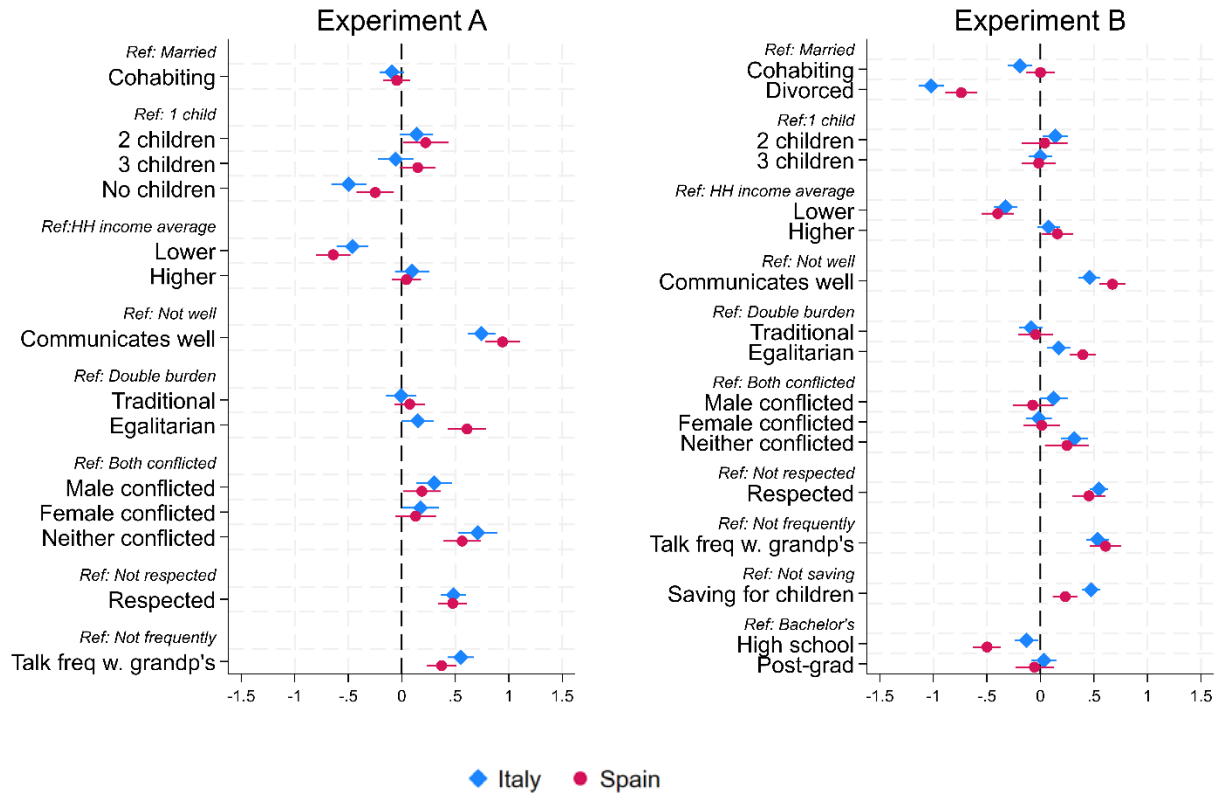
The importance of a more egalitarian share of paid and unpaid work within the couple is recognized in both countries, but particularly emphasized by Spanish respondents, as evident in both Experiment A and B.

The absence of conflict between work and family responsibilities for either partner is deemed crucial for a successful family in both countries. Likewise, family respect in the community and frequent communication with grandparents and the extended family are positively associated with family success in both countries.

Regarding attributes related to children, a lower level of educational attainment is viewed more negatively in Spain. In contrast, savings for a child's future are considered more important in Italy, highlighting a greater emphasis on familial support and assistance in Italy.

In sum, the analysis of the ascribed success of demographic behaviors suggests that post-modern family patterns are more accepted in Spain compared to Italy, especially when considering families with children in Experiment B. Likewise, attributes consistent with post-modern family's ideals, such as effective communication and gender equality, are more highly valued for a successful family in Spain.

**Figure 3. Family ideals in Italy and Spain.**



Note: Coefficient plot from random intercept regression models. 95% c.i..

## Heterogeneity by education and gender

### *Differences by respondent's educational level*

In Figure 4, we segmented our respondents based on their education levels, distinguishing between those with and without tertiary education.

