

Are spouses more satisfied than cohabitators? An exploration over the last twenty years in Italy

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Extended abstract

1 Introduction and Aim

During the second half of the 20th century, family forms have become more diverse in nearly all European countries. However, much of the research has focused on the traditional family forms and has not considered alternative pathways, and their consequences on well-being of individuals (Vignoli, Pirani and Salvini 2013). The link between well-being and family dynamics raises important questions in post-industrial societies, because even if the trend toward “new family forms” comes to a halt, a return to a traditional family model is unlikely.

A plethora of research about the link between partnership status and well-being has been conducted for the United States, while empirical findings for Europe are rather scarce. Available previous studies have found that cohabiters are less committed to and satisfied with their partner than individuals who are married (e.g., Brown and Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Stanley, et al. 2004). Importantly, the relationship between family well-being and type of couple is likely to be different in different contexts. Recent findings advocate the existence of a marked spatial variation in the degree to which relationship assessments differ across union types, mainly because of country differences in institutionalization and the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation (Soons and Kalmijn 2009; Wiik et al. 2012).

The limit of these studies is that they fail to treat family well-being and type of couple simultaneously, which leads to selection bias to the estimated effects. Individuals who have innate predispositions to report a higher level of life satisfaction may in fact systematically vary in their propensity to form unions and in their choice of a certain type of union. For instance, higher educated, liberal and open-minded persons may have higher chances of opting for a non-marital cohabitation, and simultaneously display a higher propensity to express contentment with their life.

Our objective is to contribute to the debate on the link between partnership status and well-being in Europe. Adopting a couple perspective, we evaluate whether marriage and cohabitation lead to different family satisfaction evaluations. We scrutinize the relationship for Italy, where cohabitations are far less common and less socially accepted than elsewhere. Based on the Italian representative large-scale survey “Aspects of daily-life” carried out continuously since 1993, we consider altogether 20 progressive datasets in order to evaluate changes in this link over time. We utilize a methodological approach that allows us to get unbiased estimates of the effects under interest.

2 Marriage, Cohabitation, and Well-Being

Previous research on marital status and emotional or psychological well-being shows that married persons are significantly happier and more satisfied with life than those who are divorced, separated, widowed, or single (Powdthavee 2009). Kotowska et al. (2010) clearly illustrate that living in a couple lead at an almost double satisfaction with respect to living alone, and also Kohler and colleagues (2005) found that men and women who are currently in a partnership are happier than those who are not. The benefits of marriage over living solo may vary across countries and time, and is sometimes shown to be stronger for men than for women (Mastekaasa 1992; Marks and Lambert 1998). This link is largely confirmed by both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Oswald and Wilson, 2005).

What remains unexplored is whether the benefits of being married are still present when compared to those living in non-marital cohabitation. In many European societies alternative forms of partnership, including cohabitation, are becoming increasingly common. The marriage is no longer the unique social institution for procreation, child-rearing and the organization of labor within households. The question is thus whether these new forms of partnerships bring a lower quality of the relationship or a lower level of life and/or family satisfaction for couple's members.

There are well-established theoretical concepts explaining why marriage should improve life satisfaction more than cohabitation does. Marriage is an institution defined by a legal contract which defines mutual rights, responsibilities and obligations (Musick and Bumpass 2006; Nock 1995), and this institutionalization matters from different points of view. From a societal perspective, the institution of marriage determines a legitimization of the union vis-à-vis the community, and creates normative standards with respect to appropriate behaviors. This legitimization enhances social support of family, friends and the local community (Cherlin 2004), whereas deviations from these norms – which would be the case of unmarried unions – may not be recognized and even be sanctioned from the society. For example, in countries where such alternative living arrangements are not common and accepted, cohabiting can evoke feelings of shame and guilt among people who live together without marriage (Jones and Kugler 1993). Approval is a fundamental source of well-being (Lindenberg 2001)

In addition, both marriage and cohabitation provide conditions for pooling material resources and deriving benefits from economies of scale (Brien and Sheran 2003, Weiss 1997). However, in most European countries, mutual rights and obligations of cohabitating partners are not as well defined by law as they are in the case of marriage, and the law restricts privileges related to sharing of financial resources to married couples only. Moreover, property law and divorce law protect married partners and their rights, which is not necessarily the case for cohabiters. The institutionalization and legitimization of a given type of partnership thus reduce formal and administrative barriers in everyday life and decrease insecurity about the possibility of having to enforce one's own rights in case of conflict with the partner. Through these mechanisms, forms of living arrangements which are alternative to marriage could increase the gap in well-being of cohabiters.

