

Changes in Living Arrangements Between Risks and Opportunities

Cambiamenti di Condizione Familiare tra Rischi e Opportunità

Alessandra De Rose

Sapienza Università di Roma, Dipartimento di studi geoeconomici, linguistici, statistici e storici per l'analisi regionale, Via del Castro Laurenziano, 9, 00161 Roma

alessandra.derose@uniroma1.it

Riassunto: Si propone una riflessione sulla ricerca dei comportamenti familiari e sulla sua collocazione nell'ambito dell'*Event History Analysis*. Saranno discussi quadro teorico, assunti metodologici, modelli utilizzati, lettura dei risultati ed implicazioni. Le argomentazioni critiche saranno illustrate con riferimento, in particolare, al fenomeno dello scioglimento delle unioni coniugali.

Keywords: Family studies, living arrangement, Event History Analysis, marital dissolution.

1. Background

The family situation of the individual and its changes over the personal biography have always been of interest in the demographic analysis of population. Through time, the focus of the research has progressively changed, and the same happened, as a consequence, to the methodological approaches.

The basic matter of demographers being the observation of those events which quantitatively modify the size and the age-gender structure of the population – namely births, deaths and migrations – the family is looked at as the closest context in which the individual lives and which can have an influence on the appearance of a demographic event or, in turn, can be changed by the event itself. Family characteristics, i.e., the relatives' network and the inter-generation relationships, and living arrangement, that is the partnership situation and the household typology, have usually been concerned with in relation to “purely” demographic phenomena until a relatively recent time.

Although from a sociological point of view the scholars' interest for the family *per se* and for its dynamics has always been very high, it was only in the '70s that various research lines in the population studies were devoted to family. This process has been favoured, on the one side, by the convergence of the interest of both sociology and demography for the changes in family structures and behaviours which were being observed in those years (Cavalli 1981); on the other side, by the implementation of the prominent proposal of Glick's “family life cycle” (Glick, Parke 1965), that put the methodological basis of the empirical analysis. Nevertheless, its usage has been confined to the historical demography field (Uhlenberg 1969; Schiaffino 1981) also because of the difficulty in collecting suitable empirical data (De Sandre 1976; Rossi 1975).

During the '80s, the availability of a great wealth of data collected at the individual and household levels, both from a cross-sectional and a retrospective-longitudinal prospect,

such as the World Fertility Survey and the subsequent Demographic and Health Survey, as well as the refinement of statistical tools for the treatment of ample and multivariate data sets and the accessibility of them to more technical-skilled researchers, stimulated the empirical test of complex conceptual frameworks, where individuals and their family behaviours are strictly interconnected.

The family system description and the identification of suitable research strategies to cast light on transformations underway were given a fresh impulse in the '90s thanks to the diffusion among scholars of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) idea introduced by Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa (Lesthaeghe 1995; van de Kaa 1987). According to them, the societal developments in terms of structural, cultural and technological progresses reached in the industrialized countries favoured important values change in bringing about certain demographic behaviours such as single living, pre- and post-marital cohabitation, delayed fertility, high prevalence of non-marital fertility and high rates of union disruption. Many criticism accompanied the SDT frame as a paradigm for the analysis of the recent demographic development in Europe and USA both from a theoretical point of view – SDT is or is not a theory (Coleman 2004) – and from an empirical one – the understating idea of the convergence of all the countries to a common “standard” (the Scandinavian one) is contrasted by the persistence of great heterogeneity and by the peculiarity of certain well culturally and socially identifiable areas such as the Mediterranean one (Kuijsten 1996). Whichever the substantive judgment on the SDT might be, one cannot deny that it has profoundly influenced the research on population since it made the household dynamics and the issues related to partnership behaviours and living arrangements of the individuals become of central concern (Nobile, De Rose 2005).

2. Research strategy and its improvements

The progressive way in which the interest for family entered the population research is strictly linked to the developments in the analytical perspective and research strategy on the one side and in the explanatory frameworks on the other. It is not among the purposes of this paper making a review of the methodological improvements or of the theoretical approaches, also because literature offers many exhaustive references for both (Bongaarts *et al.* 1987; van Imhoff *et al.* 1995; Caselli *et al.* 2006). Here, only selected aspects will be mentioned in order to highlight some issues of the analytical approaches followed by most of the empirical research on family in the '90s.

