

The Role of Parental Social Class in the Transition to Adulthood: a Sequence Analysis Approach in Italy and the United States.

Maria Sironi
University of Pennsylvania

Nicola Barban
University of Groningen

Roberto Impicciatore
Università di Milano

Abstract

In comparison to older cohorts, younger men and women in the developed societies delay their transition to adulthood and follow more complex trajectories. However, within cohorts variations in timing and sequencing of events still remain. Two of the major determinants of life course events related to the transition to adulthood, and in particular to family formation, are gender and social class. These two characteristics can influence the sequence of events characterizing the transition to adulthood 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 or, in other words, to push towards a more “traditional” pattern, i.e. a trajectory in which the end of education and the first job precede union formation, which in turn precedes parenthood. On the other hand, it has been highlighted that in Europe the familial status has a different effect with an increasing complexity in life course as the social class increases.

The aim of this research is to examine in details the sequence of transitions highlighting, in a comparative perspective, how the life trajectories are influenced by parental social class and gender in the US and Italy. The main result of the analysis is that the effect of parental background is different across countries and genders. In the U.S., we find that the role of social class is strong but similar for both genders: high status favors not only a higher education and an early entry in the labor market, but also an higher heterogeneity of states and the occurrence of new behaviors like single living and cohabitation. In Italy, the effect of social class is strongly gender-specific. Among men a higher social class tends to delay transitions, more than leading towards modern behaviors in their living arrangement. Among women, a higher social class either tends to facilitate the experience of more modern and independent transition and to reduce the propensity to follow more standardized pattern, or it generates a higher probability of postponing the exit from parental home, and then family formation, among those who completed education and found a job.

Keywords: transition to adulthood; social class; parental background; sequence analysis

1. Introduction

In the last fifty years the process that brings adolescents and teenagers to adulthood has changed greatly, in many – if not all – countries in the West developed world. After World War II adult roles, such as being employed full-time and financially independent were achieved by the early 20s. Nowadays it takes much longer to assume such roles, and the whole transition has been postponed to the late 20s, early 30s. The general delay that has been found in the first steps of the transition to adulthood (Sironi and Furstenberg 2012) is most likely transferred also to the subsequent events in life trajectories, such as leaving the parental home, starting a co-residential union, and having children. As a result, in developed societies young adults, as compared to older cohorts, experience a delay in the transition to adulthood (Aassve et al. 2002; Furstenberg 2010; Settersten, Furstenberg and 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 and have become 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 Elzinga and Liefbroer (Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007) pointed out, this term includes many different aspects, such as the de-institutionalization, the de-standardization, and the differentiation in the life trajectories of young adults. This means that, first, the order of events become less clear and less guided by normative rules of the society. Second, it means that the timing at which the events occur may vary substantially between individuals, as well as the duration in different states. Finally it means that the “number of distinct stages that young adults occupy increases” (Bruckner and Mayer 2005).

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 and Liefbroer 2007; Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch 2006). The exact mechanisms by which socio-economic 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 sequence of events characterizing the transition to adulthood, i.e. exiting school, entry into the labor market, leaving the parental home, entry into a co-residential union, and parenthood. All of these events mutually influence each other in terms of timing resulting in major challenges in lifestyles, responsibilities, and autonomy (Gauthier and 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 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 if and how the institutional structure and context can fill the gap stemming from disadvantaged family background. Indeed, U.S. and Italy are located in different stages along the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986) showing a different incidence of “individualized” and “secularized” behaviours such as informal cohabitations, non-marital fertility and marital dissolution.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The Second Demographic Transition Theory predicts a general trend toward heterogeneous experiences in individual life courses. Changes in the economic structure and cultural shifts trigger individualization in the demographic behavior, which implies flexibility in life trajectories and longer periods spent in states such as single person or unmarried cohabitation. Furthermore, these trends have been complicated by short-term economic fluctuation and historical events. Hence, we would expect all countries to converge in their demographic behavior and so more homogeneity in national experiences, but more diverse sequence patterns, with familial and non-familial transition markers increasingly overlapping (Shanahan, 2000). However, we still observe great heterogeneity across countries, and this is mainly due to the fact that countries can be found in different stages of the transition process. Italy and the U.S. can be considered as probably the main example of countries at a different stage of the transition, with the U.S. being the leader and Italy being the lagger. Consequently, the role of parental social class in the transition to adulthood might be different in such different contexts, and the differences across countries might become smaller as social class increases.

