

Employment Uncertainty and Divorce in Italy

Elena Bastianelli¹ – Daniele Vignoli²

¹University of Turin

²University of Florence

Background

Economic uncertainty has been shown to affect family dynamics (Kreyenfeld, Andersson, and Pailhé 2012). The relation between employment uncertainty and divorce is far from been clearly understood, however.

There is theoretical ambivalence about the direction of the effects at play. On the one side, economic instability may increase divorce through boosting the financial and psychological stress of couples; on the other, it may reduce divorce by rising its relative cost (i.e. legal settlement, moving to a new household, costs of consumer durables), or strengthening family bonds (Amato and Beattie 2010; Cohen 2014; Fischer and Liefbroer 2006). The empirical evidence on the topic is as mixed as theoretical expectations and suffers from a series of limitations. First, research on economic uncertainty and union dissolution mostly focuses on explanations at the individual level, but economic uncertainty may also be conceptualized as a macro-level phenomenon, reflecting the general uncertainty felt by people in times of economic turbulence (Sobotka, Skirbekk, and Philipov 2011). Second, prior research mostly focused on women in isolation. *The economic independence hypothesis* asserts that divorce increases when partners depend less on marriage financially, allowing an easier exit from unhappy marriages. This hypothesis has been generally used with respect to women, as wives are likely to be more economically dependent on their husbands (Amato 2010; Jalovaara 2003; Vignoli and Ferro 2009). Nevertheless, although it has received less attention, divorce is likewise to be also affected by men's economic performance; for instance, it has been shown that in certain circumstances couples in which the husband experiences a job loss are more likely to divorce (Doiron and Mendolia 2012). Finally, virtually all previous research has used unemployment as an indicator of economic performances, ignoring or downplaying other factors, like precarious work contracts.

This study addresses these oversights in previous research by offering novel evidence on the relation between economic uncertainty and divorce for Italy.

Objective

In this article, we aim to distinguish the effect of contextual- and individual-level measures of economic uncertainty on marital disruption, analysing both the impact of employment status and characteristics and the impact of regional-level economic indicators, and to disentangle gender differences and similarities.

Italy represents an interesting laboratory to study the relationship between employment uncertainty and divorce. The diffusion of divorce is still limited compared to European standards. Nonetheless, over the last decades, trend data illustrate a strong increase in total divorce (and separation) rates, which have been mirrored by a growing spread of temporary contractual arrangements and rising unemployment, and a slow and problematic convergence of gender roles.

Data and methods

We use micro data from the newest release of “Families and Social Subjects” of 2016, the Italian “variant” of the Gender and Generation Surveys, carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). The survey provides detailed retrospective data on education, employment, fertility and partnership histories. Individual-level data are combined with time-series data on unemployment and temporary work provided by Istat at the NUTS-2 (i.e. regional) level.

The event of interest is first marriage de facto separation, i.e. separation not yet accompanied by legal provision since it is the moment that mark the dissolution of marriages (Vignoli and Ferro 2009; de Rose 1992).

The analysis is segment by gender to disentangle differences and similarities between women’s and men’s life courses.

We employ event history techniques to scrutinize the effects of time varying employment status and type of contract, as well as regional unemployment and temporary work rates on the risk of union dissolution. The baseline risk is specified with a piecewise constant function.

The model is controlled for time-constant and time-varying variables suggested by the literature i.e. elapsing time since marriage, cohort, calendar years, number and age of children, parental background (divorce history and education), premarital cohabitation, rite of wedding and education (Vignoli and Ferro 2009; de Rose 1992; Amato 2010).

Preliminary results

The analysis has been conducted with the data of Family and Social Subject of 2009 and will be soon integrated with the forthcoming release of the survey.

Preliminary results show a significant effect of employment status and characteristics on the risk of separation, with opposite direction between men and women. Not working women have a lower risk of separation than permanent employed women, while not working men have a higher risk of separation than permanent employed men.

The effect of unemployment rates on the risk of separation is positive and significant for both men and women, meaning that when unemployment increases over its average, both men and women have a higher risk of separation. Moreover, the effect of unemployment rates is curvilinear and increasing, therefore it becomes stronger over time.

Contribution

We distinguish the effect of contextual- and individual-level measures of employment uncertainty on marital disruption. The effect of individual-level employment status seems to be related to gender specific roles and expectations. However, at the macro-level it seems that economic hardship is able to generate stress exacerbating discords within couples and leading to separation.

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