

Fathers' involvement in childcare in Italy: the role of cohabitation

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Abstract

This paper considers the differences between married and unmarried fathers in childcare involvement and whether the differences are attributable to the characteristics of the individuals selecting into particular family forms. The study is conducted with reference to Italy. The reasons for this analysis are two: the relatively recent increase of non-marital unions also in Italy and the importance of paternal involvement in childcare for children's development. If some differences exist, indeed, the diffusion of non-marital union could have important consequences for children. Data come from two rounds of the survey "Family and Social Subjects" conducted in Italy in 2003 and 2009 and consider married and unmarried fathers' involvement in childcare activities for babies aged 0-3 years. The detailed data allow also to distinguish among married fathers those experiencing pre-marital cohabitation, thus identifying an intermediate couple typology. Results confirmed one of the main perspectives suggested by literature, according to which unmarried fathers are more involved in childcare than their married counterparts, and this is true also for fathers experiencing pre-marital cohabitation. In fact, these results are due to selection; significant differences disappear, indeed, when some controls are taken into account. In particular, selection seems to operate differently for unmarried fathers and those who got married after a pre-marital cohabitation.

1. Introduction

Even if later than in other countries (Kiernan, 2002), non-marital unions start their diffusion also in Italy (Salvini and De Rose, 2011); at the same time, out-of-wedlock births dramatically increase, passing from 8.93% in 1997 to 25.41% in 2010 (Italian Statistical Yearbook 2001, 2012). What this implies on fathers' involvement is quite unknown. In particular, there is no clear evidence whether (and how) married and unmarried fathers differ in childcare involvement. If some differences exist, the diffusion of non-marital union could have important consequences for children, since the crucial

role of paternal time in childcare for children's development (Aldous and Mulligan, 2002; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008). Similarly, fathers' childcare activities in another increasing couple typology might be different from those in traditional marriages: we are referring to the marriages that began with cohabitations.

So far, only few studies have considered differences in father's childcare involvement between marital and consensual unions (González et al., 2010). Most literature have focused, indeed, on the differences as regards domestic work (Batalowa and Cohen, 2002, Baxter, 2005, Davis et al., 2007), or have analyzed childcare within the general notion of household labor (Meggiolaro, 2014), even if the determinants of parents' participation in childcare and domestic work have been found to be very different (Deding and Lausten, 2004). In addition, the only few studies considering father's childcare in marital and consensual unions have not accounted for the heterogeneity of the married couples, not distinguishing between fathers who marry directly and those with pre-marital cohabitation.

The current study aims to filling these gap in literature using data from two rounds of the survey "Family and Social Subjects" conducted in Italy in 2003 and 2009. In particular, the paper considers i) the differences in the involvement in childcare between married and unmarried fathers, and ii) whether the differences are attributable to the characteristics of the individuals selecting into particular couple forms. Since in Italy cohabitation is a relatively recent phenomenon, selection can be, indeed, particularly strong in this country, and thus it may explain potential differences in the fathers' involvement in childcare. In addition, in comparison with most previous studied, also potential differences among married fathers are examined, distinguishing those experiencing pre-marital cohabitation.

The analyses are conducted in the light of the main perspectives suggested by literature: the family sociological perspective (Cherlin, 2004), and the gender roles set (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006).

2. Theoretical framework

Two different and opposite theories can be used to hypothesizedifferences in childcare involvement between married and unmarried fathers.

According to family sociological perspectives, the legal bond and public commitment of marriage (the "enforceable trust" of Cherlin, 2004) define the roles of individuals as parents and spouses, establishing, in particular, a joint investment in children from both partners (Townsend, 2002). At the opposite, non-marital unions lack institutionalization (Nock, 1995), which may imply ambiguity in the fathers' parental role and instability in the relationship. Thus, according to these perspectives, married fathers would be characterized by higher investment (both in material resources and

childcare) in their children than unmarried fathers (Anderson, Kaplan and Lancaster, 2007). The same perspective, in fact, might lead to an opposite hypothesis: cohabiting fathers might be motivated to a higher childcare investment to demonstrate their commitment to the child (Hofferth and Anderson, 2003; England & Edin, 2007; Cabrera, Hofferth and Chae, 2011).

On the other hand, some other researchers (see, for example, Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006) underlie that cohabiters are less likely than married ones to adhere to traditional gender roles, assigning more value to individualism and to personal autonomy, in contraposition with married men and women who tend to embrace more traditional views of the family and of a gendered division of labour, which assigns to mothers most of childcare activities. Thus, it is expected that men in consensual unions have more egalitarian gender behaviours, sharing more equally than married men daily domestic and childcare activities. As a consequence, unmarried fathers should invest more in childcare than married ones. This may be particularly true in those countries, such as Italy, where cohabitation is relatively recent and uncommon.