As suggested by Furstenberg (2008), the relevance of family social class on the subsequent life course starts before birth, it continues throughout adolescence, and it is able to shape the course of young adult transitions and psychological development in the third and fourth decades of life. Youth from affluent and well-educated families marry and have children later in life because of a longer education, much more extended search for a permanent partner in life, and a lower incidence of unintended pregnancy (Furstenberg 2008). In other words, the family background is crucial in determining the individual resources that may lead to good decisions in the early phases of adulthood. 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. As a matter of fact, young adults from disadvantaged families, even if they go to college, do it with fewer

resources and therefore face more difficulties in completing the degree. Moreover they do not want and cannot afford to remain unemployed for too long, and consider education as a way to get a job. So they are more likely to drop out of school if they are able to find an occupation. Finally, the economic difficulties linked to the housing costs, may hinder the independent living before family formation. As far as cultural resources are concerned, Kohn et al (1986) noticed that in raising their children middle class parents tend to give more importance to autonomy whereas working class parents are more focused on conformity (Kohn, Slomczynski and Schoenbach 1986). Upper-class parents tend to talk to their children more than working-class parents do. Therefore, favouring analytical thinking, higher status parents prepare their children for higher education and higher status jobs (Nisbett 2009). However, there are other authors who 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 and Stevens 2007).

Focusing on the effect of parental resources on leaving the parental home – a crucial step in the transition to adulthood – De Jong-Gierveld et al (1991) distinguish four classes of parental resources, material and non-material, and that can or cannot be transferred to young adults. The transferable material resources are strictly related to income; the transferable non-material resources refer to parents' education, cultural and social capital, i.e. a set of values that are transmitted to the children via socialization process; the non-transferable material resources are related to the available space within the parental home (inversely related to the number of siblings) and to the mother's role in taking care of home chores, preparing meals, washing, and cleaning; the non-transferable non-material parental resources refer to the quality of relationships among family members. Each kind of resource may play a specific role in the decision of leaving the parental home and, consequently in the transition to adulthood. Results for young adults born in Netherlands show that autonomy and independence are strengthened by high level of transferable parental resources and weakened by high level of non-transferable resources (De Jong-Gierveld, Liefbroer and Beekink 1991).

In any case, 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 traditional or innovative patterns. For example, it has been underlined that children from higher family social status on the one hand tend to postpone their first union (Wiik 2009) and their first child birth (Rijken and Liefbroer 2009); on the other hand, tend to acquire their housing autonomy earlier, without directly making the transition to live with a partner (Blaauboer and Mulder 2010). A specific interest may be also devoted to the order of events related to family formation (first union,

first marriage, first child) identifying innovative patterns such as cohabitation, pre-marital pregnancies, childbirth out-of-wedlock.

The effect of familial status on the propensity to experience more complex or innovative pattern of transition to adulthood may be context-specific. The classification and the characteristics of the different welfare states suggest that the de-standardization, turbulence and individualization in life course trajectories are more advanced in countries that can be classified as liberal or social-democratic compared to the southern European countries, where welfare support is very weak and we observe a reliance on the family as the locus of support (Ferrera 1996; Mayer 2001; Trifiletti 1999). In our analysis we focus on North America and Southern Europe since the existing literature suggest crucial differences between them. Several studies show that in North America, an higher familial status tends to decrease the complexity of trajectories or, in other words, to push towards 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 and Astone 1986; Marini 1984a; Marini 1984b). In Canadian society, completing postsecondary education and getting a job are important steps to marriage and parenthood in particular among high and middle social classes (Rajulton and Burch 2010; Rajulton, Ravanera and Beaujot 2007; Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch 2003; Ravanera, Rajulton and Burch 2006). Youth born and raised in high socio-economic conditions, on average, take longer to find a permanent partner (and to have children). They are not less likely to cohabit, but their cohabitation (or their marriage) ends up to be 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, and so it can result in greater family instability later in life (Furstenberg 2008).

In Southern Europe, and Italy in particular, in a context characterized by an higher persistence of “traditional” sequencing of events (also due to the still strong influence of the Catholic Church), innovative and more complex patterns, mainly living alone, non-marital cohabitation and children out-of-wedlock, are more widespread among children of upper social classes. Thus, the “bourgeois” model is characterized by the postponement of events and the non-linear nature of the pattern leading to the adulthood, whereas lower class young people would continue to follow traditional and safer trajectories as a protection against the uncertain economic situation (Cavalli, Buzzi and De Lillo 1997; Galland 1995; Galland 1997).

Finally, the role of parental background may be different across gender in specific context. Usually women face the transition to family formation earlier than men (mainly marriage and parenthood), although this trend is reducing over time due to the expansion of female education together with the increase in the female labour force participation. However, big differences still

remain between countries. This is the case of U.S. and Italy: 46% of female employment rate in Italy in 2011 versus 62% in the U.S. (OECD 2012). Thus, we wonder whether in a society characterized by a high female unemployment rate and traditional gender roles within the couple (woman caretaker and man breadwinner) like Italy, the effect of parental resources may be different in shaping the transition to adulthood of daughters and sons.

Generally speaking, current literature, for the most part, focuses on single events in a single context. The aim of our analysis is threefold. First, we want to evaluate the impact of social origins on the patterns of transition to adulthood as a whole; second, we apply a cross-national comparative perspective to evaluate the role of a specific context in the relationship between parental social class and the transition to adulthood; third we want to focus on gender differences and in particular we want to evaluate if the role of parental background is gender-specific in the two countries. Background literature enables us to formulate the following hypotheses, to be tested separately for men and women:

H1: a higher parental socio-economic status (in terms of parents' education and/or better occupation) is associated with a general postponement in the transition to adulthood;

H2: patterns towards independence and family formation are more rapid, more innovative and less standardized in the U.S. than in Italy;

H3: the effect of parental background on the life course trajectories is context specific. In particular we expect that in the U.S. children of upper social status tend to follow more normative and standardized sequence of states than children of lower states whereas the opposite occurs in Italy.

