The effect of parental separation on attitudes of children in Italy

C. Buzzi*, F. Ongaro**, S. Mazzuco**, F. Sartori*
*Department of Sociology, University of Trento;
** Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Padova

1. Background

The rapid increase of marital instability that had been observed in Italy in this last decade induces more and more researchers to investigate on this phenomenon and on the consequences it can have on society. Children are the main actors involved in such an event, apart from the separating partners, thus impact of parental separation on children is one important research stream of this topic.

From a wide range of literature, we already know that life course and life conditions of children who underwent a parental separation are significantly different from those of children who did not. Parental separation induces, for instance, a higher poverty risk (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Page and Stevens, 2002), a less successful educational career (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Piketty, 2003), an early onset of sexual activity (Kiernan and Hobcraft, 1997; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Coppola, 2003; Ongaro, 2004) and leaving home (De Singly, Cicchelli e Cicchelli, 2003), an higher propensity of cohabiting (Kiernan, 2002) and of divorcing (Diekmann e Schmidheiny, 2002). In addition, Rodgers e Pryor (1998), have shown that children of separated parents are more prone to depression, drug and alcohol addiction, and outrageous behaviours.

Albeit large, in such a literature there is lack of information on the impact the parental separation exerts on values, attitudes and norms, i. e. all those immaterial elements which play an important role in determining the identity of young people.

Therefore, this work focuses on the consequences of parental separation on these immaterial elements. Two issues are encountered when implementing such an analysis: first, a measurement issue, depending on the abstractness and multi-dimensionality of values, norms and identity of individuals. For this issue a proper dataset collecting information on most of the encapsulated dimensions of individuals' attitudes is needed. The second issue is to single out the real effect of parental separation, netting out the spurious effect of background family characteristics. Here the data from the sixth survey, conducted by IARD Institute, on conditions of young individuals in Italy in 2004 is used. In this survey, respondents are asked on several domains of values, norms, and attitudes providing us with a lot of information on these aspects. Using this data, we try to singe out the effect of parental separation using a propensity score matching technique, which take into account the spurious effect of observed background characteristics.

2. Theoretical framework

Figure 1 shows a scheme exposing how parental separation is related with life course and attitudes of children. First of all, marital dissolution is influenced by some of the background characteristics of the couple, which also affects both the values, norms and identities of their children and their life courses. Therefore, these characteristics should be controlled for in order to single out the effect of separation only.

In addition, there is a direct effect of parental separation on children attitudes and a mediated one passing through their life courses. For example, parental separation can enhance wariness of marriage as a longlife institution by children, and this is a *direct* effect. There is a *mediated* effect if, for example, parental separation increases the probability of children to leave home earlier and an early leaving home is possibly associated with other experiences (e. g. early pregnancies) which, in turn, may alter individuals' views of life.

Another point of interest is that the attitudes of young adults are both the cause and consequence of their life course: on one hand, experiencing a particular life course event may influence the value orientation of individuals, e.g. experiencing a cohabitation may influence their attitude towards cohabitation. On the other hand, attitudes towards life course events influences the propensity of undergoing them. This feature hinders empirical analysis, as a distinction between the effects of life course on attitudes and the effects of attitudes on life course is not easy. We will not try to make such a distinction, so that the focus is on the total effect of parental separation, i. e. the sum of direct and indirect effects, but we will bear in mind it when interpreting the results.