Empirical research on this topic does not seem to clearly confirm one of these perspectives rather than the other ones. In the direction suggested by sociological perspectives, some authors found that married fathers have higher participation in caregiving for their children than cohabiting ones (Landale and Oropesa, 2001; Hofferth, 2006). Others provided only little support for the importance of marriage on fathers' parenting (Hofferth and Anderson, 2003; González et al., 2010). Some studies found no evidence that cohabiting and married fathers allocated different amounts of time to childcare (Kalenkoski et al., 2007; Gibson-Davis, 2008). Lastly, supporting the gender role perspective, Hohmann-Marriot (2011) found that unmarried fathers are more involved in their child's life than married ones.

In fact, despite these theoretical perspectives, it is possible that observed differences in childcare between married and unmarried fathers are, at least partially, attributable to the background characteristics of the individuals selecting into different family forms (as found, for example, by Berger et al., 2008). Demographic studies have indicated, indeed, that cohabiting couples are characterized by distinct features that set them apart from married couples. For example, they are found to be more likely to dissolve than marriages (Smock and Manning, 2004) and to have a higher participation in the labour market by the female partner (Kalmijin 2007). These and other factors of selection are connected with fathers' childcare involvement through several conceptual frameworks, such as household production model and sociological theories about time availability and relative resources (see the discussion in Kalenkoski et al., 2007).

