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*Research Article*

## **Age norms, family relationships, and home-leaving in Italy**

**Marco Tosi**

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## **Age norms, family relationships, and home-leaving in Italy**

**Marco Tosi<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Previous research has shown that social norms have an influence on young adults' life course transitions. However, few studies have explicitly and directly tested the idea that perceived age norms affect the decision to leave the parental home.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

I ask whether normative factors are correlated with the decision to leave the family nest in Italy, and whether this association depends on a system of perceived costs and benefits, parental approval of their children's decisions, and the quality of parent-child relationships.

#### **METHODS**

Using the panel component of Family and Social Subjects data (2003 and 2007), logit and multinomial logit models were adopted to analyze the connection between perceived norms and behavior. The Karlson, Holm, and Breen (2012) decomposition method was used to test the relevance of confounding and mediating factors.

#### **RESULTS**

The findings show that young adults who consider themselves as too young to leave the parental home are less likely to move out of the family nest in order to marry. The interaction between a 'stay' norm, the perceived benefits of leaving home, and parental approval significantly affects the transition to independence.

#### **CONTRIBUTION**

In Italy, decision-making about leaving home and getting married is shaped by age norms concerning extended coresidence. Young adults tend to comply with age norms when they perceive that their decision implies benefits and/or a violation will lead to penalties. Perceived parental disapproval reduces the influence of normative factors on individual actual behaviors, which suggests that young adults adhere to norms that are supported by parents.

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## **1. Introduction**

Departure from the parental home is often viewed as a milestone in the transition to adulthood. Leaving the family of origin is an important marker of social and psychological maturity and has profound consequences for young adults' life course outcomes, such as their socioeconomic status and well-being (Liefbroer and Toulemon 2010).

Given the importance of the home-leaving process for later life course chances, scholars have consistently examined structural opportunities and constraints that affect young adults' decision to leave the parental home. As noticed by Aassve, Cottini, and Vitali (2013), the economic recession of the last decade has contributed to increasing the diffusion of intergenerational coresidence in Europe. In addition, a growing body of research provides evidence on the role of social norms in shaping young adults' life course trajectories. From the 1950s through the 1960s the transition to adulthood was standardized, predictable, and regulated by informal norms (Modell, Furstenberg, and Hershberg 1976). Since the early 1980s this 'standard biography' has become more heterogeneous, with a multiplication of timings and routes out of the parental home. The theory of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) conceptualizes this historical process, suggesting that as a consequence of individualism and ethical changes, social norms are becoming less relevant in regulating individual life courses in contemporary societies (Lesthaeghe 2010; Van de Kaa 2003). Also, age norms, such as expectations regarding age-appropriate behavior, appear to exert a less significant influence on young adults' life course choices. Billari and Liefbroer (2010) found evidence in support of this idea and show that in contemporary societies life events in early adulthood cover a longer time span, and their order is much less predictable than ever before.

The SDT has spread across European countries, taking place at different time periods and with different intensities. Nordic European countries are often considered as forerunners, whereas Southern European countries tend to be less affected by this process. However, previous research indicates that the timing of the events in early adulthood is more heterogeneous and unpredictable in Southern than in Nordic European countries (Billari, Philipov, and Baizán 2001). In Southern European countries a late transition to independence tends to reduce the number of job experiences and the acquisition of practical skills, and generally has a negative impact on educational attainment and lifetime economic opportunities (Alesina and Giuliano 2007; Billari and Tabellini 2008). The question addressed in the present study is whether age norms continue to play a role in affecting home-leaving decisions in Italy, where the transition to independence is rather destandardized. Building on previous research on age norms (in particular, Billari and Liefbroer 2007), the contribution of

this paper to existing knowledge lies in its focus on three sources of heterogeneity in the association between normative factors and home-leaving decisions. First, a system of costs and benefits may affect the importance of a perceived age norm for individual actual behavior. Examining the perceived costs of leaving home contributes to the literature on norm violations and external sanctions. Second, parents may encourage their children to adhere to norms regarding the socially acceptable time to leave the family nest by communicating approval or disapproval of various life course transitions. Examining the role of parental approval provides an explanation of how parents and children negotiate family life course transitions. Third, the quality of the parent–child relationship is an important indicator of the family climate in which young adults acquire social norms and evaluate their life course decisions. Thus, I ask whether the level of parent–child disagreement during the period of coresidence might influence individual adherence to social norms.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Research on age norms**

The idea of time as a regulator of social life is not new in sociology and demography. Durkheim (1975: 40) described it as “an endless chart before our minds.” Social norms tend to institutionalize the life course, establishing a predictable timetable of roles and transitions for the individual. The age stages of central family transitions are perceived as guidelines for the course of individuals’ lives. Previous research has consistently documented the relevance of perceived age norms to young adults’ decisions to leave the parental home (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe 1965; Settersten and Hagestad 1996). On the one hand, normative expectations prescribe that around a certain age children should build their own paths, detaching themselves from the family of origin. Social norms fix an “age deadline”, defining the upper end limit for leaving the parental home (Aassve et al. 2002, Aassve, Arpino, and Billari 2013; Ronald and Hirayama 2009; Ward and Spitze 1992, 2007). On the other hand, age norms prescribe that young people should stay in the parental home until the end of the socialization process. Billari and Liefbroer (2007) find that about one-third of young Dutch adults perceive societal norms as prescribing that people their age should still live in the parental home.

