

## **For better or for worse**

### **Exploring the role of dissolution and secularization on the beliefs about the indissolubility of marriage**

Alessandra Minello, University of Florence

According to the Bible the marriage is indissoluble. It is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. The religious concept of the indissolubility of marriage dates back to the Council of Trent and associates the institution of marriage to a truth of divine revelation (Brugger 2017).

Believing in the indissolubility of marriage is not only a religious matter. It also clearly describes attitudes towards the importance of the union, the role it eventually plays in life, the level of commitment in case of marriage. Both theoretical and empirical research confirm that marital attitudes and expectations towards marriage are good predictors of marriage itself.

If, on the one side, the concept of indissolubility of marriage has been recently questioned by theologians (Himes and Coriden 2004), on the other side, it is called into question by changes in the social life of persons, and especially by the spread of divorce. The divorce rates doubled in the past decades, and it reshaped modern understandings of marriage and family relations (Wang and Schofer 2018).

The role of personal experience of parental dissolution, the spread of marital dissolution at contextual level, the own and contextual secularization and their effects on the persistency of the belief in indissoluble marriage are the focus of this manuscript. I will concentrate on Italy. I will use data from two surveys on university students run in 2000 and 2017. Being a place where religious value still plays a strong role and where the introduction of legal separation and divorce is recent, Italy is facing more than other countries the contrast among these phenomena.

#### **Background and research questions**

Children of divorced parents more often marry young, divorce and re-marry several times, find themselves in unhappy relationships, and mistrust people in general (Ross and Mirowsky 1999). The link between divorce and attitudes towards marriage was already studied in the past in other context and mainly with a qualitative approach. Overall, attitudes towards love are shaped by the divorce of the parents (Sprague and Kinney 2008), children who experience it have, on the contrary better attitudes towards divorce itself (Cui et al. 2011). This is called the intergenerational transmission of divorce. However, the picture when we look at attitudes towards marriage is still not so well defined. Historically there have been mixed results concerning parental divorce and negative views about marriage (Erola et al. 2012). Some studies confirm a negative link between parental divorce and positive views towards marriage (e.g., Axinn and Thornton 1996): children of divorced parents show a lack of trust not only in the intimate relations but also in marriage (King 2000), and have lower expectations for a successful marriage (Franklin et al 1990, Collardeau and Ehrenberg 2016). Others do not confirm this link (e.g., Trent and South 1992; Tasker and Richards 1994). Children of divorced couples might be more careful in the choice of a partner and developing, hence, positive feelings about long-lasting unions.

RQ1: The connection between parental divorce and beliefs towards marriage in Italy is still unexplored. I will test whether children of parents in disrupted couples believe less or more than the others in indissoluble marriage. Since divorce in some areas, especially in the North-west of the country (Istat data) is more common than in others, I will explore whether areas with higher divorce rates led to a decline in the stigma for children of divorced parents and to a drop in its consequences in association with the beliefs about the future of marriage.

Also the link between secularization and beliefs about indissolubility of marriage is unexplored. However, the national context offers some points for consideration. In Italy the Roman Catholic Church maintains a strong influence in shaping family formation patterns in favor of marriage, the pressure comes both from the family of origin and the society in general (Vignoli and Salvini 2014). The cohabitation is still seen as lacking of

social recognition and source of stigmatization. The high, even if declining, choice of religious marriages is a sign of persisting attitudes and behaviors routed by the adhesion to religious precepts (Caltabiano et al. 2006). However, in the recent years secularization is evolving. Bonarini (2013) showed that the participation in Mass for youths aged 15-24 dropped from 35% of those born in 1976-1978 to 26% for the same age peers born in 1986-1989. This means that there was a decline in the participation of 1% for each year of birth. Several studies demonstrated the decline in attachment to the Catholic church and of people claiming they believe in God and show that the distance youths put between them and religion, passes also through the critique of religious precepts, norms and rules.

