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Are spouses more satisfied than cohabitators? A survey over the last twenty years in Italy

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ABSTRACT

On the social landscape of the high-middle-income countries, unmarried cohabitation has become an increasingly popular living arrangement over the last decades. Several observers have noted a “cohabitation gap” in the satisfaction assessment of partners, with cohabitators being less satisfied than marrieds, and they advanced the hypothesis that this difference depends on how far cohabitation has diffused within a society. For the first time we test this hypothesis across time within one country – Italy – analyzing 18 progressive harmonized large-scale datasets collected continuatively since 1994 by the Italian Institute of Statistics. We employ a multilevel model to study 252,732 partnered young adults, nested in 19 regions and 18 years. Our findings support the hypothesis that as time passes and cohabitation becomes a more popular phenomenon, the difference in family satisfaction assessment between Italian cohabitators and spouses progressively weakens and, as observed in recent years, finally vanishes.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Marriage, Family satisfaction, Diffusion process.

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Introduction

On the social landscape of the United States and Europe, family life courses have become more and more diversified over the last decades and unmarried cohabitation has become an increasingly popular living arrangement (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Kiernan, 2002; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010, 2012; Vignoli, Pirani, & Salvini, 2014). The emergence of unmarried cohabitation has provided stimuli for new research, such as whether there are differences between cohabitation and marriage related to childbearing and childrearing (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010, 2012), or whether cohabitators structure their gender arrangements differently from spouses (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). A central path of inquiry focuses on the link between partnership status and the subjective well-being of individuals. The question is whether this new form of partnership brings about a “cohabitation gap” (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009) that is, a gap in subjective well-being between cohabitators and marrieds.

Some studies have reported lower psychological well-being in cohabitators with respect to married people in terms of global happiness and depression (Kim & McHenry, 2002; Kurdek, 1991). Others have found that cohabitators are less committed to and satisfied with their partnerships than spouses (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). There is a spatial variation in the degree to which satisfaction assessments differ across union types, however. Literature highlights how the “cohabitation gap” is less marked in countries where cohabitation is common and institutionalized than in countries where this type of union is still only partially diffused and represents a marginal phenomenon (Soon & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik, Keizer, & Lappégard, 2012).

Previous studies explored the diffusion hypothesis across space by comparing different countries at one point in time. For the first time we test this hypothesis across time within one country. We anticipate that differences in satisfaction assessment between spouses and cohabitators depend on the level of institutionalization and diffusion of cohabitation within that society. We focus on the Italian case, where unmarried cohabitations are far less common and less socially accepted than elsewhere in Europe, and does not yet represent an integral part of family life. Based on the representative Italian large-scale “Aspects of daily-life” surveys carried out almost continuatively since 1994, we consider a total of 18 progressive and harmonized data sets. By adopting a multilevel approach, we study whether marriage and cohabitation lead to different satisfaction evaluations and

assess whether this link has changed over time. In particular, we ask whether there are significant differences between spouses and cohabitators in the satisfaction assessment. We also wonder whether the difference in satisfaction assessment is frozen across years, or instead vary over time as cohabitation becomes a more popular phenomenon.

Marriage, cohabitation, and subjective well-being

Mechanisms

In most European countries, cohabitation and marriage are – to use a term *á la* Nock (1995) – “qualitatively” different. Marriage is a recognized social institution, defined by a legal contract which delineates mutual rights, responsibilities and obligations (Musick & Bumpass, 2006; Nock, 1995). This is not necessarily the case of cohabitation (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez Gassen, 2012). The institutionalization of marriage, reducing formal and administrative barriers in everyday life and decreasing insecurity about the possibility of having to enforce one’s own rights in case of conflict with the partner, represents an important source of personal well-being and may enhance relationship satisfaction (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Nock, 1995).

From a societal perspective, the institutionalization of marriage contributes to determine a legitimization of the couple *vis-à-vis* the community, and to create 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 could be the case of unmarried cohabitations – may not be recognized and even be sanctioned by society. Social approval has been demonstrated to be a necessary source of well-being (Lindenberg, 2001). Married people have been found to receive higher social support (Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002), and are more likely to have frequent visits with their parents and exchange emotional and material support with them (Baranowska & Pirani, 2013; Eggebeen, 2005; Nazio & Saraceno, 2013).

