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Provisional Abstract

The Changing Meaning of Cohabitation: Evidence from Bologna, Italy

In Italy the development of cohabitation is characterized by hesitant diffusion. Only a few couples opt for this new form of living arrangement – they are mainly from the urban centers of northern Italy. In general, it is argued that economic dependence on the family, the rigid structure of the housing market, high youth unemployment rates as well as traditionally strong family ties hamper the diffusion of non-marital unions. In order to reveal the mechanisms behind the decision to cohabit, we conduct semi-structured in-depth-interviews with women in Bologna, the capital city of the northern Italian region Emilia-Romagna. Our preliminary findings support the hypothesis that a change in the meaning of cohabitation is indeed taking place in (northern) Italy. The analyses draw attention to the fact that informal unions in Italy are shaped by a ‘Mediterranean’ character – Billari and Rosina (2004) refer to this phenomenon as ‘convivenza all’Italiana’.

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INTRODUCTION

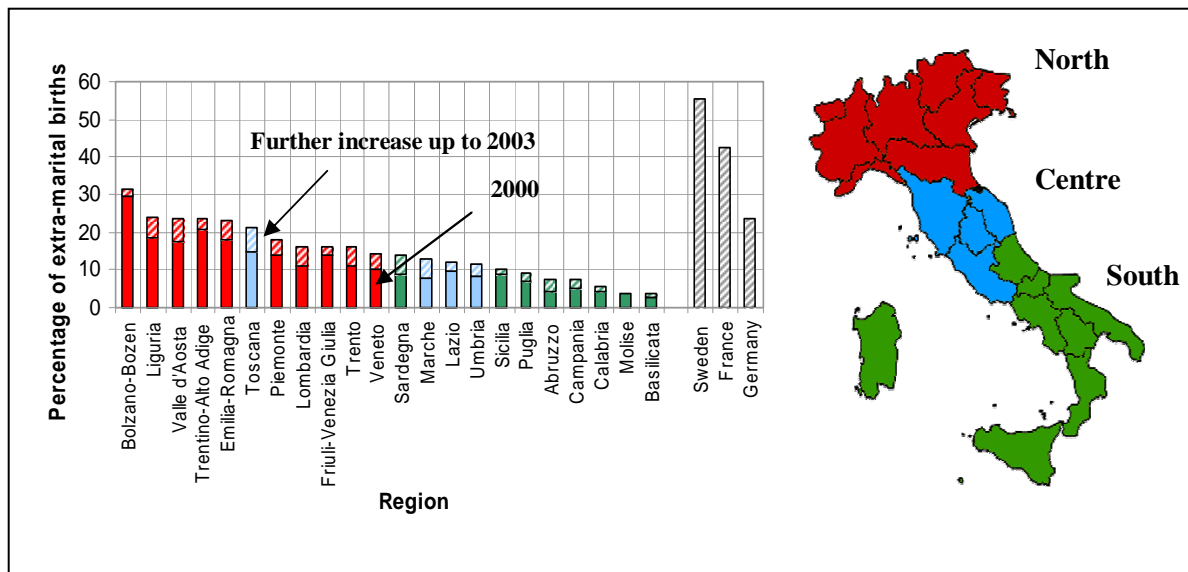
Most central and northern European countries witnessed a strong increase in informal unions over the past 25–30 years. This trend, however, does not apply to the Mediterranean countries. In southern Europe, cohabitation figures tend to remain low; this in contrast to Denmark, where 45% of all women aged 20 to 24 cohabited in 1996 (about 15% in the Netherlands and West Germany) whereas in Italy no case of cohabiting women was found for this age group. Considering Italian women aged 30–34, only 4% lived in cohabitation at that time (Kiernan 1999, based on Eurobarometer 1996). The higher diffusion of informal unions among the older young adults in Italy reflects the so-called “postponement syndrome”, typical for Mediterranean regions: Obviously, these areas experience not only late exit from the parental home, late entry into first marriage, and postponed first childbirth (Moreno Minguez 2003), but also late transition to cohabitation. Another particular characteristic of Italian family formation is the fact that – in contrast to most European countries – decreasing marriage rates do not lead to a rise in cohabitation. Instead, among the European countries, Italy is shaped by the highest percentage of women who are single: In 1996 this applied to more than 60% of women aged 25–29 (Kiernan 1999). Thus, the Italian situation is characterized by a vacuum: the drop in marriage rates was not compensated by any modern living arrangement.

