



Article

The Intersection of Work, Career, and Parenthood: A Qualitative Exploration of Fertility Intentions in the Italian Context

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Abstract

In recent decades, low birth rates, delayed parenthood, and a decline in the average number of children per couple have become prevalent issues, sparking growing scientific interest in understanding their causes. While cultural, social, and gender-related factors have been widely examined, work-related dimensions remain underexplored within work and organizational psychology. This qualitative study explores how individuals make sense of the interplay between perceived work-related factors (specifically, working conditions, organizational culture, the work-family interface, and career ambitions) and declared fertility intentions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 participants (22 women; 19 without children, 14 with one child; aged 24–45). A subtle realist positioning was adopted, and template analysis was employed to examine the data. The findings highlight how participants interpret multiple work-related dimensions as relevant to their fertility intentions, including high job demands, job insecurity, and family-unfriendly organizational cultures. Concerns about work-family conflict also emerged as central. At the personal level, career ambitions and self-efficacy were identified as key dimensions. Notably, the perception of career-parenthood interference is often associated with limited or postponed decisions about having children. This study contributes to a better understanding of the work-related dimensions that can contribute to shaping fertility intentions and offers practical recommendations for interventions.

Keywords: fertility intentions; work-home resources model; ambition; career; parenthood–career interference; qualitative study



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1. Introduction

In recent decades, developed countries have faced a shrinking population. For example, the U.S. Total Fertility Rate (TFR)—defined as the total number of children that would be born to each woman if she were to live through her childbearing years and give birth in alignment with prevailing age-specific fertility rates ([OECD 2024](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15070434))—declined from 2.51 in 1970 to 1.62 in 2024 ([United Nations 2025](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15070434)). Similarly, the EU average TFR fell from 2.28 in 1970 to a minimum of 1.4 in 1999 and had stabilized at 1.49 by 2022 ([United Nations 2022](https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci15070434)). This decline in TFR poses a serious threat to the economic systems of these countries. However, it remains unclear whether this trend reflects a “tempo distortion” (a

postponement of births that eventually occur) or a genuine shift toward smaller families (Hartnett and Gemmill 2020).

The postponement of parenthood, which appears closely linked to the non-fulfillment of intended reproductive plans (Beaujouan and Berghammer 2019), has received significant attention in the academic literature over the past two decades (Mills et al. 2011) due to the increase in the mean age of women at the birth of their first child. In the EU it rose from 28.8 years in 2013 (the first year for which EU-wide data is available) to 29.7 years in 2022 (Eurostat 2024), while in the U.S., it was 25.4 in 2010 and increased to 27.4 in 2022 (Osterman et al. 2024). The reasons for this delay are multifaceted and, in some cases, interrelated. One explanation is tied to the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 2010), marked by sustained sub-replacement fertility, a diversification of living arrangements beyond marriage, and a decline in population sizes, mitigated primarily by immigration. Key demographic shifts include rising ages at first marriage, increased prevalence of cohabitation, and a growing disconnect between marriage and childbearing. Fertility behaviors are also influenced by expectations about the future (Vignoli et al. 2020).

This study focuses in particular on the Italian context, which is experiencing a marked demographic decline, with births falling to 369,944 in 2024, the lowest level since national records began, and fertility reaching an all-time low of 1.18 children per woman (ISTAT 2025). This downturn is accompanied by a persistent postponement of childbearing, with the average age at childbirth rising to 32.6 years in 2024 (ISTAT 2025). Together, these dynamics reflect a dual process of declining fertility and delayed childbearing that characterizes the current Italian demographic landscape. This trajectory is embedded in a specific institutional and cultural context. Italy is characterized by a familistic welfare model, in which the state relies on families—through intergenerational solidarity and a gendered division of care—to compensate for the limited provision of public services (Naldini and Saraceno 2008). Formal childcare coverage for children aged 0–3 remains insufficient, with fewer than one in three children enrolled in early childhood education and care services (Juni and Vitali 2025), pushing families to depend on informal support networks. At the same time, the dualization of the Italian labor market—accelerated by deregulation reforms since the late 1990s—has produced fragmented employment careers that disproportionately affect younger cohorts during their peak reproductive years, contributing to childbearing postponement and, in many cases, to a permanent reduction in completed fertility (Alderotti et al., 2025; Scherer and Brini 2023). In this context, workplace flexibility has emerged as a particularly salient resource: in the absence of robust public support, flexible working arrangements are significantly associated with higher fertility intentions for both men and women (Juni and Vitali 2025). Together, these structural conditions shape the context in which individuals negotiate work, career, and fertility decisions, and provide essential background for interpreting the findings of this study.

The present study addresses the broader need to explore how work-related dimensions are connected to fertility intentions, a perspective that has been relatively underexplored in organizational and vocational psychology. While it may not traditionally fall within organizations' primary interests to actively engage with employees' fertility decisions—indeed, the “ideal worker” norm has historically been constructed as unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities (Acker 1990)—it remains important to examine how contemporary work characteristics and individuals' experiences of work may shape fertility-related decisions, which have broader societal, economic, and demographic implications, as well as implications for labor force sustainability. Whereas prior research has primarily focused on demographic and economic determinants (Alderotti et al. 2021; Hashemzadeh et al. 2021) or on the role of job stress (e.g., Dehkordi et al. 2025) in shaping reproductive decisions, few studies have investigated how specific working conditions, such as organizational culture,

flexibility, workload, and job insecurity, intersect with fertility intentions. A particularly original contribution lies in examining the role of career ambitions as a critical factor. While previous research has considered work-related and educational dimensions in relation to fertility intentions (e.g., [Shreffler and Johnson 2013](#); [Mitchell and Gray 2007](#); [Liu and Zhao 2024](#)), less attention has been paid to how individual career aspirations are experienced and integrated within reproductive decision-making processes.

This study adopts a qualitative approach, deemed appropriate given the still limited theoretical and empirical understanding of the interplay between work-related dimensions and fertility intentions. By adopting an exploratory qualitative approach, the study examines how individuals construct meaning around these domains and their interrelations, an aspect that remains insufficiently theorized in the current literature ([Creswell and Poth 2018](#); [Patton 2015](#)). In the following sections, the theories and models that support the study's aims, specifically the Work-Home Resources Model ([ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012](#)) and Social Cognitive Career Theory ([Lent and Brown 2013](#)), will be introduced. The research method and data analysis approach, using template analysis ([King and Brooks 2017](#)), will then be described in detail, followed by an overview of the identified categories. Finally, the key findings will be discussed, and, based on these results, recommendations for future research and for practical implications at individual, organizational and policymaking levels will be proposed.

1.1. Review of the Literature

1.1.1. Work-Home Resources Model

Fertility intention is intertwined with the theme of work-family interface, with which it has a bidirectional and complex relationship. In the work-family literature, [ten Brummelhuis and Bakker \(2012\)](#) proposed the Work-Home Resources (W-HR) Model, a comprehensive theoretical framework designed to integrally explain both the conflicting and enriching interactions between work and home domains (in line with ten Brummelhuis and Bakker's model, we will use the term 'home' when referring specifically to their framework; however, for the rest of this study, we will use the term 'family,' as our focus is specifically on the relationship between work and family). The W-HR model is grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory ([Hobfoll 1989, 2002](#)), which posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources and experience stress when these resources are threatened or lost ([Hobfoll 2002](#)). A key principle of COR theory is the gain spiral: resources can generate additional resources, leading to an accumulation that enables individuals with abundant resources to better manage stress and invest in further resource acquisition. Consequently, individuals with more resources are less adversely affected by stressors that could deplete resources ([Hobfoll 2002](#)). Conversely, the loss spiral describes the situation in which stress develops and resources are further depleted.

