

Non-resident parent-child contact after marital dissolution and parental repartnering: Evidence from Italy

Silvia Meggiolaro and Fausta Ongaro

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Abstract:

With the diffusion of marital instability, the number of children who spend some of their childhood without one of their parent has become not negligible even in Italy. In this paper we consider the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident parent after separation with a double aim: a) to analyze the impact of parental repartnering on non-resident parent's contact with their children; b) to investigate whether these effects are differentiated according to the sex of non-resident parent. The study focuses on children aged 0-17 living with only one biological parent, using data from two cross-sectional rounds of the Italian survey "Family and Social Subjects". Results show that the repartnering of parents reduces the non-resident parent-child contact only in the case of non-resident father; in the case of a non-resident mother, repartnering actually increases contact.

Keywords: non-resident parent-child contact; non-resident fathers; non-resident mothers; parents' repartnering; gender differences

Affiliation:

Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Padova, Italy

Acknowledgement: The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement no. 320116 for the research project FamiliesAndSocieties.

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1. Introduction

The increase in the proportion of separations and divorces involving children has been accompanied by an increase in sole parenthood over the past few decades, thus, an increasing number of children spend some of their childhood without one of their parent (Chapple, 2009; Panico, Bartley, Kelly, McMunn, & Sacker, 2010). For these children, examining contact with their non-resident parent after separation is important, since a good parent-child interaction contributes to the psychological well-being (Fabricius, 2003; Videon, 2005; King & Sobolewski, 2006; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Mitchell, Booth, & King 2009; Levin & Currie, 2010) and positive development (Dunn, Cheng, O' Connor, & Bridges, 2004; Carlson, 2006; Menning, 2006) of children. Of course, contact may not necessarily be good and thus may not benefit children (Kalil, Mostad, Rege, & Votruba, 2011); nevertheless, frequent contact with non-resident parents generally improves children's wellbeing, even if it is quality of the relationships that eventually matters. Non-resident parent-child contact is important also from an economic viewpoint since many studies have shown that it is positively associated with non-resident parent's compliance in paying child support¹ (see, for example, Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007). As a consequence, the frequency of contact between non-resident parents and children and the factors associated with it have been investigated by many researchers (Argys, Peters, Cook, Garasky, Nepomnyaschy, & Sorensen, 2007; Billette & Laplante, 2007; Juby et al., 2007; King & Sobolewski, 2006; Nepomnyaschy, 2007; Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009).

The diffusion of marital instability is, however, associated even with an increase of the repartnering (Ermisch, 2002; Sweeney, 2010). What about the contact between children and non-resident parent when one of the parent enters a new partnership? Previous empirical literature on non-resident parents has usually considered only children who live with their mothers after their parents' separation, disregarding those living with their fathers (Sousa & Sorensen, 2008). Studies on non-resident mothers are very dated (they are conducted during the mid-1980s through the 1990s) or based only on small and highly selected samples (see the discussion in Stewart, 1999). Recently, studies on non-resident motherhood have received some attention, but mainly from a qualitative viewpoint (Kielty, 2008a, 2008b). In addition, all these studies did not consider the effect of repartnering of both parents on non-resident parent-child contact.

¹ In fact, the causal direction is unclear. Non-resident parents visiting their children frequently may become aware of their children's economic needs and, hence, increase their payments. Alternatively, non-resident parents who pay child support may feel entitled to visit their children.

The aim of the current study is to verify how (co-resident and non-resident) parents' union biography influences non-resident parent-child contact for children under 18, examining whether the effect of repartnering differs according to the gender of non-resident parent. Analyses are conducted with data from two rounds (2003 and 2009) of the Italian survey "Family and Social Subjects" and consider non-resident parent-child contact for children under 18 living with only one biological parent after their parents' marital separation.

Italy is characterized by a recent but quite rapid spread of marital instability (Istat, 2012), and the number of children who spend some of their childhood without one of their parent is not negligible even in this country: in 2009, for example, 66.4% of separations and 60.7% of divorces were of couples with children (Istat, 2011a). Even if, independently from the custody of children, children usually live with their mothers (in 2009, for example, 86.1% of single-parent families are single-mother families), the percentage of single-father families is not insignificant, and in 2009, they regarded a total of about 163 thousands households, corresponding to 2.3% of households (Istat, 2011b). At the same time, repartnering is increasingly common: in 2009, 23% of women and 32% of men who have experienced marital instability were in a new union (Istat, 2011c). From this perspective, the current paper allows to study a topic still little explored: the effect of parents' repartnering on the non-resident parent-child contact and its interaction with the gender of non-resident parent, in a country which is moving from a traditional to a more complex family context.

