

DO CONSENSUAL UNIONS DIFFER FROM MARRIAGES? A STUDY OF FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AND RECEIVED HELPS IN ITALY¹

Romina Fraboni, Eleonora Meli

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years in Italy family formation has changed: marriage has declined, while non-marital cohabitation has increased. One of the evidence of the shift in family formation process is the rise in births out-of-wedlock.

In the literature the deinstitutionalization of marriage is linked to the growth of cohabitation and its acceptance is occurring in stages in western countries: at the beginning cohabitations is an *avant-garde* phenomenon, then it is accepted as a test or a *prelude* to marriage, then it becomes acceptable as an alternative to marriage, and finally, it becomes indistinguishable from it (Cherlin 2004, Rosina and Fraboni 2004, Kiernan 2002, Villeneuve-Gokalp 1990).

The late diffusion of consensual unions, in comparison with other western countries, can be attributed to low social acceptance, parental support in favor of marriage, existence of religious norms and lack of a legal acknowledgment.

A number of studies have shown the relation between cohabitation and social support (Nazio and Saraceno 2012, Di Giulio and Rosina 2007, Eggebeen 2005).

Since 1993, the multipurpose household surveys started to systematically investigate structure, composition, formation and dissolution of families and households.

The aim of this work is to study differences and similarities between married and unmarried couples, particularly in order to understand whether there is a convergence process between cohabitating and married couples in Italy, as far as structural characteristics (age, educational level, employment, presence and number of children) and behaviors (home activities share, childcare) are concerned.

Given the strong family ties that goes in support of newly formed unions we study the differences in the probability to receive help for both consensual and marital unions.

¹ Although the paper is the result of the joint work of the authors, paragraph 2 and 3 are due to E. Meli, paragraph 4 to R. Fraboni, introduction and conclusions are in common.

2. Method and data

We focus on couples with women in reproductive ages (15-49 years), distinguishing married couples at their first marriage and consensual unions of never married partners.

Firstly, we present a description of the spread of consensual unions in Italy from 1993 to 2014 and we focus on differences between unmarried and married couples.

Secondly, we compare married and unmarried couples as far as helps received from non-cohabiting peoples are concerned.

To this aim we use data from Multipurpose survey on “Aspects of daily life” (1993-2014) and “Family and Social Subjects” (1998, 2003, 2009), led by Istat on independent samples of 24,000 national representative households where all members are interviewed. Data are representative at regional level of analysis. We apply a logistic regression analysis on the probability to receive helps and its change across time.

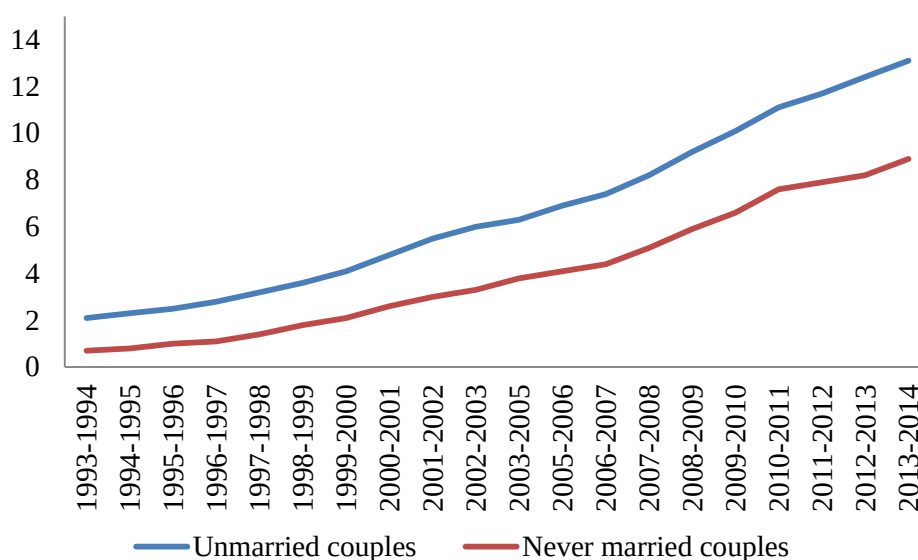
3. The spread of consensual unions in Italy and regional differences

During the last twenty years, unmarried couples have steadily increased from 227 thousands in the early 1990s to more than 1 million in 2013-2014 (i.e. from 1,6% to 7,5% of all couples). Consensual unions are differently spread across Italian regions as they are more frequent in the North-east (13,0%), the North-west (10,6%), and less frequent in the Islands (4,1%) and in the South (3,3%). Focusing on couples with woman in reproductive ages, cohabiting couples of never married partners have become ten times higher - from 61 thousands in 1993-1994 to 623 thousands in 2013-2014, therefore representing 8,9% of overall Italian couples in most recent year (Figure 1).

