

Attitudes and Behaviours of Family Formation: The Consequences of Parental Divorce

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1. Introduction

There is a considerable literature on the effects parental divorce has on several children outcomes: children who experienced a parental divorce are likely to be quite different from children coming from intact families in terms of age at marriage (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988), marriage stability (Teachman, 2002), cohabitation (Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994) socio-economic attainment (White, 1991), attitudes toward divorce (Amato and Booth, 1991) and family formation (Axinn and Thornton, 1996). Such a literature is much less wide in European contexts, especially in those countries where prevalence of divorce has remained relatively low and therein lay the seeds of the lack of studies on children from separated couples. Italy is among these countries and we find, indeed, very few studies on this topic. However, in the recent past, we observed a rapid increase of separations also in Italy, so that the phenomenon acquired a significant social relevance. Moreover, Italian context is largely different from US, and this can bring about some differences in the effect of parental divorce on children.

For instance, Italy is well-known for its late transition to adulthood, in such a context is still true that parental divorce makes children marry earlier than youth from intact families? In this work we aim to analyse these questions using data from a nationally representative survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2003. We consider both attitudes and behaviours of youth, estimating the impact of parental separation on them. Both of them are considered important channels through which intergenerational transmission of divorce passes (Teachman, 2002; Amato and DeBoer, 2001). Moreover, we expect that attitudes and behaviours are deeply interrelated, so that including both in the analysis provides a more complete insight on the underlying process.

Impact of parental separation on attitudes is estimated by means of a propensity score matching method, taking into account the spurious effect of family background characteristics and life course events experienced before interview. The effect of parental split on behaviours (i.e. leaving home and union formation) is estimated using hazard regression models, instead. Moreover, simple hazard regression models are complemented with competing risk models, taking into consideration the different routes taken out of parental home (marriage, cohabitation, other) when analysing leaving home, and the different types of unions (cohabitation or marriage) when analysing union formation.

2. The Italian context: attitudes and behaviours of family formation

Italy is well-known to be one of the countries where the diffusion of new behaviours in terms of family formation (e.g. non-marital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock fertility) has

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remained at relatively low levels if compared to other European countries. This is strictly connected with late transition to adulthood: in the last 30 years all biographical events that characterize the transition to adulthood have been postponed (Ongaro, 2001) and Italian young people – similarly to others Mediterranean countries, experience an exceptional long stay in the parental house. Along with these behaviours also union dissolution is among the lowest in Europe, even though in the recent past we observe an increasing trend of total divorce rate and total separation rate: between 1995 and 2002 the former passed from 8% to 13.1% whereas the latter passed from 15.8% to 25.7%.³

Having been the social relevance of marital instability quite low until the last years, we find poor literature on the consequences of marital dissolutions on children.

According to studies on other countries the recent spread of marital instability can trigger an acceleration of the process of approaching to Second Demographic Transition behaviours in Italy, if there is any. Children of divorcee are expected to be more inclined to informal cohabitation, to non marital fertility, to anticipation of leaving the parental home and entering in union. Hence, an increasing prevalence of marital dissolution is likely to have a significant influence on the prevalence of such behaviours. In this work we analyse to what extent these findings in terms of consequences of parental divorce on children attitudes and behaviour on family formation process, are consistent with the Italian case.

We will compare attitudes towards marriage, cohabitation, fertility, divorce, and leaving home of sons and daughters of splitted parents with the attitudes of those who have not experienced a parental separation. Similarly we analyse the differences in terms of behaviour in family formation, i.e. leaving home, entering in union, and fertility. The analysis will take into account the fact behaviours and attitude are deeply interrelated, so we need to be aware that the effect of parental divorce on behaviours passes through attitudes and, at the same way, the effect of parental divorce on attitudes passes through behaviours.

3. Data

In this study we use data from a recent (2003) nationally representative survey conducted by the national statistical institute (ISTAT) called “Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali” (Families and Social Subjects). This survey provides many retrospective information on life course events such as leaving the parental home, union formation, fertility, union dissolution. People over 18 are also asked on their intentions and their attitudes on these events. In addition, are provided with data on work history, housing, family and social networks.

