



*“Till Death Do us Part”.*  
*Analysis of the Marital relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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*“Till Death Do us Part”.*  
*Analysis of the Marital relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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**Abstract**

Despite of globalization and individualization processes throughout last decades, everyday individual life has radically changed. Particularly, traditional family system has been affected by these phenomena if we consider the increase in marital uncertainty and, hence, the de-legitimization of the old-fashioned conjugal bond. This is mostly due to the recent introduction of the divorce law through European Countries. For this reason, this descriptive study, supported by secondary statistical data, aims at analyzing both the marriage rate and the divorce rate from a longitudinal and comparative perspective. Furthermore, with the purpose to furnish an overview as more complete as possible, outside and inside marriage birth rates are taken into account.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Conjugal instability, Secondary data

**Foreword**

Emotional and sentimental patterns are changed favoring a more freely but, at the same time, uncertainty climate toward sentimental relationship. As shown by statistical data from European Commission (2019), family’s ties have become, over decades, more unstable and the divorce<sup>1</sup> rate have consistently increased, as well as the marriage rate has decreased. Economic, cultural and social changes have significantly affected the way of *doing family* and the *legal-family*<sup>2</sup> *paradigm* has overcome the traditional *natural-family paradigm* (Farber, 1973) whose patterns changed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century increasing diversity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992). As stated by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992), establish a long-term emotional bond that can be based on the ideal of romantic love has become, within a globalized society, complicated. Vice versa, it is always easier that two people prefer to establish the so-called *pure relationship* characterized by the presence of a type of convergent love that presupposes equality in giving and having affectivity.

For this reason, this descriptive analysis aims to furnish an overview about the instability and the fragility of the couple relationship, analyzing both of previous literature about the transformation of the sentimental relationship and statistical secondary data. Choosing this type of research is sustained by the assumption that “a descriptive study aims at identifying the various characteristics of a community

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<sup>1</sup> Divorce has defined as “the final legal dissolution of a marriage, that is, that separation of husband and wife which confers on the parties the right to remarriage under civil, religious and/or other provisions, according to the laws of each country”. According with national laws, these definitions embrace heterosexual couples and same sex couples (European Commission, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> As stated by European Commission (2019) marriage is “the act, ceremony or process by which the legal relationship between two persons is formed. The legality of the union may be established by civil, religious or other means as recognized by the laws of each country”.

or institution or problem under study, but it does not deal with the testing of proposition or hypothesis” (Ahmad Wani, 2017, p. 27).

Therefore, with the main aim to explore the European *status quo*, a time-series analysis of statistical indicators based on European data is provided. The study focused on updated data from the European Commission dataset concerning marriage, divorce, rate of births outside and inside marriage across EU selected Member States.

## 1. From romantic to pure: how intimate relationships have changed over time

According with the broader literature on this issue, the process of globalization and of increasing individualism have had a consistent effect on domestic partnership (Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001; Strong, DeVault & Cohen, 2011; Chambers, 2012; Cohen and Kennedy, 2013; Agnew, 2014; Wilding, 2018). Structural changes in the traditional sentimental relationship seem to bring back to the top the theory of William Thomas (1923) sustaining that socially constructed desires drive the structure of our life. For this author, some influences are inborn and they are called instincts, while some others are socially transmitted by “the claims, appeals, rewards, and punishments of society” and they are defined as wishes<sup>3</sup> (Thomas, 1923, p. 1). Among them, the wish of the new experience was one of the most cited wish around the 20<sup>th</sup> among sociologists arguing that this wish is embodied in the human curiosity. Hence, the instability of the conjugal bond can be considered as the broader pattern of the wish of the new experience (Colyer, 2015).

