

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CLASS ON PATHS TO ADULTHOOD IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the transition to adulthood in Italy and to shed light on the dynamics between events in order to highlight the main changes related to generations, gender and social class of origin.

By means of an exploratory perspective we first focus on the shifts in timing, quantum and ordering of the main events of the life-course of young adults. Then, we aim at the analysis of their sequences to study the level of differentiation between cohorts: we adopt a measure of entropy in the economic independence trajectory and in the family formation trajectory and, then, we aim at distinguishing different paths to adulthood based on a cluster analysis.

It emerges that across generations relevant shifts in the timings of the events occurred; the level of heterogeneity among most recent generations has increased due to the increase in incomplete trajectories, to the spread of cohabitations and, to some extent, to the decrease in the rigidity of the sequences, on one hand, and to the rise in temporary jobs, on the other hand. Moreover, the family background, particularly the social class of origin, plays an important role in shaping these trajectories. Men from the upper social class and the white collars follow a path in economic independence different from the others: below age 20 they have the lowest level of heterogeneity due to higher educational investment, while above age 20 they show a pretty higher heterogeneity. Women of upper social classes have similar trends. As for the family formation trajectory, very little differences among men below age 25, and differences increases by social status afterwards. Women of older birth cohorts were pretty dissimilar during their adolescence but, given their increasing participation in education, differences among cohorts have diminished. However, social class of origin still differentiates the level of heterogeneity due to increasing variability within the upper classes.

1. Introduction

Different disciplines studying the human behaviour agree in recognizing that, since the second half of the XXth century, advanced societies experienced an increasing individualization of socio-demographic phenomena which led to a stronger diversification of paths among individuals.

A prominent stage of the life course, where most of the events deeply affecting people's well-being and their life chances occur, is youth. Completing education, being active on the labour market, leaving the parental home, living in couple and becoming parent are only few of the most important steps into adulthood that people may or may not experience during their twenties and thirties (post-adolescence and youth). While most people make these transitions at different ages and following several paths, some never make them. Many scholars believe that the social conditions of young people are changing rapidly, and that, above all, the ways of transition to adult positions are changing deeply.

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Major changes in the organization of the work and emerging demographic issues altered the nature of social risks. Today, the de-standardization of individual biographies introduces new forms of vulnerability making the “risk” a structural condition in each area of social life (Beck, 2003). For example, early transitions are characterized by early independence and autonomy but, in some case (particularly in case of teen-age childbearing), may also hamper the completion of studies and increase the risk of poverty (Aasve et al., 2007).

The development of a theoretical framework and the introduction of new techniques for the analysis of the intricacies related to the transition to adulthood, have been accompanied by the acknowledgement of the relevance of adequate data-bases on life courses.

Unfortunately, cross-sectional data represent a limited/incomplete source to establish if and to what extent the social conditions of today young adults have changed from the past Schizz-Lucchini Polis (2001). Indeed, the social conditions of young adults cannot be adequately understood by just focusing on their position with respect to education, labour force participation, occupational outcomes and so on. Durations and pathways to those specific positions are even more informative of the occurred change.

2. Aim and hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the transition to adulthood in Italy and to shed light on the dynamics between events in order to highlight the main changes related to generations and gender.

We examine non-renewable sequences concerning the following events: the study completion (i.e. the last available date between drop-out or attainment of the highest level of education in order to address the time of exposure to the human capital investment), the entry into the labour market (the starting date of the first job distinguishing between the first permanent job or and the first temporary job), the leaving of the parental home, the first union (distinguishing between nonmarital and marital unions) and the birth of the first child.

In this work the analysis of changes in the biographies adopts an exploratory perspective: timing, quantum and ordering of the main events related to the transition to adulthood by generation and gender are presented. Moreover, by means of the analysis of the trajectories we aim at studying the level of differentiation between cohorts.

We outline some hypotheses on the possible relations between the events of the life course and their change across cohorts:

1. the prolonged education affects the timing to first job. Therefore we expect higher homogeneity in the experiences of early teenagers. After that stage of life, increasing proportions of individuals enter higher, secondary and tertiary education, for which thus we expect increasing heterogeneity;
2. the recent introduction of flexible forms of job, especially at the entry stage, determines an increasing heterogeneity of experiences (timing of transitions and states experienced);
3. the gender gap in education and in employment dynamics became narrower;
4. the educational expansion and the unfavourable labour market trends entail the postponement of family transitions;
5. the economic and normative constraints contrast the diversification of family forms, thus limited growth of heterogeneity across cohorts is expected;
6. the still limited labor force participation among women (some follow the breadwinner pattern, some have a limited or precarious participation in the labour market and some others are more work oriented) determines a greater heterogeneity among women.