Normative factors in making decisions about leaving home are often related to a system of sanctions and penalties. A violation of the socially accepted time for leaving the parental home may have negative effects on individual life chances. The literature suggests that parents may experience ambivalent feelings of solidarity and conflict when their children infringe the normative, unwritten rule expectation of reaching

independence in a timely fashion. Older children's presence in the household may be a burden and a source of discomfort for parents when intergenerational coresidence is seen as unwarranted dependency (Aquilino 1991; Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Ward and Spitze 2007). Suitor and Pillemer (2000) point out that mothers report closer relationships with children that experience nonnormative status transitions when these events are perceived as involuntary, and the opposite effect is found when nonnormative transitions are perceived as voluntary. In addition, Gilligan et al. (2015) argue that norm violations only have consequences for parents when they result in extreme deviant behaviors and formal legal sanctions. Since a violation of age norms is rarely perceived as voluntary or as an extreme deviant behavior, late and early home-leaving do not appear to be accompanied by interpersonal sanctions (Settersten and Hagestad 1996) or tensions in later parent–adult-child relations (Leopold 2012; Tosi and Gähler 2016). People seem to internalize and comply with age norms even when external sanctions are not applied (Heckhausen 2006; White 1994).

Starting from this debate, the present study investigates whether the perception of age norms affects individuals' decision to leave the family nest, and whether this association depends on a system of perceived costs and benefits. In Italy a late departure from the family nest might be regarded as the 'norm,' and young adults might perceive that the benefits of living with parents are higher than the costs. In fact, Italy is among the European countries characterized by the longest permanence of young adults in the parental home (Buzzi, Cavalli, and de Lillo 2007; Micheli and Rosina 2009). It can be argued that age norms concerning extended coresidence are particularly relevant to individual behavior, and that in Italy few sanctions are attached to a prolonged permanence in the family home (see section 2.3 for details on the Italian context).

## **2.2 The family of origin: parental approval and quality of the parent–child relationship**

A large body of literature suggests that societal norms are transmitted by the social networks to which young adults belong. Individual perceptions of societal norms depend on what 'significant others' approve or disapprove (Bernardi 2003; Vignoli and Salvini 2014). Family of origin and peer group constitute the most important social networks through which social acceptance is transmitted. Since the decision to leave the parental home is a family decision in which both child and parents are involved, the family of origin appears particularly important in the home-leaving process (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998). I consider two channels through which age norms may operate within the family of origin, i.e., parental approval and the quality of the parent–child relationship.

First, social norms are often learned in the context of the family. Individuals internalize normative perceptions from their family environment, where parents socialize them by communicating approval or disapproval of various life course decisions. Previous research shows that young adults with mothers with traditional attitudes toward union formation are more likely to marry than those whose mothers have less traditional attitudes (e.g., Axinn and Thornton 1993). Young adults tend to adhere to parental expectations and avoid behaviors that their parents view negatively. Parental consent has a significant influence on adult children's life course decisions, and parents view an infringement of these expectations as a source of discomfort and a personal failure (Pillemer and Suito 2002). For example, adult children's transition to divorce has detrimental consequences for parental well-being when their parents perceive divorce as a socially disapproved family event (Kalmjin and De Graaf 2012). Behaviors that are in conflict with the family of origin may also imply costs for young adult children, who usually expect parental support during the transition to adulthood (Aquilino 1997, 2005; Holdsworth 2000; White 1994). Thus, the importance of a perceived norm in making decisions about leaving home may vary according to what parents approve or disapprove. It can be argued that young adults are more prone to adhere to social norms that are upheld by parents.

Second, the relationship between a perceived age norm and individual actual behavior may be partly explained by the quality of the relationship between the parent and child. The family of origin can reinforce a perceived societal norm through affective ties during the period of intergenerational coresidence. Parents tend to instill normative ideas by sharing activities and interests with their coresident children, and warmer family relationships may strengthen the perception that the child should stay in the parental home for longer. Previous research suggests that young adults who have warm and caring relationships with their parents in childhood and adolescence tend to coreside with parents for longer than those who have less favorable family relationships (Aquilino 1991, 1997; Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1998, 1999). Close relationships with parents do not facilitate the development of physical and psychological separation from the family of origin, while authoritarian parenting styles are related to early departure from the parental home (Bucx and van Wel 2008; Seiffge-Krenke 2006). Proceeding from these findings, the development of a perceived norm concerning the timing of leaving home might be accompanied by positive or negative family relationships, which, in turn, might affect the decision to leave the family nest.

However, the association between the quality of the parent-child relationship and the decision to leave the parental home can be disputed. The role of the quality of the parent-child relationship in the nest-leaving process has seldom been analyzed longitudinally. An exception is found in Ward and Spitze's (2007) research, indicating that in the United States parent-child conflict positively affects the decision to move

out of the family nest, whereas lack of conflict is not significant for closer family relationships. Family conflict is an incentive for a young adult to leave the parental home as soon as possible, while positive family relationships do not seem to encourage children to stay in the parental home for longer. This finding could indicate that although a positive family environment may be related to norms regarding extended coresidence, these close family relations do not affect actual behavior. The quality of the parent–child relationship might have a partial effect that is independent of its effect on perceived social norms.

### **2.3 Application to the Italian case**

Previous research has extensively documented the factors affecting the prolonged permanence of young adults in the parental home in Italy and other Southern European countries. Economic factors, such as employment status and income, appear to be much more relevant to the decision to leave the parental home for Southern European young adults than for their Nordic counterparts (Aassve et al. 2002). In Italy intergenerational coresidence is an adaptive strategy to prevent poverty, particularly among lower social classes and families living in areas with high unemployment (Micheli and Rosina 2009). The effect of economic constraints is partly due to a weak welfare state that provides insufficient protection to young people. In addition, a restricted rental market and the low availability of mortgages significantly affect the decision to postpone the transition out of the family nest (Mulder and Billari 2010). Moreover, given the reliance of Italian young adults on the family as provider of welfare, parents are likely to exert an important influence on their children's choices.