Religion and religiosity also play a key role in the mechanisms linking the type of union with personal well-being. Marriage and sexual relations are interwoven in the moral teachings and precepts of most religions (Lehrer, 2000; McQuillan, 2004; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). For instance, according to the Catholic doctrine, sexual intercourse is only approved of in the context of marriage, because only in marriage can sexuality express the two fundamental dimensions of conjugal life: the harmony and fertility of the

couple (Thornton et al., 1992). Moreover, the role of religion in directing partnership choices can be reinforced by the neighborhood context. Those living in religious surroundings are likely to be embedded in very specific types of social networks which maintain behaviors that are consistent with the prescription of the dominant religion (Smith, 2003). For example, the social disapproval for non-marital cohabitation imposed in certain surroundings can evoke feelings of shame and guilt among people who live together without being married, cause heavier psychological costs, and restrict individual decisions regarding family formation even of non-religious people (Baranowska, Mynarska, & Vignoli, 2014).

Also at the couple level, marriage and cohabitation are not identical. The public nature of marriage may reduce uncertainty regarding the future duration of the relationship more than cohabitation does, reinforcing social support between spouses, commitment and mutual investment in the relationship (Hansen, Moum, & Shapiro, 2007), and ultimately, self-definition and well-being (Musick & Bumpass, 2012).

Besides the experience of cohabitation *per se*, the higher levels of well-being displayed by spouses compared to cohabitators may derive from a selection process. Cohabitors are found to be different from marrieds in terms of education and income (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Gabrielli & Hoem, 2010; Thornton et al., 1992). Research has shown that people who choose cohabitation also differ in terms of their expectations and orientations: cohabitators are more likely to be less religious and secularized (Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003; Thornton et al., 1992), and characterized by higher levels of individualism and egalitarianism (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990; Thornton et al., 1992), lower family orientation, and nontraditional values and attitudes toward family roles and marriage itself (Clarkberg et al., 1995). These selection factors – often unobserved – are generally associated with higher levels of union dissolution (Impicciatore & Billari, 2012; Kulu & Boyle, 2010; Steele, Kallis, & Joshi, 2006; Teachman, 2011) and lower levels of relationship commitments (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995). Consequently, the “cohabitation gap” in relationship and family satisfaction may also derive from a spurious link.

The diffusion of cohabitation within a society

Recent studies focusing on differences between marrieds and cohabitators have found variations from country to country in the relationship between union type and individual well-being. For instance, cohabitators in Scandinavian countries, France and the Netherlands do not exhibit lower relationship quality than spouses (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik et al., 2012). Conversely, in countries where cohabitations are far less common – for example, Italy, Spain, Portugal, but also Russia and Romania – there are marked differences, with spouses more satisfied than cohabitators (*ibid*).

Explanations for these differences focus on the stage of diffusion of cohabitation across countries, and thus on its level of institutionalization, that is its acceptance and endorsement within the society. Even if the public recognition of rights may arrive with a certain delay, the secularization of behaviors and the spreading of cohabitation within a society may facilitate the process of its institutionalization. The latter may have positive effects on the well-being of cohabitators. When the diffusion process is ongoing and the popularity of cohabitation increases, the two union types become more and more similar, with less difference in relationship quality between cohabitators and spouses. Once cohabitation has spread within a society and is no longer perceived as innovative or transgressive behavior, cohabitators receive more approval from their social environment with respect to the way they live their intimate relationship, and benefit in terms of relationship satisfaction and private well-being (Liefborer & Dourleijn, 2006). Cohabitation and marriage become increasingly similar in terms of intergenerational contacts (Nazio & Saraceno, 2013; Nock, 1995) social relations, and social ties (Skinner et al., 2002). Moreover, when the same status as a couple is recognized to cohabitators as that to spouses, their investment in relationship quality will increase, making relationship commitment similar to that of marriage (Nock, 1995).

Finally, according to the hypothesis of the diffusion of innovations (Di Giulio & Rosina, 2007; Liefborer & Dourleijn, 2006), after a new and non-conventional behavior has diffused to a greater majority of a society, selectivity factors will no longer assume a crucial role in differentiating cohabitators from spouses. At the end of the process, cohabitators may present themselves socially as a couple (Smock, 2000)

The diffusion of cohabitation in Italy

Up to the latter half of the 1970s, family patterns were characterized by very rigid life courses in Italy, with marriage at the center. Then, several signs of change began to emerge. Marriage rates declined slightly, while cohabitation and marital dissolution were spreading throughout the population.

