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Changes in the Satisfaction of Cohabitators Relative to Spouses Over Time

Family scholars have noted a gap in the subjective well-being of cohabitators relative to spouses and have hypothesized that the size of this “cohabitation gap” varies depending on how far cohabitation has diffused in a society. For the first time we test this hypothesis across time in a single country, Italy, by analyzing 20 cross-sectional, nationally representative surveys collected from 1993 to 2013 by the Italian Institute of Statistics (N = 279,190 partnered young adults). We find that differences in the assessments of family satisfaction between cohabitators and spouses have eroded over the years and that there has been no detectable cohabitation gap since 2011. In addition, we illustrate that the weakening of the cohabitation gap is attributable to the diffusion of cohabiting unions in Italian society.

Over the past decades, the number of couples who are cohabiting, or living together in an intimate union without marriage, has been increasing in many Western societies (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Kiernan, 2002; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). A central path of inquiry is whether there is a gap in the subjective well-being of cohabitators relative to married people, or a so-called cohabitation gap (Soons & Kalmijn,

2009). Some studies have reported that cohabitators have lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness and higher levels of depression than married people (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Kurdek, 1991; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009), and others have found that cohabitators are less committed to and satisfied with their partnerships than their married counterparts are (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2006).

There is evidence of spatial variation in the size of this cohabitation gap, however. Previous authors have shown that the gap is smaller in countries where cohabitation is more popular than in countries where this type of union is still a marginal phenomenon (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik, Keizer, & Lappegård, 2012). They explained these cross-national differences in light of the level of diffusion of cohabitation in a society: In countries where the practice of cohabitation is more common and accepted, differences in the satisfaction levels between cohabitators and spouses tend to be smaller. In a similar vein, the diffusion of cohabitation has been suggested to reduce differences in union dissolution risks across union types (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). So far, however, the evidence that this is the case has been only indirect, because inferences were made by comparing countries with different levels of diffusion of cohabitation.

This study provides direct evidence to evaluate whether the size of the cohabitation gap declines as cohabitation diffuses in a single country, Italy, a place where cohabitation does not yet represent an integral part of family

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Key Words: cohabitation, cross-time comparisons, marriage, satisfaction.

life but is rapidly becoming more common. We assess the cohabitation gap by focusing on family satisfaction, one domain of overall life satisfaction that is closely related to union satisfaction.

This article has two main objectives. First, we examine whether marriage and cohabitation are associated with different levels of family satisfaction and whether this cohabitation gap has weakened over time. Second, we investigate whether the gradual closing of the cohabitation gap is attributable to the diffusion of cohabitation in Italian society. Our analysis is based on data from 20 cross-sectional, nationally representative surveys collected by the Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat) from 1993 to 2013.

BACKGROUND

Mechanisms

Previous authors have focused on overall life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, or level of commitment between partners as measures of the cohabitation gap. Some of these scholars have suggested that differences in the social meanings and legal status of cohabitation and marriage can lead to differences in the satisfaction levels of the partners. Others have argued that these differences arise because of a selection effect rather than the relationship form per se. We assume that such mechanisms also apply to explain differences in the assessment of family satisfaction across union types.

In most European countries, cohabitation and marriage are—to use a term favored by Nock (1995)—“qualitatively” different. Marriage is a recognized social institution, defined by a legal contract that delineates the mutual rights, responsibilities, and obligations of the partners (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Musick & Bumpass, 2012; Nock, 1995). This is not necessarily the case for cohabitation (Perelli-Harris & Sanchez Gassen, 2012). The public and legally recognized nature of marriage may also reduce partners’ feelings of uncertainty about the future of the relationship while reinforcing the principle that spouses should support each other. Thus, married couples are expected to commit to and invest in their relationship more than cohabitants are (Hansen, Moum, & Shapiro, 2007). In all, marriage is expected to bring about higher levels of partners’ satisfaction (Musick & Bumpass, 2012).

From a societal perspective, the marriage helps to legitimize the relationship in the eyes of the community and to establish normative standards of behavior. Married couples can expect to receive social, material, and emotional support from family, friends, and the local community (Cherlin, 2004; Eggebeen, 2005; Nazio & Saraceno, 2013). By contrast, the relationship of couples who cohabit without marriage may not be recognized by society and may even be sanctioned. Individuals cohabiting in a society in which living together without being married is frowned upon may feel stigmatized (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014). Social approval has been shown to be a powerful source of satisfaction (Lindenberg, 2001).