3. Method

The basic units of the life course are events; experiencing an event marks the transition between two states.

In this study we observe that individuals may experience k non-renewable² events e_i $i=1,\dots,k$ within an observation window (e.g. first job, first union, first child ...).

Recurrent sequences allow to take into account the duration of each event and simultaneity of events. Time is assumed as measured in discrete units (particularly in our work as monthly units). Then we have a sequence of states y_{it} for individual i at time t , $t=1,\dots,h$, with h finite within an observation window.

Thus if we study k events of the life course then we have 2^k possible states.

In this way we have explicitly accounted for the time order and the timing of each sequence and we can also produce a joint sequence as a concatenation of d single sequences.

It has been argued that sequence data as in (1) can be studied according to the atomistic or the holistic approach. In the former case, only the state occupied by the individual at a given point in time is of interest, while in the latter the complete history of states up to a given time is considered. Moreover, the time perspective can be static, when it only focuses on one point in time, or dynamic when different points in time are considered as reported from Billari and Piccarreta (2005)

For the sake of simplicity, given that the number of states goes up as 2^k , for each individual we build two vectors describing economic independence and family status, where each element of the vector represents the status occupied under that domain in a specific month. We build data on sequences of states using Multipurpose on FSS (2009).

The focus is on individuals aged 35 and more to observe their entire life-course according to:

Economic independence trajectory:

- S. End of study (attainment or drop-out)
- TJ. First temporary job
- PJ. First permanent job

Family formation trajectory:

- L. Leaving the parental home
- M. First marriage
- N. First consensual union
- C. Having the first child

The study window starts from the exact age of 15 and ends at the exact age of 35, in a monthly time unit (a length of 240 months). We select people with age 35 and older at survey time (2009). Individuals belonging to younger ten-year cohorts were censored at the age at the interview of the youngest individuals in that cohort. Thus for the youngest generation (1970-79) we study the trajectories up to age 30.

Here we studying timing (when), quantum (how many) and sequencing (in which order) of the above mentioned transitions.

In a first step Kaplan-Meier estimates of the median age at each of the event under study are shown. These events are considered markers of the transition into adulthood and are analysed separately for men and women and by birth cohort. The aim here is to describe the general trends of variations across cohorts in the chronological ages at which the various steps towards adulthood took place in the individual life courses. This provides also useful insights regarding the quantum: the proportion of people that has experienced a certain amount of steps by a given age (for instance age 30) is informative about the major changes due to the shifts in the calendars.

EHA provides a useful tool of the causal analysis of events but it requires the treatment of each event individually. However, according to the thesis of individualization the traditional chronological order of the steps towards adulthood is changing on an individual basis. Also the time interval between

²During the life course it is possible to experience the same event more than once. As an example having a baby, marrying ... can be lived more than just once. However, all renewable events can be shifted into non-renewable events when we take into account the order of such events (having the first child is non-renewable, as well as having the first marriage).

these steps is changing. This requires a change of methodology in order to capture the complexity of the various transitions as a whole, i.e. in a holistic approach: therefore we study trajectories in their whole path and try to highlight also the prevalent changes in the ordering of the events. Particularly, here state distributions and heterogeneity index for the trajectories under study (economic independence and family formation) are shown:

$$E_t = -\sum_{j=1}^s p_{ij} \cdot \log(p_{ij}) \quad (3)$$

4. Analysis of results

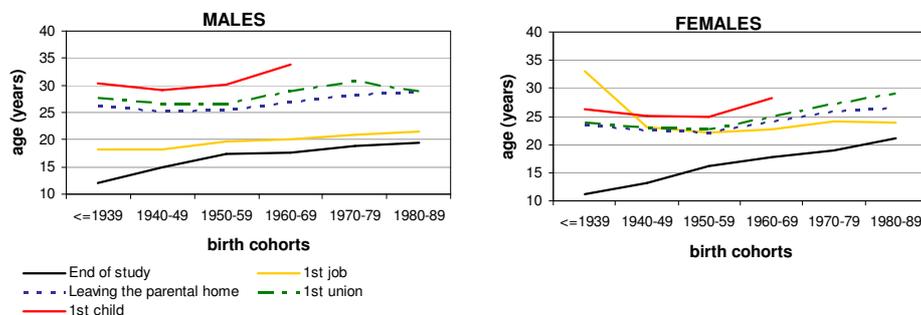
4.1. Timing

Over the last century, the expansion of the school system and the steady lengthening of the educational stage are well witnessed from these data that show a monotonic increase in the age at the end of study (Figure 1). Moreover, since 1960 the increase in the median school leaving age for women has meant to switch from negative to positive age differences between women and men in the end of study.