3. Data and Methods

In this paper we use two different data sets, one for each country, containing similar information on the life course of young adults. For the United States we use data collected through the NLSY79. The sample includes 8,636 individuals (4,275 males and 4,361 females), born between 1957 and 1964, interviewed each year from 1979 to 1994, and every other year since 1994. We consider waves from 1979 to 1996, in order to follow young adults starting when they are 14-22 years old (born between 1957 and 1964) until they are 31-39 in 1996. The NLSY79 collects information on a nationally representative sample of young men and women, designed to gather information at multiple points in time on their labor market activities and other significant life events. For Italy instead we use the Multipurpose ISTAT survey called "Famiglia e soggetti sociali", including 40,962 individuals born between 1899 and 1985 and interviewed at the end of 2003. We do not use the entire sample, but we select the same birth cohorts included in the NLSY79 to make the samples

more homogeneous and comparable. Our final sample for Italy includes 6,002 individuals (2,916 males and 3,086 females). The longitudinal structure of the NLSY79 and the retrospective questions in the Multipurpose ISTAT survey enable us to reconstruct the steps, year by year, in the independence and family transitions for each individual in the sample.

The method we intend to use to investigate the relationship between the social class and the life course trajectories is based on the *sequence analysis* (Abbott 1995; Abbott and Tsay 2000; Aisenbrey and Fasang 2010). We adopt a life course perspective, looking at the entire development of school, employment, and family history. Parental social status strongly affects the environment in which individuals grow up, and so can have a large association with young adults' life trajectories and the sequence of events in their transition to adulthood. Individuals build their future on the basis of the constraints and opportunities they have faced in the past (Elder 1994). The process is iterative and cumulative, so it is important to take a unitary, *holistic* approach and look at the effect of family background on the whole life course rather than on single events of the transition to adulthood (Barban 2011; Barban and Billari 2012; Billari 2005).

The events we take into account are the following: end of education, entry into labour force, leaving the parental home, first union (marriage and/or cohabitation), and parenthood. Parents' social status is defined on the basis of education level when the respondent was 14 years old. More specifically parental socioeconomic status can be low, medium or high depending on the level of parents' education. Given the disparity in the distribution of education level between Italy and the United States, we define a low socioeconomic status in Italy if both parents attained just primary education, a medium level if at least one attained lower secondary education, and a high level if at least one attained upper secondary education. In the United States a low level corresponds to both parents with primary or lower secondary education (9 or fewer years of education), a medium level corresponds to at least one parent with upper secondary education (12 or fewer years of education), and a high level corresponds to at least one parent with tertiary education (more than 12 years of school)¹.

In sequence analysis each life course trajectory is represented by a string of characters, resembling the one used to code DNA molecules in biological sciences. Hence, every trajectory is

¹ We also used another measure of parental social class, using parents' occupation instead of education level. We consider the father's job unless mother's job is at higher level, or father's job is missing and mother's job is not missing Erickson, Frederick. 1984. "School Literacy, Reasoning, and Civility: An Anthropologist's Perspective." *Review of Educational Research* 54(4):525-46.. Also in this case we have three different levels of social class, low (e.g. workers and farm laborers), medium (e.g. clericals, craftsmen, military soldiers), and high (e.g. professionals, managers, entrepreneurs), based on the type of occupation that parents had when the respondent was 14. Results do not change significantly when using occupation, and are more consistent with education. Education defines more clearly socioeconomic status, hence we only report results obtained with education level in the sequence analysis.

made up of a number of values that corresponds to the number of years each individual is observed. Accordingly, the number of possible combinations is equal to (# possible different states)^(# years each individual is observed). Moreover a sequence can differ along three dimensions:

- Timing, i.e. the age at which different events occur in peoples lives;
- Quantum, i.e. the number of events in a trajectory;
- Sequencing, i.e. the order in which different transitions happen.

We describe trajectories along these dimensions. In fact we investigate the median age at each event (*timing*), we look at the proportion of individuals who experienced each event by age 35 (*quantum*), and finally we report the frequencies of the five most common independence and family trajectories showing the sequence of events (*sequencing*). All these dimensions are explored by gender and parental social class.

After defining the different sequences and describing them in terms of *timing*, *quantum*, and *sequencing*, we exploit a sequence analysis to identify specific typologies of life trajectories – dealing simultaneously with timing, quantum, and sequencing – in order to study how social class is related to the likelihood of ending up in a certain typology. The analytical strategy adopted in this case uses the Longest Common Subsequences metric (LCS) proposed by Elzinga (Elzinga 2010), whose goal is to compute a matrix of dissimilarities between pairs of sequences, and so of life courses (Billari 2005). The dissimilarity measure is based on the length of common distinct subsequences between life course trajectories. This metrics differs from the Optimal Matching Algorithm of Abbott since it does not require a cost definition and can be used with sequences of different length.