The W-HR model extends the gain-loss cycle of COR theory to the specific context of the work-home interface ([ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012](#)), by applying the constructs of contextual demands and contextual resources to explain the processes of work-home conflict and enrichment. Contextual stressors or demands can be categorized into emotional, physical, social or organizational aspects that require sustained physical and/or mental efforts ([Demerouti et al. 2001](#)). Conversely, contextual resources, present in both the work and home domains, include elements such as social support, autonomy, opportunities for growth, and performance feedback ([Demerouti et al. 2001](#)). Demands and resources influence conflict and enrichment in both directions (work-to-home and home-to-work) by impacting personal (physical, psychological, intellectual, affective, and capital) resources. Work-home conflict occurs when demands in one domain drain personal resources, leading to reduced outcomes in the other domain. In contrast, work-home enrichment arises

when contextual resources foster the development of personal resources in one domain, enhancing performance in the other.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the negative consequences of work-family conflict, resulting in outcomes such as emotional withdrawal and increased anger (Cowlishaw et al. 2010), heightened relationship tension (Matthews et al. 2006), reduced family and relationship satisfaction (Lu et al. 2016), greater parental distress (Kinnunen et al. 2010), and decreased family cohesion (Stevens et al. 2006). Conversely, work-family enrichment is associated with greater family satisfaction (Bhalla and Kang 2019), improved marital satisfaction (Hakanen et al. 2011), and better relationship quality (Gareis et al. 2009). Additionally, work-family balance demonstrates significant potential for positive outcomes, including improved marital adjustment (Whiston and Cinamon 2015), enhanced family performance (Carlson et al. 2010), increased family satisfaction (Whiston and Cinamon 2015), and reduced interfamilial conflicts (Westman and Etzion 2005). Moreover, a recent quantitative study by Geng et al. (2024) has identified a positive correlation between work-family balance and fertility intentions, mediated by decent work. To contribute to this line of research, our study adopts a qualitative approach, aiming to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between work-family interface and childbearing intentions.

1.1.2. Social Cognitive Career Theory and Career Ambitions

To understand fertility intentions, it is essential to also consider career choices, as they can significantly influence family-related decisions and the overall life course. For this study, we adopted the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent and Brown 2013) as a theoretical framework for career development. SCCT builds upon Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986) and explains three fundamental cognitive factors that regulate career decision-making: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. We focused on the most recent model of the SCCT, namely the social cognitive model of career self-management (Lent and Brown 2013). This model aligns with contemporary literature on career adaptability and resilience (Creed et al. 2009) and examines how individuals negotiate normative developmental tasks and unpredictable events. It integrates personal, experiential, and contextual factors to explain the processes that shape career trajectories (Lent and Brown 2013).

The core elements of the social cognitive model of career self-management are categorized into proximal and distal antecedents of adaptive career behaviors, that may lead to ultimate career outcomes. Adaptive career behaviors refer to the actions individuals take to navigate their career paths effectively, addressing both typical developmental tasks and unexpected challenges. These behaviors encompass proactive efforts, such as planning and skill-building, as well as reactive strategies for coping with transitions or setbacks, enabling successful career management and growth (Lent and Brown 2013). On the one hand, proximal antecedents of adaptive career behaviors include: (i) cognitive-personal factors, such as self-efficacy (beliefs about one's ability to perform specific tasks) and outcome expectations (anticipated consequences of behaviors); (ii) contextual factors, such as environmental supports and barriers; (iii) personality factors, like conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness; (iv) goals, highlighted as intentions that motivate specific actions and mediate the relationship between other proximal variables and behaviors; and (v) abilities, that are acknowledged as influencing how well people perform adaptive behaviors and their success rates. On the other hand, distal antecedents refer to broad, indirect influences on adaptive career behaviors, including personal inputs like gender, culture, personality traits, abilities, and health, as well as contextual factors such as educational quality and

socioeconomic resources. These factors shape learning experiences and the development of self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent and Brown 2013).

Regarding the influence of personal goals on career paths, this study aims to investigate the role of career ambitions in understanding fertility intentions. Although the literature on ambitions is fragmented, certain conceptualizations are commonly accepted among scholars. A widely used approach defines ambitions as a middle-level trait (Cantor 1990) and describes them as “the persistent and generalized striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment” (Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller 2012, p. 759). Within the professional sphere, ambition is associated with career satisfaction (Hirschi and Spurk 2021). Consistent with the theory of purposeful work behavior (Barrick et al. 2013), ambitious individuals tend to experience greater career satisfaction, as their pursuits are aligned with intrinsically motivating goals. As far as we know, there are no studies in the literature that have investigated the relationship between career ambitions and fertility intentions. However, prior research demonstrates that high-achieving women face greater trade-offs between career success and family formation compared to their male counterparts. For example, Hewlett (2002) found that at least one-third of high-achieving women at midlife remain childless, with 49% of ultra-achieving women being childless at age 40 compared to only 19% of their male peers.

In conclusion, drawing primarily on the W-HR model (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012) and the Social Cognitive Model of career self-management (Lent and Brown 2013), this study explores how perceived working conditions, organizational culture, the work-family interface, and career ambitions relate to declared fertility intentions. To achieve this, we employed a qualitative research design using a template analysis (TA) approach, as described below.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Positionality

The design of this study is qualitative and involves collecting data through semi-structured interviews with people currently working and living with their partner. Addressing the research objective, this study adopts an exploratory qualitative design, combining an exploratory orientation with the use of existing theoretical frameworks to guide, without constraining, the analysis of a complex and understudied phenomenon. A qualitative design was selected due to the limited theoretical and empirical understanding of the interrelations between work-related dimensions and fertility intentions. This approach enables the exploration of how individuals make sense of these domains and their interplay, capturing subjective perspectives that are not adequately accessible through quantitative approaches (Creswell and Poth 2018; Patton 2015). As mentioned before, the analysis follows a TA approach, which allows us to gather complex data without losing the shades of participants’ experiences, but does not exclude the consideration of a priori themes of interest, admitting abductive approaches (King and Brooks 2017). TA is a form of thematic analysis, focused on hierarchical coding and flexibility, and well suited to psychological research (Brooks et al. 2015).

In qualitative analysis, it is essential to recognize the role of researchers in shaping the resulting knowledge (King and Brooks 2017). Thus, it is crucial to position ourselves in relation to our research. Following King and Brooks’ categorization of ontological and epistemological positions in qualitative research, we adhered to the subtle realist position (Hammersley 1992), which allows us to consider the world as real regardless of the human construction of it (and this is a realist ontology), but poses that human knowledge of the world is limited by the position we assume in it (referring to a constructivist epistemology). This view of reality considers intangible phenomena as real as physical ones, but,

when analyzed, the results cannot be separated from the researchers' subjectivity (King and Brooks 2017). This view of the world appears coherent with both the main theories informing this study. On the one hand, SCCT poses great emphasis on the subjectivity as well as on the environment, as it considers contextual characteristics as objective, but also liable to be perceived and interpreted differently by each individual (Lent et al. 2000). On the other hand, even if the WH-R model shows a more resolute realism, it gives contextual and personal resources equal importance, explaining the mutual influences of one on the other (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012).