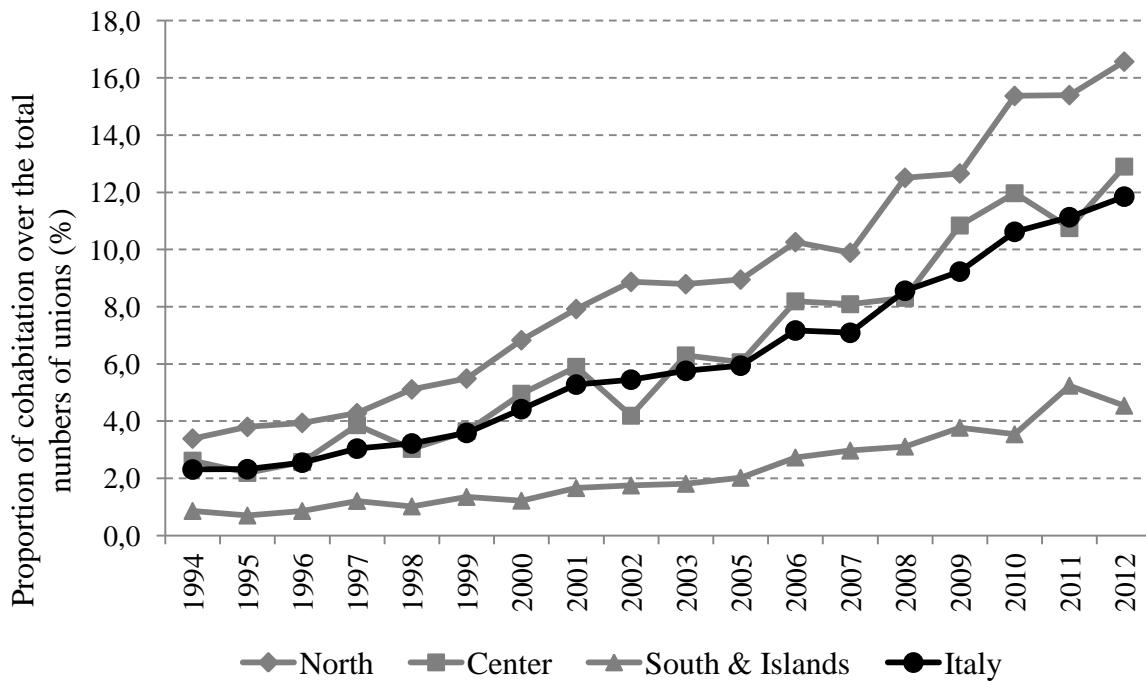
Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of non-marital cohabitations over the total number of unions between 1994 and 2012 in Italy. Year after year, it is worth noting the slow yet continuous process of diffusion of non-marital cohabitations within the country. These changes intensified in the 1990s and peaked in the first decade of the 21st century, when the pace of change rose dramatically. Whereas at the beginning of the '90s this form of living arrangement was only practiced by about 2% of Italian couples, ten years later this percentage had doubled, and in the second decade of the 21st century, more than 10 out of 100 couples lived in non-marital cohabitations. In less than 20 years, between the early '90s and the first decade of 2000s, the number of cohabiting unions increased from 227,000 to 972,000 and, among them, the number of cohabiting never married partners increased from 67,000 to 578,000 (Istat, 2012). The diffusion of cohabitation has contributed to the rise of non-marital births: in 2010, non-marital births were over 134,000, nearly a quarter of total births. The increase was rapid: from 2% in 1970 to 10% in 2000, to 19% in 2008, to 20% in 2009, and up to 24% in 2010.

The diffusion of cohabitations did not proceed at the same pace across the Italian regions, however. Already in the '90s, the northern regions registered higher proportions of people in non-marital cohabitation than in central and southern areas, and this proportion rose by more than 10% in 2005. In recent years, almost 2 out of 10 couples live together without being married in the northern regions. On the contrary, these figures were practically negligible at the beginning of the period (around 1994) in southern regions, and today they have reached the level of the north in the late '90s (6%). Central regions are just in the middle, in line with the Italian average. Overall, notwithstanding some differences, the diffusion of cohabitations in recent years is no longer confined solely to certain social groups or to certain geographical areas (Gabrielli & Hoem, 2010; Gabrielli & Vignoli, 2013).

The diffusion of cohabitation is developing hand in hand with a slow but continuous process of secularization (Sansonetti, 2009). Italians are homogeneous in terms of religion, with the Roman Catholic Church being the prevalent denomination. According to

data from the 2008 International Social Survey Program, over 90% of the Italian population was raised according to the Catholic doctrine, against a European average of 49%. Nevertheless, things are also changing in this context and a progressive trend towards greater secularization is suggested by the generalized decrease in the participation in public religious practice and, in particular, in rites of passage (baptism, communion, and so forth) as well as by a decrease in religious vocations (*ibid.*).