Indeed, the old-fashioned concept referring marriage as a long-time commitment during the whole life has been replaced by a more *fluid* form of commitment as emerging as a new mode of *pure relationship* sustained, mainly, by personal satisfaction (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992) which, as stated by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2016), “weakens the will to commit oneself to lifelong commitments because citizens increasingly prioritize individualism, autonomy, and self-realization” (Esping-Andersen, 2016, p. 13). Along these lines, Lesthaeghe (1995) views the widespread increase in family instability as part of the second demographic transition, characterized by modernization, women’s growing economic independence, secularization, and, precisely, freedom of choice in family behaviors (Thornton and Young-De Marco, 2001).

In this respect, the family system appears to have adjusted to the transformations of a globalized society and also the feeling of love, once considered long and enduring, become “top-pocket” and “liquid” (Bauman, 2003): “unlike old-fashioned relationships (not to mention 'committed' relationships, let alone long-term commitments), they seem to be made to the measure of a liquid modern life setting where 'romantic possibilities' (and not only 'romantic' ones) are supposed and hoped to come and go with ever greater speed in never thinning crowds, stampeding each other off the stage and out-shouting each other with premises 'to be more satisfying and fulfilling’” (Elliott, 2007, p. 103).

In line with this framework, Giddens (1992) argues that a *transformation of intimacy* has radically changed contemporary Western societies where the traditional

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<sup>3</sup> This means that we constantly balance innate instinctual drives and unconscious bias and motivation with the push and the pulls factors of society. Furthermore, the author sustained also that if these wishes are frustrated or “unadjusted”, delinquent or deviant behavior could follow (Colyer, 2015).

romantic family model has been replaced by the so-called “confluent love”, whose principal characteristics, as sustained by Guizzardi (2001), are:

- the *freedom*: each individual is free to leave the relationship at any time;
- the *adaptability*: the pure relationship can be decided in any situation and by anyone;
- the *privatization*: everyone is free to live their own pure relationship in absolute secrecy;
- the *relevance of sexuality* for its duration;
- the *equivalence of the exchange*: each individual will never receive more than what he/she gave.

Summarizing with Gross and Simmons (2002), who empirically tested Giddens’ theory, “whereas romantic love relationships revolved around idealized visions of manly strength and womanly virtue, the pure relationship is an effort to achieve, through constant communication, an intimate knowledge of the other’s unique and authentic self. Whereas romantic love entailed a lifelong commitment, a defining feature of pure love is that intimacy is sought as a means to self-development, so that a condition for entry into such relationships is the implicit agreement that if the values, interests, and identities of the partners begin to diverge in noncomplementary ways, the relationship loses its reason for being and becomes subject to dissolution” (p. 536). This theory assumes, so, that the relationship is maintained as long as both partners get enough satisfaction from it and, for this reason, not only love can be analyzing following an economic approach (Becker, 1981), but can be viewed as a process of social exchange (Levinger, 1976). Moreover, this concept has already been underlined by the American sociologist Peter M. Blau in his book entitled *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1986) where he stated: “in intrinsic love attachments [...] each individual furnishes rewards to the other not to receive proportionate extrinsic benefits in return but to express and confirm his own commitment and to promote the other's growing commitment to the association” (p. 76).

Nevertheless, even if the *pure relationships* are more egalitarian than the others and producing greater happiness for partners, on the other side of the coin, they produce psychological insecurity for the contingent nature of the relationship *strictu sensu*. Insecurity is connected on the role played by partners and, in line with the sociological feminists theories, it is important to focus on how gender roles came up as categories strictly related to the power (Foucault, 1976) which is typically a male-power (Di Tullio, 2018b). Relationships between women and men are considered conflictual (D’Ambrosio, 2018a), dialectic and producing a duality where the strongest personality and the weakest, appears (Bourdieu, 1998; Di Tullio, 2018a). To conclude, relationship and self-regulatory practices affect every aspects of life and constitute the *leitmotiv* of the life’s choices, such as getting married, getting divorce, having a baby and so on: “the spread of postmodern values is said to erode traditional views of family life and, instead, promote more individualistic life-style orientations together with an increased prioritization of 'higher-order' needs such as self-realization. From this perspective, the opportunity cost of long-term family commitments lies in the way these may frustrate the quest for individual accomplishment” (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015, p. 1).