King and Brooks (2017) also underlined the importance of reflexivity during the analysis process, to recognize the subjectivity of the researchers while producing knowledge that is not merely the result of that subjectivity. In this regard, the research team was composed of work and organizational psychologists, with most members identifying as women. This shared professional background may have facilitated sensitivity to issues related to work–family dynamics and fertility; at the same time, it was continuously acknowledged as a potential source of interpretative bias. To address this, reflexive discussions were conducted throughout data collection and analysis to critically examine how researchers' assumptions and disciplinary backgrounds could shape coding decisions and theme development, in line with a reflexive approach (Finlay 2002; King and Brooks 2017). In addition, using multiple independent coders—as we decided to do in this study—enables a confrontation of different points of view, helping better define the subjective perspective of the research on the phenomena observed (e.g., Dries and Pepermans 2008).

While the concept of data saturation is not a central aim in Template Analysis, the coding process was carried out iteratively, with successive refinements of the template until we were satisfied that it provided a rich and comprehensive representation of the data (King and Brooks 2017), consistent with our research aims.

2.2. Sample and Recruitment

Firstly, the research design was accepted by the Bioethical Committee of the University of Turin (document n. 437750, 2024). Following this approval, data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews carried out in 2024. Participants were then recruited through snowball sampling, leveraging the networks of both the research group and the students involved in the project. This sampling method was used as a form of purposive sampling (Creswell and Creswell 2023) to access participants who meet specific inclusion criteria and are recruited through existing networks. Eligibility criteria for participating in the study were living in Italy, being in a stable relationship, living with their partner, currently employed, either without children or with only one child, and between the ages of 24 and 45 years. The rationale for selecting this age range is based on Super's (1980) identification of the "establishment" period, defined as the years between 25 and 44, during which individuals typically focus on advancing their careers while integrating work and personal life. For this study, the range was extended by two years (one year younger and one year older) to increase the availability of participants. Including both individuals without children and those with only one child was also essential, as it increased the likelihood of capturing fertility intentions.

Prior to the interview, participants received via email all the information about the topic of the study, data treatment, procedures to guarantee their anonymity and that participation to the study was voluntary and unpaid. All participants gave their informed consent. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration since it did not involve medical treatment or other procedures that could undermine participants' psychological or social comfort.

The final sample was composed of 33 participants, 22 women and 11 men, 19 without children and 14 with one child. The mean age of the children was 2.59 years ($SD = 3.72$). All the participants were living with their partner in Italy, and all of them were in a dual-earner relationship. The average age was 31 years ($M = 30.94$, $SD = 5.54$), ranging between 24 and 45 years. Regarding the type of job of the participants, 11 were public employees, 18 were private employees, and 4 were self-employed or entrepreneurs.

For what concerns participants' partners, their average age was of 31, ranging between 23 and 43 years ($M = 31.04$; $SD = 5.3$; 9 missing). Among them, 9 were working in the public sector, 18 in the private sector, 5 were self-employed or entrepreneurs, while for one of them this information was missing.

Since fertility intention was one of the most important elements of the study, an ex-post categorization, based on this variable, was made, relying on the information given by participants during the interviews. Therefore, we formed 4 groups based on fertility intentions: 11 participants planned to have a child within three years ("short", 33.3%), 15 planned to have one child in more than three years or at an indefinite time ("long/undefined", 45.5%), 3 were unsure about having a child in the future ("unsure", 9.1%), and 4 did not want to have a child in the future ("no", 4%). A detailed distribution of fertility intentions for gender and number of children is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of fertility intentions for gender and number of children.

		Fertility Intentions			
		Short	Long/undefined	Unsure	No
		Intention to have children within 3 years	Intention to have children beyond 3 years or in an undefined timing	Uncertain about having children	Does not want children
Gender	Men	5	4	2	0
	Women	6	11	1	4
Number of children	0	8	8	1	2
	1	3	7	2	2

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, often used in psychology research designs that involve TA (Brooks et al. 2015). Interview questions were constructed based on the current scientific literature regarding the main theories guiding this study (W-HR and SCCT), fertility intention, career and ambition (e.g., Lent et al. 2000; ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012).

The interview started with a self-presentation of the participant and with some questions about demographic characteristics (work situation, career path, age, marital status, partner's information such as employment status and age, presence of children). Then, the interview proceeded with questions about perceived barriers and support to parenthood in the work domain, questions about work-family balance (how it works for the participant, what organizational and personal characteristics would help, etc.), questions about future work ambitions, and questions about fertility intentions. For participants with children, the interview was more focused on real arrangements and organization geared to reconcile work and family, and on how their work-life changed after having a baby. For participants without children, the interview explored the same themes, but in a more hypothetical way. In line with ethical principles in qualitative research (Creswell and Creswell 2023),

interviewers were trained to conduct interviews in a respectful and sensitive manner. Prior to participation, the study topic and interview procedures were clearly explained to participants to ensure informed engagement and to allow them to consider whether they felt comfortable discussing potentially sensitive issues. Interviews took place online, via Webex (Cisco Systems, Inc., San Jose, CA, USA; <https://www.webex.com>), were video recorded and were transcribed verbatim. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Italian. Excerpts included in the Appendix A (Table A1) were translated into English by members of the research team, prioritizing semantic equivalence over literal translation to preserve the original meaning and any culturally specific expressions.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the methods of TA as outlined by King and Brooks (2017). As explained before, TA is a widely recognized and adaptable approach to thematic analysis based on hierarchical coding. Our analysis followed an abductive reasoning process, where the empirical context is progressively developed and theory is continuously refined and adjusted, as described by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2017). King and Brooks' (2017) TA method is conceptualized in a series of steps: familiarization with the data, preliminary coding, clustering, producing an initial template, applying and developing the template, and final interpretation. These steps were followed as accurately as possible during the study, but, as King and Brooks (2017) also point out, it was necessary on several occasions to move back and forth between the steps, iteratively, repeating certain procedures several times, in order to arrive at a satisfactory analysis of the collected data.

The data analysis was conducted by three independent coders, all members of the research group. As King and Brooks (2017) explain, the first goal of having independent raters was to foster critical thinking and to produce more deep reflections on the data. The three raters, in fact, during the initial stage read the same transcript of interviews and discuss together about the development of the initial template; after that, they collaborate also to refine the template in order to get to the final one. Then, one of the coders read all the interviews, while the other two read half of the transcripts each: in this way, the main coder could always confront another one.

The interview transcripts were analyzed with the help of the online free tool taguette.org, an open-source software for qualitative research, where it is possible to import the research materials, highlight sentences, tag quotes, and export the results, sharing projects with the team.

The main actions that informed the data analysis unfolded in three main stages. Stage 1. Three coders independently reviewed the interview transcripts, combining a priori themes from existing theories (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012; Lent and Brown 2013) with inductive codes, and then merged their proto-templates into a shared initial structure. Stage 2. The initial template was tested on additional transcripts, refined through iterative comparison and discussion, and finalized into a hierarchical structure uploaded in Taguette (v. 1.5.2; <https://www.taguette.org>) for systematic coding. Stage 3. The final template was applied to all interviews by the coding team, with cross-checks ensuring consistency, and the resulting categorizations were integrated into a comprehensive framework of themes. The most up-to-date version of the template is presented in detail in Table 2.

Table 2. Final template of dimensions of work-personal life related to fertility intentions.

