

The social stratification in parent-child relationships after separation: Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Objective: We investigate the association between parental separation during childhood and later parent-child contact frequency and whether it varies according to parental gender and education.

Background: Separated parents, particularly fathers, have fewer contacts with their adult children than partnered parents. However, recent research suggests that highly educated parents are more involved, as they invest more in children before and after union dissolution.

Method: Using data on young adult children (18-40) from two Italian surveys, random intercept models adjusted for sample selection bias were adopted to analyse the association between parental separation and later parent-child contact frequency.

Results: Our findings show that adult children who experienced parental separation have less frequent face-to-face and phone contact with their parents. The negative association is stronger among fathers, but mother-child face-to-face interactions are also affected. Higher education does not reduce the effect of separation but even worsens it, at least with regard to face-to-face contact frequency.

Conclusion: Our results suggest that in a country like Italy, characterised by a limited occurrence of separations and a traditional division of gender roles, particularly within the analysed parental cohorts, higher parental education does not mitigate the negative effects of divorce on parent-child relationships but may even exacerbate them.

Key words: parental separation, intergenerational relations, parent-child contact, educational gradient, Italy



1. Introduction

Parent-child interaction is a crucial aspect of the development and well-being of children. The benefits of family relations persist into young adulthood when parental advice and economic support enable children to make successful transitions to independent living and family formation (Bucx, van Wel & Knijn, 2012). Family relations, as crucial sources of support, respond to current life circumstances and needs while also depending on early life conditions and events. By altering family resources and environment, parental union dissolution in childhood and adolescence is one of the most critical life events that may affect later parent-child relationships. A large number of studies have brought to light the existence of a negative effect of parental separation on later intergenerational contact and support exchange, especially in father-adult child relationships (Albertini & Garriga, 2011; Amato & Booth, 1996; De Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Manzoni & Vidal, 2023; Tosi & Gähler, 2016). Previous studies have extensively analysed the effect of parental separation during childhood on parent-adult child relations and the moderating effects of parental gender, child age at separation, and custody arrangements. Relatively less is known about how these associations vary according to parental socio-economic status (SES).

Although, in recent decades, an increasing number of non-resident parents maintain strong ties with their minor children after separation (van Spijker et al., 2022), post-separation involvement remains socially stratified. Previous studies mainly focusing on the father figure show that a high SES promotes parental involvement before and after union dissolution, and highly-educated partners are more likely to share the joint physical custody of their children (Koster & Castro-Martín, 2021; Ryan et al. 2008; Turunen & Hagquist, 2023; Westphal et al., 2014). The involvement of non-resident parents during childrearing years is beneficial for the relationship with children in the long run (Spaan et al. 2022). Kalmijn (2015) shows that the long-term negative effect of parental separation on parent-adult child contact is mitigated among highly-educated parents who have more resources to negotiate good visitation arrangements and pay child support after divorce. Similarly, Manzoni and Vidal (2023) provide evidence that the reduction of maternal support associated with parental separation is smaller among highly-educated mothers than among their lower-educated counterparts. However, other studies suggest that highly-educated divorcees have less frequent contact with their children because they have more employment constraints (Hofferth, 2003), weaker family obligations (van Houdt et al., 2018), and a larger degree of post-divorce conflict within the family (Kalil et al., 2011). It remains unclear, therefore, which of these contrasting mechanisms prevails in explaining the possible moderating effect of parental education in intergenerational relationships after union dissolution.

The social stratification of post-separation parent-child relationships may have important implications in terms of social inequalities. According to the Diverging Destinies Thesis (McLanahan, 2004), the diffusion of union dissolutions and single-parent families contributes to increased social inequalities. This would happen because parental separation and single parenthood, generally associated with adverse child outcomes in several domains, are increasingly more widespread among lower socioeconomic groups (Härkönen et al., 2017). The educational and socioeconomic outcomes of children who are already disadvantaged may be more negatively affected by growing family instability compared to those of children from more advantaged families (Boertien & Bernardi, 2022). A channel of the intergenerational reproduction of social inequalities is the reduced investment and support that divorced families provide to their children during childhood and young adulthood. Therefore, studying social stratification in post-separation parent-child relationships may reveal an important channel through which socioeconomic inequalities in children's life chances increase after union dissolution.

In this paper, we contribute to the literature by analysing the consequences of parental separation on parent-adult child relationships, that is, by looking at the frequency of parent-child contact following separation among young adult children (aged 18-40). We analyse parent-adult child contact frequency, as an indicator of family solidarity associated with the wellbeing of both younger and older generations (Kalmijn, 2023). Parent-child contact is also important for the transmission of resources across generations, not only because it captures forms of support that are too idiosyncratic to measure in regular surveys, but also because the transmission of social capital functions, in part, through family interaction (Weiss, 2012). Parental support and involvement are crucial during young adulthood when the youths typically establish themselves in the labour market and experience the transition to adulthood (e.g., Cook & Furstenberg, 2002). This is particularly relevant in a "strong-family" country like Italy (Reher, 1998), our case study, where, due to the poorness of welfare transfers and lack of formal care services, the family of origin plays a crucial role in adult children's transition to independence and work-family reconciliation (Jappens & Van

Bavel, 2012). In addition, the social stratification in parent-adult child contact after separation may have important implications for the reproduction of social inequalities in Italy, a country characterized by a strong influence of social origins on children's educational and occupational attainment (Ballarino & Bernardi, 2016). This study answers the following three questions: (Q1) *Is parental separation during childhood associated with less frequent mother-child and father-child contact during young adulthood?* (Q2) *Is there heterogeneity in post-separation parent-child contacts by parental gender and education?* (Q3) *Does the timing of parental separation matter for higher- and lower-educated parents and their relationships with children?*

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 *Does parental separation reduce father-adult child and mother-adult child contact frequency?*

There are several reasons why parent-child relationships, particularly between fathers and their children, are weaker after divorce/separation. First, a standard argument in the literature on intergenerational ties is that the non-custodial parent, usually the father, has fewer opportunities to remain involved and invest in the lives of children. Studies show that non-resident divorced/separated parents have less intense, lower quality, and more sporadic relations with their adult children (Albertini & Garriga, 2011; Amato & Booth, 1996; de Graaf & Fokkema, 2007; Kalmijn, 2013). Although less often noted, parental separation may also affect resident mothers' opportunities to invest in children. After separation, mothers tend to increase their involvement in the labour market, by reducing their time and energy dedicated to children (Özcan & Breen, 2012). The reduction of time and energy in childrearing may influence the frequency of parent-child contact later in life.

