Social origins and the sexual debut of the Italian youth

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Short abstract

We focus on the role that the family of origin plays for children's timing and type of sexual debut. We consider two fundamental dimensions defining social origins: socioeconomic factors such as parental education and social class, and features more directly related to the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), i.e. the presence of a working mother during early adolescence, the experience of parental break-up due to divorce, and the level of parents' religiosity during childhood. Higher parental socioeconomic status is usually found to be associated with a postponement of children's sexual debut, but an alternative mechanism is related to possible "emancipating" effects of higher status attainment. The expected effects of SDT-related characteristics seem more straightforward, as children experiencing parental break-up, raised by a working mother and "secular" parents should experience an earlier sexual debut. However, it is not clear whether the effects are driven by the higher monitoring exerted by more religious, intact, male-breadwinner families, or if the explanation should focus (also) on the higher emancipation and cultural openness of "non-traditional" families. The results of event-history models suggest that higher parental education and class are related to an anticipation of children's sexual debut, whereas the hypothesised effects of SDT-related characteristics are confirmed. To better understand the mechanisms underlying the effects of the family of origin, competing-risks models distinguishing by the type of first sexual intercourse (protected vs. unprotected) are carried out. Results show that higher parental education only increases the hazard of first protected sexual intercourse.

Introduction

In this paper we focus on the role that the family of origin plays for children's timing and type of sexual debut. We consider two fundamental dimensions defining social origins: socioeconomic factors such as parental education and social class, and features more directly related to the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), i.e. the presence of a working mother during early adolescence, the experience of parental break-up due to divorce, and the level of parents' religiosity during childhood.

By exploiting a unique dataset containing information on the Sexual and Emotional Life of Youths (SELFY), we are able to address those issues focusing on the Italian case, which provides an

interesting case for the analysis of parental influences. In fact, it has been shown that in a country characterised by "strong family ties" (Reher 1998) children are more likely to feel parental pressures concerning their family decisions (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007; Guetto et al. 2016), first of all because of the longer permanence in the family of origin and the latest-late age at leaving home (Billari 2004). Thus, compared to other Western countries, Italian parents are in a stronger position to influence their children's sexual and affective life.

The paper is organised as follows. First, we discuss the role that different parenting practices may play for children's sexual initiation, and draw some expectations about the possible effects of the selected characteristics of the family of origin. The methodological section follows, in which data, variables and the event history models implemented are presented. Then, preliminary results are shown and briefly discussed.

1. Theoretical background

1.1 Parenting practices and children's timing and type of sexual debut

Much of existing research on the role of the family of origin for children timing of and type of sexual debut has focused on parenting practices, such as parent-child communication about sex, parental caring and control, and relationship quality. In general, results about parent-child communication are mixed, while higher parental caring and monitoring, as well as higher quality of parent-child relationships, seem to be related to a postponement of sexual initiation.

As regards parent-child communication about sex, in their review of the empirical research on this topic carried out during the '80s and the '90s, Diiorio et al. (2003) argue that most studies found parent-teen communication about sexuality to either delay the initiation of sexual intercourse among adolescents or not to have any significant effect. Some studies did find communication about sex to be associated with an earlier sexual debut (Davis and Friel 2001; Pearson et al. 2006), but results seem to be contingent on parental values and the gender of the child (Diiorio et al. 2003). By making use of panel data, Pearson et al. (2006) simultaneously analysed the effects of several parenting practices and reported that shared dinnertime, participation in shared activities, relationship quality, and communication about sex are all significantly and independently related to the timing of sexual debut among adolescents in the US, although with different direction of effects. In fact, when children have positive relationships with their parents, share mealtimes, and participate in shared activities, they are less likely to initiate sex. On the contrary, communication about sex is related to a higher likelihood to initiate sex, but mostly among girls and non-Latino/a white adolescents.

