

Risk factors for marriage dissolution: analysis of critical events in a couple life

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Abstract. Over the last twenty years, the intimate sphere and the conjugal behaviour of Italians is radically changed. Undoubtedly, the increase of number both of legal separations and divorces, as well as defining the presence of a new and emerging phenomenon in our national context (precisely, the conflict within the couple and the resulting conjugal instability), can be seen as an indicator of this change. Having said that, the aim of this research is to study the marital breakdown with particular attention to what has happened in Italy from 1990 to 2012. More specifically, the number of legal separations is going to be analyzed through the use of secondary data by Istat - National Institute of Statistics with reference to the duration of marriage, the number and the age of the children at the moment of parents' separation.

Keywords: marital instability, secondary data, demographic change, legal separation, divorce

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Received: 10.09.2018 - Revision: 21.11.2018 – Accepted: 27.11.2018

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze, using administrative data, the phenomenon of marital instability in Italy with specific reference to those variables which take into account the duration of the couple relationship and the events that distinguish it like, for example, the birth of a child (Jacobson, 1950; Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985; Amato, 2003).

The decision to tackle this issue stems from the observation that both the number of legal separations and that of divorces have recorded, in recent years, a considerable increase in Italy (just think that if at the beginning of the Nineties the number of divorces amounted to 27.682, this number is almost tripled if we consider the introduction of the so-called "fast divorce law"¹ in 2015): as pointed out by some scholars, this might be, together with the decrease of marriage (Blasi, 2015; Istat, 2018) and the spread of unmarried cohabitation (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004), the sign of a radical change in Italian citizens' behavior and dispositions towards family-related issues.

The conjugal instability analyzed in this paper, therefore, refers to the voluntary conclusion of marriage which takes place following a judicial procedure which, although in the past it was connected to a sanction-model (the divorce was granted only in the case of misbehavior of a spouse in regard to the other spouse), today concerns a remedy-model in which the divorce arises as a solution to a situation of intolerability of cohabitation, conflict in the offspring's education, infidelity, lack of collaboration and/or material/moral assistance or absence of contribution to the needs of the family (Dogliotti & Figone, 2011). Consequently, the aspect that we intend to explore is the conflictual context that «can be indicative of only one thing; danger to familial functioning and stability. Families characterized by high rates of conflict are expected to become incapable of proper functioning and to disintegrate» (Sprey, 1969, p. 701; Fine & Harvey, 2006).

Moreover, considering the important consequences and the various changes it has generated, marital instability has to be considered as an object of social study. In the words of Marzio Barbagli (1990), a well-known Italian sociologist, marital breakdown is like a "silent revolution" that, with the passing of time, has been able to determine both social and demographic changes: among the former, the reorganization of welfare

¹"Fast divorce law", that came into force in April 2015, is a new modality provided by Law n° 55/2015 which slashed the time to get a divorce to six months from three years.

systems and, in particular, of the work-family reconciliation policies mainly for women (Todesco, 2008); among the latter, the spread of premarital cohabitation, the diffusion of the incomplete nuclear families (characterized by the presence of children with only one parent) or the reconstituted families formed when divorced persons who have children from their previous marriages remarry (Barbagli, 1990; Manucci & Curto, 2003; Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2008; Sirignano, 2010).

Causes of marital instability

In order to construct an exhaustive theoretical framework able to illustrate the determinants of marital instability, four particular elements will be taken into consideration. These elements, which have been analyzed by various national and international authors, are closely connected to the increase of this phenomenon.

The first of these aspects refers to the various economic transformations that took place from the development of the industrial society; specifically, the main change strongly associated with the increase in the rate of separations and/or divorces in Italy is represented by the massive entry of women into the labor market. This is seen as crucial especially for two reasons: first, it encourages policies of gender equality; second, it determines the overcoming of the family structure based on the male breadwinner model in which the man has the duty to guarantee income while the woman devotes herself to the care of the house (Bernardi, 1999). Following this theory, it is easy to understand how the family begins to change when women begin to work because the weakening of the objective dependence of the wife towards her husband creates the conditions of the awareness of the tensions inherent in married life (De Singly, 1987).