The interviewed sample size is about 50,000, 1686 of them reported their parents are separated or divorced. We restrict our analysis to people aged 18-34, trying to keep the sample as homogeneous as possible in terms of cohort and of length of life course covered at time of interview⁴. When considering this restricted sample, those who underwent parental separation are 715 (333 men and 382 women).

Although on the rise, marital instability is still a relatively little diffused in Italy. In our sample, the percentage of youth whose parents are separated or divorced is 15% for men and 13% for women. Average values of some background characteristics are reported in table 1.

³This difference between the total divorce rate and the total separation rate depend on constraints posed by Italian law on divorce: spouses getting sperated can divorce only after 3 years the separation time. For this reason only half of separations are subsequently transformed into divorces.

⁴ We also dropped all individuals who left home before of age 15.

On the basis of these figures we can conclude that youth who underwent the separation of their parents is a highly selected population. With respect to children of intact families, they are younger, have fewer siblings, and are more likely to live in the north or in the centre of Italy. Their parents are also significantly different from the rest of population, being splitted fathers more educated and splitted mothers younger and more likely to be employed.

We also notice some differences in terms of 'transition to adulthood' events: for instance, only 33% of sons and 48% of daughters of separated parents have ever left home, whereas children of intact couples present percentages respectively of 81 and 87%. However, these differences are likely to be biased, considering the younger age and the different characteristics of families that underwent a marital separation.

Table 1: Background characteristics of youth aged 18-34, by sex and union status of parents

	<i>MEN</i>		<i>WOMEN</i>	
	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Non-splitted parents</i>	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Non-splitted parents</i>
<i>Individual characteristics</i>				
Age (average)	25.6	29.8	25.7	29.4
Num. siblings (average)	1.2	2.0	1.4	1.9
NorthWest Italy (%)	28.1	22.7	28.4	21.1
Central Italy (%)	19.5	16.1	20.8	15.2
South Italy (%)	17.6	28.3	17.8	30.6
Islands (%)	10.8	12.4	10.0	12.3
Left home (%)	33.4	81.3	47.6	87.2
Ever worked (%)	73.3	91.9	69.5	72.5
Ever cohabited (%)	8.7	11.7	24.3	18.2
<i>Parental family</i>				
Graduated Father (%)	8.7	4.4	8.6	3.4
High sch. diploma Father (%)	31.0	16.0	31.1	15.9
Working Mother (%)	59.4	38.0	66.2	38.0
Mother's age (average)	51.5	54.1	51.2	54.2

Hence young men and women having undergone the separation of parents, in Italy, is a still highly selected population. This has to be borne in mind when looking at the descriptives results, as differences between children of separated parents and children from intact families are likely to be biased because of such a selection.

4. Descriptive results

Here we show results from a simple descriptive analysis on attitudes and behaviours of youth of age 18-34, according to union status of parents.

a) Attitudes of youth

Data from FSS/2003 provides us with few items about attitudes of individuals towards family and family formation. Individuals were asked to report their agreement with a set of

sentences such as 'marriage is an outdated institution' or 'a couple can cohabit without any plan to marry'. Attitudes are barely measured at time of interview with a five-point scale ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. The percentages of youth who agree with these sentences (strongly or not) are reported in table 2: having experienced the parental split makes youth wary of institute of marriage and more open to alternative families. In general, we notice that - in line with the literature - the attitudes of children of separated or divorced parents towards family and family formation are closer to secularized models. They show a higher acceptance on out-of-wedlock fertility, informal cohabitation, divorce, and they are more likely to think that marriage is outdated institution by now. Surprisingly, children of divorcee and children of intact families show, instead, similar attitudes regarding an early leaving of the parental home.

