MAJOR, INITIAL FAMILY-LIFE TRANSITIONS AMONGST YOUNG ITALIANS

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1. Introduction

Leaving the parental home together with completing formal education, entering the labor market, and forming a stable romantic partnership represent key events in transitioning into the independent, adult social status in Italy. The main route for leaving the home has traditionally been marriage but, in the last several years, other living arrangements such as cohabitation and living alone are gaining more importance across Europe (Corijin, Manting, 2000). Our paper aims to better understand the likelihood with which these alternative forms of family and living arrangements are pursued and whether there are particular groups of young Italians that are more likely to engage in some forms of major family-life transition as opposed to others.

2. Theoretical Background of the Italian Transition to Adulthood

The features of the Italian transition to adulthood have previously been described as the so called "Mediterranean" or the "latest-late" pattern of transition according to which a delayed marriage is not compensated by the rise of non-marital youth cohabitation and non-family households, but by a longer permanence in the parental home (Mencarini, Solera, 2011; Aassve *et al*, 2002; Billari *et al.*, 1998). Other studies have proved that the young adults in Italy show the most relevant delay in terms of age in the choice of leaving the parental home with respect to the other advanced economies (Sironi *et al.*, 2012). This prolongation of the transition has taken place within traditional models of family formation – i.e. by marriage – and therefore the incidence of cohabitation or living alone is relatively small, tough increasing (see e.g. Naldini, Jurado, 2010). The longer period of formal studying and the consequent delay of entrance into the labor market have certainly contributed to postponing the transition to a new and independent living arrangement. The economic difficulties have been the main reason for not leaving the parental home, mostly for women due to the persisting

presence of marked gender asymmetries on the labor market (Mencarini, Solera, 2011; Istat, 2009; Pupo, Licursi, 2003)[1]. In this scenario, the low share of cohabitation as an alternative way of gaining residential autonomy is highly influenced by its low level of social acceptance which is officially evident at the legislative level (see e.g. Ongaro, 2004). Cohabitation is thus observed to be a phase preceding marriage and it terminates with the arrival of children which transitions the choice of cohabitation into the choice of marriage (see e.g. Scabini, Rossi, 2006). The social context was also reported to be important for the choice of living alone: it is a phenomenon more common for men and more frequent in big urban areas of North Italy where living as a single young adult is more socially acceptable (see e.g. Benassi, Novello, 2009).

3. Hypotheses

We hypothesize that higher educated men and women under the age of 40 are less likely to marry, cohabit, or live alone than they are to live at home. Increased time in school may translate into less time to invest in the search for a long-term, romantic partner plus less money with which to live alone. Of those men and women who have the resources to leave the parental home, and a desire to engage in a co-residential romantic partnership, we hypothesize that they may engage in cohabitation as a substitute for marriage because they may still not have the financial resources fully necessary to engage in marriage. We hypothesize that young, working Italian men and women may be only slightly more likely to marry than to cohabit relative to living at home with family. For women, we hypothesize that the most economically independent women will have the greatest likelihood of living alone as opposed to any other type of living arrangement. For men with resources we hypothesize that living alone is a viable alternative to marrying, although marrying will be more likely than living alone.

4. Data, Method and Descriptive Output

In this article, we propose an alternative approach for studying the young adults' initial life transitions by directly testing all family-life living options against each other — options that young Italians are naturally faced with upon choosing to leave the parental home. In the absence of longitudinal data, 2012 data from the

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[1]Despite achieving economic independence, some young adults decide to remain in the home of origin to take care of their parents, mostly in the case of Italian women, or because they already have large degrees of autonomy and independence while living in the *liberal* family of origin (Istat, 2009).

Istat survey "Indagine Multiscopo sulle Famiglie" is used. Pulling men and women ages 19-40 we generated a subsample of 11.403 observations related to the state which was restricted to individuals who had never married or who were currently in their first marriage[2]. The subsample is representative both at the household and individual level for all of Italy. Considering the family of origin as well as the variety of routes for leaving the parental house and starting independent living, we create a multinomial dependent variable "Living arrangement" composed of the following mutually exclusive categories:
1) Never married Italians living with their parents or other relatives –*Parent* –;
2) Never married Italians living alone – *SPH* –;
3) Never married Italians that cohabit with their romantic partner –*Cohab* –;
4) Italians in their first marriage – *First Marriage*.
By applying a multinomial logistic regression, where "Living arrangement" is set to be the dependent variable, it was possible to evaluate the effect of different socio-demographic characteristics on the likelihood of not marrying and living with parents or relatives, of living alone, of cohabiting, or of being married for the first time. Since important differences exist between women and men, such as the timing of major life transitions in Italy, separate models were run for both. Also, considering that the risk of leaving home fluctuates strongly with age, we created 4 age groups: 19-24; 25-29; 30-35; 36-40. Other independent variables included are educational level[3] and professional status[4] since extended time in school and/or difficulties in finding a job emerged to be correlated with remaining in the parental home (Istat, 2009). Regional differences were controlled.
Tables 1 corroborate the idea of a delayed transition into adulthood of young Italians since 61,0% of men ages 25 to 40 and 54.1% of women ages 25 to 40 still live with their parents. It also confirms that the marriage is still a dominant transitional route although with substantial gender differences. On the other hand, the alternative living arrangement such as living alone and cohabiting appears not to be marginal among never married young Italians (with a total share of 12,8% for women and 15,2% for men). The mean ages and the share of each age group in every considered living arrangement add support to the hypothesis that