In addition to the transformations described above, even the institutional changes that have taken place in recent decades have played a fundamental role in the spread of conjugal instability in Italy: the socio-cultural influences that have occurred have been able, in fact, to lead also to the dissolution of the marriage. In more detail, we are referring, on the one hand, to the political sphere and to the introduction of the divorce law in 1970 and, on the other hand, to the spiritual sphere and, specifically, to the religious process of secularization. From this point of view, therefore, the salient factors that affect the frequencies of cases of conjugal breakdown are collective phenomena that must be traced back to social tendencies and to structural variations of the reference societies (Ardigò, 1970; Daher, 2002).

A third element related to the increase in conjugal instability is connected to the role that the family system plays in the child development. Specifically, the mechanism to which we refer is the intergenerational transmission of marital quality and marital instability: according to this, the belief system and/or expectations regarding the marriage are formed and structured by observing the experiences in the family of origin. During the primary socialization, therefore, each individual assumes as a model at least initially his/her own role model both as regards the construction of his/her identity in sexual competence and as regards a scheme of relationship with the partner (Parsons & Bales, 1955): the interiorization of the values of social orientation offered them by their parents will guide their relational needs and choices of action.

Last but not least, the fourth theory concerns the process of individualization that has led to the development of the "pure relationship". In a globalized society such as ours, it becomes more complicated to establish affective bonds that can be based on the ideal of romantic love, which presupposes the possibility of establishing a long-term affective state with the other on the basis of intrinsic qualities of the bond itself (Giddens, 1992); vice versa, according to what the British sociologist and political scientist claims in his essay *The Transformation of Intimacy*, it is always easier for two individuals to prefer to establish a pure relationship characterized by the presence of a convergent love that presupposes equality of giving and having. The pure relation is, thus, a rational relationship of exchange (Homans, 1961) in which each partner offers and receives from the other the required benefits: «an individual is attracted to another if he expects associating with him to be in some way rewarding for him, and his interest in the social rewards draws him to the other» (Blau, 1986, p.20; Donati & Di Nicola, 1998).

In this context, the rigidity of traditional roles and the old model of conjugal life find their most natural consequence in the increase of conjugal instability: this is the emergence of a new and totally modern conception of relationships based on free will «not only because it claims autonomy as a fundamental element of personality, but above all because it is aware of the drama of every relationship that inevitably places the ego in front of the experience of living and feeling with the other, and at the same time wanting to preserve itself» (Turnaturi, 1994, p.104; Bonolis, 1999; Bauman, 2003).

The trend of legal separation of spouses in Italy

In 2011, year of the last General Population and Housing Census in Italy, the separation rate in respect of inhabitants (per thousand values) almost doubled compared to 1991 (1.5 against 0.8). The marital instability has recorded, as mentioned above, a substantial increase specifically from the second half of the Nineties: in terms of absolute value, in fact, it has gone from 52.323 legal separations in 1995 to 91.706 in 2015² (most recent data available).

Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is not to analyze the phenomenon of marital instability in a comprehensive manner (describing, for example, characteristics like the territorial distribution) but to observe the trend of legal separations in Italy with reference to specific variables from 1990 to 2012³: more particularly, with reference to the Italian context, we are going to study the duration of marriage, the presence and the age of the children at the moment of separation of parents. Therefore, the time series allows us to grasp the dynamics of the object under examination, highlighting how even the family nucleus, like other social structures, responds to transformations and changes in our contemporaneity.

The legal separation in Italy by duration of marriage

The variable "duration of marriage" refers to the time interval between the date of marriage and the start of the separation process.

