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Descriptive Finding

Non-resident parent-child contact after marital dissolution and parental repartnering: Evidence from Italy

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Non-resident parent-child contact after marital dissolution and parental repartnering: Evidence from Italy

Silvia Meggiolaro¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

With the diffusion of marital instability, the number of children who spend some of their childhood without one of their parents has become significant, even in Italy. Therefore, given the importance of parent-child interactions for children's wellbeing, analyzing children's contact with the non-resident parent has become relevant.

OBJECTIVE

In this paper we consider the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident parent after separation, with a double aim: a) to analyze if and how the non-resident parent's contact with his/her children varies according to whether the (resident or non-resident) parent has repartnered, and b) to investigate whether the relationship between repartnering and contact differs according to the gender of the non-resident parent.

METHODS

The study focuses on children aged 0–17 living with only one biological parent, using data pooled together from two cross-sectional rounds of the Italian survey, Family and Social Subjects.

RESULTS

Results show that parents' repartnering is positively associated with lower non-resident parent-child contact only in the case of non-resident fathers; in the case of a non-resident mother, her repartnering is actually correlated with higher contact.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades the increase in the proportion of separations and divorce involving children has been accompanied by a rise in sole parenthood, and thus an increasing number of children spend some of their childhood without one of their parents (Chapple 2009; Panico et al. 2010). Since a good parent-child interaction contributes to children's psychological well-being and positive development (Carlson 2006; Levin and Currie 2010) and to the non-custodial parent's compliance in paying child support (see, for example, Juby et al. 2007), great attention has been paid in the literature to examining the frequency of contact between non-resident parents and their children, and the factors associated with it (Juby et al. 2007; King and Sobolewski 2006; Nepomnyaschy 2007; Amato, Meyers, and Emery 2009).

The diffusion of marital instability is, however, associated with an increase in repartnering (Ermisch 2002; Sweeney 2010). What about the contact between children and non-resident parents when one or both parents enter a new partnership? Previous empirical literature has usually considered children who live with their mothers after their parents' separation, disregarding those living with their fathers (Sousa and Sorensen 2008). This literature has generally found a negative effect of the non-resident father's repartnering on the contact with his children (Juby et al. 2007; Swiss and Le Bourdais 2009); the research evidence is more mixed regarding resident mother's repartnering. Some studies have suggested that the mother's new union decreases non-resident father involvement (Amato, Meyers, and Emery 2009; Berger, Cancian, and Meyer 2012), whereas others have found little or no effect (Day and Acock 2004; Sobolewski and King 2005; King 2009). Studies on non-resident mothers are limited: most are dated (Stewart 1999) or based on small or highly selected samples (King 2007). More recently, studies on non-resident motherhood have received some attention, but mainly from a qualitative viewpoint (Kielty 2008a, 2008b). In addition, studies on the topic have not considered the relationship between the repartnering of both parents and non-resident parent-child contact.

The aim of the current study is to verify how resident and non-resident parents' repartnering is associated with non-resident parent-child contact for children under 18, examining whether the relationship between repartnering and contact differs according to the gender of the non-resident parent. The analysis refers to Italy, a country that is characterized by a recent but quite rapid spread of marital instability (Istat 2012, 2014). Also, the number of children who spend some of their childhood without one of their parent is becoming significant: in 2009, for example, 66.4% of separations and 60.7% of divorces were of couples with children (Istat 2011a). Even if children usually live with their mothers after their parents' separation, single-father families (excluding those from widowhood) are not insignificant, and in 2009 they comprised a total of roughly

163,000 households (Istat 2011b). At the same time, repartnering is increasingly common: in 2009, 23% of women and 32% of men who had experienced marital instability were in a new union (Istat 2011c). From this perspective, the current paper could shed light on a topic – parental behavior after separation – which, given the lack of adequate data, is still little analyzed for countries moving from a traditional to a more complex family context.

2. Data and measures

The data come from pooling together two independent cross-sectional rounds of the nationally representative survey Family and Social Subjects (FSS), conducted in Italy by the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) in 2003 and in 2009. We focused on 1,079 boys and girls aged 0–17, who at the time of interview were living with their mother after their parents' marital dissolution and had a living father, and on their 135 counterparts who were living with their father and had a living mother.