3. Data and methods

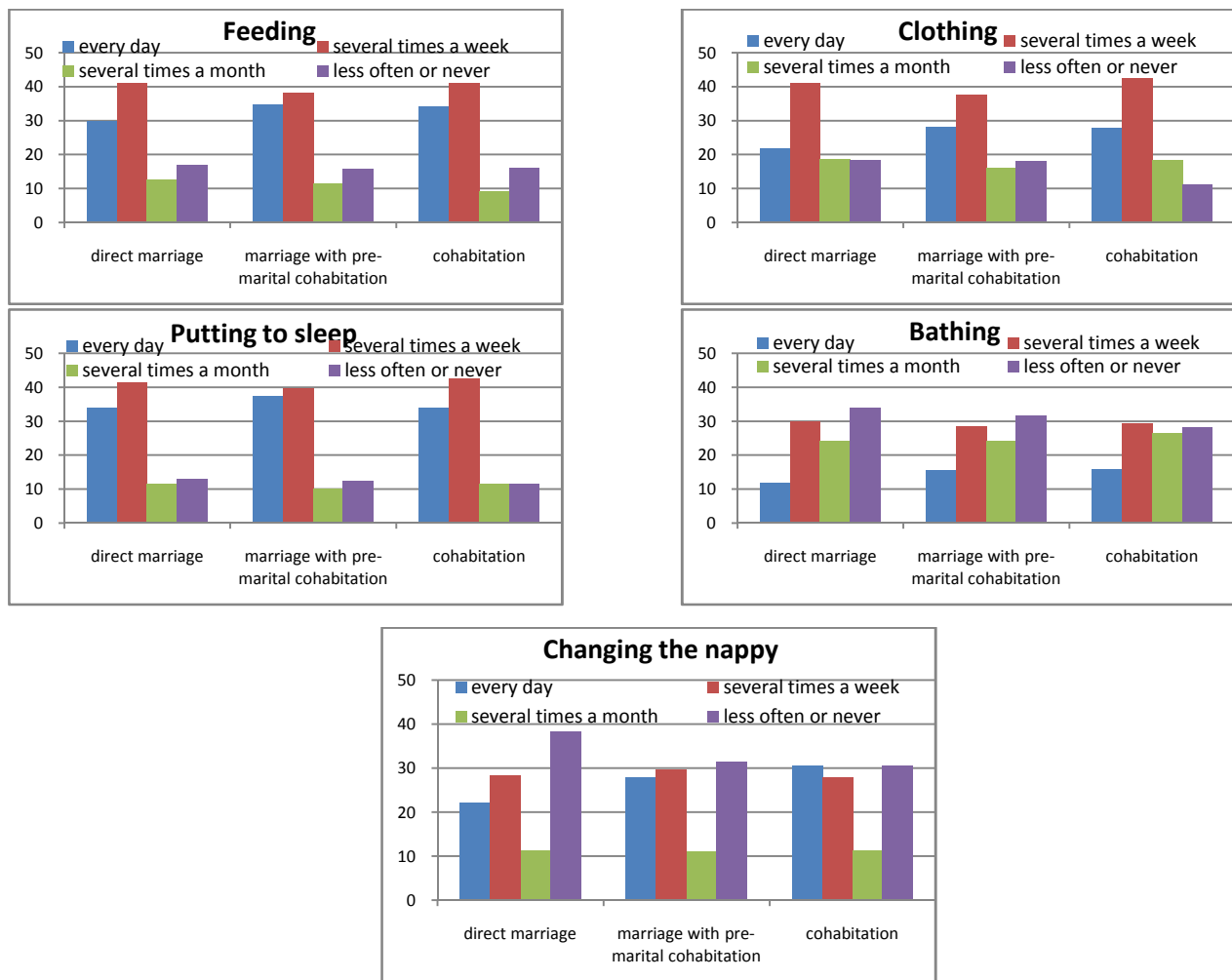
3.1 Data

The data come from two rounds of the survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS) conducted in Italy by the Italian Statistical Institute (Istat) in 2003 and in 2009. Each round of the survey is based on a representative sample at national level of about 20,000 households. Besides socio-demographic information on each household member and on the household, detailed data on current and past marital and non-marital unions were available. In addition, for each baby aged 0-3 years old living with both parents, father’s involvement in some childcare activities was investigated. Father’s participation in feeding, putting to sleep, clothing, bathing, and changing the nappy was measured on a 6-point scale (ranging from 1 = every day, to 6 = never). In this way, we have information on fathers’ childcare activities for 3,093 couples having both parents living with a baby aged 0-3: most (2,361 corresponding to 76.3%) are couples who have married directly, 14.4% (456 observations) are married couples with a premarital cohabitation, and 8.9% (276 observations) are unmarried couples.

3.2 Measuring father’s childcare according to the type of couple

In order to have a more concise description of paternal involvement in childcare, in a preliminary step of analysis, four categories are distinguished for each activity: every day (1), not every day but several times a week (2), one time a week or two or three times a month (3), less frequently or never (4). Graphs reported in figure 1 show different patterns of fathers’ involvement in childcare according to three types of couple. Thanks to the data we can distinguish not only between unmarried and married couples but even whether or not the marital couples start their formal union entering directly into the marriage or after a preliminary period of pre-marital cohabitation. In general, a stronger participation is found in activities such as feeding, clothing, and putting to sleep the baby: these tasks are performed by quite 40% of fathers several times a week, and about 30% every day (for feeding and putting to sleep, 20% for clothing). Other tasks, such as bathing and changing the nappies, are performed less frequently (more than 30% of fathers participate in these activities quite never). As regards the type of couple, a higher percentage of fathers performing childcare activities every day are observed among fathers in cohabitation, followed by those married after a pre-marital cohabitation. At the opposite, higher proportions of fathers with low involvement are observed among fathers who married directly, even if differences are not evident in some activities such as feeding and putting to sleep the baby.

Figure 1. *Fathers' involvement in childcare activities according to the type of couple.*



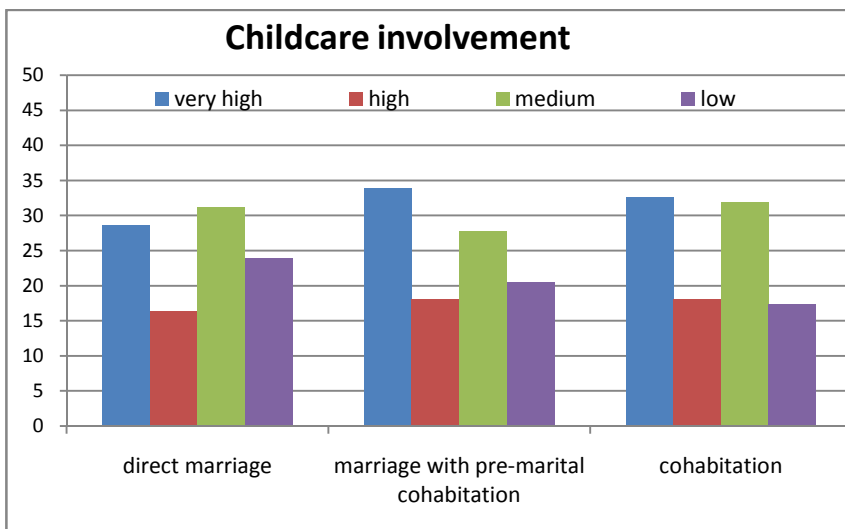
3.3 Modelling childcare involvement

In order to analyse the differences across the different types of couples, a synthetic measure of involvement in childcare is used. In particular, it is a four categories variable distinguishing¹: fathers with very high participation in childcare (who performed at least two of these activities every day and at least one of the others several times a week or every day), fathers with high involvement (those who performed one of these activities every day and at least one of the others several times a week or performed two of these activities every day), fathers with medium involvement (those with no activities performed every day, but with at least two activities performed several times a week), and, lastly fathers with low involvement (those with less strong participation, that is those who fall into the remaining types of involvement). On the whole, quite half of the fathers have at least a high involvement in childcare (29.7% very high and 16.7% high);

