

LIVING IN COUPLE. MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION IN A CHANGING ITALY¹

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1. Introduction

The profound changes in family forms and reproductive choices - which affected the Western countries over the past forty years - are considered by a significant part of specialized scholars as characteristics of a new phase in the history of the population. This new phase seems to be marked by the crisis of the institution of marriage, the spread of new forms of union, the use of "modern" contraceptive methods and the centrality of the couple's life (van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1994). In summary, these processes would characterize the peculiarities of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT).

It is a well-known and documented fact that family structures and family forms have changed considerably throughout Europe since the 1960s and 1970s. A review of existing research and statistics shows that there has been a high growth in the number of family forms within European countries over recent decades. This transformation varies considerably between European countries. Therefore, it is too naive to speak about "the European family". The Nordic countries represent one end of the scale, with late marriages, low marriage rates and a high proportion of out-of-wedlock births. These countries have moved considerably far from the "traditional" family model. At the other end of the scale there are the Southern European countries, where family patterns are still much in line with the 'traditional model', with a central importance placed on marriage, low divorce rates, and relatively low, even if increasing, incidence of out-of-wedlock births, with new family forms that only in the more recent years are widespread.

Even if the trend towards "new family forms" comes to a halt, a return to a "traditional family model" is unlikely. Especially in Northern and Western European countries, the recent decline of the "golden age of marriage" with high fertility and marriage rates, low divorce rates and an early start to family formation, has been accompanied by an increase in less institutionalized relationships.

Since the mid-1960s, marriage rates in Europe have declined, and have only

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recently stabilized. While the marriage rate was 7.6 marriages per 1.000 persons in 1965, it has fallen to as low as 4.9 in 2007 (Eurostat, 2010). When comparing European nations, some Northern European countries display high marriage rates (e.g. Denmark with 6.8 in 2008), following modest increases since 2003. Eastern European countries are rather heterogeneous concerning marriage patterns (Eurostat, 2010). A major reason might be that in some Eastern European countries the influence of the Catholic and Orthodox Church is still significant, i.e. in Poland and in Romania. Since these religions advocate a more traditional family model, it is not surprising that their citizens show the highest marriage rates within Eastern Europe. Despite this, marriage rates have declined strongly between 1990 and 1992 in all Eastern European countries (as well as in the Eastern part of Germany; see Eurostat, 2010), most likely a repercussion of both rising insecurities following the breakdown of the socialist regime, but also the discontinuation of political support for the “nuclear family” model. In most Central European countries marriage rates have fallen since the early-1960s, and are now slightly below the European average. In Southern Europe marriage rates have also fallen continuously and are either well below the European mean (e.g. Italy, Spain or Portugal), or just above the average.

While marriage rates have decreased in Europe, divorce rates have constantly risen – more than doubling from 0.8 (divorces per 1000 persons) in 1965 to 2.0 in 2005. The highest rates are observed in Lithuania, Czech Republic, Belgium, Denmark, and Latvia. In Germany, Sweden and Slovakia, rates are rather moderate, whereas in Greece, Italy and Ireland divorce rates are relatively low (Eurostat, 2010). The most obvious pattern is that lowest rates verify in countries with a high proportion of Catholics. The impetus for divorce is increasingly coming from women, and is often explained by women’s increased financial independence. However, recent research shows that the relationship between women’s employment and the increase in the divorce rate varies according to socio-cultural context. In countries with greater gender equality, like the Netherlands and the UK, the financial independence of women has a positive effect on marital stability, while in countries where equality is still far from being achieved, like Italy, the increase in the presence of women in the workforce is accompanied by increased instability of marriage (MacRae, 2003; Saraceno and Naldini, 2007).

Scholars have identified many different factors that have contributed to the “crisis of marriage” in contemporary Europe and – above all – two main variables have emerged. At the socio-economic level, the transformation of the labor market, with increasing labor force participation of women, has made marriage a choice rather than a “destiny”, by somebody defined a rite of passage into adulthood. At the cultural level, the process of secularization (Norris and Inglehart, 2004) has

contributed to the gradual spread and affirmation of cohabitation. Universal education and the emergence of collective movements such as feminism, factors strongly related to secularization, have played a key role in undermining the model of the traditional, patriarchal family. Paradoxically, the tendency to place love at the basis of contemporary marriage constitutes one of the elements of its fragility and instability. We will come back in the following paragraphs on these two particular factors to underline their potential effect on family choice. The data used derive from a research project based on qualitative analysis consisting in some focus groups carried out in Florence (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Salvini and Vignoli, 2014).