The association between union type and partners’ satisfaction may be due to selectivity factors as well: Individuals who cohabit may differ systematically in their characteristics from people who marry, leading to different reported levels of subjective well-being or relationship satisfaction. Cohabitants are found to have lower levels of education and income than are married people (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Meanwhile, access to higher levels of human capital and financial resources is shown to be positively related to subjective well-being (Ross & Van Willigen, 1997). Compared to married people, cohabitants are also characterized by lower levels of religiosity (Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003; Thornton et al., 1992) and stronger egalitarian and individualistic attitudes (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Thornton et al., 1992). Yet studies have shown that religiousness and traditional values are positively related to subjective well-being (Ellison, 1991). Moreover, differences in family orientation and traditional attitudes toward family roles and marriage (Clarkberg et al., 1995) may explain the cohabitation gap. These (often unobserved) selectivity factors are generally associated with lower levels of relationship commitment (Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995) among cohabitants and, in turn, lower levels of subjective well-being (Lucas, 2005).

In addition, cohabitants have been shown to be a heterogeneous group (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Smock, 2000). According to Heuveline and Timberlake (2004), cohabitation may be understood as an alternative to being single, as a prelude to marriage, or as an alternative to marriage. Indeed, matrimonial plans prove to be important

indicators of the characteristics of cohabitators, as cohabitators who intend to marry are more similar to spouses in terms of relationship quality than are cohabitators who do not expect to marry (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009).

The Diffusion of Cohabitation in a Society

Recent studies have shown that the relationship between union type and subjective well-being varies by country. Cohabitators in Scandinavian countries, France, and the Netherlands do not exhibit lower levels of subjective well-being or relationship quality than spouses do (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik et al., 2012). Conversely, in countries where cohabitation is far less common—such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and also Russia and Romania—spouses tend to be more satisfied than cohabitators (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik et al., 2012). These differences were explained by conceptualizing the rise in cohabitation as a diffusion process.

At the beginning of the process, the number of cohabitations is limited, and this form of union is likely to be perceived as being an innovative or transgressive behavior. Once cohabitation is more popular, cohabiting and married couples become increasingly similar in terms of intergenerational relations (Nazio & Saraceno, 2013), social relations (Nock, 1995), and social ties (Skinner, Bahr, Crane, & Call, 2002). Although the legal recognition of the rights of cohabiting couples is delayed, as cohabitation diffuses in society, cohabitators' level of commitment will become similar to that of spouses (Nock, 1995). At the end of the diffusion process, cohabitators may present themselves socially as a couple (Smock, 2000), and their level of subjective well-being will not differ much from that of spouses (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). From this perspective, as cohabitation diffuses, the cohabitation gap shrinks.

Generally speaking, a new behavior does not appear suddenly in a given population (Rogers, 2003). When few people cohabit, they will probably constitute a highly selected group (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). After the practice of cohabitation proves more appealing, it spreads to a wider group (Di Giulio & Rosina, 2007). According to the literature on the diffusion of innovations (Bongaarts & Watkins, 1996; Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006), when cohabitation has spread to a larger segment of the population, selectivity factors will no

longer play a crucial role in differentiating cohabitators from married people. In parallel, the meaning of cohabitation and the motivations for living together without marriage may evolve (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Smock, 2000), and, for instance, cohabitation may shift from being primarily a prelude to marriage to representing mostly an alternative to marriage. The growing fluidity of the meaning of cohabitation may thus reduce well-being differences not only between married people and cohabitators but also between cohabitators themselves (Wiik et al., 2012).

The Diffusion of Cohabitation in Italy

Until the second half of the 1970s, marriage in Italy was at the center of young adults' life course. By that time, however, marriage rates were starting to decline, and cohabitation and divorce were becoming increasingly common. Between the early 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s the total number of cohabiting unions increased from 227,000 to 972,000, and the number of cohabiting unions in which the partners had never been married increased from 67,000 to 578,000 (Istat, 2012). Currently, nearly six million Italians have had at least one period of cohabitation in their life (Istat, 2012). There are still marked differences between regions, however; in the southern regions the popularity of cohabitation has increased only marginally (Gabrielli & Vignoli, 2013).