Table 2: Percentage of person aged 18-34 who agree with some sentences on family and family formation, by sex and union status of parents

	<i>MEN</i>		<i>WOMEN</i>	
	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Non-splitted parents</i>	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Non-splitted parents</i>
Marriage is an outdated institution	31.83	20.07	23.56	14.78
A couple can cohabit without any plan to marry	75.38	60.48	75.13	56.84
An unhappy couple can rightly ask the divorce even if it has children	75.98	66.16	81.15	69.56
A woman can rightly have a child even without having a relation	36.64	27.47	43.98	31.80
Children should leave the parental home when they are 18-20	19.82	18.29	22.25	18.55

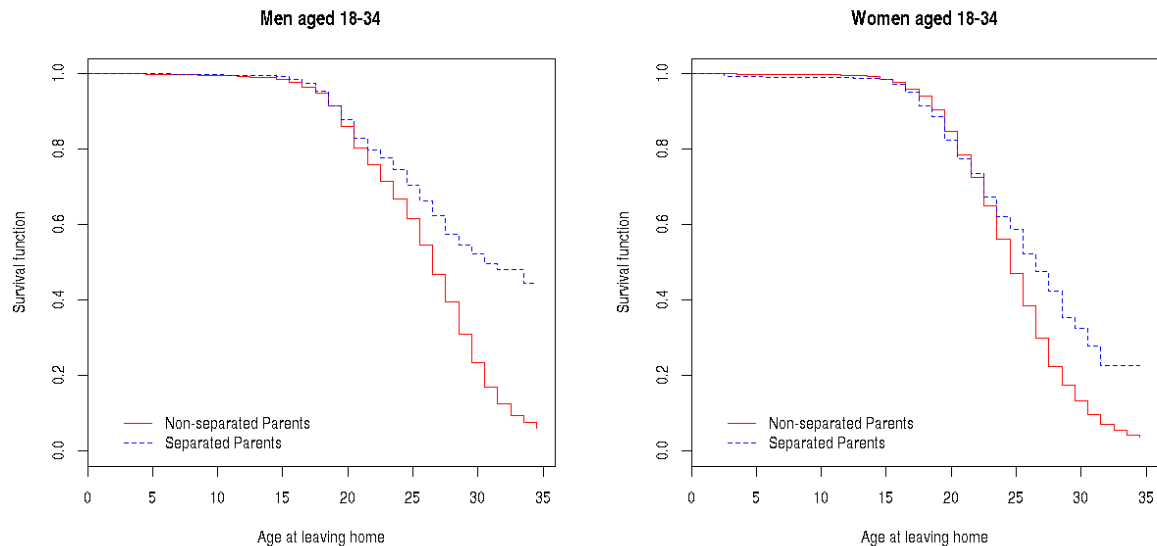
The above figures come without taking into account the selection bias we mentioned before. When measuring attitudes towards family formation we actually have two possible sources of bias. The first one is due to a different distribution of background characteristics between the two groups of young adults (i.e. those with splitted parents and those with intact families). For instance, the educational level of splitted fathers is averagely higher than that of non-splitted fathers, and fathers' education may influence attitude towards marriage and family formation, thus introducing bias in figures of table 2. A second source of bias is due to a different life course of the two groups of young adults. Considering that attitudes are likely to change with the life course events and we register them with a sectional approach, we can not exclude that their different attitudes toward family and family formation depend also by their differences in terms of age at the interview and life trajectory they followed until the interview. So, those who got married, keeping everything else equal, are likely to agree less on the sentence 'marriage is an outdated institution' than those who did not. This second source of bias is more difficult to tackle as there is a mutual causation of behaviours and attitudes towards them which makes these two variables highly endogenous. The way we consider this endogeneity issue is exposed in the following section 5a.

b) Behaviours of youth

The analysis of behaviours gives more interesting results, as they are not entirely consistent with the usual findings. First of all, youth having experienced a parental divorce does not

leave home earlier – they rather leave a bit later - than youth having not experienced such an event (Figure 1). This result is particularly evident for men who, if children of non intact couples, show a median age at leaving home clearly higher than 30.