## 2. Getting married or getting divorced?

As underlined by Eurostat - European Statistics, in the last 50 years, several changes have taken place especially with reference to family system. More in detail, the crude marriage rate<sup>4</sup> per 1.000 inhabitants in Europe has declined of 3.5 percentage points (from 7.8 in 1965 to 4.3 in 2015) while, on the contrary, the crude divorce rate<sup>5</sup> per 1.000 inhabitants has more than doubled (from 0.8 in 1965 to 1.9 in 2015). Undoubtedly, this huge increase can be explained taking into consideration the fact that in different EU Member States (such as Italy, Spain, Ireland and so on) the divorce has been approved and legalized.

Concerning the first indicator we observe that, from 1965 to 2015, the number of marriages is decreased in all the EU Member States except for Ireland, Cyprus and Malta; vice versa, the Countries where the decline in the number of marriages has been more intensive are Germany (-221.015), Italy (-204.632), United Kingdom (-138.495), France (-70.005<sup>6</sup>) and Spain (-61.614). Overall, examining the European average, the decrease in the number of marriages has been -33.7 in terms of percentage change.

Furthermore, observing the crude marriage rate, the EU Member States where the decrease of marriage was more considerable are Slovenia (from 9.2 to 3.1), Portugal (from 8.4 to 3.1), Netherlands (from 8.8 to 3.8), Greece (from 9.4 to 5.0) and, lastly, Croatia (from 9.0 to 4.7), as shown in the table below.

On the contrary, both the number of divorces and the crude divorce rate in most of EU Member States have recorded a substantial increase: indeed, as stated by Jack Dominian in his book entitled *Marital Breakdown* (1968), not only the conjugal instability is a recent phenomenon but also «divorce can take place at any phase in the course of a marriage subject to the legal requirements of the country concerned. Couples may terminate their relationship soon after marriage begins, after the children have arrived or when they have grown up and many years of marriage have elapsed» (p. 17). In this respect, especially with regard to the average length of marriage before divorce, the United Nations Statistics highlight that 40.7% of all European marriages that ended in divorce have lasted less than 10 years<sup>7</sup>. Undoubtedly, this rate varies greatly among European countries even though some evidences exist: by way of example, Cyprus, Turkey and Lithuania have the highest percentage of “flash divorces” in Europe, that are all the marriages lasting under one year (respectively, 3.8%, 1.1% and 0.9%); on the contrary, most of the European couples ask for divorce after a much longer period of being married (20 years or more): the Countries with this rate is higher are Italy (42.0%) and Slovenia (37.1%). Moreover, analyzing the divorce rate by number of children, again United Nations Statistics stress that mainly underage offspring is directly affected in the majority of divorces in Europe (56.3%): in line with what was stated by Jack Dominian, this high value proves that there is no correlation between marital crisis and offspring since this latter is no longer an effective obstacle to the separation of spouses and it is no longer an emotional constraint for both parents as in previous years (Binda, 1985; Heaton, 1990).

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<sup>4</sup> The crude marriage rate is the ratio of the number of marriages during the year to the average population in that year (European Commission, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The crude divorce rate is the ratio of the number of divorces during the year to the average population in that year (European Commission, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Due to the lack of the data concerning 2015, the difference has been calculated between the years 1965 and 2005.

<sup>7</sup> In detail: 0.5% (less than one year), 16.5% (from 1 to 4 years), 23.7% (from 5 to 9 years).