To take into account multiple domains, we adopted a *multichannel sequence analysis* approach (Pollock 2007), that allows to specify multiple domains in order to construct a single matrix of dissimilarities. In the multichannel sequence analysis, we distinguish between transitions in the family domain (i.e., marriage, cohabitation and childbearing) and transitions in the independence domain (i.e., school, leaving parental home and entering the labor market). Once the dissimilarity matrix is built, one possibility to identify a limited number of typologies is to apply a cluster analysis (Aassve, Billari and Piccarreta 2007). Finally, we perform a multinomial logistic regression analysis to investigate the relationship between parents' socio-economic status and the probability of being part of a specific typology (determined through the cluster analysis).

As a robustness check, on top of the sequence and the cluster analysis we also perform a latent class analysis to investigate whether the number of clusters selected (i.e. five clusters) is a plausible one. We indeed find that the choice of five clusters is correct, and that the characteristics of the clusters are very similar using the two methods. Consequently we only report the results

concerning the sequence and the cluster analysis, while the findings of the latent class analysis are included in the Appendix.

One aspect that is worth mentioning is how gender can affect all the analyses that will be developed in the article. Certainly the gender of individuals, together with their social class, plays a fundamental role in the way people structure their transition to adulthood. Usually women face the transition to family formation earlier than men (mainly marriage and parenthood), even if this trend is reducing over time due to the expansion of education which is greater among women, together with the increase in the female labour force participation. Also, retrospective information on parenthood is sometimes more reliable if asked of mothers rather than fathers, and sometimes fertility questions are collected only among women. Given these differences we need to adopt an analytical strategy that takes them into account, i.e. we do the analyses separately for men and women.

4. Descriptive findings

4.1. Timing

Looking at Table 1, containing the median age of each event we consider in the analysis, by country, gender, and by parental social class, the delay in the transition to adulthood among Italian people is evident compared to the U.S. With the exception of the median age at completing school, that is higher in the US because of the higher schooling rates in this country, all the other events in the independence and family transitions occur at an older age in Italy. For example, young adults leave the parental home 3-4 years later in Italy than in the US (at age 27 for men vs. age 23, and at age 24/25 for women vs. age 21/22). Accordingly, cohabitation, marriage and parenthood are postponed by 3-4 years. The median age at childbearing is well above 30 among Italian men.

When we look at the same figures but considering differences in parental socioeconomic status, we find that among men in Italy the median age at each event goes up as social class increases, meaning that coming from an advantaged family background induces a delay in the transition. Also in the U.S. this is true, but the gradient is weaker and not observable for “Starting a job” – the median age is constant at 19 –, and for “leaving the parental home” – the median age is lower (23) among those with a lower parental status than among those from a higher social class (24). The same result can be observed among women. Median age at all the events is generally lower than for men, but differences across countries and parental social class persist.

Briefly, two major results emerge: firstly, a delay in the transition to adulthood in Italy compared to the U.S.; secondly, differences across social class are stronger among Italian young adults than among Americans. These results are confirmed by looking at survival curves (see figure

A1 and A2 in Appendix). This is a first signal that family background may be more important in some contexts (i.e. Italy) than in others.

Table 1

4.2 *Quantum*

Table 2 contains the proportion of people who have experienced each event by age 35 according to gender, country and parental social status. Generally speaking, percentages tend to be higher in the U.S. showing that in this country the pattern to adulthood is more likely to be completed by age 35 compared to Italy (Table 2). Focusing on the acquisition of independence, we see in Italy a stronger gender gap for “Starting a job” (only 75.2% of Italian women enter the job market by age 35 compared to 95.6% for men whereas in the U.S. the proportions are respectively 97.9% and 98.7%) and an higher proportion of men that still live with their parents by age 35 (15.7% compared to 10.6% in the U.S.). For the events just mentioned, the gradient across social class is not very strong, except for leaving home among American men (92.7% in high SES vs. 84.3% in low SES), and for starting first job among Italian women, of which only 71.4% enter the job market if they come from a lower social class, while 89.8% start working by age 35 if from a higher social class.

Family transition, instead, shows big differences both across countries and across social classes. As a matter of fact, in Italy men and women who experience cohabitation are, respectively, at most 11.1% and 13.9% among higher class and percentages considerably decrease among medium and low social classes. In the U.S., these proportions are around 35% and do not vary by social class and gender. Interesting and contrasting characteristics in the two countries emerge for marriage: the proportion of people married by age 35 in the US tends to increase among higher social classes, while the opposite trend is observed in Italy. Moreover, differences between classes are stronger in Italy where the proportion of married by age 35 drops from 77.8% to 67% for men and from 87.1% to 75.9% for women going from higher to lower social class. It is possible that for these individuals marriage is substituted by cohabitation, or it is delayed.