1. Work/organizational dimensions	1.1 Pro-parenthood job resources	1.1.1 Social support	1.1.1.1 Peers
			1.1.1.2 Supervisors
		1.1.2 Organization	1.1.2.1 Policies and practices
			1.1.2.2 Family-friendly culture

Table 2. *Cont.*

			1.1.2.3 Working hours
		1.1.3 Job security	1.1.3.1 Return to work
			1.1.3.2 Employment contract
			1.1.3.3 Wage
		1.1.4 Flexibility	1.1.4.1 Remote working
			1.1.4.2 Flexible working hours
			1.1.4.3 Flexible work organization
		1.1.5 Partner's work features	
	1.2 Anti-parenthood job demands	1.2.1 Lack of social support	1.2.1.1 Peers
			1.2.1.2 Supervisors
		1.2.2 Organization	1.2.2.1 Absence of policies and practices
			1.2.2.2 Family-unfriendly culture
			1.2.2.3 Working hours
		1.2.3 Job insecurity	1.2.3.1 Return to work
			1.2.3.2 Employment contract
			1.2.3.3 Wage
		1.2.4 Workload	
		1.2.5 Partner's work features	
2. Individual dimensions	2.1 Professional ambitions	2.1.1 High Professional ambitions	
		2.1.2 Low Professional ambitions	
	2.2 Pro-balance competences	2.2.1 Work-related	
		2.2.2 General	
	2.3 Self-efficacy	2.3.1 Presence	2.3.1.1 Parenthood
			2.3.1.2 Balance
		2.3.2 Absence	2.3.2.1 Parenthood
			2.3.2.2 Balance
3. Work-family interface outcomes	3.1 Post-children changes	3.1.1 Work	
		3.1.2 Personal life	
	3.2. Conflict	3.2.1 Work-to-family	
		3.2.2 Family-to-work	
		3.2.3 Lack of free time	
		3.2.4 Loss cycle	
	3.3. Enrichment	3.3.1 Work-to-family	
		3.3.2 Family-to-work	
		3.3.3 Gain cycle	
	3.4 Interference	3.4.1 Career to parenthood	
		3.4.2 Parenthood to career	

3. Results

This section presents the results, explaining the meaning of each category identified, addressing the main content found for each theme and proposing relevant examples.

3.1. Work and Organizational Dimensions

Within the first-level category of “work/organizational dimensions”, all elements related to the work domain that are identified as relevant to parenthood intentions have been grouped. This category has been split into two second-level categories, “pro-parenthood job resources” (1.1) and “anti-parenthood job resources” (1.2).

3.1.1. Pro-Parenthood Job Resources

“Social support” (1.1.1) sub-category includes behaviors and attitudes of “peers” (1.1.1.1) and “supervisors” (1.1.1.2) that promote parenthood. “Peers” sub-category was the most consistent of the two, with 35 interview excerpts assigned (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 1). The most described support offered by peers regards covering for one other colleague with family or personal emergencies, but also a welcoming attitude and a warm interest towards others’ families are highlighted by participants as important elements. As for the “supervisors” sub-category (17 excerpts), participants emphasized their appreciation for leaders who showed flexibility in accommodating unexpected family needs.

The “organization” sub-category (1.1.2) includes pro-parenthood elements provided by participants’ organizations or features of the organization, such as “policies and practices” (1.1.2.1), “culture” (1.1.2.2), “public/private sector” (1.1.2.3), and “working hours” (1.1.2.3), which means having entry and exit times from work that facilitate the possible balance with family needs. The “policies and practices” sub-category, primarily addressing leave days and parental flexibility, as well as initiatives like introducing a nursery within the organization, was the most populated, including 36 excerpts (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 2). The second-largest sub-category, with 31 excerpts, was “family-friendly culture” (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 3), which encompassed various manifestations of a family-friendly environment. For participants, this meant a work culture that supports employees in balancing professional and personal responsibilities, offering flexibility while fostering a supportive atmosphere where colleagues and management respect and acknowledge family obligations without stigma.

The “job security” (1.1.3) sub-category comprises the subjective perceptions that participants’ work will continue over time, supporting fertility intentions through several aspects, such as the “return to work” (1.1.3.1) after maternity/paternity leave, having a stable or even indefinite “employment contract” (1.1.3.2), and receiving a regular “wage” (1.1.3.3). Among the three sub-categories, the most relevant, both in terms of numbers (18 excerpts) and content, is the “employment contract” category (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 4). For many participants, both women and men, having a stable and permanent employment contract is a precondition for having children.

“Flexibility” (1.1.4) sub-category refers to the possibility of organizing one’s own work, particularly regarding “remote working” (1.1.4.1) opportunities, “flexible working hours” (1.1.4.2) arrangements, and “flexible work organization” (1.1.4.3). The sub-category “flexible working hours” (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 5) was the most popular: 15 excerpts were categorized under this theme, as many participants truly appreciate, for example, the possibility of going to work a little later to take the children to school or leaving a little earlier to take them home. Additionally, the “remote working” sub-category, although with fewer excerpts (9), was perceived by participants as a central point for their ability to reconcile work and family life.

“Partner’s work features” (1.1.5) is a third-level sub-category that gathers all the 14 excerpts referring to participants’ partners’ work (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 6). We decided to include this sub-category under the broader theme of work and organizational dimensions, as partners’ job conditions can also influence individuals’ fertility intentions. Aspects such as contractual stability, job flexibility, or the availability of a company nursery at the partner’s workplace were mentioned as potentially facilitating decisions related to parenthood.

3.1.2. Anti-Parenthood Job Demands

Within the “lack of social support” (1.2.1) third level sub-category, behaviors or attitudes of both “peers” (6 excerpts, all of them from women; 1.2.1.1) and “supervisors”

(12 excerpts, 10 from women and only 2 from men; 1.2.1.2) that can hinder parenthood are documented. The most frequently described negative reactions from managers pertain to topics like maternity leave or the demands associated with a child's early months of life. These are often perceived as inconveniences that the manager or employer must address due to their employees' personal circumstances (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 7).

The "organization" third level sub-category (1.2.2) includes aspects such as "absence of policies and practices" (1.2.2.1), "family-unfriendly culture" (1.2.2.2), and "working hours" (1.2.2.3). The last sub-category refers to rigid entry and exit times that complicate balancing work with family responsibilities. The most prominent organization sub-category is "family-unfriendly culture", with 19 excerpts highlighting feelings of discomfort when sharing family matters or requesting parental leave (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 8). These feelings stem from judgment by colleagues and the prevailing cultural belief that caring for children is less important than work and may even negatively impact it. It is interesting to note that such feelings were reported by only one man, with all other excerpts in this sub-category coming exclusively from women. The "absence of policies and practices" is also a densely populated sub-category (14 excerpts), featuring examples of the lack of specific pro-parenthood initiatives or plans within the organization. Notably, within this sub-category, male participants (4 excerpts) also referred to the absence of both state- and organization-level measures supporting fatherhood. In particular, some excerpts pointed to the perceived inadequacy of the current provision of paternity leave following childbirth (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 9).

The "job insecurity" (1.2.3) sub-category reflects participants' subjective concerns about the continuity of their work. This includes issues such as uncertainty about the possibility of "returning to work" (1.2.3.1) after maternity/paternity leave under the same conditions as before, the lack of a stable or permanent "employment contract" (1.2.3.2; 15 excerpts), and irregular or insufficient "wages" (1.2.3.3; 13 excerpts). The importance of the "employment contract" is highlighted by comments that predominantly express the desire for an indefinite contract as a condition to have a child (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 10). When discussing "wage", participants expressed particular concern about not having enough resources to provide a good life for a child without making sacrifices, as well as to cover the costs of childcare solutions, such as a babysitter or daycare. Having these resources often seemed to be a prerequisite for having children (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 11).