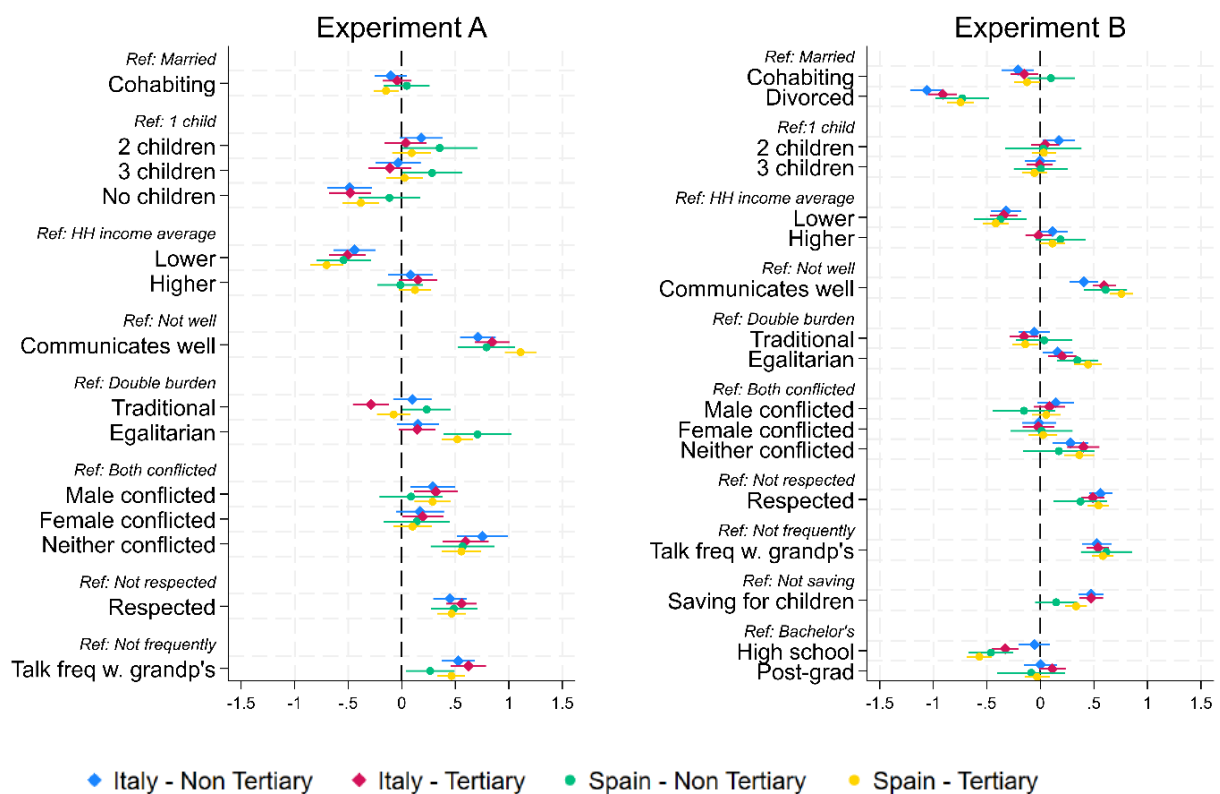
Analyzing the role of education in preferences for partnership type (marriage vs. cohabitation) reveals divergent trajectories between Italy and Spain. In Italy, the association does not vary across level of education. In Experiment A there are no significant differences in the evaluation of marriage and cohabitation, while in Experiment B, cohabitation is deemed less successful than marriage. In contrast, in Spain, in both Experiment A and B, cohabitation is regarded as equally successful as marriage among individuals without tertiary education, while highly educated Spanish respondents tend to view cohabitation as less successful than marriage. This finding

contrasts with the expectation that post-modern demographic behavior would be more widely accepted among the highly educated. This result could be attributed to the widespread diffusion of cohabitation in Spain, permeating all societal strata. Consequently, marriage may have evolved into a symbol of privilege primarily associated with the upper class, as has been found in countries such as the United States (Cherlin, 2018; Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011).

Regarding the number of children, an intriguing distinction arises when stratifying by education. Specifically, the preference for a two-child family is specific to Italians without tertiary education, as observed in Experiment B.

Another noteworthy discrepancy lies in the perceived importance of children's education. In Italy, education for children holds significant weight only for those with tertiary education. In Spain instead, there are no significant divergences in the importance attributed to children education across educational levels.

**Figure 4. Family ideals in Italy and Spain by education**



Note: Coefficient plot from random intercept regression models. 95% c.i..