In the following paragraphs, we introduce the European situation as it concerns the decline of marriages and the increase of cohabitation. Then we focus on Italian characteristics, firstly through secondary data (essentially ISTAT data) and secondly introducing the above-cited qualitative analysis. This research gave interesting results; in particular, as it regards the main factors intervening in the propensity to marry or to cohabit, that is the process of secularization in Italy and the uncertainty in working life of young people. Therefore, we will present some evidence on these topics based on the voices of our participants. Finally, we conclude our paper with a general discussion.

2. The decline of marriages, the increase of cohabitations

Over the last four decades, there have been remarkable changes in the pattern of union formation and in the extent of having children outside marriage in many western European nations. Next to the spread of low fertility, there are many other changes in family life, which were as dramatic as the rapid rise in unmarried cohabitation and non-marital births. Parallel, first marriage rates declined, the average age at marriage increased strongly and already existent marriages ended more often in divorces. The traditional sequence of a family formation pattern that has been characterized by early and widespread marriage and subsequent childbearing for about half a century has become weaker or even disappeared.

Unmarried cohabitation is not a new phenomenon in Europe. However, the reasons of forming such a relationship differ between periods. In a historic view, cohabiting unions have always been existent in most European cultural areas. Predominantly those were formed by poor people who could not afford the cost of marriage, by people who were opposed to marriage for ideological reasons or by people who chose to cohabit after a marital breakdown or the death of the former partner (Kiernan, 2001). In western Germany for example, after World War II older people often lived in cohabiting unions after a divorce or the death of their

partner because they did not want to lose their alimony or widow's pension by remarriage (Koeppen 2011).

In the recent decades, the proportion of cohabitations has increased (Perelli-Harris et al 2012, Kiernan 2004). Cohabiting couples with children are most common in Northern Europe and in France and rare, although strongly increasing, in Southern Europe (Kiernan, 2004; Salvini and Vignoli, 2014). Still, cohabitation often makes up a "preliminary" form of partnership before getting married. This indicates that overall, getting or being married is still very important for most Europeans (Speder, 2005).

Until the 1990s, to compare the data on cohabitation at the European level is difficult. Eurostat surveys and those conducted in Fertility and Family Surveys have enabled a systematic collection of the phenomenon also allowing a comparison of the development of partnerships between countries. According to recent OECD data (2013), more than 15% of European couples have lived in cohabitation. Table 1 shows that in the age group 20-34 values up to 28% of people cohabiting characterize Denmark and Finland.

While some scholars interpret the rise of cohabitation as a proof of the theory of the SDT (Lesthaeghe, 1992; van de Kaa, 1987; Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006), others stress the importance of the growing economic independence of women and the associated reduced gains to marriage (Becker, 1981). In his extensive literature review on the development of cohabiting unions, Carmichael (1995) also mentions the availability of reliable contraception, prolonged educational enrollment, late 1960s youth radicalism, increasing secularization, increasing economic uncertainty of the young and the spread of individualistic values as some of the major explanations for the rise in consensual unions. There is still no clear convergence of family and union formation patterns in Europe (Kaufmann et al., 1997). Institutional factors, like the welfare regime of a society, specific policies and long-term cultural differences are primary sources for international differences in behavior (Koeppen, 2011).

Table 1 – *Partnership and prevalence of cohabitation, recent years. In % of population of both sexes.*