Figure 1: conceptual scheme representing the way children's attitudes are affected by parental separation.
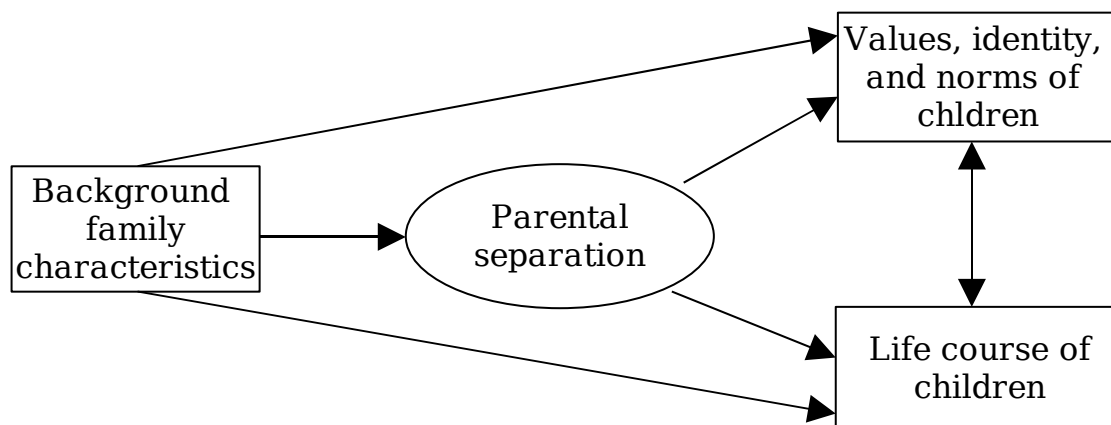
3. Methods

In order to measure the impact of parental separation on children's attitudes, we implement a propensity score matching technique to control for individuals' background confounding characteristics. This method, first proposed by Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983), 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 basis of observed covariates. Several matching methods are suggested in the literature (see Smith and Todd, 2005, for a review of them). We use here the approach proposed by Diamond and Sekhon (2005), which applies a genetic algorithm to optimise the balance between covariates of treated subjects (those who underwent parental split) and controls (those who did not). In this way, we can estimate a parameter, generally referred to as Average Treatment Effect on Treated (ATET). Basically, ATET is the difference between the average value of outcome of treated subjects and the average value of outcome of the same subjects had they not undergone the treatment, conditional to values of covariates X. In the equation:

$$ATET = E\left(Y_1 - Y_0; D = 1, X\right) \qquad (1)$$

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

Selecting covariates X to condition on is the most crucial part of this estimation strategy, since the matching technique relies on the *Conditional Independence Assumption* (CIA), i.e., it is assumed that any sources of bias is contained in X, thus ruling out bias due to unobserved variables. Therefore we need to include the most relevant covariates in the model. In this case, cohort, education attainment, region of residence, dimension of place of residence (based on number of inhabitants), educational level of parents, activity status of parents, and number of siblings.

4. Data

We use data from the sixth survey, conducted by IARD institute, on conditions of young individuals in Italy in 2004. The survey collected information among a nationally representative sample of about 3000 young individuals born between 1970 and 1989. The analysis we make is restricted to 1889 respondents with age 15-29, 143 of them have separated or divorced parents. The data set offers a very rich range of items on values, norms, attitudes of respondents, which have been classified into 5 dimensions:

- *Values:* this set of items regards the aspirations that reflects the perceived needs of individuals. These items are grouped into several life domains: affectivity, tradition, the political and social commitment, achievement, self-fulfillment, leisure time
- *Norms:* in this set of items young individuals are asked on the admissibility of several behaviours and whether they are likely to undertake such behaviours. These items are grouped into five types of behaviours: illegal actions, drugs and alcohol abuse, the life as a couple, sexual behaviours, and ethical issues
- *Cultural aspects:* this dimension includes some typical post-modern attitudes. Here we consider, what we call, *presentism,* i. e. the attitude of avoiding any kind of planning of future life and focusing only on the present, and *choice reversibility*, i. e. the attitude of avoiding life-long choices in favour of reversible choices

- *Identity and personality:* this dimension includes several traits of individuals' character and personality: level of insecurity, anxiety, relational ability, life satisfaction, and coping ability.
- *Life as a couple and gender roles:* this dimension includes opinions on cohabitation, on the elements that are considered important for a good life as a couple, and the gender roles.

All these items are recorded with a five-point scale – ranging from "not important at all" to "very important" in some cases and from "not at all" to "a lot" in others – and need to be transformed into a proper numeric index in order to implement the analysis. This is done in several ways over the five dimensions we identified. In the *values* dimension we simply create two dummies for each item, i. e. a dummy variable for having answered that the proposed value is "very important" and another dummy for having answered that the proposed value is "not very important" or "not at all important". The effect of parental separation is measured on these dummies, and results are reported in Table 1. In reading Table 1, it should be borne in mind that the first three columns refer to the dummy of considering not very important or not at all important the proposed value, whereas the last three columns refer to dummy of considering very important the proposed value. For example, in the first column the effect on item "family" is 0.012 (first column) and -0.073 (fourth column) meaning that parental separation makes the proportion of those considering family a not very important value (or not at all) increase by 1.2% and the proportion of those considering it a very important value decrease by 7.3%.

