

Non-resident parent-child contact after marital dissolution. Evidence from Italy

Contatti tra figli e genitori non residenti dopo la separazione in Italia

Silvia Meggiolaro and Fausta Ongaro

Abstract With the diffusion of marital instability, the number of children who spend some of their childhood without one of their parent has become not negligible even in Italy. In this paper we consider the determinants of the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident parent. We focus on children aged 0-17 living with only one biological parent, using data from two rounds of the Italian survey “Family and Social Subjects”. The aim is twofold: a) to analyze the impact of parental union biography after separation on non-resident parent’s contact with their children; b) to investigate whether these effects are differentiated according to the gender of resident parent. Results of multivariate analyses show that parents’ repartnering reduce non-resident parent-child contact only in the case of non-resident father.

Abstract Con la diffusione dell’instabilità matrimoniale, il numero di figli che passano parte della loro infanzia senza uno dei genitori non è trascurabile neppure in Italia. In questo lavoro si considerano le determinanti dei contatti fra genitori non residenti e figli. Il focus sono i figli fino ai 17 anni che vivono con un solo genitore biologico e i dati sono quelli dell’indagine italiana “Famiglia e Soggetti Sociali”. L’obiettivo del lavoro è doppio: a) analizzare l’impatto del repartnering dei genitori sui contatti del genitore non residente con il figlio; b) verificare se l’effetto è differenziato a seconda del genere del genitore residente. I risultati delle analisi multivariate mostrano che il repartnering dei genitori riduce i contatti con il genitore non residente solo nel caso questo sia il padre.

Key words: non-resident parent-child contact, parent’s repartnering, gender differences.

¹

Silvia Meggiolaro, Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Padova;
meg@stat.unipd.it

Fausta Ongaro, Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Padova;
ongaro@stat.unipd.it

Introduction

The increment in the proportion of separations involving children has been accompanied by an increase in sole parenthood over the past few decades, thus, an increasing number of children spends some of their childhood without one of their parent. For these children, examining contact with their non-resident parent is worthwhile, since a good parent-child interaction contributes to the psychological well-being and positive development of children (King and Sobolewski 2006). As a consequence, the frequency and the determinants of contact between non-resident parents and children have been investigated by many researchers (Billette and Laplante 2007; Juby et al. 2007).

The diffusion of marital instability is associated even to an increase of the repartnering (Sweeney 2010). What about the contact between children and non-resident parent when one or both parents enter a new union? Previous empirical literature on non-resident parents has usually considered only children who live with their mothers after their parents' separation, disregarding those living with their fathers. Studies on non-resident mothers are very dated and based on only small and highly selected sample (Stewart 1999), whereas recent studies considered mainly from a qualitative approach (Kielty 2008). In addition, all these studies did not consider the effect of repartnering of both parents on non-resident parent-child contact.

The aim of the current study is to verify how parents' union biography influences non-resident parent-child contact, examining whether the effect of repartnering differs according to the gender of non-resident parent. Analyses are conducted with data from the Italian survey "Family and Social Subjects" and consider non-resident parent-child contact for children under 18 living with only one biological parent after their parents' separation.

Background

Several studies have considered the effect of parents' repartnering on non-resident father-child contact. Literature has generally found a negative effect of the repartnering of the non-resident father for the contact with his children (Juby et al. 2007; Swiss and Le Bourdais 2009). Instead, the research evidence is quite mixed regarding the impact of the mother's new union. Some studies suggested that mother's repartnering decreases non-resident father involvement (Amato et al. 2009; Berger et al. 2012), whereas others find little or no effect (Sobolewski and King 2005; King 2009). In these studies, more in depth analyses on the effect of repartnering net of the other parent's union biography are completely missing.

Literature has suggested several mechanisms explaining the possible effect of parent's repartnering on non-resident father-child contact (King 2009). A first mechanism is based on the concept of need of support. From the viewpoint of support received by parents, we can expect that children would be less emotionally

Non-resident parent-child contact after marital dissolution. Evidence from Italy

supportive of (and thus, have less contact with) father when he is repartnered than when he is still single. From the point of view of the support received by children, non-resident fathers may withdraw from their children's lives if they feel that, due to the presence of a step-father, their involvement is less necessary. A second mechanism is connected to the role attached to the new partnership. As regards fathers, when they repartner, they shift their investments to a new family and, potentially, to new children. Similarly, a repartnered mother may wish to get her ex-partner out of their children in order to recreate a new nuclear family with her children and her new man. A third mechanism is connected with the behavior of the new partner. In the case of father's repartnering, the new partner may be reluctant to share the father with children of a former partner. As regards mother's new union, step-father may be not motivated to have their step-children with high involvement with the biological father implying a potential source of rapprochement of their new partner with the previous spouse. Lastly, another mechanism plays in an inverted way for fathers and mothers and is based on the relation between the children and the parent's new partner. In the case of fathers, there may be some difficulties for children to accept the new partner of their father. At the opposite, in the case of mother's repartnering, if children accept with difficulties the step-father, it is possible that they strengthen the relation with their father.