Finally, people experiencing parenthood are more widespread in the US than in Italy (as expected by the lower TFR in Italy). In this case though the trend is decreasing in both countries as social class goes up, possibly due to a delay in all the events preceding childbearing that lead to a postponement of parenthood as well.

Table 2

In conclusion, relevant differences between US and Italy in the transition to adulthood are confirmed looking at the *quantum*. These differences mainly concern the role of women in the job

market that is less widespread in Italy, and the events of family transition. Again we observe that differences across social class are stronger in Italy than in the US, and that in some cases the gradient is different (as for cohabitation) or even goes in opposite directions (as for marriage).

4.3 Order of events

Figure 1 shows the first five most common sequences of states in the independence and family transition according to sex, parents' level of education and country. In the pattern towards independence, in both countries and for both sexes the exit from parental home follows the end of education and the entry into the labour market (see Figure 1a. and Figure 1b.). However, if in the US starting a job before the completion of education is very common, it is almost non-existent in Italy, where end of education is strongly characterized as first step in the transition to adulthood. The effect of social class is more relevant among women than men. In particular, among the former group, the more frequent sequence (in Italy: exit education, starting a job, leaving home; in the U.S.: starting a job, exit education, leaving home) tends to be reinforced within the higher SES (Figure 1b). Moreover, leaving home without a job is very frequent in Italy, especially among lower classes, while it is almost non-existent in the U.S.

Looking at family formation pattern (Figure 1c and Figure 1d), we see a strong concentration of individual in Italy in the "traditional" sequence Single-Married-Married Parent, especially among women. In the US, this sequence is the more common as well but a higher heterogeneity of patterns emerges. For example, in the American country, it tends to be more common living as a single outside the parental home whereas in Italy people leave parental home to marry.

One again, the role of family status is more important for women than for men, with a declining frequency of "traditional" pattern among higher classes in both countries.

Figure 1

Briefly, Italy is more characterized by traditional patterns whereas in the US people tend to experience a more various set of trajectories. In both countries social class is relevant only for women showing a negative relation between family status and percentage of people experiencing the more frequent sequence (Single-M-MP). However, looking at the independence pattern, we see that in Italy a higher social class put more relevance to the end education as a first step in the transition to adulthood whereas in the U.S. a higher status favors the beginning of the first job before the end of education.

4.4. Summary

Summarizing, descriptive findings show that the transition to adulthood occurs much later in Italy, independently by social class. However, social class – measured by parents’ level of education – emerges as a relevant aspect in shaping the patterns to adulthood and sometimes its effect in the two countries is different (e.g. timing of first job, quantum of cohabitations, incidence of “single living”) or goes in the opposite directions (quantum of marriages, order between end of education and first job). In any case, from any perspective, timing, quantum and sequence of events, the relevance of socio-economic status emerges clearly stronger in Italy than in the US, in particular among women.

5. Holistic Perspective on the Transition to Adulthood

We now want to assume a more comprehensive perspective taking into account at the same time all the three aspects we have seen separately in the previous section: timing, quantum, and order of events. In order to facilitate the interpretation, we will show on separate graphs the process called “Independence” (characterized by the following states: being a student, having entered the labour market, living with parents) and the process called “Family formation” (characterized by the states: living with parents, single or cohabiting or married, having a child), estimated simultaneously considering multiple domains.

The first step considers the descriptive analysis of the distribution of states according to the various ages (Figures 2 and 3) in order to highlight general differences between the two countries in the transition to adulthood. In a second step, we will come back on the effect of parents’ background on the transition to adulthood in US and Italy following the research strategy called Sequence Analysis that starts with the identification of typical patterns (in terms of sequence of states and time experienced in each state) through a cluster analysis and then try to evaluate the propensity to follow a specific pattern according to a specific population subgroup. More specifically, we pool the data for Italy and the U.S. (but separately by gender) and through a sequence analysis we identify five different typologies that show different behaviors in experiencing the events characterizing the Independence and Family formation trajectories.

5.1 Description of the Process in the two Countries

As we can see in Figure 2, among men there exist substantial differences in the way they face both the independence and the family transitions. First of all, looking at the top of the figure, in Italy many young adults go through a phase in which they still live with parents, are not in school and do not work. This category is almost non-existent in the U.S., where young men find their first job

when they are still in school. Moreover men who completed education and found a job are more likely to still live with parents in Italy than in the U.S., and this is true also if they are still in school. As a matter of fact many people in the U.S leave the parental home when they go to college, no matter how far the college is from their parents' house. When we look at family transition (bottom part of the figure) we can see that cohabitation is very infrequent in Italy, while in the U.S. it is limited but does happen among young men. Also, some statuses like being a single parent do not exist in Italy, and living as a single out from parental home is more common in the U.S. than in Italy. Based on Figure 2 we can argue that the transition to independence occurs earlier in the U.S. where men start working when they are still in school, and leave the parental home earlier than in Italy. Family transition is characterized by a more modern behavior in the U.S., where men cohabit more and experience periods of single fatherhood in some cases.

