The Intentions of Leaving the Parental Home and their Realization: a Longitudinal Analysis for the Italian Context

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Abstract

Italy is one of the European countries with the oldest median age at leaving home. To explain this delay the scientific literature emphasizes the importance of anthropological reasons - connected with the particular nature of the relationship between parents and children - but in the first decade of the new century economic reasons have gained importance.

In order to study the different impact of structural and cultural factors on the decision-making process of becoming independent from the family of origin, panel data are necessary. Using data from the survey "Family and Social Subjects" - carried out by the National Statistical Agency (ISTAT) at the end of 2003 with a second wave at the beginning of 2007 - this article investigates the determinants of the intentions and behavior for the young adults aged between 21 and 38. Our provisional findings show a significant impact of education and occupation on the process of living the parental home. Also past experiences of partial exit and the marital status of the parents play a relevant role.

1. Introduction

Leaving the parental home, together with marriage, childbearing and entering in labour market represents one of the main steps in the transition to adulthood.

International literature (Marini, 1985; Avery *et al*., 1992; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1993; Billari and Liefbroer, 2007) emphasized the importance of leaving the parental home in the life course path and addressed its determinants. More recent studies adopted a comparative perspective,

showing strong geographical heterogeneity concerning the explanatory factors (Aassve *et al.*, 2002) and the timing of leaving the parental home (Iacovu, 2000).

What emerges in comparative studies is that Italian young adults show the most relevant delay in the choice of leaving away from home with respect to the other Western societies. An explanation for the peculiarities of the Italian context can be found in both cultural and economic reasons: if the strong attachment of Italians to the parental family (Dalla Zuanna, 2001; Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, 2004) seems to postpone the departure from the nest, also economic constraints make the realization of housing autonomy more difficult, especially, in a country characterized by the lack of opportunities for young generations (Rosina *et al.*, 2007; Benassi and Novello, 2009).

More in detail, economic and social restrictions seem to involve the decision-making process, depressing the expectations for a life independent of the parental support; indeed, according to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991), the decision of leaving the parental home is preceded by the formation of intentions toward that behaviour; the intention's formation is in turn the end of a path that involves the contribute of several determinants, such as attitudes, beliefs, social norms and economic constraints. The literature directly or indirectly recalls the impact of ideational and background factors in affecting behaviour but does not specifically address the process of formation of intentions and the link with their realization. Although empirical evidence shows as intentioned individuals are more likely to realize behaviour (Liefbroer and Gerristen, 1994), not all intentions are then effectively achieved (Meggiolaro, 2010). Changes in economic background and in life course events may impede the realization of intentions or, in most severe cases, may negatively change them. In Italy higher timing of leaving home is caused on the one hand by the late formation of positive intentions, on the other by the increased difficulty to realize the intentions; according to Istat reports only 40% of those who declared the intention of leaving the parental home have achieved the goal after three years.

Many scholars have either investigated the impact of intentions on subsequent behaviour in the field of the transition to adulthood (more frequently on the fertility behaviour) or analyzed the late Italian parental home leaving in a macro perspective. However, up to now no one has approached to the issue considering both intentions and socio-economic constraints as determinants of the home leaving behaviour for the Italian context. Thus, our work aim at covering the need of empirical results under that specific viewpoint.

We use data from the panel survey "Family and Social Subjects", belonging to the Multipurpose Survey Program and carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and we focus on the sub-sample of individuals aged between 18 and 34 living with their parents at the first wave (2003). Our purpose is two folded; on the one hand we aim at identifying the determinants of the intentions

of leaving parental home; on the other hand we investigate the economic and social factors lead to the realization of the positive intentions of autonomy from the family of origin. The choice of exit and the previous formation of intentions are strictly connected, because the behaviour may be conditioned by the same observable and unobservable determinants of positive intentions. In order to avoid sample selection problems we implement a Heckman probit regression (Heckman, 1976; Van de Ven and Van Pragg, 1981) for addressing the realization of intentions.