Second, parental separation alters a set of opportunities and costs that parents have to maintain contact with their children. The opportunity-cost of having frequent interactions with children is higher due to the need to meet the child without the other parent. Studies show that compared to children of married parents who often meet their parents on joint occasions, those with separated parents tend to prioritize the relationship with one of the two parents over the one with the other (Amato & Booth, 1996; Kalmijn, 2013).

Third, parental separation is a stressful and conflictual experience that may lead to a deterioration of both mother-child and father-child relationship quality. Research shows that intra-parental disputes surrounding parental separation tend to affect later parent-adult child relationships (Amato & Booth, 1996; Tosi & Gähler, 2016). This effect, also known as a spillover effect, suggests that conflict between divorced parents may translate into less warm relationships and sporadic contact with adult children (Kalmijn, 2015).

Most previous studies focus on father-child relationships, suggesting that mother-child relationships are affected by separation to a lesser extent. Mothers are often viewed as the kin-keepers in the family who take care of family matters and arrange meetings with their kin. Separated fathers, by losing the kin-keeper, are generally less able to maintain contact with their kin (Kalmijn, 2007; 2023). Moreover, fathers usually move out of the household after separation, and a shorter history of co-residence is associated with fewer opportunities to build and strengthen relationships with children later in life (e.g. van Houdt et al., 2018; Tosi, 2018). Given the large amount of literature showing the relevance of gender differences in the relationships that children have with separated parents, the following analyses will be carried out on both father-child and mother-child relationships.

2.2 *Does parental education reduce the negative effects of parental separation on parent-adult child relations?*

Although, on average, divorced parents invest less in children than married parents, there is a great deal of heterogeneity within the group of separated parents. The highly educated are more likely to have joint physical custody of their children than the lower-educated (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Manning & Smock, 1999; Westphal et al., 2014), and are generally more aware of the importance of both the father and mother figures for child development and wellbeing (Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014). A higher SES may promote a less normative and traditional view of family relations, including the principle of gender equity in the

division of roles within the family and in the time spent with minor children during union/marriage (Haux & Platt, 2021; van Spijker et al., 2022). Numerous studies have shown that cultural and economic resources are associated with a lower level of gender specialization of family roles and household tasks (e.g. Cunningham, 2008; Du et al., 2021). Hence, when gender roles are divided along less traditional lines during union/marriage, both parents may be involved in children and, thus, maintain more frequent contact with children after union dissolution.

Moreover, some studies show that highly-educated divorced parents are more skilled in negotiating good visitation arrangements and have more resources for child support (Hofferth, 2003; Ryan et al., 2008; Kalmijn, 2015). When financial contribution includes formal and informal types of support, such as gifts or extra cash, children may be less motivated to withdraw themselves from resourceful and engaged parents. Also, the resident parent may be less motivated to engage in gatekeeper behaviours – which consist in withdrawing children from the other parent when the relations between the ex-spouses are highly conflictual (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Westphal et al., 2015). Better-educated parents may, thus, mitigate the negative effect of union dissolution on later relationships because of their economic resources and their involvement during union/marriage.

2.3 Does parental education increase the negative effects of parental separation on parent-adult child relations?

In contrast to the previous line of reasoning, some theoretical arguments suggest that parental education has no effect or may even increase the negative consequences of divorce on later parent-child relationships. Education may affect the cultural attitudes and preferences that parents have to maintain contact with their family members. It has been suggested that the highly educated have frequent contact with one of their family members only when they enjoy or have emotional or practical rewards from it, and not because they feel obliged to maintain a relationship (Bucx et al., 2008; Kalmijn, 2007). Union dissolution further weakens family obligations, especially among fathers and children who have a short co-residence history (van Houdt et al., 2018). It may also reduce parents' satisfaction with interaction, given that arranging visits often leads to disputes with the ex-partner and requires great investments of time and effort in coordination (King & Heard, 1999). Highly-educated parents may thus have sporadic contact with a child, particularly after a disruption that makes family interaction more conflictual and less enjoyable.

Furthermore, children of high- and low-educated families often see their parents disagree in child custody and access arrangements, as well as in alimony payments and child support. Experiencing parental conflict may reduce parent-child relationship quality for children from both high- and low-SES backgrounds, although some studies suggest that conflicts surrounding parental separation are more intense among highly-educated than among lower-educated families (Kalil et al., 2011). Despite high-SES parents may be less conflictual during the union, they have more to lose in terms of economic resources following separation and may disagree more often on financial support to children (Hofferth, 2003; Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014). Higher levels of conflict around separation in high-SES families may aggravate the relational disadvantages of divorced parents.