It is less clear how the parents' new unions affect non-resident mother-child contact. Studies analyzing non-resident parent-child contact in a gender perspective are few, dated, and generally based on small and highly selected samples. More importantly, they, at best, consider parents' repartnering as a simple control (Stewart 1999). However, they let us hypothesize that non-resident mothers and fathers might respond differently to the repartnering. This literature suggests some mechanisms to describe differences between non-resident mothers-child contact and non-resident fathers-child one which can be useful even to explore possible gender differences in the effects of parents' union biography. The first perspective (the "gender roles hypothesis") expects that contact between children and their non-resident mothers should be higher than in the case of non-resident fathers due to traditional social expectations considering women as those with the role of nurturers of children. An opposite perspective suggests that non-resident mothers might be negatively selected into their non-resident status. They are often perceived as deviant and are subject to negative social judgments implying social isolation which may pose barriers to a full and active part in the lives of their children (Kielty 2008). In addition, the reasons for non-resident motherhood may indicate negative selection in itself: for example, non-resident mothers are likely to have financial difficulties and emotional problems. This "negative selection hypothesis" (Stewart 1999) suggests that non-resident mothers have less contact with their children than non-resident fathers. The last perspective asserts that contact between non-resident parent and children is related to the non-resident role rather than to the parent's sex. Mothers and fathers face similar difficulties with their non-residential role, characterized by structural and practical obstacles to visitation with absent children. This leads to an "absent parent hypothesis" according to which non-resident mothers and fathers have similar level of contact with their children.

Data and key variables

The data come from two rounds (2003 and 2009) of the survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS) conducted in Italy by the Italian Statistical Institute. The survey considers in each year a representative sample at national level of about 20,000 households. Besides socio-demographic information, each household member provides data on the frequency of contact with non-resident parents. In this study, we focused on 1,079 boys and girls aged 0-17 living with their mother after their parents’ marriage dissolution and having a living father and on their 135 counterparts living with their father and having a living mother. Children are asked the frequency of contact with their non-resident parent. In particular, two questions investigated face-to-face contact and phone contact. In both cases, response options consisted of 1 = every day, 2 = several (2-6) times per week, 3 = once per week, 4 = one to three times per month, 5 = several times a year, 6 = never. In this paper the frequency of contact between children and non-resident parent is measured with a composite indicator considering the frequency of both face-to-face and phone contact. A composite indicator conveniently taking into account both face-to-face and phone contact and the geographical distance between parents’ residence is used. In particular, a six-categories variable is obtained, distinguishing high, middle-high, middle, middle-low, and low contact.

Descriptive analyses shows that contact with non-resident parent is rather high in Italy: quite 60% of children have high or middle-high contact with their non-resident parents. This percentage is even higher if the non-resident parent is the mother, in the direction of the gender roles hypothesis. Both for mothers and for fathers, their repartnering decrease non-resident parent-child contact, at least as regards middle-high contact.

Methods and control covariates

In the multivariate analysis, in which our dependent variable is the composite indicator of the frequency of contact, an ordered logistic regression is used. We estimate a single model pooling together data referred to non-resident mothers and fathers, and controlling for the gender of the resident parent and for potential interactions of it with parental union biography.

Multivariate analysis controls for several socio-demographic variables both of children and of parents. As regards children’s characteristics, their gender and age at the interview are considered. As regard the parents, the information is available only for the resident parent. However, many maternal and paternal traits are positively correlated, and thus, although we relied on one parent’s characteristics, these variables also capture some information on the other parent. In particular, the resident-parent’s age at the interview and her/his educational level and employment status are controlled for. Also the time passed from the de facto separation is taken into account. Some other potential disturbing factors are also considered: a

Non-resident parent-child contact after marital dissolution. Evidence from Italy
 subjective measure of household economic resources, the presence of siblings and of other persons in the household, the area of residence and the year of the survey. Lastly, whether the child answers directly to the questionnaire is considered as control too.

