

A Dirty Look From The Neighbors. Does Living In A Religious Community Prevent Cohabitation?

Anna Baranowska-Rataj, Institute of Statistics and Demography, Warsaw School of Economics

Monika Mynarska, Institute of Psychology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw

Daniele Vignoli, Department of Statistics "G. Parenti", University of Florence

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to provide insights into how religion influences the family formation process. In particular, we analyze the impact of a community context religiosity on an individual decision to enter cohabitation, and disentangle the community effect from the effect of an individual religiosity. We use the data on two European societies where secularization and individualization have not yet reached momentum: Italy and Poland. We combine the empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding on the mechanisms of how the local community may affect the individual decisions on union formation. By means of quantitative multilevel analyses we can test how strong these mechanisms are in the general population. Overall, we aim to investigate whether people, who live in religious communities are less likely to cohabit and tend to marry directly, even if they are not very religious themselves.

1. Motivation

Most religions promote beliefs that are important for the family formation process: the beliefs on the sanctity of marriage or on amorality of extramarital intimate relationships. It is therefore not surprising that, the relationship between religiosity and family formation behaviour has attracted a lot of attention in demographic research within the last couple of decades. If cohabitation is believed to mean living in a sin, such non-traditional family formation decision would involve remarkable psychological costs for religious people (Lehrer 2004). The studies recurrently find that individual religiosity affects the timing, quantum and the union context of fertility (Adsera 2006; Berghammer 2009, 2012; Frejka and Westoff 2008; Lehrer 1996a, 1996b), as well as the type, quality and duration of partnerships (Berghammer 2012; Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Lehrer 2004; Teachman 2002; Marks 2005; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993). However, when we examine the role of religion in the family formation process, we should consider religiosity not only at individual but also at a community level (Goldscheider 2006).

Individual beliefs and internalised norms on how the family life should be organised are shaped by the social context. But the social context is important for people's family formation decisions throughout their whole life-course: their individual beliefs may be strengthened and encouraged or inhibited by the community they live in. In particular, individuals living in religious communities are likely to be embedded in very specific types of social networks which maintain behaviour that is consistent with the prescription of the dominating religion (Smith 2003). The community-level religiosity may interact with individual religiosity or moderate its effect. The lack of social acceptance for non-marital cohabitation and punitive sanctions for it, imposed in the community, may restrict the individual decisions regarding family formation even of not religious people. This effect might be particularly important in communities characterised by strong social ties and interdependencies between community members (e.g. rural communities).

The interplay of individual- and community-level religiosity has been analysed for explaining youth's delinquency (e.g. Regnerus 2003, Stark 1996, Welch et al. 1991) or a decision for abortion (e.g. Adamczyk 2008). Barber (2004) has provided evidence on how community context shapes the attitudes toward partnerships, but in this study the social context of communities is operationalised through variables that correspond to the concept of modernisation rather than religiosity. Besides, Barber (2004) focuses on the attitudes rather than on actual partnership behaviour. Gault-Sherman and Draper (2012) have examined the impact of community-level religiosity on cohabitation, but they have used regional rates of cohabitation rather than detailed information of individual level decisions. The same applies to the study of spatial patterns of religiosity, fertility, union formation and living arrangements by Sobotka and Adiguzel (2003). We have identified no studies that would analyse the role of community-level religiosity for individual-level decisions regarding union formation. This paper aims at filling this gap.

We analyse the impact of a community context religiosity on an individual decision to enter cohabitation, and disentangle the community effect from the effect of an individual religiosity. We combine the empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding on the mechanisms of how the local community may affect the individual decisions on union formation. By means of quantitative analyses we can test how strong these mechanisms are in the general population.

We use the data on two countries that represent key, but so far unexplored, case studies for our research motivation: Italy and Poland. In both these countries marriage is a dominant living arrangement. A diffusion of cohabitation has been rather slow, although on the rise among the younger generations, and non-marital living together is chosen mainly as a temporary living arrangement. Moreover, both these countries are regarded as extremely religious - secularisation and individualisation have not yet reached momentum in these societies. Moreover, unlike in other European societies, Poland and Italy are relatively homogenous in terms of religious affiliation, with dominating role of the Roman Catholic Church. According to data from ISSP (2008), about 98% of Poles and 95% of Italians were raised in the Catholic religion compared with an average of about 45% in other European countries. In this context, we can expect that the social attitudes towards family formation patterns are strongly related to the Catholic dogma and the community is particularly important for protecting marriage and discouraging cohabitation. In such context, even the least religious individuals might enter cohabitation reluctantly, fearing social sanctions.