No establishment of national legal regulations for unmarried coresident couples exists in Italy. Legal judgments are made case by case and depend on the partners' individual circumstances (De Rose & Marquette, 2011). In addition, a recent qualitative exploration of family formation practices among young Italians revealed that the familial and social pressures to marry remain strong (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Viewing the rise in cohabitation as a diffusion process in Italian society, we pose two main research questions:

1. Are there relevant differences in the family satisfaction levels of cohabitators and spouses? If there are differences, has the cohabitation gap become smaller in recent decades?
2. If the size of the cohabitation gap has indeed become smaller, is this decline attributable to the level of diffusion of cohabitation in Italian society?

METHOD

Data and Sample

Few standardized data sets allow for in-depth, up-to-date cross-time analyses. We built a unique data set that allowed us to conduct a large-scale comparative analysis of family satisfaction evaluations in Italy from 1993 to 2013. The data used come from the 20 harmonized data sets of the Istat multipurpose household surveys Aspects of Daily Life. These cross-sectional, nationally representative surveys were repeated each year (except in 2004) through interviews of around 20,000 households, with around 50,000 individuals. The data were collected using a two-stage sampling design with a stratification of the primary units. The municipalities are the primary units, and the households are the secondary units. The municipalities were sampled with probabilities proportional to their population size and without replacement, whereas the households were drawn with equal probabilities and without replacement. All members of the sampled households were interviewed face-to-face. The overall response rate for Istat multipurpose household surveys was greater than 80%, and there were no major differences in response rates across surveys.

We focused on heterosexual couples in which at least one of the partners was between the ages of 18 and 49 at the time of the interview. This selection led to a sample of 279,190 partnered young adults.

Outcome Variable

Family satisfaction of partnered men and women at the time of the interview was our dependent variable. In all the surveys this variable was collected through the same formulation: “Considering the last 12 months, how satisfied would you say you are with your family life?” Respondents were asked to answer on the following scale: 1 (*very satisfied*), 2 (*rather satisfied*), 3 (*a little satisfied*), and 4 (*not at all satisfied*). This variable was regrouped into a dummy variable that assumed the value 0 for individuals who said they were very satisfied with their family life (category 1 on the original variable) and 1 for those who said they were moderately or not at all satisfied (categories 2–4 on the original variable). We opted for this cutoff because the number of respondents who rated

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on Variables Used in the Analysis by Union Type, Pooled Sample, Italy, 1993–2013 (N = 279,190)

	Marrieds (%) n = 264,864	Cohabitators (%) n = 14,326
Family satisfaction		
Very satisfied	42.0	41.9
Rather satisfied	53.9	51.2
A little satisfied	3.4	5.6
Not at all satisfied	0.7	1.3
Age classes		
18–29	8.4	18.4
30–39	37.0	43.3
40 and over	54.6	38.3
Household size		
2 members	12.8	42.4
3 members	30.1	35.0
4 or more members	57.1	22.6
Presence of children aged 5 or under in the household	68.7	67.5
Previous legal separation or divorce	1.3	27.6
Presence of stepchildren in the household	0.8	13.0
Education		
Primary	51.2	44.7
Secondary and upper secondary	38.5	42.5
Postsecondary and tertiary	10.3	12.8
Employment status		
Employed	70.7	78.7
Unemployed	5.2	8.7
Inactive	24.1	12.6
Financial resources scarce/insufficient	33.3	38.7
Macroregion of residence		
North	40.8	65.9
Center	17.1	18.4
South and islands	42.1	17.5

their family life as not at all satisfying was low in all the surveys (see Table 1). Hence, our outcome variable compared those who indicated they were very satisfied with those who said they were not fully satisfied with their family life.

At the beginning of the 1990s, 52% of married respondents and 60% of cohabiting respondents said they were not fully satisfied with their

family life (i.e., the gap was 8 percentage points). The gap declined gradually over time and has decreased to around 0 in more recent years. This process of convergence has occurred primarily because of increasing levels of family satisfaction among cohabitators, especially in recent years.

