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Intergenerational Effects of Divorce in a Mediterranean and Catholic Society: Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Previous research has found negative effects of parental divorce on children's educational attainment; in addition, it has been noted that effects of divorce are not equal in all western societies. However, research on catholic and southern European countries is quite poor. The aim of the paper is to add to the research on intergenerational effects of divorce in a catholic and southern European society: Italy. Italian society differs from other western societies with respect to many characteristics of its family structure, its cultural and religious systems, its social welfare system, and also with respect to the legislation, frequency and characteristics of divorce. Based on data of the Bank of Italy Survey of Households' Income and Wealth, this study demonstrates that the educational level of the children with divorced parents is lower than the educational level of children of married parents. Next, contrary to what has been found in other European societies, it emerges from this research that widowhood has a significant negative effect on children's educational attainment. The weakness of the Italian welfare system and the importance of the extended family network for survival in Italian society might explain this unexpected result. The study also demonstrates that this negative effect of divorce cannot be explained by the negative impact of the cultural climate of the area of residency. Furthermore, the study also shows that economic deprivation is one but not the most important cause of negative effect of divorce on children and it highlights the relevance of socialization process, and particularly parental conflict for the explanation of these negative effects. Finally, the analyses indicate that children of the lowest educated mothers have the largest educational backlog compared with comparable children with married similar low educated mothers. Thus, it can be argued that parents with already lower social and cultural resources find it more difficult to cope with the negative aspects of divorce and due to this low level of resources cannot obtain enough support from the weak and familialistic Italian welfare system.

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars of different disciplines often reported intergenerational effects of parental divorce: for instance on the children's attained educational and occupational level, and on the risk of divorcing. But there are indications that these intergenerational effects of divorce are not equal in all western societies. As an example Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson (2003), comparing the educational results of pupils with divorced parents in eleven developed countries, found that single-parenthood is associated with lower maths and science achievement among young children than their counterparts in two-parent families. However, they also found significant country level variations in this negative effect of single-parenthood on children's maths and science achievements. After controlling for family resources and other demographic variables, indeed, the math performance gap in the U.S. was still larger than that in Australia, Iceland, Ireland and the Netherlands; and the science performance gap in the U.S. remained greater than in Austria, Australia, Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands and Norway. Furthermore, they found that the negative influence of single-parenthood is less detrimental in countries with favourable family policies, especially family/child allowances and parental leave. They also found a significant relationship between the prevalence of single-parent families and the achievement gap between children from two- and single-parent families. The achievement gap was greater in countries where single-parent families are more common. In other words, children from single-parent families are worse off academically in a society with many single-parent families than they are in a society with few single-parent families. This result corroborates a previous finding that schools with a high concentration of children from single-parent families also have a negative impact on students' academic achievement (Pong, 1998). Another example of the inter-countries differences in the intergenerational effects of divorce is provided by the study by Engelhardt,

Trappe & Dronkers (2002). They compared the intergenerational effects of parental divorce in West and East Germany. They found that these effects were lower in East Germany despite its much higher divorce level, but that this difference in intergenerational effect disappeared by controlling for the differences in the religious composition of these two parts of Germany.

Despite the wealth of literature on the intergenerational effects of parental divorce, this research is mostly done in countries with a strong protestant history and culture, where divorce has long been a possibility in the majority of these states; furthermore, it is particularly concentrated on Anglo-Saxon countries. Therefore, most of this research has been done in the U.S.A. and in the north-western part of Europe: U.S.A. (Yamato & Keith, 1991; Yamato, 2001); Germany (Heekerens 1987; Wagner 1997, Wagner & Weiss, 2003), the Netherlands (Borgers, Dronkers & van Praag 1996; Bosman & Louwes 1988; Dronkers 1994, 1999; Spruijt & Goede 1996; Goede, Spruijt & Maas, 1999; Spruijt, Goede & Valk, 2001), Sweden (Jonsson & Gähler 1997; McNab & Murray 1985; Murray & Sandquist 1990), Switzerland (Oggenfuss 1984), and the UK (Cherlin *et al.* 1991; Kiernan 1992; Kiernan, Land & Lewis 1998; Ní Bhrolcháin 2001; Ní Bhrolcháin, Chappell & Diamond, 2000). Only very recently have the first studies on the intergenerational effects of parental divorce have been published for two catholic societies, France (Martin, 1997: 121; Traag, Dronkers & Vallet, 2000; Archambault, 2002) and Spain (Martinez, 2002). Thus analysing the intergenerational effects for non Anglo-Saxon countries may be fruitful, in order to avoid generalisation based on just a few, not necessarily representative, societies.

One of the main causes of the late development of research on the intergenerational effects of parental divorce in the catholic countries is the relatively recent rise in the occurrence of divorce, especially among couples with children, in these societies. Consequently, researching the intergenerational effects of parental divorce was extremely difficult because the number of

grownup children of divorced parents was too small to be analysed reliably. This late rise can be attributed to three main causes. Firstly, the strong role exercised in these societies by the Catholic Church about the ethical and moral values regarding family and divorce. Secondly, political problems within these catholic societies to regulate civil marriage - next to the church marriage - and its dissolution has also played a role in lowering divorce rates. In France, for example, this struggle between the State and the Church resulted in the earliest law for common divorce in Europe during the French Revolution. But this divorce law was changed or repealed frequently during the 19th and 20th centuries, depending on the balance of political power between the secular and the traditional parties. Thirdly, these countries are often characterised by a strongly familialistic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1999), making it more likely that divorce is accompanied by a strong social stigma and large economic difficulties, and thus will be avoided more than in countries with a less familialistic culture.

