

**Living apart together at parents home (LATAP): a Mediterranean route to
adulthood**

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Short Abstract

Demographic research defines the transition to union primarily on the base of legal acts or residential moves. The exception, represented by the recent focus on unmarried couples living apart together, has however been discussed only for individuals who left the parental home. This paper defines a new type of couple living arrangement, “living apart together at parents’ home” (LATAP), concerning individuals in a couple relationship, who have not left the parental home. Drawing on a large set of 75 semi-structured interviews collected in Italy in 2005-6, we specify the events marking the transition to LATAP and how LATAP shape the timing and forms of subsequent co-residential partnerships. By explicitly defining LATAP, we put attention on a living arrangement which is not only common (even though neglected by current statistics) but also key to understand union dynamics in countries with high shares of long-lasting co-residence between parents and children.

Extended abstract

Introduction

Life course transitions and the events marking the passage from one stage to the other are a matter of definition. Some of these definitions are institution-dependent, marked by residential, vital, or legal events (e.g descent, co-residence, marriage, adoption). Some definitions are relation-dependent (e.g. intimate relationships, social networks, care and support). When we rely on relation-dependant definitions, the timing of transitions is fluid and its definition is rather based on interdependent subjective evaluations. We propose to rethink our conceptualization of “entering a union” as a relation-dependent transitions. This conceptual step carries along two major implications for our measurement of union dynamics.

First, this implies that *entering a union is a transition that can begin before cohabitation*. In studying unions, we often look at people who pass from one living arrangement (living alone, at parents’ home, sharing with peers, or living with a different partner) to a co-residential partnership; yet we rarely look at what defines the couple before this residential transition. However in several contexts, the gap between the moment in which the partners form a couple and the moment in which they move in together is of several years. Research has addressed this issue only in the case of men and women defining themselves as being in a relationship but having chosen to maintain independent households (Villeneuve-Gokalp 1997, Levin 2004, Haskey

2006); virtually no research has been done on individuals defining themselves as being in a relationship but not having left their family of origin.

Second, *entering a union is a transition that can involve third actors beyond the partners*. It is often assumed that in post-industrial societies partners control to a great extent their transition to couplehood. They are the ones to decide when their transition begins, what statuses they will pass through (e.g. the exclusivity of the relationship, the frequency of contacts, the common activities, the level of social exposure, whether having children together, etc...) and how much time they will spend in each state. Drawing on the idea of interlinked lives (Elder 2003, MacMillan and Copher 2005), we challenge this assumption by arguing that the timing of this process is also defined by the social recognition of the couple. Even when union formation does not create legal or formal obligations between the partners' families it almost always means creating affective and moral bonds with them. As being involved in the process partners' relatives may acknowledge, ignore, support, resist, being excluded by, or even deny a new couple. They may do it on the basis of affection, interest, values, and commitment.

We focus on the typical southern European version of living apart together, that is a union status characterizing young adults who enter a steady relationships and form couples before cohabiting while co-residing with their own parents. Co-residence with parents makes the choice of a partner a relationally dense choice due to the frequent exposure to relevant others' expectations, evaluations, and behavior towards the new forming couple. This situation is far from rare in the Mediterranean countries where young adults between 20 and 30 are likely to experience long lasting couple relationships while living each at their parents'.

The parental home as context for couple formation in Italy

Independent living before age 30 and often until age 35 is far from common in the Mediterranean countries so that it is common that young adults experience long lasting intimate relationships while living separately at their parents'. The prolonged co-residence of parents and children is rooted in the local family culture and persists under changed economic and social conditions. In Italy, young adults stay at parents' home longer and longer, well after the end of education in their late twenties and mid thirties and the great majority of them leave home only when marrying (De Rose et al 2008). This pattern seems to be a shadow of past, a culture-dependent answer to the growing uncertainty in employment and housing conditions, originating in the late-home-leaving tradition which historically distinguished Southern European regions from continental and Scandinavian Europe (Barbagli 2003, Reher 1998, Jones 1995). The perception of both parents and children is often that this practice increases their chances of social success or at least some certainty in adult life (Menniti et al. 2000). In Italy, where labor market entry is hard and social infrastructures weak for young adults, family solidarity provides protection for individuals and a private substitute for public social security. In particular, downward intergenerational transfers of resources are crucial. Comparative studies on intergenerational transfers have shown not only that adult children in Italy receive "much higher proportions of support, higher than those in the Continental and Nordic countries" but also that "co-residence is *the* Southern European way of transferring resources from parents to children and vice versa". (Albertini et al 2007:17).