Hence, the structure of the paper is the following. After this brief introduction, section 2 supplies summary statistics after providing further details on the survey "Family and Social Subjects"; section 3 clarifies the estimation strategy, whereas section 4 displays empirical results. Finally, section 5 discusses and concludes.
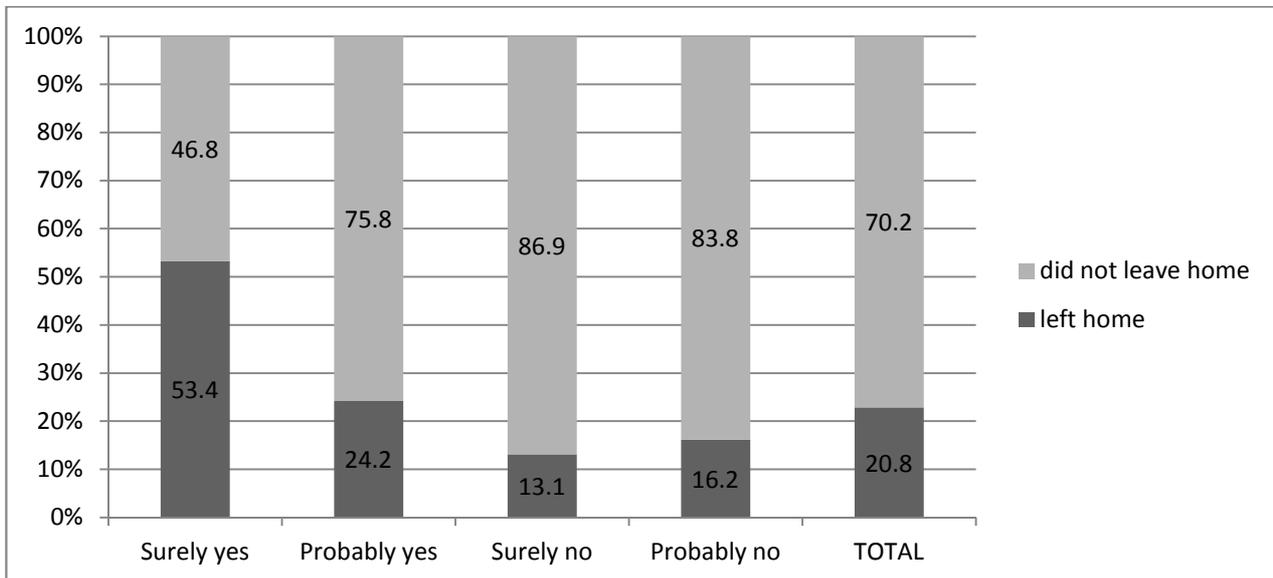
2. Data

Data from the "Family and Social Subjects" survey are used, partially included in the Generations and Gender Program developed by UNECE.

The first wave of the survey was carried out in 2003 with the aim of studying the transition to adulthood, including information on the intentions concerning the departure from the parental home and the processes of family formation. The survey also investigates aspects such as social networks and family background of the respondents. Moreover, questions on attitudes, beliefs, job careers, and search for employment are also included.

The 2003 sample was composed of 49.541 men and women. The second wave (entitled "Critical aspects in the work life course in a gender perspective") took place at the beginning of 2007 and focused on a sub-sample of 9,997 subjects of the first wave that have been re-interviewed, in order to capture changes in intentions, behaviours, and social characteristics.

As the focus of this paper is to investigate the process of realization of intentions of departure from home for the Italian young adults, we restrict the analysis to the respondents aged between 18 and 34 at the time of the first interview (thus aged 21 to 38 three years later). Referring to the choice of leaving the parental home in the next three years, respondents were asked about their intentions in 2003 in the following way: "Do you intend to leave the parental home in the next three years?". The four different options presented in the survey were: "Surely not", "Probably not", "Probably yes" and "Surely yes". Figure 1 presents the percentages of people who answered to the previous question, according to the subsequent behaviour.

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Fig. 1: Realization in 2007 of intentions for the question "Do you intend to leave the parental home in the next three years?" formulated for young Italians still living with at least one parent in 2003. Istat (2009).

As we can see from Fig. 1 and as suggested in literature (Liefbroer and Gerristen, 1994), positively intentioned respondents are more likely to realize their purpose. In particular, young adults who declared of being surely intentioned to leave show the highest rate of departure at 2007. However, only 24.2% of people answering "Probably yes" to the question "Do you intend to leave parental home in the next three years?" effectively left parental home at the time of the second interview. This probably means that changes in life course events and in the socio-economic background impede in somewhat the realization of intentions to be independent.

3. Methodology

The aim of the empirical part of the paper is to investigate the determinants of the young adults' departure from the parental home in 2007, conditionally on their positive intentions of leaving away in 2003, through a regression analysis.

