Age Norms, Family Relationships and Home Leaving in Italy

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Abstract
In this paper, I ask whether age norms affect 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. The panel component of Family and Social Subject data (2003 and 2007) was used to understand whether perceived age norms (in the first wave) are connected to the decision to leave the parental home in the later wave. The results show that a “stay” norm is negatively correlated with the likelihood of leaving the parental home in order to marry. Perceived parental disapproval reduces the influence of normative factors on individual actual behaviors, regardless of the quality of parent-child relationships. Overall, young adults tend to comply with age norms when they perceive that their decision will imply benefits and/or a violation will lead to penalties.

Keywords: Leaving home, transition to adulthood, age norms, parental approval, quality of parent-child relationships.
1. Introduction
The departure from the parental home is often viewed as a milestone-process 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 social-economic status and well-being (Liefbroer and Toulemon 2010). In southern European countries, a late transition to independence tends to reduce the number of job experiences, the acquisition of practical skills, and generally has a negative impact on educational attainment and lifetime economic opportunities (Alesina and Giuliano 2007; Alessie et al. 2006; Billari and Tabellini 2008).

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 et al. (2013a), the economic recession during the last decade has contributed to increase the diffusion of intergenerational co-residence in Europe. In addition, a growing body of research provides evidence about the role of social norms in shaping young adults’ life course trajectories. From the period of the 1950s through the 1960s, the transition to adulthood was rather standardized, predictable, and regulated by informal norms (Modell et al. 1976). Since the early 1980s, this “standard biography” becomes more heterogeneous, with a sensible multiplication of timings and routes out of the parental home. This historical process has been conceptualized by the theory of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), suggesting that, as consequences 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). 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 question addressed in the present study is whether age norms continue to play a role in affecting home-leaving decisions in Italy. Contrary to expectations concerning the SDT, the timing of the events in early adulthood is more heterogeneous in Southern than in Nordic European countries (Billari et al. 2001). In Italy the transition to independence is rather de-standardized, which suggests that age norms may have lost their relevance for young adults’ choices. Next, building on previous research on age norms (in particular, Billari and Liefbroer 2007), the present study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge by focusing 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 accepted time to leave the family nest, by communicating approval.
or disapproval of various life course transitions. Testing the role of parental approval provides an explanation on how parents and children negotiate family life course transitions. Third, the panel component of Family and Social Subject data (2003 and 2007) offers the opportunity to observe a broad set of indicators of parent-child agreement during the period of co-residence, which may partly explain the individual adherence to social norms. The quality of parent-child relationships is an important indicator of the family climate in which young adults acquire social norms and evaluate their life course decisions.

2. Background

2.1 Research on age norms

The idea of time as a regulation of social life is not new in sociology and demography, and already Durkheim (1892: 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 an individual. People perceive age stages for central family transitions as guidelines for the course of their lives. Previous research has consistently documented the relevance of perceived age norms concerning young adults’ decisions to leave the parental home (Neugarten at al. 1965; Settersten and Hagestad 1996). On the one hand, normative expectations prescribe that around a certain age children should build their own path detaching themselves from the family of origin. Social norms fix an “age deadline” defining the upper end limit to leave one’s parental home (Aassve et al. 2002, 2013b; Ronald and Hirayama 2009; Ward and Spitze 1992, 2007). On the other hand, age norms prescribe that young people should stay in their parental home until the end of the process of socialization. Billari and Liefbroer (2007) found that about one-third of young Dutch adults perceives societal norms as prescribing that people their age should still live in the parental home.

Normative factors in the decision making 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. Children’s presence in the household may be a burden and a source of discomfort for parents when intergenerational co-residence 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 their children who experienced non-normative status transitions, when these events are perceived as involuntary; whereas the opposite effect is found when non-normative transitions are seen as voluntary. In addition, Gilligan et al. (2015) argue that norm violations have consequences for parents only when resulting 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 seem to be accompanied by interpersonal sanctions (Settersten and Hagestad 1996) or tensions in later parent-adult child relations (Leopold 2012; Tosi and Gahler 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 individual perception of age norms affects their decision to leave the family nest, and whether this association depends on a system of perceived costs and benefits.