	20 years old and over				Ages 20-34				
	Single	Married	Cohabiting	Other	Single	Married	Cohabiting	Par. home	Other
Australia	18.5	51.2	8.9	21.4	:	:	:	:	:
Austria	16.5	48.3	6.5	28.7	15.3	32.6	13.7	32.4	6.0
Belgium	19.5	48.6	6.4	25.6	18.8	22.0	5.2	54.1	
Bulgaria	14.0	42.4	4.2	39.4	6.4	18.9	2.8	71.9	
Canada	10.7	39.3	8.9	41.1	:	:	:	:	:
Cyprus	6.3	61.7	0.9	41.9	4.1	47.6	2.1	33.8	12.4
Czech Rep.	14.8	51.6	2.9	30.7	11.9	39.0	4.2	40.1	4.9
Denmark	24.1	40.8	11.5	23.5	33.7	25.4	28.6	7.6	4.8
Estonia	18.2	43.9	11.8	26.1	14.1	31.8	23.5	27.4	3.2
Finland	19.6	43.6	11.8	25.0	20.8	27.0	28.3	17.7	6.2
France	22.8	44.6	14.4	18.2	19.4	21.3	21.8	37.5	
Germany	16.4	47.5	5.3	30.7	20.3	33.7	13.6	23.9	8.5
Greece	8.0	56.4	1.7	33.9	6.0	36.4	3.1	45.5	8.9
Hungary	12.0	50.9	6.3	30.7	6.6	39.4	11.5	36.0	6.5
Ireland	10.6	53.4	5.9	30.0	5.5	27.6	13.4	45.2	8.3
Italy	10.8	53.9	2.0	33.2	5.8	30.5	3.0	51.1	9.5
Japan	15.5	47.5	2.07	:	:	34.8	:	:	:
Latvia	16.5	58.0	5.5	20.0	7.5	35.0	6.3	51.2	0.0
Lithuania	14.2	55.0	4.1	26.6	15.4	69.2	8.3	0.0	7.1
Luxembourg	19.1	58.2	14.0	8.7	18.0	23.3	11.4	47.2	
Malta	7.0	40.1	2.1	50.8	3.1	31.4	0.8	64.7	
Netherlands	15.8	48.1	9.3	26.9	19.5	29.9	21.9	19.9	8.8
New Zealand	17.6	48.6	9.38	24.5	:	:	:	:	:
Norway	19.3	44.1	10.7	25.8	21.0	25.0	22.7	26.6	4.7
Poland	11.2	56.3	1.3	31.1	8.0	40.7	1.9	43.5	6.0
Portugal	7.0	56.5	4.1	32.4	4.1	40.5	5.9	39.0	10.6
Romania	7.6	56.1	4.3	32.0	3.1	48.8	7.4	31.4	9.3
Slovenia	9.6	52.7	5.4	32.3	3.8	27.5	8.8	57.0	2.8
Slovak Rep.	14.6	54.5	1.4	29.4	10.8	40.5	1.7	42.9	4.1
Spain	8.6	53.6	3.3	34.5	5.4	27.3	5.5	52.1	9.7
Switzerland	17.5	49.3	5.9	27.4	20.7	35.2	12.3	21.3	10.5
Turkey	3.9	45.7	0.2	50.3	2.4	37.8	0.0	59.7	
Un. Kingdom	14.9	47.3	8.7	29.0	11.4	32.2	22.2	24.7	9.6
United States	13.4	52.9	5.5	28.2	:	:	:	:	:
OECD-25	15.2	49.9	6.8	27.9	14.3	31.4	12.4	36.4	7.7

Source: OECD Family Database www.oecd.org/social/family/database OECD - Social Policy Division – Directorate of Employment, Labor and Social Affairs, Last updated 31/01/2013

Some questions arise about cohabitation: (i) what is the meaning of these relationships? (ii) are cohabitations real alternatives to marriage or just a phase of family life courses? (iii) do couples want to marry but do they meet obstacles to marriage? (iv) or do they reject marriage in favor of relationships that ensure greater freedom and independence?

3. Cohabitation in Italy

As for other demographic phenomena, the differences between Italy and other European countries in terms of changes in contemporary family are explained through two main hypotheses. Firstly, the hypothesis of “specificity”, according which the case of Italy is not comparable to that of the other Western countries, because the traditional family retains a greater force than elsewhere (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). Therefore, in Italy there is a different model of evolution of the family: the Mediterranean model called “familism” (Reher 1998). The other explanation derives from the hypothesis of “delay”: even in Italy, as the modernization process moves forward, we see a change in the role of women in the family and society. Consequently, the family forms will tend to converge to those of other European countries (Barbagli 1997; Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina 2007). This second assumption seems the more adherent to the reality because things are changing strongly in Italy, both regarding formation and interruption of unions.

The diffusion of cohabitation before marriage has often been considered a major cause of the decline of marriage in Western countries since the 1970s. We can doubt however on the link of cause and effect between the two phenomena, because only in the early spread of cohabitation it has influenced the decline in marriages. In fact, over the years, the marriage rate has decreased so much that *de facto* unions cannot offset it. They will combine the decrease in marriages with the cultural and religious meaning of marriage, which in the eyes of young people no longer appears as an event that marks the transition to adulthood, the access to sexual and reproductive life, but increasingly as an event that regulates unions already established by a period of cohabitation.

The trend of cohabitations and marriages in Italy shows that the two phenomena record very low proportions, index of difficulty of the young Italians to enter into first union. These difficulties relate to access to the labor market, the spread of atypical work, the rigidity of the housing market, all factors making very hard the family transition process (Santoro, 2012).

Among all the countries Italy holds the record of having the highest percentage of young people aged 25-34 that have not entered in union (55%) and the lowest of married (34%), compared to a similarly low proportion of cohabiting and of young people who have experienced cohabitation. An apparent anomaly that finds its explanation in the high primacy held by our country: the highest proportion of young people who still live with their parents and therefore is not yet out of the family home.