The delaying effects of parental monitoring have been confirmed in several studies (see, e.g., Meschke and Silbereisen 1997), especially in studies that proxy the extent of parental control and supervision with the type of family arrangement the child has been exposed to during childhood and adolescence. Children who experienced parental separation/divorce are deemed to develop a weaker relation with the noncustodial parent, usually the father, and feel less normatively bounded by parental expectations about their sexual and family choices (Amato 1993; 2000). Especially in societies characterised by traditional gender roles, it is the father who serves as the figure of authority, setting the child-rearing norms and ensuring compliance with them (Booth and Amato 1994). Thus, according to Thorton (1991), children of divorced parents are exposed to a weaker control, not only because of father absence, but also because the mother is more likely to work and be less present. The

importance of the number of adults in the household has been confirmed by Calhoun and Friel (2001). They found girls grown up in families with only one parent to be more sexually precocious than those grown up with two married biological parents, but they found no significant differences between the latter and girls of reconstructed families, unmarried parents, and families formed by a lesbian couple.

The effects of parent-child communication and parental monitoring may differ when focusing also on the type, and not only on the timing of first sexual intercourse, however. For instance, Parkes et al. (2011) show that if parents support the autonomy of their children, encouraging them to have sexual intercourse only within stable relationships, this is positively associated with numerous benefits in their sexual life, like a more common use of condoms. Thus, mixed results concerning communication about sex may be due to opposing effects: a delaying effect on the likelihood of experiencing unprotected sex, and an accelerating effect on the likelihood of experienced protected sex. The same may hold true as far as parental monitoring: the results of a meta-analysis taking into account all studies carried out between 1984 and 2014 suggest that parental supervision is associated with both delayed sexual intercourse and greater condom use (Dittus et al. 2015).

1.2 Social origins and children's timing and type of sexual debut

Much of the available empirical evidence, mostly concerning the U.S., on the association between parental socioeconomic status and adolescent sexual behaviour shows that the highest parental education and income, the lower the risk of having had sexual intercourse (Santelli et al. 2000; Pearson et al. 2006) and experiencing adolescent pregnancy (Miller 2010). Parental education and social class have been found to influence a more general postponement of family decisions, from union formation (see, e.g., Mooyaart and Liefbroer 2016; Brons et al 2017) to fertility choices (see, e.g., Rijken and Liefbroer 2009). The reasons why a higher parental socioeconomic status should be associated with a postponement of the sexual debut may be traced back to a more effective monitoring, better communication and higher-quality parent-child relationships (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016). Better monitoring by higher-status parents may also be finalised to avoiding behaviours that might put their children's school performance and career at risk.

However, an alternative mechanism is related to possible "emancipating" effects of higher socioeconomic status attainment. That is, more educated and higher-status parents may be more "open" toward sexuality and may be less likely to perceive their children's sexual life as a taboo argument. Following previous arguments on the ambiguous effects of communication, higher parental socioeconomic status may be related to a postponement of unprotected sexual initiation, but the effect on protected sex may even be positive.

The direction of the effects of SDT-related characteristics seem more straightforward compared to parents' socioeconomic status: children experiencing parental break-up, raised by a working mother and "secular" parents should experience an earlier sexual debut. As mentioned, parental divorce has been consistently found to be associated to higher chances of earlier sexual debut. Net of parental socioeconomic status, also having been raised by a working mother has been associated to earlier sexual initiation (Thorton 1991). Finally, there is ample empirical evidence on the delaying effect of greater parental religiosity, and especially the frequent attendance at religious services during adolescence has been found to have a strong delaying effect on the timing of first intercourse (Jones et al. 2005).