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[2]The data do not permit us to determine if these young Italians have lived alone or cohabited prior to their current living arrangement. What we know, and underline as a crucial assumption for our first life-transition analysis, is that they have not been married before, or, in case they are married, it is their first marriage experience. In this way we eliminate the effect of divorce, separation, and widowhood on the choice of living arrangement.
[3]The education was summarized in 4 categories: postgraduate (that includes PhD, four-year university degree – old cycle – and Master degree); higher education (Bachelor, college, academy degrees); high-school; less than high school (incorporating primary education and lower secondary education).
[4]Within the professional status variable, the category "unemployed" incorporates individuals seeking a new job, seeking the first job as well as those who are classified in the dataset as unable to work.

cohabitation and living alone are transitional phases for some — after the age of 35 marital unions are slightly more common. While living alone is more common for men and cohabitation for women, the common feature for both living arrangements is that they are more prevalent in Northern Italy. However, a statistical analysis is necessary to determine if there are significant differences between these living arrangements and those that engage in them.

Table 1 – *Descriptive Statistics*

		Female				*Male*			
		SPH	Cohab	First Marriage	Parent	SPH	Cohab	First Marriage	Parent
Total		*5,8*	*7,0*	*41,4*	*45,7*	*9,5*	*5,7*	*27,5*	*57,4*
Mean age		32,4	31,6	34,4	26,2	32,9	32,3	35,4	26,9
Age	19-24	8,1	13,3	2,7	45,8	6,3	11,2	0,8	42,0
Group	25-29	21,1	22,3	11,6	28,1	18,8	18,1	7,0	26,3
	30-35	38,5	33,8	39,3	17,4	38,0	36,6	36,2	20,6
	36-40	32,3	30,7	46,4	8,7	36,9	34,1	55,9	11,1
Postgraduate		25,8	17,1	15,1	13,5	14,8	9,4	10,6	8,2
Higher educ.		12,7	8,2	4,4	9,4	6,5	3,9	3,7	6,2
High-School		45,3	46,3	45,7	58,8	51,7	47,1	48,0	57,6
Less than High-School		16,1	28,4	34,8	18,4	26,9	39,6	37,7	28,0
Housewife		0,0	10,0	32,4	2,6	-	-	-	-
Student		5,9	6,6	0,9	32,8	3,1	4,5	0,1	23,0
Employed		78,3	68,5	51,3	36,9	85,0	84,0	87,6	48,0
Unemployed		15,8	14,8	15,4	27,6	11,9	11,5	12,3	28,9
North-West		24,5	29,7	20,0	16,3	23,0	33,2	21,1	17,4
North-East		26,1	35,5	20,9	17,4	23,7	33,5	21,3	18,9
Center		19,6	19,7	16,3	17,5	19,7	16,6	16,6	16,6
South & Island		29,8	15,1	42,8	48,8	33,6	16,6	41,0	47,0

Source: own elaboration of Istat data (2012).

5. The Demographics of Who is Likely to Live in a Particular Arrangement

As expected, as women age, their likelihood of living outside of their parental home dramatically increases for every type of alternative living arrangement (marriage, living alone, and cohabitation). Of all these forms of major life transition from the parental home, marriage – when compared to living alone or cohabiting – is *not* the most likely for individuals aged 19-29[5]. In focusing on the

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[5] All cited differences in odds between categories of the dependent variable have been tested and are statistically significant.

[6] The difference between odds were calculated by using relative risk ratio ratios (RRRR).

transition from a younger adult to an older adult, i.e. for women 30-35 compared to women 25-29 the odds of entering cohabitation or living alone increases approximately 125,0%-160,0%, respectively; whereas in the case of first marriage there is a 413,0%[6] increase in the odds between these two age groups. Interestingly, living alone is *more* likely than marriage for women between the ages of 30-35. This begins to provide evidence that living alone and cohabiting might be viable options to marriage, even at older ages, for some young Italians making their first major life transition. Moreover, as a woman's level of educational attainment increases, the odds of getting married are reduced, which suggests that marriage, for highly educated women, may be increasingly unattractive. In terms of professional status, compared to women who are unemployed, employed women are 130,0% more likely to live alone than live at home, 86,0% more likely to cohabit and 63,0% more likely to marry. Although it is clear that women who identify as housewives have a higher probability of being married (or vice versa), this relationship is less intuitive for never married cohabiters: employed women are still 86,0% more likely to cohabit than unemployed women, but it is not near the 480,0% higher likelihood of being a housewife. These findings suggest that there may be two different types of female cohabiters in contemporary Italy. The first type are the working women who stay attached to work because they enjoy financial empowerment and may not want to engage in a traditional marriage with strict gender-role delineations which would separate them from the labor market.