The median ages at each event increase with social class: the descendants of the upper class and of white collars complete their studies at higher ages than those who come from the lower middle class and the working class. Although declining, the age gap at the end of the studies remain relevant (on average from about 8 to about 5 years between upper class and working class) and it also affects subsequent paths of transition.

Figure 1 – Median ages at selected events by sex and birth cohorts.

Kaplan Meyer estimates



Source: our elaborations from Multipurpose household survey on Family and social subjects (Istat, 2009).

The spread of higher education and, consequently, the growth of the age at the study completion implied a postponement of the age at first job experience: the two events are strictly connected as they both shift upward monotonically and the age at first job is systematically higher than that of end of study. Indirectly, this also means that among all birth cohorts there exist social norms and constraints that shape the entry into the labour market, once the educational stage is over³. The positive age difference between first job and end of study is relatively higher for women (4 years on average versus 2 years for men). The reduction in the gap between education and entry into the labour market is mainly due to the increase in the age at end of study.

³ It should be noticed that the exceptionally high age at first job for women is due to the very low proportion of working women from old birth cohorts.

Changes across generation are also due to a different regulation of the labour market. As for the type of contract at first job, recent labour market reforms have implied rising proportions of atypical workers (short-term employees, consultants, collaborations). Therefore, especially younger cohorts have been involved in atypical jobs: among young people with at least a job experience born during the '80s 44,6% experienced at their first job an atypical job, while it was 31,1% for people born in the '70s, 23,2% for those born in the '60s and about 16% for those born in the '40s. Remarkable gender differences show that atypical workers are more spread among women and people with tertiary education.

The median ages at first job are higher among the wealthier social classes, as a consequence of the degree of human capital investment. However, across generations there is a shrink in difference in median ages at first job between upper and working classes (from about 5 and a half years among those born in the '40s and '50s to nearly 3 years difference among those born in the 80s).

Older women had a very low participation in the labor market that makes difficult to estimate the median age at first job. Contrary to the past, today mainly women of the wealthier social classes participate in the labor market (Barbagli et al. 2003). Working-class women were mainly involved in agricultural work in the past and today they preserve a more traditional model: they leave school early, and leave the parental home and get married early as well, but more often they do not work.

As for the process of leaving the parental home it has changed non monotonically across birth cohorts in a U-shaped trend. Strictly following the overall trend of timing to marriage, the median age at leaving the family of origin has decreased first and increased afterwards. The time lag between leaving the parental home and first marriage are increasing across cohorts especially for men (a set of different reasons for leaving emerges: cohabitation, work, autonomy).

Social class differences in leaving the parental home are little among men and larger among women. These are broadly divided into two groups: women coming from the upper classes (bourgeoisie and white collar middle class) postpone longer than others their departure from home. In addition, the gap between leaving the parental home and first union (often first marriage) has increased across generations to witness the growing de-synchronization between these two steps of the life course. As regard first union, social class differences are relevant especially for women: working class women experience first union on average two years earlier than the other ones.

The median age at first union is systematically higher than the age at first job and lower than that at first child. Thus, at least at an aggregate level, people get married only once they find a job and become parents after a stable relation. In a sense, people act respecting already existing social norms. A relevant change among generations emerges as well. Indeed, the family formation process is characterized by U-shaped changes in the timings of major events: older cohorts married and had a baby later than people born during the '40s and '50s. Younger cohorts are increasingly postponing the occurrence of these events especially first child. Indeed, the gap between age at first union and at first birth is increasing. This is extremely important for men where the age at first child reached about 33 years for the generation born at the beginning of the '60s. Again, the trend shows a U-shaped shift in the timing of first child with increasing postponement for younger birth cohorts.

Women have similar pattern but at lower levels. As shown in the previous steps to adulthood, where the birth cohorts born during the '40s and '50s had lower ages at leaving the parental home and first union, also timing to first child is lower for these birth cohorts.

Overall, these cohorts were able to take advantage of the favourable economic conditions, rising employment rates and generous welfare system. Afterwards, a prolonged postponement of parental roles emerges clearly for the younger cohorts. These cohorts are characterized by increasing school leaving age, delayed entry into the labour market, together with the increasing flexibility (and insecurity) of job, and these factors, together with the persistence of social norms addressing the right sequence among events of transition to adulthood, result in a shift onwards in the timing of first union and first child, especially for men.