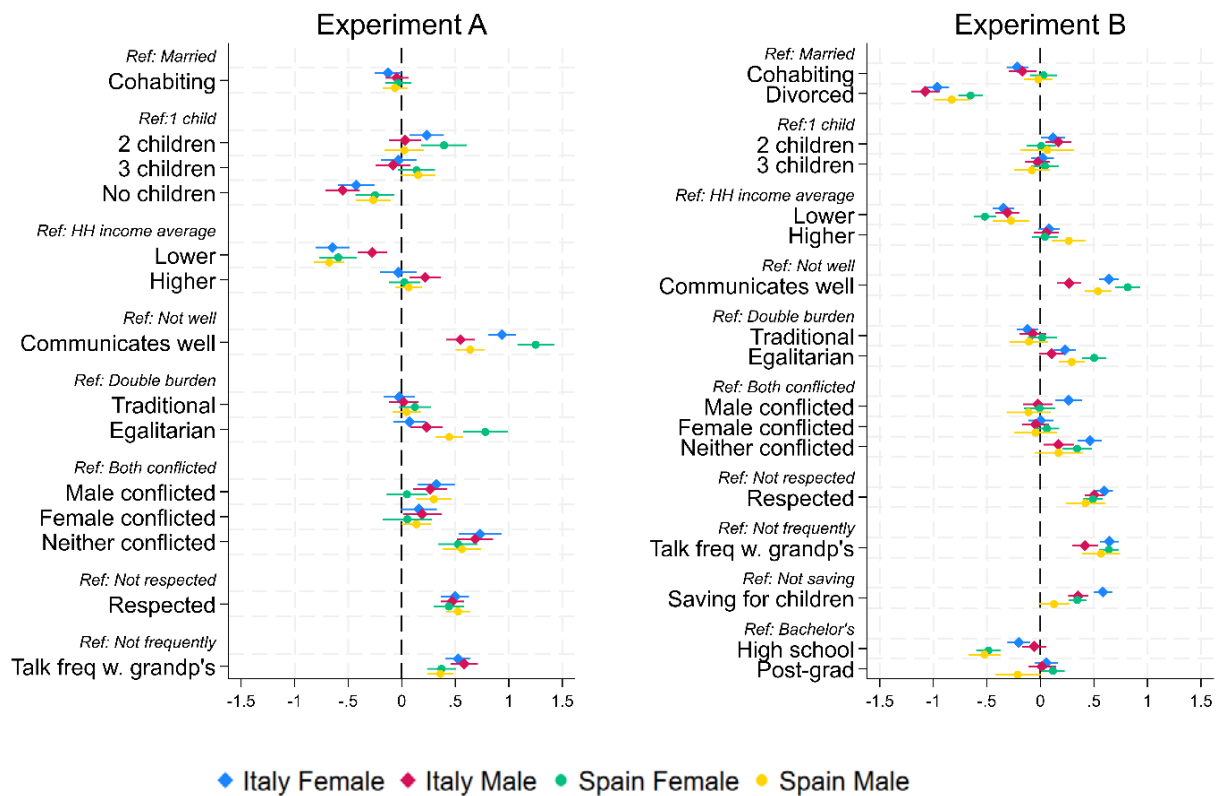
### Differences by respondent's gender

Figure 5 displays differences across genders. The most notable disparities are found in the importance of communication. While effective communication among family members is considered crucial by all genders in both countries, it is particularly valued by women, with Spanish women assigning the highest importance to it.

Similarly, Spanish women are also those who most value an egalitarian division of labor between partners.

Finally, it seems that women in both countries place more importance than men in saving for their children's future.

**Figure 5. Family ideals in Italy and Spain by gender**



Note: Coefficient plot from random intercept regression models. 95% c.i..

## 5. Conclusions

This study examines whether Italy and Spain still uphold traditional family ideals linked to the Southern European family model, challenging the notion that they are homogeneously traditional family-oriented countries. Furthermore, it explored whether family ideals in the two countries are evolving along similar trajectories or diverging, while also examining differences in family ideals across education and gender.

To thoroughly examine family ideals, we designed a factorial survey experiment, presenting respondents with various family scenarios to evaluate. By moving away from the conventional approach of analyzing specific family dimensions in isolation, which often overlooks necessary tradeoffs, our factorial experimental design enables us to assess the relative importance of different family characteristics in relation to one another.

Overall, our study shows a significant sign of modernization in family ideals in both countries, however, the analysis of cross-country differences in various family attributes indicates a more deinstitutionalized context in Spain compared to Italy.