The "workload" (1.2.4) third-level category contains 14 excerpts, highlighting that a highly demanding job—both in terms of time and energy—poses a significant challenge to balancing work and family life and can hinder family planning or the decision to have a child (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 12).

Finally, "partner's work obstacles" (1.2.5) includes 11 excerpts in which participants referred to features of their partner's job that hinder or complicate fertility intentions, such as high workload, low flexibility, the need for frequent business trips, or job insecurity (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 13).

3.2. Individual Dimensions

3.2.1. Ambitions

This second-level sub-category includes participants' desires and plans for their future selves in the work domain. Within the "high professional ambitions" sub-category (2.1.1), excerpts numbered 43, and they mainly describe the participants' envisioned future roles as workers, their ideal career paths, and their professional aspirations (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 14). The category includes excerpts expressing the desire to achieve significant career goals, such as starting one's own business, pursuing advanced education, or attaining

leadership roles, highlighting aspirations for autonomy, excellence, and professional growth. These excerpts often suggest that when professional ambitions are high, work tends to become the primary life priority.

“Low professional ambition” (2.1.2) was indicated in 23 excerpts, with some participants expressing a preference for dedicating more time to their private and family life rather than focusing heavily on professional growth. Others reported feeling satisfied with their current achievements, while some simply desired stability and a relaxed future in their professional life (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 15). Such reflections were not always framed negatively, but sometimes indicated a deliberate prioritization of family over work.

3.2.2. Pro-Balance Competences

This second level sub-category includes excerpts describing the abilities and skills participants recognize as playing a role in balancing work and family life. These elements can instead be considered positive resources that support the planning of work–parenthood integration. The third-level sub-category “work-related” competences (2.2.1) includes 8 excerpts describing participants’ competences specific to the professional domain that supports work-family balance (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 16). These mainly include organizational skills and time management, but also a strong commitment to work motivated by a sense of responsibility for the family, as well as knowledge about family services or life with children gained through work experience.

The other third level sub-category of “pro-balance competencies” includes 19 excerpts highlighting “general” (2.2.2) life skills that positively influence balance, such as organization, stress management, multitasking, and positivity (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 17).

3.2.3. Self-Efficacy

The second level sub-category “self-efficacy” (2.3) explores participants’ beliefs in their ability to successfully manage and navigate their roles as parents and workers. This category is divided into two third-level sub-categories: the “presence” of self-efficacy (2.3.1), which gathers excerpts in which participants expressed confidence in their capabilities, and the “absence” of self-efficacy (2.3.2), which includes instances of doubt or insecurity.

Within the “presence” sub-category, self-efficacy is further divided into two fourth-level sub-categories: “parenthood” (2.3.1.1) and “conciliation” (2.3.1.2). The “parenthood” sub-category, with 4 excerpts, reflects participants’ confidence in their ability to fulfill the responsibilities of being a parent, particularly the economic ones. The “conciliation” sub-category (11 excerpts) instead highlights participants’ belief in their ability to balance the demands of work and family life (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 18).

On the other hand, the “absence” of self-efficacy sub-category is also divided into “parenthood” (2.3.2.1) and “conciliation” (2.3.2.2). In the “parenthood” sub-category (5 excerpts), participants shared feelings of inadequacy or fear of not being able to be a good parent (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 19). Meanwhile, the “conciliation” sub-category (14 excerpts) reflected participants’ struggles with the perceived challenges of managing both work and family responsibilities. It is interesting to note that feelings of self-efficacy in balancing work and family were reported by only 2 men out of a total of 14 excerpts (14.3%), with the remaining contributions coming from women.

3.3. Work-Family Interface Outcomes

3.3.1. Post-Children Changes

This second level category comprises the elements regarding changes perceived by individuals in their “work” (3.1.1) and “personal life” (3.1.2) after the birth of their first child. These elements offer insight into the perceived strain and difficulty of planning to combine work and family responsibilities. As regards the changes that occurred in the work

sphere after the birth of the first child (39 excerpts), the interviewees reported negative consequences in their routines and work performance due to tiredness or child-related duties, such as taking them to school. Of these, 15 excerpts were produced by male participants and mainly focused on the reorganization of working hours and routines, including adjustments to overtime, shifts, and daily schedules in relation to childcare demands (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 20). These accounts were also accompanied by references to an increased sense of economic responsibility and job commitment following the transition to fatherhood, which appeared to inform participants' efforts to maintain work performance while adapting to new family-related constraints.

The "personal life" category contains 5 excerpts and refers to situations where, after the child's birth, individuals struggled to find time to restore their past routine during their free time (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 21).

3.3.2. Conflict

The third-level category "work-to-family conflict" (3.2.1) contains 26 excerpts and includes elements of perceived conflict from the work context toward the family context. The most recurrent problem described by the interviewees is the lack of time to spend with their children due to work schedules. It is clear to most of them that the first three years of a child's life are the most time and energy demanding, but also the most rewarding. The inability to spend more time with their children is experienced as particularly frustrating (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 22).

The third-level category "family-to-work conflict" (3.2.2) represents the inverse of the previous one. It has been cited 28 times and includes situations where childcare responsibilities negatively impact job activities. Common issues include the need to leave work at fixed times, limiting the ability to work overtime, and the exhaustion caused by childcare duties. This fatigue often results in reduced work performance, particularly during the child's first year of life (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 23).

The third level category "lack of free time" (3.2.3) has been cited 18 times and comprises all the statements made by the individuals regarding their struggle to find time for themselves and their passions after the birth of their first child (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 24).

The last third-level category, "loss cycle" (3.2.4), cited 7 times (to note that all the excerpts were from women), consists of excerpts regarding the cycle where the demands of a certain context drain the individual's resources, activating a vicious cycle (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 25). The more resources are drained, the less the person is able to recover them.

3.3.3. Enrichment

The third-level category "work-to-family enrichment" (3.3.1) comprises the excerpts (6) where interviewees described situations where their work somehow helped them to better manage family, and in particular, childcare issues (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 26).

The third-level category "family-to-work enrichment" (3.3.2), cited 20 times, mirrors the previous one and illustrates situations where becoming a parent and taking care of a child resulted in a gain in work performance and work skills. Examples include enhanced patience and empathy in interpersonal interactions, a heightened ability to manage multiple tasks and unforeseen challenges efficiently, and a shift toward prioritizing effectively and handling stress with greater composure. Additionally, some parents reported that their perspective on life broadened, enabling them to approach work situations with a more thoughtful and creative outlook, ultimately fostering personal and professional growth (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 27).

Finally, the third-level category “gain-cycle” (3.3.3) refers to the inverse of the loss cycle and contains 9 excerpts. This process takes place when the resources from one context allow the resources in other contexts to increase, generating better performances in several aspects of one’s life. The responders seemed to have gained a motivational boost since their child’s birth that positively affected their working life (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 28).

3.3.4. Interference

The second-level category named “interference” (3.4) refers to the negative influence exerted by “career-to-parenthood” (3.4.1) and “parenthood-to-career” (3.4.2). It is important to emphasize that both third-level categories predominantly consist of women’s responses, suggesting that these interferences appear to have a greater impact on female participants.