¹ In fact, alternative specifications of this variable have also been considered. Results of multivariate analyses presented in section 4 are robust to the different specification, and thus, the choice of this four categories variable has been preferred for its simplicity.

30.8% present a medium involvement and 22.8% declare a low level of involvement. The percentages of fathers in these new categories according to the type of couple are reported in Figure 2. The proportions of fathers with very high involvement are higher among fathers who married after a pre-marital cohabitation and among unmarried fathers than among those who married directly; the opposite happens for medium and low involvement. In particular, the percentages of fathers with low involvement are lower among unmarried fathers.

Figure 2. *Fathers' involvement in childcare in the different types of couple.*



Clearly, these figures represent marginal distributions and there may be many composition effects producing these results. Table 1 shows, for example, that in cohabiting couples there are higher proportions of (full-time) employed mothers than within married couples (particularly if they are direct marriages), and this probably means a higher involvement in childcare by fathers. In addition, cohabitations are characterized by lower number of children in the household and by a lower duration of the union, in comparison with marriages; among marriages, those with a pre-marital cohabitation are quite different from direct marriages and they can be considered in an intermediate position between direct marriages and cohabitations.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics according to the types of couple.*

	Direct marriage	Marriage with pre- marital cohabitation	Cohabitation	Total
Highest educational level of parents				
High	22.2	30.9	21.0	23.4
Medium	53.2	46.1	50.7	52.0
Low	24.6	23.0	28.3	24.6
Parental employment				
Employed father and not employed mother	46.1	37.5	35.9	43.9
Employed father, full-time employed mother	24.1	28.3	31.5	25.4
Employed father, part-time employed mother	22.7	27.2	25.0	23.6
Other	7.1	7.0	7.6	7.1
Mother's age (mean)	33.31	33.24	32.20	33.21
Duration of the union in years (mean)	9.13	8.61	5.59	8.74
Children in the household				
One child	38.0	42.8	52.5	40.0
Two or more children	62.0	57.2	47.5	60.0
Grandparents involved in childcare				
Yes	59.7	58.1	59.8	59.5
No	40.3	41.9	40.2	40.5
Household economic resources				
Sufficient	69.1	66.7	62.3	68.1
Poor or insufficient	30.9	33.3	37.7	31.9
Area of residence				
North	36.6	53.3	60.1	41.2
Centre	17.6	22.2	15.6	18.1
South	45.8	24.5	24.3	41.7
N	2,361	456	276	3,093

Thus, multivariate models which control for all these composition effects have to be used. The multinomial logistic models presented in the next section take into account of some socio-demographic characteristics of the partners and of the child, and of the household context.

As regards the characteristics of the parents, the highest educational level of at least one parent (through a three categories covariate), the employment status of both parents (through a variable combining the status of the couple and distinguishing, for mothers, also whether the job is full- or part-time), and the mother's age (through a three categories specification: under 30, 30-34, over 34) are considered. Education may have an impact on father's childcare involvement, as more highly educated parents have more supportive co-parenting behavior, being conscious of the importance of father's role for children's development (Yeung et al., 2001; Gracia, 2014). As regards the employment status, being employed reduces involvement in childcare (Hohmann-Marriot, 2011): this means that mother's employment increases father's participation in childcare, and, at the opposite, father's employment decreases his childcare involvement. Since mother's and father's age are usually very correlated, the mother's age at the interview is controlled for in the models (for the role of parents' age, see the review by Monna and Gauthier, 2008).

The child characteristics and household context may also be important. Some research has indicated that fathers are more involved when their child is a boy than when the child is a girl (Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007) and with younger children than with older ones (see the review by Monna and Gauthier, 2008): the gender and the age (in years) of the child are thus considered. Whether there are other children in the household is also taken into account, since when there are more children in the household, fathers may have less time available for any single child (Sullivan, Billari and Altintas, 2014). Lastly, the union duration (expressed in years since the couple has starting living together) is controlled for as a measure of stability of the relationship. In fact, it is possible that longer unions have more conventional views and have established more specialized roles that designate childcare for young children as a specific role of mothers.