Figure 1 – Proportion of cohabitation over the total number of unions (%), 1994-2012



Source: Authors' analysis of the "Aspects of daily-life" survey data, 1994-2012. Weighted data.

In legal terms, no real establishment of norms and regulations for unmarried couples exists in Italy, 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). Cohabiting individuals have less protection in case of separation or a partner's death, because they do not have access to alimony or the partner's old age pension benefits. 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 & Marquette, 2011).

Based on a comparative study encompassing 30 European countries, Soon and Kalmijn (2009) found that Italian cohabitators are not as satisfied as their married counterparts, explaining most of this gap with the low level of institutionalization of cohabitation in the country. Nevertheless, the Italian data used by the authors were extracted from the 2002 European Social Survey for the country. We know nothing about the link between satisfaction assessments and type of union in more recent years, when cohabitation started to become a pervasive phenomenon within the Italian society.

Analytical strategy

Data

The data used come from the surveys called “Aspects of daily-life” carried out continuatively since 1994 by the Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat). We analyzed a total of 18 progressive and harmonized data sets (except 2004, when the survey was not carried out) that offer data on heterosexual couple families. We limited the analysis to men and women living as co-resident couples, in which at least one member was aged 18-49 at the time of the survey, regardless of the presence of other people in the household. This selection produced a sample size which, depending on the year of survey, ranged from 10,000 to 20,000 individuals, cohabiting or married.

Outcome variable

Family satisfaction of men and women living as a couple at the time of the survey is our dependent variable. In all the surveys it has been collected through the same question “*Considering the last 12 months, how satisfied would you say you are with your family life?*”. It assumes a value of 0 for people satisfied with their family life, and a value of 1 for those who are not satisfied.

For Italy, this is the first time that the domain of family satisfaction is considered. The only previous research including Italy in the analysis (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009) investigated differences in well-being between spouses and cohabitators by referring to their overall level of life satisfaction. These indicators referred to the global subjective well-being of the individual, and generically considered their overall life, also including domains other than family life, such as satisfaction in the areas of employment, leisure

time, social relations, health, and so forth. In our study, we go further, using a specific indicator of family life relationships.

At the beginning of the '90s, no more than 3% of marrieds expressed dissatisfaction with their family life, whereas this percentage doubled when considering cohabitators. After a slight increase in dissatisfaction for married people in the early 2000s, the percentage stabilized at 5% in the last decade. Conversely, the evaluation expressed by cohabitators fluctuated within a dissatisfaction range of about 7-to-8% in the 1994-2005 period and after 2005, progressively decreased to 5%. The process of convergence between the evaluations expressed by marrieds and cohabitators is thus dominated in recent years by increasing levels of family satisfaction among cohabitators.

Method

Our purpose was to highlight the variation in the relationship between family satisfaction and union type over time. We built a pooled data set encompassing more than 250,000 individuals observed across the 18 different cross-sectional surveys. Within each year, individuals are nested in geographical regions which may be deeply dissimilar in background characteristics, especially in terms of cohabitation diffusion (see again Figure 1). In addition, in our analysis we considered men and women in couples as described above. This couple-level may imply similarities between partners in the same couple due, for example, to the fact that they share the same domestic and private environment.

From a statistical point of view, the presence of an explicit hierarchical structure entails a violation of the independence assumption among observations within the same order-level units (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008), and represents a nuisance in the estimation of relationships at the individual level. By adding higher level-specific random intercepts to the predictor, multilevel models explicitly introduce the hierarchical structure in the analysis, modeling the unobserved heterogeneity and producing valid standard errors. In order to account for the complex hierarchical structure of our data – temporal, geographical and couple-specific – we propose a three-level hierarchical model that considers individuals (first level units) as nested in couples (second level units), which are in turn nested in geographical regions combined with years (third level units). We have 252,732 men and women nested in 126,366 couples, nested in 342 third level units (namely, region times year).

Formally, let us consider an individual i , the first level units, with $i=1, \dots, I$, for whom a set of individual variables X_{ijh} is collected. Individuals live in couples j , with $j=1, \dots, J$. Also for these second level units we avail of a set of characteristic Z_{jh} . Each couple lives in a given region and is interviewed in a given year, so we define h , with $h=1, \dots, H$, the third level built as a combination of regions and years. Also for this level, we consider region-year-specific covariates, Q_h . By considering the logit transformation of the probability that individual i reports dissatisfaction in his/her family life, the model becomes:

$$\text{logit}\{P(Y_{ijh} = 1)\} = \gamma + \delta + \sum \beta_{ijh} X_{ijh} + \sum \beta_{jh} Z_{jh} + \sum \beta_h Q_h + u_j + v_h$$

β coefficients represent the slope parameters for the individual and contextual covariates, while γ and δ are the mean intercepts among second and third level units. The u_j and v_h , random variables normally distributed, represent the combined effect of all omitted group-specific covariates that cause homogeneity among individuals within the same higher order-level unit (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008).