Results

Table 1 reports the coefficients of the key covariates.

Table 1: Ordinal logit regression (probability of more frequent non-resident parent-child contact)

	<i>Coefficients</i>
Resident parent (ref: mother)	
Yes	0.175
Parents' repartnering (ref: neither parents)	
Only the mother has repartnered	-0.509**
Only the father has repartnered	-0.472***
Both parents have repartnered	-0.325
Interactions	
Resident father * only mother's repartnering	1.128**
Resident father * only father's repartnering	-0.791
Resident father * both parents' repartnering	2.791***

***= p<.001; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10

The significant coefficients of interaction terms suggest that the effect of the parents' union biography is significantly different for non-resident mothers and fathers, but that - net of these aspects - there are no different levels of contact for non-resident fathers and mothers, in the direction of the absent parent hypothesis. The effect of repartnering of only the father is in the expected direction, but it is significant only when the resident parent is the mother; mother's repartnering decreases father-child contact when the child lives with the mother, but increases mother-child contact when the child lives with the father. Both parents' repartnering has not significant impact on non-resident father-child contact, but, at the opposite, it is positively associated with higher non-resident mother-child contact. In other words, for non-resident mothers, higher contact is observed when they repartnered than when they remained single; instead, for non-resident fathers, higher contact is observed when both parents have the same union history (both have or have not repartnered).

Discussion and future research

This paper is the first attempt to study the frequency of non-resident parent-child contact in a context of recent diffusion of marital instability and repartnering such as

Italy. Results show a rather complex scenario. In the case of non-resident father, results show a negative effect of father's repartnering on contact, and a similar result holds for mother's repartnering; surprisingly, repartnering of both parents does not show any effect. Instead, when the non-resident parent is the mother, her repartnering leads to an increase of contact with her non-resident child, supporting the gender role hypothesis; in the case of father's new union, contact between non-resident mother and her child does not decrease as observed for non-resident fathers; the effect of both parents' repartnering is again surprising and in the direction of an increase of contact.

Further studies are needed to confirm what found and to overcome some limitations of the current paper. This study might suffer, indeed, for the relatively modest sample of some groups (such as those in which both parents repartnered and those of non-resident mothers) which may make some results little significant. In addition, some control factors that literature has shown to be important cannot be taken into account in this study. For example, a detailed picture of the non-resident parents should be considered, examining more in detail their situations.

References

1. Amato, P.R., Meyers, C.E., Emery, R.E.: Changes in nonresident father-child contact from 1976 to 2002. *Fam Relat*, 58(1), 41--53 (2009)
2. Berger, L.M., Cancian, M., Meyer, D.R.: Maternal re-partnering and new-partner fertility: Associations with nonresident father investments in children. *Child Youth Serv Rev*, 34(2), 426--436 (2012)
3. Billette, J.H., Laplante, B.: Nonresident fathers and children: Parents' new unions and frequency of contact. *J Fam Issues*, 28, 1220--1245 (2007)
4. Juby, H., Billette, J., Laplante, B., Le Bourdais, C.L.: Nonresident fathers and children: Parents' new unions and frequency of contact. *J Fam Issues*, 28, 1220--1245 (2007).
5. Kieley, S.: Working hard to resist a "bad mother" label. Narratives of non-resident motherhood. *Qual Soc Work*, 7(3), 363--379 (2008)
6. King, V.: Stepfamily formation: Implications for adolescent ties to mothers, nonresident fathers, and stepfathers. *J Marriage Fam*, 71(4), 954--968 2009
7. King, V., Sobolewski, J.M.: Nonresident fathers' contributions to adolescent well-being. *J Marriage Fam*, 68, 537--557, (2006)
8. Sobolewski, J.M., King, V.: The importance of the coparental relationship for non resident fathers' ties to children. *J Marriage Fam*, 67, 1196--1212 (2005)
9. Stewart, S.D.: Nonresident mothers' and fathers' social contact with children. *J Marriage Fam*, 62(4), 894--907 (1999)
10. Sweeney, M.M.: Remarriage and stepfamilies: strategic sites for family scholarship in the 21st century. *J Marriage Fam*, 72, 667--684 (2010)
11. Swiss, L., Le Bourdais, C.: Father-child contact after separation the influence of living arrangements. *J Fam Issues*, 30(5), 623--652 (2009)