The aim of the paper is to add to the research on intergenerational effects of divorce in catholic countries. Until now, in Italy, no empirical research based on a large data-set has been done on the intergenerational effects of parental divorce on children education. Although the Italian case may differ from northern European societies, we assume that the results found in other European societies also apply in principal to Italy (we will not review this literature, because there are sufficient recent reviews, for example Amato 2001; Wagner & Weiss, 2003). Therefore, our hypotheses are based on international research. Having said this, however, considering that Italy is a country with strong regional differences in religious, cultural, political and social characteristics, we will develop hypotheses on the effect of the religious, cultural, political and social macro-context on the intergenerational effects of parental divorce.

THE ITALIAN CASE

Italian society is quite different from the north-western European societies with respect to many characteristics of its family structure, its cultural and religious systems, its social welfare system, and also with respect to the legislation, frequency and characteristics of divorce.

The prevalent family models and living arrangements in Italy are deemed to have remained traditional and stable, especially when compared with the changes in household forms in other countries (Pinelli, 1995; Blossfeld et al., 1995). As such, in the Italy of the 1990s, there continues to be a high percentage of women not in the labour market, a low rate of divorce, a low rate of birth out of the wedlock and a relatively high rate of marriages (Crouch, 1999). Furthermore, the family has an important role in the system of values of Italians: for a large majority of young people, who are generally deemed to be critical towards traditional values such as "religion", "family", and so forth, the family represents one of the most important things in their life (De Lillo, 2002). Thus, the role of the family in Italian society cannot be overestimated. For example, it has also been found that informal (enlarged) family networks in Italy play a stronger role in supporting its members economically, than in northern European countries (Bentolila & Ichino, 2000).

Another peculiar characteristic of Italian society regarding attitudes and behaviours towards issues related to the family, and particularly to divorce, is the important role played by the Catholic Church. According to recent research, more than 46% of young people have complete trust in priests; moreover, a large majority of young people think that there is a strong social stigma towards those people who divorce, have an abortion or cohabit without marrying (La Valle, 2002; Faccioli & Altieri, 2002). Thus the "traditional" approach of the Catholic Church to the family – expressed, for example, in the Pope's letters

Familiaris Consortio; Mulieres Dignitatem and *Lettera alle Famiglie* – is likely to play a stronger role in Italian society than in other western countries. The ethical and moral values promoted by this institution certainly influence individuals' behaviour; in particular it has been argued that religiosity has a strong effect on the divorce rate in Italy (Bosco, 1905; Barbagli & Saraceno, 1998).

The possibility of civil divorce has only recently been introduced in Italy. With the exception of a very short period under the Napoleonic regime, until 1970 only legal separation was allowed. Furthermore, unlike the majority of other western countries, legal separation still plays a strong role in Italian legislation on divorce. Married couples, indeed, need to undergo a period of at least three years of legal separation before they can ask for a divorce. This length and relevance of legal separation is an exception also with respect to other catholic and southern European countries (Barbagli & Saraceno, 1998).

The Italian social welfare system is, in comparison with the social welfare systems of other European countries, rather weak and not as generous as the Nothern European welfare systems (with some exceptions not related with divorce). As mentioned above, the Southern European welfare system are strongly familialistic (Esping-Anderson, 1999) and assume the substantive help of other members of the family in cases of poverty and other difficult situations. Compared to this help from family members, the subvention from the state is very meagre, although still more than the subvention in the USA. Divorce nearly always affects the bonds within the extended families (either the biological or the family-in-law) negatively. Thus the amount of help by family after the divorce to compensate the decline in economic resources will be smaller than the help after a comparable decline in economic resources not related to divorce. Moreover, a divorce will reduce the social capital of the divorcee, and given the importance of social capital for the survival in Italian

society (including its social welfare system), a divorce will reduce the quality of life to a greater extent than in other European societies.

Italy represents a peculiar case also with respect to the frequency of divorce. Although divorce rate and separation rates have increased in Italy during the last two decades – the absolute numbers of divorces and separations increased by 39% and 37.5% respectively from 1990 to 2000 (ISTAT, 2002) – the break-up of a married couple is still less frequent than in many other western societies (Crouch, 1999). Furthermore, some of the characteristics of the phenomenon of divorce are different in the Italian case. Firstly, it has been found that while in all the western countries the positive relationship between the rate of divorce/separation and social class, which held during the nineteenth century but changed during the twentieth century, in Italy this relationship remained stable during the 1980s and has only started to change very slowly during the 1990s – even if it should be noted that there are noticeable differences at the regional level (Bosco, 1905; Barbagli & Saraceno, 1998). Secondly, in Italy children represent a "disincentive" to divorce. Indeed, the separation rate is inversely – and strongly – related to the number of children; moreover, this correlation is confirmed when controlling for the duration of the marriage. This negative relation between divorce rate and the number of children is much weaker in other European countries. It should also be stressed that as a consequence of this "disincentive effect" of children, in addition to the low fertility rate, one third of divorcing couples do not have any children (Barbagli & Saraceno, 1998).

HYPOTHESES

The studies about the intergenerational effects of divorce on the educational attainment of children in Italy are not particularly numerous; furthermore, as far

as we know, there are no studies on this topic which are based on large data sets representative of the entire Italian population. Although there are peculiarities within Italian society concerning the family and divorce, we assume that the average results of studies on European societies as also being valid for Italy, because these peculiarities are minor in relation to the commonalties between Italy and the other European societies. The intergenerational effects of divorce on the educational attainment of children in European societies are generally negative and significant. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that they are usually not very strong. Moreover, these effects seem to become weaker, but not insignificant, when controlling for other possible consequences of divorce: e.g. poverty.