Tab. 1 - Crude marriage rate in EU Countries (1965-2015)

<i>EU Member States</i>	<b>1965</b>	<b>1975</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2015</b>
European Union - 28 Countries	7.8	7.7	6.2	-	-	4.3
Austria	7.8	6.1	5.9	5.4	4.8	5.1
Belgium	7.0	7.3	5.8	5.1	4.1	4.0
Bulgaria	8.0	8.6	7.4	4.4	4.4	3.9
Croatia	9.0	8.0	6.6	5.3	5.1	4.7
Cyprus	7.6	11.2	10.5	10.2	8.0	7.2
Czechia	8.4	9.7	7.8	5.3	5.1	4.6
Denmark	8.8	6.3	5.7	6.6	6.7	5.1
Estonia	8.2	8.7	8.4	4.9	4.5	5.2
Finland	7.9	6.7	5.3	4.6	5.6	4.5
France	7.1	7.4	4.9	4.4	4.5	-
Germany	8.2	6.7	6.4	5.3	4.7	4.9
Greece	9.4	8.5	6.4	6.1	5.5	5.0
Hungary	8.8	9.8	6.9	5.2	4.4	4.7
Ireland	5.9	6.7	5.3	4.3	5.1	4.7
Italy	7.7	6.7	5.3	5.1	4.3	3.2
Latvia	8.8	10.0	9.3	4.5	5.6	6.9
Lithuania	8.4	9.0	9.7	6.1	6.0	7.6
Luxembourg	6.6	6.8	5.4	5.1	4.4	3.6
Malta	6.2	9.2	7.6	6.1	5.9	6.7
Netherlands	8.8	7.3	5.7	5.3	4.4	3.8
Poland	6.4	9.7	7.2	5.4	5.4	5.0
Portugal	8.4	11.3	6.8	6.6	4.6	3.1
Romania	8.6	8.8	7.1	6.8	6.7	6.3
Slovakia	7.0	9.2	7.5	5.1	4.9	5.3
Slovenia	9.2	8.6	5.4	4.1	2.9	3.1
Spain	7.1	7.6	5.2	5.1	4.7	3.6
Sweden	7.8	5.4	4.6	-	4.9	5.3
United Kingdom	7.8	7.7	7.0	5.6	-	4.4

Source: Eurostat - European Commission

Going on to examine the number of divorces in Europe, we can note that this value is almost tripled throughout the last 50 years (from 330.869 in 1965 to 946.457 in 2015). The Countries where this increase has been more substantial are France (+117.143<sup>8</sup>), Spain (+78.270<sup>9</sup>), Germany (+78.030), United Kingdom (+74.604) and Italy (+71.710<sup>10</sup>).

Furthermore, looking at the crude divorce rate (Tab. 2), we can observe that the European Countries where the increase has been more particularly strong are Lithuania (from 0.9 to 3.2), Portugal (from 0.1 to 2.3) and Luxembourg (from 0.4 to 2.4) while, for all the other Countries, the increase has been less than 2 percentage points.

<sup>8</sup> Due to the lack of the data concerning 2015, the difference has been calculated between the years 1965 and 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Due to the lack of the data concerning 1965 and 1975, the difference has been calculated between the years 1985 and 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Due to the lack of the data concerning 1965, the difference has been calculated between the years 1975 and 2015.

Tab. 2 - Crude divorce rate in EU Countries (1965-2015)