RQ2: In this context, I expect secularized youths being less prone to believe in the indissolubility of marriage. At the same time, there might be a change over time especially in the areas where secularization is more widespread.

The interaction between parental marriage dissolution and secularization and its impact on youths' beliefs about indissoluble marriage is an issue. The literature shows how these two dimensions interacts. It is demonstrated that parental divorce is associated with a potential disruption of children religious beliefs (Ellison et al. 2011). Divorced people, and hence also divorced parents, are less likely to attend religious services (Regnerus and Uecker, 2006; Zhai et al. 2007). Moreover, if parents are divorced, children are less prone to consider themselves religious than children of married parents (Zhai et al 2008). A specific study on the role of religiosity in shaping the risk of divorce in case of infidelity showed that there

RQ3: I expect that young people declaring themselves as religious and being children of a disrupted couple might have such a high level of attachment to religion to overcome the parents' experience and to believe in everlasting marriage. On the other side, secularized children who did experience parents' couple dissolution, might be reinforced in their lack of trust about eternal marriage.

## **Data and methods**

This study is based on two surveys. SELFY, Sexual and Emotional LiFe of Youths, carried out in 2017 in 28 Italian universities and an almost identical survey (The Sis Survey: Sexuality of Italian Students), carried out in 2000-2001. In 2000 4,998 students were surveyed and in 2017 8,094, all attending undergraduate courses in economics and statistics in Italian public universities.

Students are asked to declare their level of agreement to the sentence "When there is a marriage, it is forever". The scale has five categories; from "I totally disagree" to "I totally agree". I am interested into those who strongly believe in indissoluble marriage, hence I used it as a dichotomous variable that assume value 1 only in case they totally agree. 36% of the respondents strongly believe that marriage is indissoluble. As a measure of parental marriage dissolution of the parents, in one question students have to declare the date of separation of the parents<sup>1</sup>. They can indicate the date or declare they don't remember it or that they are not separated. I transform this variable into a dichotomous where the value is 1 if they are separated. 9.4% of the students experienced parents' separation.

As a measure of secularization students are asked how important religion is in their life. If they answered that religion is not important at all, I include them among the most secularized and compare them to all the others. 18.2% of the students declare that religion for them is not important at all. Despite I can not identify the religion of the respondent, I can assume that almost all the respondents refer to the Catholic religion, and control for the country of origin (Foreigner vs native) to capture eventual other religions.

The models control for: gender, area of residence, having had a relationship or being in a relationship, dimension of the town, level of education of the parents, age.

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<sup>1</sup> Separation literally corresponds to the step before divorce. As mentioned, divorce can nowadays happen 6 months after separation. Before the reform of the divorce law in 2015, the time was of 3 years. The separation as it is defined here refers more broadly to couples' disruption. Since our focus is mainly on emotions and experiences that can influence youths' imaginaries, this distinction is not essential.

For the region of residence during adolescence I include information about both the level of secularization in 2015 and the increase in the level of secularization of the region, measured as the percentage of people aged more than 6 declaring to never go to Mass, and as a difference between this measure in 2015 and in 2001 (Istat Data 2015, 2001 is the first available year). For the divorce, I included divorce rate in 2015 and in 1999 and the increase in the level of divorce of the region. 2015 and 1999 are chosen to lag the date to the years when students attended secondary education.

I use logit models to calculate students' belief in indissoluble marriage. I stratified the sample by years of the survey. To discern the impact of the regional context on their belief about marriage, I estimated multilevel models, that permit to take into consideration heterogeneity within as well as between schools. Specifically, I address whether regions with a high diffusion of secularization, a high development of secularization and high rates of divorce are associated with the beliefs about eternal love of students.

## Results

While divorce and secularization rise between 2000 and 2017, the believe in eternal marriage decline. Children of disrupted couples believe less in indissoluble marriage than children of married/cohabiting couples. The percentage went from 30.5% in 2000 to 21% in 2017 for the firsts, and from 43.1 to 33.5 for the second. The change was basically the same in both the groups. Secularized children believe less than religious students in eternal marriage, but while the percentage of secularized one slightly increased same over time (from 18.9 in 2000 to 19.2 in 2017), the one of religious students decreased from 44.9% to 36%, remaining the highest among the considered groups. Multivariate analysis shows that while the effect of disruption is identical in 2000 and 2017, the effect of secularization decreases over time.