The area of residence (North, Centre, South), a subjective measure of household economic condition (sufficient or poor), whether grandparents are involved in childcare, and the year of the survey (2003 or 2009) are also controlled for.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the results of a series of multinomial logistic models. The first model includes only the type of couple as predictor; the second adds parents' characteristics (education, employment status, and age); model three controls only for union duration; model four, besides parents' characteristics and union duration, takes into account child's and household's characteristics (age, gender, and whether there are other children in the household) and all other controls mentioned above (area of residence, household economic condition, whether grandparents are involved in childcare, and the year of the survey).

Model 1 shows that unmarried fathers are more likely to have a very high (vs low) involvement in childcare than directly married ones; in comparison with the latter ones, fathers who married after a pre-marital cohabitation have a higher different levels of childcare participation involvement too (with significant coefficients observed for the contrast low and very high, and for the contrast medium and very high). In fact, these last effects of fathers who entered into marriage with a pre-marital cohabitation almost disappears when controlling for characteristics of fathers and mothers, in particular, their educational level and employment status; instead, the differences between unmarried and directly married fathers remain when controlling for these characteristics and decrease a lot when only union duration is taken into account. Model 4 shows that all differences according to the type of couple completely disappear when characteristics of the child and of the household (child's gender and age, whether there are other children in the household) and the other controls are included.

Table 2. Multinomial logistic models for fathers' childcare involvement.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Low vs. Very High	Medium vs. Very High	High vs. Very High	Low vs. Very High	Medium vs. Very High	High vs. Very High	Low vs. Very High	Medium vs. Very High	High vs. Very High	Low vs. Very High	Medium vs. Very High	High vs. Very High
Type of union (ref: marriage without premarital cohabitation)												
Marriage with premarital cohabitation	-0.33**	-0.28**	-0.07	-0.24*	-0.23*	-0.03	-0.31**	-0.27**	-0.06	-0.16	-0.17	-0.02
Cohabitation	-0.45**	-0.11	-0.03	-0.39**	-0.08	0.01	-0.34*	-0.01	0.07	-0.18	0.11	0.14
Educational status of parents (ref: low)												
High				-0.66***	-0.39***	-0.24				-0.56***	-0.19	-0.11
Medium				-0.39***	-0.16	-0.13				-0.32**	-0.06	-0.08
Parental employment (ref: empl. father and not empl. mother)												
Empl. father, full-time empl. mother				-0.72***	-0.54***	-0.35**				-0.62***	-0.47***	-0.37**
Empl. father, part-time empl. mother				-0.62***	-0.44***	-0.33**				-0.55***	-0.39***	-0.39**
Other				-0.52**	-0.19	0.02				-0.55**	-0.28	0.06
Mother's age (ref: >34)												
Under 30				-0.10	0.32**	0.05				0.15	0.51***	0.26
30-34				0.01	0.22**	0.16				0.15	0.33***	0.29**
Union duration							0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03**	0.05***	0.04***

***= p<.001; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10

Model 4 controls also for child's gender and age, the presence of siblings of the child, the area of residence, whether grandparents are involved in childcare, subjective measure of household economic resources, and the year of the survey.

In conclusion, there is no evidence that living in cohabitation matters for father's involvement in childcare: the effect of the type of couple (which is significant only for some contrasts of the level of childcare involvement described by the models) is, indeed, cancelled out after controlling for characteristics of the parents, the child, and the household, which select the different type of couple. In particular, for fathers who entered into marriage with a pre-marital cohabitation selection seems to operate through parents' characteristics, and the feature that selects childcare involvement of unmarried fathers is connected with the duration of their union.

5. Discussion and future research

These analyses offer new information about father's childcare involvement with very young children in a country such as Italy, characterized by a recent increase in non-marital unions and in out-of-wedlock birth. In particular, the present study verifies whether fathers' involvement in childcare varies according to the type of couple, in the hypothesis that unmarried fathers have higher involvement than married ones and that some differences also exist within the group of married fathers: those who married after a pre-marital cohabitation are expected to be more involved than directly married fathers.

After controlling for the main compositional effects, such as parents' employment status and education, and union duration, we do not find evidence that fathers have different levels of involvement in childcare according to the type of couple. Thus, these results do not support neither the family sociological perspective or the gender role set hypothesis; instead, the results confirm that couples in different unions are selected for different characteristics, influencing and explaining different involvement in childcare.

Surely some limitations have to be noted. Although we control for a wider range of parents' characteristics, it is possible that the estimates are biased because of omitted variables. For example, underlying values and attitudes are not controlled since not available in the data.

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