

“Mamma” and the diffusion of cohabitation: the Italian case

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the role of parental attitudes in the likelihood to start cohabiting in Italy. The Italian context is characterized by a low prevalence of cohabitation, and by the presence of particularly strong ties between parents and children. Following Rosina and Fraboni (2004) we hypothesize that the limited diffusion of cohabitation in Italy is not so much due to the limited interest of the Italian youth towards this type of union, but most of all to the convenience of the children in the “familialistic” Italian society to avoid choices which are openly clashing with the values of parents. To test this hypothesis, we use data from a new survey on Italian youth and their mothers and model the likelihood to start cohabiting. Our preliminary results (on women only) document the importance of the societal context (i.e. the area of residence) but also of the perceived parental attitude.

Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Southern European countries (and more specifically, Italy and Spain) have recently attracted the attention of researchers studying family formation for various reasons. On the one side, all crucial demographic events in the transition to adulthood take place, on average, later than in other parts of the industrialized worlds. This has led to the definition of “latest-late” transition to adulthood (see Billari et al., 2002; Billari, 2004). More specifically, young adults leave home later than their counterparts in Northern Europe or North America, and marriage remains largely the more frequent option for the start of a union. On the other side, exactly in an area where vertical family ties are believed to be particularly strong (see Reher, 1998; Dalla Zuanna Micheli 2004) the decrease in fertility has reached levels that were previously unobserved for large populations, leading to “lowest-low” fertility.

Some links have been made between these phenomena. Rosina and Fraboni (2004) have argued - basing their analyses on different sources - that exactly the strong family ties at the basis of the relatively scarce diffusion of unmarried cohabitation. The prolonged permanence in the parental family, the residential proximity, and the continuous and intense relationship, even after the exit from the parental family (Barbagli et al. 2003) do not favour, in Italy (but more generally in the Southern European countries), the development of that “tolerant indifference” among generations which enables the youth in the weak family ties area to freely make choices, even though these are not shared by their parents (Beck 1997). Familialistic parents tend to discourage their children from behaviour they do not approve of with affective and material means at their disposal. On the other hand, the strategic importance of the parent’s support makes it particularly disadvantageous for young Italians to make choices which parents do not approve of, and that could render their help less generous. This implies that in the strong family ties area the diffusion of cohabitation among the young generations must be preceded by a process of acceptability of this behaviour among the generations of the parents.

The need to receive help from parents is, indeed, a crucial feature of the Southern European system. The welfare state is characterized by a “familialistic” approach, with important transfers towards the older generations and very limited direct help towards youth (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Whether this configuration of the welfare state is the outcome of long-standing cultural factors (Reher, 1998) or whether present attitudes are shaped by institutional configuration (Breen and Buchman, 2002) is less important. What is crucial is that familialistic welfare state and strong ties between generations go hand in hand and form a consistent system (Mayer, 2001; Billari, 2004). This consistency has at least two implications. First, it has implications in terms of flows between generations: the help of parents is fundamental when young adults, but also adults who have already formed their own family, need to decide to undertake important life course transition, such as starting a union and having children. This help may be financial (e.g. help directed towards buying a flat) as well as in-kind (e.g. help with the childcare of very young children), and it is eased by the high level of spatial proximity of parents and children who have left home (Tomassini et al., 2003), coupled with a relatively low level of spatial mobility. These features also allow the flow to become reversed as parents become older. The second order of implications is on the importance of normative pressure: given the particularly important value of the link between generations and also the need to receive help, Southern European children are supposed to take (and have to take) into particular account the attitudes of their parents towards their own potential choices. However, no specific results are available on this point so far.

Given these premises, testing the weight of perceived and actual parental attitudes in the decision-making process during family formation in the Southern European setting may provide on the one side a confirmation of the ideas found in the literature, and on the other side a hint on the medium- and short-term changes that Southern Europe is facing. In general, cohabitation is believed to play an increasingly important role in fertility (see e.g. Smock and Manning, 2004). In Italy and Spain, the diffusion of cohabiting unions taking place at earlier ages than the current mostly marital unions may be one of the forces pushing fertility to higher levels (Baizán et al., 2003; Billari and Rosina, 2004). On a cross-country level, for instance, the prevalence of extramarital births is now positively associated with fertility (Billari and Kohler, 2004).

In this paper, exploiting a new dataset covering Italian youth and their mothers, we analyze the determinants of starting a cohabiting union, mostly focusing on the attitudes of parents as perceived by their children and as reported directly by mothers.