In the second dimension (norms) we created five synthetic indices for each domain. Each index has been created with a two step procedure: in the first step the variable has been transformed by assigning to each value of the scale the value of empirical distribution function

$$\tilde{Y}_i = F_n(Y_i) = \frac{1}{n}\sum I(y_i \leq Y_i) \tag{2}$$

In this way $\tilde{Y}$ is still a variable with five values, but the distance between different values is not uniform and depends on the prevalence of each modality. The second step consists of aggregating the (transformed) items into a single index. This is done by averaging the items belonging to the same domain. These items are not equally weighted but each one is given a weight proportional to the coefficient of variation. In this way, we give a larger weight to items for which the proportion of those consider the proposed behaviour allowable is lower, i. e. a larger weight is given to more unconventional opinions. The effect of parental separation on these indices is reported in Table 2.

In the third dimension (cultural views) we have a "presentism" index, which was constructed with the same two-step procedure used for indices in the norms dimension, and a "choice reversibility" index, which is made up of a single item, where respondents are asked to choose among two sentences: "Neither the most important choices are "forever", you can always change your mind" and "In life there are moments when make decisions from which you cannot turn back". Results for this dimension are reported in Table 3.

In the fourth dimension (personality) we use the same approach used in the first one, i. e. we construct two dummies for each item (one for low agreement of the proposed sentence, and another one for high agreement). Results for these items are reported in Table 4. In Table 5 we find results for indices of

satisfaction and of coping ability. Satisfaction items are measured with a five-point scale, whereas coping ability items are measured with ten-points scale. The indices of Table 5 are computed in the same way we have done for the indices of norms dimension.

In the last dimension (life as a couple and gender roles) we have several elements of life as a couple which importance respondents are asked to rate, with a five-point scale. After having rescaled the variables using equation (2), computed the relative weight of each one through equation

$$RW(\tilde{Y}_{ij}) = \frac{\tilde{Y}_{ij} \cdot w_j}{\sum_j \tilde{Y}_{ij} \cdot w_j} \tag{3}$$

where $\tilde{Y}_{ij}$ is the value of (rescaled) item j for subject i, and w_j is the weight given to item j. In this way the variable computed in (3) gives the relative importance of item j in the total sum of scores of all items.

As far as gender roles views are concerned we computed a "gender bias" index summarizing seven items measuring agreement towards seven genderized opinions. The synthetic index has been constructed with the same procedure used for norms indices, and results are reported in Table 6.

5. Results and discussion

The results of propensity score matching estimates give us a detailed picture of the effects of parental separation on children's attitudes.

For the first dimension, we find that children of separated parents are more oriented towards individualistic and achievement values, giving higher importance to career, earnings and less to family, love, religion, social commitment, respecting rules, public order, and education. It seems that traditional values are less attractive to them, especially when related with any authority.

Table 1 – Effect of parental separation on children's values[1]

	"NOT VERY" OR "NOT AT ALL" IMPORTANT			"VERY IMPORTANT"		
	Effect	St. Err.	t-value	Effect	St. Err.	t-value
affective values						
family	0,012	0,015	0,794	-0,073	0,044	-1,659*
love	0,036	0,017	2,088**	-0,010	0,049	-0,207
friendship	0,006	0,014	0,435	0,017	0,043	0,398
achievement values						
career	0,023	0,043	0,527	0,119	0,052	2,288**
social prestige	0,125	0,050	2,516**	-0,001	0,044	-0,023
earning a lot	-0,025	0,046	-0,558	0,084	0,051	1,648*
physical beauty	0,006	0,052	0,109	0,043	0,043	1,012
economic well-being	0,001	0,034	0,024	0,069	0,056	1,238
social commitment values						
political activity	-0,004	0,051	-0,076	0,027	0,030	0,903
social commitment	0,050	0,046	1,088	-0,101	0,047	-2,172**
solidarity	0,003	0,031	0,098	-0,049	0,053	-0,932
democracy	0,046	0,027	1,691*	-0,042	0,053	-0,796