2. Data and methods

Qualitative analysis

An importance of complementing quantitative findings with insights from the qualitative research have been recurrently emphasized in the literature – also in the studies on family formation and cohabitation (Hantrais 2005, Smock 2000). We use qualitative data collected in the recent project “Childbearing Within Cohabitation” coordinated by Brienna Perelli-Harris at University of Southampton. We analyze the data obtained in the focus group interviews (FGI), which were conducted in February-April 2012 in Italy and in March 2012 in Poland. Recruitment of the respondents and organization of the focus group interviews were supported by the research agency (ARC Poland, University of Florence Academic Spin—Off Valmon Italy) and the groups took place at their premises. The research agency recruited the respondents, according to the following criteria: 25-40 of age, divided into groups by gender and education attainment. In total, eight FGIs were conducted in each country. In Poland, the recruitment was conducted by the employees of the research agency. They used the agency data base and then a snow-ball method. In Italy, the recruitment strategy has been conducted by the research agency via distribution of brochures and advertisements in cinemas, universities, sport clubs, shopping malls, and so on.

The interview guideline included numerous questions on why people cohabit or marry. Importantly, a role of religion was explicitly mentioned in the questions. The qualitative analysis aims at exploring mechanism in which religiosity at the community level might be important for individual decision to cohabit. In particular, we investigate:

- (1) How the topic of religiosity was discussed in relation to cohabitation? Were the respondents referring to individual- or community-level religiosity (religiosity in their country, region, neighborhood)? What kind of community did they refer to?
- (2) Did the respondents recognize and describe any mechanisms of how community encourages or discourages individual decisions to cohabit? Were they aware of these mechanisms? Did they mention any sanctions imposed at the community level which might be attributed to religion?

(3) Did the respondents mention any characteristics of the community that might be important for promoting Catholic dogma? E.g. did they refer to any differences between regions in the country, between rural and urban settlements, and so forth.

Quantitative analysis

In the quantitative part of our paper, we draw on the 2009 Italian Multipurpose Household Survey “Family and Social Subjects” and the 2011 Polish Generation and Gender Survey (GGS). These two surveys were conducted in both countries by means of face-to-face interviews in nationally representative samples. The questionnaires of both surveys took into account the guidelines formulated by the international committee that set up the whole Generation and Gender Programme (Vikat et al., 2007)¹. They provide very detailed information on union formation and childbearing processes and in the same time they are also a valuable source of data on the social background. We restrict the samples to young people, born in cohorts from 1975-1995 because most variables on individual and community-level religiosity are cross-sectional. Following standard practice (e.g., Berghammer 2012) by limiting the study to selected cohorts we avoid a problem of having a religiosity measured years after a decision to cohabit was made.

We focus on the probability of nonmarital cohabitation as a first union. Our key covariate is the contextual variable on religiosity of communities where respondents live (among adult inhabitants in the place of residence). The key control variable is the measure of individual-level religiosity. Additionally, we control for a range of socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, such as age, gender and educational attainment as well as parental background. We use the multilevel logit models to test if the community-level religiosity affects the individual-level union formation. Additionally, following recent advances in statistical methods applied in demographic research (Pirani and Salvini 2012; Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal 2008), we look at the empirical bayes residuals by region in order to examine if specific types of regions cluster closer in terms of how strongly community-level religiosity do emerge. Hence, we can test if the impact of community-level religiosity is stronger in any particular regions of the countries, providing us with additional insights into how community may influence individual choices.

3. Preliminary findings from qualitative analyses

The initial analysis of the narrative material shows that the respondents refer to both levels (individual and community) when they discuss what role that religion has for their decision to cohabit. When they refer to the community level – they discuss the country level most of all. They say that their countries are Catholic and religious, they refer to Catholic culture and tradition when discuss cohabitation and marriage.

¹ The Italian “variant” of the GGS was conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics in 2003. The 2009 survey is a replication of that previous survey with a more detailed collection of employment and education histories.