Premarital cohabitation has always played a relevant role in partnership. Indeed, beyond the current partnership, taking into account the overall amount of people with an consensual union, also in the past, it emerges that, in 2009, in Italy, there were overall 5 million 915 thousands people who were living in a consensual union or who had experienced it in their past life-course: i.e. 11,5% of people aged 15 and over (ISTAT 2011a). Most of them have, eventually, married. Far from being perceived as an alternative to marriage, cohabitation is more often considered a step to marriage in Italy.

Over 55% of people who has had a consensual union and who, at the beginning, did not intend to marry, perceives cohabitation as a test to marriage: they declare that “living together” has proven the possibility to marry.

Figure 1 – *Unmarried couples and couples of never married partners per 100 couples with woman aged 15-49. Years 1993-2014*



Source : Istat, Aspects of daily life

3.1. Differences and similarities on partners' characteristics

The analysis of the differences and similarities on partners' characteristics show that cohabiting women are younger, have higher educational level and are more often employed than married women at their first marriage (Table 1). Indeed, the majority of women (15-49) in a consensual union is still younger than 35 years, even if it is declining over time (78,7% in 1993-1994 and 52,7% in 2013-2014); among married women at their first marriage only 23,2% of them is below age 35 (it was 39% in 1993-1994). Thus, postponing family formation affects both first marriage and first consensual union, with a lower proportion of younger women than in the past. However, consensual unions show the largest share of younger women. Age heterogamy is changing quickly and it is generally lower among consensual unions than marital unions. Married couples at their first marriage are composed more often by men older than women (79,6% vs 66,2% in consensual unions), while consensual unions of never married partners are composed more often by women older than men (24,1% in 2013-2014) (Table 2).

Table 1 – *Women in couple by couple typology, age, level of education and geographical area. Years 1993-1994 and 2013-2014 (percentage distributions)*

Women's characteristics	Never married couples		First married couples	
	1993-1994	2013-2014	1993-1994	2013-2014
Age				
15-34	79,2	52,7	39,0	23,2
35-49	20,8	47,3	61,0	76,8
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
Education				
Graduated	9,4	21,8	7,8	16,2
Upper secondary	38,8	50,4	34,0	45,9
Up to lower secondary- school license	51,8	27,8	58,2	38,0
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
Geographical area (a)				
North-West	1,0	11,8	93,8	78,3
North-East	1,2	13,9	94,8	76,5
Centre	0,3	8,4	95,3	83,1
South	0,2	3,7	97,4	92,1
Islands	0,9	4,2	96,1	90,4
Italy	0,7	8,9	95,5	83,3

(a) As a % of overall couples in the same area.

Source : Istat, *Aspects of daily life*

The rise of the level of education attained by women is particularly relevant among youngest cohorts. However graduated women rise more in consensual unions than in married couples. The gap in educational levels between partners are increasing between these two union typologies. In 30,6% of consensual unions women have a higher educational level than men. This occurs in 27,6% of married couples.

Unmarried women are more often employed than married ones. Employed women in unmarried couples have increased more during the last 20 years. Consensual unions are characterized by double-earner partners more often than married couples (65% vs 45,7%). In 2013-2014 couple with “employed man and housewife” amount to 8,5% in consensual unions, while it reaches 27,3% in married couples.

Couples with young children are increasing, too. The number of children born out-of-wedlock is increasing: from 8% in 1995 to 25,9% in 2013. As a consequence the proportion of consensual unions with children increases from 33% in 1993-1994 to 53% in 2013-2014. Children in consensual unions are younger

(74,5% of children aged 0-3 years vs 40,2% in married couples). Most of unmarried couples have only one child (68,5%).