2. Background and hypotheses

2.1. The case of non-resident father

Several studies have considered the effect of parents' repartnering (either through marriage or cohabitation) on non-resident father-child contact. The literature has generally found a negative effect of the repartnering of the non-resident father on the contact with his children (Juby et al., 2007; Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009): thus, paternal repartnering is expected to be associated with lower contact with a non-resident father in comparison with the situation where the father does not have a new partner. Instead, the research evidence is quite mixed regarding whether a mother's repartnering negatively affects non-resident father-child contact. Some studies suggest that the mother's new union decreases non-resident father involvement (see, for example, Harris & Ryan, 2004; Juby et al., 2007; Amato et al., 2009; Guzzo, 2009; Berger, Cancian, & Meyer, 2012), whereas others find little or no effect of

mother's repartnering (Day & Acock, 2004; Sobolewski & King, 2005; King, 2009). In these studies, more in depth analyses on the effect of repartnering net of the other parent's union biography are completely missing.

The literature has suggested several mechanisms explaining the possible effect of parent's repartnering (King, 2009; Kalmijn, 2013).

A first mechanism is based on the concept of need of support. From the viewpoint of support for parents, this mechanism can suggest a role played by father's repartnering. Since a partner is an essential source of support and divorced parents who are alone have more need of support than those who have repartnered (Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 2004), one can expect that children would be less emotionally supportive of (and thus, have less contact with) their father when he is repartnered than when he is still single. From the point of view of the support received by children, the mechanism may explain the effect of mother's repartnering. Non-resident fathers may withdraw from their children's lives (and thus, decrease contact with them) if they feel that, due to the presence of a step-father, their involvement is less necessary or his own role is less clear. Correspondingly, repartnered mothers may view non-resident fathers as less necessary and, thus, no longer encourage father-child contact. In this perspective, the step-father acts as a substitute parent, taking over the parenting role.

A second mechanism is connected to the role attached to the new partnership. As regards paternal repartnering, when fathers repartner, they shift their investments to a new family and, potentially, to new children. In the same direction, a new partner may pressure to invest more in the new union and in the new ties and responsibilities toward the new family members, also at the cost of the children from the previous union. The father may be motivated to answer this need to show that he is a good partner. This dynamic of "swapping" the old family for a new one has often been referred to by literature (Manning & Smock, 2000): on the one hand, time and economic constraints and duties imposed by the new relationships may curtail the resources devoted to maintain the ties with children from previous union; on the other hand, the fulfillment of emotional needs by having contact with children may be transferred to the new partner. Clearly, repartnered mothers are less prone to "swap" families, since they have usually the primary physical custody of their children (Argys et al., 2007). However, a repartnered mother may wish to get her ex-partner away from their children in order to recreate a new nuclear family with her children and her new partner, feeling the non-resident father-child contact as an intrusion into her new family.

A third mechanism is connected with the behavior of the new partner. In the case of father's repartnering, the new partner maybe more reluctant to share the father with the

children of a former partner. As regards mother's repartnering, the step-father may be not motivated to have their step-children with high involvement with the biological fathers implying a potential source of rapprochement of their new partner with the previous spouse.

Lastly, another mechanism plays in an inverted way for father's and mother's repartnering and is based on the relation between the children and the parent's new partner. In the case of father's repartnering, there may be some difficulties for children to accept the new partner of their father, and, particularly when the relationship with the new partner is not good, the child-father contact may be less frequent, since the children distance themselves from the father. At the same time, also mothers may limit non-resident father's contact with their children either because they are reluctant to allow their children to spend some time with their father's new partner (Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009). At the opposite, in the case of mother's repartnering, if children accept with difficulties the step-father and do not have good relation with him, it is possible that they strengthen the relation with their father, increasing their contact with him (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002); in some cases, the mother herself can encourage the children to spend more time with their biological father in order to have more free time for her new partner, since children from first marriage may be seen as a disturbance to the new relationship.