<i>EU Member States</i>	<b>1965</b>	<b>1975</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2015</b>
European Union - 28 Countries	0.8	1.4	1.7	1.8	2.1	1.9
Austria	1.2	1.4	2.0	2.3	2.4	1.9
Belgium	0.6	1.1	1.9	3.5	2.9	2.2
Bulgaria	1.1	1.3	1.6	1.3	1.9	1.5
Croatia	1.3	1.3	1.1	0.9	1.1	1.4
Cyprus	0.2	0.2	0.5	1.2	2.0	2.1
Czechia	1.7	2.6	2.9	3.0	3.1	2.5
Denmark	1.4	2.6	2.8	2.5	2.8	2.9
Estonia	2.3	3.4	4.0	5.2	3.0	2.6
Finland	1.0	2.0	1.8	2.7	2.6	2.5
France	0.7	1.2	1.9	2.1	2.5	-
Germany	1.1	1.9	2.3	2.1	2.4	2.0
Greece	0.4	0.4	0.8	1.0	1.2	1.4
Hungary	2.0	2.5	2.8	2.4	2.5	2.1
Ireland	-	-	-	-	0.8	0.7
Italy	-	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.8	1.4
Latvia	2.8	4.8	4.5	3.1	2.8	2.6
Lithuania	0.9	2.7	3.2	2.8	3.3	3.2
Luxembourg	0.4	0.6	1.8	1.8	2.2	2.4
Malta	-	-	-	-	-	0.8
Netherlands	0.5	1.5	2.3	2.2	2.0	2.0
Poland	0.7	1.2	1.3	1.0	1.8	1.8
Portugal	0.1	0.2	0.9	1.2	2.2	2.3
Romania	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.6
Slovakia	0.6	1.3	1.5	1.7	2.2	1.8
Slovenia	1.1	1.2	1.3	0.8	1.3	1.2
Spain	-	-	0.5	0.8	1.7	2.1
Sweden	1.2	3.1	2.4	2.6	2.2	2.5
United Kingdom	0.7	2.1	2.8	2.9	2.6	1.7

Source: Eurostat - European Commission

Last but not least, another aspect we can focus on, is the number of divorces per 100 marriages, that is the ratio between the number of divorces (independently of the duration) and the number of marriages in a given year. In this regard, European statistics show that in 2015, this value is higher in Portugal (72.2), Luxembourg (65.6) and Spain (57.9). Not surprisingly that, in terms of timeline, it is precisely in these three Countries that the percentage difference reaches high levels (respectively, +71.3 in Portugal from 1965 to 2015, +58.8 in Luxembourg from 1965 to 2015 and +48.7 in Spain from 1985 to 2015).

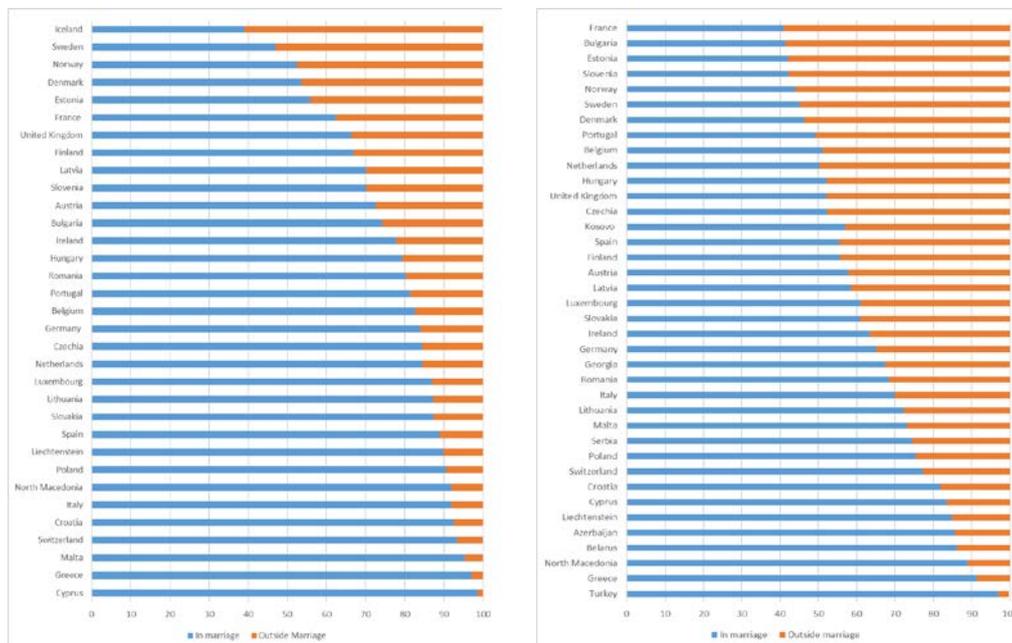
### 3. Analysis of childbearing outside and inside marriage