Another important point of our research regards the causes of the negative effect of parents' divorce on the educational attainment of their children. When considering possible explanations of this effect, we can identify two different perspectives which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Firstly, many scholars have argued that economic deprivation, which is often a consequence of divorce (see for example Sörensen, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), is the main cause of the intergenerational effects of divorce. According to this perspective family disruption dramatically reduces the economic resources available to the children, and consequently affects their educational attainment. In particular, it is often the case that economic resources of the non-custodial parent are no longer accessible to the children. This is particularly harmful if the non-custodial parent, generally the father, was the main income receiver in the couple. Secondly, the other perspective on the lower educational attainment of children of divorced parents refers to the lower quality of the socialisation process. According to this perspective, family disruption negatively affects the parent-child relationships by lowering the parental control and authority over the children, and thus the quality of the socialisation process. This lower quality is partly a consequence of the time and

energy devoted to the separation and divorce, but mostly of the parental conflict before and after divorce, which mainly explains the negative intergenerational effects of separation (Dronkers, 1999; Sun, 2001). Here it should be stressed that while the economic deprivation and the lower parental control affect, in principle, also other types of single parent families (i.e. single and widowed mothers), the latter factor we have mentioned – parental conflict – is particular to divorced parent families.

Barbagli and Saraceno (1998) have argued that the hypothesis that intergenerational effects are due to economic reasons has found more supporting evidence in the Italian case. According to the data of the *Commissione di indagine sulla Povertà e l'Emarginazione*, during the year 1995 6,4% of Italian couples with children were in a condition of poverty, while this percentage rises to 13,2% when only single parent families with children are taken into consideration (1996a; 1996b). On the other hand, it is also stressed that the conflict between divorced partners is more frequent, both before and after the divorce, among the lowest social classes; thus it can be argued that economic deprivation and conflict are two different but correlated causes of negative effect of divorce.

One of the aims of this article is to test if economic poverty is the main factor explaining negative intergenerational effects of divorce in Italy. If the intergenerational effects of divorce are largely due to the economic poverty, which results from the separation of partners, we would expect to find that once we control for income and wealth, the negative effect of divorce becomes insignificant. On the other hand, if poverty were not the main cause of intergenerational effect of divorce, controlling for wealth and income would not cancel the negative effect of divorce.

Another aim of the article is to test if the catholic religion and church have a significant effect on the consequences of divorce. We don't have individual information on the religious attitudes of the parents. But to start to

estimate the significance of religion within Italy for divorce-outcomes, we use macro indicators on differences in religious behaviour and attitudes in the 20 regions of Italy: religious participation, separation level and non-traditional views. We assume that the negative reactions on divorce are stronger in the more religious and traditional regions and thus that mothers and children are less supported by their families and surrounding, and thus that the negative effect of divorce on children is larger in these religious and traditional regions. Engelhardt, Trappe & Dronkers (2002) found that negative effect of parental divorce on children was less strong in the less religious and less traditional DDR than in the more religious and more traditional former FRG. We use this result on these two parts of Germany to formulate our hypotheses on the effects of religious regional differences on outcomes of divorce in Italy.

As it has been argued before, the other main hypotheses are based on international research (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001), and they are articulated as follows:

The educational level of children with divorced parents but living with their mother, is lower than the educational level of children of still married parents.The educational level of children of widowed mothers is equal to the educational level of children of married parents their economic resources being equal. The negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children is equal for males and females. The negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children is equal for low and high-educated mothers and for mothers with high and low incomes or wealth.

The higher the religious participation in a region, the stronger the negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children. The higher the separation level in a region, the weaker the negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children. The higher the level of non-traditional attitudes in a region, the weaker the negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children.

METHOD

Data and case selection

This article uses data from the Bank of Italy Survey of Households' Income and Wealth (SHIW); more specifically we have used the data provided in the Historical Archive (HA) of the survey, which covers the years 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1998 and 2000. Each wave of the survey consists of two sub-parts: a panel section and a cross-sectional one; the relative proportion of the first sub-part rose from 15% of the survey in the 1989, to 45% in 1995. The survey concentrates mainly on information regarding the economic status of households and their members: income, wealth, consumption, occupation, etc. These characteristics prove to be particularly useful when evaluating the hypothesis that poverty is the main cause of intergenerational effects of divorce. On the other hand, the SHIW-HA also provides information regarding other characteristics relevant to this study, for example the civil status of the household members (since year 1989) and educational attainment of each member.

This analysis of the intergenerational effects of divorce has children as its unit of analysis, and we will compare the educational attainment of comparable children according to the different civil status of their parents. However, there are three different factors, already mentioned before, which makes the selection of our Italian sample difficult: i) the low rate of divorce; ii) the low birth rate in Italy; iii) the negative relation between having children and the risk of divorce. All these factors can explain why, in the SHIW-HA survey, the number of children living with a divorced parent is extremely low in all the years considered. This problem of the small number of children of divorced parents forces us to use all households and their members irrespectively of the moment they enter or exit the survey and of the number of times they have participated

to the survey. This solution has certain advantages: a) it does not suffer from a possible bias due to non-random panel-dropout of the households (Brandolini, 1999; Quintano, Castellan & Romano, 1996); and b) it provides a much greater number of children living with divorced, single or widowed parents. We considered using only those households included in the panel section which were interviewed at least twice between years 1989-2000. However, the number of children living with divorced, single or widowed parents would have been very small (746, with only 232 children of divorced mothers) and therefore the results less reliable. However, we ran the same regressions on this far smaller panel section. The results, which can be obtained from the authors, do not contradict the main results of our analyses of the full sample.