The “career-to-parenthood” (3.4.1) category counts 19 citations and contains the elements where individuals described how their career ambitions somehow negatively impact their fertility intentions (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 29); this aspect was particularly salient for childless interviewees and for women, as 80% of the elements in this category belong to them.

The third-level category “parenthood-to-career” (3.4.2) counts 62 (44 of which come from female participants) occurrences and collects the excerpts describing the inverse process of the previous one, that is when the willingness of having a family contrasts the career ambitions (e.g., Appendix A, excerpt 30).

4. Discussion

As declining birth rates, delayed parenthood, and smaller family sizes become increasingly widespread, there is growing scientific interest in identifying the factors driving these trends. While demographic and economic perspectives have been extensively explored, the role of work-related factors remains overlooked, particularly within work and organizational psychology. This study provided new insights into the relationship between work and fertility intentions by examining how working conditions, organizational culture, the work-family interface, and career ambitions are perceived as relevant in shaping individuals’ family planning decisions. By adopting a qualitative approach, it captured the complexity of psychological mechanisms beyond traditional quantitative measures. Moreover, it is among the first to explore the relationship between career ambition and reproductive choices. The findings were synthesized into a conceptual model (Figure 1), which illustrates, as described below, the primary work-related dimensions described as relevant to fertility intentions within the working population.

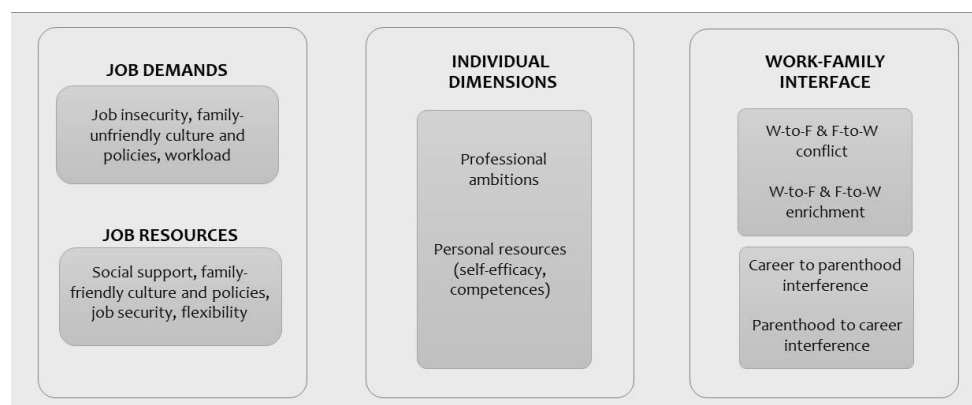


Figure 1. Dimensions perceived as relevant to fertility intentions.

4.1. Job Demands and Resources

Among the most significant factors perceived as relevant to fertility intentions are working conditions, categorized into job demands and job resources. These findings align with the W-HR model (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012), which posits that high job demands deplete personal resources, leading to strain and a reduced capacity for non-work activities such as family planning, while job resources enhance family outcomes by fostering a gain in personal resources. Participants of our study described various working conditions that negatively influenced their thoughts and decisions about parenthood. The most critical factor appears to be job insecurity, encompassing both the fear of job loss (quantitative job insecurity) and concerns about losing valued aspects of the job, such as career advancement opportunities or favorable working conditions (qualitative job insecurity) (De Witte 1999). Regarding quantitative job insecurity, the instability of both job contracts and salaries leaves individuals feeling uncertain, not able and reluctant to expand their families, even when they express a desire to do so. Numerous studies have already highlighted the role of stable employment and income in shaping childbearing intentions, particularly among highly educated individuals (Alderotti et al. 2021; Hashemzadeh et al. 2021). Notably, our findings extend this understanding to qualitative job insecurity, which also appears to be related to parenthood intentions and behaviors, particularly for women, who fear returning to altered working conditions or reduced career opportunities following maternity leave.

Another significant job demand identified by participants was workload, defined as the amount or pace of work. The literature on workload is extensive, with studies demonstrating its dual potential to positively or negatively influence workers' well-being and motivation, depending on whether it is perceived as a challenge or hindrance (Van den Broeck et al. 2010) and whether sufficient resources are available to cope with it (Bakker et al. 2023). However, in the context of childbearing intentions, excessive workload is often perceived as an obstacle, negatively affecting parenting self-efficacy, work-family balance and deterring decisions to have children.

Finally, other negative organization-related dimensions relevant to fertility intentions emerged. One of these is the presence of a family-unfriendly culture, characterized by negative attitudes and judgments toward employees with children who prioritize family responsibilities over work. This perception, particularly prevalent among women, can be detrimental since it often leads to a reluctance to exercise parental rights in the workplace. In contrast, a family-friendly culture, defined as an organizational environment that respects and supports family responsibilities, was identified as one of the most valuable resources related to the decision to have children. Such a culture fosters inclusivity and is bolstered by organizational policies and practices that promote work-family balance, such as parental leave benefits and childcare support (Fahlén 2013). Other highly valued organizational resources related to family-friendly policies and practices include flexible working hours, adaptable schedules, and the possibility of remote working. These measures enable employees to balance work and family life better, encouraging the decision to have children (Sinyavskaya and Billingsley 2015). Finally, colleague and supervisor support was frequently highlighted as a critical resource. Material support, such as assistance in managing unexpected family duties, and emotional support, such as creating a space to share the joys and challenges of parenting, were deemed particularly beneficial in fostering a work environment conducive to childbearing.

4.2. Individual Dimensions

One of the most significant and original findings of this study concerns ambitions and their association with fertility intentions. Many participants shared their ambitious

aspirations within the professional context and described their ideal career paths. Notably, a significant number of them, particularly among younger participants, reported either no intention or only long-term intentions to have children. This finding underscores how intensive investment in work and career can make it more challenging to plan for parenthood, especially during the early stages of one's professional journey. According to SCCT (Lent and Brown 2013), career-related goals operate as proximal determinants that direct resources and attention toward professional advancement, at the expense of family planning. This aligns with SCCT's proposition that personal goals act as motivational drivers mediating the relationship between contextual supports/barriers and individual choices. Moreover, outcome expectations appear salient: participants anticipated that parenthood would hinder their capacity to meet professional aspirations, which discouraged immediate fertility decisions. Conversely, those with stronger family-oriented ambitions framed childbearing as a meaningful goal, integrating it into their life design despite work-related obstacles. These dynamics highlight how the negotiation between career and family ambitions reflects not only contextual work conditions but also individual self-regulatory processes.

As expected, among the individual dimensions, personal resources also showed to be particularly critical. The most important personal resource was parenting self-efficacy, described as the perceived ability to successfully raise children and fulfill the responsibilities of being a parent (Jones and Prinz 2005). In addition, our participants also described confidence in their ability to balance family and work responsibilities and demands effectively. This is also consistent with Lent and Brown's (2013) study on the antecedents of career self-management, which highlights the pivotal role of self-efficacy for effectively managing one's career, which may include balancing it with fertility intentions. According to Bandura's Theory (Bandura 1986) and to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991), self-efficacy plays a critical role in shaping intentions to engage in a specific behavior—in this case, parenthood. For those who already have a child, there could be a greater sense of control and a feeling of being able to deal with potential obstacles associated with parenthood.