This phenomenon induces a problem of "sample selection" addressed by Heckman (1976): observable and omitted variables that influence the intentions of leaving away may also affect the realization of the intentions. The presence of potential correlation between the error terms may produce bias in coefficient estimates.

As we are in presence of a binary response outcome (i.e. the realization or not of the intentions illustrated in Tab. 1), we adopt a two-equations modelling strategy, using a binomial probit with sample selection (Van de Ven and Van Pragg, 1981) instead of a traditional Heckman sample selection regression, that is developed only for continuous outcomes. The sample of analysis is

composed by the individuals aged 18-34 that were still living in the parental home in 2003 (thus aged 21 to 38 three years later). Using a latent variable approach, the model is specified as follows:

$$y_{1j}^* = x_{1j}^T \beta_1 + u_{1j}$$

$$y_{2j}^* = x_{2j}^T \beta_2 + u_{2j}$$

$$\begin{pmatrix} u_{1j} \\ u_{2j} \end{pmatrix} \sim N \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}, \begin{pmatrix} 1 & \rho \\ \rho & 1 \end{pmatrix} \right\}$$

y_{1j}^* is the dependent variable of the main regression, indicating the propensity of going away between 2003 and 2007. As remarked above, we address the departure from the nest only in the sub-sample of the positively intentioned respondents at the time of the first interview: y_{2j}^*, that is the dependent variable for the selection equation, indicates whether the respondent j was intentioned or not to leave away in the next three years. In probit with sample selection, standard setting y_{1j}^* is observed only when $y_{2j}^* > 0$. The correlation between the error terms underlines the presence of a connection between omitted variables in both the selection and the main equation.

The second equation assesses potential factors leading to a sample selection and includes covariates measured at the time of the first interview: the age, father's and respondent's educational level, the employment status and the number of siblings. The vector of explanatory variables x_{1j}^T for the main equation includes the age, the gender, the number of siblings, parents' and respondent's educational level, a past experience outside the parental home of more than 3 months, the marital status of parents, the religiosity and, finally, the mother's and respondent's occupational status in 2003. The covariates of the selection equation include a sub-set of individual variables used in the main equation such as the age, the educational level and the employment status of the respondents and the presence of a partner. Regarding the family background, we consider parents' educational level and marital status, with the addition of the employment status of the mother. Although the selection model includes only variables that appear also in the main equation, literature does not deny the correct identification of the model (see Cameron and Trivedi, 2003). All the results are finally controlled for geographical heterogeneity through the introduction of macro-regional dummies, that are omitted in the outputs.

In Tab. 1 we supply descriptive statistics on the variables used in the regression analysis. What emerges from the data is a strong heterogeneity concerning the percentage of individuals that have a partner and past experiences outside the parental home in the probability of realizing the intentions to exit. Conversely, heterogeneity is weaker when we compare individuals who realized the positive intentions to depart with those who remained at home in 2007, although intentioned to leave in 2003.

Differences in mean consistently increase when we compare intentioned individuals with not intentioned; as displayed in Tab. 1, the percentage of respondents without a partner or without a past experience out of the parental home is higher among the not intentioned individuals than in the intentioned ones. In addition, unemployed respondents are more concentrated in the sample of not intentioned. However, these results could be spurious, because unemployment rates are higher among young adults who have not complete their studies yet or who are in their early stages of working career. Hence, in order to achieve more reliable results, we implement the regression analysis as showed in Tab.2.

