The Determinants of Marital Disruption in Italy: Differences and Similarities Between Women and Men

Le determinanti degli scioglimenti coniugali in Italia: differenze e somiglianze tra uomini e donne

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1. Introduction and objective

The profound transformations regarding family patterns and reproductive choices experienced by many countries since the Second World War, and particularly throughout the most recent years, concern various aspects of individual and collective life; from the sexual and reproductive behaviour, to the models of couples’ formation and dissolution.

In Europe, these transformations started within the Northern countries, and subsequently spread out to the Central and Southern countries, at different periods and at varying intensities. Also in Italy, over the last ten years, data showed a progressive rise of divorces. Between 1995 and 2005, the incidence of divorce rose from 80 to 151 divorces per 1000 marriages celebrated in the same year - with an absolute number of divorces rose of 75% (Istat, 2007).

However, for the Italian context the analysis of individual strategies concerning divorce as a step in the life-course are scarce. The available micro-level analyses on the causes of marital disruption in Italy demonstrate that women’s highest-risk life course in which a marital disruption is developed characterise those women born in the more recent decades, who marry at younger age, reside in the Center and Northern regions of Italy, who have a less traditional view of marriage, who are highly educated, and who are employed (De Rose, 1992; Ferro and Vignoli, 2007). We now wonder whether (or not) women’s determinants are similar to those concerning men.

2. Data and method

In this paper, data stemming from the 2003 multipurpose household survey “Family and Social Subjects”, carried out by the Italian Statistical Office, are used.

The analysis is conducted under a life-course perspective, and an event history model is employed to measure the hazard of separation. In Italy, in fact, the divorce rate cannot be used as the sole indicator of the frequency of marital dissolution. According to Italian law,
it is separation, and not divorce, which is treated as the crucial point when dealing with marital conflict. Woman and man’s separation risk is defined as the probability of experiencing a de facto separation, given her and his individual characteristics and some characteristics of their parents. For the specification of the baseline hazard, a piecewise constant function is chosen.

3. Preliminary findings and future research

Our preliminary model outcomes highlight that the “basic” determinants of separation risks are quite similar between men and women. The general pattern is on the increase of separation intensity for the youngest cohorts. The trend may reflect the greater diffusion of a more flexible typology of union amongst the new generations. As expected, then, marrying older reduces women and men’s risk of separating. Furthermore, it was found that those who experienced a parental dissolution are most likely to separate themselves. This is in line with the current literature. An interpretation that may be convincing for the Italian context is a vertical diffusion of family patterns, namely women and men with divorced parents may perceive the approval of their own divorce more then the others. Looking at the area of residence, the well-known North-South differential emerges clearly from our estimates. Moreover, the model outcomes show that the dissolution risk enlarges when women and men are better educated.

The main difference between the causes of divorce between men and women concern the role of work. Women’s risk of experiencing a separation significantly enlarges for those who are working (whatever the job is permanent or temporary), with respect to those not-working. Thus, women’s degree of economic autonomy is one factor which plays a pivotal role in the effective possibilities to handle a separation. Differently when a man has a permanent job this does not have any significant impact on marital disruption.

As for (close) future research, a particular issue we want to investigate is the role of family size as determinant of marital dissolution. Does the first childbirth emphasise arguments among spouses in unhappy marriages and therefore enlarge the risk of marital breakdown? Or, on the contrary, is it a clear sign of family harmony and well-stabilized relationship with a low dissolution risk? Is the impact of children on marital disruption different according to the birth order? Have family size a gender-specific impact on the phenomenon under study?

References