In fact, the literature has also suggested that the direction of causation between repartnering and non-resident parent-child contact could be inverted. In this perspective, fewer non-resident parent-child contact might not be the effect of parents' repartnering, but rather parents' repartnering might be the effect of poor non-resident parent-child contact just before the parents' repartnering: in the case of resident parents, they may want to replace a not present parent for their children; in the case of non-resident parents, they may want to form a new family, replacing the previous one. However, the few longitudinal studies exploring the direction of causation for non-resident fathers did not confirm this latter hypothesis (Juby et al., 2007), and it is beyond the scope of the current paper.

All these remarks suggest the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Fathers' repartnering reduces contact with children, due to the convergent effects of the four mechanisms described above;

Hypothesis 2: Mothers' repartnering decreases non-resident fathers-child contact. The fourth mechanism described above suggests the opposite, but in Italy it might not work: in this country, indeed, repartnering of mothers co-resident with their children is only recent and probably not completely socially accepted, and thus, mothers might be particularly mindful the new partner is approved by co-resident children;

Hypothesis 3: Both parents' repartnering reduces non-resident fathers-child contact due to possible cumulating effects of the repartnering of each parent.

2.2. The case of non-resident mother

It is less clear how the parents' repartnering affect non-resident parent-child contact in the case of the non-resident mother. Studies analyzing non-resident parent-child contact in a gender perspective are few, dated, and generally based on small and highly selected samples. More importantly, they, at best, consider parents' repartnering as a simple control (Stewart, 1999). However, they let us hypothesize that non-resident mothers and fathers might respond differently to the repartnering. In addition, this literature suggests some mechanisms to describe differences between non-resident mothers-child contact and non-resident fathers-child one which can be useful even to explore possible gender differences in the effects of parents' repartnering.

The first perspective explaining gender differences in non-resident parent-child contact expects that contact between children and their non-resident mothers should be higher than that between children and their non-resident fathers due to traditional social expectations considering women as those with the role of nurturers of children (Perrone, Wright, & Jackson, 2009; King, Mitchell, & Hawkins, 2010). In the case of non-resident mothers, they might be pressured to have high contact with their children by negative stereotypes of non-resident motherhood (Kielty, 2008a). According to this "gender roles hypothesis", non-resident mothers have more contact with their children than non-resident fathers.

An opposite perspective suggests that non-resident mothers might be negatively selected into their non-resident status. In situations of union dissolution, it is usual for mothers to retain the central care role so that the fathers typically become the non-resident parent. Thus, non-resident mothers are often perceived as deviant and are subject to negative social judgments implying social isolation which may pose barriers to a full and active part in the lives of their children (Kielty, 2008a, 2008b). In addition, the reasons for non-resident motherhood may indicate negative selection in itself: for example, non-resident mothers are likely to have financial difficulties (Sousa & Sorensen, 2008) and emotional problems. Other mothers mention that father residence was the best solution for children (Kielty, 2008a). This "negative selection hypothesis" (Stewart, 1999) suggests that non-resident mothers have significantly less contact with their children than non-resident fathers.

The last perspective asserts that contact between non-resident parent and children is related to the non-resident role rather than to the parent's sex (Stewart, 1999). Mothers and fathers face similar difficulties with their nonresidential role, characterized by feelings of guilt and helplessness, decreases in the daily activities with their children, structural and practical obstacles (such as distance, time and expenses) to visitation and pattern of involvement with absent children (Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006). Such negative aspects may reduce contact frequency in the same way for non-resident mothers and fathers. This leads to an "absent parent hypothesis" according to which non-resident mothers and fathers have similar level of contact with their children.

All these remarks do not allow to make precise hypotheses similar to those formulated in the case of non-resident fathers. However, the above perspectives allow to assume what could be the effect of parents' repartnering for non-resident mothers in relative terms with respect to what expected in the case of non-resident fathers. In particular, a scenario of three alternative hypotheses might be proposed.