Besides economic conditions, cultural traits describe contextual differences in the timing of leaving the parental home. Italy is often defined as a strong family culture where an extended period of intergenerational coresidence is considered part of the socialization of offspring (Dalla Zuanna 2001; Reher 1998). In Italy and other Southern European countries where traditionally the family group has had priority over the individual, coresidence is the most important way for parents and their adult children to exchange mutual support (Albertini and Kohli 2013). Since the Middle Ages intergenerational coresidence has been used to pool economic resources. Over the centuries the persistence of this pattern was related to the sharecropping system, which favored the formation of large households as work groups (Reher 1998; Santarelli and Cottone 2009). The historical roots of family organization suggest that in a context characterized by strong cultural patterns of familial loyalty such as Italy, age norms prescribing extended coresidence between generations continue to exert an influence on



actual behavior. I would expect that *A 'stay' norm is significantly associated with the choices young adults make about living independently (Hypothesis 1a).*

More specifically, in Southern European countries late departure from the parental home tends to coincide with marriage. Traditionally, marriage is viewed as the normative occasion to leave the family of origin, and as an institution that binds older and younger generations together (Yahirun and Hamplová 2014). Some scholars find a partial desynchronization between home leaving and marriage in Italy among the highly educated living in the North of the country (Rosina and Fraboni 2004). It can be argued that in the total population, social norms still prescribe marriage as the traditional route out of the family nest. It can be hypothesized that *Age norms play an important role in predicting the decision to leave the parental home in order to marry (Hypothesis 1b).*

Furthermore, people may comply with age norms because of the positive effect of their decision on costs and benefits. Young adults may adhere to age norms when they perceive that an infringement will imply high costs and/or sanctions. The perceived benefits and costs of leaving the parental home involve different areas of everyday life such as partner relationships, economic opportunities, feelings of independence, life satisfaction, and privacy. These improvements in everyday life may vary according to the different life course stages and are likely to interact with individual perceptions of the appropriate age for leaving the parental home. It can be hypothesized that *People tend to comply with a 'stay' norm when the perceived benefits of leaving home are low, and with a 'leave' norm when these benefits are high (Hypothesis 2).*

With regard to family relationships, the literature suggests that Italian parents play a particularly powerful role in their children's life course decisions such as nest-leaving and union formation. For example, Italian young adults are more prone to adopt 'new' family behaviors such as cohabitation if their parents approve their choice (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007; Schröder 2008). Rosina and Fraboni (2004) point out that Italian parents tend to discourage their children from behaviors that are not socially acceptable by adopting emotional and material sanctions. Young adults who do not act in accordance with their parent's views are less likely to receive help from the family of origin. In Italy, where the welfare state does not facilitate young people to rely on their own resources, parental support is particularly relevant for children during the transition to adulthood (Mencarini, Meroni, and Pronzato 2012). The pressure of the family of origin is an important aspect of the transition to independence and may affect the costs and benefits of complying with age norms. I would expect that *The association between a perceived age norm and young adults' decision to leave the parental home varies according to what is approved by the family of origin (Hypothesis 3).*

The literature shows that Italian parents tend to emphasize emotional closeness in their relationships with their young adult children, even when very close relationships lead to a lack of autonomy on the part of the children. In a culture of strong family ties,

parents tend to consider their children as extensions of themselves and do not encourage them to become autonomous (Dalla Zuanna 2001; Santarelli and Cottone 2009). Leaving the parental home generally has a negative influence on parents' life satisfaction, and young adults are concerned about this parental distress (Bonifazi et al. 1999; Mazzuco 2006). Proceeding from these findings, young adults who have close relationships with their parents may be less likely to move out of the parental home in the later wave. Concomitantly, positive family relationships may reinforce the normative idea that young adults should stay in the family nest for longer. Therefore, I would expect that *The quality of the parent–child relationship partly explains the relationship between age norm and home-leaving decision (Hypothesis 4).*

### 3. Data and methods

The empirical analysis is based on the panel component of the survey Family and Social Subjects (FSS), which took place in 2003 and 2007.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the survey is to examine employment and family transitions between the first and second waves. The survey is representative of the Italian population and in the first wave comprises about 10,000 individuals aged 18–64. In 2007 respondents were re-interviewed in a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI). The database contains detailed information about parental characteristics and intergenerational relationships during the period of coresidence.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate the transition out of the parental home, the sample was reduced to young adults aged 18–34 who were living in the parental home during the first wave (N=1,675). This procedure introduces a possible bias of sample selection. For example, young adults living in the North of Italy may be more likely to reside in an independent household, and of them, those who are observed in the sample may be characterized by particular features, such as a willingness to reside with parents. In order to partly account for sample selection bias, the inverse Mills' ratio summarizes the observed characteristics that define the sample and may affect the estimates. Thus, I estimated a probit model on the likelihood of coresiding with parents in wave 1, and I used the predicted probabilities in order to compute the inverse Mills' ratio (N=2,605).

The variables included in the model of selection are: age, age<sup>2</sup>, sex, living in the south, education level, parental education, and having at least one child (see Table 2). Having a child was used as an instrumental variable, i.e., a factor correlated with the

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<sup>2</sup> The 2007 survey is called "Criticità dei percorsi lavorativi in ottica di genere" (Critical issues in the work life course from a gender perspective). The FSS survey is the Italian variant of the Gender and Generations Survey.

probability of being selected in the sample but not associated with the dependent variable. In the present data, having a child is significantly correlated with the likelihood of coresiding with parents in the first wave, but it does not have any significant influence on the probability of moving out of the parental home in the later wave. Previous research finds an ambiguous effect of childbearing on the decision to leave the parental home. On the one hand, parental involvement in childcare may increase the benefit of staying in the parental home. On the other hand, space constraints and desires for autonomy encourage young couples to move out of the family of origin in the case of childbearing (Aassve et al. 2002). It is therefore possible that for young parents who decide to leave the parental home the costs and benefits of coresiding with parents are counterbalanced by the costs and benefits of leaving.