Individual-level covariates

The main explanatory covariate is the union type declared at the interview date, which is coded 0 for married people and 1 for cohabitators. This variable is introduced into the multilevel model in combination with the year of survey in order to be able to appreciate whether and to what extent the association between type of union and family satisfaction changes over time.

The association between family satisfaction and union type is likely to be affected by several other factors as well. Due to the fact that many of these factors themselves can be related to the partnership status, they are possible confounders in this link. Thus, the model includes quite a few additional covariates. Gender (coded 0 for men and 1 for women) and age (grouped in classes: 1 = <29, 2 = 30-39, 3 = 40 and over) are salient factors both in the choice of cohabitation and in the relationship quality assessment (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Musick & Bumpass, 2012). The latter variable also serves to account for the fact that the spread of cohabitation is generally higher among younger people.

Married people are more likely to have children than cohabitators, and parenthood is argued to be a relevant factor in satisfaction evaluations (Vignoli et al., 2014). Moreover,

the presence of children is generally associated with higher commitment and represents a stabilizing factor in cohabiting relationships (Brown & Booth, 1996). We consider the presence in the household of at least one child in pre-school age, that is aged 5 or less (1 = yes). In addition, due to the fact that family life may be distressed by the number of people living in the household, we distinguish between households where the couple lives alone (1), households with 3 inhabitants (2), and households with 4 or more inhabitants (3). It must be noted that for the large majority, the presence of other people in the household (parents, other relatives or friends) only accounts for less than 5% of the sample selected. These two variables referring to the household composition are measured at the couple-level.

The breakdown of a past relationship has enduring negative effects on individual well-being (Kurdek, 1991; Lucas, 2005) and is likely to increase the risk of dissatisfaction in family relationships. Moreover, most divorcees are found among cohabitators. To account for this potential selectivity factor, we introduced a variable indicating whether the respondent has ever been through a separation or a divorce (1 = yes).

The potential selection related to socio-economic factors is accounted for with three variables: education, occupational status, and economic status. Following the ISCED classification of educational levels we grouped educational attainment into the three standard levels: post-secondary and tertiary education (1), secondary and upper secondary education (2), and basic education (3). Higher levels of education are generally linked to higher levels of wealth as well as well-being and satisfaction (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009) and, at the same time, in Italy highly educated people are more likely to enter into cohabitation (Gabrielli & Vignoli, 2013). The occupational status is another factor strongly linked with the availability of material resources and well-being; we distinguish between employed (1), unemployed (2), and inactive people (3). The great majority of inactive people includes housewives (93%), while the rest is represented by people who are out of the labor market for other reasons (such as students or disable persons). The material resources available to the household (a couple-level covariate) are accounted for using the subjective assessment of the economic situation (0 = good, 1 = not good).

Aggregate-level covariates

We constructed two aggregate-level covariates. We first considered the degree of institutionalization of cohabitation, measured through the degree of diffusion of

cohabitation over time, as the percentage of cohabiting couples over the total number of couples. We then included the percentage of people who declared that they did not go to church regularly, in order to check the strength of the secularization process. We constructed these variables as the difference between the regional level and the national level within each year. In addition, we also included in the model two additional variables containing the national level of cohabitation and the national level of secularization year by year. Thanks to this approach, we were able to account for the within-year and between-years degree of diffusion of cohabitation and secularization in the Italian society.

Results

Model results

The results of the multilevel logistic regression models are illustrated in Table 1. We estimated three step-wise models: Model 1 only included the union type – cohabitation vs. marriage – per year of the survey, where the reference category is represented by marriage; Model 2 we added individual and couple-level socio-demographic variables; finally, Model 3 we also included aggregate-level variables that account for the degree of institutionalization and secularization within regions and over time. The coefficients are transformed into odd ratios (ORs) through the simple manipulation $\exp(\beta)$. The OR expresses how much the event under study is likely to occur in a certain group with respect to the reference group.