Figure 2 and 3

Among women (Figure 3) the differences between the two countries are even more visible. There is one difference that we observed also for men, i.e. that young women start working when they are still in school in the U.S., while in Italy there is a fraction of them who are not in school, live with parents and do not work. Also when they exit from school and find a job the moving-out process is less common and slower. In addition, more than 20% of Italian women finish school, leave their parents but do not enter the labor market. So presumably they end up as housewives and possibly mothers. This group cannot be found in the U.S. where most of women enter the labor market, many of them also when still in school. Country differences concerning the family transitions are very similar to those found among men. In the U.S. more women cohabit and have children during the cohabitation, and more experience periods of single motherhood. With respect to men, there are fewer women who are single and leave their parents, and on average they experience a faster transition.

5.2 Cluster analysis

Certainly there are large individual variations within countries, and we do want to identify these differences. Therefore, as a second step and as explained above, we perform a cluster analysis pooling data for both countries together, but separately by gender, in order to identify typologies of different behaviors in the transition to adulthood. In Figure 4 and 5 we show the graphs concerning the clusters, respectively for men and women. In each figure we show on the left the clusters for family formation and on the right side the clusters for the independence transition.

We start from the discussion of males' clusters. The first cluster – *Modern and Independent Transition* (22.5% of the male sample in Italy and 26.7% in the U.S.) – can be defined as experiencing a modern behavior in the transition to adulthood. In fact men in this group leave their parents' house when they finish school and find a job, but they do not move out necessarily to marry. They also stay single or cohabit. Moreover men in cluster 1 delay substantially childbearing. The second cluster instead can be defined as traditional – *Traditional and Early Transition* (22.4% of the male sample in Italy and 27.8% in the U.S.) –, given that both their achievement of independence and their family formation occur very early and pretty quickly. These young men leave their parents very soon, and usually do it to marry. Very few leave to stay single or to cohabit, and those who marry become fathers very shortly after the marriage. The third cluster – *Slow and Late Independence* (15.1% of the male sample in Italy and 7.5% in the U.S.) – is very different from the first two. The transition to adulthood is very slow and they gain their independence very late. Most of them in their late 20s is still in school and lives with parents, even if they found a job. In addition, more than 20% of men in this group never marries, never cohabits and does not have children before 35 years of age. Also cluster 4 – *Late Home Leavers (with a job)* (19.3% of the male sample in Italy and 19.8% in the U.S.)– is very different from the first two, but for different reasons. These individuals finish school and find a job relatively early, but then they do not move out from their parents' home, resulting in a strong postponement in family formation: almost 60% by age 35 still live with parents, they do not marry, or if they do they do it very late. Thus, their transition to adulthood seems to be incomplete. The fifth cluster – *Single Living with High Education* (20.8% of the male sample in Italy and 18.2% in the U.S.) – presents very peculiar characteristics. These young men leave their family of origin very soon, even if they are in school and sometimes even before than having a job. They leave to stay single at least for a while, then they marry or cohabit and have kids. Presumably the typical person belonging to this cluster is a young man who goes to college and starts living by himself when still in school. They enter the “marriage market” with some delay because they wait until they complete education, and they finish later than others. Hence in cluster 5 we do observe a delay in the transition to adulthood, in this case due to high education.

Figure 4

Figure 5 reveals some similarities in a couple of clusters, but also profound differences in the transitions between men and women, supporting our strategy to analyze this topic separately by gender. The first cluster – *Traditional and Early Transition* (38.3% of the female sample in Italy and 38.8% in the U.S.) – corresponds to a traditional transition, with an early achievement of

independence and a fast family formation through marriage and motherhood (almost no cohabitation or single living). Cluster 2 – *Modern and Independent Transition* (11.4% of the female sample in Italy and 20.2% in the U.S.) – is extremely modern with respect to cluster 1. In fact these women experience a very fast transition to independence, and more than 50% at age 24 have already left the parental home, have completed education and found a job. When they leave their parents they do it to stay single or to cohabit. If they marry, they still delay substantially childbearing or do not have kids at all.

Figure 5

The third cluster – *Housewives* (21.8% of the female sample in Italy and 3.9% in the U.S.) – is a unique typology that we do not find among men. These women exit education and leave their parents early in their life, but they never enter the job market. So they leave their parents because they find a partner, they marry and have children early. We can define this typology as the one of mothers and housewives. As we observed in the tables and figures reported above about quantum and sequencing, most of the women in this cluster are from the Italian sample, because the majority of American women actually enter the labor market. Cluster 4 – *Late Home Leavers (with a job)* (24.8% of the female sample in Italy and 20.9% in the U.S.) – is very similar to Cluster 4 for men, in which people leave the parental home very late, and a long time after the end of education and the entry into the labor market. Consequently they marry late – if they marry – and become mothers even later. In Cluster 5 – *Higher Education* (3.6% of the female sample in Italy and 17.3% in the U.S.) – we can find more educated women that stay in school longer, but find a job while studying and usually leave their parents early in life. Not necessarily they delay marriage, but to some extent delay motherhood. Also, in this cluster as in cluster 2 we find a greater number of women cohabiting than in other typologies.