That being said, the mechanisms underlying such effects are not clear: are the effects driven by the higher supervision and control exerted by more religious, intact, male-breadwinner families? Or should the explanation focus (also) on the higher "emancipation" and cultural openness of "non-traditional" families? In fact, according to the SDT thesis (Lesthaeghe 1995; Van de Kaa 1987), the increase in female labour market participation and the spreading of new family forms such as divorce would be a consequence, at least in part, of a shift toward "post-materialist" values emphasizing autonomy and self-expression (Inglehart 1977). Such cultural shift has been deemed to contribute to the ongoing secularisation process, and to a detachment from traditional family models and behaviour (Inglehart and Appel 1989; Inglehart and Norris 2003; 2004). Thus, the effects of parental divorce or having been raised by a working mother on children's earlier sexual initiation may not necessarily be related to lower parental monitoring and control, but (also) to the influence of post-materialist values and life-style choices. Even if we hypothesise both mechanisms to be at work, it is not easy to disentangle empirically their contribution. We argue that a distinction between different types of sexual initiation (protected vs. unprotected) may represent an interpretative key.

2. Data and methods

This study is based on SELFY, a survey coordinated by researchers from the Universities of Florence, Messina, and Padua. The survey was carried out in the first half of 2017 in 28 Italian universities with the aim of drawing an updated picture of sexual and emotional opinions and behaviour among Italian university students. It was almost identical to a survey carried out seventeen years before. In 2000 4,998 students were surveyed and in 2017 8,094. All were attending Italian undergraduate courses in economics and statistics. Our sample is not, of course, representative of the population of young Italians as a whole. The sexuality of our sample of university students seems to be delayed and to be less intense than that of their less educated peers. In addition, it is in line with, or slightly more delayed and less intense than, that of university students in other fields of study. After excluding some incomplete questionnaires and questionnaires with deliberately fatuous answers, the survey was realised with 12,604 cases.

We study the timing and type of sexual debut of Italian university students with event-history techniques. The analysis is divided into two steps. In the first step, the baseline duration is the time elapsed since the age of 13 to the first sexual intercourse; the remaining observations are right-censored at the time of the interview. In the second step, the baseline duration is the time elapsed from the age of 13 to the type of first sexual intercourse, protected or unprotected, whichever came first. We considered the transition to a protected vs unprotected as two distinct processes or competing risks – i.e., the occurrence of one event removed the individual from the possibility of experiencing the other. We censored the remaining observations at the time of the interview.

After preliminary data cleaning, our final analytical sample for the model consists of 10,863 observations. We eliminated: 283 records because the date of the event was missing; 95 because the type of first sexual intercourse (protected or not) was missing; 119 foreign students because information about their migratory background was missing; 1,242 because of missing information uniformly distributed throughout independent variables; the remaining two cases were eliminated because of coding mistakes.

The parental social background is operationalized through a set of variables; they all refer to the time when the child was aged 13, apart from parental divorce which is a time-varying variable.

The parental education classifies the family according to the highest education level achieved by the parents, using the predominant category approach. The levels are: "up to lower-secondary" (no title, elementary school, lower-secondary school); "upper-secondary" (upper-secondary courses lasting from 2/3 to 5 years); "tertiary" (higher education).

The father's job focuses on the prestige of the occupation: "low" (worker, craftsman without employees, farmer); "medium" (employee, armed forces, craftsman with employees, trader); "high" (entrepreneur, manager, military official); "did not work".

For mothers we did not look at the type of occupation, but rather at whether she was employed when the respondent was aged 13 (0 = "not employed", 1 = "employed). This variable has two meanings: it proxies, on the one side, the presence at home of the mother and, on the other, it can be interpreted as a sign of SDT diffusion.

Parental divorce (time-varying) is a dichotomous variable (0 = "parents never divorced or divorced after the first sexual intercourse"; 1 = "divorce before sexual intercourse").

To account for parental religiosity, models include the level of church attendance of the family (0 = "none of the parents regularly attended to the mass during", 1 = "at least one of the parents regularly attended the mass).