Besides socio-demographic data on each household member and on the household (family structure, economic conditions, geographical area of residence), the survey provided information on the geographical distance and frequency of contact between non-resident parents and their children. In particular, two questions investigated face-to-face 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 addition, the FSS survey reported the non-resident parent's union status. Unfortunately, further information about the non-resident parent (socio-demographic characteristics) or her/his possible new family (children born from any new union) were unavailable. In addition, no information was provided on whether children's parents shared custody, introduced in Italy as an ordinary procedure by law 54/2006. The survey only asked whether in the last year the child had lived in a different home from that at the time of the interview for some days a week, to be with a parent: however, the corresponding percentage is negligible (6.3%) and thus this information is not considered in the analyses.

In the current paper the frequency of contact between children and non-resident parents is measured with a composite index that considers the frequency of both face-to-face and phone contact. Following the approach suggested in previous studies (Lader 2008), direct contact takes priority over indirect contact, resulting in a six-category variable (different categorizations of the variable give similar results) (Figure 1a): a high frequency of contact is defined as the non-resident parent having in-person visits with the child every day; a middle-high frequency is assigned when in-person visits are several times per week and/or phone contact is every day; mid-level contact refers to

situations when children see their non-resident parents once per week or have phone contact several times per week; middle-low contact is defined as in-person visits one to three times per month, or phone contact once per week or one to three times per month; lastly, children who reported not having contact with their non-resident parents at all, either by phone or by in-person visits, and children who only had contact several times a year are classified as low contact. For non-resident parents living more than 50 kilometers from their children’s residence, phone contact is given more importance than in-person contact when defining high contact. The complete categorization is described in Figure 1b.

In fact, the geographical distance between children’s and non-resident parents’ households might be an important control covariate (Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010), but many questions about the causal direction remain and cannot be adequately addressed with the cross-sectional data used here (Le Bourdais, Juby, and Marcil-Gratton 2002; Swiss and Le Bourdais 2009). Consequently, non-resident parents’ proximity to children is not included in the analyses as a control covariate, but in the definition of the dependent variable.

Figure 1a: Definition of non-resident parent-child contact for non-resident parents living less than 50 kilometers away from the child

		In-person visits					
		Every day	Several (2-6) times per week	Once per week	One to three times per month	Several times a year	Never
Phone contact	Every day	High Contact	Middle-high contact				
	Several (2-6) times per week		Middle contact				
	Once per week						
	One to three times per month				Middle-low contact		
	Several times a year					Low contact	
	Never					Low contact	
	Never					Low contact	

Figure 1b: Definition of non-resident parent-child contact for non-resident parents living more than 50 kilometers away from the child

		In-person visits					
		Every day	Several (2-6) times per week	Once per week	One to three times per month	Several times a year	Never
Phone contact	Every day	High Contact			Middle-high contact		
	Several (2-6) times per week	High Contact			Middle contact		
	Once per week	Middle-high contact	Middle contact	Middle-low contact			
	One to three times per month						
	Several times a year	Low contact					
	Never						

3. Analyzing non-resident parent-child contact

3.1 Preliminary results

Table 1 shows that contact with the non-resident parent is fairly high in Italy: around 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. For non-resident fathers, parents' repartnering is associated with lower father-child contact, at least as regards high and middle-high contact, and this is particularly true if the mother or both parents have repartnered. In the case of non-resident mothers, the small sample size of some categories (only the father repartnered and both parents repartnered) does not allow for separately analyzing all the possible parent repartnering statuses. However, some results can be equally stressed. First, neither parent repartnering seems to have a similar role to that observed for the case of resident mothers. Second, contrary to what

happens with non-resident fathers, the proportion of children with high or middle-high contact with their mothers is higher when the mothers have repartnered.

