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Parental social class and the transition to adulthood in Italy and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Compared to older cohorts, young adults in developed societies delay their transition to adulthood. Yet within cohorts, variations in timing and sequencing of events still remain. A major determinant of life course differences is social class. This characteristic can influence the sequence of events in terms of socioeconomic inequalities through a different availability of opportunities for social mobility. Several studies show that in North America, a higher familial status tends to decrease the complexity of trajectories, while the opposite effect has been found in Southern Europe.

This research examines the sequence of transitions, highlighting in a comparative perspective how life trajectories are influenced by parental social class in the United States and Italy. The main result of the analysis is that the effect of parental status is in fact different across countries, however in an unforeseen way based on what the literature on the topic has found so far.

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1. Introduction

In the last 50 years, the process that brings adolescents to adulthood has changed greatly in many—if not all—countries in the Western developed world. After World War II, adult roles, such as being employed full-time and financially independent, were achieved by the early 1920s. Nowadays, it takes much longer to assume such roles, and the entire transition has been postponed to the late 1920s and early 1930s. The general delay that has been found in the first steps of the transition to adulthood (Sironi & Furstenberg, 2012) is most likely also transferred to the subsequent events in life trajectories, such as leaving the parental home, starting a co-residential union, and having children. As a result, young adults, compared to older cohorts, experience a delay in the transition to adulthood (Aassve, Burgess, Chesher, & Propper, 2002; Furstenberg, 2010; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2006). However, the patterns leading to adulthood are not simply postponed. Because of profound structural and cultural changes that occurred in the Western world in the last few decades, life

trajectories had to adapt, becoming more diverse. The “second demographic transition” theory would use the word *individualization* to characterize changes in the life course (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987). But as Bruckner and Mayer (2005) point out, this term includes many different elements, such as de-institutionalization, de-standardization, and differentiation in the life trajectories of young adults.

Within the framework of postponement and individualization of trajectories shaping the life course, timing and sequencing of events in the patterns of transition to adulthood are still strongly influenced by family background (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007; Ravanera, Rajulton, & Burch, 2006). The exact mechanisms by which socioeconomic status affects the transition to adulthood and the ability to achieve economic self-sufficiency are largely unknown, but presumably include factors such as role modeling, labor market connections, neighborhood influences, and parents’ ability to make monetary investments in their children.

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of parental social status on the entire transition to adulthood. Following the definition given by Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg (1976), we consider the transition to adulthood as a multifaceted process marked by a series of events, namely completion of education, entry into the labor market, leaving the parental home, entry into a co-residential union, and parenthood. These events mutually influence each other in terms of timing, which results in major

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challenges to lifestyles, responsibilities, and autonomy (Gauthier & Furstenberg, 2002). Thus, focusing on single events makes it difficult to understand the interrelationships of these different steps. We address this issue by implementing a sequence analysis, an approach that gives a “holistic” perspective and in which the life course is seen as one meaningful conceptual unit (Billari, 2001). Moreover, we compare two different countries—the United States and Italy—in order to understand whether and how the institutional structure and context can fill the gap that stems from disadvantaged family background. Notably, the United States and Italy are located in different stages along the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986), showing a different incidence of “individualized” and “secularized” behaviors, such as informal cohabitations, non-marital fertility, and marital dissolution. All our analysis will be carried out separately by gender. This will allow us to take into account possible differences in the impact of family background on men and women’s transition to adulthood, which, as far as we know, has not been considered in previous literature.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Social class and the transition to adulthood