Figure 1: Survival functions of leaving home. Men and women, Italy, 2003.



Another point of interest is the reason for having left home. Considering only the sub-sample of young people who had left parental home at the time of interview, we notice strong differences between the two groups of youth: children of separated parents are more likely to leave home for other reasons than union formation, though marriage remains for women the main route taken out of the parental home (see table 2). The phenomenon is particularly evident among men: more than 70% of those whose parents’ marriage had broken down have left home for education, work, autonomy or “other”, whereas the same figure is only 56% among those brought up with both their parents. Therefore, the evidence suggests that children of separated and divorced parents reach their residential autonomy at a later age but with a more different pathway than those coming from intact families.

Table 3: Men and women aged 18-34 by parental union state, reason for having left home and median age at leaving (sub-sample of people who left parental home at the time of interview)

	MEN			WOMEN		
	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Not splitted parents</i>	<i>Median age at LPH</i>	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Not splitted parents</i>	<i>Median age at LPH</i>
Cohabitation	16 (15%)	194 (13%)	25.5	44 (25%)	281 (14%)	23.5
Marriage	13 (12%)	672 (46%)	27.5	49 (28%)	1387 (69%)	24.5
Work	23 (21%)	297 (20%)	21.5	17 (10%)	131 (7%)	21.5
Education	17 (16%)	88 (6%)	19.5	23 (13%)	113 (6%)	20.5
Autonomy/Independence	21 (19%)	203 (14%)	24.5	30 (17%)	174 (9%)	21.5
Other	18 (17%)	94 (6%)	20.5	13 (7%)	17 (1%)	18.5

	<i>MEN</i>		<i>WOMEN</i>	
TOTAL	108	1454	176	2001

Union formation of children of divorcee is delayed too. Contradicting a wide range of literature (see, for instance, McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988) figure 2 shows that women, and especially men, enter in a union later if they have experienced a parental divorce or separation. On the other hand, children of splitted parents are more inclined to cohabitation (see table 4) - and this is consistent with other studies - so that for many of them the first union is a cohabitation and marriage is furtherly postponed or even avoided. Again, this contradicts a wide range of literature although there are other studies finding that parental divorce delays marriage (see Wolfinger, 2003, for a list of them).

Figure 2: Survival functions of first union (marriage or cohabitation). Men and women, Italy, 2003.