4.3. Work-Family Interface

Our results showed that both work-family conflict and enrichment processes were described by participants as mechanisms related to their fertility intentions. WFC emerged as a situation in which demands in one domain deplete personal resources, leaving the individual less capable of functioning effectively in the other domain (ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012). For instance, a heavy workload reduces the time and energy available for family, a situation that can reduce parenting self-efficacy and is perceived by some as a barrier to parenthood. While work-family conflict was commonly reported, several participants also described positive spillover between the two domains, where skills or experiences gained at work enhanced family life, and vice versa. Individuals who experienced work-family enrichment were often more motivated and better equipped to manage both domains. This finding is consistent with the gain cycle described in the COR theory (Hobfoll 1989) and suggests that enrichment, by improving personal resources, can strengthen self-efficacy and parenting intentions. Moreover, these results resonate with quantitative evidence showing that work-family conflict is associated with lower fertility intentions through increased stress and anxiety (Zhao 2024).

Interestingly, we also observed a specific dynamic of interference between career and parenthood. Regarding career-to-parenthood interference, some participants explicitly described perceiving their job and career aspirations as barriers to parenthood or a reason not to have children. They expressed the belief that reconciling these two domains would be very difficult, emphasizing a stronger urgency to achieve their professional goals rather

than the family ones. Conversely, parenthood-to-career interference describes situations where individuals would feel compelled to make career sacrifices due to their parental responsibilities, which may negatively impact their professional trajectories. These dynamics were more commonly reported by individuals without children and emerged as significant factors in their decision-making process regarding childbearing. The Social Cognitive Theory (Lent et al. 2000) emphasizes the relevance of barriers (both tangible obstacles and socially constructed perceptions, such as the idea that a career must be pursued at the expense of other life domains) and how they could influence self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations; a child's birth could be seen as a barrier to career development and modify the career expectations.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Despite providing valuable insights into the complex interplay between work, career and fertility intentions, there are some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the characteristics of the sample impose certain constraints. The sample is highly heterogeneous and not fully representative of different age groups and professional categories. In addition, the study exclusively included heterosexual couples, limiting the generalizability of the findings to more diverse partnership configurations. Furthermore, the relatively small sample size limits the extent to which the results can be extrapolated to a wider population.

Second, the study adopts a qualitative approach, which, while well suited to capturing the depth and nuance of participants' experiences, is not meant to allow for causal inferences between variables. Future research could employ quantitative and longitudinal designs to build upon the preliminary findings of this study and validate the insights emerging from this research. In particular, the role of ambition, which has emerged as a key factor in the relationship between career and parenthood, could be operationalized and investigated in more detail.

The study was conducted in Italy, a country whose specific institutional and cultural context—as described in the introduction—may have shaped participants' perceptions of the relationship between work, career, and fertility intentions (Naldini and Saraceno 2008; Alderotti et al. 2025; Scherer and Brini 2023; Juni and Vitali 2025). Therefore, the results may not be directly transferable to countries with significantly different work-family structures, but may be more applicable to societies with similar familistic welfare models. Another limitation is that, although gender differences clearly emerged in participants' narratives, the study did not systematically analyze or report these differences, which could have provided additional insights into how men and women differently experience the work-family-fertility nexus. Based on these study results, future studies should also investigate the effectiveness and role played by organizational initiatives designed to facilitate a free choice of fertility intention. These organizational interventions could focus both on the phase of decision to have children and on programs aimed to facilitate the return to work and new family-work arrangements.

5.2. Implications for Practice

Fostering fertility intentions while supporting career development requires a multilevel approach that integrates individual reflection, organizational commitment, and structural policy interventions. At the individual level, it is crucial to provide opportunities for reflection on one's personal biography through practices that support life choices. These practices should be easily accessible and designed to help individuals bring their life projects to the surface, including any phase-specific beliefs, as conceptualized in the SCCT (Lent and Brown 2013). Such beliefs can be further explored and re-elaborated in individual

counseling settings or small-group training sessions. These interventions should particularly focus on the interplay between different life domains, fertility intentions, and career aspirations, enabling individuals to reconstruct their system of demands and resources from both a synchronous and diachronic perspective.

However, these individual-focused practices inevitably extend to the organizational and public policy levels, as organizations and institutions play a fundamental role in providing them as part of a broader investment in well-being. Alongside these initiatives, organizations should critically examine the cultural model of work and its relationship with family—both explicitly and implicitly promoted—to determine whether a career-centered mindset prevails, portraying work as a sacrifice at the expense of personal life. This reflection process may also extend to national cultures and be translated into concrete aspects such as regulations, the presence or absence of support systems, policies, and practices.

At the organizational level, the implementation of family-friendly policies and practices, both formal and informal, should be supported by an authentic family-supportive culture, characterized, for instance, by an evaluation of work based on the achievement of objectives, absence of negative consequences for those who use work-family balance solutions and interpersonal support received. A results-oriented evaluation system, where the work is characterized by flexibility and control over time, has been shown to contribute to greater work-family balance and job satisfaction (Valcour 2007). Moreover, ensuring that employees who use work-family balance solutions do not face negative career consequences is equally important.

At the public policy level, a more sustainable and inclusive approach to work-family policies is needed, one that does not place the burden of care solely on families but rather promotes shared social responsibility between employers, institutions, and the state. Recent findings indicate that policies that extend parental leave to both parents, provide accessible childcare, and incentivize flexible work arrangements contribute not only to higher fertility rates but also to more equitable gender participation in the labor market and in unpaid care work (de Laat et al. 2023). However, policies do not operate in a linear or context-independent way; family-friendly measures may be embedded within organizational environments that simultaneously reinforce strong career orientations and performance expectations, potentially limiting their effectiveness in shaping fertility decisions (Zhao 2024). Finally, in both the communication and implementation of policies, it is essential to involve all genders in the dialog to ensure that fertility and career choices do not become yet another arena for reproducing the gender gap.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study consist of qualitative interview transcripts. Due to the sensitive and potentially identifying nature of these materials, the full transcripts cannot be shared publicly in order to protect participant confidentiality. Anonymized excerpts relevant to the study are included in the appendix. Further information about the data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

TFR	Total Fertility Rate
W-HR	Work-Home Resources
COR	Conservation of Resources
SCCT	Social Cognitive Career Theory
SD	Standard Deviation
M	Mean

Appendix A

Table A1. Interviews' excerpts.

1	e.g., <i>"If I have a problem, yes. . . they understand it right away and help me with it. There are some colleagues who might say: 'don't worry, if you need to go take care of this thing, go ahead, I'll cover for you'. Yes, I have this support, yes, thankfully"</i> . (Woman with one child, fertility intentions "long/undefined", excerpt category 1.1.1.1)
2	e.g., <i>"For instance, there's also the option to take leave days if my child is sick; for example, there are specific leave days, or even just personal leave days when I can dedicate time to my child. So, in my work environment as well, I feel supported"</i> . (Woman with one child, fertility intentions "short", excerpt category 1.1.2.1)
3	e.g., <i>"So, I can say that families are very important, also through charity events at times aimed at less fortunate families, etc. I believe that family can be considered a central focus"</i> . (Man without children, fertility intentions "short", excerpt category 1.1.2.2)
4	e.g., <i>"We were ready and wanted a baby. However, in reality, we waited to try concretely for a few months because I was waiting to be offered a permanent contract. The moment I signed it, we started trying right after, and then it happened right away"</i> . (Woman with one child, fertility intentions "long/undefined", excerpt category 1.1.3.2)
5	e.g., <i>"However, the fact that I can start working within a flexible time frame—between eight and nine-thirty, depending on my commitments—[could be very helpful]. Of course, if I have a meeting at eight-thirty, I need to connect at that time. But if I don't have any meetings, no one requires me to be online at eight. I can log in at nine-thirty and also decide to log off between five and six-thirty. Moreover, it's also allowed that if I have a commitment during the day, say from two to three, I can take that hour off and make it up later"</i> . (Woman with one child, fertility intentions "unsure", excerpt category 1.1.4.2)
6	e.g., <i>"The organization is more likely to favor my wife, as the nursery is part of her company. If our enrolment is confirmed, it would be easier for her to bring the child along, given that the facility is located within the same premises as her office"</i> . (Man with one child, fertility intentions "short", excerpt category 1.1.5)
7	e.g., <i>"My boss said: well, if the new pharmacist I just hired—because he hired another one—goes on maternity leave right away, I don't know if I'll keep her because I don't like dealing with maternity leaves"</i> . (Woman without children, fertility intentions "long/undefined", excerpt category 1.2.1.2)

Table A1. Cont.