In 2013, for the first time the number of marriages drops below the two hundred thousand. 194,057 marriages were in fact celebrated in Italy (13,081 fewer than in

2012). Another sharp decline, therefore, in line with the accentuation of the downward trend in place since 2008: about 53 thousand marriages less than the last five years. The decrease regards mainly the first marriage between spouses of Italian citizenship: 145,571 celebrations in 2013, over 40 thousand less in the past five years. This difference alone explains 77% of the observed decrease in the total number of marriages in 2008-2013. Even marriages after the first decrease, going down from 34,137 in 2008 to 30,691 in 2013, but the pace of decline was smaller than that of the first marriage. Therefore, their share of the total continues to increase, from 13.8% in 2008 to 15.8% in 2013. In 2013, 111,545 marriages were celebrated with religious rite, over 44 thousand less with respect to 2008 (-29%). The changes of the model of marriage do not concern only the intensity of the phenomenon but also the timing. In the countries of Northern Europe, the raising of the age at marriage is related to the period of cohabitation that generally young people under the age of 30 live before deciding to get married. In Italy, instead, the increase of the age at marriage has been one of the results of the extension of the stay of young people in the parental home, the effect of the postponement of the "transition to adulthood".

Currently, we cannot deny the diffusion of cohabitation in Italy. Nearly 6 million Italians have experienced at least a period of cohabitation in their lifetime, considering those who continue to live together, those who are married to the partner with whom lived together, and those who have finally concluded the union (Istat 2012). In less than twenty years cohabitations quadrupled, passing from 227 thousand in 1993-94 to nearly 1 million in 2010-11. The cohabitations between unmarried men and unmarried women increased from 67 thousand to 578mila, almost tenfold. These national trends, however, hide territorial differences, even deep, suggesting the well-known North-South gradient. In fact, cohabitations grow everywhere but the percentage of cohabitations with respect to total marriages in the North is more than three times that of the South (17% vs. 5%).

The phenomenon of marital instability has seen a strong acceleration during the mid-nineties and since 2000 seems to have entered a new phase of growth that is rapidly narrowing the gap with the other countries of Continental Europe and North America. New generations face not only the choice of the "if" and "when" to get married, but also of "whether" to stay married. In 2012, the separations were 88,288 and divorces 51,319, both down from the previous year (respectively -0.6% and -4.6%). The rates of separation and divorce, growing since 1995, have a setback in 2012. For every 1,000 marriages, there are 311 separations and 174 divorces. Comparing marriages celebrated in 1985 with those of 2005, unions interrupted after seven years of separation have doubled, rising from 4.5% to 9.3% (Istat, 2011).

4. Questions and answers of our research

The data on family formation in Italy show that is now in act a revolution of the times and of the ways to form a family, but these data help us to understand only partially why Italians are choosing to marry or to live together without marrying. The explanation of these mechanisms is the reason of our qualitative research carried out through focus groups interviews (FGIs) that aims (a) to learn more about the meaning of the choices in terms of cohabitation and marriage in Italy (b) to add to the numbers the subjective perception and the direct witnesses of people.

This research is part of an international project coordinated by Brienna Perelli-Harris, University of Southampton, supported by ERC Starting Grant (CHILDCOHAB). The scholars included in this research conducted focus groups in towns and cities: Australia (Sydney), Austria (Vienna), Germany (Lübeck and Rostock), Italy (Florence), Norway (Oslo), Netherlands (Rotterdam), Poland (Warsaw), United Kingdom (Southampton), Russia (Moscow), and Switzerland (Lausanne). Participants to the FGIs are stratified by gender and education (high vs. low medium) in order to facilitate conversations.

In the city of Florence, 58 people between 25 and 40 years participated to FGIs. Recruiting has been conducted by distributing flyers in theaters, in faculties, in sports clubs and shopping malls, with an incentive of 20 Euro. Each focus group lasted around 90 minutes and was based on a standard questionnaire, which is the track of the discussion, the same for the different countries, to make the results comparable. Our study does not claim to be representative either at national or for the city of Florence. However, although the ideas that emerged from the witness of the participants depend on the composition of the sample, and can therefore be biased towards those who are more willing to express their opinion, the concepts outlined in the course of the research were recurrent in all the meetings. For this reason, we think that our thoughts would remain essentially the same even with different samples.

The questions of the qualitative survey are the following: The case of Italy in Europe, "atypical" or "late"? What are the reasons that lead to marriage or living together? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the two types of union? Is there something blocking marriage? How are cohabitations perceived in a context like Italy, where legislation does not recognize the rights and duties of unmarried couples?