1 Here and in the following tables: * p-value <0.10, ** p-value <0.05, *** p-value<0.01

	"NOT VERY" OR "NOT AT ALL" IMPORTANT			"VERY IMPORTANT"		
peace	-0,001	0,015	-0,079	-0,056	0,045	-1,235
traditional values						
religion*				-0,114	0,051	-2,263**
country	0,029	0,054	0,534	-0,052	0,044	-1,178
public order	0,055	0,031	1,769	-0,128	0,052	-2,493**
respect of rules	0,005	0,029	0,169	-0,128	0,054	-2,366**
self-fulfillment values						
work	0,039	0,021	1,902	-0,009	0,052	-0,183
education	0,043	0,026	1,655*	0,028	0,054	0,532
cultural interests	0,027	0,033	0,819	-0,017	0,058	-0,291
self-fulfillment	0,015	0,020	0,733	0,015	0,053	0,287
leisure time values						
leisure time	-0,004	0,027	-0,152	-0,013	0,055	-0,237
sport	0,027	0,045	0,598	-0,063	0,052	-1,208
fun	0,028	0,017	1,714*	0,037	0,053	0,696

* The question posed to respondents was: "How much important is religion?". Effect on the quota of those who answered "fairly important" or "very important"

As far as norms are concerned, results show that children of separated parents are more tolerant with behaviours generally considered outrageous or even illegal. This higher tolerance is constant throughout all the considered domains: sexuality, life as a couple, ethical issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and illegal actions. Only for the latter domain the effect of parental separation is rather weak, whereas it is very strong for the others.

Table 2 – Effect of parental separation on children's norms (synthetic indices)

	DEEM IT ALLOWABLE			MIGHT HAPPEN		
	Effect	*St. Err.*	*t-value*	*Effect*	*St. Err.*	*t-value*
Sexuality	0,057	0,021	2,657***	0,041	0,025	1,660*
Life as a couple	0,114	0,031	3,675***	0,152	0,034	4,451***
Ethical questions	0,109	0,046	2,347**	0,079	0,043	1,832*
Drug and alcohol abuse	0,095	0,028	3,393***	0,093	0,032	2,906***
Illegal actions	0,052	0,029	1,775*	0,004	0,031	0,142

Our estimates do not show any effect of parental separation on the cultural outcomes considered here. In particular, there is no evidence of a higher degree of *presentism* nor of a higher preference of reversible choices among children of separated parents.

Table 3 – Effect of parental separation on children's cultural views (* synthetic index)

	Effect	*St. Err.*	*t-value*
Presentism *	0,002	0,025	0,068
Choice reversibility	-0,013	0,073	-0,171

We have more interesting results in the dimension of identity and personality. For example, it emerges that children of uncoupled parents are less satisfied with their life. They also report a lower ability of controlling their emotions and of establishing relations with others. Despite of this, they do not report lower coping ability.