Individual level: "It depends, to what extent one is a believer and to what extent one participates in this religion, I guess. Because if one practices, attends the church every Sunday and all the celebrations, then surely this feeling of a duty to have a church wedding is stronger. I agree with my colleague that it depends how strongly one believes in God, in this Church, in this all, because it is an individual thing" (Poland, FG2, Fem, Low edu)

Community / societal level: "The Vatican influences the dominant traditional culture and of course especially the decision to get married instead of cohabiting!" (Italy, FG2, Male, High edu)

The respondents are aware of the social pressure related to the Catholic culture. For instance, both the Polish and Italian respondents notice that declining social pressure and secularization are key reasons for which cohabitation becomes more popular in their countries. At the same time they believe that the Catholic tradition and social pressure related to it are the main reasons for which the cohabitation does not spread faster.

The respondents also recognize actual mechanism of social control that operate at the community level and discourage cohabitation. For example, the Polish respondents refer to two mechanisms: "neighbors' talking" and sanctions imposed directly by the Catholic church. Noteworthy, in both cases the sanctions are more severe when childbearing is involved. Neighbors' talking is more dangerous when it can hurt a child. Also the Church's role is more important when it comes to baptizing a child. The Polish respondents quite unanimously recognize that one of the key reasons why people marry is because they want to baptize their (future) children. They describe numerous examples of how Catholic priests refused to baptize a child born out of wedlock. Even though this sanction does not relate to cohabitation per se, it still protects the importance of marriage.

Neighbors' talking – no child involved: "People around me find my wedding more important than I do; - Instead of minding their own business they think of me , this is the most important thing for them; - People are always interested in what they neighbors do, instead of minding their own business." (Poland, FG4, Male, High edu)

Neighbors' talking – child involved: "If I was pregnant, I would do anything to get married. Even for this simple reason: a child goes to school and will be pointed at that he or she doesn't have a daddy. Meaning: a mum is not married... Times have changed, but people are still just the same..." (Poland, FG7, Fem, High edu).

Church's sanctions – no child involved: "If one is in informal union, one does not have an access to sacraments" (Poland, FG2, Fem, Low edu)

Church's sanction – child involved: "There are problems with baptizing a child; - But it all depends on the church. My colleague went to the parish and there were huge problems to baptize a child [born out of wedlock]. After three years, he gave up and went to another place and there – no problem." (Poland, FG6, Male, High edu)

The last quote, reported above, indicates that the respondent was aware that the social sanctions may vary in different communities. This is clearly visible in the way the respondents discuss differences in how religion and religiosity are important for cohabitation in different context. Importantly, the key difference between Italy and Poland is revealed here.

In Poland, the respondents recurrently and unanimously say that religiosity and mechanism of social control have greater impact on decision to cohabit or marry in rural areas. They say that in small villages the role of religion is particularly strong and local society impacts individual choices with greater power. In Italy, such comments are absent. Instead, the respondents refer to south-north division, saying that role of religion is more powerful in the southern regions of the country. In the paper, this difference between Poland and Italy will be further explored.

Poland – rural / urban distinction: *“We were talking about the influence of Church, about the impact of families and environment in hermetic villages or small towns. In big cities, it works in a different way.” (Poland, FG4, Fem, Low edu)*

“This is also an issue of small cities for sure, where the local society is small, people know each other very well, so for example in villages there is more pressure and attachment to this traditional family model. In metropolitan agglomerations, where these human relations are looser...- They don’t pay attention; - One is more anonymous.” (Poland, FG3, Male, Low edu)

Italy – south / north distinction: *“Religious fundamentalism is particularly strong in Southern Italian regions, both among lower and higher educated people. I came from the South, and I know!” (Italy, FG5, Fem, Low edu)*

4. Expected findings from quantitative analyses

We expect that both in Italy and in Poland, the social environment in which people live does have a potent influence on the individual-level union choices. We expect that people who live in religious communities are less likely to cohabit and tend to marry directly, even if they are not very religious themselves.

We also anticipate that the impact of community-level religiosity may differ across regions and that we expect that certain communities will cluster in terms of the magnitude of this impact. The stronger role played by community religiosity is expected to be crucial especially in contexts where strong social ties dominate.

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