

The Spreading of Cohabitations as a Diffusion Process. Evidence From Italy

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Long abstract

Cohabitations started to spread in Europe in the late '60s as part of a process of demographic change which involved other “new” family behaviours, such as marital disruption and sub-replacement fertility, and that has been conceptualised as a “Second Demographic Transition”. European countries strongly differed in the extent of initial adoption of new family forms, Southern European ones being those where “traditional” family forms remained dominant. However, in recent years, a growth of cohabitations has been identified in Southern European countries as well. This paper addresses the issue focusing on the Italian case. In analysing trends and patterns of adoption of cohabitations in this country, the paper tests whether the recent growth of cohabitations has followed the typical patterns of the processes of diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1983), building on previous works in the literature (Di Giulio and Rosina, 2007; Nazio and Blossfeld, 2003).

According to Rogers, in the early period of diffusion of an innovative behaviour, a certain part of the population, more cosmopolite, more educated and which constitutes a small, cohesive group distinct from the external environment is the one which ignites the process itself. At this stage, the diffusion is driven by *peer effects*, i.e. a direct influence between individuals who are placed in the same segment of the society and share several structural characteristics. At later stages, the diffusion should be driven by *pre-cohort* effects. As long as the new behaviour spread, experiences of previous adopters become more accessible by non-adopters and, thus, even less selected segments of the social system are exposed to the innovation and prone to adopt it.

While we argue that both mechanisms are detectable in the diffusion of cohabitations in Italy, we also hypothesise that the characteristics of the Italian family system have largely determined the way the diffusion of cohabitation has proceeded. It has been claimed in the literature that parental acceptance of cohabitation is far more important in Italy than the preferences of the young and their friends. Therefore, it is likely that in Italy the prevalence of adopters in previous cohorts - i.e. pre-cohort effects - played a much more relevant role compared to the rate of adoption among peers – peer effects.

We test our hypotheses on data from the ISTAT Multipurpose survey (2009), which contains retrospective information on educational, labour market and family histories. We select women born between 1954 and 1984 and apply competing risks duration models to study women’s transition to first cohabitation. Peer- and pre-cohort variables represent the cumulative experience of the same and previous cohorts respectively. Empirical results show that peer-effects are indeed even larger than pre-cohort effects among individuals born from 1954 to 1969, when cohabitation was a very rare event. Peer-effects have been found only among highly educated women, consistently with the predictions of the diffusion theory. However, as long as the diffusion of cohabitations proceeds,



peer-effects become little and disappear once models include women born in the '70s, while pre-cohort effects become strong and significant.