5.3 Multivariate Analysis

Now that we described the different typologies of life course trajectories for men and women, it is important to go back to the main research question of this study, that is how the family background and parental socioeconomic status influence the transition to adulthood, and how this effect differs in the two countries. To answer this question we implement some multinomial logistic regressions, separately by gender, to test the importance of parental SES in the probability of belonging to the different clusters in Italy and in the U.S. Our typology of reference is the one with a *traditional* life course trajectory, i.e. Cluster 2 for men and Cluster 1 for women. As explanatory variables in the model we include *birth cohort*, the *number of siblings* in the family of origin, and the key variables

country and *parental SES*. We do not want to study only the different probabilities of belonging to a specific typology based on family social class and country, but we also want to investigate how the role of social class varies in different contexts. Therefore we include an interaction term between parental SES and the country dummies. Tables A3 (Men) and A4 (Women) in the Appendix show in details the results of the multinomial logistic regressions, but to focus on the key results of the models we plotted in Figures 6 and 7 the predicted probabilities of being in each cluster derived from the regressions, by country and family social class. The graphs in these figures report also the confidence interval (at 95% level) in order to determine if differences across countries and social classes are significant.

Among men (Figure 6) we find that the probability of belonging to the first cluster – *Modern and independent trajectory* – is the same in the two countries for a low level of parental SES, but it increases by almost 10% in the U.S. as we go from low to high social class, while it stays the same in Italy. The probability to be in the second cluster – *traditional and early transition* – decreases as social class increases in both countries, even if the probability is always higher in the U.S. The opposite is true when we look at cluster 3 – *slow and late independence* – given that the probabilities are quite low in both countries when parental SES is low (8% in the U.S. and 12% in Italy), they increase substantially in Italy and get to 25% when social class is high, while they remain very low in the U.S.

Based on these first three clusters we can say that generally as family socioeconomic status increases the typologies of life course trajectories in the two countries move in different directions: in Italy among higher classes emerges a delay both in the independence and family formation patterns (the effect of parental background is negative in cluster 2 and positive in cluster 3); in the US an higher status pushes towards modern and more heterogeneous trajectories in the family formation but it is not clearly associated with a delay in the independence trajectory (the effect of parental background is positive in cluster 1 and negative in cluster 2 where both of these clusters are characterized by early independence).

These indications are confirmed looking at the last two clusters: in the US, men with an higher social status show a lower probability of belonging to cluster 4 – *late home leavers* –, in which exit from parental home and consequently family formation are strongly postponed, but an higher probability of belonging to cluster 5 – *single living with high education* –, in which an early departure from parental home results in an higher proportion of men living as a single. In Italy, for both clusters, differences according to parental background are not supported by an adequate statistical significance.

Figure 6

Figure 7

Among women (Figure 7) the probability of experiencing a traditional and early transition decreases as social class increases in both Italy and the U.S., with a slightly larger decrease in Italy (from 37% to 32% in the U.S. and from 40% to 27% in Italy, even if differences between countries are not significant). On the contrary, as parental SES goes up the probability of being in cluster 2 – *modern and independent trajectory* – increases in both countries. In Italy women coming from a low social class have a 8% probability of being in this cluster, while those from high social class a 23% probability. In the U.S. the increase goes from 17% to 25%. Predicted probabilities of belonging to cluster 3 – *housewives* – clearly shows how the missed entrance into the labor market is a phenomenon that occurs almost only in the Italian context. The probability is lower than 10% in the U.S. and this probability goes to zero when we look at high parental SES. In Italy, those with a low family social class have almost 30% probability of being in this group, and this probability drops to 12% for women from a higher social class.

Generally speaking, the analysis of the first three clusters suggests that among women high social classes push towards a modern and more heterogeneous pattern of transition to adulthood in both countries, even though with a different level of the predicted probabilities. On the contrary, a clear-cut interaction between country and family background emerges for cluster 4 – *late home leavers*. In fact, if in Italy the predicted probability is 21% for a low social class woman, this probability increases to 30% when social class goes up. In the U.S. instead, the relationship goes in the opposite direction since the probability decreases from 27% to 15% as family SES goes up. This is clear also if we look at the predicted probability of ending up in cluster 5 – *higher education*. First of all this kind of life course trajectory (i.e. exit from the parental home and find a job when still in school, presumably in college) is by far more likely to happen in the U.S. Moreover this probability increases with social class in the U.S. (from 12% to 28%) while it stays roughly constant in Italy (between 4 and 5%).