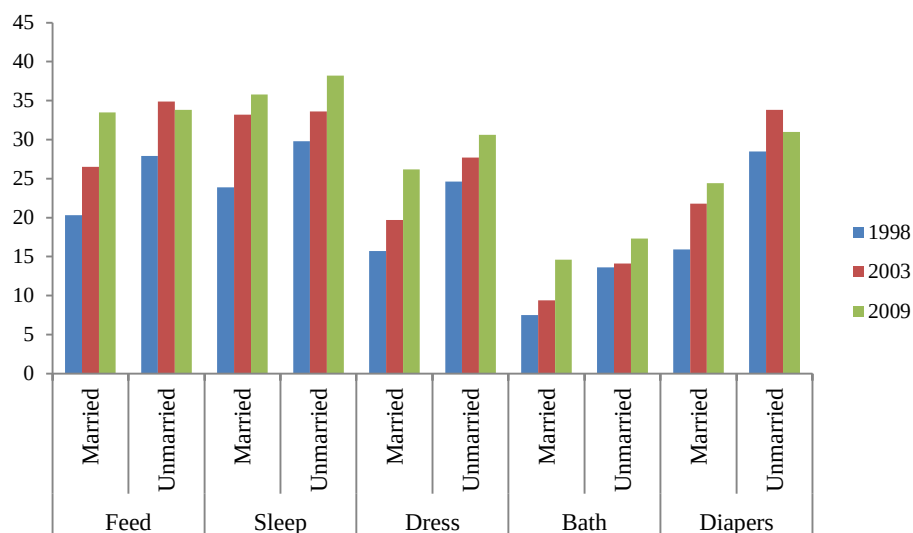
Table 2 – *Never married couples and first married couples by partners' characteristics. Years 2013-2014 (percentage distributions).*

Partners' characteristics	Never married couples	First married couples
Age difference		
She is younger	66,2	79,6
Same age	9,7	8,4
She is older	24,1	12,0
Educational level		
She is more educated	30,6	27,6
Same education	53,2	55,3
She is less educated	16,3	17,1
Occupational status		
Both employed	65,0	45,7
He is employed, she is housewife	8,5	27,3
He is employed, she is unemployed	11,3	10,1
He is unemployed, she is employed	4,6	4,9
Other	10,5	12,0
Presence of children		
With at least one child	53,0	86,1
With children aged 0-5	74,5	40,2

Source : Istat, *Aspects of daily life*

Home activities sharing and childcare are changing slowly, even among unmarried cohabitants. Quite all of domestic activities is done by women, but in unmarried couples men are more often involved in daily care and home duties: in 17,1% of the cases men in consensual unions work at least as woman vs in 11,1% of the cases of married men. In presence of 0-3 years old children, the involvement of unmarried fathers in daily childcare is larger than that of married ones, and it is rising over time. Among all the considered activities unmarried fathers do more than married ones.

Figure 2 – Children aged 0-3 years by father's involvement in daily care activities and father's marital status, per 100 children aged 0-3 years. Years 1998, 2003, 2009



Source : Istat, Family and social subjects

4. Inequality in the support to families with children

The possibility to receive informal support (such as economic aid, health assistance, personal care, help in study or work, childcare, elderly care or help with disabled people, domestic chores, accompanying, companionship, bureaucratic/administrative duties ...) during the four weeks preceding the interview is very relevant in a society where strong family ties are observed.

Previous studies have shown that, apart from families with a disabled person that have the highest ranking in received helps, families with children and employed mother are the privileged target of informal care received from non-cohabiting people (ISTAT 2011b). Besides that, we include public helps provided by the municipality or by charity or health assistance institutions, as well as, private services paid by the family (such as baby-sitter, domestic help, assistance to elderly or disabled people). Overall, informal support covers three fourth of the total amount of received helps. Comparing the two couples typologies with children 0-13 years we find that received helps are higher for unmarried couples

than for married ones. Received helps increase in both cases: from 42,4% to 43,7% in presence of unmarried mothers and from 30,7% in 1998 to 38,8% in 2009 in presence of married ones. In order to better understand the determinants that affect the probability to receive help in married and unmarried couples with children we, then, apply a logistic regression model. We focus on couples at first marriage and consensual unions of never married partners with women aged 15-49 and we study the probability to receive helps. We include partners' characteristics (such as age, education level, employment status); couples' characteristics (geographical area, demographic dimension of municipalities, number of 0-3 children, presence of lone people in the family or extended families); family of origin's characteristics: both partners parents' education. We pool together the three survey editions to understand the evolution over time of the phenomenon under study.