Moreover, we find a large extent of regional heterogeneity in this country. In 2001, of all Italian couples 3.6% were living in cohabitation. In the northern regions the proportion was between 5 and 8%, whereas in the south the figure was under 2% (ISTAT 2001a, Censimento) – although a traditional kind of cohabitation is existing there: Poor couples who can not afford to marry flee from their home villages in order to set up home with their partners (the so-called “fuitine”). We are interested in the modern kind of cohabitation, however, which is mainly spreading in the northern regions of Italy. In this area, big cities are among those with the strongest increase in informal unions. Between 1991 and 2001, cohabitation figures in Italy rose from 1.57% to 3.64%, with the northern regions witnessing an average growth of about 3.1% (own calculations based on Sabbadini 1997 referring to Censimento 1991 and ISTAT 2001a, Censimento). Considering not only the spread of cohabitation, but also the development of extra-marital births, we notice that between 2000 and 2003 some Italian regions show an increase of more than 5%. Emilia-Romagna, for instance,

experienced a rise in extra-marital births from 17.8% in 2000 to 22.9% in 2003. In the latter year, most northern Italian regions was percentages above 15%, some even more than 20% (see Figure 1). Both the development of informal unions and the rise in births out-of-wedlock can be seen as indicators for a change in family formation in Italy.

Apart from the lower diffusion of non-marital unions, cohabitation in Italy differs also in its meaning from that of other European countries. Prinz (1995) distinguishes four stages in the diffusion of informal unions in Europe: cohabitation as deviant behavior, as prelude to marriage, as a socially accepted living arrangement equal to marriage (even when having children), and the convergence of marriage and cohabitation to one type of lifestyle. Whereas in the Nordic countries nonmarital unions are socially accepted as an alternative to marriage, in Italy cohabitation remains a mixture of deviant behavior and a precursor to marriage.

Figure 1: Percentages of extra-marital births by region, Italy (2000, 2003), Sweden, France, and Germany (2000).



Source: ISTAT, Annuario Statistico Italiano 2001b, 2004; Council of Europe, Demographic Yearbook 2003.

Previous research found that economic dependence on the family, the rigid structure of the housing market (Holdsworth/Iraozqui Solda 2002; Tomassini et al. 2003), and the high rate of youth unemployment (De Sandre et al. 1997; Ferrera 1996,

1997; Menniti et al. 2000) contribute to the fact that young men and women are not able to form autonomous households of their own. In comparison to their European counterparts, Italian adults stay at their parental home for a longer period of time and leave it less frequently (Tuorto 2002; Sgritta 2002). Furthermore, the strong-family-ties approach argues that the relationship between Italian parents and their adult children is characterized by the strong economic and emotional involvement of parents in the life of their offspring. Since marriage is still seen as a cultural norm, parents tend to discourage their children from entering cohabitation (Reher 2004; Rosina/Fraboni 2004).

In order to reveal how these cultural norms, institutional conditions, and economic constraints affect females' decisions for or against cohabitation in northern Italy, we use qualitative research methods to focus on the decision-making-process. We conduct semi-structured in-depth-interviews in Bologna with cohabiting women and women, who married after previous cohabitation, women with and without children. In detail, the interviews and their analysis concentrate on the question whether women who decided for cohabitation (and in several cases for subsequent marriage) perceive differences regarding meaning and expectations between cohabitation and marriage. We look for the kind of motivations, norms, and values that lead women to decide for one living arrangement or the other, we analyze the mechanisms behind their decision and how these mechanisms affect the decision-making-process. In particular, we investigate the impact of factors such as housing, parental pressure, and economic uncertainty – factors that are usually mentioned as reasons for the lower diffusion of cohabitation in Italy. Finally, we analyze the link between cohabitation, marriage, and first childbirth. It seems to be conceivable that the ongoing growth of informal unions may also have an impact on extra-marital births. Rising acceptance of informal unions may lead to a further increase in births out-of-wedlock and a decrease in informal unions that convert to marriage when giving birth to a child.

DATA AND METHODS

Previous research has focused only sporadically on the question, why some Italian adults enter non-marital union and others rather choose marriage. Existing

studies on this issue rely mainly on quantitative approaches. This may be problematic, as the number of events is low. In order to focus on the decision-making-process, it is necessary to use methods that permit an extensive consideration of this phenomenon within its daily frame of reference: methods, which identify the meaning of cohabitation and marriage, and the underlying norms and expectations of and reasons for the personal behavior. Therefore we conduct a qualitative analysis, which provides a deeper understanding of the social phenomena (Silverman 2001).