As possible intervenient variables models include two time-constant variables concerning students' school career: the grade obtained at the final exam of lower-secondary school (a continuous variable from 6 to 10), and the type of school in which students obtained their upper-secondary diploma, from the most prestigious Academic tracks (Classical and Scientific Lycei), to other general tracks, different types of technical institutes (Accounting, other technical institutes) and more vocational courses (Professional institutes).[1]

We also include in the model equation a set of control variables. They are: the area of residence during adolescence (0 = "North", 1 = "Centre, including Sardinia", 2 = "South, including Sicily"); gender (0 = "men", 1 = "women"); year of survey (0 = "2000", 1 = "2017").

3. Preliminary results

3.1 Social origins and the timing of sexual debut

The distribution of person-months (exposures) and events according to all categorical variables considered are reported in the Appendix. An interaction of the variables of interest, i.e. those relating to social origin, with the baseline duration (not shown, but available upon request) suggests a non-proportional effect of the covariates. In addition, the shape of the hazard function suggests the appropriateness of a log-logistic or a log-normal model specification (figure 1). We opted for a log-

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[1] The final exam at lower-secondary schools is taken at age 14, which is also the age when children usually decide at which upper-secondary school track to enrol. However, two assumptions have to be made in order to treat these variables as time-constant: that children had a regular school career (no interruptions/grade repetitions), and that they did not change type of upper-secondary school after initial enrolment.

logistic specification, using the Accelerated Failure Time parameterization, as it proved superior on the basis of AIC and BIC statistics.
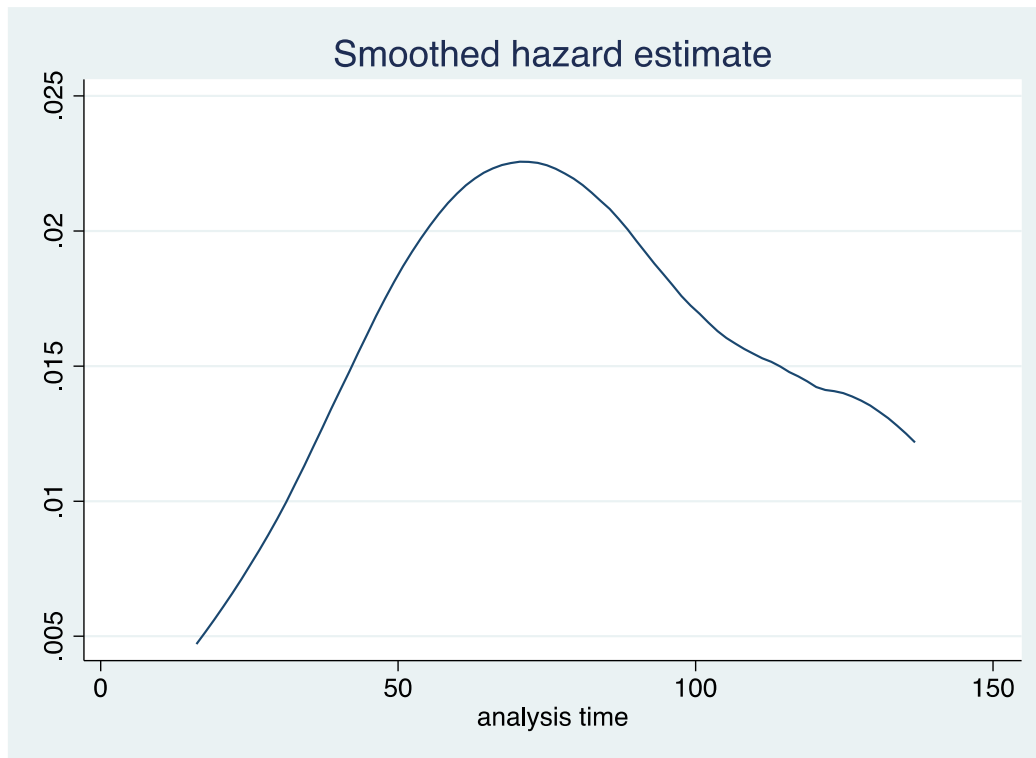
Figure 1: Shape of the hazard function for the transition to first sexual intercourse