In tables 2-4, we reported the more frequent words that have been cited in the meetings from the participants according to gender, level of education and to these variables together. As we can note, the differences in the language are quite strong: women are different from men, underlining the importance of the members of the family, while men seem to speak more about legal facts, duties and rights. Women

that are more educated refer to culture, stable work cohabitation and choices while less educated ones often use the reference to God and protection. The issue of homosexual bonds emerges among more educated men, while it does not appear among the less educated ones, often speaking about alimonies.

The issues on which we questioned are the following, with reference to the major components of the track of the questionnaire. The first question concerns the reason cohabiting and not marrying, that is why more and more couples live together without getting married. The reasons are that to dissolve cohabitation is simpler, that to marry is expensive and to divorce even more (economic reasons push to cohabitation), that nowadays the process of secularization is more diffused than ever, and consequently, there is, in particular among more educated persons, a public refusal of the institution of marriage. Finally, barriers to marriage, related to economic uncertainty and insecurity of working, are cited. The second question, on the other side, is the following: why do people still get married? The voices of the participants underline the role of tradition and family and society pressure, but also the spread of the marriage as a romantic ideal and a still alive institution. Last but not least (in particular if there are children) in the conversations emerged the importance of the normative benefits.

We want to focus on two factors that push people to cohabit: the first is the religion and the second the labor uncertainty.

5. Cohabitation and the process of secularization

In the researchs on Europe and North America, cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation have often been discussed from the perspective of the SDT (Seltzer 2000; Kiernan 2001; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). The spread of cohabitation is regarded in fact because of rising expectations of personal autonomy, rejection of church and state intervention in the regulation of private life, the growing importance of personal satisfaction within the couple relationship and secularization, a multidimensional and complex social process (Lesthaeghe 2010).

With the term secularization, we intend an overall reduction in religious tradition and practice (for a general review of the concept see Gorski and Altinordu 2008; for a review of the concept with specific reference to Mediterranean Europe see Kosmin and Keysar, 2009). In sum, a process characterized by the withdrawal from traditional religious beliefs and a decline in subjective religiosity among individuals (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988; van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). In this context, Italy represents an interesting case study.

Attachment to Catholic values and the strong position of the Roman Catholic Church constitute key elements that characterize Italian society (Vignoli and Salvini, 2014). The Church forbids pre-marital sex, cohabitation, and divorce, whereas a high value is placed on marriage and family life. In addition, the presence of the Vatican City within the national borders makes Italy a unique setting for studying the links between religion and family choices. Italian demographers and sociologists have often linked the strong attachment to Catholic values to the delayed diffusion in Italy of new family behaviors such as cohabitation, marital dissolution, or non-marital childbearing (De Sandre et al. 1997; Barbagli and Saraceno 1997; Angeli, Pillati, and Rettaroli 1999; Barbagli 2000; Castiglioni, 1999; Barbagli, Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2003; De Rose, Racioppi, and Zanatta 2008; Zanatta 2008; De Rose and Vignoli 2011).

Table 2 – Language by gender

Women	Men
Child	Advantage
Household	Son
Husband	Bond
To change	Legal

Table 3 – Language by education

Low-medium education	High education
Low	Cultural
To be afraid	De facto
God	Choice
To be protected	Stability

Despite its orientation towards placing a high value on traditional marriage, however, contemporary Italy is faced with a rising breakdown of marriages and a growing flexibility of union patterns. As we have above underlined, in less than 20 years, between 1993 and 2011, the number of cohabiting unions increased strongly (Istat 2011). In addition, the diffusion of cohabitation is no longer confined solely to certain social groups or to certain geographical areas (Gabrielli and Hoem 2010; Gabrielli and Vignoli 2013). Interestingly, the diffusion of cohabitation is

developing hand in hand with a slow but continuous process of secularization. This trend towards greater secularization is suggested by the generalized decrease in participation in public religious practice and in particular in rites of passage (e.g., baptism, communion, Church wedding), as well as by a decrease in religious vocations (Sansonetti 2009).