Finally, a more structural explanation focuses on a set of opportunities and costs that separated parents have to maintain contact with their children. Highly-educated parents usually have more employment constraints, work more hours, and have less time to spend with non-resident children. They contribute to the family economically and may feel that they do not need to contribute in other ways (Hofferth, 2003). The highly educated also have a smaller and geographically located labour market, which motivates them to relocate to selected areas (Michielin & Mulder, 2007). As a result, when highly-educated couples separate, the non-resident parent may move at a greater distance from their children, with reduced opportunities for face-to-face interaction (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Kalil et al., 2011). This pattern, which recalls the “intimate but distant” relations of upper-class families (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), suggests that higher education may hardly mitigate the negative effect of divorce on the frequency of parent-adult child contact.

2.4 The timing of parental separation and parent-adult child relations

Previous arguments on the moderating effect of parental education suggest that post-separation relationships between parents and their minor children are likely to be carried over the life course. Studies

show that the negative effect of divorce on the relationship with non-resident parents tends to reduce according to the time spent with children under the same roof, which suggests that the negative effect of divorce is partly due to lower investment and fewer opportunities to build a relationship with children during co-residence (Kalmijn, 2013; Tosi, 2018; van Houdt et al., 2018; Westphal et al., 2014). The timing of separation is therefore relevant because a longer involvement in younger children during the union is an opportunity to build a long-term relationship with children.

The shorter period of co-residence with the minor child(ren) may represent a crucial mechanism to explain why fathers are usually found to be more strongly affected by parental separation in terms of contact with their adult child(ren). However, the timing of parental separation may not only influence the size and gender differences in the divorce penalty but also its educational gradient. Higher parental education may mitigate the negative consequences of parental separation when younger children are involved, as high-educated parents have been found to invest more time in the care and education of their small children (Guryan et al., 2012; Haux & Platt, 2021). For these reasons, our empirical analyses will explore the role of the timing of parental separation in the social stratification in parent-child relationships after separation.

2.5 *The Italian context*

Divorce was introduced relatively late in Italy, in 1970, and divorce rates have consistently remained lower compared to most Western countries (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). However, since the second half of the '90s, Italy has experienced considerable growth in both non-marital cohabitation and separation/divorce, coinciding with a strong decline in marriage rates (Lesthaeghe, 2020). The diffusion of divorce accelerated after 2015 due to the introduction of a new law called “fast divorce” (Law 55/2015) that reduced the time interval between legal separation and divorce and introduced the possibility of obtaining legal separation without the intervention of judicial authorities.

With the goal of increasing father involvement in childrearing, another reform in 2006 made joint custody the default option for separating couples. Although shared custody is awarded in the vast majority of cases (90% in 2015), children of separated parents still spend most of their time with their mothers, while the amount of time spent with fathers remains similar to the pre-reform levels (de Blasio & Vuri, 2019). Even today, Italian divorced fathers rarely obtain physical custody of their children and are non-resident figures in their children's lives. 85% of minor children living with a single parent in 2021 lived with their mother (Guetto et al., 2023), and only one in four had more than weekly contact with their divorced father during adulthood (Tosi, 2018). Post-separation arrangements stem from the persistence of a traditional gender ideology and division of gender roles. Italy is characterized by a rather unequal division of housework within the couple, and the single-earner/male breadwinner model still represents a frequent family type when children are present, especially among low-educated couples (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). In such a setting, high-educated fathers contribute more to the care of their child(ren) than their less-educated counterparts and may thus be more likely to remain involved in their children's lives after separation (Solera et al., 2020).

At the same time, the significantly greater economic independence of highly-educated Italian women generates stronger incentives for gatekeeping behavior compared to their low-educated counterparts, who predominantly rely on their ex-partners for subsistence. While the role of parental education for post-separation parent-child relations remains a difficult puzzle to unravel theoretically, Italy provides a very interesting case study. In fact, family relations are particularly relevant in a “strong family” system (Reher, 1998), for both cultural and institutional reasons. In Italy, the welfare state provides only limited support to the youth, and intergenerational co-residence is the most common way to support and transfer resources from parents to children (Albertini et al., 2018; Tosi, 2017). The strong influence of family ties on Italian children's socioeconomic outcomes continues even after the exit from the parental home. Recent comparative studies indicate that the direct effect of parental social class on children's occupational attainment is particularly strong in Italy (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016). Parental separation, by potentially disrupting this type of family social capital, may reinforce the already strong reproduction of social inequalities across generations if highly educated parents are better able to keep connections with their children after the family break-up. On the other hand, parental union dissolution may act as a “social equalizer” if children of high-educated parents are more at risk of reduced parent-child contacts – and possible loss of family social capital – following separation (Guetto et al., 2022a; 2022b).

3. Data and methods

3.1 *Sample*

We use data from the last two waves of the Family and Social Subject (FSS) survey, conducted in 2009 and 2016 by the Italian National Statistical Office. We use data from both waves to increase the statistical power needed to examine three-way interactions between parental union dissolution, parental education, and parent-child contact frequency. The FSS is a cross-sectional survey representative of the entire Italian population (response rates were 85% in 2009 and 80% in 2016) and contains information on approximately 40,000 individuals in 2009 and 25,000 individuals in 2016.

The sample utilized in our analysis includes young adult children, i.e. respondents aged 18-40 who have at least one parent alive at the time of the interviews (either in 2009 or 2016). The age range is chosen to analyse the “middle years” of parent-child relationships in which both younger and older generations enjoy good health conditions and are relatively free from the need to provide care to each other. In addition, the choice of the upper age limit of 40 is because parental separation is more exceptional in older generations. We also excluded cases (527 parent-child dyads) where parental union dissolution occurred when the child was 18 or older because a separation at older ages – particularly when the child lives outside the household – has different effects on later parent-child relationships (Kalmijn, 2013), and because our theoretical arguments on post-separation parent-child relations mainly focus on parental involvement during childhood and adolescence (e.g. parental custody and visitation arrangements).