Step-wise multivariate models have been implemented and results are shown in Table 1. Both variables related to parental socioeconomic status (parental education and class) and those more related to the SDT (working mother, parental divorce and religiosity) exert a statistically significant effect on the hazard of first sexual intercourse. Parental education exerts a non-linear effect: the coefficient for the upper-secondary educated is negative and statistically significant, indicating an acceleration of the time to the first intercourse. The difference between the (up to) lower-secondary and tertiary categories is not statistically significant and close to zero. The father's job variable shows a significant difference between the High and Medium categories compared to the Low category. In this case, results suggest that the higher the socioeconomic prestige of the family of origin, the earlier students' sexual debut, in line with a higher parental "openness" interpretation.

Another important result concerns maternal employment: the significant and negative coefficient indicates that having been raised by a working mother is strongly associated with an acceleration of the time to the event. In Model 2 the dummy for parental divorce has been added, which shows a highly significant and negative (accelerating) effect, which does not substantially modify the coefficients related to the other parental characteristics. Church attendance has been added in Model 3, its coefficient showing that higher parental religiosity is associated with a strong delaying effect. Its addition doesn't influence the effects of the other variables, except for parental divorce.

Finally, adding variables regarding students' previous school performance and the type of high school attended, an interesting result is found: there is a positive relation between the "quality" of students' school career (a higher lower-secondary school grade and attending the most prestigious curricula of upper-secondary school) and the duration to first sexual intercourse. Notwithstanding results concern

a highly-selected group (based on ISTAT data, only about 25% of those who attend professional institutes subsequently enrol to university), also in our sample of university students those who chose professional and technical institutes are more precocious than those who attended the classical or scientific lyceum. However, the effect of social origin doesn't decrease adding these potentially intervening variables. Again, the reason is likely due to the selectivity of our sample.

As far as control variables: the baseline of the covariate "Area" is Central Italy. There are significant differences only with respect to the Northern regions, for whom a positive coefficient suggests a delay of the occurrence of the event. The year of survey underlines changes in the behaviours: nowadays, the first sexual intercourse occurs sooner and more frequently. The "Gender" variable suggests that differences between males and females were greater in the year 2000. In fact, the interaction coefficient between gender and time shows how those same differences turned non-significantly different in 2017.

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Area (Centre)				
North - East	0.0973*** (0.0192)	0.0970*** (0.0192)	0.0850*** (0.0192)	0.0860*** (0.0191)
North - West	0.0333** (0.0167)	0.0339** (0.0167)	0.0273 (0.0167)	0.0329** (0.0167)
South	0.0172 (0.0148)	0.0156 (0.0148)	0.00980 (0.0148)	0.00403 (0.0148)
Survey (2000)				
2017	-0.196*** (0.0182)	-0.192*** (0.0182)	-0.186*** (0.0182)	-0.187*** (0.0182)
Gender (Male)				
Female	0.0577*** (0.0193)	0.0585*** (0.0193)	0.0578*** (0.0192)	0.0497** (0.0194)
Survey ## Gender				
2017 # Female	-0.0624*** (0.0242)	-0.0639*** (0.0242)	-0.0746*** (0.0241)	-0.0760*** (0.0241)
Parental educ (Up to low-sec)				
Upper-secondary	-0.0335** (0.0163)	-0.0322** (0.0163)	-0.0365** (0.0163)	-0.0413** (0.0163)
Tertiary	0.00414 (0.0197)	0.00641 (0.0197)	-0.000894(0.0196)	-0.0116 (0.0200)
Father's Job (Low)				
Medium	-0.0480*** (0.0153)	-0.0479*** (0.0153)	-0.0498*** (0.0153)	-0.0516*** (0.0153)
High	-0.130*** (0.0175)	-0.129*** (0.0175)	-0.132*** (0.0175)	-0.134*** (0.0176)
Does not work	-0.0790 (0.0680)	-0.0626 (0.0683)	-0.0708 (0.0681)	-0.0673 (0.0677)
Working mother (No)				
Yes	-0.100*** (0.0128)	-0.0972*** (0.0129)	-0.0962*** (0.0128)	-0.0962*** (0.0128)