Table 1: Non-resident parent-child contact according to the gender of resident parent and parents' repartnering (%)

	High	Middle-high	Middle	Middle-low	Low	N = 100
Resident mother						
Both parents repartnered	15.6	25.0	12.5	31.3	15.6	32
Only the mother repartnered	12.9	29.0	16.1	11.3	30.7	62
Only the father repartnered	18.9	32.3	14.4	20.0	14.4	180
Neither parents repartnered	23.5	36.5	14.7	11.4	13.9	805
Total	21.9	35.1	14.6	13.4	15.0	1,079
Resident father						
Both parents repartnered	76.9	7.7	7.7	0.0	7.7	13
Only the mother repartnered	34.3	40.0	17.1	8.6	0.0	35
Only the father repartnered	0.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	4
Neither parents repartnered	25.3	38.5	15.7	13.3	7.2	83
Total	31.8	36.3	14.8	10.4	6.7	135
Total	23.0	35.2	14.6	13.1	14.1	1,214

3.2 Modeling non-resident parent-child contact

Parents' repartnering might vary according to their characteristics, their children's characteristics, and the household's characteristics; which, in turn, can be associated with contact. Thus, a multivariate analysis has to be used to take into account potential compositional effects. In particular, an ordered logistic regression (De Maris 2004) is used to model the frequency of contact. In this way the estimated coefficients of an independent variable predict the probability of having higher/lower (in our specification, higher) contact. We estimate a single model by pooling together data referring to non-resident mothers and fathers; in addition, a within-family working

correlation matrix structure is specified to account for the non-independence of children within the same family (Agresti 2002). The key covariate distinguishes all possible parent repartnering statuses (as described in Table 1) for resident mothers but only whether mothers repartnered or not (independent of fathers' repartnering) for resident fathers. This categorization allows us to avoid too small sample sizes in some categories of the key covariate; however, it merges cases which, in the descriptive results (Table 1), seem to have similar effects on non-resident mother-child contact (at least as regards high and middle-high contact).

Besides the key covariate, the model takes into account the socio-demographic characteristics of both children and parents. As regards children's characteristics, their gender and age at interview are considered, due to their importance for non-resident parent-child contact suggested by the literature (King, Harris, and Heard 2004; Amato, Meyers, and Emery 2009; Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010). As regard the parents, the available information is about the resident parent and not the non-resident parent (as in most previous studies, for example, Juby et al. 2007). However, several maternal and paternal traits are positively correlated, and thus, although we relied on one parent's characteristics, we may expect that these variables also capture some information about the other parent. In particular, the resident parent's age at time of interview and her/his educational level and employment status are controlled for, following suggestions made in previous studies (Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010; Lindsey, Caldera, and Colwell 2005). Also, the time passed since the de facto separation (chosen as marking the end of the marriage, following the approach used in other Italian studies; for example, Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2008) is taken into account, because children's relationships with their non-resident parents are stronger when less time has elapsed since separation (Le Bourdais, Juby, and Marcil-Gratton 2002; Aquilino 2006). Some other potential disturbing factors are also considered. In particular, some household characteristics (a subjective measure of economic resources, the presence of siblings or other persons in the household) are controlled for. The area of residence (north, center, or south Italy) and the year of the survey are inserted in the models as a measure of contextual background (in particular, the year of the survey could be a proxy for the changes in the shared custody law). Lastly, whether the child answered directly to the questionnaire is also considered as control.

Table 2 reports the odds ratios of some covariates for two models. Model 1 only considers the key covariate and model 2 controls for children's and resident parents' characteristics (and other background covariates). Other models tested for the interactions between the gender of non-resident parents and each control variable to verify whether the role of any of these variables operates differently for mothers and fathers, but no interactions were statistically significant.

Model 1 shows that for non-resident fathers, parents' repartnering is generally associated with lower father-child contact than when neither parents has repartnered (baseline group). For non-resident mothers the results show a different picture: if the mother has not repartnered, mother-child contact does not significantly differ from that of the baseline group; if the mother has repartnered the contact is significantly higher than in the baseline group. Other analyses, not reported here for space reasons, show that non-resident mother-child contact when neither parent has repartnered does not significantly differ from the baseline category, and thus contact does not significantly differ by gender of the resident parent when neither parent has repartnered. The same analyses also show that, when only the non-resident mother repartnered, significantly higher contact is observed with respect to the baseline group.

Model 2 tells us that the potential compositional factors and controls do not greatly interfere with that found by Model 1, except for in the case of non-resident fathers when both parents have repartnered (whose coefficient is no longer significant) and when only the mother has repartnered (it becomes borderline significant). This could, however, be due to the relatively limited sample size of these two categories and has to be considered with caution.