Individual-Level Covariates

The union type was our key explanatory variable; it was declared at the interview date and coded 0 for married people and 1 for cohabitators. We then considered a range of additional covariates. The composition of the sample is illustrated in Table 1. Gender (coded 0 for men and 1 for women) and age (grouped in classes: 1 = 18–29, 2 = 30–39, 3 = 40 and over) are salient factors both in the choice of union type and in the assessment of subjective well-being (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Musick & Bumpass, 2012). As family life may be altered by the number of people living in the household, we distinguished between households with two members, or in which the couple live alone (1), three members (2), and four or more members (3). Parenthood is considered a relevant factor in satisfaction evaluations (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011), and in Italy married couples are more likely than cohabiting couples to have children (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Moreover, the presence of children is generally associated with a higher degree of relationship commitment and represents a stabilizing factor in cohabiting relationships (Brown & Booth, 1996). We considered the presence in the household of at least one child of preschool age, or aged 5 or younger (1 = *yes*).

The breakdown of a past relationship has enduring negative effects on subjective well-being (Kurdek, 1991; Lucas, 2005) and is likely to increase the risk of dissatisfaction in family relationships. Thus, we introduced a variable indicating whether the respondent had ever been through a legal separation or a divorce (1 = *yes*). As the presence of children from past relationships might also be associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Brown, 2004), we accounted for the presence of stepchildren in the household (1 = *yes*).

Higher levels of education, employment status, and availability of financial resources are generally linked to higher levels of satisfaction (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). At the same

time, these factors may have influenced the practice of cohabitation (Gabrielli & Vignoli, 2013). We created the following educational attainment groups: primary (1), secondary and upper secondary (2), and postsecondary and tertiary (3). Employment status was grouped as follows: employed (1), unemployed (2), and inactive (3). The great majority of the people in the inactive category were homemakers (93%), whereas most of the remainder were out of the labor market because they were students or disabled. We also considered the subjective assessment of respondents' financial resources (0 = *very good/good*, 1 = *scarce/insufficient*).

Finally, to account for the high degree of regional heterogeneity in Italy, we controlled our estimates for the macroregion of residence. On the basis of Eurostat classification, we distinguished between the north (1), the center (2), and the south and the islands (3).

The surveys did not collect retrospective or prospective partnership histories. Thus, we were not able to control for previous cohabitation experiences or to explore the matrimonial plans of cohabitators, even though these factors may be important for explaining differences between cohabitators and spouses in their assessments of relationship satisfaction (Brown & Booth, 1996). Moreover, information about the duration of the relationship—a factor that could influence the respondents' levels of commitment to and satisfaction with their relationship (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Wiik et al., 2009, 2012)—is not available in our data. These omissions should not seriously affect our results, however. First, because cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is gradually being replaced by cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, it is likely that this distinction has lost some of its importance in recent years (Wiik et al., 2012). Second, our decision to restrict the analysis to young couples and to control for respondents' age profile should limit the impact of the failure to include information about relationship duration.

Aggregate-Level Covariate

We computed the region-year incidence of cohabitation from our analytical sample as the share of cohabiting couples over the total number of unions for each one of the 19 Italian regions in a given year. The region-year incidence of cohabitation exemplifies the level of

diffusion of cohabitation in Italy. The slow yet continuous process of diffusion of cohabitation across years is self-evident (Figure 1). Whereas at the beginning of the 1990s only around 2% of young Italian couples were cohabiting, 10 years later this percentage had doubled, and by the second decade of the 21st century, more than 10% of couples were cohabiting.

Nevertheless, the diffusion of cohabitation did not proceed at the same pace across Italian regions. Starting in the 1990s, the incidence of cohabitation was higher in the northern than in the central and southern regions, and this incidence had reached 10% in 2006. In recent years, almost two out of 10 young couples in the northern regions have been living together without being married. In the southern regions and islands, incidence of cohabitation was extremely low at the beginning of 1990s and is currently at the level reached in the northern regions in 2000 (6%). The values of the central regions are between these two extremes and in line with the Italian average.

We acknowledge that other measures could be used to explain the erosion of the cohabitation gap over time, such as attitudes toward marriage or the importance of getting married. Unfortunately, this information was not available in our data set.