Table 4 – *Language by gender and education*

Women, low-medium education	Women, high education	Men, low-medium education	Men, high education
He	Stable work	Son	De-facto
Beatiful	Choice	Duties	Duties
Mum	Cohabitation	Bonds	Bonds
Needed	“Italians”	Alimonies	Society
Protection	Child	Grandfathers	Homosexual

We want to discuss here three potential contexts of interaction between religion and union formation: (1) Catholic precepts, (2) social pressure, and (3) tradition. First, in Catholic morality, premarital sexual relations are not only disapproved but definitely excluded. Hence, Catholic people should opt for marriage rather than cohabitation. Second, individuals may experience social pressure to marry. Religiosity may not only affect individual-level behavior by promoting specific norms or rules, but it may also promote broader values or principles that influence family formation indirectly. Third, an important context in which religion interacts with family formation lies in the power of tradition. The term tradition usually refers to the transmission over time of memories, social or historical events, customs, rituals, and religious beliefs within a group or society (e.g., family traditions). Giddens (1994) sees tradition as something bound to ritual, where ritual guarantees the continuation of tradition. Although the concept of tradition is clearly intertwined with familial and social pressure towards marriage, it allows us to explore the link between religion and union choices from a different angle. The Catholic Church maintains a strong influence in many societies, especially in Southern Europe, also in light of the prevailing tradition. Adult children must rely on prevailing customs and habits when making their own choices. From this perspective, many Catholics preserve religion merely as a form of social identity and tradition, going to church only for rites of passage (Pierucci and Prandi 2000). Marrying in Church is perhaps the most important of such rites (Dittgen 1995).

As one participant to our FGIs stated, “I am a religious person, so I believe in marriage, not in cohabitation” (FG2, woman, highly educated). One female informant put this clearly, “I married 10 years ago, when I was young ... I decided to get married in church because I am a practicing Catholic... the marriage has a value beyond a civil union.” (FG2, woman, highly educated). Interestingly, the overall process of secularization seems to have made this group of “deep believers” increasingly selective. Within this group, some participants revealed that they are happy that cohabitation is now spreading rapidly in Italy, because in the future only genuinely religious people will opt for marriage, in a conscious way. Importantly, even among this cluster of practicing Catholics, there were no specific references to Catholic precepts and dogmas.

At the other extreme, a cluster of highly educated people recurrently mentioned a connection between cohabitation and secularization. Individuals participating to different FGIs who were extremely opposed to conventional social norms and the Church form this group. For instance, the following participants put this concept very clearly: “[cohabitation] is a personal, even ideological, cultural choice, because I don’t like [the idea] of getting married” (FG2, woman, highly educated); “I reject the *marriage system* and I do not want to help preserve it forever” (FG3, man, highly educated). For these higher educated participants, cohabitation means a strong form of commitment in itself that is perceived as at least as important as a traditional (religious) marriage. A highly educated woman stated “...cohabitation is already per se a commitment. When my partner and I decided to start living together, it was like deciding to get married: it was exactly the same thing” (FG1, woman, highly educated). For this cluster of highly educated people, people cohabiting work harder at the quality of the relationship, i.e. “the advantage of cohabitation is this: you wake up in the morning and if you want to leave, you can leave, and so... you have to choose to stay” (FG4, man, highly educated).

6. Cohabitation, marriage and economic uncertainty

If cultural and religious factor influence the choice of people in terms of union, economic factor – in particular work uncertainty – modify the intensity and the timing of union. Recent studies have shown that cohabitation in some countries can be related to socioeconomic disadvantage and entered as an alternative to marriage by people with few economic resources or poor economic expectations (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Kiernan et al. 2011). In this case, the aim of our qualitative analysis was to explore mechanisms through which employment uncertainty might be important for the decision to cohabit or marry. We identified all passages where motivation to marry or cohabit were discussed in the transcripts. We applied

bottom-up coding procedures to this material to identify main themes appearing in discussions. Special attention was paid to any reference to precarious forms of employment and the categories were systematically compared to investigate the mechanisms via which employment uncertainty intertwines with relationship choices (Vignoli et al., 2015).

There is a generalized need for greater stability in the labor market, as this male participant pointed out: “I graduated, but I’m currently unemployed, I even accepted to carry out several unpaid training periods ... we are this new generation that lives hoping in God, holding only temporary contracts: Everything is postponed until a moment of stability in life...” (FG 4; man, high education). When partners have jobs of unlimited duration, they can get married. As one informant stated, “it is important to have at least one permanent job, at least one fixed point in life!” (FG 8; man, low education). Another informant put this very clearly: “The right moment to get married arrives with a stable job! I am 32, but I continue to get one-year contracts only, so with my partner we say: we will get married as soon as we have a secure point in our life. In fact, I don’t even know if I’ll still live in Florence next year ... and this is the fault of my job!” (FG 1; woman, high education). The spread of job precariousness seems to affect the decision to marry also by acting as a financial barrier to the wedding ceremony: “Getting married is expensive! I married in April at a small ceremony, with only few people and simple catering at my place. But we still had to spend money and not everybody can afford it.” (FG 1; woman, high education)