Our investigation into relationship patterns revealed that cohabitation is not necessarily perceived as less successful than marriage. In Italy, cohabitation is viewed less favorably than marriage only within the context of families with children, regardless of educational and gender differences. In Spain, there is no overall difference in the evaluation of marriage and cohabitation; however, cohabitation is perceived less favorably than marriage among the highly educated. This discrepancy in perception across educational levels may be attributed to the widespread acceptance of cohabitation across all societal strata in Spain, potentially leading marriage to be regarded as a symbol of privilege primarily associated with the upper class (Cherlin, 2020). Divorce, on the other hand, is universally considered indicative of an unsuccessful family in both countries, across gender and educational backgrounds, with Italian respondents holding a more negative view of divorce compared to their Spanish counterparts.

A noteworthy finding is that despite persistently low fertility levels in both countries, parenthood remains a highly valued family attribute. Furthermore, there is a slight preference for families with two children over those with only one child, indicating a continued preference for the two-child family in both Italy and Spain. However, in Spain, when examining preferences within the context

of families with children, the introduction of additional dimensions alters the relative importance of the number of children to enhance other family features. This aligns with observed fertility trends, which are significantly lower than the traditional two-children ideal would suggest. In contrast, Italian respondents continue to favor families with two children over those with only one child. However, the analysis of differences across education reveals that the preference for the two-child family is specific to Italians without tertiary education, suggesting that cross-country differences in educational levels may contribute to variations in preferences for family size.

Communication and gender equality emerge as crucial elements for an ideal family. Overall, considering the relative importance attributed to each factor, they appear to be more significant than marriage and children in evaluating family success in both Italy and Spain. While both effective communication among family members and an egalitarian division of paid and unpaid work are positively evaluated in both countries, they are considered more essential in Spain. Interestingly, our analysis of gender differences indicates that these two factors—effective communication and egalitarianism—are especially crucial for women.

When considering attributes related to children, our findings reveal distinct perspectives between Spain and Italy. In Spain, lower levels of educational attainment are viewed more negatively, reflecting the emphasis placed on education and upward mobility. Conversely, in Italy, savings for a child's future are considered more important, highlighting the crucial value attributed to familial support and financial assistance.

This comprehensive examination provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of family ideals in Italy and Spain. Influenced heavily by their respective authoritarian pasts and the pervasive role of the Catholic Church, both Italy and Spain initially exhibited resistance to changes in family and gender roles. Both countries face persistent challenges related to high unemployment rates, employment instability, and entrenched gender norms that hinder the full realization of gender equality and complicate family formation. The strong culture of familialism in both countries has historically compensated for limited state intervention, but has also perpetuated traditional family structures and delayed broader societal changes. However, while Italy and Spain continue to grapple with the legacy of their pasts, they are gradually aligning with broader European trends. In both countries, ongoing societal shifts suggest a complex but undeniable transition away from traditional familistic models towards more post-modern-family dynamics.

Italy and Spain now diverge in several ways, particularly in their rates of educational attainment and gender equality, with Spain advancing more rapidly in these areas. These differences are reflected in a higher diffusion of postmodern demographic behaviors and family ideals in Spain.

While the evolution of societal values played a pivotal role in the spread of new family demographic trends, the surge of new family patterns may have, in turn, contributed to a redefinition of what constitutes an "ideal" family. As these alternative family trajectories become more common and widespread in society, they gradually shed their earlier stigma, becoming more widely accepted (Festinger, 1957). It is important to note that drawing precise connections between trends in family attitudes and behaviors can be a complex endeavor and exceeds the scope of this study. Nevertheless, examining both behaviors and ideals provide a comprehensive understanding of the deinstitutionalization of family in countries that have historically been characterized by traditional family patterns.

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## 7. Appendix

**Figure A1: example of a vignette (Experiment A)**

*In the following you will find a description of Lisa and Robert's family.*

Lisa and Robert are both around 45 years old.

Lisa and Robert are cohabiting.

Lisa and Robert have three children.

Lisa and Robert's combined income is lower than the country average.

The family is not well respected in their community.

Each parent and the children discuss their daily life infrequently, and they do not feel comfortable expressing their feelings and raising disagreements with each other.

Lisa and Robert talk with their respective parents frequently and their children talk with all grandparents frequently as well.

While Robert focuses on his career, Lisa focuses on taking care of the family and household responsibilities.

Lisa does not feel conflicted between her family responsibilities and a potential career, while Robert feels conflicted between his career and the possibility to help out with family responsibilities.

*This describes a successful family -- 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree)*