According to the "gender role hypothesis" (probably the most plausible in Italy, due to its traditional context), in the case of mother's repartnering, mother could feel that her new condition (presumably more favorable in terms of material and non material resources) does not justify a reduction of mother-child contact; instead, it could promote a greater involvement of the child in her new family's life. In the case of father's repartnering, mother could be worry to share her role with the new partner of the resident father. In both cases the father could encourage the mother's wishes: he could indeed assume that the mother should be the main caregiver of the child. Thus, we may expect that:

A: Parents' repartnering (father, mother or both) reduces non-resident mothers contact with their children to a lower extent in comparison with what assumed in hypotheses 1, 2, or 3 in the case of non-resident fathers.

According to the "negative selection hypothesis", in the case of a repartnered mother, she could tend to shift their investment to a new family and new partner more than a father in the same situation would do; in the case of a repartnered father, the mother could tend to delegate to the father's new partner part of her parental duties; in addition, the father himself could be aim to substitute a potential negative model of biological mother with that of the new partner. This leads to expect that:

B: Parents' repartnering (father, mother or both) reduces non-resident mothers-child contact more than what has been assumed in the case of non-resident fathers (see hypotheses 1, 2, 3).

Lastly, in the case of the “absent parent hypothesis”, the gender of non-resident parents does not matter, leading to:

C: Father’s, mother’s or both parents’ repartnering have the same effect expected for non-resident fathers.

3. Data and key variables

3.1. Data

The data come from two cross-sectional rounds of the survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS) conducted in Italy by the Italian Statistical Institute (Istat) in 2003 and in 2009. The survey targets in each year a representative sample at national level of about 20,000 households. In this study, we focused on households with at least one child born from a couple that experienced a union dissolution. More precisely we addressed 1,079 boys and girls aged 0-17 living with their mother after their parents’ marital dissolution and who have a living father (henceforth, they are referred to as mother-resident children) and on their 135 counterparts living with their father and having a living mother (father-resident children). Besides socio-demographic information on each household member, the data-set provides the frequency of contact with non-resident parent: after information on the distance between parental residences, children are asked the frequency of contact with their non-resident parent. In particular, two questions investigated face-to-face contact and phone contact. In both cases, response options consisted of 1 = every day, 2 = several (2-6) times per week, 3 = once per week, 4 = one to three times per month, 5 = several times a year, 6 = never. Thus, the data allow to consider the diverse aspects of non-resident parent-child interaction: besides the frequently used face to face contact they take into account phone contact which can be relevant, especially when non-resident parent lives far from their children (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996).

In addition, FSS provided information on household characteristics (structure, economic conditions, geographical area of residence) and on non-resident parents’ union status. In this way, we can know whether both the resident parent and the non-resident one have repartnered or not. Unfortunately further information about the non-resident parent (socio-demographic characteristics) or her/his possible new family (type of new union, children born from the new union) were not available.

3.2. Dependent variable

In this paper the frequency of contact between children and non-resident parent is measured with a composite index considering the frequency of both face-to-face and phone contact. In particular, following the approach suggested in previous studies (Lader, 2008), direct contact takes priority over indirect contact. Clearly, both types of contact are important and phone contact is especially important in the case that non-resident parents live far from their children, but direct contact can be considered of greater importance: relations of trust, for example, are established and sustained more easily with face-to-face contact (Urry, 2003; Peacey & Hunt, 2008). In this perspective, a six-category variable is obtained² (Figure 1a): a high frequency of contact is defined when the non-resident parent has in-person visits with the child every day; a middle-high frequency is assigned in the cases in-person visits are several (2-6) times per week and/or phone contact is every day; middle level of contact refers to situations when the children see their non-resident parents once per week or have phone contact several (2-6) times per week; middle-low contact is defined for one to three times per month in-person visits or once per week or one to three times per months phone contact; lastly, children who reported not having contact with their non-resident parent at all neither by phone or by in-person visits, or those with only several times a year contact are classified as with low contact.

For non-resident parents living more than 50 kilometers far away from their children's residence³ (daily in-person visits are clearly less possible), the phone contact is given more importance for defining a high contact: the categorization is described in Figure 1b.

² Different categorizations of the variable give similar results.

³ In fact, the geographical distance between children's and non-resident parent' households might be important a control covariate in the following analyses. Some studies showed, indeed, that it is consistently negatively associated with the frequency of contact (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Skevik, 2006), but many questions about the causal direction remain and cannot be adequately addressed with cross-sectional survey data of the type we have (Le Bourdais, Juby, & Marcil-Gratton, 2002; Swiss & Le Bourdais, 2009). Consequently, following the perspective used by some previous studies, non-resident parent's proximity to children will not be included in the analyses presented here as control covariate, but in the definition of the dependent variable.