Table 4 – Effect of parental separation on children's personality

	NOT MUCH OR NOT AT ALL			A LOT		
	Effect	St. Err.	t-value	Effect	St. Err.	t-value
security/insecurity						
I'm often frightened	0,051	0,047	1,082	0,015	0,016	0,928
I devote myself to what I believe in	0,009	0,033	0,275	-0,031	0,054	-0,569
I take the decisions for my own life	0,065	0,036	1,816*	0,017	0,052	0,324
I'm afraid of criticism	-0,025	0,050	-0,502	-0,024	0,029	-0,843
I don't get discouraged	0,039	0,044	0,901	-0,003	0,042	-0,073
I'm able to express my feelings	0,112	0,041	2,712***	-0,050	0,047	-1,056
I take offense at criticism	-0,059	0,060	-0,982	0,044	0,034	1,286
anxiety/stress/emotional control						
I feel sad	-0,116	0,048	-2,410**	0,015	0,024	0,628
Sometimes I loose my reason	-0,030	0,052	-0,572	0,073	0,026	2,837***
I feel confused and/or in anxiety	-0,039	0,049	-0,798	0,033	0,027	1,248
When someone makes me loose my temper, I take it easy	0,058	0,057	1,018	-0,038	0,036	-1,057
flexibility/rigidity						
I'm tolerant with opinions different from mine	0,048	0,044	1,102	-0,005	0,044	-0,114
responsibility						
I avoid responsibilities	-0,033	0,047	-0,703	0,015	0,019	0,794
Nothing is worth devoting oneself to	-0,008	0,039	-0,199	-0,015	0,013	-1,173
relazionalità						
When I'm in troubles, there is always someone to count on	0,030	0,038	0,804	-0,014	0,053	-0,255
I feel esteemed	0,027	0,041	0,668	0,008	0,044	0,181
I'm able to expose my ideas	0,122	0,039	3,116***	0,027	0,043	0,631
I have something in common with my peers	0,088	0,052	1,696*	-0,002	0,031	-0,066
satisfaction/dissatisfaction						
I feel bored	-0,012	0,051	-0,229	0,006	0,022	0,273
I feel happy	0,108	0,042	2,571**	-0,063	0,044	-1,435
I'm satisfied with my life	0,061	0,037	1,644*	-0,114	0,046	-2,451**

Table 5 – Effect of parental separation on children's satisfaction and coping ability (synthetic indices)

	Effect	St. Err.	t-value
Index of satisfaction with			
health	-0,075	0,029	-2,595***
psychological well-being	-0,087	0,029	-2,984***
economic well-being	-0,076	0,027	-2,789***
social relations	-0,069	0,025	-2,727***
Indices of coping strategies			
rational approach	-0,044	0,034	-1,287
emotional approach	0,031	0,023	1,318

Finally, we don not find any significant effect of parental separation on personal views of gender roles, but we do find effects on personal views on life as a couple. Interestingly, children of separated parents give higher importance, for a successful relationship, to sexual understanding and lower importance to fidelity.

Table 6 – Effect of parental separation on children's view of life as a couple and gender roles

	Effect	St. Err.	t-value
Which aspect is more important for a couple (relative contribution)			

	Effect	St. Err.	t-value
common values	0,002	0,005	0,376
mutual understanding	-0,002	0,005	-0,378
respect	-0,005	0,005	-0,966
sexual understanding	0,010	0,005	2,081**
economic independence	0,006	0,004	1,426
same education level	0,005	0,005	1,095
communication	-0,001	0,005	-0,274
fidelity	-0,018	0,006	-3,030***
common friends	-0,004	0,005	-0,706
common interests	0,001	0,005	0,185
common feelings	0,006	0,005	1,118
in favour of cohabitation	0,160	0,053	2,994***
"gender bias" index*	0,005	0,017	0,266

Summarizing, children of separated parents have a more individualistic and less idealistic view of life. This makes them more attracted from achievement values (career, earnings) rather than familistic ones. This is confirmed also by the different views of a successful couple with respect to children of intact families: children having undergone a parental separation are more likely to give higher importance to sexual understanding and less to fidelity. Another interesting feature, is the higher tolerance of generally considered outrageous behaviours by children of uncoupled parents. This higher tolerance is likely to be related with a general wariness of authorities. Such a wariness is reflected by the low importance given to values such as "respect of rules", "religion", and "public order". However, this wariness of authorities does not imply that children of separated couples are more independent and autonomous. Conversely, they report a lower satisfaction on several life domains, with less ability of controlling their emotions and of establishing relations with others. Therefore, it appears that parental separations destabilize several certainties in the life of children, a destabilization that makes them frailer and more dissatisfied.

The analysis outlined here need some refinements, especially on the side of definition and measurement of values, norms and identity of young adults. The dimensions identified here present some redundancies and some indices can be improved. In addition, we would like to harmonize the indices used for analysis, which lacks of homogeneity. Despite of this issues, and even though there is room for improvements, the evidence emerging from the present work does show that parental separations significantly alter the opinions, values and identities of children.

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