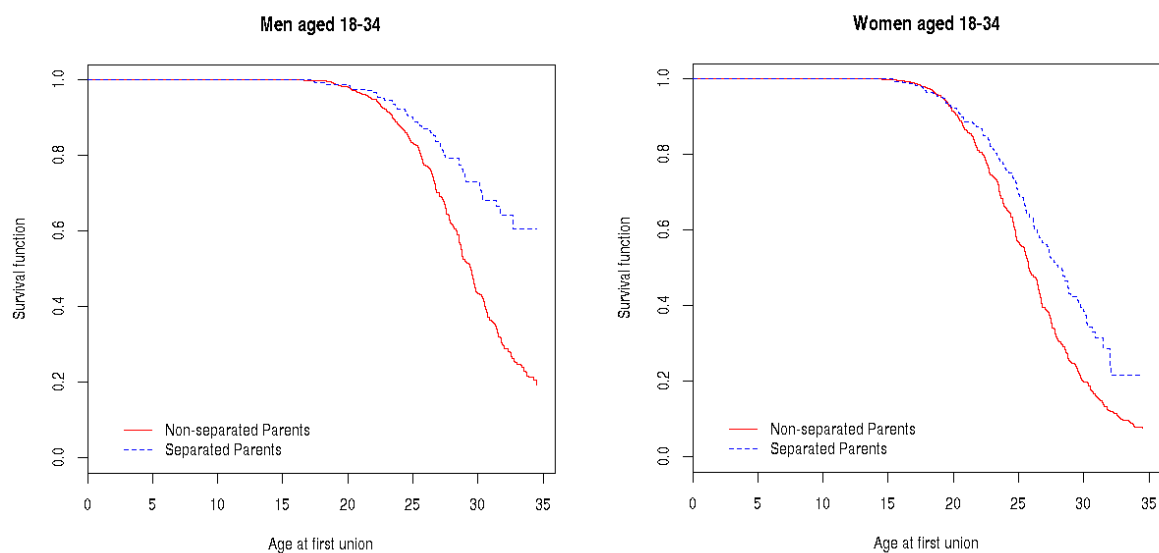


Table 4: Men and women aged 18-34 at time of interview by parental union state and type of first union (sub-sample of individuals who entered first union at the time of interview)

	<i>MEN</i>			<i>WOMEN</i>		
	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Not splitted parents</i>	<i>Median age at 1st union</i>	<i>Splitted parents</i>	<i>Not splitted parents</i>	<i>Median age at 1st union</i>
Cohabitation	28 (53%)	224 (20%)	24.7	86 (57%)	398 (21%)	24.1
Marriage	25 (47%)	879 (80%)	26.5	64 (43%)	1512 (79%)	24.5
TOTAL	53	1103		150	1910	

This descriptive results are therefore intriguing since they show some unexpected results. However, these results need to be confirmed by the multivariate analysis, since children of divorced or separated parents are very likely to be selected, as we highlighted before. Marital instability is growing in the last years but it still remains at very low levels in comparison with European standards. Therefore these, and possibly others, source of bias need to be controlled for in order to single out the effect of parental divorce from the confounding effect of selection. This will be done in the following section by using multivariate analyses, which take into accounts *simultaneously* the effect of the variable of interest (parental divorce) and the confounders.

5. Estimating the effects of parental separation

a) The attitudes of youth: methods and results

In order to measure the impact of parental separation on children attitudes, we implement a propensity score matching technique to control for background confounding characteristics of individuals. This method, proposed by Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) first, simply matches every individual who underwent the separation of parents with the most similar individual who did not. Similarity of individuals is determined on the base of observed covariates. Several matching methods are suggested in literature (see Smith and Todd, 2005 for a review of them), here we use the approach proposed by Diamond and Sekhon (2005), which uses a genetic algorithm to optimize the balance between covariates of treated (those who underwent parental split) and controls (those who did not undergo parental split). In this way, we are able to estimate a parameter, which is generally referred to as Average Treatment Effect on Treated (ATET). Basically ATET is the difference between the average value of outcome of treated and the average value of outcome of the same treated had they not undergone the treatment, conditional to values of covariates X . In formulas:

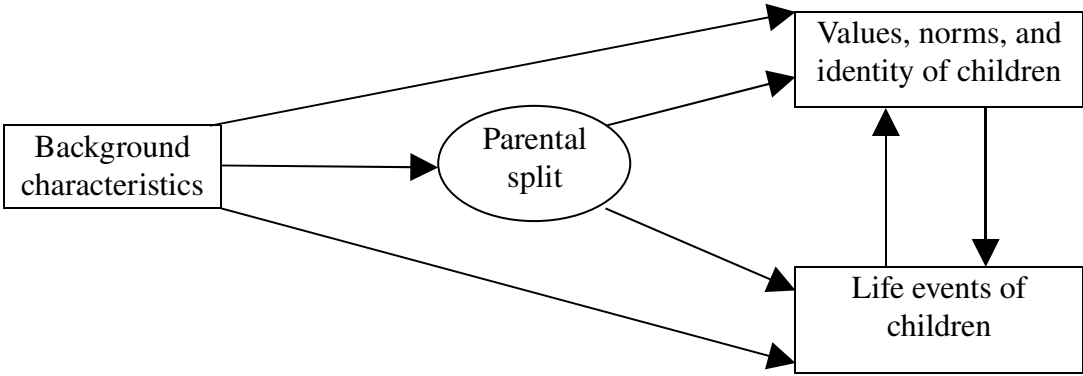
$$ATET = E(Y_1 - Y_0; D=1, X) \quad (1)$$

where D is a variable for treatment status of individuals, Y_1 and Y_0 are the potential outcomes of individuals in case of treatment and in case of no treatment, respectively.