Model and Analytical Strategy

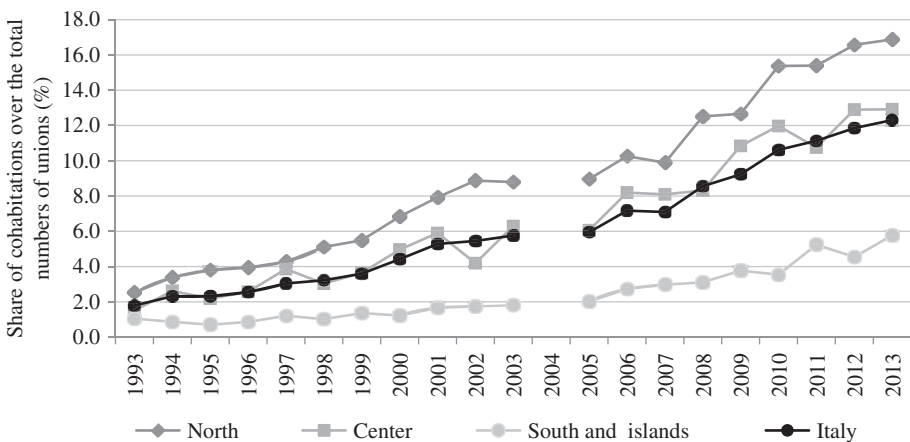
To address our research questions, we present two model specifications. Both of them drew on logistic regression models, considering the logit transformation of $P(Y = 1)$, or the probability that a person will state that he or she is not fully satisfied with his or her family life.

In the first specification (Model 1), we included a main effect for union type (cohabitation vs. marriage), a linear main effect for year, and an interaction term between union type and year. The linear specification of the year effect fits the data well enough that adding higher-order terms does not improve the estimation. Such a specification allows us to determine whether a cohabitation gap exists and, if so, whether its size has changed over time.

In the second specification (Model 2), in addition to the main effect for union type and the linear main effect for year, we included a linear main effect for the region-year incidence of cohabitation and an interaction term between union type and the region-year incidence of cohabitation. This specification is designed to verify whether the cohabitation gap has become smaller over time as cohabitation has diffused in Italian society.

We computed the average marginal effects (AMEs) to interpret changes over time and across groups (Mood, 2010). AME expresses

FIGURE 1. DIFFUSION OF COHABITATION IN ITALY AND ITALIAN MACROREGIONS, INDIVIDUALS AGED 18–49, ITALY, 1993–2013.



Note: Authors' analysis of Aspects of Daily Life survey data, 1993–2013. The survey was not carried out in 2004. Weighted data.

the effect on $P(Y = 1)$ as a categorical covariate changes from one category to another or as a continuous covariate increases of 1 unit, averaged across the values of the other covariates introduced in the model.

Within each year, individuals were nested in 19 geographical regions. Individuals were also nested in couples. The existence of regional and couple clusters implies that the observations violate the independence assumption required by most estimation methods. We dealt with this clustered data structure by adjusting the estimates of standard errors to account for nonindependence (i.e., robust standard errors).

RESULTS

Did the Cohabitation Gap Weaken Over Time?

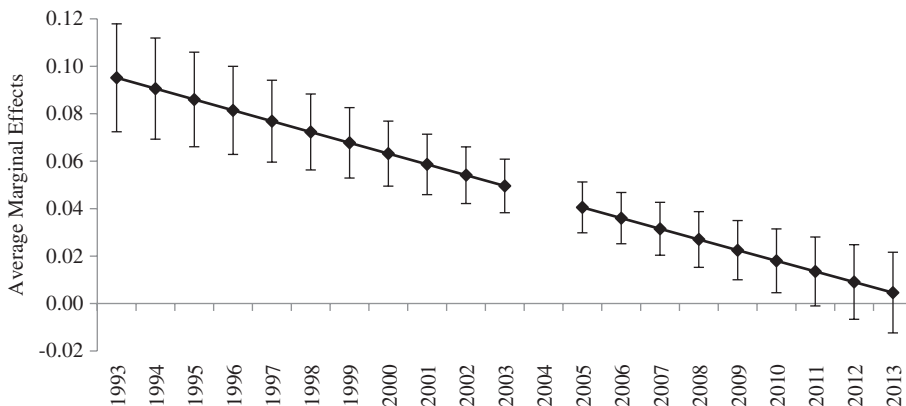
In Model 1, the main explanatory variables were union type, year, and their interaction. Table 2 reports complete model results. We assessed the cohabitation gap through the AME of cohabitation: in other terms, the change, passing from cohabitation to marriage, in the predicted probability of not being fully satisfied with family life, averaged across the values of the other covariates. Figure 2 shows the trend in the cohabitation gap over the past two decades in Italy. Note that the linearity of this relationship, which reflects the linearity adopted in the model specification, hides some turbulence across years but does not alter the meaning of the results.

