

Reproductive behaviour of women experiencing marital disruption: findings from a Mediterranean country

Silvia Meggiolaro*, Fausta Ongaro*,

*Department of Statistics, University of Padova, Via C. Battisti 241, 35121 Padova, Italy

e-mail: meg@stat.unipd.it, ongaro@stat.unipd.it

1. Introduction

Since marital instability began to increase in the 1970s in Europe, scholars have devoted growing interest in their implications for women's fertility. A significant number of women are spending, indeed, some proportion of their life in a "post-dissolution" state. In the last decade, several empirical studies have analysed this topic, but until now there has been no highly focused picture of the matter. The difficulty of acquiring adequate data as well the difficulty of adequately keeping under control both the complex interactions between fertility and union history and the numerous confounding factors do not make easy the investigations on this topic..

This paper has two main aims. The first one studies which women have a greater likelihood of having a/another child after marital dissolution: in this analysis, particular attention is paid to the impact of some life-course factors connected with the experience of separation, that is, the woman's status at marital dissolution (age and children) and union career following marital dissolution (see, for example, Vikat *et al.*, 1999 and Jefferies *et al.*, 2000). The second examines the overall effect of union dissolution on fertility, considering the various factors at stake. The main question in this case is whether or not marital instability is a lowering factor to women's fertility (Lesthaeghe and Moors, 1994; Billari, 2004; Leone and Hinde, 2007).

Existing research uses American or Northern European data. In this work we use data from Italy, a Mediterranean country, where marital instability is relatively recent, but also rapidly growing (Istat, 2007). How marital instability influences fertility behaviour is a crucial theme for Italy, as it is characterised by very low fertility levels: the diffusion of marital instability could be an additional factor of reduction of country fertility. In addition, as Italy shares specific family and reproductive behaviours with other Southern European countries (which are undergoing a delayed but relatively autonomous convergence towards new family forms), this is one of the first studies to shed light on how marital instability interacts with reproductive behaviour in the Mediterranean area.

The availability of data from the survey "Family and Social Subjects", conducted in Italy by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) in 2003, allows us to investigate both these aspects for a sample of women representative at national level.

2. The determinants of having a child after marital separation

Fertility behaviour after the first marital dissolution is analysed focusing on separated women aged 25-64 at the interview and aged under 40 at the separation (633 observations). Descriptive analyses show that the end of the first marriage is not the end of a woman's reproductive history: as many as 21% of women who broke up their first marriage by the age of 30 had (at least) a birth within the five years following marital dissolution, and this figure reaches 32% if the years become ten.

Table 1 lists the results of event history analysis models (piecewise exponential models, Blossfeld and Rohwer, 2002) estimating the risk of having a child after separation, according to different sets of explanatory variables. The results show that the factors most strongly associated with the risk of a post-dissolution birth are both the number and ages of a woman's children and her repartnering behaviour. As expected, women who enter a second union are more likely to have a child than those who do not repartner. Remarried women are the most likely to have a child; however, interestingly for a country like Italy with a low percentage of out of wedlock births, cohabitation is highly

associated with the likelihood of childbearing too. As regards parity, globally, it is negatively associated with further childbearing, but this relationship becomes weaker as the youngest child at separation is six or over (the lowest risk of childbearing is observed for women with two or more children and at least one under six). Then, the effect of parity changes according to the presence or not of babies among children. As regards the background variables, it should be noted that the woman's birth cohort have weak effect, whereas a strong negative effect of employed status is found.

Table 1. Piecewise exponential models of time to childbearing for women experiencing marital disruption.

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
<i>Period 1: < 2 years</i>	-4.83***	-4.83***	-4.76***	-3.61***
<i>Period 2: 3 - 5 years</i>	-4.46***	-4.56***	-4.69***	-3.45***
<i>Period 3: 5 - 9 years</i>	-4.46***	-4.67***	-4.89***	-3.63***
<i>Period 4: > 9 years</i>	-5.58***	-5.86***	-6.01***	-4.65***
<i>Age at separation</i> (ref: 35-39)				
<i>Under 30</i>	1.87***	1.85***	1.16**	0.93*
<i>30-34 years</i>	0.99**	0.99**	0.69	0.63
<i>Presence of cohabiting children</i> (ref: 0)				
<i>1 child under 6</i>	-0.78***	-0.76***	-0.68***	-0.73***
<i>1 child over 6</i>	-0.52*	-0.49	-0.43	-0.55*
<i>2 or more children, with at least one under 6</i>	-1.91***	-1.83***	-1.26***	-1.40***
<i>2 or more children, over 6</i>	-0.57	-0.55	-0.60	-0.84*
<i>Experience of divorce</i> ‡ (ref: no)				
<i>Yes</i>		0.43*	-0.19	-0.14
<i>Repartnering in reproductive age</i> ‡ (ref: no)				
<i>Yes</i>			1.87***	1.92***
<i>Remarriage in reproductive age</i> ‡ (ref: no)				
<i>Yes</i>			0.81**	0.81**
<i>Birth cohort</i> (ref: after 1960)				
<i>Until 1960</i>				-0.39*
<i>Residence region</i> (ref: South)				
<i>North</i>				-0.32
<i>Centre</i>				-0.62*
<i>Educational level</i> (ref: low)				
<i>Middle-high</i>				-0.05
<i>Employment status</i> ‡ (ref: not employed)				
<i>Employed</i>				-0.85***

‡ Time-varying variables. * = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .01$

3. The effect of marital instability on woman's fertility

To analyse the effect of separation on fertility, we consider the women aged 25-64 at the interview who are not widowed and who were less than 40 at their first marriage¹: this leads to focus on 10,567 women. Of these, 829 have experienced (at least) the de facto separation by the interview, the others being still in intact marriages.