Selection of covariates X to condition on is the most crucial part of this estimation strategy, since the matching techniques relies on *Conditional Independence Assumption*, (CIA) i.e. it is assumed that all the possible source of bias is contained in X thus ruling out the bias due to unobserved variables. However, variables that are *caused* by treatment (i.e. parental split) should not be included (Heckman *et al.* 1999) otherwise we introduce some bias netting out indirect effects of treatment. In our setting, this poses a dilemma on how experience of some life events (such as having left home, having started a cohabitation) should be treated. Here we hypothesize that background characteristics, parental split, life events of children and their values, norms and identity are related as shown in the conceptual schema below (figure 3). According to that schema, life events experienced by children of separated parents are both cause and consequence of their values, norms and identity: on the one hand, experiencing a particular life event might change the value orientation of individuals (e.g. experiencing a

cohabitation influence the attitude toward cohabitation), on the other hand attitudes towards life events influence the propensity of experiencing them. This means that both including life events in the set of covariates to condition on and excluding them might introduce some bias.

Figure 3 – Conceptual schema of relations of factors affecting values, norms and identity of children



Here we choose to include life events into the set of matching variables we control for. As said before, this could introduce some bias by netting out an indirect effect of parental split but as compensation the *direct* effect of parental split on children attitudes is free of bias (provided that CIA holds).

A minor issue is that outcome (i.e. attitudes) are measured through a five-point scale, a feature that poses the dilemma on the numerical value each point of the scale should be given. We adopt the solution proposed by Cheli and Lemmi (1995) consisting of using the values of empirical distribution function. In that way, the distance between two points, for example between 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' depends on the difference between the number of individuals who answered 'Agree' or less and those who answered 'Strongly agree' or less. Formally, we transform the variable Y which takes values 1,2,...,5 into a new variable \tilde{Y} according to formula:

$$\tilde{Y}_i = F(Y_i) \tag{2}$$

In that way variable \tilde{Y} takes values from 0, for the lowest agreement to 1 for the highest agreement.

In table 5 results of matching estimates are reported. These are the effects of parental split on attitudes of youth net of the following covariates: education level of fathers, working status of mothers, mother’s age, age group of young people, number of siblings, geographical location, having already experienced the first job, the first leaving home, and the first cohabitation.

The results show that, even after having controlled for family of origin characteristics and life course events, differences of attitudes towards family and family formation between youth who underwent a parental split and youth who did not still persist. The former have a significant higher agreement with respect to most of the proposed sentences: marriage is outdated institution; a couple can cohabit without any plan to marry; a woman can rightly have a child without having a relationship; and an unhappy couple can rightly ask the divorce

even if it has children. No significant effect is found on attitude toward leaving home timing, meaning that parental split does not affect the perceived norm on age at leaving home.

These effects are a bit larger when we do not include life events covariates in the specification of propensity score logit model. Following the reasoning we made before, this means that the figures in table 5 might have been downward biased by the introduction of life events as matching variables. However, results do not change qualitatively from one version to the other, and figures in table 5 are qualitatively the same we obtain excluding life events from the matching variables.

Table 5: Men and women aged 18-34: effect of parental split on their level of agreement on several sentences about family

	MEN			WOMEN		
	Effect	St. Error	p value	Effect	St. Error	p value
Marriage is an outdated institution	0.063	0.018	0.000	0.067	0.015	0.000
A couple can cohabit without any plan to marry	0.069	0.020	0.000	0.058	0.017	0.001
A woman can rightly have a child even without having a relation	0.040	0.020	0.042	0.057	0.018	0.002
An unhappy couple can rightly ask the divorce even if it has children	0.092	0.021	0.000	0.054	0.018	0.003
Children should leave the parental home when they are 18-20	0.028	0.019	0.134	0.015	0.017	0.363

b) The behaviours of youth: methods and results

Behaviours we consider here are analysed in terms of timing of the following events: leaving home, first union, cohabitation or marriage. Therefore, we use the classical approach of *event history analysis* (Blossfeld and Rowher, 1995). Timing of leaving home and union formation is analysed using a piecewise-exponential regression model. Simple regression models are complemented with multiple destination models, where we distinguish leaving home by destination (two or three destinations) and union formation by type of union (marriage vs cohabitation).