At the beginning of the study period in the early 1990s, cohabitators were almost 10 percentage points more likely than married people to report dissatisfaction with their family life (AME approximately 0.10). Over the following decade, the size of the cohabitation gap decreased but remained statistically significant: By the early 2000s, cohabitators were 6 percentage points more likely than married people to say they were dissatisfied with their family life (AME approximately 0.06). In the second half of the 2000s, the cohabitation gap grew smaller year by year. By 2010, the cohabitation gap was less than 2 percentage points (AME confined under 0.02); since 2011, no cohabitation gap can be detected (AME not statistically significant).

Estimated Effects of Confounders

The results regarding the association between family satisfaction and the other covariates (Table 2) are consistent with those of previous literature. Women are less satisfied with their family life than men are (AME = 0.02), and the level of dissatisfaction increases with age. A larger household size (three or more members vs. two members) is generally associated with a decrease in family satisfaction, and the presence of a young child (aged 5 or younger) is associated with a significant increase in family satisfaction. The latter result is rather standard in cross-sectional analyses (e.g., Vignoli, Pirani, & Salvini, 2014), but it has recently been

FIGURE 2. AMES OF COHABITATION RELATIVE TO MARRIAGE ON THE PROBABILITY OF NOT BEING FULLY SATISFIED WITH FAMILY LIFE, FOR EACH YEAR, LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL (MODEL 1), ITALY, 1993–2013.



Note: In this analysis we controlled for the variables in Table 2, Model 1. Confidence intervals at 95%. The survey was not carried out in 2004.

Table 2. Results From the Logistic Regression Models (Model 1 and Model 2) Predicting Probability of Not Being Fully Satisfied With Family Life, Italy, 1993–2013 (N = 279,190)

	Model 1				Model 2			
	B	SE B	AME	SE AME	B	SE B	AME	SE AME
Cohabitation (ref.: marriage)	.27***	.031	.06***	.006	.32***	.047	.06***	.007
Year (centered at 2000)	.01***	.001	.00***	.000	.02***	.001	.00***	.000
Cohabitation × year (interaction)	-.02***	.004						
Region-year incidence of cohabitation					-.02***	.002	-.00***	.000
Cohabitation × region-year incidence of cohabitation (interaction)					-.01**	.004		
Women	.10***	.007	.02***	.002	.10***	.007	.02***	.002
Age classes (ref.: 18–29)								
30–39	.16***	.016	.04***	.004	.16***	.016	.04***	.004
40 and over	.35***	.019	.08***	.004	.35***	.019	.08***	.004
Household size (ref.: 2 members)								
3 members	.13***	.017	.03***	.004	.13***	.017	.03***	.004
4 or more members	.12***	.017	.03***	.004	.12***	.017	.03***	.004
Presence of children aged 5 or under in the household	-.13***	.013	-.03***	.003	-.12***	.013	-.03***	.003
Previous legal separation or divorce	-.03	.029	-.01	.007	-.03	.029	-.01	.007
Presence of stepchildren in the household	.07	.043	.02	.010	.07	.043	.02	.010
Education (ref.: primary)								
Secondary and upper secondary	-.10***	.010	-.02***	.002	-.09***	.010	-.02***	.002
Post-secondary and tertiary	-.22***	.015	-.05***	.004	-.21***	.015	-.05***	.004
Employment status (ref.: employed)								
Unemployed	.02	.019	.00	.004	.01	.019	.00	.004
Inactive	.03**	.011	.01**	.003	.03*	.011	.01**	.003
Financial resources scarce/insufficient	.18***	.011	.04***	.003	.18***	.011	.04***	.003
Macroregion of residence (ref.: North)								
Center	.20***	.014	.05***	.003	.15***	.015	.03***	.004
South and islands	.51***	.011	.12***	.003	.37***	.018	.09***	.004
Constant	-.32***	.020			-.15***	.026		

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

challenged by longitudinal studies on the link between fertility and subjective well-being (Myrskylä & Margolis, 2014). Having experienced a legal separation or a divorce in the past, which is relatively common among cohabitators (see Table 1), does not affect dissatisfaction with family life. The presence of stepchildren in the household does not significantly increase the probability of dissatisfaction with family life.