In sum, timings of the process of adulthood have changed deeply across cohorts and social classes according to two different patterns. On one hand, the process of economic independence where education and first job are both characterized by monotonic increases in the median ages; on the other

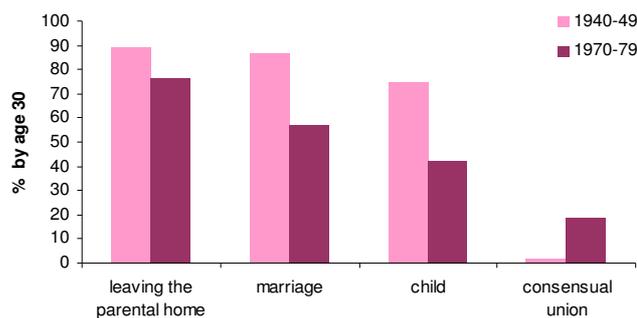
hand, the steps towards family formation reflect the postponement in education and work and show the U-shaped pattern of the median ages.

4.2. *Quantum*

As a consequence of the shifts in the observed timings the proportion of people experiencing a certain amount of steps in the transition to adulthood by a given age has changed deeply. Considering the proportion of individuals with at least one family event (such as leaving the family of origin, entering a first consensual union, having a first marriage or a first child) by a given age, it emerges a change in the path across cohorts especially concerning those ages where typically the majority of the events took place. Indeed, a very small and constant across cohorts proportion of young men used to experience a family event before their 20th birthday, less than half of them used to experience it by age 25, on the contrary most of them had a family event between their 25th and 30th birthday. However, this proportion reached a maximum among men born in the '40s (about 80% of them had at least one family event by age 30) and it declined steadily afterwards (almost 60% for men born in the '70s). In the same way, but with a certain time lag, women experienced a family event in an increasing proportion by age 25 until cohorts born in the '50s (about 75%) and declined afterwards (less than 50% for young women born in the '70s). The shifts in quantum of people with a certain trajectory has changed also in relation to each different event of the transition to adulthood. As an example comparing two birth cohorts of women (Figure 2 - those born in the '40s the post world war II and those born in the '70s, approximately daughters of the first group) it is evident the decrease in the proportion having left the parental home, or married or, even more, became mother by the 30th birthday. On the contrary the proportion with a consensual union by age 30 has risen up to 19%.

The postponement effect is even clearer when considering the level of education. If age 35 is taken as a threshold, only 50% of tertiary educated women were mothers against 70% of low educated ones. Moreover, the fertility gap by age 35 between high and low educated women has increased: from about 20% for women born in the '40s to more than 30% for the youngest generations, especially due to the decrease in fertility among more educated women. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, the increase in the average age of education has pushed women to stay at the parental home longer, postponing their entry into couple relationship and reproductive life (Guarneri, Prati e Fraboni 2013).

Figure 2 - Proportion of women experiencing one of the family event by age 30 by birth cohort.



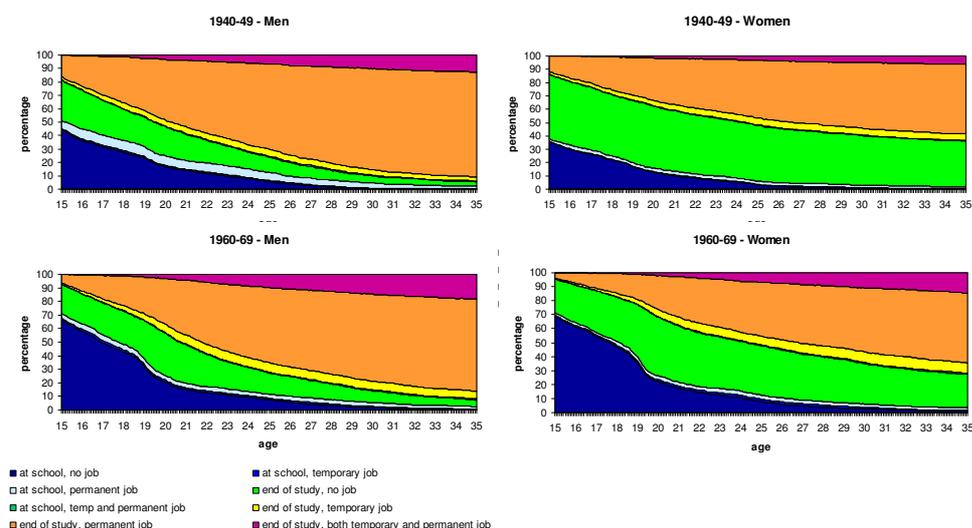
4.3. *Changes in the trajectories*

The monthly distribution of the states observed in the transition to adulthood between ages 15 and 35 are compared by birth cohorts and gender in order to observe variations in the processes of economic independence and family formation.