It must also be noted that, although our selection, using all households and their members, increases the number of children living with their divorced parents, there are still very few children living with their divorced, widowed or single fathers. Consequently, they could not be analysed reliably as a separate group. Thus, our analyses are restricted to children living with their divorced, widowed or single mothers. Moreover, we did not use in the analysis fathers' characteristics, because they are only available for the very few cases in which the mother divorced, or became a widow, while participating in the panel part of the survey. For the same reason (the very few cases in which the mother divorced, or became widow, while participating in the panel sub-part of the survey) we could not analyse the effect of the change in economic resources connected with the event of divorce or widowhood. We have to restrict ourselves to control for the amount of economic resources after divorce or widowhood, although given the current level of analysis of the intergenerational effects of divorce in Italy, this is already an important improvement.

Finally, it should be noted than if one individual participates in more than one survey – there are some households participating in all – the information considered is that provided by the last survey in which they participated.

Hence, the sample we use consists of children living with their divorced, widowed or single mother and of children living with their married parents. Furthermore, we select all those children who, in the last survey in which they participated, were older than 13 or younger than 35. Children younger than 14 years are not allowed to leave the school system and, unless they are special cases, are attending lower secondary school (*scuole medie*). Therefore, only when they are older than 13 they can have the lower secondary school diploma or a diploma of a higher degree. On the other hand, those older than 34 and still living with their parents may also be considered as special cases and thus potential outliers. Nevertheless, considering the long period that Italian students usually need to get their university degree and the very high percentage of those who leave their parents' home during their 30s, we have decided not to limit our study, as is conventionally done, to those who are younger than 30 years (Buzzi, Cavalli & De Lillo, 2002).

Dependent variable

Educational attainment of the child. The educational attainment of each family member is registered in the SHIW-HA by asking people which is the highest diploma they have obtained. Therefore, this variable does not consider the level of education they are still attending or they attended without getting any diploma. For instance, the educational level registered for those who are still attending university is secondary school diploma. The variable runs from no degree of education (value 0) to higher than a bachelor's degree (value 5). The other possible educational qualifications are "elementary school", "middle school", "high school" and "bachelor's degree". The variable measures the child's qualification in the last survey she/he participated.

Independent variables

Family type. The civil status of the mother was registered in the SHIW-HA in all the years considered. It should be noted that the data of the SHIW-HA does not permit a distinction to be made between separated and divorced people, because both civil statuses were coded with the same category. However, we believe that this distinction between separation and divorce is not very important for our hypotheses. Legal separation is the crucial moment of the breaking up of a couple in Italy, so although divorce can be obtained only after three years of separation, all the most important decisions (regarding incomes, children, and so forth) are taken at the moment of legal separation. Looking at those who participate more than once in the survey, mothers' civil status can assume a variety of different forms: some remain married for the whole period covered by the surveys, some divorce and remarry, some divorce and then declare themselves – or, at least they are registered in the data set – as singles, and so on. Therefore we have constructed the variable "family type" to refer to the answers given in the surveys to the question of marital status. It is coded using the following procedure: when a mother indicates once that she is divorced or separated, she is coded as divorced. If a mother indicates once that she is widowed and she never indicates that she is separated or divorced, she is coded as widowed. If a mother indicates once that she is single and never indicates that she is separated, divorced or widowed, she is coded as single. If a mother indicates that she is married and she never indicates that she is separated, divorced, widowed or single, she is coded as married.

Child characteristics. We consider three variables which account for child characteristics: gender, age and year of birth. The gender variable is a dummy, with females being coded with a value of 1 and males with a value of 0. The age of the child is measured in the last survey in which she/he participated. As is

mentioned above, we include in our analysis only those children between 14 and 34 years.

Mothers' characteristics. We take two variables into consideration when accounting for the status and "social capital" of the mother: her occupation and her educational level. The latter is measured and codified exactly in the same way it is done for the educational level of the child. The occupation variable and the various so-called non-employment statutes, as registered in the SHIW-HA, present 13 different categories. The inclusion of all these 13 categories in the regression model as dummy variables would be quite confusing; moreover, some of these categories contain very few mothers from our sample. Therefore, we include in the analyses, as dummy variables, only those occupation or non-employment statues which are held by more than 5% of the mothers, i.e. blue-collar worker or similar jobs, office worker or school teacher, sole proprietor, freelance and unpaid family member, homemaker, and pensioner. The variable measures mothers' occupational status in the last survey she participated.

Family characteristics. Three different variables are considered to account for family characteristics, namely wealth, income and family size. The total net wealth of a household is measured in the SHIW-HA as the sum of real assets and financial assets minus financial liabilities. The variable registers the value of net household wealth in the last survey the child participated. It should be stressed that the high rate of inflation in Italy in some of the years considered – with the consequence that the same wealth value in different years has different real values – as well as the fact that we are merging data from different years, necessitates that we "correct" wealth values in order to avoid any possible selection bias. To this end, we have utilised the adequate coefficients provided by ISTAT (the official Italian statistics office), which are based on the national indexes of prices (FOI), to express the value of household wealth in terms of

2002 tens of thousands of Euro. Consequently, the year in which wealth and income are registered does not bias our results. Net household income is measured in the SHIW-HA as the sum of compensation of employees, pensions and other transfers, net income form self-employment, and property income. It is registered in the last interview in which the child participated. Similarly to what is done for household wealth, we transform this value, and it is expressed in tens of thousands of 2002 Euro. Finally, we also consider the number of family members in last year the child participates in the survey.