Figure 1. Definition of non-resident parent-child contact for non-resident parents

a) living less than 50 kilometers from the child

		In-person visits					
		Every day	Several (2-6) times per week	Once per week	One to three times per month	Several times a year	Never
Phone contact	Every day	High Contact	Middle-high contact				
	Several (2-6) times per week		Middle contact				
	Once per week						
	One to three times per month			Middle-low contact			
	Several times a year				Low contact		
	Never						

b) living more than 50 kilometers away

		In-person visits					
		Every day	Several (2-6) times per week	Once per week	One to three times per month	Several times a year	Never
Phone contact	Every day	High Contact			Middle-high contact		
	Several (2-6) times per week	Middle-high contact			Middle contact		
	Once per week						
	One to three times per month		Middle-high contact	Middle contact	Middle-low contact		
	Several times a year					Low contact	
	Never						

3.3. Some descriptive analyses

Table 1, which presents the percentage distribution of frequency of non-resident parent-child contact, shows that contact with the non-resident parent is rather high in Italy: around 60% of children have high or middle-high contact with their non-resident parent. This percentage is even higher if the non-resident parent is the mother, in the direction of the gender roles hypothesis. Both for mothers and for fathers, their repartnering decreases non-resident parent-child contact, at least as regards middle-high contact.

Table 1. Non-resident parent-child contact according to the gender of non-resident parent and the parental union biography (%).

	High	Middle-high	Middle	Middle-low	Low	N = 100
Non-resident parent						
Father	21.9	35.1	14.6	13.4	15.0	1,079
Mother	31.8	36.3	14.8	10.4	6.7	135
Mother's repartnering						
Yes	24.6	28.9	14.8	14.1	17.6	142
No	22.8	36.0	14.6	13.0	13.6	1,072
Father's repartnering						
Yes	21.4	30.1	13.5	20.1	14.9	229
No	23.3	36.4	14.9	11.5	13.9	985
Parents' repartnering						
Both parents repartner	33.3	20.0	11.1	22.2	13.4	45
Only the mother repartner	20.6	33.0	16.5	10.3	19.6	97
Only the father repartner	18.5	32.6	14.1	19.6	15.2	184
Neither parents repartner	23.6	36.7	14.8	11.6	13.3	888
Total	23.0	35.2	14.6	13.1	14.1	1,214

Considering both parents' repartnering jointly, we find that, even if some groups present a small sample size (and thus percentages could be not always reliable), proportions of children

with high and middle-high level of contact with their non-resident parents are higher when neither parents have repartnered. It is interesting to note also the high proportion of children with high contact with their non-resident parents among children for whom both parents repartnered.

Table 2 (last rows) shows that the repartnering biography of parents is quite different according to the non-resident parent's gender: clearly, non-resident parent's repartnering is more common than resident parent's one, and, when children live with their mothers after parental separation, repartnering of neither parent is more common than in the case of non-resident mothers; instead, when children live with their fathers, repartnering of both parents is more widespread. In addition, non-resident mothers are more likely, for example, to have an older and male absent child than non-resident fathers; resident fathers are older and with higher economic resources than resident mothers. Thus a multivariate analysis has to be used to take into account these and other compositional effects.

Table 2. Children's and their resident parents' characteristics according to non-resident parent's gender.

	Father	Mother
Child's gender		
Male	50.3	58.5
Female	49.7	41.5
Child's age		
Under 6	22.3	11.9
6-10	28.8	31.1
11-13	20.2	24.4
14-17	28.7	32.6
Years from parents' separation (ref: more than 5)		
Missing	19.7	7.4
2 or less years	19.4	14.8
3-5 years	18.9	14.1
More than 5 years	42.0	63.7
Resident parent's age		
Mean	38.95	43.59
Resident parent's education		
Low	38.1	41.5
Middle	47.0	42.2
High	14.9	16.3
Resident parent's employment status		
Employed	70.6	85.2
Not employed	29.4	14.8
Parents' repartnering		
Neither parents	74.6	61.5
Only the mother has repartnered	5.7	25.9
Only the father has repartnered	16.7	3.0
Both parents have repartnered	3.0	9.6
Total	1,079	135