2.2 The family of origin: parental approval and the quality of parent-child relationships
A large body of literature suggests that societal norms are transmitted by the social networks to which young adults belong. The individual perception about societal norms depends on what “significant others” approve or disapprove (Bernardi 2003; Vignoli and Salvini 2014). The family of origin and the group of peers constitute the most important social networks through which social acceptance can be 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 social norms may operate within the family of origin, i.e. parental approval and the quality of parent-child relationships.

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 are more likely to marry when their mothers have traditional attitudes toward union formation, compared to 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 an infringement of these expectations is seen by parents as a source of discomfort and a personal failure (Pillemer and Suitor 2002). For example, adult children’s transition to divorce has detrimental consequences on parental well-being when parents perceive divorce as a socially disapproved family event (Kalmjin and De Graaf 2012). Behavior in conflict with the family of origin may imply costs also for young adult children who usually have expectations about parents’ support during the transition to adulthood (Aquilino 1997, 2005; Holdsworth 2000; White 1994). Thus, the importance of a perceived norm in the decision making 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 backed up by parents.
Second, the association between a perceived age norm and individual actual behavior may be partly explained by the quality of parent-child relationships. A perceived societal norm can be reinforced by the family of origin through affective ties during the period of intergenerational co-residence. Parents tend to instill normative ideas by sharing activities and interests with their co-resident children, and warmer family relationships may strengthen the perception that one should stay in the parental home for longer. Previous research suggests that young adults who have warmer and caring relationships with their parents in childhood and adolescence tend to co-reside with parents for longer, compared to those who live 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 authoritative parenting styles are related to early departures from the parental home (Bucx and van Weil 2008; Seiffge-Krenke 2006). Proceeding from these findings, the development of a perceived norm concerning the timing of leaving home may be accompanied by a positive or negative family climate, which, in turn, affects the actual decision to leave the family nest.

However, the association between the quality of parent-child relationships and the decision to leave the parental home can be disputed. The role of the quality of parent-child relationships in nest-leaving processes is seldom analyzed longitudinally. An exception can be found in Ward and Spitze’s (2007) research, indicating that in the U.S. parent-child conflicts positively affect the decision to move out of the family nest, whereas the reverse effect is not significant for closer family relationships. Family conflicts constitute 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 about an extended co-residence, these close family relations do not affect actual behavior. The quality of parent-child relationships may have a partial effect independent from the one of perceived social norms.

2.3 An application to the Italian case
Previous research suggests that the transition to adulthood has become more heterogeneous. In Italy the heterogeneity of home-leaving age has increased over the last decades: its interquartile difference is equal to 8.3 years for men and 5.2 for women born between 1945-50, while it is about 10 and 8 years for young adults born around 1970 (Billari 2001; Buzzi et al. 2007). The idea of de-standardization of the life course predicts less significant relevance of social norms in affecting the transition to independence. Nevertheless, Italy is often defined as a strong family culture where an extended period of intergenerational co-residence is considered as a relevant part of the socialization of offspring (Dalla Zuanna 2001; Reher 1998). Moreover, in Southern European countries where traditionally the family group has had priority over the individual, co-residence is
the most important way through which parents and their adult children exchange mutual support (Albertini et al. 2013). In this light, it can be argued that social norms prescribing an extended co-residence between generations continue to exert an influence on actual behavior. I would expect that a perceived social norm has a significant association with the choices young adults make about living independently (Hypothesis 1).

Furthermore, people may comply with age norms by reflecting the positive effects on the costs and benefits of their decision. Young adults may adhere to age norms when they perceive that an infringement will imply high costs and/or sanctions. It can be hypothesized that people tend to comply with a “stay” norm when the perceived benefits of leaving home are low, while they may be more likely to adhere to a “leave” norm when these benefits are high (Hypothesis 2).