a) economic independence trajectory

The analysis of this trajectory aims to provide an overview of the changes occurring on the educational and working domain across cohorts (Figure 3). First of all, it increases the proportion of people at school and with no job experience by age 20 (blu area): from 17% to 21% to 27% of men born in the '40s, '60s and '70s respectively, and from 13%, to 22% to 33% of women. As a consequence, women that ended education and had no job by age 30 (green area) have declined from 37% to 29% to 24% while this proportion is only around 8% for men.

Figures 3 – People aged 35 years and more by economic independence states distribution, sex, age and birth cohort.



The traditional pattern of end of education and standard job has declined too (orange area), accompanied by an increase in atypical jobs (yellow area). At their 30th 75% of men born in the '40s had had a permanent job while this is true for 65% of men born in the '60s and for 59% of those born in the '70s. At the same time those experiencing precariousness by age 30 have passed from 4 to 9 % of men born in the '40s and '70s.

A much lower proportion of women has experienced a job by age 30, yet in atypical positions. Permanent jobs among women declined from 49% to 40% of the birth cohorts of the '40s and '70s respectively and atypical jobs involved from 5% to 11% of women.

Middle and upper classes (51%) men at age 30 have lower proportion of end of study and permanent job state (orange) than lower class (61%). As a matter of fact, atypical jobs are more widespread among the upper class and white collars whilst it is much lower among working class and middle class.

Women from upper class have the lowest proportion of end of study –no job (green) at age 30(11% vs 25% of working and middle class). Sons and, above all, daughters of the upper class have the highest proportions of precariousness at first job.

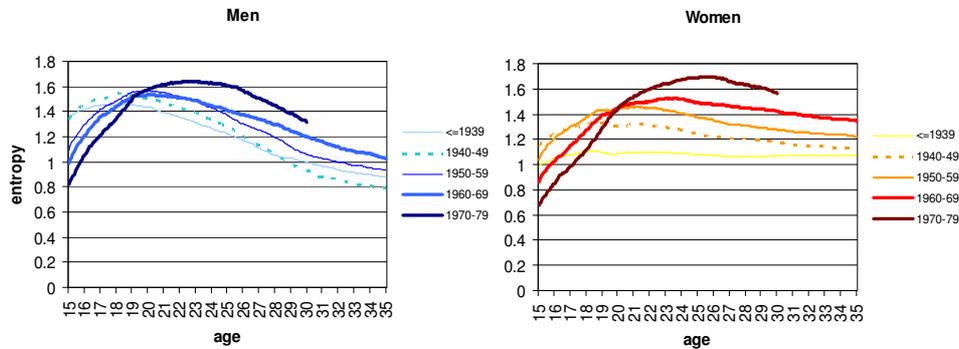
Heterogeneity in economic independence

The increasing individualization of trajectories implies a rise in the level of heterogeneity too, and viceversa, the standardization of life courses implies a decline in the level of heterogeneity. From the analysis of the monthly distributions of states concerning end of study and first job (Figure 4) it emerges that the overall trends across ages of the heterogeneity index is pretty similar among cohorts, especially for men while women underwent a process of increasing diversification of trajectories.

More specifically, younger cohorts have higher levels of standardization of their life courses between the ages of 15 and 20 years, mainly as a consequence of prolonged permanence at school.

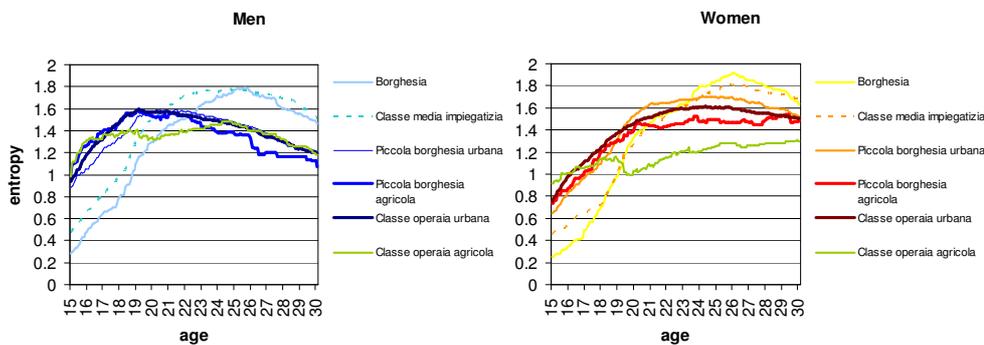
Afterwards, the gradual changes by cohorts highlight the increase in the ages at which the highest level of dissimilarity are reached and the age spans during which the maximum heterogeneity show up.