The graphs below examine the childbearing through marital and extra-marital bond, from the available statistical European data<sup>11</sup>, in 1995 and 2015. They show that births outside marriage have been increased in the last twenty years highlighting a massive reverse gear in favor of births outside the marriage, respectively:

<sup>11</sup> Countries were selected considering the availability of statistical data throughout the decades. They were ranked considering the relevance of the gap between births inside the marriage and births outside the marriage.

Netherlands (+35%), Spain (+33%), Portugal (+32%), Bulgaria (+32%), Belgium (+31%), Germany (+28%), Slovakia (+27%), France (+22%), Italy (+22%), Poland (+16%), United Kingdom (+14%), Ireland (+14%) and, finally, Estonia (+11%).

Fig.1 - Births outside and inside marriage across EU Member States - % (1995 and 2015)



Source: Our elaboration on Eurostat - European Commission

These data reflect structural changes in society, mostly due to the legalization of the divorce law (around the '70 across Europe), but it is not just limited to that. Indeed, as stated by Bauman (2001), in recent years several social transformation, i.e. the female increased tertiary educational attainment and/or the increased female employment rate (these aspects will be analyzed in more details in the next paragraph), have occurred.

Alongside, accordingly with the “less family” scenario, it would expect that highly educated women are generally more inclined to embrace individualistic values of self-realization (Becker, 1960; Lesthaeghe, 1995); nevertheless, recent studies shown a reversal of trends especially in fertility rates (Esping-Andersen, 2016).

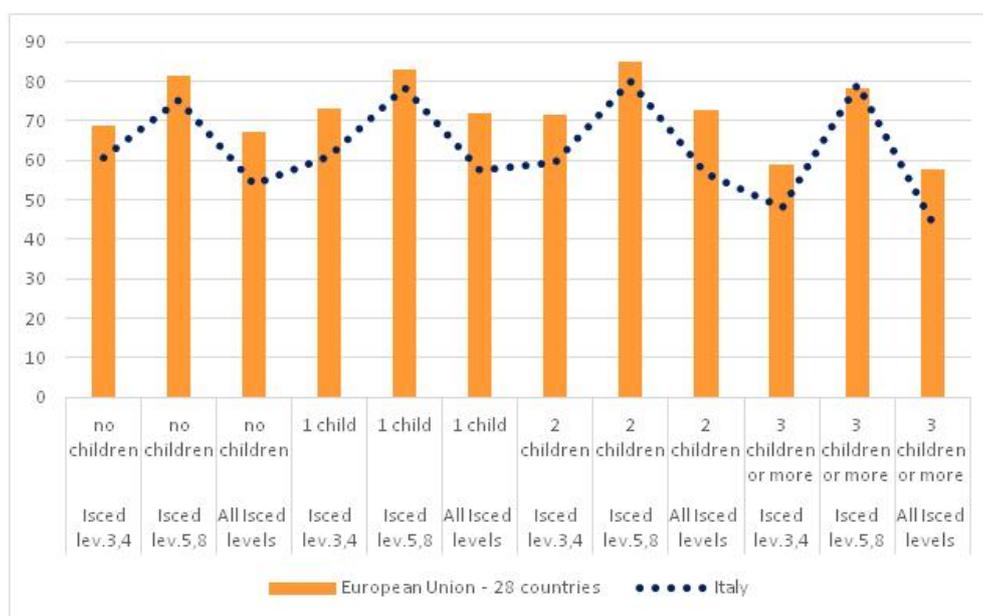
In this respect, observing European statistics, we can note that there is a correlation between the women’ educational level, the number of children and the employment rate. Based on the assumption that, as data shown, women with high level of education (Isced level 5 to 8<sup>12</sup>) have an employment rate higher than women with lower education (Isced, levels 3 and 4<sup>13</sup>), the increasing number of children (from one to three, for instance) is not linked to the employment rate but to the women’ educational level. So, having one child or two children do not negatively affect the women’ employment rate<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> For further details see Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> For further details see Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Further analysis are also suggested in order to consider the situation of employment rate within married men, male childbearing responsibilities and educational attainment.