We can define this field of study as deeply micro-founded, in a life-course perspective, based on individual survey data, and mainly oriented toward the search for causal links between family behaviours and social, demographic and economic characteristics in the New Home Economics frame.

This largely followed research approach implies many choices as far as the definition of the phenomena under study and of the event of interest, the research hypotheses, the statistical modelling, the data processing and the results interpretation are concerned. In the case of family studies, it barely means that the main objects are not really family structures and functioning but the individual's living arrangement and its change over his/her life course; so, the events of interest are those individual behaviours which make the family status change at a certain stage of the individual's life (i.e. a marriage changes the individual's status from single to married; a divorce from married to

separated; a birth increases the household size; and so on). The main analytical efforts are to find those factors which can make the event more or less *likely* to happen according to some sociological and/or economic hypotheses. The most common way of modelling the process under study is referring to the *event history analysis* choosing among the great wealth of statistical tools developed to model even highly complicated processes; data usually come from national or comparative sample surveys (see, for example the recently-closed project of Fertility and Family Survey in the UN-ECE countries) which collect retrospective individual biographies including changes in living arrangements. The interpretation of the results is influenced by the model chosen and by data constraints, also when the research hypotheses are driven from a quite complex theoretical frame.

The field of study has been then progressively enriched by a variety of methodological improvements which partly solve some of the critical issues related to an excessive focus on the micro-founded-demography triggered by many scholars (Lee 2001). Moreover, the conceptual frameworks suggest a very comprehensive explanation of the transformation of family life and households system and required a much more refined analytical tools and perspectives to be empirically validated. Billari effectively synthesized (Billari 2006) the progresses of the recent research, including the extension to multilevel and multiprocess event history modelling; the contextual level of observation both in the analytical frame and in the data collection (see, for example, the GGP program); the micro-macro link; the tentative to encompass the classic “evaluation problem” in the causality analysis by means of the differences-in-differences estimator combined with propensity score matching techniques.

There is no doubt, however, that twenty-years-long literature on micro-founded household behaviours and the popular event history analysis setting – either in its original formulation or in the most comprehensive extensions - have profoundly influenced family demography. There is no value judgement in this statement: the aim, here, is only to underline what the meaning is in terms of definitions, analytical approaches, and results interpreting.

Now, to make the point as less vague as possible, we need to illustrate a concrete example.

3. The study of marital dissolution: some tricks

The international literature is rich in studies on the phenomenon of marital dissolution, back to the beginning of the ‘80s and the great part of them refer to the USA, where the rate of divorce was already at a quite high level (40% of total marriages). In Europe, the focus on the topic has been drawn by the diffusion of the SDT ideas as the general increase in number of divorces has been considered as being one of the main characteristics of the general changes in the lifestyles (Lesthaeghe *cit.*). In Italy, although the phenomenon has never been ignored from a sociological point of view (Barbagli 1990), it started to be considered “statistically” interesting at the end of the first decade of application of the law on divorce approved in 1970 (De Sandre 1980; Greco and Roveri Carannante 1981). The yearly number of separations and divorces, although on the increase, did not exceed respectively 50,000 and 30,000 units until the year 1995 with a Total Divorce Rate per 100 marriages around 5.

Thus, the quantitative impact of divorces on the Italian family system has remained quite insignificant for a long while and the analytical research on the phenomenon of marital dissolution in a life course perspective did not developed much after a first pioneering study using data from the first Istat survey on Households structures and behaviours held in the year 1983 (De Rose 1992). The new millennium registers an increase in proportion of split conjugal unions: in 2003 the Total Divorce Rate was 10 per 100 marriages, while the same indicator calculated for separations was 20 per 100 marriages. The observation of a greater marriage instability gives a new impulse to the empirical research also in Italy. Nowadays, many are those scholars interested in investigating thoroughly the determinants and the consequences of marital dissolution (see, for instance, the session programme of the VII edition of the SIS-GCD *Giornate di studio sulla popolazione*, Latina, 14-16 February 2007 website: w3.uniroma1.it/gsp07). There is no room nor interest in this paper for a detailed literature's review, that can be found elsewhere (White 1990; DaVanzo and Rahman 1993; De Rose 1998). Here, only selected issues will be dealt with.