Because many Italians aged 18-40 still live with their parents, first, we focus on the overall sample of young adults to examine their probabilities of living independently in our selection model (48% of young adults living outside the family of origin, see Table 1). Then, we select an analytical sample of young adults who have left the parental home to analyze the association between parental separation and parent-child contact frequency. The survey collects information on mothers and fathers separately, which allows us to distinguish the effects of union dissolution on mother-child and father-child relationships. Thus, we use the parent-child dyad as the unit of analysis, corresponding to two observations per individual when both parents are alive and to one observation when only one parent is alive. The final sample includes 8,664 young adults aged 18-40 living outside the parental home and 15,634 parent-child dyads.

3.2 *Variables*

The dependent variables regard face-to-face contact and telephone contact. Although in-person contact is often used as the most significant form of interaction through which people share experiences and exchange both expressive and instrumental support, indirect contact may help parents living distant to remain in contact with their children. These contact variables, ranging from “never” to “daily”, are categorized using the threshold of “more than weekly contact” as an indicator of frequent parent-child interaction. The choice of this threshold is driven by the variable distribution – which is strongly skewed and difficult to treat as a metric variable –, showing a high proportion of parents having daily or more than weekly contact with children. More than 60% of parents see their children at least twice a week, and more than 70% of them have more than weekly phone calls (see Table 1).

The main independent variable is a dummy indicating whether the respondent experienced the dissolution of parental union, either cohabitation or marriage. We rely on information about the date of de-facto parental separation (when the parents stopped living together) to focus on the effect of parental union dissolution before age 18 on later father-child and mother-child relations. Heterogeneity in parental separation effects on post-separation relationships is studied according to parental gender (father or mother) and education (up to lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary). This variable refers to the parent-specific level of education. We also distinguish between parental separations occurring at the age of 6 or below and separations occurring between ages 7 and 17. This choice is driven by our theoretical arguments suggesting that highly educated parents are more involved in children when they are growing up during childhood. The timing of parental separation also measures the time elapsed between separation and the time of the interview, with children from recently divorced parents being more likely affected by union dissolution than those who experienced it many years before the interview.

Control variables refer to both parents' and children's characteristics. Parental characteristics are: age, gender, being widowed, and having limitations (severe or not) in daily activities. Children's characteristics are gender, age (18-40), number of siblings (0-4), and area of residence (North, Centre, and South of Italy). In the analysis of independent living, we consider parental characteristics at the household level: the highest level of completed education between parents, parental age referring to the oldest parent, and having at least one parent with health limitation(s). Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the sample distinguishing between the overall sample – including young adults living with and without parents – and the analytical sample – including only children living independently.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Overall sample % or mean (N)	Analytical sample % or mean (N)
Independent living	47.9 (8,665)	
Meetings (more than weekly)		60.7 (9,500)
Phone calls (more than weekly)		73.0 (11,409)
Parental separation < 18	7.8 (1,418)	5.9 (925)
Father		46.9 (7,330)
Parental education		
Tertiary	11.1 (2,003)	5.5 (860)
Upper secondary	33.4 (6,030)	22.9 (3,577)
Up to lower secondary	55.5 (10,042)	71.6 (11,202)
Parental age (mean)	61.1	62.6
Widowed parent	13.9 (2,519)	10.3 (1,614)
Parental Health limitation(s)	24.7 (4,458)	20.1 (3,152)
<i>Children's characteristics</i>		
Female child	50.1 (9,054)	55.7 (8,714)
Child's age (mean)	29.7	33.7
N. Of Siblings (mean)	1.5	1.6
Region		
North	40.0 (7,233)	44.9 (7,020)
Centre	16.9 (3,055)	17.1 (2,678)
South	43.1 (7,787)	38.0 (5,936)
Wave (2016)	35.8 (6,457)	36.0 (5,627)
Home ownership (family level)		
Rent	31.3 (5,659)	
Owner	52.0 (9,408)	
Owner with mortgage	16.6 (3,008)	
N. of children	18,075	
N. of parent-child dyads		15,634

Note: In the overall sample parental education refers to the highest level of completed education between parents, parental age refers to the oldest parent, and parental health limitation refers to having at least one parent with health limitation(s)

3.3 Analytical strategy

Our analytical strategy consists of estimating the association between parental separation and parent-child contact frequency, accounting for selection processes into co-residence vs. independent living. Because many Italian young adults still live in the parental home at ages 18-40, individual differences due to the non-randomly selected sample of people living outside the family of origin may introduce a bias in the estimate. To account for these differences, we apply the two-step sample selection approach introduced by Heckman (1977).

In the first step, the selection model is estimated as a probit model on the probability of living independently from parents. The statistical identification of the model requires the inclusion of at least one variable that is correlated with the probability of living independently but not with the frequency of parent-

child contact. We use information on whether the respondent lives in a rented or an owned (with or without mortgage) home and the regional housing price (the average price per square meter divided by 100; source: OMI, 2009; 2016) as exogenous sources of variation affecting parent-child contact frequency only through co-residence. Young adults who have left the family nest are generally less likely to acquire a home and more likely to live in a rented apartment, compared to those who live in the parental home. Given that living with or without parents is measured as an individual choice that involves both parents, we exclude parental gender and include variables at the family level in the Selection Model. We estimate the inverse probability of living outside the parental home from the Selection Model to calculate the Inverse Mills' Ratio (IMR) and account for sample selection bias in Analytical Models 1 and 2.

In the second step, we run random-intercept linear probability models on the likelihood of having more than weekly meetings (Model 1) and phone calls (Model 2), including the IMR in the models. The IMR summarizes individual probabilities of being selected in the sample as a decreasing function so that higher values indicate lower probabilities of living independently (or higher probabilities of living with parents). Besides being easier to interpret, linear probability models are computationally less demanding compared to an iterative process of maximum likelihood when using clustered data (Allison, 2009).