The other type of female cohabiters is the more probable: they are less attached to the labor force and engage in domestic responsibilities. Such a finding is backed up by odds ratios that report that women with the lowest education have the greatest odds of cohabiting or marrying and suggests that cohabitation in Italy may be far more similar to marriage in its character than it is in other countries. Thus, in these cases, cohabitation may be an adaptive family form for those with poor financial prospects. These findings are very important because they speak to an emerging dichotomy amongst Italian women: those with the least attachment to the workforce are the most likely to be married or cohabit and those with strong attachment to the workforce are the most likely to live alone.

It cannot be ignored that the causal direction is not clear – women may have left the work force after marriage and not beforehand – but the final relationship is nonetheless clear: Italian women have increased odds of being attached to the labor force, relative to being unemployed, when they are *not* involved in a marital or cohabiting union. Relative to living at home, all alternative forms of partnership were more likely for women in the North than in the South of Italy. While not surprising for living alone or cohabitation, for marriage this may be a commentary on greater economic opportunities in the North which enable greater probabilities of young couples feeling financially prepared to marry. Similar to women, as men

age, their likelihood of living outside of their family of origin dramatically increases for every type of alternative living arrangement, with the highest odds ratios for the oldest age group. Consistent with women, they are also more likely to live alone rather than marry between the ages of 30 and 35. At all levels of education for high school completion and above, young Italian men are more likely to live in their parental home than to cohabit or marry.

Table 2 – *Multinomial regression outcomes (odds ratios)*

	Covariates	Female			Male		
		SPH	Cohab	First Marriage	SPH	Cohab	First Marriage
Age	19-24	,087***	,120***	,016***	,073***	,119***	,007***
	25-29	,253***	,272***	,091***	,254***	,274***	,064***
	30-35	,650***	,611***	,463***	,573***	,618***	,362***
	36-40	*Reference category*					
Educational attainment	Postgraduate	,852	,406***	,448***	,966	,405***	,450***
	Higher educ.	1,318	,555**	,505***	1,151	,441**	,532***
	High-School	,858	,550***	,721***	,997	,573***	,715***
	Less than High-School	*Reference category*					
Profession al Status	Housewife	1,77e-01	5,807***	19,632***	-	-	-
	Student	,601*	,627**	,186***	,790	1,015	,097***
	Employed	2,306***	1,700***	1,628***	3,152***	2,735***	3,593***
	Unemployed	*Reference category*					
Geographical Partition	North-West	1,826***	5,387***	1,565***	1,380**	4,413***	1,012
	North-East	1,777***	6,024***	1,499***	1,330*	4,163***	,966
	Center	1,484*	3,587***	1,218*	1,287	2,429***	,883
	South and Island	*Reference category*					

Note: Reference category. Never married persons living with their parents or other relatives
Source: own elaboration of 2012 Istat data.

The similarity in likelihood between marrying and cohabiting for this demographic again speaks to the idea that cohabitation and marriage are very similar in many regards in Italy. Additionally, there appears to be little distinction between socioeconomic groups and the choice to cohabit or marry. The nature of this similarity must be investigated more. Employed men are more likely to engage in every form of living arrangement relative to living at home: they are 259,0% more likely to marry, 215,0% more likely to live alone, and 173,0% more likely to cohabit. This raises more questions about the nature of single-living for young men in Italy since the likelihood of marrying when employed, relative to living at home, was only slightly greater than the likelihood of living alone.

5. Conclusions

Relative to living at home, both Italian men and women under the age of 40 are less likely to marry, cohabit, or live alone with the more education that they have. This is likely due to the fact that an increased time in school translates into less time to invest in the search for a long-term, romantic partner plus less money with which to live alone. However, when employment status is explored the likelihoods of cohabitation or marriage appear similarly common amongst working men and working women. Yet, for working women, living alone is the most likely living arrangement while for men, marriage is most likely one, followed by living alone. The findings indicate that young Italian women may sense the incompatibility between work and marriage in Italy and/or perhaps a growing enjoyment of single life for both women and men with independent finances in Italy. Additionally, less educated young Italian men and women, or working men and women, engage in cohabitation and marriage with roughly equal likelihoods relative to living in the parental house, or relative to being unemployed. More so, being a housewife is the most likely employment status for both female cohabiters and females that are married. Such similarities and a lack of demographic contrasts in these associations speak to the idea that cohabitation and marriage are similar in character in Italy and the choice to cohabit may have far more to do with economic pressures as opposed to ideological reasons.

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SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to assess the effects of individual socio-demographic features in determining the likelihood of Italian young adults (19-40) to leave their parental home and acquire their residential autonomy through living alone, cohabitation, or first marriage. The analysis uses the 2012 Istat data from the Multipurpose Household Survey.

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