With regard to family relationships, the literature suggests that Italian parents have a particular power in negotiating their children’s life course decisions, such as nest-leaving and union formation. Rosina and Fraboni (2004) point out that Italian parents tend to discourage their children from behaviors that are not socially accepted, by adopting emotional and material sanctions. Young adults who do not act in accordance with their parental views are less likely to receive help from the family of origin. Parental support appears particularly relevant for children during the transition to adulthood in Italy where the welfare state does not facilitate young people relying on their own resources (Mencarini et al. 2012). For this reason, parental influence on their children’s choices partly explains the diffusion of modern living arrangements, such as cohabitation (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007; Schröder 2008). In a similar vein, the pressure of the family of origin may be 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 the relationship with their young adult children, even when too close relationships lead to a scarce autonomy on the children’s part. In a culture of strong family ties, parents tend to consider their children as their own extensions 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 established closer relationships with their parents may be less likely to move out of the parental home in the later wave. Concomitantly, a positive family climate may reinforce the normative idea that young adults should stay in the family nest for longer. Therefore, I would expect that the quality of parent-child relationships partly explains the association between age norms and home leaving decisions (Hypothesis 4).
In Southern European countries, the departure from the parental home tends to coincide with marriage. Traditionally marriage is viewed as the normative occasion to leave the family of origin (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999) and as an institution that binds older and younger generations together (Yahirun and Hamplová 2014). Some scholars found a partial de-synchronization 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 viewing 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 5).*

3. Data and Methods

The empirical analysis is based on the panel component of the survey Family and Social Subject (FSS) that took place in 2003 and 2007. The survey is representative of the Italian population and involves about 10,000 individuals aged 18-64 in the first wave. The database contains detailed information about parental characteristics and intergenerational relationships during the period of co-residence. The purpose of the survey is to examine employment and family transitions between the first and second wave. Thus, in 2007 respondents were re-interviewed in a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI).

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 lived in the parental home during the first wave (N=1,675). This procedure introduces a possible bias of sample selection. In order to partly account for sample selection characteristics, I estimated a probit model on the likelihood of co-residing with parents in wave 1, and I computed the inverse Mills’ ratio (N=2,605). The variables included in the model of selection are: age, age^2, sex, living in the south, degree, parental education and having at least one child (see Table 2 below). Having a child was used as an instrumental variable when computing the inverse Mills’ ratio. In the present data, having a child is significantly correlated with the likelihood of co-residing with parents in the first wave, but it does not have a 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, space constraints and desires for autonomy encourage young couples to move out of the family of origin in case of childbearing (Aassve et al. 2002). It is possible,

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1 The survey of 2007 is named “Criticità dei percorsi lavorativi in ottica di genere” (Issues about employment paths from a gender perspective).
therefore, that the costs and benefits of co-residing with parents are counterbalanced for young parents who decide to leave the parental home.

Table 1: Sample characteristics.

|                          | Mean or % | S.D. | Range |
|--------------------------|-----------|------|-------|
| **Dependent variable**   |           |      |       |
| Routes out of the parental home<br>(Staying at home in wave 2) |           |      |       |
| Marriage                 | 6.33      |      |       |
| Other routes             | 6.45      |      |       |
| **Independent variables**|           |      |       |
| Perceived norm (“on time”) (wave 1)<br>Should go | 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  |
| **Control variables**    |           |      |       |
| Age (wave 1)             | 24.57     | 4.58 | 18-34 |
| Female                   | 54.75     |      |       |
| Southern (wave 1)        | 39.70     |      |       |
| Education (Lower) (wave 1)<br>Secondary | 59.16 |      |       |
|                          | Tertiary  | 10.87|       |
| Parents’ education (Lower) (fixed across waves)<br>Secondary | 37.38 |      |       |
|                          | Tertiary  | 12.84|       |
| Parental divorce/separation (wave 1) | 5.31 |      |       |
| Household economic conditions (Good) (wave 1)<br>Adequate | 66.31 |      |       |
| Poor                     | 27.64     |      |       |
| Attitudes toward marriage (wave 1) | 11.18 | 2.84 | 4-20  |
| Observations             | 1,675     |      |       |
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). Moreover, 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 “What was the main reason to start living on your own?” (at wave 2). Table 1 shows that about 50% of respondents who leave the family of origin do so to get married.