At the beginning of the Nineties, legal separations in Italy stemmed mainly from shorter marriages: the class 5-9 years of marriage was characterized, in fact, by the highest percentage (24.7%), followed by a class of duration still minor (0-4 years of marriage) with 20.8% of cases (Fig. 1). According to international literature, the reason for the high percentage of "precocious" legal separations is given by the lack of the necessary minimum (physical and emotional) of a relationship and by the incompleteness of information related to one's partner: in this regard, most

² We prefer to study legal separation rather than divorces because it is the first step to apply for annulment of marriage in the Italian civil legislation so it is a reliable indicator to analyze marital instability.

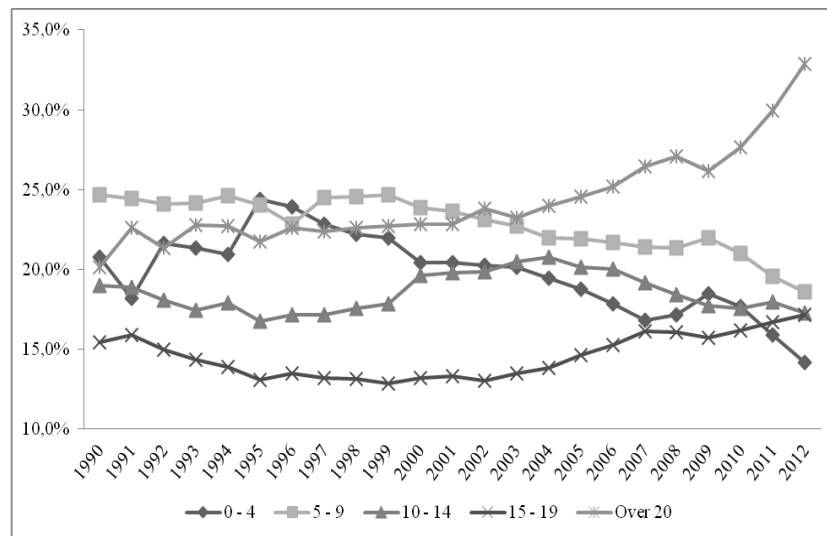
³ The choice to focus the attention on this specific period of time has been dictated, to a greater extent, by the complete availability of data, especially as regards the individual characteristics of the spouses. From 2013 onwards, in fact, it is possible to find only contextual data (number, region) within the report "Weddings, separations and divorces" annually updated by Istat or within the section "Population and families" in the Italian Statistical Yearbook, also edited by the National Institute of Statistics.

studies of conjugal psychology say that the pathologies within the couple are born when the partners fail to mutually satisfy their needs or when one of the two partners has some hopes that, with the passing of the time, disintegrate (Willi, 1988). Gary Becker writes (1981): «I suggest that marriages fail early primarily because of imperfect information in marriage markets and the accumulation of better information during marriage» (p. 223).

From this point of view, the risk of marital instability would be reduced with the passing of time only for those spouses able to negotiate these elements in the first years of marriage: «the earlier the marriage starts the greater are the likely changes in the personality requiring considerable mutual adaptation later on. One reason for the high incidence of divorce in youthful marriages is precisely this marked change which exposes the couple to completely new facets of themselves» (Dominian, 1968, p. 19).

Figure 1

Separations by duration of marriage (1990 -2012) – percentage



Source: elaboration on Istat

Only recently, as it can also be seen from the figure above, there is an inversion of this trend: starting from 2003, the percentage of separations decreases for those couples with a few years of marriage and, conversely, the percentage of separations for couples with 15 to 19 years of marriage or

more than 20 years of marriage increases. Especially for this last class we observe the greater increase: in fact, in less than ten years, this value increases by 52.8% (18.979 in 2003 and 29.001 in 2012), thus proving that socially expected durations are no longer included among the elements to take into account in determining the action⁴. In regard to the growing acceptance theory (which maintains that the risks of separation diminish with the passage of time because partners learn to know and accept each other), this seems to be replaced by the accumulated irritations theory (which, on the contrary, is based on the assumption that the probability of divorcing grows during marriage).