Field definition. The broader matter of study is "Household dissolution" which, in theory, includes all the possible modes (death, forced living apart together, keeping children away from parents, partners separation,..) a whatever set of family relations could be broken. Actually, the definition commonly adopted is the breakdown of a (heterosexual) union, either conjugal or cohabitation, due to a voluntary separation or divorce, either consensual or on request of one partner only.

Conceptual frameworks. By the above definition, the end of a partnership is the result of a conflict between a man and a woman who have lived together and have been attached to one another by sexual and sentimental bonds. As such, the phenomenon of union dissolution had to be brought within the framework of conflict theory (Chafetz 1980). From a life course outlook, specific theories have been elaborated explaining trends in marital quality and discord according to length of marriage. Trost (1986) maintains that the stability of marriage increases with its length: with time, the couple is bound together less and less by emotional bonds and more and more by shared interests, such as children. Diekmann and Mitter (1984) refer to a "learning process" which in the first year of marriage is extremely quick, when the probability of divorce is high; this helps reducing the risk in later years, once the partners have "got to know" each other. Trussell *et al.* (1992) elaborate the theory of "accumulated irritation", which explains the risk of divorce with length of marriage and the compensating theory of "growing acceptance" which helps contain the risk.

Looking for the determinants of conflict between the male and female partners in a couple in a gender perspective (De Rose, Di Cesare 2007) means that all the aspects of the relationship and their change in time are to be taken into account, including household and partners' characteristics, role division, the sharing of duties and resources, and the different expectations from a loving and intimate relationship. This deeply study on risk of divorce can be done only if suitable data which usually are collected in very small and specific psychological or behaviouristic project. Actually, both the factors affecting a union break-up and the way in which each partner faces the consequences of separation are quite exclusively related to the characteristics and personal resources of the two (Thompson and Walker 1989). Among these, an important role is played by factors related to women's emancipation - higher education levels and mass participation in the labour market. The increased earning capacity of women is view as one of the main causes leading to the decline in marriage and the

increase in divorce. In a micro-analytical perspective, the reference is to the New Home Economics (Becker 1981), claiming that the increased economic power of women undermines the “gain” from marriage for both partners. By applying a micro-economic model to individual choices, Becker maintains that people will continue to marry until the advantages expected from marriage remain greater than those from staying single. The same apply for the decision to remain married or split.

Unit of analysis. Given the above definition, it would seem straightforward to refer to the couple as the basic statistical unit. Actually, the great majority of the empirical studies have the individual as the reference unit, and this individual is practically always the woman. Whether this common approach is strictly embedded in the research strategy adopted (the life course perspective) or simple forced by data availability (see further) should be yet discussed. Indeed, this definition of the unit of analysis is not without consequences on the successive methodological choices and on results discussion.

Events of interest. If the statistical unit was the couple, the events to be studied would be the “origin” of the union (i.e. starting live together as a couple) and its “break” (i.e. separation or not living more together, or divorce, or death of one of the partner). The focus being on the individual and him/her life course, the actual interest is on the change of status from in union to not in union. It could seem an over-subtle distinction, but it has to be done when dealing with the search for the determinants of the event occurrence: looking for the “divorce or union dissolution determinants” is not as the same as looking for “the reasons why an individual exits from a union”. In the first case information on the couple life and characteristics and on both partners are fundamental; in the second, the individual factors prevail in the behaviours explanation. Actually, most studies declare to have the “search for the determinant of divorce” as the object, but define the individual (woman) change of status from married to divorced as the event to explain.

Data. Large scale survey collecting representative longitudinal data on couples and their biographies in a life course perspective are practically non-existent neither at international level nor at national. In Italy, in particular, the low statistical relevance of the phenomenon itself until very recently, has prevented from focusing on the couples-life-histories while drawing even ample households survey samples.