The main independent variable refers to a perceived norm concerning the timing of leaving the parental home. The normative age to leave the parental home was considered as that given by the interviewees answering the question: “in your opinion, what is the right age to leave the parental home?” (at wave 1). In the selected sample, young adults report that, on the average, the right age to leave the family of origin is equal to 26.8 for men and 25.7 for women. I considered two opposite perceptions of age norms: “I should stay” when the “right” time directly expressed by the interviewees is at least five years higher than the individual age, and “I should leave” when the normative age 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 on the Netherland, a “stay” norm is much more often perceived than a “leave” norm also in Italy. 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 at their age should live at home.

In order to test the second hypothesis about the role of the costs and benefits of leaving home, I built an index based on the question: “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”. For each of these items interviewees reported the degree of improvement for their lives (at wave 1, 1=much worse, 5=much better). I run 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 sees the transition out of the parental home as a resource depleting event, regardless of other benefits for their lives. The scale about the cost-benefit ratio of leaving home ranges from 5 to 25, and 98% of the total distribution is comprised 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 respondents’ decision to leave the parental home were measured through 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 will totally agree (1) or totally disagree (5) with their decision. Moreover, the questionnaire contains different questions asking the frequency (at wave 1, 1=never, 5=often) of disagreement with parents in eight areas: (1) helping around the house, (2) spending money, (3) school performances, (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 included in values between 8 to 26. The mean value is 17, which indicates that Italian co-resident 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 concerning the age of nest-leaving. Respondents’ 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 degree. 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 individual perceptions of 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 regard to 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).

The analytical strategy consists in estimating a selection model on the likelihood of co-residing 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 understand whether social norms predict the probability of leaving the parental home between the two waves, controlling for selection processes and other correlates (Hypothesis 1). Model 2 includes interaction terms between perceived social norms and benefits of leaving home to test the second hypothesis. Model 3 adds interaction terms between social norms and parents’ approval 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). 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).
Finally, a multinomial model is employed to test the fifth hypothesis that a perceived norm is associated with leaving home to marry (Hypothesis 5).

In order to understand the role of the cost/benefit ratio, parental approval and the quality of parent-child relationships, predicted probabilities were estimated and plotted in graphs. I also adopted the KHB method for the decomposition of direct and indirect effects in nonlinear probability models, when analyzing the mediating role of parent-child agreement in the association between age norms and home leaving decisions (Breen et al. 2013; Kohler et al. 2011).

Table 2: Probit model concerning the likelihood of co-residing 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.

4. Results

Table 3 presents Average Marginal Effects concerning the likelihood of leaving the parental home between 2003 and 2007. Model 1 shows that young adults who think that people their age should stay at home have an average probability of leaving their parental home 4.4 percentage points lower than those who perceived themselves as being “on time”. Consistent with the first hypothesis, perceived social norms have an influence on young adults’ life course decisions, even after controlling for a number of correlates. However, 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”. Also friends’ disapproval of individual decisions is not significantly associated with the likelihood of leaving home (AME= -0.004). Parental disapproval of their children’s choices, instead, is significantly related to the transition to independence, and its average marginal effect is equal to -3.3 percentage points. The average effect for 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 et al. (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 parents’ approval is significant, while the direct effect indicates that age norms 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 for young adults’ decision to live in the parental home, when the benefits of residential independence are low. This is consistent with the second hypothesis, suggesting that the influence of social norms on individual life course decisions depends on a system of costs and benefits. On the contrary, the average marginal effect of “leave” norm does not vary significantly according to the benefits of leaving home. A significant difference between young adults who think they should leave the parental home and those who are “on time” can be observed 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 what is approved by parents (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 people who perceive themselves as being “late” and those who think that they should stay in the family of origin declines and disappears according to parental disapproval. When parents support their children’s decision to leave the nest, young adults who perceive themselves as being “on time” or late are more likely to leave their family nest than those who think that it is too early for moving out. These differences are no longer significant when parents want their children to stay in the family. This finding suggests that societal norms about the timing of leaving home affect later behavior when they are backed up by parental approval.