4. Methods and control covariates

In the multivariate analysis, our dependent variable, the frequency of contact, is an ordered categorical variable, thus an ordered logistic regression is used, since it provides a very parsimonious description of the data than any other multinomial approaches (De Maris, 2004). In this way, the estimated coefficients of an independent variable give the effect on increasing/decreasing (in our specification, increasing) the odds of high contact (last category). We estimate a single model pooling together data referred to non-resident mothers and fathers, and controlling for the sex of the resident parent and for potential interactions of it with parental union biography.

As said above, FSS also collected information on socio-demographic variables both of children and of parents which can thus be taken into account in the multivariate analysis, besides the two key covariates on gender of the resident parent and both parents' repartnering.

As regards children's characteristics, their gender and age at the interview are considered. Literature has found, indeed, that non-resident fathers have more frequent contact with sons than with daughters (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Pasley & Moorefield, 2004), even if other studies have also found no significant effect of the child's gender on the contact with a non-resident father (Le Bourdais et al., 2002; Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003). Mixed evidence has been shown also for the age of children: some studies have found that non-resident fathers have more frequent contact with older than younger children (Manning et al., 2003), but other found the opposite (King et al., 2004; Stewart, 2005; Amato et al., 2009; Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010; Cheadle et al., 2010).

As regard the parents, the information is about the resident parent and not to non-resident parent (as in most previous studies, see, for example Juby et al., 2007). However, many maternal and paternal traits are positively correlated, and thus, although we relied on one parent's characteristics, these variables also capture some information on the other parent. In particular, the resident-parent's age at the time of the interview and her/his educational level and employment status are controlled for. Many studies showed that education and maternal age are positively associated with the frequency of contact with non-resident fathers (Cheadle et al., 2010; Landale & Oropesa, 2001; Manning et al., 2003). A richer co-parenting, implying high interaction with both parents, is more common also for resident parents who are employed (Lindsey, Caldera, & Colwell, 2005).

Also the time passed from the *de facto* separation⁴ is taken into account⁵, because children's relationships with their non-resident parents are stronger when less time is elapsed from separation (Le Bourdais et al., 2002; Aquilino, 2006).

Some other potential disturbing factors are also considered. In particular, a subjective measure of household economic resources (scarce, insufficient, good) and the presence of siblings and of other persons in the household are controlled for. The area of residence (North, Centre, South) and the year of the survey are inserted in the models as measure of contextual background. Lastly, whether the child answers directly to the questionnaire⁶ is considered as controls too.

5. Results

Table 3 reports the coefficients of some covariates for different models: model 1 considers only the gender of non-resident parent; model 2 only parents' union biography following separation; model 3 considers both the gender of non-resident parent and parents' repartnering; model 4 adds the interactions between these two covariate; finally, model 5 examines the effect of the two key covariates and their interaction, controlling for children's and resident parents' characteristics (and other background covariates). Other models, not shown here for space reasons, tested for the interactions between the gender of non-resident parents and each control variable to verify whether the effects of any of these variables operate differently for mothers and fathers, but no interactions were statistically significant.

⁴ Following the approach used in other Italian studies (see, for example, Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2008), the date of *de facto* separation was chosen as marking the end of the marriage.

⁵ In the cases in which the date of *de facto* separation is not available from resident-parent's reports (499 observations), it is obtained from children's reports on the year on which their parents stopped living together (274 observations), thus reducing missing information to 225 cases. Most (222 observations) of these cases for which both parents' and children's reports are missing information are situations in which only the *de facto* separation has been experienced (and probably these are recent situation), and in order to not reducing the sample excessively, they are considered in the analyses, but this missing information is taken into account. For the (3) observations for which the date of legal separation is available, we considered the time elapsed from the *de facto* separation to the interview as the years between the legal separation and the interview. Indeed, where calculable, the time between *de facto* and legal separation was quite short (in 2003, on average 1.82 years) and not very variable (the two events happened within two years for 77%).