Geographical characteristics. Two main variables are inserted into the model to account for where the child lives. The first regards the Italian area where she/he lives. We adopt the classical distinction between northern, central and southern areas. Secondly, we also use the a variable which accounts for the size of municipality; this is codified in 4 different categories, ranging from "up to 20,000 inhabitants" (lowest category) to "more than 500,000 inhabitants (highest category). Both these variables are measured in the last survey the child participated.

Cultural and social characteristics of the region of residence. In addition to the classical distinction between northern, central and southern area, Italy is also divided into 20 regions. We use these 20 regions to characterise the social and cultural context of the households analysed. Three different variables are used to distinguish the social and cultural characteristics of the living environment of the child although, due to constraints of data availability, we have been forced to consider these characteristics at the regional level. Thus, using macro-data from ISTAT we have used the following variables: the number of separations per 1000 inhabitants; the percentage of inhabitants of the region aged over 5 years who declared that they participate in religious activities at least once a week; and the number of voluntarily interrupted pregnancies per 1000 women

aged between 14 and 49 years. All these variables are registered for the region in which the child was living during the last interview she/he participated. The values of these variables have been registered by ISTAT in the year 1998.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Here, we begin by reporting some basic statistics about all the variables considered, according to the mothers civil status, and the cross tabulation of the family type and the educational attainment of the child. Then, we apply simple OLS regression models to test our hypotheses with the child's educational attainment as the dependent variable. We follow with a series of nested regression-equations. First, we start our main explanatory variable: the civil status of the mother; therefore a set of three dummy variables was inserted excluding the reference category which is the status "married".

In the second model we utilised, three different variables accounting for the child's characteristics are introduced: sex of the child, age of the child, and year of birth of the child. We know that, females of the younger cohorts have higher educational attainment than men, that age is strongly related to the kind of diploma attained, and that the average level of education is higher among younger cohorts. Therefore, it is necessary to control for the possibility that differences according to mother's civil status are not due to a "composition effect", meaning an over representation of females in the group of married mothers' children. In the third model we control for mother's civil status effect by the characteristics of the family and the mother. As we mention above, it is often the case that single parent (mother) families are poorer and in a weaker occupational position than married mothers. Furthermore, as has already been alluded to, many scholars have argued that the negative intergenerational effects of divorce are mainly due to the relatively worse economic conditions relating

to divorce; in other words, the higher risk of poverty arising from divorce. Therefore, we need to control for the negative relationship between divorce status and child educational attainment with various family and mother's characteristics, such as the educational level of the mother, the occupational status of the mother, net household income and wealth, and the number of family members. This model will also confirm or falsify our first and second hypothesis.

It is also important to consider the area of residence of the family. Indeed, it should be stressed that there are relevant social, cultural and economic differences between the north, centre and south of Italy, as well as between the twenty Italian regions. Considering that divorce mostly occurs in the wealthier and more prosperous regions of northern Italy, the intergenerational effects of divorce may be hidden for the lay eye. The children of divorced parents could even attain a higher average educational level than children of married parents, but only because the former live in more wealthy and prosperous regions and thus have higher educational outcomes. Moreover, it is also important to control for the social and cultural characteristics of the region, which differ strongly at the regional level, and which also affect the ratio of divorce. For example, Barbagli and Saraceno have found a negative effect of religiosity on the regional level on the separation ratio (1998).

Finally, after inserting all these controlling variables, we tested our hypotheses by adding to the fourth regression model various interaction variables one by one: gender of the child*divorce (third hypothesis); educational level of the mother*divorce and household income*divorce (fourth hypothesis); religiosity of the region*divorce (fifth hypothesis); separation rate*divorce (sixth hypothesis); abortion rate*divorce (seventh hypothesis). We discount all the interactions whose coefficients were not significant at the .05 level. In the final model, therefore, only those interactions significantly related to the independent variable are presented. As we will see in the next paragraph,

we have been persuaded by the results of this latter model of the need to test also for the interactions between the educational level of the mother and the other two single parent family statutes (model 6), which are widow and single families.

RESULTS

As is reported in table 1, the children of divorced mothers represent 3.5% of our sample while children of widows are more than double this figure. Thus it seems from this data that the death of the father, more than divorce, is the cause of single mothers families in Italy. Indeed, "single mother families" number very few, representing less than 1% of the sample.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

It is well known that, in Italy, females generally tend to leave their parental home at an earlier age than males (see, for example, Facchini, 2002). Thus, it is not surprising that females are less than 50% in all types of families considered. Furthermore, the fact that this percentage is clearly higher in "divorced families", and to some extent also in "single families", seems to indicate a peculiar characteristic of this type of family. The average age of the child is very similar in all types of families, with the exception of "widowed families" where the average age of the child is higher.

The level of education of the mother varies a lot according to the family type, with divorced and single mothers being generally better educated than the others, while widows have, on average, a much lower educational level. These educational differences underline the importance of controlling for the mother's educational level in an analysis of the effects of divorce. Even if, as we have

seen, the educational attainment of divorced mothers is on average the highest, this type of family is generally the poorest among those considered. Indeed, as indicated by data presented in table 1, widowed mothers also enjoy a better economic situation than divorced mothers. Moreover, the data shows that "divorced families" have, on average, the smallest family size, while the size of "married families" is the biggest.

The children of divorced mothers are over represented in the child population of the northern regions, where they represent more than 5% of all children, compared to 3.5% at the national level. On the other hand, children living with widowed mothers are most likely to live in the southern regions.