4.1. Main results of a model on the probability to receive helps

The probability to receive helps is significantly higher for women aged 30-39 than aged 15-29 years and it decreases with increasing age of the man. As for the territorial effect we observe a higher probability to receive helps in the North-east and North-west than in the South and Islands. In the suburbs of the metropolitan area helps are slightly more frequent than in the centre of the main municipality. Education is highly associated with helps received by the couples. Indeed, the probability to receive helps increases with higher educational level of each partners. The same effect is shown by the social status of the family of origin: the probability to receive helps increases with the highest level of education of the woman's parents. As for the occupational status we notice that, in comparison with double-earners couples, those characterized by the male-breadwinner model receive lower help. On the contrary, higher probability to receive help is shown by couples where none of the partners works, particularly where the man is unemployed and the woman is housewife, and, evidently, this is a selected set of couples in need of help. The family structure plays a relevant role in the support, particularly when more than one family cohabit, i.e. extended family, as this reduces helps from other non-cohabiting people. The presence of young children (aged 0-3 years) in the couple has the strongest effect in the analysis: it positively affects the helps received by the couple and it rises with the number of young children. As for the different typology of couple, it emerges that, all other things being equal, marriage is associated with higher probability to receive any kind of support in comparison with consensual union. Finally, the trend over time shows an increase in the trend of helps received in 2009 with respect to 1998.

Table 3 – *Main results of the logistic regression on the probability to receive helps*

	b	S.E.	Exp(b)	p		b	S.E.	Exp(b)	p
Age woman (ref=15-29)					Higher level of education of Her's parents (ref=Up to primary)				
30-39	0,249	0,062	1,282	<,0001	Upper secondary or tertiary	0,239	0,051	1,270	<,0001
40-49	0,032	0,078	1,033	0,682	Lower secondary	0,112	0,046	1,119	0,015
Age man (ref=15-29)					Couple's employment status (ref=Both employed)				
30-39	-0,163	0,086	0,849	0,057	He is employed, she is housewife	-0,589	0,043	0,555	<,0001
40-49	-0,185	0,097	0,832	0,056	He is employed, she is unemployed	-0,289	0,083	0,749	0,001
50 and more	-0,488	0,113	0,614	<,0001	He is unemployed, she is employed	0,034	0,129	1,035	0,791
Geographical area (ref=North-West)					He is unemployed, she is housewife	0,745	0,109	2,106	<,0001
North-East	0,195	0,051	1,216	0,000	Other	-0,022	0,076	0,978	0,772
Centre	0,030	0,052	1,031	0,562	Couple's Typology (ref=Unmarried)				
South	-0,206	0,051	0,814	<,0001	Married	0,192	0,091	1,212	0,035
Islands	-0,126	0,064	0,881	0,047	Nr. Children 0-3 (ref=0)				
Municipality (ref=Metropolitan area - Centre)					One	0,726	0,043	2,067	<,0001
Metropolitan area - suburbs	0,303	0,067	1,354	<,0001	Two or more	1,199	0,102	3,316	<,0001
until 10,000 inhabitants	0,072	0,059	1,075	0,222	Presence of lone people in the hh. (ref=No)				
10,001 inhabitants and over	0,067	0,055	1,070	0,222	Yes	-0,088	0,089	0,916	0,321
Woman educational level (ref=Graduated)					Presence of more than 1 cohabiting family member (ref=No)				
Upper secondary diploma	-0,321	0,058	0,725	<,0001	Yes	-0,733	0,133	0,480	<,0001
Lower secondary school licence	-0,580	0,069	0,560	<,0001	Survey edition (ref.=1998)				
Primary school certificate	-0,649	0,098	0,523	<,0001	2003	0,020	0,041	1,020	0,625
Man educational level (ref=Graduated)					2009	0,156	0,044	1,169	0,000
Upper secondary diploma	-0,505	0,060	0,603	<,0001					
Lower secondary school licence	-0,610	0,068	0,543	<,0001					
Elementary school licence	-0,716	0,094	0,489	<,0001					

Source : Istat, *Family and social subjects*

Moreover, running models separately by kind of couple, we find that having young children, especially if more than one, is the most important determinant of received helps either for married couples and for unmarried ones. The model concerning married couples is consistent with the overall model. Instead, when compared with the general one, the model of unmarried couples shows no effect of the partners' and their family of origin's level of education, as well as no increase over time. Moreover, the female age effect is significant also at age 40-49 years where it increases. The effect of living with lone people is significant and negative. The strongest and positive effect is associated with the absence of employment of both unmarried partners, which makes this group of people in need of help.