Table 2: Ordinal logit regressions (odds ratios for the probability of more frequent non-resident parent-child contact)

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender of resident parent and parents' repartnering (ref: resident mother and neither parents repartnered)		
Resident mother and only father repartnered	0.73*	0.62***
Resident mother and only mother repartnered	0.44***	0.59*
Resident mother and both parents repartnered	0.52**	0.72
Resident father and mother did not repartner	1.14	1.13
Resident father and mother repartnered	2.69***	3.25***
Child's gender (ref: female)		
Male		1.17
Child's age (ref: under 6)		
6-10		0.67**
11-13		0.55***
14-17		0.41***
Years from parents' separation (ref: more than 5)		
Missing		2.93***
2 or less years		1.38*
3-5 years		0.98

Table 2: (Continued)

	Model 1	Model 2
Resident parent's age		1.03***
Resident parent's education (<i>ref: low</i>)		
Middle		1.33**
High		1.26
Resident parent's employment status (<i>ref: not employed</i>)		
Employed		0.79
Area of residence (<i>ref: South</i>)		
North		1.37**
Center		1.66***
Year of the survey (<i>ref: 2003</i>)		
2009		1.03
Household economic resource (<i>ref: sufficient</i>)		
Insufficient		0.70***
Presence of child's siblings the household (<i>ref: No</i>)		
Yes		0.95
Presence of other persons in the household (<i>ref: No</i>)		
Yes		0.56***
The child directly answered to the questionnaire (<i>ref: No</i>)		
Yes		1.04
<i>Number of observations</i>	1,214	1,214

Notes: ***= $p < .001$; **= $p < 0.05$; *= $p < 0.10$.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper is the one of the few attempts to use a quantitative approach to study the frequency of non-resident parent-child contact i) focusing on both non-resident fathers and mothers and ii) analyzing jointly their repartnering after separation. Another distinctive aspect of the study is that the results refer to a country where the diffusion of marital instability and repartnering is recent and thus the family context is still rather traditional and hard to explore with non-specific surveys.

The results show a rather complex scenario. First, when neither parent has repartnered, non-resident mothers have a level of contact with their children similar to that observed for non-resident fathers. Second, parents' new unions after separation played a very different role according to the gender of the resident parent. In the case of non-resident fathers, results confirm what has previously been found in literature: a negative association between father's repartnering and father-child contact (Swiss and Le Bourdais 2009). A similar result seems to hold (even if with a borderline

significance) for mother's repartnering, in line with that found in the US context (see, for example, Berger, Cancian, and Meyer 2012). On the other hand, the repartnering of both parents does not appear to be associated with variation in father-child contact with respect to the case when neither parents repartnered. The results tell a different story when the non-resident parent is the mother. Surprisingly, her repartnering is associated with higher contact with her non-resident child, compared to the situation of a single non-resident mother. The available data do not allow us to state that this is true whatever the father's repartnering status; however, this is certainly true when the father has not repartnered.

The cross-sectional approach does not allow us to move to a causal interpretation of the results. For example, we cannot control for contact before repartnering; indeed, we cannot exclude that the investment in children expressed through contact influences the risk of repartnering itself, as found by studies analyzing the effect of parental status or custody arrangements on the risk of a post-divorce union (Ivanova, Kalmijin, and Uunk 2013). In addition, we lack some information (characteristics of non-resident parent or her/his new family, shared custody). However, the results suggest some hypotheses for further more focused research on the topic, especially for countries at a relatively early stage of transition to more complex family forms. Is the irrelevance of the resident parent's gender, when neither parent has repartnered, explained by the lack of a control for relevant non-resident parent or family characteristics, or by the "absent parent hypothesis", according to which mothers and fathers face similar difficulties in their non-residential role (Hawkins, Amato, and King 2006)? Does non-resident repartnered fathers' lower level of contact depend on the fact that they are selected for having lower contact with their children even before repartnering, or are there mechanisms linked with repartnering (Swiss and Le Bourdais 2009)? Finally, is the higher contact of non-resident repartnered mothers due to a selection effect moving in the opposite direction to that of non-resident repartnered fathers, or to inadequate control of differences in their new family (i.e., new children)? Alternatively, can we hypothesize that in Italy when the mother can count on having a new own family, a gender effect that considers women to be the nurturers of children (King, Stamps, and Hawkins, 2010) is operating? These and other questions may drive further longitudinal studies that aim to overcome a purely descriptive approach.

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