Parental divorce (No)				
Yes		-0.0762*** (0.0236)	-0.0542** (0.0236)	-0.0483** (0.0235)
Church Attendance (Never)				
At least one parent			0.118*** (0.0130)	0.113*** (0.0130)
Low-Sec School Grade				0.0233*** (0.00597)
Type of high school (Classical)				
Accounting				-0.00180 (0.0233)
Scientific lyceum				-0.0200 (0.0216)
Other technical institutes				-0.0927*** (0.0293)
Other General tracks				-0.0461 (0.0313)
Professional institutes				-0.0997** (0.0420)
Constant	4.382*** (0.0236)	4.381*** (0.0236)	4.356*** (0.0236)	4.201*** (0.0589)
Observations	10863	10863	10863	10863

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard errors in parentheses.

Table 2: Log-logistic event-history models for the analysis of the transition to first sexual intercourse

For a more substantive interpretation of the results concerning parental socioeconomic status and other SDT-related characteristics of the family origin, in Figure 2 we show predicted survival curves at different combinations of the social background variables (with all other covariates set at their mean value), based on M4 in Table 1. The median duration to first sexual intercourse is substantially longer for children raised by parents with low socioeconomic status (panel a) and by more "traditional" families (panel b).
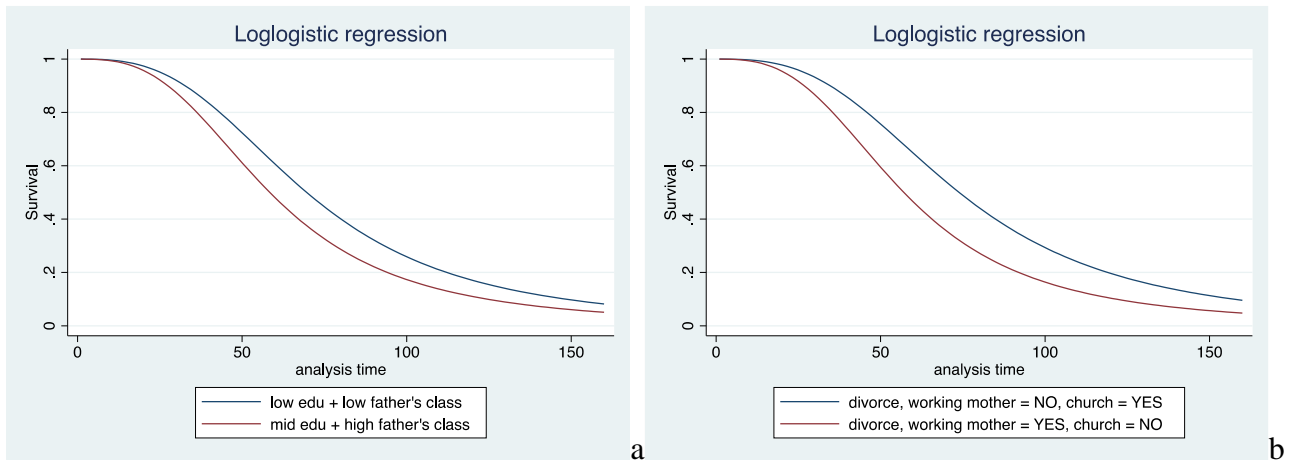
Figure 3: Predicted survival curves for students raised in families with higher vs. lower parental socioeconomic status (panel a) and raised in "modern" vs. "traditional" families (panel b)

3.2 Social origins and the type of sexual debut

As mentioned, the analysis has also been developed considering the type of first sexual intercourse (protected or not) through competing risks models, which can give interesting hints concerning the mechanism underlying the effects of the different characteristics of the family of origin considered. For instance, we argued that higher parental education may be associated with better parent-child communication regarding sexuality, which should be associated with a higher likelihood of protected first sexual intercourse, even if more precocious. The results of competing risks models are shown in Table 2 below.