5. Conclusions

In Italy differences on partners' characteristics between cohabiting and married couples still persist as in the former partners are usually younger, more educated and with higher female employment rate, more gender-balanced than in the latter; moreover, the number of children in cohabiting couples is increasing, but it is usually lower and they are younger than in married couples. Consensual unions are not uniformly spread over the country. The study of received helps shows that couples with young children have the highest probability to receive helps, regardless of union typology. Moreover, from the model it emerges that married couples have higher probability to be supported than cohabiting couples and that, only in the first case helps have risen across years.

References

- CHERLIN A. J. 2004. The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of marriage and family*, Vol. 66, pp. 848-861.
- DI GIULIO P., ROSINA A. 2007. Intergenerational family ties and the diffusion of cohabitation in Italy. *Demographic Research*, Vol. 16(14), pp. 441-468.
- EGGEBEEN D. J., 2005. Cohabitation and exchanges of support. *Social Forces*, Vol. 83, N. 3, pp. 1097-1110.
- KIERNAN K. 2002. Cohabitation in Western Europe: trends, issues and implications, in Booth, Alan and Crouter, Ann. C, (eds.) *Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation on Families, Children and Social Policy*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, pp. 3-32.
- ISTAT 2011a. Come cambiano le forme familiari. Comunicato stampa. www.istat.it.
- ISTAT 2011b. Rapporto annuale. La situazione del Paese nel 2010. http://www3.istat.it/dati/catalogo/20110523_00/Avvio2010.pdf
- LACHANCE-GRZELA M., BOUCHARD G. 2009. La cohabitation et le mariage, deux monde à part? Un examen des caractéristiques démographiques, individuelles et relationnelles, *Canadian journal of behavioural science*, Vol. 41, pp. 37-44
- NAZIO T., SARACENO C. 2012. Does cohabitation lead to weaker intergenerational bonds than marriage? A comparison between Italy and the United Kingdom, *European Sociological Review*, pp. 1-16.
- PIRANI E., VIGNOLI D. 2014. Are spouses more satisfied than cohabitators? A survey over the last twenty years in Italy, Working paper - Dipartimento di Statistica, Informatica, Applicazioni "Giuseppe Parenti" - Università degli studi Firenze, N. 9.
- POORTMAN A.-R., MILLS M. 2012. Investments in marriage and cohabitation: the role of legal and interpersonal commitment, *Journal of marriage and family*, Vol. 74, pp. 357-376.
- ROSINA A., FRABONI R. 2004. Is marriage losing its centrality in Italy? *Demographic Research*, Vol. 11, pp. 149-172.
- SALVINI S., VIGNOLI D. 2014. *Convivere o sposarsi?*. Il Mulino, Bologna.
- VACULÍK M., JEDRZEJCZYKOVÁ V. 2009. Commitment in unmarried cohabitation, *Studia psychologica*, Vol. 51, pp. 101-117.
- VILLENEUVE-GOKALP C. 1990. Du mariage aux unions sans papiers: histoire récente des transformations conjugales. *Population*, Vol. 2, pp. 265-298.

SUMMARY

Do consensual unions differ from marriages? A study of family characteristics and received helps in Italy

In the last 20 years in Italy marriage has lost its exclusivity in the traditional model of family, at the same time consensual union has been more and more accepted as a form of union and, as a result, at least a quarter of births are out-of-wedlock.

This paper examines the spread of consensual unions and the structural characteristics of partners in comparison to married couples. Then, we focus on the differences in the support received in presence of children.

Results show that consensual unions of never married partners preserve distinctive traits related to age, education and labor force participation of both partners in comparison with more traditional couples. Moreover, cohabiting couples have less and younger children than married ones. Finally, the most relevant determinant of received help is the presence of young children. However, couples at their first marriage show a higher - and increasing over time - propensity to get help than cohabiting couples.