Figure 4 – Entropy in economic independence by sex and birth cohorts



The analysis by social class of origin shows also the effect of the calendar shifts (Figure 4.a). The descendants from the bourgeoisie and the white collar middle class deviate from the paths taken by those with different social status. Indeed, below the age 20, men from the wealthier classes have very low level of heterogeneity because of greater educational investment, while above age 20 they have the highest level of heterogeneity. Instead, small proprietors and farmers and working class share very similar profiles. The heterogeneity index is affected by the prolonged education and postponement of first job of the children of the upper class and of the white collars; it also denotes a greater number of states around the age of maximum heterogeneity (about 26 years). As for men, the heterogeneity among women increases after age 20 and as a consequence of increasing employment rates. On the opposite, daughters of small farmers or of the agricultural working class have the lowest level of heterogeneity: they run similar paths at similar ages.

Figura 4.a – Entropy in economic independence by sex and social class of origin – Birth cohort: 1970-79

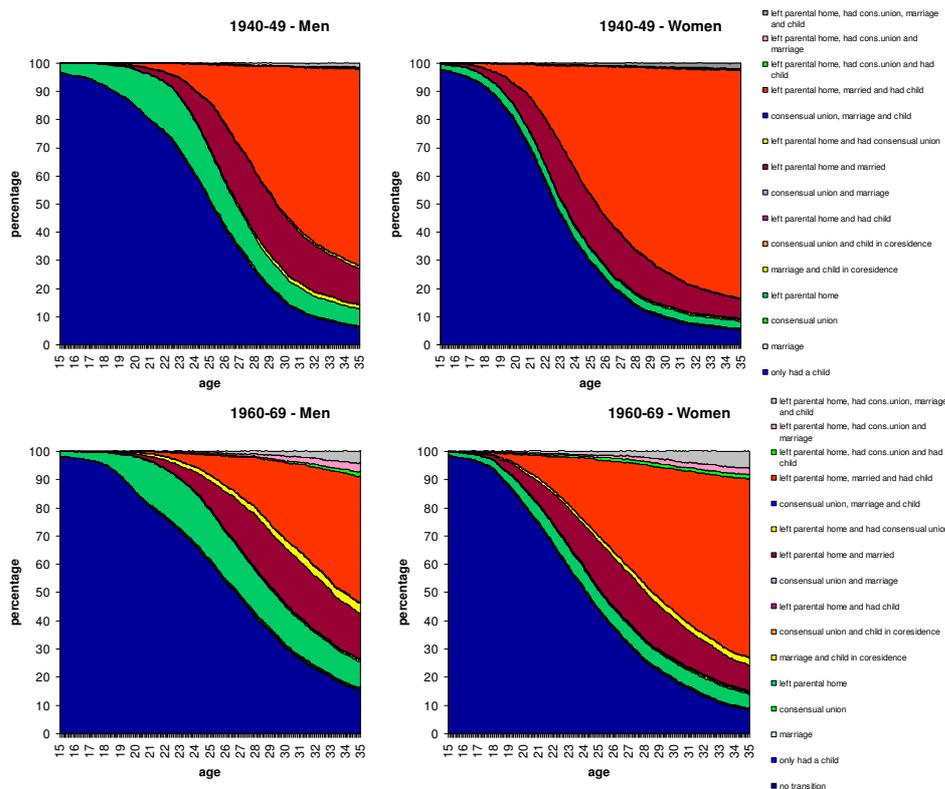


b) family formation trajectory

The analysis of this trajectory aims to provide an overview of the diversification of the life courses in terms of leaving the family of origin, forming a union and childbearing (Figure 5).

First of all the proportion of people with no transition (deep blue area) at a given age increased across cohorts and, due to the usual shift in the timing of marriage and fertility, is higher for men. At age 30, 37% of men born in the '70s was living in the family of origin, did not form a union and did not have a child (it was about 15% among their fathers' generation born in the '40s); at the same age, 23% of women born in the '70 was in the same situation (and 9% of their mothers' too).

Figures 5 People aged 35 years and more by family formation states distribution, sex, age and birth cohort.