	M5	M6
Type (Protected)		
Unprotected	0.603*** (0.0131)	0.509*** (0.0346)
Area(Centre)		
North - East	0.0840*** (0.0186)	0.0841*** (0.0186)
North - Ovest	0.0278* (0.0163)	0.0276* (0.0163)
South	-0.00294 (0.0144)	-0.00244 (0.0144)
Survey (2000)		
2017	-0.176*** (0.0178)	-0.176*** (0.0178)
Gender (male)		
Female	0.0466** (0.0191)	0.0470** (0.0191)
Survey # Gender (2001xMale)		
Survey # Gender (2017xFemale)	-0.0700*** (0.0237)	-0.0707*** (0.0237)
Parental educ (Up to low-sec)		
Upper-secondary	-0.0423*** (0.0160)	-0.0724*** (0.0190)

Tertiary	-0.00875 (0.0196)	-0.0525** (0.0230)
Father's Job (Low)		
Medium	-0.0485*** (0.0150)	-0.0358** (0.0177)
High	-0.132*** (0.0172)	-0.122*** (0.0203)
Does not work	-0.0730 (0.0667)	-0.0702 (0.0786)
Working mother (No)		
Working mother at 13 years old (Yes)	-0.0979*** (0.0125)	-0.113*** (0.0148)
Parental divorce (no)		
Parental divorce (yes)	-0.0483** (0.0227)	-0.0359 (0.0270)
Church attendance (never)		
At least one parent	0.113*** (0.0127)	0.113*** (0.0150)
Low-Sec School Grade	0.0216*** (0.00579)	0.0216*** (0.00579)
Type of high school (Classical)		
Accounting	0.00431 (0.0228)	0.00474 (0.0228)
Scientific lyceum	-0.0173 (0.0211)	-0.0171 (0.0212)
Other technical institutes	-0.0838*** (0.0285)	-0.0835*** (0.0285)
Other General tracks	-0.0465 (0.0304)	-0.0462 (0.0305)
Professional institutes	-0.0934** (0.0408)	-0.0916** (0.0408)
Type # Education (Unprotected # Low-sec)		
Unprotected # Upp-sec		0.0998*** (0.0338)
Unprotected # Tertiary		0.148*** (0.0412)
Type # Father's Job (Unprotected # Low)		
Unprotected # Medium		-0.0428 (0.0327)
Unprotected # High		-0.0332 (0.0375)
Unprotected # Does not work		-0.0149 (0.149)
Type # Working mother (Unprotected # No)		
Unprotected # Yes		0.0503* (0.0271)
Type # Parental divorce (Unprotected # No)		
Unprotected # Yes		-0.0415 (0.0491)
Type # Church Attendance (Unprotected # Neither)		
Unprotected # At least one		-0.00232 (0.0279)
Constant	4.340*** (0.0575)	4.367*** (0.0583)
Observations	10863	10863

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Standard Errors in parentheses.

Table 2: Log-logistic competing-risks models for the analysis of the transition to first sexual intercourse

In the first model (M5), without interaction terms between parental characteristics and type of intercourse, it is evident that unprotected intercourses have a strong delaying effect on the time of the event. In the second model (M6), interactions between the type of intercourse and all variables related with the social origin has been added. Only two interaction terms are statistically significant. As hypothesised, a higher educational level of the family accelerates the timing of first protected intercourse, and slows down the timing of unprotected one, net of all other variables included in the model. Also the accelerating effect of having been raised by a working mother is stronger as far as the hazard of first protected intercourse is concerned, suggesting that having been raised by a working mother may also be related, at least in part, to a more open parent(mother)-child communication about sex. However, in this case the interaction coefficient is only marginally significant.