On the other hand, the same reasons that are perceived as inhibitors to marriage are also mentioned among the major motivations beyond the choice to cohabit. The following quote is representative of this state of affairs: “People cohabit due to money shortages, definitely, and due to precarious working conditions. These reasons are more important than anything else!” (FG 5; woman; low education). Uncertainty on the labor market is associated with uncertainty in private life, where cohabitation is preferred to a more “stable” marriage. In fact, cohabiting is easier to disrupt than marriage and may be seen as an opportunity to test the functioning of a relationship, «a sort of test». For example, one participant argued: “With cohabitation there are no problems if you decide to split, you just need to say “thanks and goodbye”, and that’s it!” (FG 3; man, high education). When both partners have reached a permanent employment status, then the “right time” to reach also a permanent status in their relationship seems to follow soon after, in a sort of “time-squeeze”. The following quotes are representative of this situation: “Stable job for him, stable job for myself, 4 months later we got married, 9 months later I was pregnant... we were ready! I mean: finally we have some protection, we have some rights... we can go!” (FG 1; woman, high education). “If you have a

permanent job, then you can also make a permanent choice!” (FG 2; woman, high education)

In all, informants believe that economic circumstances matter for marriage. Based on our study, we can therefore advance the hypothesis that marriage is linked to employment stability, while cohabitation is linked to employment uncertainty. Few qualitative studies, to our knowledge, in particular for Italy, analyzed the mechanisms of formation of the partnership. Among these, we recall the recent surveys conducted among women living in two cities, Bologna and Cagliari, made in order to understand the effect of family background on the decision to live together (Schröder, 2008). The analysis, conducted through in-depth interviews, reveals the different levels of acceptance that parents have towards cohabitation. Traditionalist parents tend to criticize the informal union of their daughters, even if the daughters see cohabitation as a step before the wedding. Parents with modern values and attitudes, on the contrary, accept more easily their children's choice of cohabitation, including the cohabitation agreement as an alternative to marriage.

Santoro (2012) too conducted a survey with in-depth interviews, choosing Milan as the urban context. As in our survey carried out in Florence, her results suggest that choosing marriage implies having reached a stable social-economic status, while cohabitation, because of its reversible characteristic, may be associated to uncertainty status. For example, living together without marrying for the younger generation could represent a strategy to adapt their life to the precarious condition of the labor market. Retracing together with the participant to the interview way and timing of the transition to adulthood (achievement of economic independence, of autonomy at home, choosing to live together and to have the first child) allows to highlight the structural constraints existing before and while choosing to live together and, later, when marrying.

7. Concluding

We must now take a summary of what has been said so far. The results of our qualitative research suggest that at present, a strong secularization process is in act and consequently living together without marrying is becoming increasingly widespread. Within this process, we can distinguish two positions. For some (the vast majority), cohabitation is a later stage in life paths less and less standardized. Living together without being married is part of a more general process, which sees a series of tests and referrals, waiting for the stable employment, the right apartment and finally the right partner. Cohabitation offers the possibility to follow a gradual process; it establishes a union as a simple engagement and it is not yet a

definitive commitment like marriage. Living together without being married, you can check the relationship during the every-day life, a process where the marriage is still the ultimate goal. For others (a group still selected) cohabitation is seen as a “real” alternative to marriage. Proponents of this view believe that the partners commit themselves daily for the quality of their relation, while in marriage the spouses often are satisfied to be together even if the bond is no longer good as before. This group of participants do not accept marriage, because they do not see any reason to get married, now or in the future, and the value of marriage is denied.

However, marriage is not losing its centrality in Italy. Why? Tradition and religion are certainly crucial aspects in this response. The powerful role of the Catholic Church and the presence of the Vatican City within national boundaries, are highly decisive factors in the patterns of family formation. In addition, there is a pressure in favor of marriage from the family of origin, which perceives the child as really “settled” only if he/she is married. Nevertheless, the family of origin is not the unique entity that matters. Respondents often perceive even a more general social pressure from “the others” that, in the case of cohabitation, do not believe that the two partners are a true couple. Religion acts through the powerful role of tradition too: celebrating the church wedding is still an important rite of passage in the lives of many Italians.

Looking at the overall role of religion as it emerges from our witnesses, Italians do not seem to attribute much importance to the precepts and dogmas of the Church, since specific references to Catholic doctrine were completely absent from the narratives of participants.