One of the most traditional state represented by people that left their parents, married and had a child (orange area) underwent the largest contraction: at age 30 it represented more than half of the states for men born in the '40s and it decline to just 14% for those born in the '70s. Also for women this contraction is very important: from 2 third of the states to one third of the youngest female birth cohorts. At the same time the diversification of state distribution is found in the increase of combinations of less traditional events such as independent living (green) and consensual union (yellow). Indeed, having left the parental home is a state occupied by 18% of men and 10% of women born in the '70s at age 30 while this was the case for just half of their parents (born in the '40s). In the same way, leaving the parental home and having a cohabitation more uxorio is a state occupied by about 8% of young people born in the '70s.

Similarly, more complex combinations of events, like cohabitation and marriage or childbearing (pink, grey and light green), are arising among the youngest generations as signals of greater diversifications of pathways to adulthood.

Let's compare the statuses occupied by people born in the '70s, at their 30th birthday. The absence of transitions is more common among people descending from the middle class (41% in the white collar middle class and small proprietors) and the working class (38%) and less common among the children of the upper class (31%) which, in turn live autonomously (25%) from parents or in consensual union (15%) more often. In addition, the more traditional path, of leaving the parental home by marriage and arrival of a child, is the least followed one (9%).

If 25% of girls of any social status is still at home at age 30 without cohabitation or children, higher diversification is found in the adoption of the traditional model: this model (leaving the parental home, marriage and child) is more widespread among the daughters of the working class (35%) and small proprietors (30%) than the upper class (17%) and white collars (27%). Independent living or cohabiting is more widespread among daughters of the upper class, as sons.

Therefore the most affluent social class shows the greater departure from the traditional model and the adoption of more options of transitions to adulthood.

Heterogeneity in family formation

This is also confirmed by the analysis of the complexity of the trajectories in this domain. Even if at the beginning of the life courses there is a relevant homogeneity among cohorts, especially for men, in the family formation process, resulting from the increased standardization observed for the prolonged school attendance as shown previously, from age 28 onwards the heterogeneity index rises (Figure 6). This is particularly remarkable since the '60s. Variations in the maximum age of entropy and in the age span during which the members of each birth cohort reached the highest levels of dissimilarities are shown. These results are in accordance with those emerged from previous analyses (Schizzerotto and Lucchini 2002, Billari?) until the cohorts born in the '50. Subsequent generations, whose behaviour at a relatively adult age can be observed with these more recent data, show a change of path, a greater diversification of life courses than before.

By analogy with the economic trajectory we consider again the generations of the 70s (Figure 6.a.) Few path differences between people from different social backgrounds before about 25 years. From that age onwards heterogeneity is greater for the children of the upper class, and it gradually declines up to the children of those employed in agriculture. With the latest generation examined here, ie those born in the 70s, it is observed that the trends followed by the classes are quite similar, but, once again, the paths followed by the children of white collar middle class are slower and those of the descendants of agricultural workers are faster. In particular, boys and girls coming from the agricultural sector anticipate the steps of family formation while those coming from the upper class or middle class, in particular the white collars, with a longer investment in education, put forward these trends.

Overall, comparing two generations (those born in the '40s and in the '70s) it emerges for men and increased diversification between the social classes of origin even before the age of 30, while for women this diversification was already present in the older generation.

Figure 6 – Entropy in family formation by sex and birth cohorts

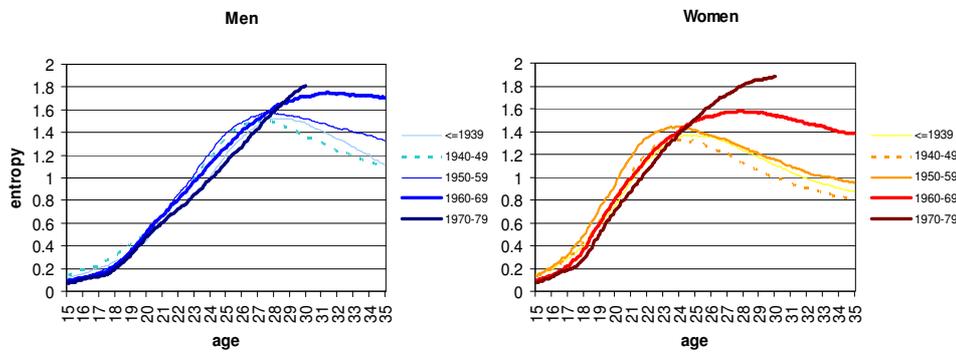
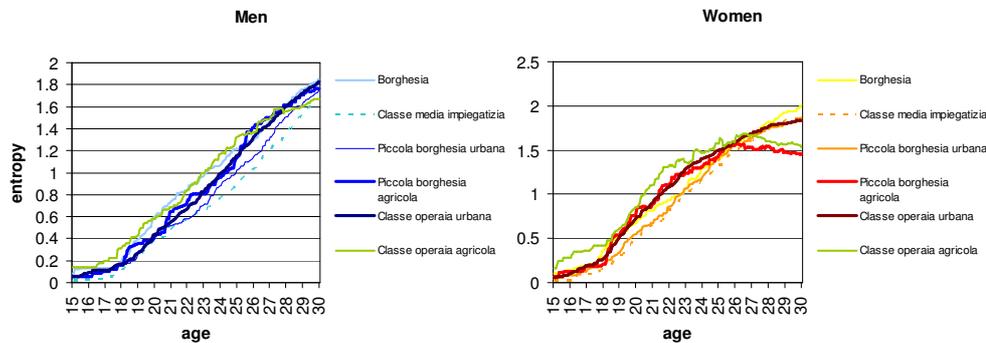