We specify three linear probability models. First, we estimate the interaction between parental separation and gender to answer the question of whether parental separation is associated with later mother-child and father-child contact frequency (Q1). The estimates of these models are reported in Table 2. Second, we estimate the three-way interaction between parental separation, gender, and education to investigate whether parental education mitigates or increases the negative effects of parental union dissolution on mother-child and father-child contact (Q2). Average marginal effects (AME) of parental separation by parental gender and education are presented in Figure 1. Third, we distinguish between parental separations occurring at ages 0-6 and separations at ages 7-17 (Q3). The results are reported in Figures 2 and 3 (full estimates in Tables 1A in [Appendix](#)).

4. Results

Table 2 shows the estimates of random intercept linear probability models on the likelihood of having more than weekly contact with parents adjusted for sample selection bias. The selection model, which accounts for the individual differences in living independently from parents, indicates that there are no differences between children from intact and non-intact families. Adult children with highly educated parents are less likely to live independently compared to those with lower-educated parents. Female children and those living in the North of Italy are more likely to have left their family of origin compared to their male counterparts and those living in the South. Our instruments – whether the respondent lives in a rented or owned (with or without mortgage) house and the average housing price at the regional level – are strongly related to the probability of still living in the parental home, with children in a rented home being much more likely to have left the parental home. The probability of living independently increases by 17 percentage points (p.p.) for young adults living in a rented home, compared to those who live in an owned home, and decreases by 0.1 p.p. when the home price increases by 100 euro per square meter (AME based on estimates of Table 2).

The analytical models of Table 2 show that the IMR calculated in our selection model is positively associated with the likelihood of having more than weekly contact with parents. Young adult children who are less likely to live independently from their parents, indicated by higher values of the Inverse Mills Ratio, are more likely to have frequent meetings and phone calls with them. In other words, the individual characteristics associated with intergenerational co-residence also have a positive effect on parent-child contact frequency.

Analytical Model 1 includes interaction effects between parental gender and parental separation on the probability of more-than-weekly parent-child meetings to answer the first research question (Q1). Parental separation is associated with less frequent face-to-face- and phone contact with children. This reduction is larger for separated fathers than for mothers. Separated mothers have less frequent face-to-face meetings, but not phone calls, with their adult children compared to mothers who did not experience separation or divorce.

Table 2: Probit model on the likelihood of living independently from both parents (Selection Model). Random intercept linear probability models on the likelihood of having more than weekly meetings and/or phone calls with parents

	Selection Model		Face-to-face contact		Phone calls	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Father			-0.01**	(0.00)	-0.03**	(0.00)
Parental separation	-0.04	(0.04)	-0.11**	(0.02)	-0.03	(0.02)
Father × Parental separation			-0.20**	(0.01)	-0.27**	(0.01)
Parental education (ref. up to lower secondary)						
Upper secondary	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.01+	(0.01)	0.02**	(0.01)
Tertiary	-0.12**	(0.05)	-0.03**	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Widowed parent	-0.08*	(0.03)	-0.06**	(0.01)	-0.03*	(0.01)
Parental age	-0.01**	(0.00)	0.00*	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Parental health limitation(s)	-0.17**	(0.03)	-0.01**	(0.01)	-0.02**	(0.01)
<i>Children's characteristics</i>						
Female child	0.38**	(0.02)	0.07**	(0.01)	0.10**	(0.01)
Child age	0.44**	(0.02)	0.10**	(0.01)	0.07**	(0.01)
Child age ²	-0.00**	(0.00)	-0.00**	(0.00)	-0.00**	(0.00)
N. Of Sibling	0.14**	(0.01)	-0.06**	(0.00)	-0.05**	(0.00)
Region (ref. North)						
Centre	-0.19**	(0.03)	0.02	(0.01)	0.05**	(0.01)
South	-0.45**	(0.03)	0.20**	(0.01)	0.09**	(0.01)
Wave (2016)	-0.03	(0.02)	-0.00	(0.01)	0.03**	(0.01)
Inverse Mills Ratio			0.23**	(0.03)	0.16**	(0.02)
Home ownership (ref. rent)						
Owner	-0.71**	(0.03)				
Owner with mortgage	0.15**	(0.04)				
Regional housing price	-0.01*	(0.00)				
Constant	-7.80**	(0.33)	-1.44**	(0.26)	-0.57*	(0.24)
Variance between			0.44		0.39	
N. of parent-child dyads	18,015		15,634		15,634	
N. of children			8,664		8,664	

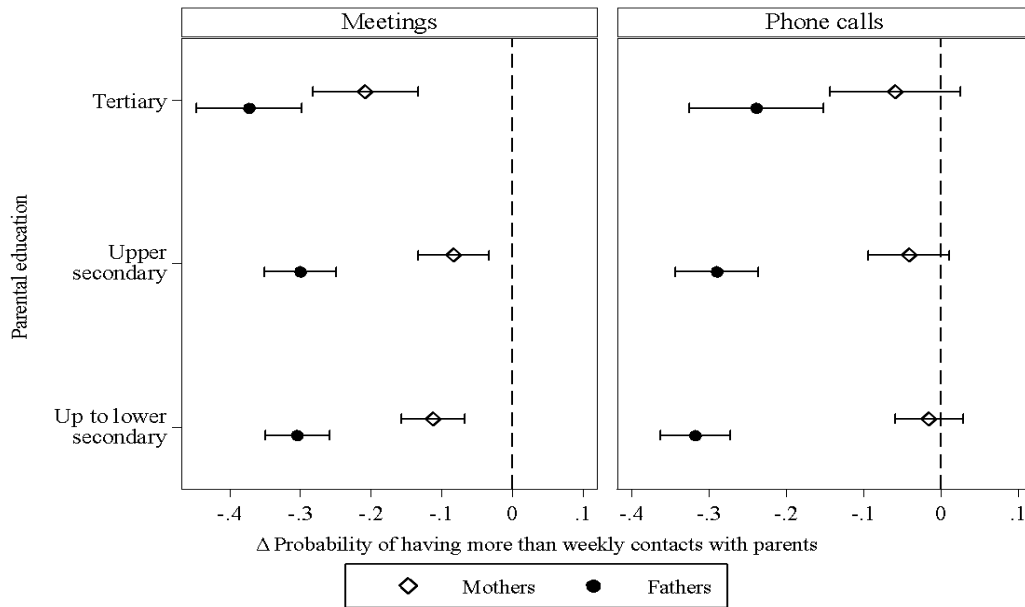
Note: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