As the level of education increases, the probability that the respondent will not be fully satisfied with his or her family life decreases. Net of the other variables included in the equation, unemployment does not significantly increase the probability that the respondent will be dissatisfied with his or her family life; the AME of inactive people, though significant, is marginal.

Experiencing financial difficulties is one of the most important correlates of family dissatisfaction: Individuals reporting limited financial resources have a higher probability of indicating that they are not fully satisfied with their family life (AME = 0.04). Finally, people who live in the central and southern regions are significantly more likely than people who live in the north to report dissatisfaction with their family life.

Did the Diffusion of Cohabitation Play a Role?

From Model 1 we were able to verify that the cohabitation gap in family satisfaction eroded over time. But the reasons for this leveling off have yet to be explained. To test whether the cohabitation gap would become smaller over time as cohabitation diffuses in Italy, we estimated Model 2. In addition to the union type

and the year, Model 2 included the region-year incidence of cohabitation and its interaction with union type (Table 2). The coefficient of the interaction term between the union type and the incidence of cohabitation is negative and statistically significant, which proves that the difference between cohabitators and married individuals is smaller where and when cohabitation is more widespread.

We evaluated the cohabitation gap at given levels of diffusion of cohabitation (Figure 3). A limited incidence of cohabitation (i.e., less than 2% of couples) corresponds to a cohabitation gap of about 7 percentage points. This was the incidence of cohabitation at the beginning of the 1990s in Italy. The cohabitation gap slowly decreases as this type of union becomes more popular. For instance, when 5%–10% of Italian couples are cohabiting, the gap is less than 6 percentage points; this is the case of contemporary Italy on average or of northern regions since the second half of 2000s. As the diffusion of cohabitation advances, with an incidence around 16%, the cohabitation gap is no longer significant. This is the case of northern Italian regions during recent years. Hence, the weakening of the cohabitation gap in family satisfaction over time seems to be attributable to the increasing number of people who join cohabitation.

Robustness Checks

Our results proved robust to a series of sensitivity checks (results not shown but available upon

request). First, we acknowledge that it is important to account for individual religiosity. This information was available for all the data sets, except for the 2012 data set. We nonetheless decided to include the year 2012 in the analysis and to exclude individual religiosity from the estimation. We are confident of this decision, because we reestimated the model including individual religiosity and excluding the year 2012, and the outcomes remained virtually unchanged.

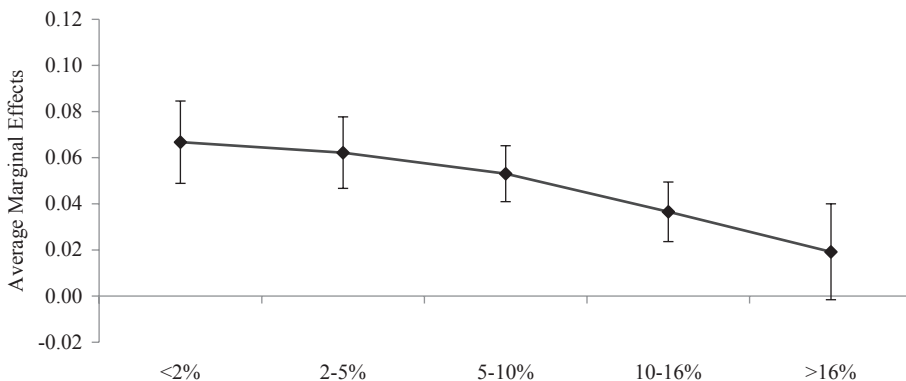
Second, because family satisfaction presumably encompasses satisfaction with both the couple relationship and broader family ties, we estimated the models only for couples living without other family members. As the results confirmed our findings, we decided to maintain the entire sample by keeping all the couples in the analysis and using household composition as a control variable.