In the next step the inverse Mills' ratio was included in logit and multinomial logit models. Logit models were used to analyze the likelihood of leaving the parental home between 2003 and 2007. The dependent variable is equal to one when young adults leave the family nest between the two waves (12.8% of the sample, see Table 1). Multinomial logit models were employed in order to investigate whether age norms have a significant effect on two different routes out of the parental home, i.e., marriage and "other routes." The different pathways to independence were measured through the question (at wave 2), "What was the main reason for starting to live on your own?" Table 1 shows that about 50% of respondents who left their family of origin did so to get married.

The main independent variable refers to the perceived norm concerning the timing of leaving the parental home. The normative age to leave the parental home was considered as that given by interviewees' answers to the question (at wave 1), "In your opinion, what is the right age to leave the parental home?" In the selected sample, young adults report that, on average, the right age to leave the family of origin is 26.8 years for men and 25.7 years for women. I considered two opposite perceptions of the age norm: "I should stay" – when the "right age" expressed by the interviewee is at least five years higher than that person's age; and "I should leave" – when the "right age" response given is at least five years lower than the respondent's age. The reference category "on time" falls in between. Consistent with Billari and Liefbroer's (2007) findings for the Netherlands, in Italy a 'stay' norm is much more common than a 'leave' norm. Only 11.3% of Italian young adults state that the normative age for leaving the parental home is at least five years lower than their actual age, while about 31.6% think that people of their age should live at home.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

	Mean or %	S.D.	Range
<i>Dependent variable</i>			
Route out of the parental home (In wave 2, Staying in the parental home)			
Marriage	6.45		
Other routes	6.33		
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Perceived norm (“on time”) (wave 1)			
Should leave	11.28		
Should stay	31.58		
Parental disapproval (wave 1)	2.85	1.00	1–5
Friends’ disapproval (wave 1)	2.44	0.75	1–5
Parent–child disagreement (wave 1)	17.13	5.87	8–40
Perceived benefits (wave 1)	13.36	2.00	5–25
<i>Control variables</i>			
Age (wave 1)	24.57	4.58	18–34
Female	54.75		
Southern (wave 1)	39.70		
Education (Lower) (wave 1)			
Secondary	59.16		
Tertiary	10.87		
Parents’ education (Lower) (fixed across waves)			
Secondary	37.38		
Tertiary	12.84		
Parental divorce/separation (wave 1)	5.31		
Household economic conditions (Good) (wave 1)			
Adequate	66.31		
Poor	27.64		
Attitudes toward marriage (wave 1)	11.18	2.84	4–20
Observations	1,675		

In order to test the second hypothesis about the role of the costs and benefits of leaving home, I built an index based on respondents’ ranking of the statements: Leaving the parental home will be better or worse for 1) your level of independence from your parents, 2) employment opportunities, 3) economic conditions, 4) sexual life, 5) recognition you receive from people around you, and 6) life satisfaction. Interviewees at wave 1 reported the degree of improvement for their lives of each of these items (1=much worse, 5=much better). I ran a Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCA) in order to extract a latent dimension. To improve the cohesiveness of the items I decided

to exclude the third item about economic conditions from the overall scale (Alpha=0.74). Indeed, the large majority of Italian young adults see transition out of the parental home as a resource-depleting event, regardless of any benefits to their lives. The scale for the cost–benefit ratio of leaving home ranges between 5 and 25, and 98% of the total distribution is between 10 and 16. The mean value is 13.3, suggesting that on average the perceived cost of leaving home tends to be higher than the benefit.

The two indicators of parents' and friends' approval of a decision by the respondent to leave the parental home were measured by the question: "If you leave the parental home, will your parents/friends agree with your choice?" At wave 1, respondents were asked whether their parents and friends would totally agree (1) or totally disagree (5) with their decision. At wave 1 the questionnaire also contained questions asking the frequency (1=never, 5=often) of disagreement with parents in eight areas: 1) helping around the house, 2) spending money, 3) school performance, 4) spending free time, 5) managing daily activities, 6) working or looking for a job, 7) having a boyfriend or girlfriend, 8) choosing friends. After adopting a PCA, these items were combined into an overall scale of disagreement (Alpha=0.76). This variable includes values from 8 to 40, and about 85% of the total distribution is between 8 and 26. The mean value is 17, which indicates that Italian coresident children are likely to experience positive relationships with their parents.

The following models control for a set of parents' and offspring's characteristics that may affect the home-leaving process and the perceived norm for the age of leaving the nest. Respondent's residential area distinguishes between the South and the Center/North of Italy. Parents' and children's education distinguishes between tertiary, secondary, and a lower educational levels. Parental divorce or separation may produce a change in social norms and a less favorable family climate, reflecting a less welcoming home for young adult children. Household economic conditions refer to an individual's perception of the family economy and reflect structural constraints in the decision to leave the parental home. Finally, the following models include an index of attitudes toward marriage when analyzing different routes out of the family of origin (Alpha=0.75). At wave 1 respondents were asked whether they totally agree (5) or disagree (1) with the following claims: "Marriage is an outdated institution," "People can cohabit without marriage," "Women can have a child even without a stable relationship" and "Unhappy couples can interrupt their marriage even when they have children." It is possible that a 'stay' norm is associated with traditional attitudes, which, in turn, foster marriage as the normative pathway to independence. Traditional attitudes are, in fact, associated with a postponement of leaving home in order to marry (e.g., Billari 2004).

