"I’m happy when you are happy"

Life satisfaction between cohabitation and marriage

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Family dynamics and wellbeing

- During the second half of the 20th century, family forms have become more diverse in nearly all European countries.

- However, much of the research has focused on the traditional family and has not considered alternative pathways, and their consequences on wellbeing of individuals (Vignoli, Pirani & Salvini 2013).

- The link between wellbeing and family dynamics raises important questions in post-industrial societies, because even if the trend toward “new family forms” comes to a halt, a return to a traditional family model is unlikely.
Partnership status and wellbeing

- Although **some European studies** exist (but not for Italy), the majority of this research has been conducted for the US.

- Previous studies have found that cohabiters are **less committed** to and **less satisfied** with their partnerships than individuals who are married (e.g., Brown & Booth 1996; Nock 1995; Stanley, Whitton & Markman 2004).

- In addition, there are reasons to expect that there are **country variations** in the degree to which relationship assessments differ across union types...

- ...mainly because of country differences in **institutionalization and the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation** (Soons & Kalmijn 2009; Wilk, Keizer & Lappegård 2012).
Partners’ wellbeing

- **In marriage**, we know that, for both genders, there is a positive and statistically significant **spillover effect** of life satisfaction that runs from one partner to the other.

- **BUT**: is it true also in cohabitations?

- **AND**: is it true in realities where cohabitations are far less common than elsewhere?

- **Our Objective**:
  - to contribute to the debate on the **link between partnership status and wellbeing**,
  - taking into account **partners’ spillover effects**
  - scrutinizing the relationship for **Italy**.
Data & Variables

• Data
  ➢ Istat survey «Aspetti della vita quotidiana» 2012
  ➢ About 4,000 couples (married or cohabiting)
  ➢ Men and women aged 18-49

• Key variables
  ➢ Life satisfaction of couples’ members (1-to-10 scale response)
  ➢ Cohabitation vs. marriage

• Correlates
  ➢ Demographic variables: age, area of residence, household size, presence of children
  ➢ Socio-economic status: education, occupational status, assessment of economic resources
  ➢ Other control variable: assessment of health status
Method

- **SEM – Structural Equation Model** (or simultaneous equation models): multi-equation regression models.

- The response variable in one regression equation may appear as a predictor in another equation: *variables may influence one-another reciprocally*, either directly or through other variables as intermediaries.

- **Effects:**
  - direct (presumed causal relationship between 2 variables),
  - indirect (presumed causal relationship via other intervening or mediating variables),
  - total (sum of direct and indirect effects)

- **Non-recursive model**: dependencies between endogenous variables (feedback loops)
Path diagram  (1/5)
Path diagram (2/5)

- **his health**
- **child**
- **economic evaluation**
- **household size**
- **her health**
- **his occupation**
- **his education**
- **his age**
- **area of residence**
- **her education**
- **her age**
- **ε1**
- **ε2**

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Path diagram (3/5)

- his health
- economic evaluation
- household size
- her health
- child
- his satisfaction
- her satisfaction
- his occupation
- her occupation
- his education
- her education
- his age
- area of residence
- her age

$\epsilon_1$

$\epsilon_2$
Path diagram

(4/5)

his health \( \varepsilon_1 \)

his occupation

his education

his age

area of residence

his satisfaction

economic evaluation

child

household size

her health \( \varepsilon_2 \)

her occupation

her education

her age

cohabitation vs. marriage

Partners' life satisfaction – Pirani & Vignoli
Results

The diagram illustrates the factors influencing partners' life satisfaction, with arrows indicating the relationships between variables such as child, economic evaluation, household size, health, occupation, education, age, area of residence, cohabitation vs. marriage, and regional diffusion of cohabitation. Each variable is connected to the satisfaction node, indicating its impact on overall life satisfaction for both partners.
Concluding remarks

• Italian cohabiting people are **not less satisfied** with their lives than married couples
  • Are things changing? Is this a signal of an increasing acceptance of cohabitation?

• **Spillover effect** between partners exist also in case of cohabitation and it does not differ from marriage

• **Life satisfaction** assessment comes from different spheres of life (e.g.: family, health, economic situation, job, social relationships,...)
  • What happens if we consider **satisfaction of family relations**?
Furter developments

• Modeling **satisfaction of family relations**

• **Introducing temporal comparison**
  • Has the relation between partnership status and wellbeing changed in last 20 years?

• **Overcoming some drawbacks** with data: e.g.
  • religion,
  • relationship duration,
  • marriage intention

• **Longitudinal data**
Thank you – Comments and suggestions are welcome!

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