Third, we reestimated the models while restricting the sample to people who were living with at least one child. Also in this case the results were consistent with the results estimated for the whole sample. Finally, our model accounts for children of preschool age. The results were again robust when we also considered children up to age 13.

DISCUSSION

This article adds to the literature on the differences in the subjective well-being of cohabiting

FIGURE 3. AMES OF COHABITATION RELATIVE TO MARRIAGE ON THE PROBABILITY OF NOT BEING FULLY SATISFIED WITH FAMILY LIFE, AT GIVEN LEVELS OF DIFFUSION OF COHABITATION, THROUGH LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL (MODEL 2), ITALY, 1993–2013.



Note: In this analysis we controlled for the variables in Table 2, Model 2. Confidence intervals at 95%.

and married couples. We evaluated the cohabitation gap from the early 1990s until recent years in Italy in an effort to address two main research questions: whether this link has changed over time and whether this change can be attributable to the diffusion of cohabitation in society.

First, we found that at the beginning of 1990s, cohabitators were less satisfied than spouses were. In the first decade of the 2000s this association then weakened, and since 2011 cohabitators are no longer less satisfied with their family life than married people. Second, we show that the closing of the cohabitation gap can be partly explained by the level of diffusion of cohabitation across space and time in Italy. Our analysis suggests that, even in familistic welfare states like Italy, the slow yet ongoing propagation of cohabitation leads to an increase in the approval and legitimization of cohabiting unions and, in turn, to an increase in the satisfaction levels of cohabitators.

In contemporary Italy the cohabitation gap has vanished despite the fact that the country still lacks a legal framework for cohabiting couples who do not wish to marry. Although there are no differences between cohabitators and spouses in their daily routine—they share a household, pool their incomes, and make many decisions jointly—cohabitators have legal disadvantages relative to married couples, such as a lack of rights to access alimony or partner's old-age pension benefits. These disadvantages are clearly understood by young adult Italians (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014). It must therefore be stressed that in Italy there is still a gap between the way cohabitation is addressed at legislative level and its perception among individuals.

Our results illustrate that when about 15% of the couples cohabit, the cohabitation gap tends to vanish. This result cannot be generalized, however. For example, Soons and Kalmijn (2009) found that a higher incidence of cohabitation is needed before the differences in subjective well-being between cohabitators and spouses disappear. The different outcome variable used could explain different results: We used family satisfaction, whereas Soons and Kalmijn used overall life satisfaction. As cohabitation becomes more common, partners might feel more relaxed about their arrangements, but some stigma may remain; hence, cohabitators' overall life satisfaction levels might still be somewhat

lower, even though their family-specific satisfaction levels have become similar to those of married people.

We acknowledge that our analysis has limited power to inform about causal relationships. We cannot rule out the possibility that individuals who have an innate predisposition to report a higher level of family satisfaction might also systematically vary in their propensity to form a (given type of) union. Nonetheless, our goal was to document changes in the gap in family satisfaction levels between cohabitators and married people over time while viewing the rise in cohabitation as a diffusion process, not to make inferences about causation. Although the issue of differences across union types has been examined in a number of studies using single-country examples (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Stanley et al., 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2006), and the question of whether the differences between married and cohabiting people are smaller in countries where cohabitation is widespread has also been explored previously (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik et al., 2012), this study represents a next step in the literature. It offers, for the first time, direct documentation of the closing of the cohabitation gap in a single country and not between countries. We have illustrated that the differences in the assessment of family satisfaction between spouses and cohabitators shifts from being strong to weak and, finally, to being nonexistent as cohabitation diffuses in society.

NOTE

An earlier version of this article was presented at the session "Cohabitation and Marriage" at the 2014 Population Association of America (Boston) and the session "Socio-economic Well-Being of Partnership" at the 2014 European Population Conference (Budapest). We gratefully acknowledge Arnstein Aassve, Diederik Boertien, Gustavo De Santis, Sven Drefahl, Anna Matysiak, Letizia Mencarini, and Valentina Tocchioni for their comments on earlier drafts. Daniele Vignoli gratefully acknowledges financial support from the European Research Council under European ERC Grant Agreement No. StG-313617 (SWELL-FER: Subjective Well-Being and Fertility, PI Letizia Mencarini).

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