According to this paradigm, «the spouses able to react optimistically to the first difficulties, showing willingness to agree on issues of disagreement and to overcome existing problems. But over time the possibility of overcoming obstacles would seem increasingly remote and this would increase the idea of the existence of a non-recurring fracture. In addition, tensions, problems and recriminations among the partners would build up in the course of married life. The impossibility of imagining a solution to difficult situations and the weakening of the desire to face them as a couple would therefore increase the possibilities of a breakdown» (Arosio, 2008, p. 85).

The legal separation in Italy by number and the age of children

Most of the empirical research aimed at examining the link between the dissolution of the conjugal relationship and the number of children has shown that there is a strong correlation between the crisis of the couple and the presence of offspring: the latter, in fact, is characterized as an effective obstacle to the separation of spouses as it represents a fundamental emotional bond for both parents. The birth of a child is, indeed, a very important event for the marital dyad because it represents the origin of the family's generational history and the passage from the conjugal bond to the parental bond (Rossi, 2003). Not only that: from a psychological point of

⁴ «Socially expected durations - hereafter, SED or SEDs for short - are socially prescribed or collectively patterned expectations about temporal durations imbedded in social structures of various kinds: for example, the length of time that individuals are institutionally permitted to occupy particular statuses (such as an office in an organization or membership in a group); the assumed probable durations of diverse kinds of social relationships (such as friendship or a professional-client relation); and the patterned and therefore anticipated longevity of individual occupants of statuses, of groups, and of organizations» (Merton, 1984, p. 265).

view, this event brings with it several positive effects including (Binda, 1985):

- the increase in cohesion between parents who now have shared developmental tasks (relational or organizational) for the growth of the infant;
- emotional benefits (the child is perceived as a source of emotionally constructive and rewarding feelings for the parents);
- enrichment and development of the self (the new parents are less focused on themselves and more concentrated on the growth of the child);
- the sense of identification with the child (parents can relive memories, needs, desires that bind them to their childhood and their past).

From a sociological point of view, however, the birth of a child represents the transition to adulthood (Rossi, 2011), since it requires the assumption of responsibility both to yourself and to the other and the cure of a new generation. Moreover, the presence of children would favor the division of labor between husband and wife increasing interdependence within the couple and the organic solidarity of durkheimian memory. «The presence of the new born, totally dependent on adults, can constitute for the couple a moment of individual growth. In this phase of the life cycle they will have to face specific developmental tasks that can be divided into a relational and organizational side and which involve the whole family system» (Binda, 1985, p. 178).

Already Lewis A. Coser (1956), resuming Simmel's concept about the conflict in its purely sociological meaning (Simmel, 1908), affirmed the need to distinguish conflicts that involve the basis of an intimate relationship from conflicts that concern issues of minor importance. In one of the theses he elaborated in order to broaden this theoretical line on social conflict and the functions that it exerts in relation to the group's structures, Coser argued that the conflicts developed in certain commonly accepted structures have a different impact from all those conflicts that question the very basis of consent: it is the example, the same author emphasizes, of the conjugal relationship in which the conflict about having or not having children can invest the basis of the agreement (this being an element that represents, unquestionably, one of the basic purposes of marriage) and which can prove to be much more incisive than other types of conflict which appear irrelevant when compared to this (how to distribute the family budget or how to spend a holiday).