Finally, it should be noted that, generally speaking, children of divorced mothers live in bigger municipalities and in regions where the number of separations is higher and the religiosity is lower. On the contrary, the children of divorced or widowed families live in regions where the number of voluntarily interrupted pregnancies is lower.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The cross tabulation of child educational attainment and the type of family is presented in table 2. First, it should be noted that in all types of families, with the exception of married ones, there is an over representation of children without any degree. Furthermore children living with divorced or widowed mothers are more likely than others to gain only an elementary school diploma. This data must necessarily be controlled according to the age of the child. Nevertheless, considering that the successful attendance of compulsory school implies that children attain the middle school diploma, this seems to signal a high level of social exclusion among children living in divorced or widow families. A further consideration is that a large number of the children of divorced mothers only get the diplomas of compulsory schools; in other words,

the percentage of those living in divorced families who get a diploma higher than that of middle school, is much lower than it is for the overall population.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The results of the OLS regression analyses are presented in table 3. The analysis begins with a model, which only considers the effect of mother's civil status on the educational attainment of the child. The results of this first model are fully comparable with those of table 2. With respect to the reference category – married mothers – all the other possible civil statutes considered are negatively associated to the child's educational attainment. However, only the children of divorced mothers have a *significantly* lower educational level than those with married parents. Moreover, it should be stressed that the difference is small (nearly .10), given that educational attainment varies from 0 to 6. The coefficients of children of single and widowed mothers are also negative but not significant.

Model 2 includes the child's characteristics. Therefore, our basic hypothesis about the negative effect of divorce is tested against compositional effects due to our selection procedure, such as more females, older children in the group of married parents. As expected, the age of the child is strongly and positively related to the level of diploma obtained (the value of the standardized coefficient is .44). However, in this second model, there is an unexpected but important change in the coefficient related to the widowhood status of the mother: it becomes more negative and significant. This negative effect of widowhood was probably hidden by the age composition of the children of widowed mothers who are, as it has been noted before, on average much older than other children. At this point of the analysis, widowhood seems to have a worse effect on a child's educational attainment than does divorce. This effect

of parental divorce has hardly changed by the introduction of the child's characteristics: it is still negative and significant.

In model 3, the variables on the economic conditions of the family, family-size, and the educational level and occupational status of the mother are added to the equation. As expected, the educational level of the mother and the level of income are positively related to the educational attainment of the child. This model can also be seen as a test for the hypothesis that the economic disadvantage associated with divorce – or more generally of the absence of one of the two parents (single mothers; widows) - is the only, or main, cause of the negative intergenerational effects of divorce. If this economic hypothesis explains the negative effect of divorce that we found in our first two models, this effect should become insignificant. On the contrary, however, the results of our third model suggest that, once income, wealth and other characteristics of the mother have been controlled for, the negative relation between divorce status of the mother and child educational attainment becomes even stronger. Indeed, the coefficient of divorce almost doubles. Interestingly, the negative effect of widowhood becomes less in model 3 compared to model 2, but is unexpectedly about the same size of that of divorce.

The fourth step is to add to the control variables the "geographical characteristics" of the households, and the social and cultural characteristics of region of residence. The coefficients of the different civil statutes of the mother do not change significantly by adding these geographical characteristics.

In model 5, we test many of our hypotheses by adding a number of interaction variables one by one, and by removing from the model all variables with insignificant coefficients. The coefficients resulting from model 5 confirm our third hypothesis, namely that the interaction between divorce and child's gender was not significant, although we have a "mixed" result for the fourth hypothesis. The second part of this fourth hypothesis is confirmed, in that the interaction between the variables divorce and household income is not

significant. However, the interaction between the mother's educational level and divorce status proves to be significant. Therefore, the first part of fourth hypothesis has to be rejected. The evidence suggests that mothers' educational level has a much more positive effect on educational level of the child when the mother is divorced. And yet, it should be noted that – considering the size of the coefficients – the mother has to have a bachelor's degree to almost neutralize ((-.337 + (4*.082)) ~= 0) the negative effect of divorce. It is also important to consider that, once this interaction variable is introduced, the size of the coefficient of divorce increases considerably and, as a consequence, the negative effect of divorce becomes much higher than that related to widowhood. All the subsequent hypotheses, numbering from five to seven, have to be rejected; none of the interaction variables – between divorce and religiosity level of the region/ separation rate in the region/ abortion rate in the region – give a result that is significant. Hence, it seems that the social and cultural environment does not influence the size of the negative effect of mother divorce on child's educational attainment.

At this point of the analysis, the first hypothesis can be accepted finally, whilst the second one must be rejected. After introducing all the control variables, the children of widowed mothers still have a lower educational level than children living with both parents. It is also interesting to note that, when considering model 5, the difference between the coefficients for divorce and widowhood seems to confirm the negative role played by parental conflict. As we have argued before, this explanatory factor is peculiar to the divorced families, whereas other factors related to the socialization process and to economic deprivation also apply to other types of single parent families. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the difference only emerges when controlling for the interaction between divorce and mother's education. As such, we present a sixth model which introduces the interaction between the others family types and mother's education. The results of model 6 indicate that, in

comparison to married couples, the negative effects of divorce and widowhood become similar and remain substantial. However, the educational levels of children of higher educated divorced and widowed mothers are less negatively affected by their parental divorce or fathers' death than children of lower educated divorced and widowed mothers. A higher educated widow can fully neutralize the negative effect of widowhood: this happens if the widowed mother has a high school diploma or more $((-.363 + (3*.142))>0)$. Divorced mothers needs to have at least a bachelor degree to neutralize fully the negative effect of divorce on the educational level of their children $((-.358 + (4*.094))>0)$. An interesting consequence of these positive interactions is that the educational levels of children with widowed mothers with a bachelor degree or more are higher than those of comparable children living in a household with their married parents. Another remarkable result of model 6 is the negative effect of the interaction between a mother's education and being a single mother. This means that the educational level of children with single mothers with more than middle school diploma $((.160 - (2*.121))<0)$ is lower than that of comparable children living in a household with their married parents.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

