

Does premarital cohabitation have a negative impact on the stability of marriage? Empirical evidence for the Italian case.

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1. Research issue

The phase preceding union formation belongs to the crucial process of individual development, well-known in the literature as transition to adulthood. In the classical approach of Modell and colleagues (1976) this process involves several transitions: leaving formal education, entering the labour market, leaving parental home, forming a co-residential union with a partner (cohabiting or getting married), having a first child. The existing literature predicts that both the timing and the sequencing of events are expected to have an impact on the following careers (Waite et al., 1986; Beets et al., 1999). For instance, what people do before marriage could influence the union stability. In this sense, Zeman (2002) shows that adults who lived alone after leaving their parental home also present a higher propensity to disrupt marriage. However, we want to focus on premarital cohabitation. The international literature (especially focusing on the American experience) suggests that divorce rates are higher for who cohabit before marriage than for who married without living together first.

The mechanisms able to explain this result can be substantially of two different kinds: selectivity and causation.

Firstly, it might happen that some specific paths or timing of events are easily experienced by certain groups of individuals, with characteristics that are likely to influence union stability. More specifically, it has been pointed out that individuals who cohabit before marriage are generally less oriented to perceive marriage as an "institution" with respect to individuals who marry directly, i.e. they are characterized by a stronger attachment to individualistic values, typically associated with propensities to union dissolution.

From the causal point of view, having experienced a certain event brings itself some consequences: individuals who cohabit before marriage not only have different characteristics from those who married directly, but at the same time, due to cohabitation, they might have developed different attitudes and value orientations. The experience of cohabitation might be associated with the development of behaviours that make success in marriage more difficult, even if this mechanism has not been found to be statistically significant by Lillard et al. (1995). At the opposite, we can hypothesize that a period of cohabitation means a first and useful screening mechanism: it gives the chance to gain in advance information toward the potential spouse and the kind of life the couple would entail, therefore constituting a protection factor toward divorce.

In any case, the mechanism could depend by the cultural and institutional settings, as the literature has repeatedly shown. For instance, premarital cohabitation seems to have different effects on the divorce risk in different societies (Dourleijn and Liebroer, 2002). In this respect, the Italian case

appears particularly interesting since divorce has been formally introduced quite recently in the Italian regulation and given the low diffusion of cohabitations.

Briefly, the main substantive questions we wish to answer are the following: how does having experienced events as cohabitation, impact on subsequent marriage instability? Which is the most important mechanism between selectivity and causation?

We will try to give an answer in the Italian case using through a simultaneous statistical analysis, of selection and causation elements in partnership instability due to premarital cohabitation.

2. Methodology and data

In order to study interrelated trajectories we will apply event history techniques including equations for hazard regression, with the aim to evaluating the impact of one specific trajectory (as a sequence of events) on other trajectories, net of those common determinants that constitute a potential source of spurious correlation. More in detail, we intend to estimate multi-process models with simultaneous equations, including hazard regressions and spline regression. These kinds of models, as proposed by Lillard (1993), are particularly useful, since causal effects can be disentangled by selection effects. If the distribution of the unobserved components is hypothesised as being (multivariate) normal, the estimate of the parameters of the model via maximum likelihood can be obtained using aML, a suitable software for the estimation of advanced statistical models (Lillard and Panis, 2003).

The survey called “Longitudinal Survey on Italia Households (ILFI)” gives suitable micro-level longitudinal data for the study of life course trajectories and pathways to adulthood.

ILFI data contains wide retrospective information on: timing and sequencing in the transition to adulthood; co-residential union histories; other socioeconomic trajectories. More specifically, the survey offers data on the history of marital unions, cohabitations (followed by a marriage or not) and marital disruption. The longitudinal nature of the survey makes it possible to update the collected information and to follow the same individual over time. At the moment, ILFI has four waves (1997, 1999, 2001 and 2003).

3. Envisaged outcomes

In Italy, cohabitations are growing but, compared to the most of European countries, their diffusion is still low. Therefore, we can imagine that in this country the choice to cohabit is strongly related to specific values and attitudes that easily lead to higher risk of marital disruption. In other words, where the practice of cohabitation is less widespread, the selectivity could play a more important role. As a consequence, in Italy the increasing diffusion of cohabitations does not necessarily mean higher divorce rates in the future. If it not the case, i.e. if the analysis reveals that causation is the more important mechanism, we can expect that marital disruption in Italy will further increase.

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