As a number of quantitative and qualitative and ethnographic studies show, parents and adult children relationships evolved in the direction of losing much of the hierarchical characteristics they used to have in the past; in contemporary families self-realization, self-expression, and autonomy of children are encouraged and supported (Allegra, 2002, Facchini 2002). Paths of emancipation and individualization are built within the frame of strong networks of family solidarity. Middle class parents are ready not only to agree on most of their children's educational, vocational, and partnering choices, but also to invest personal and familiar resources to make them possible (Oppo and Ferrara 2005).

In this context young adults enter in long-lasting intimate relationships much before leaving their parental home. The only available recent nationally representative large scale data on non co-residential intimate relationships in Italy show that most of adult children living with parents engage in committing intimate relationships while living at their parents' home, as their age mates in other parts of Europe do after having already left the parental home. According to the most recent ISTAT data, the duration of pre-cohabiting engagements in Italy has been steadily growing in the last cohorts: averagely it lasts 5 years for the marriage cohort of 1993 (ISTAT, 2006) which means that a considerable part of these relationships last ten years or more¹. We argue for the necessity to distinguish these kinds of unions as specific living arrangements different from those of singles living at parents home, from couples living in co-residential unions and from LAT relationships. In order to do that, we name these living arrangements living apart together at parents' home, or LATAP.

During LATAP relationships young adults' family membership is multiple: they are simultaneously children and siblings in their family of origin, they are partners in the new intimate relationship, and they are children's partners for the partner's family of origin. In this life stage affective and economic bonds are created also with the partner's parents and siblings; similarly conflicts and divergences may emerge with them. The process that binds individuals in families, made of negotiations between family obligations and family bonding, inner and outer constraints, values and identity is the context which define LATAP relationships. We focus on this context to identify the events which can be used as transition markers for LATAP and the major characteristics of a LATAP relationship. We then discuss the role of LATAP relationships in defining subsequent union transitions.

Data and methods

We rely here on a qualitative study carried out with women aged 20-45 in southern Italy. The analysis is based on 75 qualitative narrative interview data and collected between 2005 and 2006. In one fourth of the cases we have interviewed also the woman's current partner, if she was cohabiting, and the woman's mother. All interviews contains a detailed subjective reconstruction of the respondents' life course development from adolescence to adulthood, of the respondents' family of origin and peers' group, with attention to major events and transitions related to employment,

¹ Unfortunately ISTAT data on pre – co-residential unions have been collected only with relation to unions still existing at the moment of the interview therefore.

partnerships and unions, and family formation.² Women were resident in the two cities of Cagliari and Napoli in southern Italy and they were selected through personal contacts gained by a complex indirect snowballing procedure with multiple entry (independently selected initial contacts) to avoid a clustered sample. Interviewers were trained anthropologists with whom the authors regularly interacted before and during the fieldwork over a two-year period.

The sample includes substantial variation in respondents' ages, social background characteristics, education, employment, couple and parity statuses, as well as the kinds of living arrangements. A summary of the main distribution of these characteristics is given in the first half of Table 1 in the Appendix. Of the 34 women who are still living with their parents (10 only with their separated mother or with siblings) at the moment of the interview 20 are engaged, only 5 were never engaged, while the remaining 10 were engaged but had more or less recently broken up with their partner. The distribution of the absolute number of relationships and of their durations (second half of Table 1) shows that the sample covers an important range of engagement experiences.

An important feature of this dataset is the rare information on intimate relationships developing in living-apart-together-at-parents home residential arrangements. The analysis is based on interpretative content analysis of their narratives. We employ the initial concepts of partnership and coupling as orientation concepts to search for the sequences in the narrations in which the interviewees reconstruct their partnership biographies and their phases until they move out of their parental home. Particularly, we focus on the *social birth* of a couple, the transition from the status of an intimate relationship involving exclusively the partners to a socially recognized couple embedded in a larger net of relationships.

