

Are spouses more satisfied than cohabitators? An exploration over the last twenty years in Italy

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Abstract

During last decades, cohabitation has becoming increasingly common form of family life everywhere in the social landscape of Europe. This research adds to the European literature on the link between partnership status and family satisfaction. We scrutinize the relationship for Italy, where the diffusion of cohabitations is still limited, analyzing seventeen progressive large-scale datasets carried out continuatively since 1993 by Italian Institute of Statistics. We employ a multilevel model to study more than 235,000 individuals, nested in almost 118,000 couples, 19 regions and 17 years. We found that, in the past, Italian cohabitators were less satisfied with their family life than married couples. As time passes, the difference in family satisfaction between cohabitation and marriage weakens. Then, in contemporary years, cohabitators are not less satisfied than spouses anymore. We suggest that the slow, but never-ending, propagation of cohabitations leads to an increase in the approval and legitimization of cohabitators and, in turn, to an increase in their family satisfaction, despite the Italian familistic-oriented welfare state.