We summarize our results with a discussion of our hypotheses. The first hypothesis, which assumes that the educational level of children with divorced parents living with their mother is lower than the educational level of children of still married parents, is fully endorsed by our results. This negative result cannot be explained by the more difficult economic and social situation of divorced families, nor by the negative impact of the cultural climate of their region. Controlling for these factors increases the negative effect of divorce instead of decreasing. The main explanation of this unusual increase by

controlling is that divorce with children is mostly done in Italy by parents with enough resources. This 'bias' of divorce by the higher social strata in Italy 'hides' its negative effect on the educational outcomes of their children. The acceptance of our first hypothesis suggest that economic deprivation is one but not the most important cause of negative effects of divorce on children and it highlights the relevance of socialisation process, and particularly parental conflict for the explanation of these negative effects.

The second hypothesis, that the educational level of children of widowed mothers is equal to the educational level of children of married parents after controlling for economic and cultural resources, is not upheld by our data. The second hypothesis is only true for children of widowed mothers of a middle school diploma or more. Children of widowed mothers with less than a middle school diploma have lower educational outcomes than comparable children with married parents with the same economic and social resources. However, the educational levels of children with widowed mothers with a bachelor degree or more are higher than those of comparable children living in a household with their married parents. So, living without a father doesn't need to be negative for children, but the mother needs to have enough economic and social resources to compensate the weak Italian welfare system and probably the lost of a part of the support of her wider family. The weakness of the Italian welfare system and the importance of the family for survival in Italian society might explain the negative effect of widowhood on children's educational outcomes in our Italian data. Because a comparable negative effect of widowhood is not found in other European societies with more developed welfare regimes and a lower importance of the family for survival. The only exception is a Spanish analysis of the effect of widowhood and divorce (Martinez, 2002), but Spain has also a weak welfare system and a strong emphasis on the family as a mean for support in difficult times.

The third hypothesis, which assumes that the negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children is equal for males and females, can be accepted. This Italian result doesn't deviate from the other European ones.

The fourth hypothesis, which assumes that the negative effect of parental divorce on the educational level of their children is equal for low and high-educated mothers and for mothers with high and low incomes or wealth, must be rejected partly (for mother's educational level) and can be partly accepted. Divorced mothers need to have at least a bachelor degree (the highest educational diploma of divorced mothers in our sample) to neutralize fully the substantive negative effect of divorce on the educational level of their children. This also means that the children of lowest educated mothers have the largest educational backlog compared with comparable children with married similar low educated mothers. With other words, the negative effect of divorce on children is for the divorced families with the lowest social and cultural resources. This latter doesn't mean economic resources, because we control for income and wealth and because the negative effect of divorce happens to be equal for children with low and high-educated mothers. It is probably more correct to conclude from this different results, that parents with already lower social and cultural resources find it more difficult to cope with the negative aspects of divorce (parental conflict before and after separation and divorce; the partly loss of parental authority; the lower quality of socialisation; the partly loss of the support from the wider family) and due to this low level of social and cultural resources cannot obtain enough support from the weak Italian welfare system. On the other hand high educated divorced mothers can use their stronger social and cultural capital to find their way more successfully through the Italian welfare system and thus obtaining more financial and other support. The stronger effect of the educational level of widowed mothers and the possibility of high educated widows to fully neutralise the negative

consequences of fathers death can be interpreted as an indication of the larger support of widows than divorcees by the Italian welfare system. This supports the description of Italy as a strongly familialistic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1999). A divorce is a stronger break with the familialistic character of Italian society, while it denies the eternal bonds within the (extended) family and thus produces a larger loss of social and cultural resources than divorce in more individualistic European societies or widowhood in Italy.

The rejection of the three last hypotheses on the importance of regional indicators of religiosity, separation level, or non-traditional attitudes indicates that the effect of divorce is equal in all regions of Italy. This result suggests that the familialistic character of Italian society is not restricted to some backward regions or to their characteristics. It also suggests that the negative effect of divorce will not decrease as soon as an Italian region will become less traditional or religious or more modern or individualistic. And these results neither support the thesis that religious differences in Catholic practice and attitudes are important for understanding different outcomes of divorce; from this point of view divorce and its results the catholic character of Italy seems to be less important for these outcomes. The insignificance of the strong regional Italian differences in as religiosity, separation level, and non-traditional attitudes doesn't support an optimistic thesis on a decreasing negative intergenerational effect of divorce, as it becomes a less stigmatising event in a modernising society.

However, although divorce thus has negative intergenerational consequences, which cannot be explained by a lack of economic resources, it is good to remember that parental education has a larger impact on their children lives than their divorce.

The clear intergenerational effect of parental divorce shows that divorce processes in Italy don't deviate strongly from that in other European societies. The catholic character of Italy seems not to be a reason for a deviant Italian

case. The only deviation might be the result of the stronger family orientation and the weaker welfare system in Italy compared to the more individualistic northern European societies. It makes the consequences of divorce more negative in Italy, because divorce often also means the partial loss of the help of the family, necessary to maintain oneself in the Italian society. But our data are not suited to estimate precisely the strength of the possible deviation of this Italian effect. This should be done in future cross-national comparative research, which is very rare in the field of divorce (but see Garib, Garcia & Dronkers, 2003).

