

The main goal of my doctoral project is to study the changes in family formation in various nations of the European Union in the globalisation process. In particular, it aims at analysing the effects of increasing uncertainties in the family formation due to the rising pace of social change that come with it. These increasing uncertainties in individuals' lives would make long-term commitments for youth more difficult to undertake, inducing postponement in the transitions to first parenthood and changes in the ways new families are formed. A plurality of factors, whose effects are filtered by institutional contexts, are seen as affecting differently the life courses of women and men in the various European countries.

The emphasis of the project is on how cultural traditions, socio-political institutions and welfare state regimes interact with globalisation and influence (dampen or accelerate) the diffusion of new living arrangements such as consensual unions.

My attention is directed to individual based diffusion models as tools able to capture a causal process of cohabitation diffusion. My interest is motivated by a sharply rising hazard of cohabitation over time, with country specific timing and speed. Over the last thirty years, in fact, consensual unions as a strategy to form a new family have gained in importance -though with different speeds and levels- all over Europe, becoming more and more an option for partnering to individuals in transition to adulthood. Cohabitation it is characterised as an highly dynamic, still increasing, phenomena I want to study as a diffusion process, combining life course analysis and the new generation of individual level based diffusion models. Utilising the new methodology developed by Strang and Tuma (1993) I aim at rooting this specific approach in the light shed by traditional theory on cohabitation with a particular focus on the effects of actors' social embeddedness. With an event history individuals' based formulation of heterogeneous diffusion models it would be possible to distinguish a plurality of effects through an highly disaggregated and relational specific analysis incorporating time dependent processes at different levels (individual's age, birth cohorts and calendar time). The intention is to account for the mechanisms and speed through which the behaviour of cohabiting has spread in Europe in recent years, as mediated by the effects of the different institutional contexts creating structural and cultural ties to individuals' behaviours.

The general framework from which I depart is that of a social system characterised by dynamic processes (Edling: 1998), in which subjects have to –rationally- make their own strategic decisions in differently shaped national institutional contexts that changes at increasingly fast speed. In this contexts individuals face a set of (varying) opportunities and constrains, dependent both on the economic (labour market) conditions they experience in the historical time they happen to live in and on the set of normative values attached to what are progressively defined as available behavioural options to individuals. In this context cohabitation is seen as an emerging new behaviour in 'rational' reply to growing uncertainty that surrounds the transition to adulthood, characterised by being potentially more efficient (being less binding though allowing to share an household and pulling of resources) to individuals in respect to marriage (Oppenheimer: 1988, 1994 and 1997).

Longitudinal retrospectively collected data from the Fertility and Family Surveys are used to analyse this diffusion process across several countries<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the project is to

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<sup>1</sup> I plan to study 5 to 6 countries, very likely West and East Germany, Italy, France, Spain, The Netherlands and Sweden. Great Britain would be added when comparable data were available. The choice for these countries lies in the desire to cover the widest possible spectrum of European welfare regimes, as well the range of different

disentangle the changes in family formation that occurred in the last twenty five to thirty years (between the mid-late sixties and the early nineties<sup>2</sup>) in several European countries in a comparative perspective, where both educational expansion, especially female, and labour participation are accounted for among the factors affecting family formation processes at individual level. Event history models are used to address this aspect, allowing the incorporation of time-varying indicators along with individual life courses and cohort differences<sup>3</sup>. In addition, an institutionally specific dimension and an effect of societal influence are added by the methodological improvement of these models through the integration with the diffusion approach. My general purpose is, indeed, to explain a particular class of individuals' strategic decisions related to the event of first partnering with reference not only to individuals personal characteristics but also to social influence processes and, through this, to account for the process of social change at the macro level<sup>4</sup>.

The social influence I am dealing with is exercised by the structure of the situation in which individuals are into or, as it will be modelled, the degree of previous experiences of the new behaviour experienced at each point in time within each society through previous choices faced by individuals. I would not control for direct forms of interpersonal influence, but rather deal with a more visible phenomenon to which all individuals are exposed to: the emergence and spread of a new behavioural option that individuals experience as already adopted by others in increasing proportions with time. In this framework, when adoption is socially meaningful, it can be easily thought of individuals as making different choices cognitively available to each other, developing shared understandings, and exploring the consequences of innovative behaviours through each other's experience. Learning from the experience of others appears in this respect a sensible and even optimal strategy where means-ends relationships are not well understood, they defy calculation or behaviours are subject to social normative pressure.