The impact of parental split on behaviours has been investigated by applying several hazard regression models with a set of covariates that are listed in table 6. They include age, age of mothers, education level of fathers, occupational status of mothers (working or not), number of siblings, geographical location (north-east, north-west, centre, south and islands), leaving home and cohabitation. The last two covariates are time varying and are included only in the union formation and marriage models (leaving home) or in the marriage model (cohabitation).

Table 6: Covariates included in the hazard regression models, in addition to union status of parents.

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Time constant/ time varying</i>
Age of children	<i>Time constant</i>
Age of mothers	<i>Time constant</i>
Education level of fathers	<i>Time constant</i>
Working status of mothers	<i>Time constant</i>
Number of siblings	<i>Time constant</i>

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Time constant/ time varying</i>
Geographical location	<i>Time constant</i>
Leaving home (only in union models and marriage models)	<i>Time varying</i>
Cohabitation (only in marriage models)	<i>Time varying</i>

First we focus on leaving home. Figures in table 7, illustrate the effects of parental separation on hazard of leaving home with three different models. For the sake of parsimony here (and in the subsequent analyses) we present only the effects of the factor (parental separation) which is the focus of our analysis.

In the first one (model A), we do not make any distinction of the route taken out of parental home, using a single destination model. Net of age at the interview and other background covariates, model 1 turns out that there is no effect of parental separation on the hazard of leaving home for men and a positive effect for women. When we distinguish union-related leaving home from not union related ones (model B) we have a clearly different picture: men with separated parents are less likely to leave for union and more likely to leave for other reasons than union; women are more likely to leave parental home only for reasons other than union considering that for them there is no significant effect of parental split on the hazard of leaving home for union. The third model provides us with even more information: both men and women who underwent a parental split are more likely to leave home for non-union related reasons and less likely to leave home for marriage, whereas only women are more likely to leave home for marriage. Thus, gender differences with respect to the impact of parental separation on the age at leaving home depends only by the fact that the experience of parental separation for women promotes a higher propensity to leave for cohabitation, which is not observed for men.

Table 7: Effect of parental separation in three different model of leaving home (net of other background and life course covariates)

	MEN			WOMEN		
	Effect	St. Error	p value	Effect	St. Error	p value
<i>A. Model with a single destination</i>						
Leaving home for any reason	0.111	0.101	0.268	0.217	0.079	0.006
<i>B. Model with two destinations</i>						
Leav. home for union	-0.333	0.190	0.079	0.027	0.108	0.602
Leav. home not for union	0.343	0.119	0.004	0.456	0.119	0.000
<i>C. Model with three destinations</i>						
Leav. home not for union	0.342	0.119	0.004	0.457	0.119	0.000
Leav. home for cohabitation	0.264	0.262	0.324	0.739	0.165	0.000
Leav. home for marriage	-0.785	0.281	0.005	-0.356	0.147	0.015

Next, we turn to union formation (table 8). Even in this case, we first use a single destination model, i.e. we consider first union without make any distinction between cohabitation and marriage (model D), and then a double destination model where we distinguish first marriage from first cohabitation (model E). Finally, we present the results of a single destination model which estimates the effect of parental separation on the age at first marriage of their children (Model F).