Model 4 introduces a measure of the quality of parent-child relationships in the analysis. Social norms regarding the normative time to leave the parental home may exert an influence on the decision to stay at home, because they are developed in a positive family climate (Hypothesis 4). However, this hypothesis fails to garner much support.
The average marginal effect for the norm decreases only from 0.044 in model 1 to 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.

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

**Figure 2:** Predicted probabilities of leaving the parental home according to a perceived norm and parental disapproval (estimates form model 3).
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 AME | Model 1 S.E. | Model 2 AME | Model 2 S.E. | Model 3 AME | Model 3 S.E. | Model 4 AME | Model 4 S.E. |
|--------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| **Age^2**          | Neg.*       |              |             |              | Neg.*       |              |             |              |
| **Age**            | 0.004+      | (0.002)      | 0.004+      | (0.002)      | 0.005+      | (0.003)      | 0.004+      | (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+     | (0.041)      | -0.071      | (0.041)      | -0.074+     | (0.041)      | -0.078+     | (0.041)      |
| Poor              | -0.085+     | (0.050)      | -0.082+     | (0.050)      | -0.085+     | (0.050)      | -0.087+     | (0.050)      |
| **Perceived benefits** |         |              |             |              |             |              |             |              |
| Should go         | 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)      |
| Inverse Mills’ ratio | 0.128**   | (0.034)      | 0.128**     | (0.034)      | 0.127**     | (0.034)      | 0.136**     | (0.034)      |
| 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)      |
| **Perceived norms X Benefits** |         |              |             |              |             |              |             |              |
| Should go X Benefits | Pos.        |              |             |              |             |              |             |              |
| Should stay X Benefits | Pos.**     |              |             |              |             |              |             |              |
| **Norms X Parental disapproval** |         |              |             |              |             |              |             |              |
| Should go 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.
In addition, as shown by Figure 3, the association between the scale of parent-child disagreement and the likelihood of moving out of the family of origin is curvilinear. High levels of parent-child disagreement do not seem to decrease the attractiveness of the family nest, compared to an average level of agreement with their parents. In addition, contrary to my expectations, young adults who experienced a positive family climate are more prone to leave the parental home. The average predicted probability of leaving the parental home is equal to 17% for those who experienced high levels of agreement with parents, while it is equal to 11% for people who reported having medium or low levels of agreement. An explanation of this result is provided by the analysis in Table 4 where different routes out of the parental home are considered. The scale of parent-child disagreement is negatively correlated with the likelihood of moving out of the family nest to get married. Thus, the quality of family relationships tends to encourage young adults to follow a traditional route out of the parental home.

**Figure 3:** Predicted probabilities of leaving the parental home according parent-child disagreement (estimates form model 4).

Table 4 presents average marginal effects of leaving the parental home in order to marry and 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 non-significant 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
that per se plays an important role in predicting both pathways to independence. I also includes a measure of traditional attitudes toward marriage in the analysis. Thus, it can be observed that people who reported having positive orientation toward the institution of marriage at the previous 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 or other pathways between 2003 and 2007 (Average Marginal Effects). Estimates computed controlling for sample selection in wave 1.