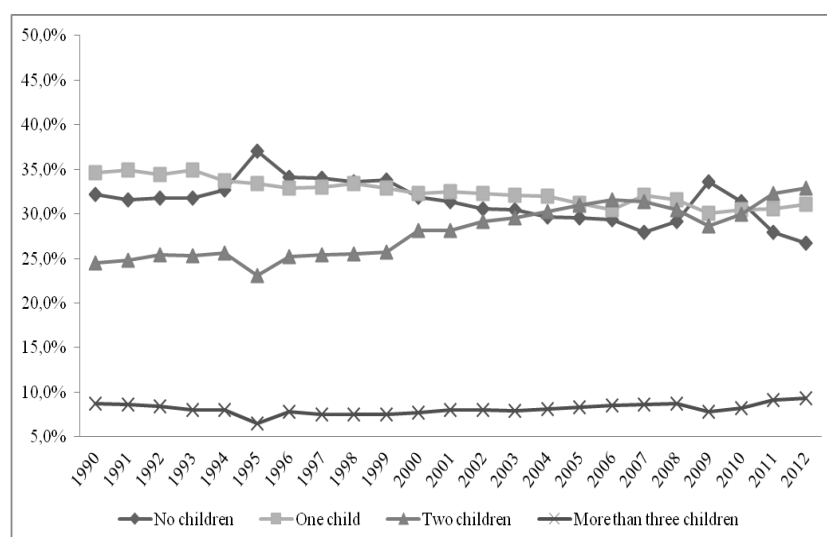
Coser's thesis, therefore, is confirmed if we observe the figure below: even in the Italian context, the fragility of the family unit tends to decrease

when the number of children grows. The presence of offspring, therefore, is decisive in the choice of spouses to separate: «each additional child significantly reduces the association between alter's divorce status and ego's likelihood of getting divorced» (McDermott, Fowler & Christakis, 2013, p. 513).

Summarizing the results of our analysis, we note that from 1990 to 2012 the lowest percentage of separations occurs for those couples who have three children (the average percentage is 6.3%) or more than four children (1.8 %). On the contrary, couples with a lack of children or, at most, the presence of only one child are more frequently separated (the average percentage is around 31-32% for each of these modalities).

Figure 2.

Separations by number of children (1990 -2012) – percentage



Source: elaboration on Istat

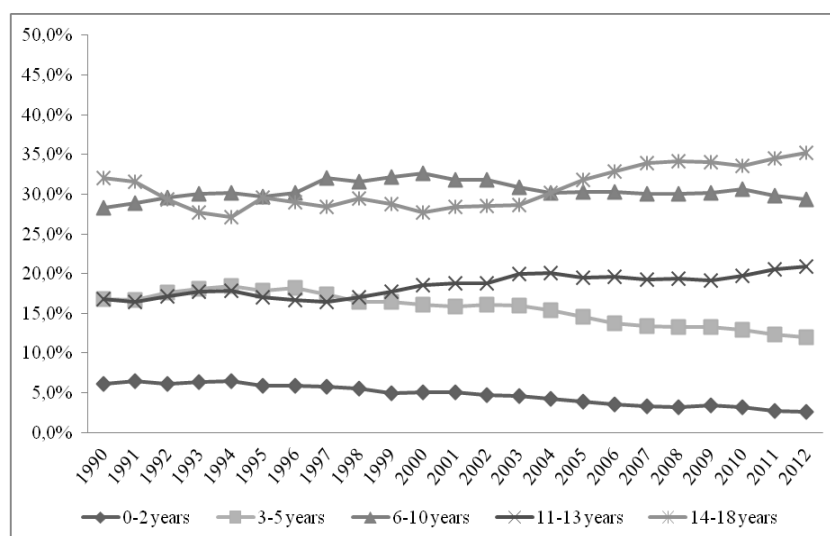
Moreover, from Figure 2, it is possible to highlight that, from 2000 onwards, separation procedures increase for those couples who have two children (+24.9% from 2000 to 2012). In this regard, it is interesting to conduct an analysis in order to examine the age of the first and second child at the time of the separation of the parents.

The following graphs describe legal separations by age of the children: in the first of the two figures, the proposed trend refers to the age of the

first child whose highest values are recorded for school age (from 6 to 10 years) and for adolescence (from 14 to 18): specifically, the first average value is around 30.4% and the second is 30.7%.

Figure 3.