Marriage clashes today not only with the growing secularization of behaviors, but also with powerful economic obstacles. These obstacles derive from the longest economic crisis that modern Italy has ever lived (Sabbadini, 2013). First, a wedding in a cultural context such as the Italian one, where the importance of the ceremony plays a major role, is now expensive. Among the participants, it emerged a widespread sentiment that recognizes in the cost of the ceremony - whether civil or religious - a major deterrent to the choice to marry. Sometimes the cost of the wedding might compete with the choice (and, hence, the cost) to have a child. This is an interesting result, because, in our view, relatively new in the literature. One might conclude that - in theory - having a child is in competition with the formalization of union or, in other words, that couples choose, in an evaluation of costs and benefits, to allocate funds, in itself limited, in parenting rather than in marriage. Secondly, the dissolution of marriage is expensive too, even if today there is a new law that strongly reduces the times of separation preceding divorce. Many young people seem to prefer living together so to avoid the difficulties of the possible dissolution of an unhappy marriage. Consequently, the simplification of divorce law can, ironically enough, to encourage marriage. Thirdly, there is an

additional and important obstacle to marriage: the growing instability in the workplace affects and limits the family and life plans of many young people. The increasing economic uncertainty that characterizes today's Italy is widening the postponement of the assumption of responsibilities of adulthood. Consequently, also family choices become more uncertain, and definitive choices increasingly procrastinate over time. In this phase of Italian history, cohabitation translates into a coherent choice in life paths the increasing uncertainty of work.

As we have noted, the marriage has not lost, however, its centrality in the opinions and perceptions of individuals, despite the increasing constraints that it faces. At the same time, the free choice to live together is a phenomenon in net increase, which institutions must take into account. For a minority of respondents, in fact, living together is a perfect match between the lifestyle choice and their ideological beliefs. Nevertheless, cohabitation suffers from severe disadvantages of legislative nature. A serious problem concerns the rights of the partners. Among people who do not want to get married too, the lack of legal recognition of the rights of cohabiting leads to a clear request to the legislature to formalize the status of a partner.

Our analysis has also dealt with a very salient issue in the Italian debate that is used by many politicians to argue against the legal recognition of the rights of people living together. Namely, whether heterosexual partners have the opportunity to formalize their union through a marriage (whether civil or religious), why do they require a formalization of cohabitation, when they could just get married? The answer to this question is two-fold: the cost of divorce and the ideology that contrasts the marriage as an institution.

In summary, our analysis puts contemporary Italy at a crucial stage. On the one hand, marriage is compared with at least two challenges: the increasing secularization of behavior in a still traditional society and the recent economic downturn, so that the cost of the wedding is increasingly a clear barrier to marriage itself. On the other hand, our results suggest that the increase in cohabitation has not devalued the concept of marriage but, conversely, it can be a way to preserve and protect marriage as an ideal long-term commitment, a nest where raising children.

Finally, we would like to conclude with a brief comment. The theme of the research, which revolves around the big question "Living Together or get married?", is a current topic of great interest, now entered in the agenda of the cultural, social and political debate of our country. A subject like this divides and creates ideological clashes. In our qualitative research - based on the life histories and opinions of participants - the final reflections do not answer the big question, but define some different profiles of people that compound the constellations of intellectual positions in Italy on union choice.

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SUMMARY

LIVING IN COUPLE. MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION IN A CHANGING ITALY

It is a well-known and documented fact that family structures and family forms have changed considerably throughout Europe since the 1960s and 1970s. As for other demographic phenomena, the differences between Italy and other European countries in terms of changes in contemporary family are explained through two main hypotheses. Firstly, the hypothesis of “specificity”, according which the case of Italy is not comparable to that of the other Western countries, because the traditional family retains a greater force than elsewhere. Secondly, there is the hypothesis of the “delay”: in Italy too, as the modernization process moves forward, we see a change in the role of women in the family and society. Consequently, the family forms will tend to converge to those of other European countries. As the data on family formation in Italy show that is now in act a revolution of the times and of the ways to form a family, we retain the second hypothesis. Nevertheless, these data help us to understand only partially why Italians are choosing to marry or to live together without marrying. The explanation of these mechanisms is the reason of our qualitative research carried out through focus groups interviews (FGIs). The results of our qualitative research suggest that at present, a strong secularization process is in act and consequently living together without marrying is becoming increasingly widespread. In addition, there is a pressure in favor of marriage from the family of origin. However, marriage clashes today not only with the growing secularization of behaviors, but also with powerful economic obstacles. These obstacles derive from the longest economic crisis that modern Italy has ever lived. First, a wedding in a cultural context such as the Italian one, where the importance of the ceremony plays a major role, is now expensive. Sometimes the cost of the wedding might compete with the choice (and, hence, the cost) to have a child. This is an interesting result, because, in our view, relatively new in the literature. Secondly, the dissolution of marriage is expensive too, even if today there is a new law that strongly reduces the times of separation preceding divorce. Finally, our results show that there is an additional and important obstacle to marriage: the growing instability in the workplace affects and limits the family and life plans of many young people.