8	e.g., “The atmosphere isn’t great [. . .]. I see colleagues who go on maternity leave—they’re not very well regarded, and that bothers me. For example, I’ve often heard about a woman who got pregnant during her maternity leave [. . .]. In the end, she had two kids close together and stayed home for three years. People say all sorts of things about her, without hesitation or guilt, making comments like, ‘It’s nice to work like that, getting paid for doing nothing’. It’s as if having children has become a kind of privilege”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 1.2.2.2)
9	e.g., “We didn’t have any officially recognized, paid leave days, so I took very little time off work—barely ten days. And even then, I used my vacation days, not any days officially designated as paternity leave”. (Man with one child, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 1.2.2.1)
10	e.g., “I wanted to have one [child] by the age of thirty, but it’s really difficult to secure a stable job by then. My idea is that I need to be sure I have that job before having a child”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 1.2.3.2)
11	e.g., “It makes me smile when my boyfriend’s father says that children grow up with love but also with money. Unfortunately, I think that would be a huge, huge difficulty for me”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “no”, excerpt category 1.2.3.3)
12	e.g., “If you want to do your job well, you clearly have to take time away from something or someone, and this could be a problem in general”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “no”, excerpt category 1.2.4)
13	e.g., ““It’s hard to know exactly when that moment [the moment to have a baby] will come, because we’re both working—he’s a research fellow, and even though he’ll probably stay there, his contract depends on funding”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 1.2.5)
14	e.g., “My work is also closely linked to a path of personal fulfillment, not just professional. It’s a path that I don’t undertake purely for professional reasons, but it is a type of work that impacts me a lot as a person, because it requires skills I didn’t have a few years ago, or at least not in the same way. So I see it as a very formative journey for me, one that is giving me a lot and also requires a lot of time. Therefore, at this stage of my life, [work] is a very, very important aspect in the choices that I make and that we make”. (Man without children, fertility intentions “unsure”, excerpt category 2.1.1)
15	e.g., “Since becoming a mother, I must admit that, in a way, I’ve become a little ‘lazy,’ because, to be honest, working part-time and being able to spend weekends at home with my daughter is convenient and something I enjoy. So, at the moment, I’d say I see my future like this—continuing to work as an educator. But, of course, never say never. Maybe as my daughter grows, things will change. But for now, I really enjoy having a lot of time to spend with my family”. (Woman with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 2.1.2)
16	e.g., “The fact that I enjoy managing and organizing a bit, and not stopping, not wasting time, but rather trying to do as many things as possible in that moment”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 2.2.1)
17	e.g., “I am an unwavering optimist, so I’m not worried about being present, running from one place to another, and trying to take care of everyone”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 2.2.2)
18	e.g., “Anyway, you do what you have to do. You know you have to go to work, and you know that when you finish work you have a family waiting for you at home. After work, you go home. When you are at work, you focus on working; when you are at home, you try to disconnect from work and enjoy your family”. (Man without children, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 2.3.1.2)

Table A1. Cont.

19	e.g., “When I think about motherhood and the day is maybe tough, then scenarios of fear arise, and I wonder “Will I be able to do it?” rather than “Will I be able to give as much as I have been given?”. I really feel this sense of responsibility”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 2.3.2.1)
20	e.g., “My work schedule has changed because I used to start an hour earlier since the company requires overtime [...] now, I will be forced to stop doing overtime [...] I might have to work on Saturday mornings to make up for the hour of overtime I used to do during the week”. (Man with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.1.1)
21	e.g., “Nowadays, I realize that there is not much free time [...] I can never leave anything to chance, every day must be well-organized in terms of schedule, otherwise, we won’t manage”. (Woman with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.1.2)
22	e.g., “You have a child, take your mandatory maternity leave, maybe some additional optional leave, but at the end of the day, when your child is six, seven, or eight months old, you return to full-time work [...] Honestly, the idea of having a child and then leaving them practically all day in daycare at such a young age, dedicating myself almost entirely to work and only seeing my child from five or six in the evening until they fall asleep, is a situation that genuinely gives me a bit of anxiety”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 3.2.1)
23	e.g., “[...] it’s clear that we sleep less. We sleep less because [...] so far, she still wakes up two or three times a night [...] Obviously, all this impacts work a bit: you arrive at work not as rested as before, maybe you’re more nervous, and maybe you perform much less at work because, in the long run, if you sleep less, you achieve less”. (Man with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.2.2)
24	e.g., “For the moment, I have set aside hobbies like swimming or going for walks, etc., because I simply don’t have the time.” (Woman with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.2.3)
25	e.g., “So I was constantly interrupted in my work by my daughter getting sick [...] and thus I was neither satisfied at home with my daughter, because I felt I was falling short at work, nor at work, because I felt sorry for my daughter, who was at home, maybe with a babysitter [...] and instead, I would have liked to be there myself”. (Woman with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.2.4)
26	e.g., “I believe I have been greatly advantaged by the work I do, that is, being an educator and being in contact with very young children every day [...] I think it has helped me a lot in not having difficulties or fears [...] I am a very calm mother who is not afraid of anything, but I attribute all of this to the work I do”. (Woman with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.3.1)
27	e.g., “One thing I had by nature, but which has become much more acute, is being sensitive and understanding what the child is feeling [...] and I must say this proves very important in my job, because it’s predominantly relational work, especially with adolescents”. (Woman with one child, fertility intentions “short”, excerpt category 3.3.2)
28	e.g., “When we decided to have a child, it happened to be the summer when I also decided to resume my studies, so in my opinion, it was an incentive. [...] And so, it was also an unconscious incentive to change jobs and improve my working conditions. It’s something I had never considered; it just came naturally”. (Man with one child, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.3.3)

Table A1. Cont.

29	e.g., “I don’t feel like I’ve reached any significant milestone in my career, so I want to advance my career because, well, it’s not the ultimate goal in life since work isn’t my absolute priority, but obviously, [...] with all the effort I’ve put in so far, I wouldn’t want it to amount to nothing; so I definitely think about my career, and when I do, I realize I don’t have time [...] if I don’t even have time to take care of my dogs, let alone a child, it’s just impossible”. (Woman without children, fertility intentions “no”, excerpt category 3.4.1)
30	e.g., “In my opinion, not in a bad sense, but obviously having children is a wonderful experience that brings you to face different choices. [...] I realize that if I were to receive a proposal to go abroad for six months and had children, my answer would be... I’m not saying it would be different, but I would certainly think about it a lot more than I would now. So, undoubtedly, making decisions carries a different weight when you have children”. (Man without children, fertility intentions “long/undefined”, excerpt category 3.4.2)

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