Summarizing, among women we have a clear and unambiguous effect of parents' status in the US: high social status increases modern trajectories in family formation such as cohabitation and single living (positive effect in cluster 2 and 5), decreases early transition due to marriage (negative effect in cluster 1), decreases traditional gender roles within the couple (negative effect in cluster 3), and also decreases a postponed exit from parental home (negative effect in cluster 4). Among Italian women, the role of parental status is more complex and it emerges a sort of dual effect. On the one hand family status increases the propensity to experience modern and more heterogeneous

trajectories (positive effect in cluster 2) reducing, at the same time, the probability to experience an early family formation (negative effect in cluster 1) and of being a not-working married women (negative effect in cluster 3). On the other hand, among those woman who did not experienced an early departure from parental home, mainly to form new union, coming from an advantaged family background “protects” Italian women and keep them into the family nest for a longer time even if they found a job and completed education (positive effect in cluster 4).

6. Discussion

In our analysis we evaluated the role played by parental background in the transition to adulthood. The inherent complexity of the phenomenon under analysis – transition to adulthood consists of several events that mutually influence each other – has been captured by looking at the entire adulthood trajectory, i.e. considering at the same time the timing, the quantum, and the sequence of events. This allows us to evaluate the effect of social origins on the entire pattern leading to independence and family formation. This broader, if not properly “holistic”, perspective has been possible applying a sequence analysis, followed by a cluster analysis and multinomial logistic regressions. Moreover, we considered a double comparative perspective taking into account differences by gender and two different countries, U.S. and Italy,

In general, we found large differences between countries that not always are accounted for differences in family social class. Descriptive findings show a more relevant postponement in the transition to adulthood in Italy and a higher heterogeneity of states and trajectories in the U.S. In particular, compared to U.S., Italy is characterized by a lower incidence of women entered in the labour market and a reduced occurrence of informal cohabitation. However, the relevance of social class cannot be neglected. In line with the existing literature, our results confirm that parental background influences the transition to adulthood (Rijken and Liefbroer 2009; Blaauboer and Mulder 2010; Wiik 2008). In general, our analysis shows that the transition to adulthood is slower among higher classes. However, the more interesting results emerge looking at the interplay between social class, gender and country. For example, cohabitation is more widespread among higher classes in Italy, whereas in the U.S. social class is not relevant. On the contrary marriage is more common among lower classes in Italy whereas in the U.S. it is more widespread among higher classes.

Multivariate regressions estimates, based on cluster analysis, generally confirm the main findings showed in the descriptive analysis but add precious indications. The main result of the analysis is that the effect of parental background is different across countries and genders. In the U.S., we find

that the role of social class is strong but similar for both genders: high status favors not only a higher education and an early entry in the labor market, but also an higher heterogeneity of states and the occurrence of new behaviors like single living and cohabitation. In Italy, the effect of social class is strongly gender-specific. Among men a higher social class tends to delay transitions (both in terms of independence and family formation patterns), more than leading towards modern behaviors in their living arrangement. Among women, we found two different effects. The first is the same observed in the U.S.: a higher social class tends to facilitate the experience of more modern and independent transition and to reduce the propensity to follow more standardized pattern, i.e. exit from parental home to marry and then parenthood. The second effect relates to the higher probability of postponing the exit from parental home, and then family formation, among higher class women that completed education and found a job. Following a different point of view, results from multivariate analysis suggest that parents with lower resources put more pressure on their daughters to leave the parental home and start a family life irrespective of the fact that they have a job or not. The same result does not apply to men for whom, on the contrary, difficulties to find a job cause an automatic postponement of family formation.

Going back to the hypotheses made in Section 2, our analysis confirms that the lower the socio-economic status, the higher the probability of experiencing an early and fast transition to adulthood (H1). This result can be explained by two mechanisms: on the one hand individuals with lower family resources have more constraints that lead to lower educational attainments and a more rapid entry into the labor market (Furstenberg 2008), on the other hand that children of lower classes are more prone to experience standard trajectories (Kohn, Slomczynski and Schoenbach 1986) with the result that the early exit from parental home corresponds to an early family formation.

Our results also confirmed that the trajectories leading to independence and family formation are more rapid, more innovative and less standardized in the U.S. than in Italy (H2). This expected result is totally in line with the different stage of the two countries in the second demographic transition.

As far as H3 is concerned, the relationship between family background and life course trajectories is context specific but not in the expected direction. Actually, in the U.S. de-standardized and individualized trajectories, involving a job before the end of education, an independent period prior to family formation, informal cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock pregnancies, are more widespread among individuals with a higher parental status. This contrasts with existing literature focusing on single events or without a global view on the transition to adulthood. In Italy, the relation is not as clear as in the U.S. In the South-European country the reliance on the family as a fundamental support during the first stages in the life course implies that among the higher classes the de-

standardization of trajectories is less evident. This is expressed mainly in terms of a further postponement of family formation, due to a prolonged stay in the parental home, especially among men. Therefore, in Italy, a more affluent family of origin constitutes not only a protection factor in the presence of economic constraints, such as unemployment or unaffordable housing market, but also a golden cage (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 1994) that children are not encouraged to leave even if they have already completed education and started a job. This result leads us to the conclusion that in Italy the familistic viewpoint (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli 2004), characterized by strong affective bonds between parents and children (Micheli 2000; Reher 1998) that are able to hinder the process leading to residential autonomy, expressed its full potential among wealthier families.

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