⁶ Non-resident parent-child contact is not always reported directly by children. When the reports are not made by children, it is possible that information is reported by the resident parent (non-resident parents' reports are not available). Using resident parents' reports probably reduced social desirability bias in the reports by non-resident parents, since resident parents have usually little reason to inflate their reports of non-resident parent-child contact. In fact, it is possible that resident parents underreport contact, particularly in those cases where the two parents are in conflict.

Table 3. Ordinal logit regression (probability of more frequent non-resident parent-child contact).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Resident parent (<i>ref: mother</i>)					
Father	0.538***		0.600***	0.189	0.175
Parents' repartnering (<i>ref: neither parents</i>)					
Only the mother has repartnered		-0.268	-0.443**	-0.825***	-0.509**
Only the father has repartnered		-0.346**	-0.302**	-0.316**	-0.472***
Both parents have repartnered		-0.022	-0.104	-0.661**	-0.325
Interactions					
Resident father * only mother's repartnering				1.302***	1.128**
Resident father * only father's repartnering				-1.194	-0.791
Resident father * both parents' repartnering				2.719***	2.791***
Child's gender (<i>ref: female</i>)					
Male					0.162
Child's age (<i>ref: under 6</i>)					
6-10					-0.416**
11-13					-0.598***
14-17					-0.903***
Years from parents' separation (<i>ref: more than 5</i>)					
Missing					1.088***
2 or less years					0.333**
3-5 years					0.016
Resident parent's age					0.035***
Resident parent's education (<i>ref: low</i>)					
Middle					0.285**
High					0.230
Resident parent's employment status (<i>ref: not employed</i>)					
Employed					-0.233*

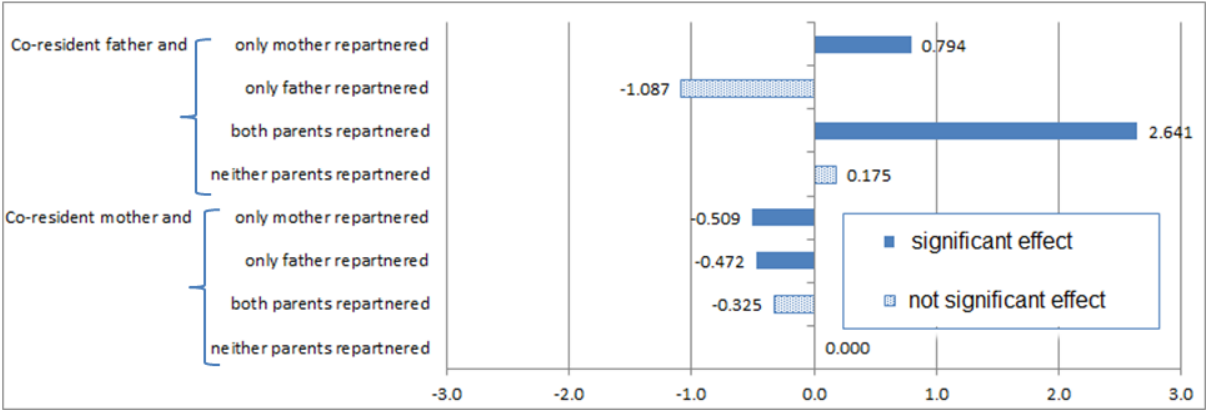
***= p<.001; **=p<0.05; *=p<0.10

Model 5 controls also for the area of residence, the year of the survey, the presence of other children and of other persons in the household, and whether the child answers directly to the questionnaire.

Model 1 shows that non-resident mothers have significantly higher contact with their children than their male counterparts, thus in the direction of the gender hypothesis; model 2 suggests that non-resident parent-child interaction decreases only in the case of father's repartnering. However, model 3 shows that – if we control for the non-resident parent's gender - this is true also when only the mother repartners. In fact, if we consider model 4, the situation looks more complex: in particular, the significant coefficients of interaction terms suggest that the effect of the parents' union biography is significantly different for non-resident mothers and fathers, but that - net of these aspects - there are no different levels of contact for non-resident fathers and mothers, in the direction of the absent parent hypothesis. Finally, model 5 tells us that the potential compositional factors and controls do not interfere with those of parents' repartnering (effects do not change in comparison with those of model 4, except for the case when both parents repartnered). Figure 3 referred to Model 5 can help in the interpretation of results. In the case of non-resident father, as expected, both his repartnering and resident mother's one reduce non-resident father-child contact, but this is not true when both parents have a new union. In the case of non-resident mother, her repartnering (independently from