The model is then augmented with three-way interactions to examine the moderating effect of parental education (Q2). The AME of parental separation on contact frequency by parental gender and education are reported in the first panel of Figure 1 (full results are shown in Table 1A in Appendix). Adult children who experienced parental separation before turning 18 have less face-to-face contact with their lower-educated mothers (-11 p.p. in the probability of having more than weekly meetings [95% C.I. -16 – -7]). Compared to mothers, low-educated fathers are affected by parental separation to a greater extent, with a decrease of about 31 percentage points in the probability of having more than weekly meetings. The “divorce effect” on parent-adult child contact is even stronger for highly-educated fathers (-37 p.p. [C.I. -45 – -30]), and the same holds for highly educated mothers, whose probability of having frequent interactions with their children is reduced by -21 p.p. ([C.I. -28 – -13]). The three-way interactions between parental gender, education, and union dissolution are not statistically significant, indicating that the moderating effect of parental education is similar for mothers and fathers. Highly-educated parents (regardless of their gender) seem, thus, to be more negatively affected by a separation than their lower-educated counterparts.

The second panel of Figure 1 presents the AME of parental union dissolution estimated from the same model with three-way interactions (full results are shown in Table 1A in Appendix) but considering the frequency of phone contact as a dependent variable. The coefficients related to parental union dissolution are close to zero with regard to the probability of having frequent mother-child contact, regardless of the mother’s educational level. Father-child relationships are much more affected by parental separation. In fact, children of separated parents are less likely to have frequent phone contact with the father, and such

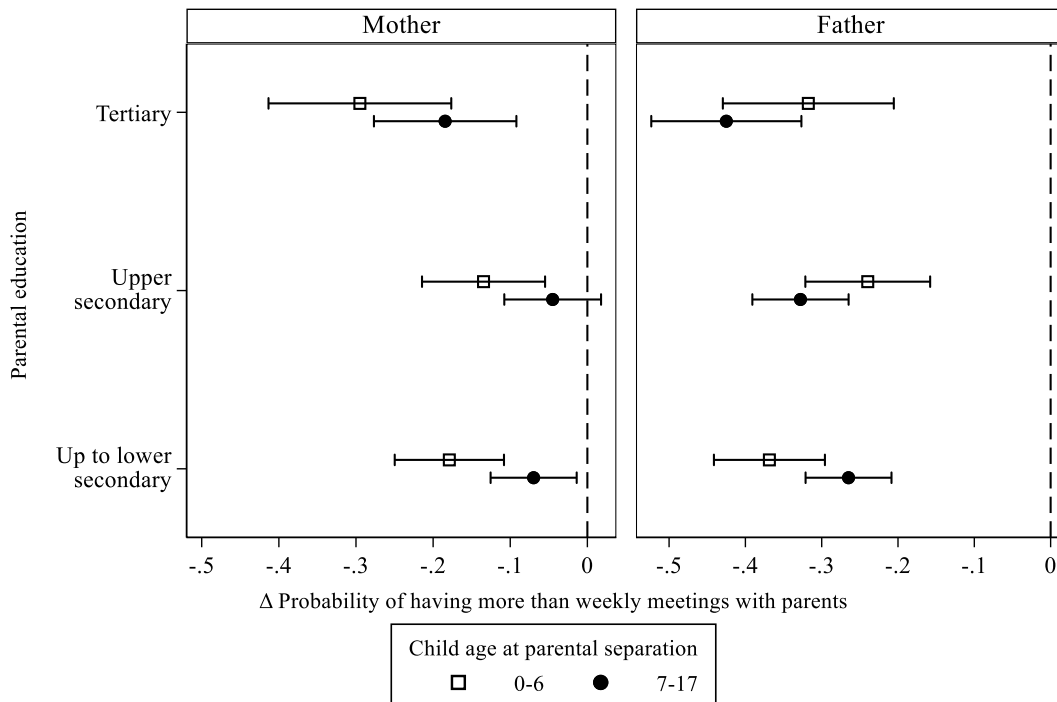
association varies according to his education. The probability of having frequent phone calls is reduced by 32 percentage points for lower-educated fathers ([C.I. = -27 – -36]) and by 24 percentage points for highly-educated fathers ([C.I. = -32 – -15]) after parental separation. These results suggest that among separated fathers, higher education is associated with a higher probability of having frequent phone calls but a lower probability of meeting children more than weekly, compared to parents with a lower educational degree.