We start the description of the results by first looking at the results of Model 3 (Table 1), leaving the comments related to the stepwise specification until the end of the section. Overall, despite some turbulence in the estimates attributable to the small numbers of Italian cohabitators recorded during the '90s, our findings display a clear-cut pattern. In the past, Italian unmarried cohabitators were less satisfied with their family life than spouses. As time passes, the difference in family satisfaction evaluation between cohabitation and marriage weakens. Then, in recent years (2010 onwards), cohabiting partners are no longer less satisfied than spouses.

During the first years of the analyzed period, that is the second half of the '90s, cohabitators show a higher risk of being dissatisfied with their family life, with ORs ranging from 2 to 3.3. By considering Table 1 and Figure 1 together, it is evident that this period corresponds to a stage of very low diffusion of cohabitation as a form of living

arrangement in Italy. Up to 1999, cohabitation involved less than 4% of young couples, even if some differences existed among regions (or social groups). It can be noted how, despite the limited incidence of cohabitations, the size of the estimated effects is also remarkable for the first years of investigation (1994-1999), suggesting the presence of clear-cut differences.

In the early 2000s, cohabitators continue to show lower levels of family satisfaction evaluation with respect to married couples. Then, from the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, when cohabitation began to spread throughout the Italian society passing from 4% of the total number of couples to about 7%, the gap in family satisfaction between the two types of family forms starts to progressively break down each year (ORs are generally around 2). Although slow, this change has been continuous and constant.

The end of the first decade of 2000s and turn of the new decade marks another cut-off point. In 2008 and 2009 the diffusion of cohabitation as an alternative form of union to marriage continues to rise, and in 2010, for the first time, the quota of cohabitant couples in the total of couples exceeds 10%. In parallel, the ORs of being dissatisfied with family life, estimated for 2008-09, are lower compared to the previous years and do not exceed the value of 2. From 2010 onwards, this link loses its force and magnitude (ORs ranging from 0.9 to 1.3).

The results regarding the association between family satisfaction evaluation and the other individual- and couple-level covariates considered are consistent with previous literature. Women are generally less satisfied with their family life than men, and dissatisfaction increases with age. The household size (3 or more person vs. 2) is associated with a decrease in family satisfaction evaluation; on the contrary, it is the presence of a young child aged less than 5 that significantly improves individuals' assessment of family satisfaction. As expected, to have experienced a separation or a divorce in the past entails a higher risk of being dissatisfied with family life (OR about 1.6). More highly educated people are the less satisfied with family life (ORs for medium and less educated equal to 0.88 and 0.85, respectively). The condition of unemployment produces a 30% higher odd of not being satisfied with family life; also for inactive people the effect leads in the same direction, even if lower (OR = 1.07). Financial difficulties have been found to be one of the most important correlates of family life dissatisfaction: individuals who find that their economic resources are scarce or insufficient to make ends

meet have an OR equal to 2.6, entailing a more than two times higher odd of being dissatisfied with their family life.

Table 1 – Multilevel logistic models with individual- and aggregate-level variables predicting family dissatisfaction, Italy 1994-2012.