Separation by age of the first child (1990 -2012) – percentage

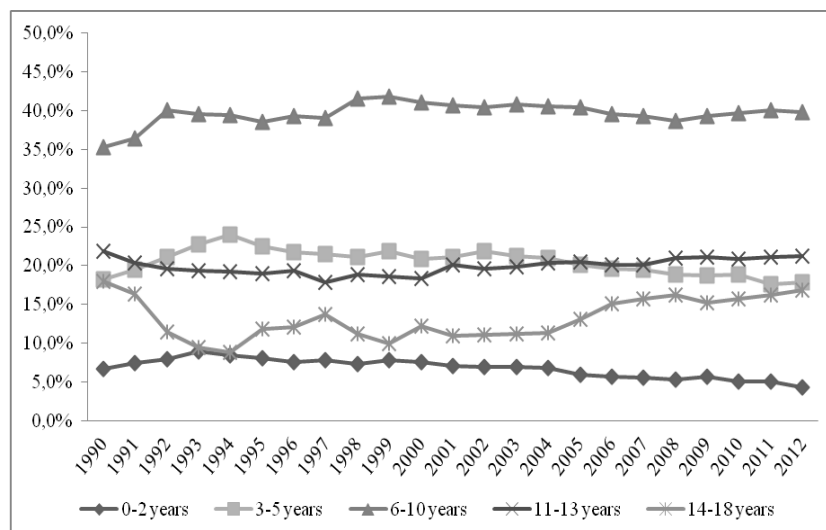


Source: elaboration on Istat

A different trend emerges for legal separations by the age of the second child: the highest percentage is recorded (and remains constant for all years taken into account) for school age (6 to 10 years) with an average of 39.7% and for the pre-school age with an average of 20.5% (Fig. 4).

Figure 4.

Separation by age of the second child (1990 -2012) – percentage



Source: elaboration on Istat

Nevertheless, observing both figures, it is possible to note that they are characterized by a low percentage relative to childhood (from 0 to 2 years): as previously mentioned, therefore, the marital instability could also depend on the age of the children since:

«aging of children should reduce dependency between spouses. Children become more capable of caring for themselves as they grow older and schools provide substantial child care. Moreover, parents may feel that older children can better cope with marital disruption. To the degree that dependency is tied to the youthfulness of children, the age of the youngest child should provide an index of dependency. As the youngest child ages, dependency should decrease and the likelihood of dissolution will increase. Dependence should be lowest before children are born and after they leave home. Independence, and the related probability of dissolution, should also be negatively related to the number of children in the home» (Heaton, 1990, p. 56).

Conclusion

The results obtained have highlighted what have become, over the years, the so-called risk factors which make some individuals more inclined than others to dissolve their conjugal bond: it has been explored, in fact, how the propensity to marital instability has increased for those couples characterized by the absence of children or at most, in their presence, by children over the age of six years and for those relationships that have a higher duration of marriage. As far as the latter is concerned, in the recent Report from Istat (2016) entitled "Marriage, separations and divorces", it emerges that, also in 2015 (last data available), the highest percentage of separations refers to people aged between 40 and 50 and the average length of the marriage ending in separation is 17 years, confirming the trend above analyzed.

Overall, the reconstructed time series have allowed us to examine how marriage is, today, something temporary and precarious: "the couple has changed", Kaufmann writes (1993). From an institution that once lasted a lifetime without asking too many questions, today it has become a dynamic system of permanent adjustments of life and it requires a real personal commitment from those who attempt the experience.

Now, far from assuming that the increase in marital breakdowns in Italy consequently represents an increase in conjugal unhappiness and/or a deterioration in the quality of the relation, what we want to discuss here is the idea that this phenomenon indicates, rather, the drastic weakening of the traditional norm that subordinated the two spouses to the ideal of "romantic love" (Maggioni, 1997; Giddens, 1992): for this reason, we are faced with not so much a defeat of the matrimonial institution as with a cultural transformation of our advanced society which, subjecting people to numerous incentives and pressures concerning the different areas of daily life, also makes uncertain both the destinies and the future trajectories concerning the private and personal life of each of us.

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