Figure 1: Average marginal effect of parental separation on contact frequency



Source: Family and Social Subjects Survey 2009 and 2016

Figure 2: Average marginal effect of parental separation on face-to-face contact

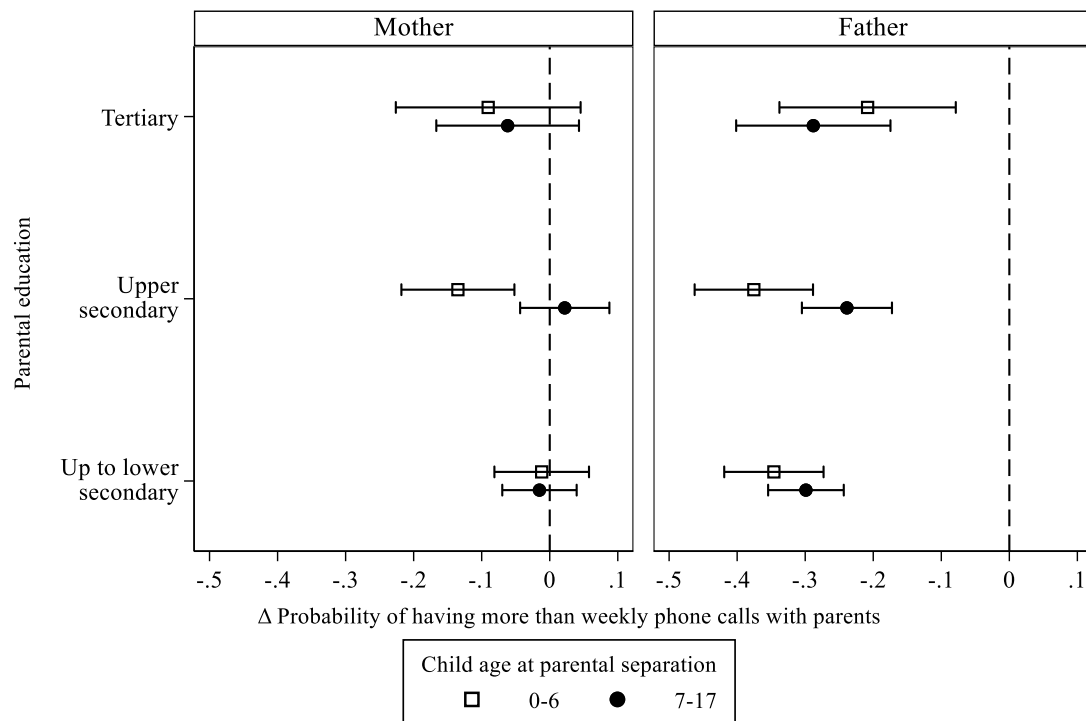


Source: Family and Social Subjects Survey 2009 and 2016

4.1 The timing of parental separation

The timing of parental separation is often studied as an important source of heterogeneity in the effect of divorce on parent-child relationships (Q3). Figures 2 and 3 present the AME of parental separation at age 0-6 and age 7-17 on parent-child contact frequency, according to parental gender and education (full results are shown in Table 2A in [Appendix](#)). Parental separation at a younger age (0-6) is associated with more negative consequences on mother-child face-to-face contact, indicating that the longer the time spent by children with both parents at home, the smaller the effects of union dissolution (Figure 2). Among fathers, this pattern is evident only among the lower-educated. This implies that, among fathers who separate at an early stage of the child's life course, educational differences are largely muted. The higher penalty in face-to-face contact for the high-educated fathers is thus mostly visible when parental separation occurs at an older age. Figure 3 reports the results concerning phone calls and shows that separating at an older age brings some benefits for father-child and mother-child relationships, but these interaction terms are statistically significant only among parents with an upper-secondary degree.

Figure 3: Average marginal effect of parental separation on telephone contact



Source: Family and Social Subjects Survey 2009 and 2016

4.2 Sensitivity analysis

We carried out a number of additional analyses to check the robustness of our results. First, we performed an OLS analysis on the logged number of contacts per year as the dependent variable. The main findings (Figure 1A in [Appendix](#)) remain similar to those presented in the results section. Second, we examined whether the results vary according to the strategy used to address the sample selection bias. Our estimates remain similar independent of the inclusion of the IMR or the choice of the instrument (i.e., housing tenure and/or the regional housing price). Third, conflicts surrounding parental separation may have negative implications for the quality of parent-adult child relationships, and separated parents may be less family-oriented and have a lower preference for having frequent contact with their children. To reduce the influence of these selection factors, we performed a sensitivity analysis by adopting a within-family approach in which mothers and fathers belonging to the same family are compared. The results (Table 3A in [Appendix](#)) concerning the existence of a larger father "penalty" in separated families and its interaction

with parental education remained consistent with those presented here, although the average effect of separation is not estimable in these models.

5. Discussion

Separated parents, particularly fathers, have fewer contacts with their adult children than partnered parents, due to custody legislation, post-divorce living arrangements, and family conflict surrounding union dissolution. However, recent research suggests that as parental separation has become more widespread and culturally accepted, divorced parents may be increasingly able to mitigate the negative impact of separation on their relationships with children (Haux & Platt, 2021; Kaufman, 2013). In this paper, we contribute to this literature by analysing the consequences of parental separation on parent-adult child relationships, that is by looking at the frequency of parent-child contact following separation among young adult children (aged 18-40). We focus on both dissolutions of marital and cohabiting unions in Italy, a country where the diffusion of cohabitation and union dissolution was postponed compared to other Western countries, but dramatically accelerated in the last three decades.

Our analysis provides support for the long-term impact of union dissolution on parent-adult child contact (Q1). Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Amato & Booth, 1996; Kalmijn, 2013), parental union dissolution during childhood and adolescence brings about a weakening father-child relationship, while the relationship with the mother is affected to a lesser extent. Parental separation tends to increase inequality between parents, with a reduction of father-child meetings and phone calls in young adulthood. This can be attributed to the kin-keeper role of the mother and the reduced investment that non-resident fathers make in their children after union dissolution.