Tab. 1 Summary Statistics for explanatory variables	Intentioned individuals who left parental home (n=200)				Intentioned individuals who did not leave parental home (n=497)				Individuals who were not intentioned to leave (n=943)			
Variables	**Mean**	**St. dev**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**St. dev**	**Min**	**Max**	**Mean**	**St. dev**	**Min**	**Max**
AGE	30.18	3.48	21	38	29.04	4.4	21	38	26.48	4.4	21	38
GENDER												
Females	0.52	0.50	0	1	0.47	0.50	0	1	0.42	0.5	0	1
Males	0.48	0.50	0	1	0.53	0.50	0	1	0.58	0.5	0	1
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL												
Low	0.11	0.31	0	1	0.22	0.4	0	1	0.28	0.5	0	1
High	0.89	0.31	0	1	0.78	0.4	0	1	0.72	0.5	0	1
EMPLOYMENT STATUS												
Employed	0.58	0.50	0	1	0.51	0.50	0	1	0.39	0.5	0	1
Unemployed	0.42	0.50	0	1	0.49	0.50	0	1	0.61	0.5	0	1
NUMBER OF SIBLINGS												
< 2 siblings	0.70	0.5	0	1	0.67	0.47	0	1	0.71	0.5	0	1
≥ 2 siblings	0.30	0.5	0	1	0.33	0.47	0	1	0.29	0.5	0	1
PAST EXPERIENCES OUTSIDE THE PARENTAL HOME												
Yes	0.19	0.4	0	1	0.10	0.30	0	1	0.12	0.3	0	1
No	0.81	0.4	0	1	0.90	0.30	0	1	0.88	0.3	0	1
PRESENCE OF A PARTNER												
Yes	0.56	0.50	0	1	0.35	0.5	0	1	0.25	0.4	0	1
No	0.44	0.50	0	1	0.65	0.5	0	1	0.75	0.4	0	1
RELIGIOSITY												
Religious	0.41	0.49	0	1	0.40	0.5	0	1	0.43	0.50	0	1
Not religious	0.59	0.49	0	1	0.60	0.5	0	1	0.57	0.50	0	1
FATHERS'S EDUCATIONAL LEVEL												
Low	0.58	0.50	0	1	0.66	0.5	0	1	0.58	0.5	0	1
High	0.42	0.50	0	1	0.34	0.5	0	1	0.42	0.5	0	1
MOTHERS'S EDUCATIONAL LEVEL												
Low	0.61	0.5	0	1	0.67	0.5	0	1	0.58	0.5	0	1
High	0.39	0.5	0	1	0.33	0.5	0	1	0.42	0.5	0	1
MOTHER'S EMPOLYMENT STATUS												
Employed	0.53	0.50	0	1	0.47	0.50	0	1	0.52	0.50	0	1
Retired or unemployed	0.47	0.50	0	1	0.53	0.50	0	1	0.48	0.50	0	1
PARENTS' MARITAL STATUS												
Divorced	0.38	0.5	0	1	0.27	0.44	0	1	0.34	0.47	0	1
Not divorced	0.62	0.5	0	1	0.73	0.44	0	1	0.66	0.47	0	1

4. Empirical Results

The analysis is performed separately from males and females in Tab. 2:

Tab. 2 Heckman sample selection equation for the intentions of leaving the parental home and their realization

The respondent left parental home between 2003 and 2007	*M* (n=184)		*F* (n=181)	
Main equation (Realization of Intentions)	coef.	sign	coef.	sign
Age (ref: 29-34)				
Age 21-28	**-0,90**	***	0,00	ns
Age 35-38	-0,26	ns	-0,12	ns
Educational level (ref: low) 2003				
High	**0,50**	**	0,22	ns
Employment status (ref: unemployed) 2003				
Employed	-0,07	ns	0,14	ns
Number of siblings (ref: 2+)				
<2 Siblings	0,03	ns	0,07	ns
Past experience out of the parental home (ref: No)				
Yes	0,22	ns	**0,52**	**
Presence of a partner (ref: without partner)				
With partner	**0,80**	***	0,26	ns
Religiosity (rif: religious)				
Not Religious	-0,17	ns	0,19	ns
Father's educational level (ref: high)				
Low	-0,09	ns	-0,11	ns
Mother's educational level (ref: high)				
Low	0,21	ns	-0,31	ns
Mother's employment status (ref: retired or not employed)				
Employed	0,03	ns	-0,03	ns
Parents Marital Status (ref. not divorced)				
Divorced	0,16	ns	**0,59**	**
Intercept	**-2,38**	***	-0,81	ns
Selection Equation (Intentions)				
Age (ref: 29-34)				
Age 21-28	**-0,86**	***	**-0,83**	***
Age 35-38	-0,16	ns	-0,29	ns
Educational level (ref: low) 2003				
High	**0,22**	**	0,18	ns
Employment status (ref: unemployed) 2003				
Employed	-0,03	ns	**0,29**	**
Presence of a partner (ref: without partner)				
With partner	**0,39**	***	**0,46**	***
Father's educational level (ref: high)				
Low	0,11	ns	0,02	ns
Mother's educational level (ref: high)				
Low	0,12	ns	-0,01	ns
Mother's employment status (ref: retired or not employed)				
Employed	0,09	ns	-0,11	ns
Parents Marital Status (ref. not divorced)				
Divorced	0,20	ns	0,40	ns
Intercept	**-0,52**	**	**-0,42**	**
ρ	0,67	ns	-0,15	ns