Table 8: Effect of parental separation on age in three different models of union formation (net of other background covariates and life course events)

	MEN			WOMEN		
	Effect	St. Error	p value	Effect	St. Error	p value
<i>D. Model with a single destination</i>						
Entering first union	0.036	0.060	0.543	0.129	0.059	0.030
<i>E. Model with two destinations</i>						
Entering first marriage	-0.002	0.063	0.975	-0.030	0.069	0.662
Entering first cohabitation	0.422	0.202	0.047	0.683	0.122	0.000
<i>F. Model with a single destination</i>						
Entering first marriage	-0.491	0.165	0.003	-0.264	0.106	0.013

As for leaving home, single destination model does not show any significant effect of parental split on union formation for men whereas there is a significant positive effect for women. In the double destination model we find a positive and significant effect on the hazard of entering in cohabitation (weakly significant for men and highly significant for women).

It might look odd that the effect of parental split on the hazard of marriage is not significantly negative, given that results in table 7 show that parental separation significantly delay the leaving home for marriage.

This is caused by a violation of a critical assumption multiple destination models rely on: it is assumed that the two competing risks (marriage and cohabitation) are mutually independent, i.e. the risk of cohabiting does not influence the risk of getting married and the risk of getting married does not influence the risk of cohabiting. In facts, risk of cohabitation is likely to influence the risk of marriage, given that many couples intend cohabitation as a preparation to marriage. Hence the two destinations are not really “competing” in the true sense. This suggests for caution in interpreting the results reported in table 8, and in order to have a full comprehension of union formation dynamics, we estimated a further hazard model on first marriage. This model clearly documents that there is a delay of marriage associated with parental separation, a delay particularly strong for men but significant for women, too.

6. Comments

In this work we found empirical evidence that in Italy parental divorce have an impact on the subsequent family formation of offspring. After having taken into account several selection factors, we found that children of divorcee – with respect to those from intact families - are more prone to leave parental home for reasons other than union; less prone to enter marriage (non only in connection with the leaving of parental home but also in general); more prone to enter a cohabiting union. In this sense, parental separation has the effect of increase the family paths of young people.

However, this effect is gender differentiated. For men, the greater opportunities of both leaving parental home and enter unions do not imply a change of the timing of family events. Young men who underwent a parental separation do not leave home earlier or later than the others, rather they are more likely to leave home for other reasons than union and less likely to leave home for union; similarly, they do not enter in union earlier or later but they are more

likely to start union formation with cohabitation rather than marriage, and this causes a general delay of first marriage. Parent separation, among men, has, therefore, only the effect of inserting intermediate phases (single, cohabiting), so prolonging the process of transition to adulthood. For women the greater opportunities of leaving home and enter unions is, instead, associated with an anticipation of some important family events. Daughters of nonintact parenting show an earlier age at leaving parental home and an earlier age at first union. This let us imagine that for women the split of the parental family is also a factor of acceleration of the process of transition to adulthood.

We also find evidence that people 18-34 aged are more likely to have attitudes less traditional towards the family and family formation, if their parents experienced a separation or a divorce. Even though there is no changes of norms on the age at leaving home, children of separated parents are more inclined to accept “new” families based on more informal ties. This finding is irrespective of gender and persists even when background characteristics and life course events are taken into account.

Also considering that we could not take into account some cultural aspect of family of origin (i.e. religiosity) and some youth biographical elements (end of education; entry into labour market) our results support the hypothesis that, union dissolution may be a factor of acceleration of social change and of diffusion in Italy of new family behaviour closer to those of Second demographic transition.

The survey design of our data (cross-sectional for attitudes and retrospective for behaviour) do not allow us to use directly the data on attitudes as a factor of explanation of behaviour but our analyses suggest also that parental split affects subsequent family behaviour of offspring through mediating mechanisms, one of them being commitment and attitudes toward family. So, the experience of a split of parental couple makes the offspring more prone to alternative living arrangement and consequently more inclined to adopt non traditional family behaviour. The same results, however, tell us that in this specific historical phase most of the change refers to the states to be occupied rather than the timing of events. Maybe this can be explained with the persisting strong family ties of Italian families and a still low diffusion of step-parent families that could force the children of a separated couple to escape unhappy home environments.

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