What I argue is that the social systems self-generate pressures toward change as an increased proportion of the member of the system adopt a new behaviour and, along with this increasing adoption trend, it changes also the meaning attached to cohabitation. This means that until an individual has a certain minimum level of information and peer influence from his or her system's environment (being this threshold point different for every innovative behaviour and

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timing and speed in the increased numbers of cohabitation in the last decades. Although an armonisation of the data for the different countries is required, this source allows for an exceptionally high degree of comparability since the relevant questions were identically formulated and since all the field-works took place rather recently, in a short time span which conveniently allows to cover most of the period of interest.

France: ca. 4800 respondents in age range 20-49 interviewed between Jan. and Apr. 1994.

Germany: ca. 10000 respondents in age range 20-39 interviewed in Jul. 1992.

Italy: ca. 6000 respondents in age range 20-49 interviewed between Nov. 1995 and Jan. 1996.

The Netherlands: ca. 8200 respondents in age range 18-42 interviewed between Feb. and Jun. 1993.

Spain: ca. 6000 respondents in age range 18-49 interviewed between Nov. 1994 and Nov. 1995

Sweden: ca. 5000 respondents in age range 23-43 interviewed between Jan. and Oct. 1995.

<sup>2</sup> The period when the major changes in family formation through cohabitation took place in Europe (with the only exception of the Nordic Countries).

<sup>3</sup> The observation window for individual's life histories is set to begin at age 15 and it goes up to the interview date (or to the happening of the first event of family formation, being it in the anticipated models a marriage or a consensual union, whichever occur first).

<sup>4</sup> Following the way in which Boudon frames Weber's paradigm of action: a social phenomenon M is a function of individual's actions  $m$ , which depend on the actor's situation S, which in turn is influenced by macro-social factors  $M'$ . Or, in other terms, in order to explain M it is necessary to specify all the terms of  $M_i = MmSM'$ .

every society), he/she will be not likely to enter a consensual union, but once this level is passed the likelihood of entrance is further increased by each additional input of knowledge/persuasion in the societal' environment. But the norms of the system towards the new behaviour will change over time, together with the increasing adoptions and as the diffusion process proceeds, cohabitation is gradually incorporated into the life-stream of the system (Roger: 1995). This happens when eventually a point in the diffusion of the new practice is reached at which the new behaviour becomes institutionalised and regularised part of the adopters' ongoing operations<sup>5</sup>. The process of diffusion is thus seen as the progressive transformation of a population from one with a low proportion of cohabiters to one with high proportion of them by means of information disseminated through mass media and interpersonal contacts, where institutional and cultural contexts affect the timing and speed of these increases.

The contribution brought about by this study would be to add to traditional analysis a focus on how society can have (had) an effect on the adoption and diffusion of an innovative behaviour like cohabitation, over and above the effect of such variables as the individual's characteristics of cohabiters. In this respect individual innovativeness is allowed to be affected both by the individual characteristics and by external influences such as the prevalent cultural climate (as previously defined) of the society of which the individuals are members. The changing nature of both these dimensions with time requires the combination of life course analysis and diffusion models. This choice is due to the complexity inherent the intertwining between life course dynamics and the fact that different cohorts of individuals happened to be exposed to different levels of ongoing cohabitation practice as well as to different historical conditions. Event history analysis, individual based, models are thus chosen given the key role of temporal ordering, the intrinsic nature of the behaviour as a personal individual choice (even those subject to negotiation with a partner), the presence of time-varying covariates, and the right censoring of the process.

In such a modelling of the diffusion process social influence exercised towards the adoption of new behaviours tend to increase with historical time and it has thus different sizes when it affects individuals of different cohorts at different ages along their life course. It is, in other terms, a diffusion process in which individuals may enter and/or exit the "risk set" at different points in time<sup>6</sup>, so as to experience this (to them) "new behaviour" while being exposed at different levels of practice in their society.

Beside the study of consensual union as such, the same competing risk models (without the inclusion of the "diffusion covariates" capturing societal influence towards cohabitation) will be applied to the study of marital choices in the first partnership. This would allow to depict more appropriately the role of cohabitation across birth cohorts and as related to individuals' characteristics. In substance the focus of the project would be directed to the spread of consensual unions within societal national boundaries in time (and possibly in space) in a way that aims at disentangle the behavioural change process itself. A conceptual and analytical strength is gained by incorporating time as an essential element in this process, both in its historical (period and cohort effects) and individual meanings (age effect).

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<sup>5</sup> e.g. the extension of Law discipline to consensual unions in Sweden at first, then followed by other countries.

<sup>6</sup> This is due both to their birth cohorts belonging and to the point in time in which they happen to experience the first partnership along their own life-courses.

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