At couple level, marriage can be argued to reduce uncertainty regarding the future duration of the relationship more than cohabitation does, which in turn reinforces commitment and mutual investment in the relationships (Hansen et al. 2007). By contrast, cohabitation gives a weaker guarantee of personal commitment, since an informal promise is easier to break than a public and formal contract (Cherlin 2004; Nock 1995). In this case, due to gender differences in the motivation to engage in long-term partnerships, formalization of unions might increase well-being mainly among females.

Empirical findings comparing marriage and cohabitation have focused on different measures of well-being: emotional and psychological indicators, life satisfaction, quality of relationship, or relational ties. Studies have found a worst psychological well-being of cohabiters with respect to married people. For example, evidences have been proved in terms of global happiness and depression (Kurdek 1991; Kim and McHenry 2002). However, other authors reported no difference (e.g. Horwitz and White 1998). Differences between cohabitation and marriage arise for social relations and social ties, with married people found to be closer to their parents (Nock 1995) and more likely to have frequent visits and exchange emotional and material support with them (Baranowska and Pirani 2013; Eggebeen 2005). Others (e.g., Brown and Booth 1996; Nock 1995; Stanley et al. 2004) have found that cohabiters are less committed to and satisfied with their partnerships than individuals who are married. The work of Soons and Kalmijn (2009) showed that cohabiters reported lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness compared with married couples. For USA, Musick and Bumpass (2006) showed that in general moving from being single into any type of union increases happiness to the same extent. Stutzer and Frey (2006) found that the entry into cohabitation has a positive impact on life satisfaction, even if the magnitude of the effect was not as large as for marriage.

From a spatial perspective, the literature highlights that although these effects have been found even in societies where cohabitation is widespread and socially accepted (Hansen et al. 2007), the “cohabitation gap” is smaller in countries where cohabitation is common and institutionalized than in countries where cohabitation still represent a marginal phenomenon (Soon and Kalmijn 2009). In other words, in countries where cohabitation is not largely accepted and widespread, cohabitation and marriage remain two distinct phenomena, but as cohabitation become more common, they tend to become largely identical, e.g. in terms of family formation and fertility behavior (Wiik et al. 2012).

In sum, consistent findings point to a disadvantage of cohabiters’ satisfaction over their union status compared to the married. However, there is spatial variation in the degree to which relationship assessments differ across union type, mainly because of country differences in institutionalization and the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation. In this paper we argue that variation can be found not only over space, but also over time. We study Italy, a setting where the diffusion of cohabitation is still less widespread than elsewhere.

The Italian Context

In Italy the role of marriage is still prominent and this choice is more popular than cohabitation (Rosina and Fraboni 2004). Overall the universe of cohabiting people is very heterogeneous, a sort of “archipelagos” (Rosina, 2007): some people perceive cohabitation as a specific step in their life-course prior to marriage, either to evaluate if the relationship is well-functioning or to wait a more stable (housing and economic) situation; some cohabit by choice and remains un-married for the rest of their lives; other cohabit because it is not possible to legally formalize their union, as not yet legally divorced or in the case of same-sex couples.