To better appreciate the reversal of the educational gradient in the hazard of first sexual intercourse depending on whether the latter is protected or unprotected, the following survival curves have been predicted based on M6 (Figure 3).
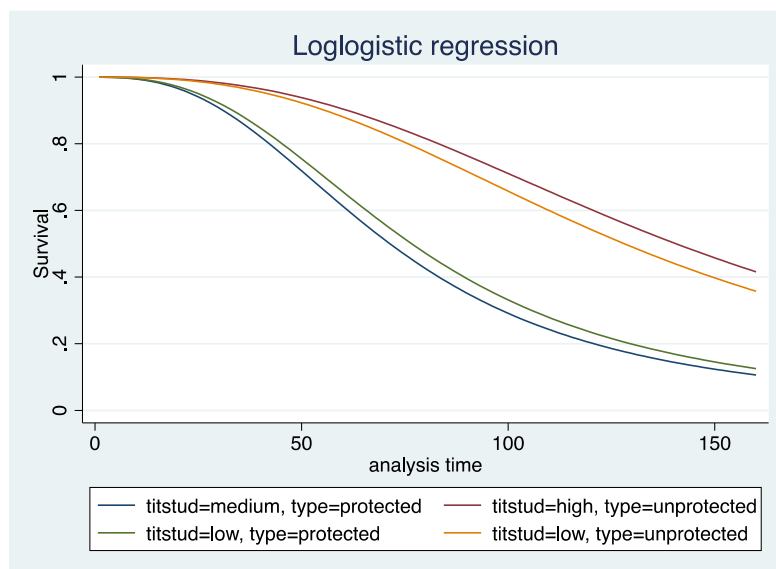

Figure 3: Predicted survival curves by parental education and type (protected vs unprotected) of first sexual intercourse

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Appendix

	person-time	failures	abs. rate	Low	Up
Area of residence during adolescence					
Centre	198563	2455	0.01236383	0.0118843	0.0128627
Northeast	105325	1161	0.01102302	0.0104069	0.0116757
Northwest	163897	1895	0.01156214	0.0110531	0.0120946
South	288512	3386	0.01173608	0.0113474	0.0121381
Survey year					
2001	316315	2991	0.00945576	0.0091229	0.0098008
2017	439982	5906	0.01342328	0.0130853	0.01377
Gender					
Male	357646	4444	0.01242569	0.0120657	0.0127964
Female	398651	4453	0.01117017	0.0108469	0.0115031
Parental education					
Up to lower-secondary	166346	1669	0.0100333	0.0095633	0.0105264
Upper-secondary	379470	4612	0.01215379	0.011808	0.0125097
Tertiary	204781	2549	0.01244744	0.0119735	0.0129402
Father's job					
Low	191016	2027	0.01061168	0.0101596	0.0110838
Medium	322493	3725	0.01155064	0.0111856	0.0119276
High	215343	2813	0.01306288	0.012589	0.0135546
Doesn't work	5841	81	0.01386749	0.0111537	0.0172415
Working mother					
No	257049	2637	0.01025874	0.0098746	0.0106579
Yes	475635	5973	0.01255795	0.0122435	0.0128805
Church attendance					
Never	522351	6499	0.01244183	0.012143	0.012748
At least one parent	222945	2266	0.01016394	0.009754	0.0105912
Type of high school					
Classical lyceum	64868	755	0.01163902	0.0108377	0.0124996
Accounting	244903	2653	0.01083286	0.0104284	0.011253
Scientific lyceum	320091	3846	0.01201533	0.0116415	0.0124011
Other technical institutes	59471	772	0.01298112	0.012097	0.0139299
Other General tracks	42228	560	0.01326134	0.0122072	0.0144065
Professional institutes	20414	253	0.01239346	0.0109567	0.0140187
Parental divorce					
No	684196	7913	0.0115654	0.0113134	0.0118231
Yes	42728	615	0.01439337	0.0132996	0.0155771