**Table 2: Probit model concerning the likelihood of coresiding in the parental home at wave 1 (sample selection). Estimates used when computing the inverse Mills' ratio**

	Coef.	S.E.
Age	-0.461**	(0.103)
Age^2	0.006**	(0.002)
Female	-0.411**	(0.070)
Southern	0.278**	(0.073)
Education (Lower)		
Secondary	0.217**	(0.079)
Tertiary	0.322**	(0.119)
Parents' education		
Secondary	-0.048	(0.079)
Tertiary	0.191	(0.133)
Having at least one child	-2.092**	(0.119)
Constant	11.199**	(1.393)
Observations		2,605

Note: \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, □ p<0.1.

The analytical strategy consists of estimating a selection model on the likelihood of coresiding with parents in wave 1 (Table 2), in order to compute the Inverse Mills' Ratio. In the second step, logit regression models were used to discover whether social norms predict the probability of leaving the parental home between the two waves, controlling for selection processes and other correlates. In Model 1, I test Hypothesis 1a, that a 'stay' norm is significantly associated with actual behavior. This analysis also aims to investigate to what extent the association between age norms and actual behavior is mediated by the judgment of friends and parents as 'significant others.' Model 2 includes interaction terms between the perceived social norms and benefits of leaving home in order to test the second hypothesis (i.e., the association between a perceived norm and actual behavior is stronger when the adherence to a norm implies benefits). Model 3 adds interaction terms between social norms and parents' approval in order to understand whether the effect of normative factors on the decision to move out of the family nest is stronger when people act in accordance with parents' acceptance (Hypothesis 3, i.e., young adults comply with norms that are approved of by parents). Model 4 aims to evaluate the quality of parent-child relationships as a possible mediating factor in the association between social norms and home-leaving behavior by including the scale of parent-child agreement in the analysis (Hypothesis 4: The quality of family relationships partly explains the association between age norms and the

decision to leave the family nest). Finally, a multinomial model is employed to test the hypothesis that a perceived norm is associated with leaving home to marry (Hypothesis 1b).

In order to examine the roles of the cost/benefit ratio, friends' and parental approval, and the quality of parent-child relationships, predicted probabilities were estimated and plotted in graphs. I also adopted a technique for the decomposition of direct and indirect effects in nonlinear probability models, in order to better understand whether the association between age norms and actual behaviors is mediated by friends' and parental approval, and/or confounded by the quality of family relations. The KHB method developed by Karlson, Holm, and Breen (2012) allows understanding whether changes of coefficients across models are due to the introduction of confounding variables. It is worth noting that logit coefficients excluding confounders are not equal to the sum of the direct and indirect effects. Thus, comparing coefficients in different models including and excluding confounders can lead to erroneous conclusions on the role of a mediating or confounding factor (Breen, Karlson, and Holm 2013; Kohler, Karlson, and Holm 2011).

## 4. Results

Table 3 presents Average Marginal Effects (AME) concerning the likelihood of leaving the parental home between 2003 and 2007. Model 1 shows that the average probability of leaving the parental home for Italian young adults who think that people their age should continue to live with their parents is 4.4 percentage points lower than those who perceive themselves as being "on time." On the contrary, a 'leave' norm is not significantly associated with young adults' actual behavior, and its average marginal effect is close to zero (AME= 0.016). Italian young adults who observe a 'leave' norm are not more likely to move out of the parental home at the later wave, compared to those who perceive themselves as being "on time." This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1a, which says that a 'stay' norm has an influence on young adults' life course decisions even after controlling for a number of correlates. In a culture of strong family ties such as Italy, age norms regarding extended coresidence appear to be particularly important to young people's home-leaving decisions.

Before examining the role of the cost/benefits ratio and parental and friends' disapproval in shaping the association between age norms and behavior, it is necessary to look at their main effects. People who think that leaving the parental home will imply high benefits are more likely to move out of the family nest in the later wave (Model 1). Also, parental disapproval of their children's choices is significantly related to the transition to independence, and its average marginal effect is equal to -3.3 percentage

points. Friends' disapproval of individual decisions, however, is not significantly associated with the likelihood of leaving home ( $AME = -0.004$ ). The judgment of parents and friends may also moderate the association between age norms and actual behavior. In fact, parents and friends are considered as 'significant others' through whom social norms are transmitted. The average effect of a perceived 'stay' norm decreases from  $-4.8$  to  $-4.4$  percentage points after including parents' and friends' disapproval in the analysis. By adopting the KHB method implemented by Kohler, Karlson, and Holm (2011), the results show that 9% of the total effect of a 'stay' norm is due to parents' (8.04%) and friends' (0.96%) approval (results not shown). The mediating role of parental approval is significant, while the direct effect indicates that age norms for leaving home are significantly associated with home-leaving decisions even after accounting for parents' and friends' acceptance.

Model 2 includes an interaction term between perceived norms and the benefits of leaving home. The negative average marginal effect of a 'stay' norm becomes smaller according to the perceived benefits of leaving home. A 'stay' norm appears to be more relevant to young adults' decision to live in the parental home when the benefits of residential independence are low. This is consistent with the second hypothesis that the influence of social norms on individual life course decisions depends on a system of costs and benefits. However, the average marginal effect of the 'leave' norm does not vary significantly according to the benefits of leaving home. The difference between young adults who think they should leave the parental home and those who are "on time" is significant only when the benefits of moving out of the family of origin are relatively high (see Figure 1).