In our study, we focus on Bologna, the capital city of the northern Italian region Emilia-Romagna. Here, the share of informal unions rose from 2.7% of all couples in 1991 to 7.6% in 2001 (Sabbadini 1997; ISTAT 2001a, Censimento). In the urban centers of northern Italy, we find mainly young, employed adults with higher education and without children who decide for cohabitation (Sabbadini 1997). Bologna – traditionally governed by more liberal left-wing parties – takes up a particular position with respect to cohabitation: The area witnesses a stronger increase in informal unions than do other northern Italian regions – this applies not only to the cities, but also to the countryside. Only the small area of Valle d’Aosta, situated at the border with France, experienced a stronger increase (own calculations based on Sabbadini 1997 referring to Censimento 1991 and ISTAT 2001a, Censimento).

In our – still ongoing – study, we conduct about 30 semi-structured in-depth-interviews. We concentrate on women aged 25 to 40 who are currently cohabiting or who married after previous cohabitation; women with and without children. For sampling purposes, we use both a register with women living in Bologna and the snowball-method. Our sample consists of women living in different parts of the city and having different kinds of occupations. Although we did not sample for education, most of our interviewed women have higher educational degrees, corresponding with earlier findings (Rosina/Fraboni 2004). The interviews have a duration of about 60 to 90 minutes each. During the talk, we focus on several main topics, such as the decision for cohabitation (and marriage), family relations, the parents’ reactions to cohabitation, the decision for a child etc. After the interview, the respondent answers a short questionnaire on her socio-demographic characteristics. The interviews are recorded, transcribed, and coded. Recording and transcribing enables us to go back to the data several times. The coding and categorizing of the interviews is inspired by grounded theory, a procedure developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for analyzing qualitative data. Furthermore, we use memos as an intermediate step between coding

and analyzing (Charmaz 2000). So far, we have realized about 16 interviews and will finish field work with about 30 interviews by the end of October 2005.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Analyzing the interviews we conducted so far, we observe an interesting aspect in the life course of women living in Bologna: We found that a large number of women reported that they felt inexperienced in life when they left university. Several of them used the time after their studies for self-discovery.

“In reality, with 26 you have hardly finished your studies, you try to build your future ... I was really a child at that age. (...) Certainly, I never would have married with 25 ... because it’s an age at which you are looking for the direction you want to take, what you want to do, even as far as work is concerned ... what you want to do when you are grown-up” (married woman (34), childless)

We assume that this shift in the stages of life is part of the postponement syndrome. Since a whole range of structural and cultural reasons hamper an early exit from the parental home, Italian adults tend to set up an independent household at a later point in time than their European counterparts, often after having completed their education and after several years of employment (Rossi 1997; Menniti et al. 2000). We assume that it is only now that they have the opportunity to experience a phase of self-discovery. On the other side, we observe the same phenomenon among women who left home in order to study in another place. Nevertheless, these women reached financial independence only after their studies. Since Italy is shaped by particular strong family ties (Reher 2004), we suspect that parents impact more or less their children’s life, especially when the latter are economically dependent on them. Thus, young adults need to wait for their economic independence before they can enter a phase of adult-stage self-discovery. Because young adults reach financial autonomy at a very late point in time in Italy, we believe that even within the Italian society a certain “postponed” time frame exists that is meant for family formation. The analysis we conducted so far supports this suggestion. In addition, we noticed that a large majority of our interviewees left the parental home at their early twenties, either to study or during their studies. Some of them experienced different living arrangements,

such as sharing a flat or living in a student's residence. Others stayed abroad for a relatively long period. We hypothesize that there is a relationship between early home leaving and the decision to cohabit. Since these women achieved already in their early adulthood the preconditions for setting up cohabitation (such as having a flat and a job), they have better opportunities and probably more incentives to enter cohabitation when they are older. It is possible that living on one's own results in a change in norms and attitudes and thus in an orientation towards more liberal living arrangements. Having also the necessary preconditions for cohabitation may favor entry into this kind of living arrangement.

Furthermore, we suggest on the basis of our first analyses that a change in the meaning of cohabitation is taking place in Italy. Since the 1990s, when Prinz (1995) claimed that cohabitation has shifted from deviant behavior to a prelude to marriage, strong changes in Italy in the development of cohabitation have been occurring. Prinz (1995) assumed that the higher diffusion of non-marital partnerships also favors a change in the meaning of cohabitation. And indeed, as far as Bologna is concerned we find that nowadays cohabitation is seen both as a prelude and alternative to marriage. Some of our interviewed women emphasized that they regard cohabitation only as a first stage in their relationship:

“For me, cohabitation was important because it was an instrument for staying together, but it was nothing definitive. I didn't like the situation at all. (...) I believe in family and somehow the family must be given an officially acknowledged framework. Therefore it was an important moment to say 'o.k., now we marry, we continue this way.'” (married woman (37), childless)

Some women decided against marriage as such, even when having children or at least the intention to have them in the near future. They attach particular importance to what they perceive as equal status between marriage and cohabitation:

“For me and also for my partner, our relation is of the same value as marriage” (cohabiting woman (34), childless)

As far as the relationship between first childbirth and entry into marriage is concerned, we notice that among our interviewed women who are currently cohabiting we found women with the desire to have children (or who have them already) as well as women without such intentions. When considering women

currently married, we notice that all of them either have children or they have a strong intention to have a child in the near future.