<i>Independent variables</i>	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	OR	B	SE B	OR	B	SE B	OR
Union type by year (ref.: married)									
cohabitation in 1994	1.25 ***	0.41	3.48	0.98 ***	0.33	2.66	0.87 ***	0.37	2.39
cohabitation in 1995	1.26 ***	0.36	3.54	0.92 ***	0.41	2.51	1.18 ***	0.40	3.27
cohabitation in 1996	0.95	0.62	2.59	0.68 †	0.42	1.97	0.84 ***	0.36	2.32
cohabitation in 1997	0.72 *	0.40	2.05	0.46	0.43	1.58	0.67 *	0.34	1.95
cohabitation in 1998	1.30 ***	0.28	3.68	1.05 ***	0.26	2.84	1.10 ***	0.23	3.00
cohabitation in 1999	0.85 ***	0.32	2.33	0.49 *	0.33	1.63	0.83 **	0.30	2.30
cohabitation in 2000	0.72 *	0.35	2.05	0.77 *	0.44	2.15	0.67 *	0.34	1.95
cohabitation in 2001	1.25 ***	0.37	3.49	1.27 ***	0.33	3.57	0.85 ***	0.29	2.34
cohabitation in 2002	1.06 ***	0.24	2.88	0.76 *	0.28	2.14	0.82 **	0.35	2.27
cohabitation in 2003	0.87 ***	0.34	2.38	0.47 †	0.32	1.61	0.66 ***	0.28	1.94
cohabitation in 2005	1.10 ***	0.23	3.00	1.05 ***	0.39	2.86	1.00 ***	0.25	2.71
cohabitation in 2006	1.40 ***	0.28	4.04	1.16 ***	0.24	3.20	1.06 ***	0.25	2.90
cohabitation in 2007	0.99 **	0.39	2.69	0.94 ***	0.31	2.57	0.81 ***	0.25	2.25
cohabitation in 2008	0.94 ***	0.29	2.55	0.62 *	0.28	1.85	0.69 ***	0.23	1.99
cohabitation in 2009	0.96 ***	0.25	2.62	0.73 ***	0.24	2.08	0.61 *	0.30	1.84
cohabitation in 2010	0.62 ***	0.24	1.85	0.36	0.35	1.43	0.22	0.23	1.25
cohabitation in 2011	0.95 ***	0.32	2.58	0.56 *	0.27	1.76	0.30	0.29	1.35
cohabitation in 2012	0.40 †	0.26	1.49	0.40 *	0.24	1.49	-0.06	0.26	0.94
Woman				0.31 ***	0.03	1.36	0.31 ***	0.02	1.36
Age in classes (ref.: <29)									
30-39				0.10 ***	0.04	1.10	0.15 ***	0.03	1.16
40 and over				0.27 ***	0.05	1.31	0.33 ***	0.02	1.39
Household size (ref.: 2 persons)									
3 persons				0.17 ***	0.06	1.18	0.12 *	0.06	1.13
4 or more persons				0.02	0.05	1.02	-0.05	0.06	0.95
Child(ren) less than 6 in the hh (ref.: no)				-0.25 ***	0.06	0.78	-0.24 ***	0.04	0.79
Previous separation/divorce (ref.: no)				0.51 ***	0.08	1.67	0.52 ***	0.08	1.69
Education (ref.: high)									
Medium				-0.09 †	0.05	0.91	-0.13 ***	0.04	0.88
Low				-0.14 ***	0.05	0.87	-0.17 ***	0.04	0.85
Employment status (ref.: employed)									
Unemployed				0.31 ***	0.06	1.36	0.27 ***	0.07	1.31
Inactive				0.06 *	0.04	1.06	0.07 **	0.04	1.07
Good economic situation (ref.: not good)				0.97 ***	0.04	2.63	0.94 ***	0.04	2.57
<i>Higher level variables</i>									
Institutionalization (region-year specific, difference from the mean)							-0.01 *	0.01	0.99
Institutionalization (annual average)							0.03 ***	0.00	1.03
Secularization (region-year specific, difference from the mean)							0.00	0.00	1.00
Secularization (annual average)							0.06 ***	0.00	1.07
Constant	-6.49 ***			-7.03 ***			-11.65 ***		

Note: OR= odds ratio. N=252,732. †p ≤ .10. *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.

Model 3 also includes contextual variables. Firstly, as expected, an increasing level of secularization implies a rise in dissatisfaction with family life. Secondly, and more generally, the higher the incidence of cohabitation, the greater the family dissatisfaction ($OR = 1.03$). This result should be interpreted together with secularization, and can be explained with the growing instability of the partners' relationships that has accompanied the diffusion of cohabitation in recent years. In relative terms, as the level of institutionalization of cohabitation in a given area in a given year increases with respect to the Italian level in the same year, the risk of being dissatisfied with one's own family life decreases significantly.

We conclude this section by comparing Models 1 to 3 in order to appreciate the role of individual and contextual variables in mediating the relationship between union type and family satisfaction. We note that in Model 1 cohabitators are systematically less satisfied than marrieds in all the years investigated, from the '90s to recent years, with ORs higher than 2 (except in 2012). The addition of individual- and couple-level covariates (Model 2) determines a reduction in the cohabitators' odds of being dissatisfied – but they remain statistically significant – demonstrating a definite role of selectivity factors. Finally, and more importantly, it is the inclusion of the levels of institutionalization of cohabitation and secularization in the model (Model 3) that explains the weakening before, and the disappearance after, of the "cohabitation gap" in the family satisfaction assessment.

Robustness checks

Our results proved to be robust to a series of sensitivity checks. First, we acknowledge that it is important to account for individual religiosity in studies on union type and family satisfaction. This information was available for all progressive data sets, except for 2012. We still decided to include the year 2012 in the analysis and consequently, to exclude individual religiosity from the estimation. We are certain of this decision because we conducted a sensitivity test replicating the model estimation including individual religiosity (and excluding the year 2012) and the estimates showed virtually unchanged outcomes (results not shown but available upon request).

Second, as described above, our sample includes all couples, regardless of the presence of children or other members in the household. Since this presence may represent a factor influencing family relations and satisfaction, we also estimated multilevel models limited to people living alone as a couple. Since the results (not shown but available upon

request) confirmed the findings illustrated in Table 1, we preferred to maintain the whole sample by keeping all couples in the analysis.