Model 3 adds an interaction term between age norms and parental disapproval, in order to test whether the role of these normative factors depends on parental approval (Hypothesis 3). Model 3 and Figure 2 show that parental approval shapes the relation between perceived norms and the nest-leaving process. The difference between young people who perceive themselves as being late leavers and those who think that they should stay in the family of origin declines and disappears according to the level of parental disapproval. Only when parents support their decision, young adults who perceive themselves as being "around the norm" or "late" are more likely to leave the family nest than those who think that it is too early. These differences are no longer significant when parents want their children to stay in the family. This finding suggests that in Italy, where the role of the family of origin is often considered an important precondition for making individual decisions, social norms about the timing of leaving home affect later behavior when they are backed up by parental approval.

Parental approval of home-leaving decisions and parent-child disagreement are theoretically and empirically two separated factors, although to some extent correlated. The former refers to young adults' perception that they are violating parental



expectations concerning the transition to adulthood, while the latter indicates the frequency in everyday life of actual conflict between parents and their coresiding children. Therefore, Model 4 introduces a measure of parent–child disagreement in the analysis, as an indicator of the quality of the relationship between parent and child. Social norms regarding the normative time to leave the parental home may exert an influence on the decision to stay because they are developed in family contexts where the quality of parent–child relationships is high (Hypothesis 4). However, this hypothesis fails to garner much support. The average marginal effect for the norm decreases from 0.044 in model 1 to only 0.042 in model 4. By using the KHB method, the findings indicate that only 1% of the total effect of a ‘stay’ norm is mediated by parent–child agreement, and this indirect effect is not significant. In line with these results, additional analyses show that interaction terms between age norms and the quality of family relations are not significant.

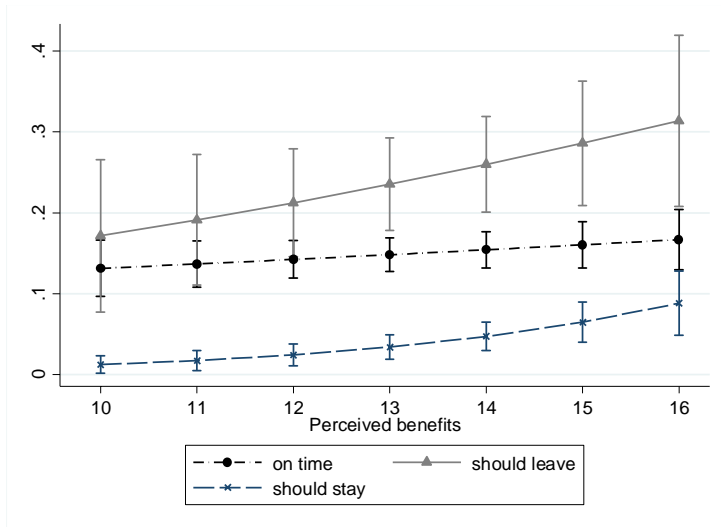
As shown in Figure 3, the association between the scale of parent–child disagreement and the likelihood of moving out of the family home is curvilinear. High levels of parent–child disagreement do not decrease the attractiveness of the family nest, compared to an average level of agreement with parents. In fact, contrary to expectations, young adults who experience positive family relationships are more prone to leave the parental home. The average predicted probability of leaving the parental home is 17% for those who experience high levels of agreement with parents and 11% for those who report having medium or low levels of agreement. An explanation of this result is provided by the analysis shown in Table 4, which considers different routes out of the parental home. The scale of parent–child disagreement is negatively correlated with the likelihood of moving out of the family nest to get married. This result seems to indicate that young adults who agree with their parents on everyday issues are more likely to follow a traditional route out of the parental home. It is also possible that young adults who are characterized by traditional attitudes report having few conflicts with parents and tend to leave the parental home to marry. In other words, those who have a high quality parent–child relationship may be selected by less rebellious and/or more traditional values.

**Table 3: Logit models concerning the likelihood of leaving the parental home between 2003 and 2007 (Average Marginal Effects). Estimates computed controlling for sample selection in wave 1**