A first descriptive analysis (here not presented) shows that, in each marriage cohort, women undergoing marital dissolution have fewer children than women who are still married at interview, and this is true at any duration (in completed years) from the marriage. However, these differences do not take into account several factors. A Poisson regression model (Cameron, Trivedi, 1998) was used to estimate the impact of separation on a woman's cumulated fertility (up to age at interview),

¹ To avoid to consider marriages who are most spent in non reproductive ages.

controlling for the effects of potential disturbance factors. Our main explanatory covariate is the union biography of the respondent up to interview, which considers not only the separation and entry into a new union, but also whether both separated persons entered into a second union, and whether the second union was spent in reproductive age. Besides background variables, the “exposure” time, that is the time in reproductive ages (18-39 years) spent within an union (first marriage or second unions), is considered.

Table 2 reports the results of the main four Poisson regression models².

Table 2. Coefficients of determinants of cumulated fertility according to Poisson regression models.

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
<i>Scale parameter</i>	0.72	0.69	0.67	0.66
<i>Intercept</i>	0.75***	0.85***	0.45***	0.16***
<i>Age at interview (ref: over 50)</i>				
<i>Under 34</i>	-0.58***	-0.54***	-0.52***	-0.19***
<i>35-39</i>	-0.23***	-0.19***	-0.15***	-0.08***
<i>40-49</i>	-0.12***	-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.09***
<i>Age at first marriage (ref: over 30)</i>				
<i>Under 25</i>			0.47***	0.06**
<i>25-29</i>			0.29***	0.08***
<i>Residence region (ref: South)</i>				
<i>North</i>		-0.19***	-0.19***	-0.19***
<i>Centre</i>		-0.18***	-0.18***	-0.17***
<i>Educational level (ref: low)</i>				
<i>High</i>		-0.19***	-0.05**	-0.01
<i>Middle</i>		-0.12***	-0.07***	-0.04***
<i>Employment status at first marriage (ref: not employed)</i>				
<i>Employed</i>		-0.12***	-0.09***	-0.07***
<i>Presence of separated parents (ref: no)</i>				
<i>Yes</i>		0.02	0.01	0.03
<i>Siblings (ref: 2 or more)</i>				
<i>0</i>		-0.16***	-0.16***	-0.16***
<i>1</i>		-0.11***	-0.10***	-0.10***
<i>Ceremony of first marriage (ref: Religious)</i>				
<i>Civil</i>		-0.04**	0.01	0.02
<i>Years in reproductive age spent within a union</i>				0.04***
<i>Experience of separation and of a second union (ref: no ‡)</i>				
<i>Separation under 40, no second union in reprod. age</i>	-0.33***	-0.28***	-0.29***	-0.11***
<i>Separation under 40, second union in reprod. age (<40)</i>	-0.16***	-0.08*	-0.15***	-0.04

‡ Time-varying variables. * = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .01$

When only age at interview is controlled for, women undergoing marital separation have, on average, fewer children than those still in first marriage or with separation at a relatively older age (model 1). Taking into account women’s background characteristics, the depressing effect of separation on fertility decreases, thus suggesting that the separated women are a selected population with respect to other factors influencing fertility (model 2). When we add the age at first marriage the depressing effect of separation followed by a union in fertile age again becomes higher (model 3): this means that separated women with a second union in reproductive age are characterized by younger ages at first marriage than those with no union after marital dissolution. Model 4 shows that, when the reproductive time spent within an union is taken into account, women who have a second union during fertile age have the same cumulated fertility as those with intact first marriages.

² We include a scale parameter to correct the lack of efficiency due to overdispersion.

4. Conclusions

This paper has investigated the reproductive behaviour of Italian women who underwent a marital dissolution, using data updated to 2003. Two aspects have been analyzed: the demographic determinants of childbearing after separation; the effect of marital disruption on women's cumulated fertility.

As regards the first aspect, the results of event history analysis models show that after having controlled for repartnering, parity has an impact, but its effect interacts with the age of children. There is thus no clear support for the hypothesis that (step) couples desire a joint child irrespective of parity (Vikat *et al.*, 1999).

As regards the second aspect, we noted that the effect of union dissolution on the cumulated fertility is differentiated according to the woman's subsequent repartnering history. Separated women who do not have undergone a repartnering in reproductive age have indeed a lower fertility than women in intact first marriage; but the negative effect of separation on cumulated fertility decreases a lot if a woman experiences a second union in reproductive ages and disappears if the "exposure" time is taken into account.

Even if some aspects should be studied in more details, this study has provided important insights into the fertility behaviour of Italian women who experience the dissolution of their first marriage.

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