father’s repartnering) increases the contact with her child, especially when the father repartners too (with respect to the baseline group but even respect to the group of single nonresident mothers); resident father’s new union, instead, does not significantly change the frequency of mother-child contact. Thus, for non-resident mothers, parental repartnering does not decrease contact with their children to a less extent in comparison with the case of non-resident fathers (as expected), but it does not have an impact (father’s repartnering) or even increase contact (mother’s repartnering). The same figure shows also that when neither parents repartnered there are not differences between the case of a co-resident mother and that of a co-resident father.

Figure 3. *Effects of the gender of the resident parent and of parents’ union biography (coefficients of an ordinal logit regression).*



6. Discussion

This paper is the first attempt to study the frequency of non-resident parent-child contact (i) focusing on both non-resident fathers and mothers, and (ii) analyzing jointly their union biography after separation. Thus, a group of non-resident parents, such as mothers, not usually considered in the literature and the effect of repartnering net of the union status of the other parent are analyzed. Another distinctive aspect of the study is that the results refer to a country of recent diffusion of marital instability and repartnering, thus we have a picture of the impact of repartnering on non-resident parent-child contact in a still rather traditional family context.

Results show a rather complex scenario. First, the analysis shows that when neither parents repartnered, non-resident mothers have similar level of contact with their children to those observed for non-resident fathers. Thus, in a country with still rather traditional family

models, the results do not support neither the “gender role” or the “negative selection” hypotheses but the “absent parent hypothesis”. Second, a very different role is found to be played by parents’ union history after separation according to the gender of resident parent. In the case of non-resident father, results confirm what has been found in literature and our hypothesis of a negative effect of father’s repartnering on contact. A similar result holds for mother’s repartnering, in line with what found in the US context (see, for example, Berger et al., 2012). Thus, for fathers’ repartnering, the several mechanisms described in Section 2 hold also in Italy, regardless or even because of its traditional family context. For mothers’ repartnering, similar mechanisms play out, and we cannot exclude that the results are due also to fewer difficulties of children to accept a step-father: as supposed, repartnering of mothers might occur only when the new partner is approved by children. Surprisingly, repartnering of both parents does not show any significant effect. This result suggest a presence of a possible interaction effect of both parents’ repartnering that should be better explored if we had a more numerous sample (we may suppose, for example, that a new union for both parents weakens the negative effects of repartnering). The result could be however due to the relatively limited sample size of children with both repartnered parents, and thus has to be considered with caution.

The results tell a different story when the non-resident parent is the mother. Her repartnering leads to an increase of contact with her non-resident child, whatever the union status of the resident father is. Thus, mother’s repartnering not only decreases the non-resident mother-child contact less than what happens in the case repartnering of non-resident fathers, but, surprisingly, increases the mother-child contact with respect the situation of a single non-resident mother. The gender effect, which does not operate when neither parents repartnered, definitely operates in the case of repartnering of non-resident mother. Unfortunately, our cross-sectional data do not allow to examine whether this result (which is statistically significant even with a relatively little numerous sample group) could be attributed to a selection effect: it could be, indeed, that repartnered mothers are selected for having higher parent-child contact even before the repartnering. However, we could not exclude that in a country with still traditional family context, the “gender role hypothesis” operates only when the mother can count on a new own family. The absence of a negative effect of a resident father’s repartnering on the mother-child contact could be interpreted in the same perspective: it could be explained by the fact that the mother fears the competition of her ex-spouse’s new partner and the ex-spouse himself does not prevent contact. In this case, we cannot exclude, however, that the not significant effect is due to the small size of this group. An interesting

theoretical implication of these results is that the different hypotheses proposed in 2.2. as regard the gender effect can be not necessarily alternative; instead they can jointly operate according to the parents' union status.

Further studies will be able to confirm what found. They should overcome some limitations of the current paper like the relatively modest sample of some groups and the lack of some control factors that literature has shown to be important cannot be taken into account in this study (for example, a detailed picture of the non-resident parents and the presence of new children in the new union). In addition, a longitudinal analysis aiming to control for the selection of non-resident parent according to their union biography could shed further light on the topic.

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