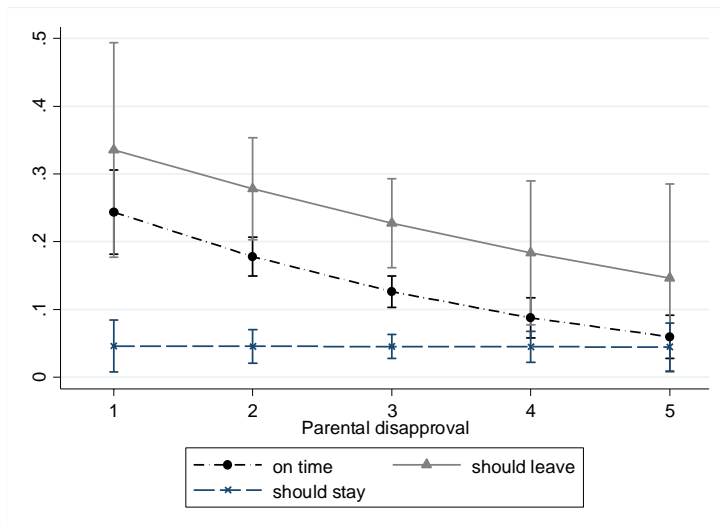
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	AME	S.E.	AME	S.E.	AME	S.E.	AME	S.E.
Perceived norms								
Should leave	0.016	(0.024)	0.016	(0.024)	0.016	(0.024)	0.016	(0.024)
Should stay	-0.044*	(0.019)	-0.045**	(0.018)	-0.049**	(0.019)	-0.042*	(0.019)
Perceived benefits								
Parental disapproval	-0.033**	(0.009)	-0.033**	(0.009)	-0.034**	(0.009)	-0.032**	(0.009)
Friends' disapproval	-0.004	(0.011)	-0.004	(0.011)	-0.003	(0.011)	-0.004	(0.011)
Age^2	Neg.*		Neg.*		Neg.*		Neg.*	
Age	0.004 <sup>+</sup>	(0.002)	0.004 <sup>+</sup>	(0.002)	0.005 <sup>+</sup>	(0.003)	0.004 <sup>+</sup>	(0.002)
Female	-0.002	(0.017)	0.003	(0.017)	-0.002	(0.017)	-0.002	(0.017)
Southern	-0.006	(0.017)	-0.006	(0.017)	-0.006	(0.017)	-0.006	(0.017)
Education (Lower)								
Secondary	0.049**	(0.018)	0.050**	(0.018)	0.048**	(0.018)	0.047**	(0.018)
Tertiary	0.089**	(0.029)	0.088**	(0.029)	0.087**	(0.029)	0.084**	(0.029)
Parents' education								
Secondary	0.019	(0.018)	0.018	(0.018)	0.018	(0.018)	0.019	(0.017)
Tertiary	0.001	(0.025)	0.000	(0.025)	-0.001	(0.025)	0.005	(0.025)
Parental divorce/separation	0.052	(0.038)	0.050	(0.037)	0.053	(0.038)	0.045	(0.037)
Household economic conditions (Good)								
Adequate	-0.075	(0.051)	-0.071	(0.041)	-0.074 <sup>+</sup>	(0.041)	-0.078 <sup>+</sup>	(0.041)
Poor	-0.085 <sup>+</sup>	(0.050)	-0.082 <sup>+</sup>	(0.050)	-0.085 <sup>+</sup>	(0.050)	-0.087 <sup>+</sup>	(0.050)
Inverse Mills' ratio	0.128**	(0.034)	0.128**	(0.034)	0.127**	(0.034)	0.136**	(0.034)
Perceived norms X Benefits								
Should leave X Benefits			Pos.					
Should stay X Benefits			Pos.**					
Norms X Parental disapproval								
Should leave X disapproval					Pos.			
Should stay X disapproval					Pos.*			
Parent-child disagreement							-0.005**	(0.002)
Parent-child disagreement^2							Neg.**	
Observations	1,675		1,675		1,675		1,675	

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

**Figure 1: Predicted probability of leaving the parental home according to a perceived norm and the cost/benefit ratio (estimates from model 2)**



**Figure 2: Predicted probability of leaving the parental home according to a perceived norm and parental disapproval (estimates from model 3)**



**Figure 3: Predicted probability of leaving the parental home according to parent-child disagreement (estimates from model 4)**

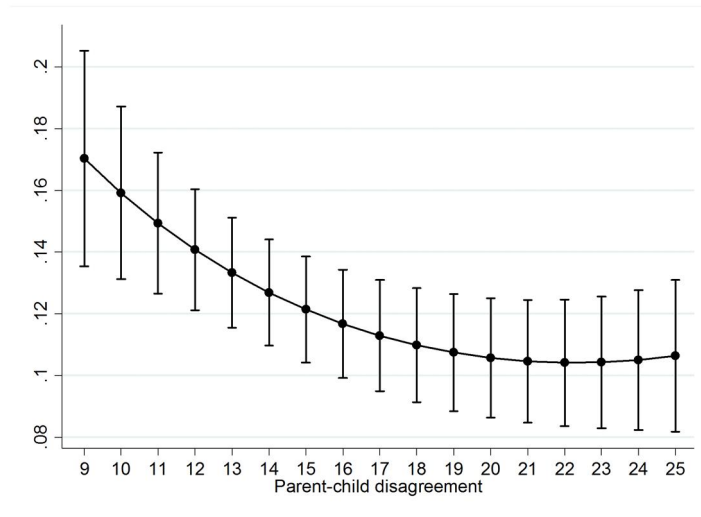


Table 4 presents average marginal effects of leaving the parental home in order to marry or to follow other routes to independence. These estimates are computed from a multinomial logistic regression model. A perceived social norm has a significant association with the decision of moving out of the family of origin in order to marry, whereas a nonsignificant effect is found with regard to other routes to independence. Similar to that observed in Table 3, the probability of leaving the parental home to marry is 4.2 percentage points lower for people who feel that someone their age should live at home than for those who perceive themselves as being “on time.” This positive association is significant, even controlling for parental disapproval of children’s decision, which in itself plays an important role in predicting both pathways to independence. Model 4 also includes a measure of traditional attitudes toward marriage in the analysis. Thus, it can be observed that people who reported having a positive orientation toward the institution of marriage at the first wave are more likely to leave the family nest in order to marry.

**Table 4: Multinomial logit models concerning the likelihood of leaving the parental home to marry and other pathways to independence between 2003 and 2007 (Average Marginal Effects). Estimates computed controlling for sample selection in wave 1**

	Marriage		Other routes	
	AME	S.E.	AME	S.E.
Perceived norms				
Should leave	0.001	(0.017)	0.018	(0.020)
Should remain	-0.042**	(0.014)	-0.006	(0.016)
Perceived benefits	0.003	(0.003)	0.007*	(0.003)
Parental disapproval	-0.015*	(0.007)	-0.015*	(0.007)
Friends' disapproval	-0.020*	(0.009)	0.016*	(0.010)
Parent-child disagreement	-0.004*	(0.001)	-0.001	(0.001)
Parent-child disagreement <sup>2</sup>	Pos.*		Pos.	
Attitudes toward marriage	0.007**	(0.002)	-0.001	(0.002)
Age <sup>2</sup>	Neg.		Neg.	
Age	0.003	(0.002)	0.000	(0.002)
Female	-0.003	(0.013)	0.000	(0.012)
Southern	0.015	(0.012)	-0.033*	(0.014)
Education (Lower)				
Secondary	0.026+	(0.014)	0.023+	(0.013)
Tertiary	0.027	(0.019)	0.054*	(0.025)
Parents' education				
Secondary	0.010	(0.014)	0.011	(0.014)
Tertiary	-0.003	(0.018)	0.008	(0.020)
Parental divorce/separation	0.009	(0.027)	0.055+	(0.030)
Household economic conditions (Good)				
Adequate	-0.077+	(0.045)	0.010	(0.031)
Poor	-0.086+	(0.046)	0.012	(0.033)
Inverse Mills' ratio	0.030	(0.031)	0.084**	(0.020)
Observations	1,675		1,675	