Up to the second half of the 1970s, family patterns in Italy were characterized by very rigid life courses; then traces of change began to emerge. Marriage rates declined slightly, while cohabitation and marital dissolution were spreading throughout the population. These changes intensified in the 1990s and spiked in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the pace of change rose dramatically (Vignoli, Gabrielli, and Gualtieri 2011). Marriage is now increasingly postponed (in the period 2000-2008, the mean age at first marriage rose from 28 to 30 years for women and from 31 to 33 years for men). This phenomenon explains most of the reduction in crude marriage rates from 6 per thousand in 1990, to 5 per thousand

in 2000, up to 4 per thousand in 2008. Contemporary Italy is faced with a rising breaking-down in marriage towards a growing flexibility of union patterns. In less than 20 years, between 1993 and 2011, cohabitations increased from 227 thousands to 972 thousands, and cohabitations among unmarried partners increased from 67 thousands to 578 thousands (Istat 2011). In addition, the diffusion of cohabitations is not anymore confined to certain social groups nor to certain geographical areas (Gabrielli and Hoem 2010; Gabrielli and Vignoli 2013).

From the legal perspective, no real establishment of legal regulations devoted to unmarried couples exists, with the exception of a few minor regional laws. Legal judgments are essentially made case by case on the basis of the partners' situation (Zanatta 2008). Individuals living in cohabitation have less protection in case of separation or partner's death, because they do not have access to alimony or to partner's old age pension benefit. In addition, these legal judgments are complex, especially when unmarried partners split up after neglecting to specify who paid which amounts of money for what purpose. In 2007, a moderate government bill on the legal recognition of rights and obligations of cohabiting (including same-sex) couples was abandoned, due to controversies inside the "center-left" parliamentary majority (De Rose and Marquette 2011).

The increasing relevance of cohabitation thus raises important questions about the link between well-being, family relations and union status, in Italy as in other post-industrial societies. To the best of our knowledge, very few empirical studies have investigated these issues for this country. Differences between cohabitation and marriage arise for intergenerational relations, with cohabiting people found to be less likely to have frequent contacts with their parents (Baranowska and Pirani 2013; Nazio and Saraceno 2012); the union type does not seem to be relevant as for the exchange of material and financial support with them, however (Baranowska and Pirani 2013). Based on a comparative study encompassing 30 European countries, Soon and Kalmijn (2009) found that married Italian people are much happier than their cohabitant counterpart, explaining most of this gap with the low level of institutionalization of cohabitation in this country.

3 Methodological Framework and Data

Our objective is to evaluate whether living in cohabitation leads to a significantly different satisfaction with one's own family relationships with respect to living in marriage. In addition, since one partner's well-being is a function of the other partner's well-being (Powdthavee 2009), we simultaneously consider both partners, in order to account for spillover effects. To the best of our knowledge, this is a novelty in the research on cohabitation. Family satisfaction of both partners are the dependent variables, while the main explanatory covariate is the union type that individual is currently experimenting, i.e. cohabitation vs. marriage. The dependent variable on family satisfaction allows a 1-4 scale-response to the question "*Considering the last 12 months, how satisfied would you say you are with your family relations?*".

Although we control for several variables known to be associated with the union type as well as with our outcomes, we cannot rule out the possibility that individuals who cohabit systematically differ from individuals who are married. Selection on observed and unobserved characteristics may account for a different evaluation of family satisfaction of cohabiters with respect to married people. In order to properly address all these issues, we rely on Structural Equation Models (SEM) (Goldberger 1972; Hoyle 1995; Kline 2010). SEM framework encompasses a large set of models (e.g. simultaneous equations, confirmative factor analysis, latent growth models, mimic models, etc.), all of them characterized for being multi-equation models, that is a series of equations to be estimated simultaneously. In this kind of models,

the response variable in one regression equation may appear as a predictor in another equation: variables may influence one-another reciprocally, either directly or through other variables as intermediaries. One can distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* effects, the former presumed causal relationship between two variables, and the latter presumed causal relationship via other intervening or mediating variables. The sum of direct and indirect effects represents the *total* effect, which account for the simultaneity existing in the system.

In our specification the dependent variables are simultaneously the family satisfactions of both partners, and we allow for dependencies between these endogenous variables. This specification is known as non-recursive model. In order to control for the selection effect into a certain union type, we introduce a third equation, where the dependent variable is the type of union, cohabitation vs. marriage. At the same time, the type of union is the main explanatory variable for the family satisfaction of both partners. This variable considers the union type that individual is currently experimenting, regardless previous forms of union, and it does not necessarily refer to the first union of individuals.