Brief summary of the findings

In this paper we introduce the concept of LATAP (living apart together at parents' home) and analyze the boundaries and markers which makes it a distinguished living arrangement. Entering a union by a long-term commitment based on long lasting pre-cohabitation intimate relationships while living at parents' home is part of the union formation practice in contemporary Italy. Values, norms, processes, and practices about the way in which partners become recognized as a couple in the larger group of relatives, structure such practices. We identify three stages in this process - the couple encounter, the couple recognition, and the couple project - and we could identify specific markers of the transitions between these stages - the disclosure of the relationship to parents and siblings, the participation in the partner's family events and routines, the pooling of economic and investments resources.

² The interviews were collected within the frame of a larger research project (ELFI: Explaining Low Fertility in Italy) supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R01 HD048715) and the National Science Foundation (BCS 0418443). For more information about the project see: <http://www.demogr.mpg.de/general/structure/division2/irg-cr/152.html>

At each stage of the coupling process preferences, commitment, and compromises (mainly involving parents but also siblings and peers) are present. From the moment of disclosure, the existing family configuration is interrogated and the position of the new member in it needs to be defined. Couples in the project-oriented stage are enmeshed in the families of origin and perceived as a unit in anticipation of the new nuclear family that they promise to become. Actors involved in these transitions share the meaning of the mentioned markers (though with differences according to the socio-educational groups). We show how the timing of the transitions is partially defined by the two partners and partially dependent on others' reception of the intimate partnership.

Actual partnerships may take a variety of shapes and may be relatively discordant or unhappy. The coupling process may not be realized, and long lasting pre-cohabiting relationships never make it to the final residential or legal step that sanctions the transition to union. One third of the women in our sample report having had more than one serious relationship, where "serious" is generally an attribute used for relationships which are certainly well advanced in the phase of disclosure and often already in the project phase. The previous relationships broke up and with it also the project and the expectations, of both the partners and of the relevant others who participated in various degrees to the process of couple formation. The more advanced the process was, the longer the duration of the relationship, the higher the affective and material investment of partners and relatives, the more concrete the expectations during the process, the larger the disappointment is at the moment of breaking up.

We show how LATAP partnerships are key to understand the individual's subsequent union history by modulating its timing and its relational context. LATAP intensity, timing, and duration are likely to correlate to subsequent co-residential union dynamics. Collecting large scale representative data on LATAP histories is crucial to the understanding of union and family dynamics in context where parents and adult children co-residence is common and long lasting and to make sensible cross-countries comparisons of union dynamics across Europe.

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Appendix

Table 1. Selected characteristics of the sample

Selected characteristics of the woman	Number of women (N=75)	
<i>Social class (a)</i>	Low class	39
	Middle class	32
	Bourgeoisie	4
<i>Level of education</i>	Compulsory (up to 14)	10
	Highschool	30
	Student	9
	University	23
	Post University	3
<i>Couple status at the moment of the interview</i>	Single	16
	Engaged	18
	Cohabiting	8
	Married	30
	Separated/divorced	3
<i>Employment status at the moment of the interview</i>	Housewife	6
	Unemployed	5
	Jobbing	9
	Employed	46
	Student	9
<i>Number of children</i>	0	38
	pregnant	5
	1	17
	2 or more	15
<i>Age at the moment of the interview</i>	20-25	15
	26-30	17
	31-35	19
	36-40	13
	40 and more	11
Selected characteristic of engagements		
<i>Age at first engagement</i>	up to 15	15
	16-20	33
	21-25	10
	miss	12
	never (b)	5
<i>Duration of the first engagement (c)</i>	up to 3	8
	4-5	7
	6-9	6
	10 or more	8
	miss	44
	never	2
<i>Number of important relationships</i>	0	5
	1	37
	2	16
	2 or more	17
<i>Duration of the last engagement</i>	up to 3	24
	4-5	14
	6-9	11
	10 or more	17
	miss	4
	never	5

a) This is a rough indicator about the woman's family of origin based on her parents professions and education

b) *Never* includes women who declare never having had a relationship

c) Information available only for one city

d) It includes only the period before cohabitation / marriage