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Table 1. Characteristics of children between 13 and 35 living in the parental household, their mothers, their families, their municipalities, and their regions, separately for children with married parents, children with single mothers, children with widowed mothers and children with divorced mothers (standard deviation between parentheses).

	Married	*Single*	*Widow*	*Divorced*
No and percentage of the total population	18233	156	1552	723
	88.24%	0.75%	7.51%	3.50%
Percentage of female children	44.86%	46.15%	43.43%	49.10%
Average age of the child	21.745	21.308	24.844	21.346
	(4.986)	(5.073)	(5.182)	(4.818)
Average educational level of the mother	1.752	1.936	1.406	2.160
	(1.011)	(.988)	(1.017)	(.971)
Average net household yearly income in price level 2002 (*10,000 Euro)	3.558	3.083	2.707	2.399
	(2.320)	(2.435)	(1.650)	(1.725)
Average net household wealth in price level 2002 (* 10,000 Euro)	19.602	16.615	12.440	9.987
	(43.670)	(21.437)	(17.646)	(23.963)
Average family size	4.315	3.769	3.289	3.178
	(1.079)	(1.489)	(1.271)	(1.075)
Percentage from the specific family type in northern regions	86.72	.83	7.18	5.26

Percentage from the specific family type in central regions	89.11	.91	6.65	3.34
Percentage from the specific family type in southern regions	89.08	.62	8.18	2.12
Average value of the ordinal variable "municipality size"	2.497	2.5	2.480	2.707
	(.964)	(.898)	(.990)	(.983)
Average number of separations per 1000 inhabitants in region	1.027	1.052	1.007	1.171
	(.351)	(.353)	(.344)	(.313)
Average percentage of people (> 5 years) attending religious activities at least one a week in region	36.599 (7.017)	36.235 (7.596)	36.806 (6.817)	34.637 (6.946)
Average number of voluntarily interrupted pregnancies per 1000 women (14<age<49)	9.732 (2.278)	9.547 (2.463)	9.458 (2.161)	9.465 (2.013)

Table 2. The educational level of children living in households with married parents, single mothers, widowed mothers or divorced mothers.

Family type	None	Elementary school	Middle school	High school	Bachelor's degree	Post-graduate qualification	Total
Married	.53	3.65	45.76	44.28	5.70	.09	100
Single	1.28	3.85	47.44	42.95	4.49	-	100
Widow	1.35	6.89	41.56	42.85	7.15	.19	100
Divorced	.97	4.29	51.04	39.70	4.01	-	100
Total	.61	3.92	45.64	44.00	5.74	.09	100

Table 3. The unstandardized regression coefficients and their standard errors between parentheses of 6 nested regression equations with the educational level of children as dependent variable.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Divorced (ref. both married parents)	-.097***	-.084***	-.164***	-.160***	-.337***	-.358***
	(.026)	(.024)	(.023)	(.023)	(.056)	(.055)
Single (ref. both married parents)	-.057	-.044	-.071	-.075	-.075	.160*
	(.056)	(.051)	(.048)	(.048)	(.048)	(.093)
Widowed (ref. both married parents)	-.031*	-.202***	-.159***	-.155***	-.156***	-.363***
	(.018)	(.017)	(.018)	(.018)	(.018)	(.029)
Female		.120***	.119***	.119***	.119***	.118***
		(.009)	(.008)	(.008)	(.008)	(.008)
Age of the child		.060***	.056***	.056***	.056***	.056***
		(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Year of birth of the child		.004***	-.002**	-.002**	-.002**	-.002*
		(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Educational level mother			.199***	.200***	.197***	.185***
			(.005)	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)
Blue collar worker or similar (ref. other occupations)			.021	.020	.026	.021
			(.027)	(.027)	(.027)	(.027)

Office worker or school teacher (ref. other occupations)	-.030 (.026)	-.030 (.026)	-.029 (.026)	-.028 (.025)
Sole proprietor, freelance and unpaid family member (ref. other occupations)	.059** (.028)	.059** (.028)	.060** (.028)	.057** (.028)
Pensioner (ref. other occupations)	.023 (.026)	.026 (.026)	.029 (.026)	.034 (.026)
Homemaker (ref. other occupations)	.070** (.024)	.076** (.024)	.077*** (.024)	.071** (.024)
Household yearly income (*10,000)	.028*** (.002)	.028*** (.002)	.028*** (.002)	.029*** (.002)
Household wealth (*10,000)	.0002* (.0001)	.0002* (.0001)	.0002* (.0001)	.0002* (.0001)
Household size	-.062*** (.004)	-.060*** (.004)	-.060*** (.004)	-.060*** (.004)
Middle Area of Italy (ref. North)		-.043** (.016)	-.043** (.016)	-.043** (.016)
Southern Area of Italy (ref. North)		-.155*** (.031)	-.156*** (.031)	-.150*** (.031)
Size of the municipality		.001 (.004)	.001 (.004)	.001 (.004)

Regional separation rate				-.251***	-.252***	-.245***
				(.051)	(.051)	(.051)
Regional level of religiosity				-.004***	-.004***	-.004***
				(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Regional level of abortion rate				.006**	.006**	.006**
				(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Divorce* mother's education					.082***	.094***
					(.023)	(.023)
Widow* mother's education						.142***
						(.015)
Single* mother's education						-.121**
						(.041)
Intercept	2.512***	-7.626***	5.892***	5.842**	5.833**	4.987**
	(.005)	(2.205)	(2.084)	(2.104)	(2.103)	(2.101)
Adjusted R2	.001	.167	.279	.280	.281	0.284

* sig. <.10; **sig. <.05; *** sig. <.001