Method of analysis. Union dissolution has been one of the earliest applications of event history analysis in demography (EHA) (Menken *et al.* 1981) and this is still the prevailing strategies adopted, although with a great variety of methodological improvements, as recalled before. The basic ideas of the EHA modelling easily adapt to the conceptual framework for the study of marital breakdown, which highly stresses the role of the length of marriage as a basic factor and suggests a set of causal relations for the marital dissolution explanation. Actually, the so much diffused use of the EHA has profoundly influenced the way of reasoning when dealing with the union dissolution phenomenon, throughout a specific mode of defining the hypotheses and interpreting the results, sometimes beyond the explanatory theory of reference. Some discussion on the terminological choices will clear the point.

Terminology. The EHA extended the actuarial life table techniques to more general duration data analysis through a formal statistical theory. This process, made the mathematical concept of “hazard” to become popular among non-statisticians, progressively supplementing that of “probability” and that of “risk” with which demographers have been always much more familiar. Actually, in the common

language, the words and the concepts of “hazard” evoke those of the term “risk” and the two words are often used one for the other (for example in Wikipedia the word “risk” is among the synonymous of “hazard” and in many dictionaries the respective definitions are largely overlapping). However, while both words imply the idea of fate and that of chance, only “risk” is usually linked to the idea of danger, that is it is associated to the occurrence of an undesirable event, for example death. In the original frame of the EHA (see, for example, the everywhere cited article of Cox, 1972) the word “risk” is used only while defining the *risk set* in a probabilistic context, that is the amount of the individuals exposed to failure at time t , or, in other words, those individuals whose failure time is at least t . The linguistic confusion involved the use of the term “risk” – or, better, “instantaneous risk” - instead of “hazard” also in many scientific applications, thus attaching a value judgement to the chance of an event occurrence and to the consequences of it. In the Italian language it happens quite naturally because no words for a literally translation of “hazard” is appealing enough to avoid the use of the word “risk”. While that usage can be easily considered disagreeable in the case of “pleasant” event such as the birth of a baby or a marriage because the consequences of the occurrence itself could be happy to the individual or to the society as a whole, nothing seems to be objected while dealing with divorce or separation. Really, if one compares (as I have done) the number of times the word “risk” appears in an article with an application of EHA on union dissolution with that in another article of the same length but dealing with the same modelling of the reproductive process, that number is much higher in the first than in the second. There is no intention to enter any philosophical debate, or to review the scientific meanings of the word “risk” in a quantitative approach (Kaplan 1977; Kaplan and Garrick 1981). The point is simply the following: if the most accepted usage of the term “risk” is “to refer more in general to a situation where it is possible but not certain that an *undesirable* event will occur [...] (and this) concept includes both the probability and the character of undesirable event” (Hansson 1989, p.108), we are in doubt that it is always appropriate while speaking about union dissolution. That is, while it is correct to associate a probability to the event, or, more precisely to estimate an hazard function in the EHA asset, the definition of “undesirable” is rather worrying and its interpretation much more complicated.

4. The end of a union: risk or opportunity?

When a couple consensually splits or one of the partners leaves the other the event is surely a “failure” in terms of the survival analysis and so it is commonly defined in terms of marital commitment. Really, the breaking off of a partnership is the final event of a more or less long process during which the quality of the union had (progressively) perished until living together as a couple has become highly conflicting or just no more convenient for one of the partners or both. In such a process, the final event (union split or divorce) has to be viewed as “desirable” by both partners or at least by one of them. Thus, more than a “risk” the possibility to split is an “opportunity” to exit from an unsatisfactory relationship.

As briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph-*Conceptual frameworks*, neither the current population data nor the most widely used households and individuals sample survey data make it possible to depict the quality of a partnership nor its changes in time in a life course and in a gender perspective. Therefore, there is usually no way to

understand how long the partnership has been satisfactory or to know whether and since when the divorce started to be considered a solution. This should suggest to being more caution while dealing with this matter and, in particular, in the choice of words and phrasing.