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

## 5. Discussion

This study tested the role of age norms in young adults' decisions to leave home in Italy, where the home-leaving process is rather destandardized. The theory of the

Second Demographic Transition suggests that individual life courses are less standardized and regulated by social norms. However, the findings presented here underline the importance of normative perceptions in the transition to independence. In line with previous research, young people consider age norms to be important guidelines for their life course transitions (Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Settersten and Hagestad 1996). Young adults who think that people of their age should still live at home are less likely to leave the family of origin at the later wave than those who perceive themselves as being “on time” or “late”. A ‘leave’ norm, however, does not encourage young adults to move out of the parental home. The relevance of a ‘stay’ norm may be related to the cultural context, in which extended coresidence between generations is seen as an important process of socializing offspring regarding family responsibilities (Billari, Philipov, and Baizán 2001; Reher 1998). The results also indicate that age norms tend to affect the decision to leave the parental home when that decision is synchronized with marriage. Marriage, as the principal reason for leaving the family nest, appears to be regulated by age norms in the context of Italy where marriage is traditionally an institution that binds different family generations together.

Moreover, the influence of social norms is channeled through the family of origin. The findings presented here reveal a complex interplay between one’s own choices, the approval of the family of origin, and compliance with age norms. If young adults think that it is the right time to live independently they tend to leave the parental home when this perception is supported by parental approval. However, when young adults think that their parents will not approve their decision to leave the family home they tend to stay regardless of perceived age norms. Thus, perceived parental disapproval reduces the normative influence on individual behavior. Parents play an important role in negotiating their children’s life decisions in Italy, where young adults are generally concerned about parental willingness and tend to be economically dependent on family resources. It is worth noting that Italian parents use material sanctions to discourage their children from socially unacceptable behaviors, and that these sanctions are particularly relevant in a weak welfare system (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007; Rosina and Fraboni 2004).

Social pressure exerted by parents affects the costs and benefits of adhering to a norm. The association between a perceived norm and actual behavior depends on a system of costs and benefits of leaving home. Again, the Italian context offers a possible interpretation of these findings. The evaluation of costs and benefits seems to play a particularly important role in a context where young adults generally face high economic risks in early adulthood. The high perceived costs of leaving home seem to induce young adults to comply with a ‘stay’ norm. Individual adherence to a ‘stay’ norm depends on whether intergenerational coresidence is attached to lower costs than residential independence. This finding suggests that Italian young adults tend to act in

accordance with age norms when they perceive that a violation will be connected to penalties or sanctions.

Contrary to expectations, the association between social norms and later home-leaving decisions is not explained by the quality of parent–child relationship. A perceived ‘stay’ norm and parents’ disapproval of young adults’ choices contribute to the postponement of the transition to adulthood, regardless of the quality of parent–child relationship. Parent–child agreement is not significantly related to a postponement of leaving home, but rather it encourages young adults to live independently and get married. This finding is partly in contrast to previous research showing that Italian parents value highly closeness with coresident children and do not encourage them to become autonomous (e.g., Santarelli and Cottone 2009). Also, contrary to Ward and Spitze’s (2007) findings for the United States, parent–child disagreements do not have a positive influence on young adults’ decision to move out of the family home. These differences to previous research can be explained by a possible bias of reverse causality: Young adults may have hostile relationships with their parents as a consequence of their failure to acquire independence (Tosi and Gähler 2016; Ward and Spitze 2007). But, compared to an average level of disagreement, parent–child conflict does not correlate with a higher probability of staying in the family nest. Another possible explanation is that the quality of the parent–child relationship tends to affect the timing of leaving home rather than its likelihood. An important limitation of the present study is that the small number of transitions out of the parental home does not allow analyzing the timing of leaving home. Nevertheless, given the scarcity of longitudinal panel data in Italy and the lack of databases including information on norms and behaviors, there is still value in analyzing a data set of this size.

In spite of these limitations, this study provides an important contribution to the subject and offers an analysis of the role that age norms and family environment play in young adults’ life course decisions in Italy. In Italy age norms appear to encourage young adults to adhere to the so-called ‘latest late’ pattern of transition to adulthood in which leaving the family home and union formation is postponed. Italian young adults follow this normative pattern because they think that complying with the norm implies benefits and/or that penalties are attached to a transgression. These sanctions are partly shaped by the judgment of the family of origin in a strong family system, where maintaining close family relationships is fundamental for the economic and social well-being of younger and older generations.

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**Dichiarazioni sostitutive di certificazione e dell'atto di notorietà  
ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28 dicembre 2000, n. 445**

Ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28 dicembre 2000, n. 445, consapevole che le dichiarazioni mendaci sono punite ai sensi del Codice penale e delle leggi speciali in materia, secondo quanto previsto dall'art. 76 del D.P.R. 28 dicembre 2000, n. 445, il sottoscritto Marco Tosi nato a Bologna il 11/03/1985,

DICHIARA:

- che la pubblicazione di Marco Tosi "Age norms, family relationships, and home-leaving in Italy" presentata in formato digitale è conforme all'originale;
- che il lavoro qui presentato è attribuito interamente a Marco Tosi.

Torino, 30 ottobre 2019.

Firma

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Tosi', with a small mark to its right.