Fig. 2 - Employment rate of females by educational attainment level and number of children - % (2018)



Source: Our elaboration on Eurostat - European Commission

## Discussion and Conclusion

The focus of this work is on the instability of the linked lives and to rethinking commitment. Statistical data shown that, in the greater part of European Countries analyzed, marriage rate has decreased while, on the other hand, the divorce rate increased. In this scenario, a relevant role has been played, undoubtedly, by the amendments and by the liberalization of the divorce law, occurred during the considered period for this analysis (see the approval of new French civil code in 2005; the new family code in Bulgaria in 2009; the liberalization of the process in Portugal in 2008, etc.). Besides that, law modification reflects changes in society and, in this case, it should be considered as a structural change within a society mostly characterized to be individualistic and liquid (Bauman, 2001). In addition, other factors like the rise of unmarried childbearing, the changing division of labor at home and the growth of unmarried cohabitation, as well as the arise of same-sex marriage, could be analyzed as causes enhancing the de-institutionalization of the marriage (Giddens, 2006; Cherlin, 2009).

In this context, where people are less embedded in the predominant social bonds (Durkheim, 1897), we can assume that the more freedom of choices couples have, the more they can autonomously choose their own sentimental direction, increasing the marital breakdown, which is not longer be considered the ultimate penalty to who violated the marriage' rules, like for example adultery (Dogliotti and Figone, 2011), but it becomes a way to get away from an unhappy or miserable situation (Giddens, 2006).

From this point of view, we can assume that conjugal instability is the consequent of the fostering and consolidating pure relationship and confluent love concepts, based on the reciprocity and equality between lovers (Mooney and Evans, 2007).

In this regard, this standpoint also enhance the gender perspective as favoring women as well men since each component has the freedom to get married/divorced

or to have babies and so on, weakening the feeling of deference that women had to have toward men in past decades (Saltzman Chafets, 1997; Plummer, 2002). Our thesis is based on the centrality of the ongoing changes of gender roles and on emerging of endogenous factors reinforcing gender equality and egalitarian (Esping-Andersen, 2015). This perspective will allow couples to freely choose every family dimensions aspects, as sustained by Hakin’s data (2000) showing that a large majority of women express a clear preference for combining career and economic autonomy with raising children. Moreover, as sustained by several studies (D’Ambrosio, 2018b), having, for the women, an higher educational attainment could affect the divorce rate which means that all those who have a tertiary educational level tend to getting divorced more especially if they are in relationship with a men with a lower educational degree.

In conclusion, we can assume that, in line with the discussed literature and according to Giddens’ theory, findings from the analysis highlighted how the traditional romantic relationship centered scenario has changed. The “uncertainty principle” has affected also the intimate sphere of individuals where globalization and uncontrollable risk have gradually become a part of our daily life and both contradictory trends and unsettling conditions of the modern world and/or life have been transforming intimacy of each of us through the development of the pure relationship (Misztal, 2000).

However, marriage stills own powerful symbolic significance for many people as a marker of achievements and prestige (Cherlin, 2009) since it is based on supporting each other, to rely on family’s member and to ameliorate risks of economic uncertainty (Seltzer, 2019). On the other hand, further analysis are suggested in order to investigate how economic bonds, financial instability and some other reasons, could hindering the possibility of getting divorce since there is a substantial part of couples that still trust on the “sanctity of marriage” (Giddens, 2006).

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