Third, we estimated multilevel models restricting the sample to people living with at least one child. Also in this case, results (not shown but available upon request) were consistent with the results estimated for the whole sample. Finally, our model accounts for children in pre-school age. Results proved to be robust if we consider children aged up to 13 years.

Concluding discussion

In this paper we add to international literature concerning the link between partnership status and individual family satisfaction, focusing on this relationship for Italy, a country where the diffusion of cohabitation and its social acceptance, even if increasing, are still less widespread than elsewhere in Europe and United States. In particular, we explored the relationship from the early '90s up until recent years, assessing whether this link has changed over time. We found that in the second half of the '90s, cohabitators ran a significantly higher risk of being dissatisfied with their family life than married couples. Nevertheless, in the first decade of the 2000s the association between union type and family life satisfaction weakened, and from the second decade of the '2000 it is no more significant, suggesting that cohabitators are no longer less satisfied than spouses.

We showed how this change is due to both the demography of cohabitation – i.e., the degree of diffusion of cohabitation within the Italian society over the last 20 years – and the process of secularization. As cohabitation becomes a pervasive phenomenon and Italy reaches a more and more secular setting, marriage and cohabitation are becoming increasingly equal in the individuals' perceptions, so that today Italian cohabitators are no less satisfied with their family life than marrieds. The “cohabitation gap”, existing in the early phases of the transition process towards new family patterns, slowly decreases when cohabitation starts to be seen as common and acceptable behavior. Our findings suggest that even in cases – such as the Italian one – of a familistic-oriented welfare state with relatively little diffusion of cohabitation compared to other settings, the slow yet continuing propagation of cohabitation leads to an increase in approval and legitimization of cohabitators and in turn, to an increase in their family satisfaction as well.

Three data-related caveats of this study should be noted. Firstly, in our analysis we were not able to distinguish between cohabitation and pre-marital cohabitation nor we could explore the matrimonial plans of cohabitators which are instead important for depicting differences in the relationship quality of cohabitators and spouses (Brown & Booth, 1996). Secondly, we could not control our estimates for the duration of the relationship. The duration of couples could be another factor influencing commitment to and satisfaction with the partnership status (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Kurdek, 1999; Nock, 1995). Nevertheless, we believe that this omission does not seriously affect the credibility of our findings because our sample only includes relatively young couples and we control our estimates for the respondents' age-profile. Finally, our analysis has limited power in informing us about causal relationships. We cannot rule out that those individuals who have an innate predisposition to report a higher level of family satisfaction might also systematically vary in their propensity to form a (given type of) union. Nonetheless, our goal was to document differences in family satisfaction assessment between cohabitation and marriage over time, viewing the rise in cohabitation and secularization as diffusion processes, and not to infer about causation.

Despite these data-related limitations, our study represents a fresh contribution to the literature on the assessment of subjective well-being between cohabitation and marriage in general, and to the family demography literature for Southern Europe in particular. To the best of our knowledge this study tests the diffusion hypothesis in the explanation of the "cohabitation gap" across time within a country, and not across space, for the first time in Italy and elsewhere. There are very few standardized data sets that allow for in-depth cross-time comparative analyses, and given the upward trend in cohabitation, data can soon become out-of-date. In our case, we built a unique data set coming from 18 progressive and harmonized surveys, allowing us to conduct a large-scale comparative analysis of family-satisfaction evaluation in Italy over the last two decades. We were able to document that as the emergence of cohabitation becomes a pervasive phenomenon in modern Italy, the difference in the assessment of family satisfaction between spouses and cohabitators shift from being strong to very weak and finally, nonexistent.

To conclude, it is worth noting that cohabitation still represents an incomplete institution in Italy. Cohabitors are similar to married couples on a day-to-day basis. For instance, they share households, pool incomes, and decisions are made in the interaction and negotiations between partners (Smoke, 2000). Italian cohabitators suffer from a series

of legal disadvantages compared to spouses, however. Such disadvantages were clearly advanced by the young Italians who participated in a recent qualitative study (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014). Justifications voiced for changes in cohabitation-related laws and regulations include the need to adapt to changing family behaviors, and the avoidance of differences in rights and benefits between married couples and cohabitators, also in order to protect the weakest and most vulnerable family members. It must therefore be stressed how quite a clear divergence exists in Italy between the way in which consensual unions are seen and addressed at an institutional and legislative level (with the consequential void of state laws on this subject), and the diffusion and perception of cohabitation on an individual basis.

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