$*** p < 0.01; ** 0.01 < p < 0.05; * 0.05 < p < 0.1$

Younger cohorts are less likely to show positive intentions to leave the nest; conversely, higher levels of education are significantly correlated with positive intentions of leaving away (selection equation), even if the impact of this variable is not significant for the women. While education plays a relevant role for men, the positive intentions of leaving the nest are more associated with the employment status among females. The impact of the presence of a partner is approximately the same for both genders, confirming the results obtained from the descriptive analysis.

The main equation considers only those who were positively intentioned of leaving away in 2003. What emerges is that younger cohorts are less likely to realize the intentions, but the result is significant only for males; in addition, young adult males are generally less likely to be intentioned of leaving away and, if intentioned, they face more problems in their realization. Results regarding the educational level confirm those of the selection model: if a degree increases the likelihood of being intentioned to leave, high education seems also a good predictor for the effective departure. The effect is positive for both genders but it is significant only for males. For females a past experience of more than three months outside the parental home seems to be more important in affecting the transition from intentions to behaviour. Moreover, the impact of marital disruption is higher for women than for men in accelerating the process of obtaining an independence from the family of origin. These results are decisive both in shaping the intentions and their realization. The presence of a partner is particularly important, mainly for women in the intention and mainly for men in the dimension of realization.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has taken into consideration a sample of young Italian adults aged between 21 and 38 in order to investigate the process of formation of intentions to leave the parental home and their realization. In this context, we have to remark that addressing the Italians' departure from the nest is interesting in light of the available literature, because Italy is characterized by the highest median age of departure from parental home among European countries. Indeed, following the last available Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2009) the mean ages at the departure from parental home is about 29 for females and 31 for males. According to the Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975 and Ajzen, 1991), the choice of leaving away is the outcome of a medium-run process that involves several factors and intermediate stages. In first instance, the life course event of interest (the departure) is anticipated by the formation of intentions that are considered as the strongest predictor of that behaviour.

However, especially in Italy, even economic and social constraints plays a dual role in both limiting intentions and their actual realization. As Istat report (2009) underlines, only 50% of those that

affirmed in 2003 to be sure of going away from parental home have realized their intentions three years later.

Since panel data on life course events were hardly available until nowadays for the Italian context, this article contributes in filling up the lack of empirical research on the issue of leaving the parental home, considering intentions together with socio-economic constraints as its determinants. In order to investigate the role of socio-economic factors in the potential realization of intentions, we assumed that common observables and unobservable factors affect simultaneously intentions and their realization. Hence, we implement a Heckman sample selection model in order to address the determinants of the realization of intentions controlling for the selection effect on the intentions..

Results show a strong gender heterogeneity, suggesting that females are more likely to realize their positive intentions if they spent more than three months outside the parental home. This is in line with the assumption that a previous autonomous experience can be a pushing factor for a permanent leaving. Parental background also plays a decisive role in increasing the likelihood of an effective departure from home: young women with divorced parents are more likely to leave the nest. As a matter of fact, the parents' experience, eventually along with the constitution of a step family, could have created a unfavourable home environment which in turn could have contributed to the females' higher propensity to leave. Even if the employment status acts indirectly through intentions, this result underlines the importance of having a job for a woman in order to leave the parental home in the younger generations. Conversely, males are less affected by their past experience and are influenced in their effective realization of becoming independent from the family of origin by the presence of a partner. Also high educational levels play a crucial role on the motivations and abilities to effectively realize the positive intentions. However, the fact that the employment status is not significant for males, supports the strand of research stating that for young generations, and mainly for men, the occupation is losing its importance in the process of leaving the parental home (Schizzerotto 2002, Menniti *at al*. 2000). In light of the discussed results, the future research agenda should require a more detailed analysis of the typology of employment for the respondents. In particular fixed term employment appears less reliable for future plans of young Italians than a permanent job. In addition, fixed term employment is strongly spreading especially among young workers in the first stages of occupational career; hence, in order to implement a complete analysis we need to decompose employment status in sub categories. This work can be improved following the Theory of Planned Behaviour schema, including variables concerning attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioural control in the selection equation on intentions of our model in order to capture further explanatory factors of the transition process.

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