“One reason for marriage was to start a family. At the moment, we do not have children, but in future we would like to have some” (married woman (34), childless)

What becomes obvious is that within the discussion on cohabitation as a preliminary step or an alternative to marriage, intended or realized childbirth is essential. The women in our sample who consider their cohabitation as prelude to marriage tend to enter the conjugal bond when giving birth to a child or when intending to do so in the near future. The women who consider their relationship as an alternative to marriage do not marry even when becoming a mother.

As to the influence of the parents on their children’s decision, we notice that families who originally come from Bologna or the northern parts of Italy have more tolerant attitudes on family formation than their southern counterparts. Most parents and sometimes especially mothers support their adult daughters when these leave home and enter into cohabitation.

“At some stage my parents told me ‘leave, it’s the right moment’. They gave me the impetus to say ‘yes, you will see, everything will be fine’, and at this point it was very nice ... in the beginning when I moved to my flat, I slept at my parents’ home now and then, but only in the beginning ... “ (cohabiting woman (34), childless)

“When I decided to cohabit I was 27, I had already lived on my own for years, thus I had some experience. My mother never would have allowed herself to say ‘no’” (cohabiting woman (36), childless)

Cases with parents having more difficulties in accepting their daughter’s cohabitation are mainly found among families coming from the south of Italy. In general, these parents accept their daughter’s decision after some discussions. Having a stable employment position and thus economic independence makes it easier for these women to enter informal union.

“Maybe some years ago it would have been something that cannot be suggested, they (her parents) would have felt very bad. But on the one side, I was already grown up when I started cohabiting, I have been living in Bologna

for several years; on the other side I was economically independent and therefore they did not have the power to decide otherwise or to veto in my life. I knew that cohabitation was not the ideal solution for them and that they wanted me to marry, but they didn't let me feel bad, they didn't criticize me, neither did they hamper me somehow... it was something said between the lines, that means I knew that they wanted me to marry someday ...” (married woman (36), one child)

Some of our interviewed women even keep their cohabitation secret. They are afraid that their parents would not understand and support their decision. The strong consideration of the parent's reactions and the attempt to calm them down lead us to suggest that women try to avoid any confrontation with their parents, especially when they perceive their parents to have a strong traditional attitude towards family formation.

CONCLUSION

Our preliminary findings support the hypothesis that a change in the meaning of cohabitation is taking place in northern Italy. Cohabitation in Bologna is mainly seen as a mixture between a prelude and alternative to marriage. Some women who explicitly decided for cohabitation instead of the conjugal bond emphasized that they regarded marriage and cohabitation to be of equal status. Furthermore, the analysis we conducted so far provides evidence for the special character of cohabitation in Italy: With reference to the postponement syndrome, we observe that young adults experience an adult phase of self-discovery at a relatively late point in time (after university). We argue that there is a positive relationship between this postponed phase and the relatively long economic dependence of young adults on their parents, which is due to the Italian welfare system and the particular strong family ties in Italian society. Postponement of entry into marital and non-marital relationships seems to be related to a late adult phase of self-discovery in southern Italy. This means that cohabitation gains a special importance for couples and that it is seen less as a probationary phase. Whereas young couples in other European countries often enter cohabitation in order to experiment a new way of life, Italian adults choose cohabitation at a later point in time and often with the intention to set up a family. Based on our first interviews we suspect that there is a link between early home

leaving and the decision to cohabit. The majority of our interviewees left home at their early twenties. We argue that early home leaving favors the development of more liberal attitudes towards family formation. What becomes obvious as well is the higher tolerance of parents coming from Bologna or any other northern region. Parents coming from the south of Italy have stronger difficulties accepting their daughter's decision to enter informal union. In conclusion, we find in Bologna a more tolerant atmosphere towards modern living arrangements such as cohabitation than the theory on cohabitation in Italy would lead us to expect. Even when couples decide not to marry at all, they have no real difficulties defending their decision. As a result, cohabitation may spread more rapidly than in the past.

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