Apart from any average effect of divorce on later intergenerational relations, our study analysed the social stratification of post-separation parent-adult child relationships, focusing on the role of parental education (Q2). From a theoretical point of view, parental education may have ambiguous effects. On the one hand, high education promotes parental involvement during childrearing years, which is positively associated with subsequent parent-child contact after separation (Kalmijn, 2015; Spaan et al., 2022). On the other hand, high-educated parents may face a stronger “penalty” because of higher risks of family conflict concerning the division of economic resources, higher opportunity-costs in keeping strong connections with their non-resident children, or because they feel less obliged to see their children frequently when they contribute to the welfare of children economically (Hofferth, 2003). In this study, we find that highly-educated separated parents have less frequent face-to-face meetings with their young adult children, compared to their lower-educated counterparts. High-educated fathers show the lowest probability of having frequent face-to-face contact, although the reduction of phone contact appears to be larger among the lower-educated. This may be attributed to the preference of high-educated fathers to stay involved in their adult children’s lives through less intrusive forms of communication. This pattern of interactions may be characterized by “intimacy at a distance” (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997), given that face-to-face contact requires close proximity between family members.

Finally, consistent with the argument that the longer the time spent by children with both parents at home, the smaller the effects of union dissolution, our results show that parental separation at a younger age (0-6) is associated with more negative consequences on parent-child contact (Q3). This result holds especially as far as mother-child face-to-face contact is concerned. In line with some studies (e.g. Albertini & Garriga, 2011), but in contrast with others (e.g. Tosi, 2018), the reduction of father-adult child contact following separation is not affected by the timing of parental union dissolution. Our data are cross-sectional and offer limited opportunities to study childhood circumstances surrounding parental separation that may affect later parent-child contact.

Our results are more in line with the arguments claiming a negative moderating effect of higher parental education on post-separation parent-child relationships. In particular, mothers with low or medium education generally face a very limited negative impact of union dissolution, while the highly educated have lower face-to-face contact with their children after separation. On the other hand, fathers face lower contact with their adult children largely irrespective of their level of education, and both in terms of face-to-face and phone contact. These results may be explained by the strong normativity of the matrifocal bias in kinship patterns in a country still characterized by traditional gender roles, particularly within the analysed parental cohorts, which puts fathers at high risk of exclusion from their children’s lives regardless

of their socioeconomic characteristics. In fact, legal reforms notwithstanding, very few Italian fathers obtain the physical custody of their child(ren) after separation.

Studying social stratification in post-separation parent-child relationships is important also because it may represent an important channel through which socioeconomic inequalities in children's life chances increase after union dissolution (McLanahan, 2004). Children of low-educated parents may face higher risks related to parental union dissolution, including reduced investment and support during childhood and young adulthood. However, we found no evidence in support of this hypothesis. On the contrary, high parental education has been found to increase the gap in face-to-face contact frequency between married and divorced fathers as well as between married and divorced mothers. Our results on face-to-face contact are consistent with the argument that children of high-educated parents have more social and economic resources to lose if their parents break up (Boertien & Bernardi, 2022), also because they are more at risk of reduced parent-child contact following separation compared to children of low-educated parents. In this scenario, parental separation, rather than increasing social inequalities, may even "equalize down" the life chances of children of different socioeconomic backgrounds (Guetto et al., 2022a; 2022b).

Our results showing a persistent gap in post-separation contact frequency between divorced mothers and fathers, as well as the negative moderating effect of parental education, may be traced back to the specific context analysed. We analysed the stratification of post-divorce family relationships among Italian parents born between 1938 and 1968 who may still have traditional attitudes toward gender roles. Future studies using more recent data are needed to know whether the youngest cohorts of (highly educated) Italian fathers have become more involved in the lives of their children following union dissolution.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available from the ISTAT Contact Centre (https://contact.istat.it/s/?language=en_US) after registration.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Die soziale Stratifikation von Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen nach der Trennung der Eltern: Befunde aus Italien

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Wir untersuchen den Zusammenhang zwischen der elterlichen Trennung in der Kindheit und der späteren Häufigkeit von Eltern-Kind-Kontakten und ob dieser Zusammenhang in Abhängigkeit von Geschlecht und Bildung der Eltern variiert.

Hintergrund: Getrennte Eltern, insbesondere Väter, haben weniger Kontakte zu ihren erwachsenen Kindern als verpartnete Eltern. Aktuelle Forschungsergebnisse deuten jedoch darauf hin, dass Eltern mit hohem Bildungsniveau stärker involviert sind, da sie vor und nach der Trennung mehr in die Kinder investieren.

Methode: Anhand von Daten zu jungen erwachsenen Kindern (18-40 Jahre) aus zwei italienischen Erhebungen wurde der Zusammenhang zwischen der Trennung der Eltern und der Häufigkeit der späteren Eltern-Kind-Kontakte mit Hilfe von Random-Intercept-Modellen mit Heckman-Korrektur analysiert.

Ergebnisse: Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, dass erwachsene Kinder, die eine elterliche Trennung erlebt haben, weniger häufig direkten persönlichen und telefonischen Kontakt zu ihren Eltern haben. Der negative Zusammenhang ist bei Vätern stärker ausgeprägt, aber auch die Face-to-Face-Interaktionen zwischen Mutter und Kind sind betroffen. Höhere Bildung reduziert diesen Effekt nicht, sondern verstärkt im Falle von Face-to-Face-Interaktionen sogar.

Schlussfolgerung: Unsere Befunde legen nahe, dass in einem Land wie Italien, das durch eine geringe Anzahl von Trennungen und traditionelle Geschlechterrollen gekennzeichnet ist, innerhalb der hier untersuchten Elternkohorten eine höhere elterliche Bildung die negativen Auswirkungen einer Scheidung auf die Beziehungen zwischen Eltern und Kindern nicht abschwächt, sondern gegebenenfalls sogar verstärkt.

Schlagwörter: Trennung, intergenerationale Beziehungen, Kontakthäufigkeit, Bildungsunterschiede, Italien

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