The same holds in discussing the results of the *explanatory* models. The wide use of the confirmatory models in the sociological application has made the terms of the causality theory to become much popular. Although it is usually clear from the context of the analysis the meaning of the word “cause” when associated to the discussion of the model’s results, still interpreting the outcomes of statistical associations between a union dissolution and individual characteristics in terms of causality - even when the word “cause” is substituted by “determinant” or “factor” – does not seem appropriate.

As stated just before, it is not of common practice in large survey to collect information on the quality of the relationship in a union or on events, behaviours and any critical situation which could be defined as a “cause” for the breaking of the union. What it is usually obtained from the models is a set of relations, even very complicated, between the hazard of the event and individual or couple characteristics and/or pieces of biography. These covariates can be considered as situations or conditions favourable for the union dissolution to occur, provided that the conflict between the partners or the convenience of one to split does exist. Literature offers many empirical results on factors related to union dissolution and, interestingly, they are quite stable across time (Teachman 2002) and among countries even at very different rate of divorce and separation (De Rose, Di Cesare *cit.*). We again recommend the cited references for an extensive review of the specific results. One aspect, however, needs to be cited also in order to complete our argumentations. In Italy, as in most of other Western countries, the hazard of union dissolution is positively associated with women’s work. The overall socio-economic family situation acts in the same direction, that is, the higher it is, the higher the probability the couple splits. This latter finding is in contrast with just the opposite result usually observed in other countries at much higher level of divorce rate such as the USA and the UK, and it has been interpreted as an Italian specificity (Barbagli and Saraceno 1997). Actually, observation across cohorts and a thoroughly international comparison (Blossfeld *et al.* 1995) teach that the positive relation between social class and hazard of union dissolution tends to level off and to change in sign, the more and more the dissolubility of the marriage itself is more diffused and accepted in the society. In other words, also in Italy, where the frequency of unions’ breakdown is recently increasing, the inter-classes differences in marital stability tend to disappear. However, can we conclude that the “risk” of divorce is increasing for families in the lowest socio-economic conditions or should we also read this result as a social achievement, since the more and more couples and individuals wishing to split have the “opportunity” to do so whatever the socio-economic conditions might be?

With the same caution we should read the findings related to the analysis of the consequences of union dissolution, like, in particular, the effects on the well-being of any member of a dissolved union. The American literature fully documents the perishing of socio-economic and psycho-physical conditions of women and children after a divorce (McLanahan *et al.* 1992; Amato 2000). In Europe, comparable studies on the effects of divorce are much rarer (Del Boca 1998). In Italy, however, despite a limited diffusion of the phenomenon, the attention over the consequences of separations and divorces is quite high and all the analytical findings confirm that the economic conditions tend to worsen after divorce (Barbagli and Saraceno *cit.*; Del Boca 2003;

Ongaro *et al.* 2006). These are particularly hard for women since it is documented that the single-headed households have higher risk of poverty than the intact ones, and that these families are mainly formed by a separated or divorced woman and her children. Compared with men, women appear as bearing the greatest costs of a marital dissolution. However, a gender analysis of living conditions after a marital breakdown (Istat 2004; Angeli and De Rose 2007; De Rose and Spagnoli 2007) throws further light on meanings and directions of the differences between males and females: women usually are lone-mothers and rarely enter a new union, while men usually start living with another woman or come back to the parental home; both men and women have more free time than married people but the gain is greater for men; both men and women adopt unsafe behaviours as they smoke, drink alcoholics and use drugs in higher proportion than married people, but a worsening of the health status is perceived only with regard to women.

Thus, also looking at the consequences of divorce, the concept of “risk” is not always appropriate, that is divorce appears to be more than a risk for woman but not for men, at least not every time and under any condition.

Actually, beyond the need of using the right words, the delicate balance between risks and opportunities shall also be taken into account while conducting empirical analysis of the individuals’ behaviours and of changes in living arrangements. Only further practice combined with a good amount of “bravery” can prevent us from being too deeply embedded by the technical language and make us able to fully benefit of the wealthy conceptual frames for the family life interpretation.

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