Figure 6.a Entropy in family formation by sex and social class of origin - Birth cohort: 1970-79



4.4. Does ordering matter?

The distribution of states at a given time of the life course analyzed above expresses in a synthetic way the sum of the events lived by the individuals up to a given age. However, that analysis does not represent the observed sequence occurred on each individual life course. Many scholars focused on the aspects related to the existence of a normative path in the transition to adulthood (Guarneri, Prati and Fraboni 2013).

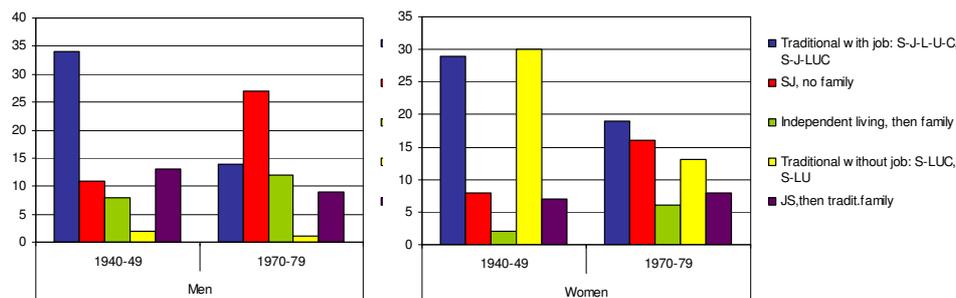
Considering the whole path followed by individuals up to a given age it is possible to ascertain whether there has been a change in the normative sequence. Let us focus on people at their 30s and observe the shift in the proportion of the most prevalent pattern.

As an example, the traditional path to adulthood, where end of study is followed by entry into the labour market, then independent living and family formation (either union and first child), i.e. in acronym S-J-L-U-C, S-J-LUC, was once lived by one third of men born in the '40s while nowadays it involves 14% of men born in the '70s (Figure 7). This pattern typically characterized the traditional model of the male bread-winner and its decline has been accompanied by a rise in the incomplete path of end of study and job experience but with no family transition up to age 30, therefore a postponement beyond age 30: this trajectory involves 11% of men born in the '40s and 27% of those born in the '70s respectively. Also the less traditional path constituted by a period of independent living and family formation has increased too: from 8% to 12% respectively.

As for women, the traditional pattern without job experience was once followed by 30% of those born in the '40s and by 13% of those born in the '70s. Also the traditional pattern with job experience declined dramatically. As for men, also among female trajectories it is possible to envisage the postponement of family formation beyond age 30, as outlined by the increase in the process of end of study and labour market participation not followed by family formation. As for men, women experiencing a period of independent living followed by the formation of a family have increased.

When considering the social class of origin it is possible to highlight that the ordering of the trajectories of events occurred to life course matters as, people from the upper classes have a lower propensity to experience traditional patterns to adulthood than those from the working class while the experience of independent living followed by the family formation is more spread.

Figure 7 – People aged 35 and more by transition sequences at age 30, sex and birth cohort - 2009 (per 100 people with same characteristics)



5. Concluding remarks

Changes in timing are relevant among generations (postponement) but still suggest the existence of a relative stability of the rules regulating the sequence of transitions .

Little increase in heterogeneity of pathways to family formation across cohorts: however, higher values of heterogeneity among cohorts born in the '60s and '70s of men and women.

Increasing heterogeneity also for economic independence trajectories has been observed due to the introduction flexible contracts especially at first job for the youngest birth cohorts.

As for the ordering, little increase in highly non traditional sequence has emerged. Social status of the family of origin play an important role: it affects timing of transitions an also determines a different variability of paths .

Further analysis should be addressed to study the complexity of the sequences including social class differences.

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