The relevance of family social class for the subsequent life course starts before birth, continues throughout adolescence, and is able to shape the course of young adult transitions and psychological development in the third and fourth decades of life. As previous research on developed societies has found, youth from affluent and well-educated families marry and have children later than those from lower social classes because of a longer education. They also have a much more extended search for a permanent partner in life and a lower incidence of unintended pregnancy. In other words, the family background is crucial in determining the individual resources that may lead to decisions in the early phases of adulthood (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). These resources may be economic and cultural. *Financial resources* may create or facilitate opportunities for a longer education and a delayed entry into the labor market. Previous research shows that disadvantaged youth differ in many aspects of transition to adulthood (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005). They are more likely to interrupt education earlier and to enter the labor market. Moreover, they do not want to and cannot afford to remain unemployed for too long, and they consider education only as means to get a job; therefore, they are more likely to drop out of school if they are able to find an occupation (Furstenberg, 2008). The economic difficulties linked to housing costs may hinder independent living before family formation. On the contrary, youth from affluent and well-educated families expect to remain in educational settings for a longer period of time and are far likelier to complete their education before entering full-time employment. As far as *cultural resources* are concerned, Kohn, Slomczynski, and Schoenbach (1986) noticed that middle-class parents tend to give more importance to autonomy when raising their children, whereas working class parents are more focused on conformity (Kohn et al., 1986). Also, upper-class parents tend to talk to their children more than working-class parents do, which favors analytical thinking; therefore, higher-status parents prepare their children for higher education and higher-status jobs (Nisbett, 2009). However, De Jong-Gierveld, Liefbroer, and Beekink (1991) found that in the process leading to autonomy and independence, the relevant distinction is between *transferrable* and *non-transferrable* resources rather than between material and non-material. Others, following a radically different point of view, posit that the association between parents’ socioeconomic status and young adult outcomes may also reflect the intergenerational

transmission of genetic traits, such as intelligence or motivation (Guldi, Page, & Stevens, 2007).

Differences also arise in the family domain. On average, young adults from higher social class postpone family formation and have higher educational homogamy if mating. Cohabitation is generally stable and considered a prelude to marriage. Not surprisingly, marital stability is higher and the risk of divorce is considerably lower for them, as compared to low socioeconomic families (Furstenberg, 2008). Less advantaged youth are more likely to cohabit in response to unplanned parenthood and this may create the basis for later family instability. In all of these circumstances, family background can influence not only the timing of events in the transition to adulthood, but also the sequencing of these events, thus modifying the propensity to experience peculiar patterns of transition to adulthood. For example, it has been underlined that children from a higher family social status tend to postpone their first union (Wiik, 2009) and their first child birth (Rijken & Liefbroer, 2009), but they also tend to reach housing autonomy earlier, without directly making the transition to living with a partner (Blaauboer & Mulder, 2010).

However, the relationship between parental social class and transition to adulthood has mainly been investigated in the literature by focusing on single events. Existing literature strongly suggests that family and economic domains are strongly interdependent, and the way in which they interact is a key question in the study of transition to adulthood. Thus, a more consistent approach should take into account the entire development of the trajectory of economic independence and family formation. In other words, rather than focusing on a single event or a couple of events, the analysis of the relations between the family status and the transition to adulthood should consider the type, the number, the duration, and the order of events in the process.

2.2. The relevance of context: a comparison between U.S. and Italy

In our analysis, we focus on North America and Southern Europe because the existing literature suggests crucial differences between them. Several studies show that in North America, a higher familial status tends to decrease the complexity of trajectories, or, in other words, to push toward a more “traditional” pattern, i.e., a trajectory in which the end of education and the first job precedes union formation, which, in turn, precedes parenthood (Hogan, 1981; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Marini, 1984a, 1984b; Rajulton & Burch, 2010; Rajulton, Ravanera, & Beaujot, 2007; Ravanera, Rajulton, & Burch, 2003; Ravanera et al., 2006). Youth born and raised in high socioeconomic conditions, on average, take longer to find a permanent partner (and to have children). Although they are not less likely to cohabit, their cohabitation (or their marriage) ends up being much more stable than co-residential unions of young adults coming from low-educated families. For disadvantaged young men and women, cohabitation may be the result of unintended pregnancy, so it can result in greater family instability later in life (Furstenberg, 2008).

In Southern Europe, and Italy in particular, where the Roman Catholic Church is still strongly influential, the spread of secularized behaviors has been somewhat hindered in the last decades and a more *normative* (or standardized) sequence of events emerges, i.e., a more rigid sequence of steps where at the end of education and the entry into the labor market, marriage happens followed by childbirth (see Marini, 1984a). Within this framework, more secularized events (e.g., living alone, non-marital cohabitation, and children out-of-wedlock) and more complex patterns leading to adulthood tend to be more widespread among children of upper social classes. Lower-class young people would continue to follow normative trajectories as protection against an

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