2. Data and methods

Our analyses are based on a new survey on young adults and their parents (IDEA) carried at the end of 2003 on a representative sample of Italian youth aged 23-27 and 33-37, with a total sample size of 3,000. The survey has been organized by a consortium of University within a research project on the transition to adulthood, family formation and fertility—it is planned as a first wave of a panel survey. Interviews were conducted using CATI. For youth living with their parents (the majority of the 23-27 year olds) also their mother was interviewed.

The questionnaire asks, besides standard background information, about intentions and expectation concerning events on family formation (including the likelihood of starting a non-marital cohabitation), as well about attitudes concerning specific behaviors. Similar and complementary questions are posed to mothers.

After descriptive analyses, we model the likelihood of starting a non-marital cohabitation (collected on a 4-point scale) using a logit model for ordered responses. Response categories go from “I

exclude to start cohabiting” to “I will almost certainly start to cohabit”. The choice of this variable is consistent with research on decision-making based on perceived likelihood to perform a behavior—see de Jong Gierveld and Liefbroer (1992) on the choice between cohabitation and marriage, and Manning and Smock (2002) on the marriage of cohabitants.

3. Preliminary Results

Our preliminary results focus on women aged 23-27, never in a union. Final analyses will include both genders and also data concerning their mothers. Table 1 shows that there is a marked difference between North-Center and South-Islands. In South-Islands still the vast majority of respondents (65.3%) exclude cohabitation as an option. On the contrary, in North-Center, about 42% of the respondents see starting cohabitation as a very likely or almost certain event.

Other descriptive analyses (not shown here) document that a positive attitude towards cohabitation are associated with a higher likelihood to start cohabitation.

What is more interesting for us is the relationship between the parental attitude as perceived by the respondent and the likelihood to cohabit (Table 2). A perceive permissive parental attitude is associated with a higher likelihood.

Moreover, human capital (as measured by educational level) and religiousness (as measured by church attendance) are also associated with the likelihood to cohabit.

Table 1. Likelihood to start cohabitating within the next three years. Women aged 23-27, never in a union. Percentage distribution.

	<i>North-Center</i>	<i>South-Islands</i>
Excluded	40.5	65.3
Probably not	17.6	15.6
Probably yes	26.8	13.8
Almost certainly yes	15.1	5.4
<i>Tot.</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>N</i>	205	167

Table 2. Likelihood to start cohabitating within the next three years. Women aged 23-27, never in a union. Percentage distribution.

	<i>Parents would not oppose</i>	<i>Parents would mildly oppose</i>	<i>Parents would firmly oppose</i>
Exclude	35.3	56.4	74.1
Probably not	18.1	17.8	13.8
Probably yes	27.6	18.8	10.3
Almost certainly	19.0	6.9	1.7
<i>Tot.</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>N</i>	116	101	58

Our preliminary multivariate analyses are based on a ordered logit model (in the final version, analyses will include men, data on mother’s attitudes as provided by mothers, and an accurate testing of interaction effects). The crucial role of the societal environment (here represented by the area of residence) and of general values (religiousness) is confirmed. Personal attitudes matter as well. What is crucial for our analysis is the effect of the perceived parental opinion. Women whose

parents would accept their choice to cohabit declare a higher likelihood to start cohabitation, controlling for the female own attitude and other important covariates. Human capital as measured by educational level does not matter (although it may have an indirect influence).

Table 3. Results of an ordered logit model on the likelihood to start cohabiting. Women aged 23 -27, never in a union. Constants not shown here.

	Estimate (log-odds ratio)	p-value
<i>Area of residence:</i>		
South-Islands (reference)	0	
North-Center	0.709	0.004
<i>Attitude toward cohabitation:</i>		
Negative own attitude (reference)	0	
Positive own attitude	0.569	>0.001
<i>Perceived parental position:</i>		
Parents would firmly oppose (reference)	0	
Parents would not oppose	0.419	0.028
Parents would mildly oppose	-0.075	0.689
<i>Education:</i>		
Currently enrolled at university (reference)	0	
Not enrolled, university education	0.162	0.468
Not enrolled, high school	0.198	0.269
Not enrolled, lower than high school	0.113	0.619
<i>Religiosity:</i>		
No Mass attendance (reference)	0	
Mass attendance	-0.841	>0.001

The results of our preliminary analyses confirm that the role of strong intergenerational ties may explain the so far limited diffusion of cohabitation in Italy. For the future, as the share of parents who would not oppose their children's cohabitation is bound to increase, this is going to change.

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