|                              | Marriage AME | S.E. | Other routes AME | S.E. |
|------------------------------|--------------|------|------------------|------|
| Age^2                        | Neg.         | 0.003 (0.002) | Neg.         | 0.000 (0.002) |
| Age                          |              | 0.000 (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)            |              | 0.000 (0.001) |              | 0.000 (0.001) |
| Secondary                    |              | 0.026+ (0.014) |              | 0.023+ (0.013) |
| Tertiary                     |              | 0.027 (0.019) |              | 0.054* (0.025) |
| Parents' education           |              | 0.000 (0.001) |              | 0.000 (0.001) |
| 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) |         | 0.000 (0.003) |              | 0.007* (0.003) |
| Adequate                     |              | -0.077+ (0.045) |              | 0.010 (0.031) |
| Poor                         |              | -0.086+ (0.046) |              | 0.012 (0.033) |
| Perceived benefits           |              | 0.003 (0.003) |              | 0.007* (0.003) |
| Perceived norms              |              | 0.000 (0.001) |              | 0.000 (0.001) |
| Should go                    |              | 0.001 (0.017) |              | 0.018 (0.020) |
| Should stay                  |              | -0.042** (0.014) |              | -0.006 (0.016) |
| Inverse Mills’ ratio         |              | 0.030 (0.031) |              | 0.084** (0.020) |
| 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^2  |              | Pos.* (0.001) |              | Pos.* (0.001) |
| Attitudes toward marriage    |              | 0.007** (0.002) |              | -0.001 (0.002) |
| 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 de-standardized. 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, people consider age norms as 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 a later wave, compared to those who perceive themselves as being “on time” or “late”. A “leave” norm, instead, does not encourage young adults to move out of the parental home. In Italy social norms seem to be relevant in prescribing an extended co-residence between generations, probably because it is culturally seen as an important process of socialization of the offspring toward family and caregiving responsibilities (Billari et al. 2001; Reher 1998).

The results indicate that in Italy social norms tend to affect the decision to leave the parental home when it is synchronized with marriage. This means that marriage as the traditional occasion to leave the family nest is likely to be regulated by age norms. In line with this, Billari and Liefbroer (2007) find that social norms encourages Dutch young adults to postpone leaving home in order to live with a partner. The authors also show that people who believe that their parents want them to co-reside postpone the transition to independence. The influence of social norms appears to operate through the channel of the family of origin. The findings presented here reveal a complex interplay between making one's own choices, considering the approval of the family of origin and complying with age norms. When young adults think that their parents will not approve their decision to leave the family of origin, they tend to stay in the parental home regardless of perceived age norms. At this regard, perceived parental disapproval reduces the normative influence on individual behavior. Young adults who think that it is the “right” time to live independently and obtain parents’ approval are more likely to leave the parental home than those who perceive a “stay” norm. Overall, the role of social norms in decision making about leaving home depends on what young adults think that their parents approve or disapprove.

Parental disapproval is likely to increase the costs of leaving the family of origin. It is worth noting that Italian parents discourage their children from socially unaccepted behaviors by adopting material sanctions, and that these sanctions may be 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 perceived norm. The association between a perceived norm and actual behavior depends on a system of costs and benefits of leaving home. The findings of this study indicate that
Individual adherence to a “stay” norm depends on whether intergenerational co-residence is attached to lower costs than residential independence. High perceived costs of leaving home seem to induce young adults to comply with a “stay” norm. This could suggest that people tend to act in accordance with age norms when they perceive that a violation is connected to penalties or sanctions.

Contrary to my expectations, the association between social norms and later home-leaving decisions is not explained by the quality of parent-child relationships. 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. A positive family environment may facilitate the development of a norm that one should live with parents for longer. But, parent-child agreement is not significantly related to a postponement of leaving home, rather it encourages young adults to live independently and get married. This finding is partly in contrast to previous research, showing that Italian parents highly value the closeness with their co-resident children and do not encourage them to become autonomous (e.g. Santarelli and Cottone 2009). Also, contrary to Ward and Spitze’s (2007) findings on the U.S., parent-child disagreements do not have a positive influence on young adults’ decision to move out of the family of origin. These differences can be explained by the fact that the quality of parent-child relationships tends to affect the timing of leaving home, rather than its likelihood. This is an important limitation of the present study. Unfortunately, the small number of transitions out of the parental home does not allow to analyze the timing of leaving home. Nevertheless, only few databases include information on norms and behaviors, and, therefore, I took advantage of this opportunity even if a larger number of transitions would be desirable.

In spite of these limitations, this study provides an important contribution to the subject and offers a suggestive explanation about how age norms and family environment play a role in the young adults’ life course decisions. In Italy social norms promote a postponement of independence and union formation, especially when young adults think that a violation would lead to costs and penalties. These perceived consequences can partly operate through the judgment of the family of origin: parental approval and disapproval encourage or discourage people to comply with the normative idea that youth their age should move out of the family nest.

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