Tab. 1 contains the complete model with the interaction between being children of a disrupted or married/cohabiting couple and being secularized or religious stratified by year of the survey. The interaction shows that in 2000, with respect to not secularized children of married couples, those secularized and with married parents were the least likely to believe in indissoluble marriage. Also the other two groups show negative and significant odds. In 2017 the negative primacy goes to the secularized children of disrupted couples, and also in this case the other two groups show negative and statistically significant odds.

Tab. 1. Results from logistic models. Odd ratios. Dependent variable: believing in indissoluble marriage. Interaction: Being children of a disrupted couple and being secularized. Separated models: 2000 and 2017

	2000			2017		
	Odds	SE	<i>p</i>	Odds	SE	<i>p</i>
Disruption#secularization						
Ref. Married/cohabiting parents - not secularized children						
Married/cohabiting parents - secularized children	0.27	.041	0.000	0.44	0.034	0.000
Disrupted parents - not secularized children	0.54	.100	0.001	0.61	0.066	0.000
Disrupted parents - secularized children	0.38	.157	0.020	0.27	0.048	0.000.

The model control for: gender, area of residence, having had a relationship or being in a relationship, dimension of the town, level of education of the parents, age.

I looked at the effect of regional variables. The multilevel models do not give the results I expected. The only significant and positive second level variable<sup>2</sup>, both from 2000 and 2017, is the secularization of the region, measured through the percentage of people who declare they never go to the church. As higher as secularization is in a region, as more are the students prone to believe in indissoluble marriage. The divorce rate at regional level has no effect on beliefs about marriage. Neither the change in secularization over time nor the divorce

<sup>2</sup>I interpret it with caution due to the low number of second level groups (20). I additionally run logistic models with robust standard errors, that confirm my results.

give positive results. Contrary to my expectations, there is not an impact of these variables on the belief about marriage of university students.

## Conclusions

Youths believe less and less in eternal marriage. Children of parents in disrupted couples believe less than the children of married/cohabiting couples in indissoluble marriage. However, despite I expected a decrease of the effect of parental disruption over time, results do not confirm this hypothesis. There is not an effect of the eventual decline of stigmatization, with less disruptive consequences on children, when divorce becomes more common. There is also not a diverse effect over of the spread of divorce, that I hypothesised following the same pattern of decrease in stigmatization. The event of family disruption is, hence, very disruptive for Italian students. The role of secularization and, in contrast of religion, is confirmed. Secularized students do not believe in indissoluble marriage as well as their religious peers do. Moreover, secularization also shapes the role of parental marital dissolution. However, there has been a decline over time, with younger cohort of students less affected by secularization than older students in defining marriage beliefs. Also the secularization of the region where the students grow up plays a role: students in more secularized regions believe in marriage more than children who grow up in less secularized regions. This counterintuitive result is, however, in line with the decreasing role of secularization in negatively shaping beliefs about marriage, at least when not interacting with parental disruption. I can only cautiously suggest that there might be a new idea of eternal marriage that is becoming more and more independent from religion. This idea is consistent with previous qualitative findings (Vignoli and Salvini 2014): marriage is relevant *per se*, despite its connection with religiosity, because of the role of tradition that in Italy might be as strong as religion.

Finally, the interaction between parental dissolution and secularization shows that, as expected, secularized children with disrupted families are less likely than all the others to believe in the for better and for worse marriage, but only in 2017. In the previous cohort of students those who are secularized but have married/cohabiting parents are those with a lowest faith in eternal marriage. The religion, on the other side is confirmed to be protective in this sense, but divorce is acting as detrimental for marriage beliefs also among religious children.

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