The model includes quite a few individual-level independent variables, both for the equations regarding family satisfaction and for the equation of union type. Referring to previous literature, we consider demographic variables (age, household size, presence of children); socio-economic variables (education, occupational status, assessment of economic resources); other control variables are the area of residence and the assessment of health status. Figure 1 shows the path diagram where the theoretical relations among the variables of interest are represented.

The data used come from surveys “Aspects of daily-life” carried out continually since 1993 by the Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat). Altogether we analyze 20 progressive datasets (from 1993 to 2012). We estimate the same model every year in order to acknowledge the variation of the relationship between family satisfaction and partnership status over time.

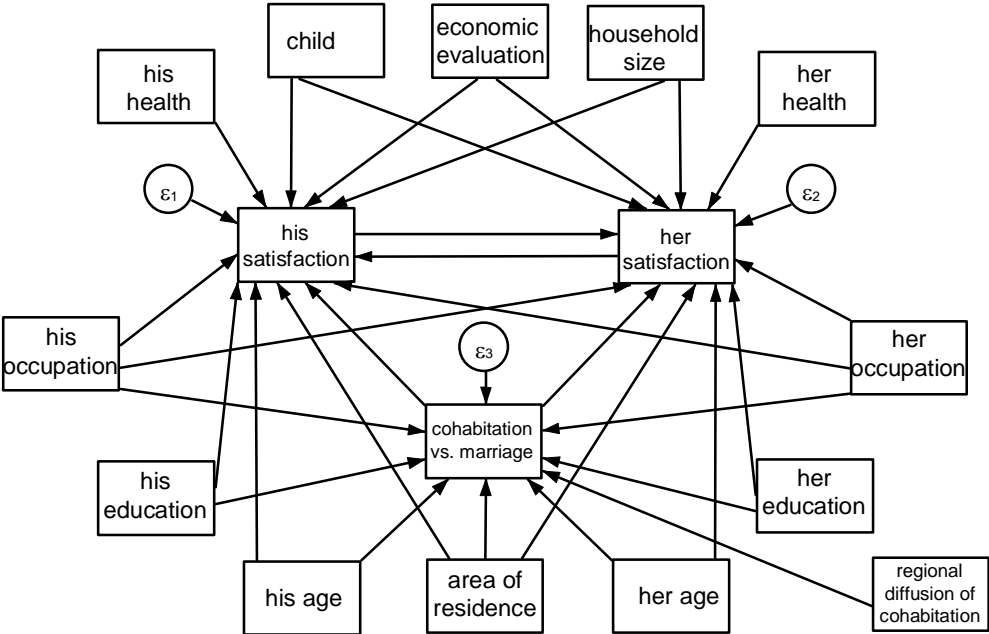


Figure 1: Path diagram of the theoretical relations between partnership status (cohabitation vs. marriage) and family satisfaction of both partners.

4 Preliminary Finding

Our preliminary findings show that, in the past, Italian cohabiters were less satisfied with their family life than married couples. As time passes the differences in family satisfaction between cohabitation and marriage weakens. Then, in contemporary years (from 2010 forward) cohabiting partners are not less satisfied than spouses. Results also show that a spillover effect between partners exists also in case of cohabitation and it does not differ from marriage.

We interpret the findings in light of the process of diffusion of cohabitation that characterized the Italian society in the last 20 years. As cohabitation spreads over the Italian society, marriage and cohabitation are becoming increasingly equivalent in individuals' perceptions so that today Italian cohabiting people are not less satisfied with their family relationships than married couples. The "cohabitation gap", existing in the first phases of the process of transition toward new family patterns, slowly reduces when cohabitation starts to be seen as a common and acceptable behavior. Even in cases of not uniform and large diffusion of cohabitations in the country or among social groups, as for Italy, the slow but continuing propagation of cohabitations leads to an increase in the approval and legitimization of cohabitant couples, so to an increase in their well-being.

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