



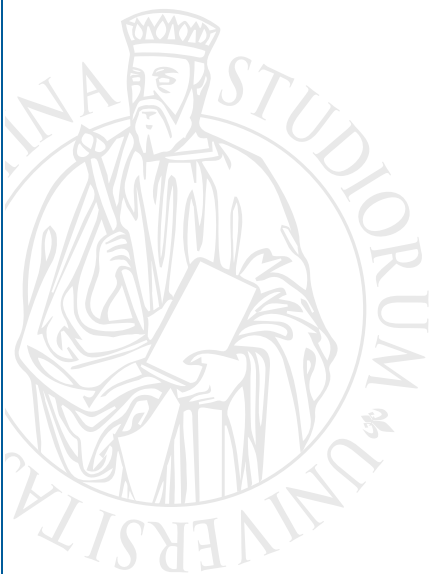
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**Uncertain Lives.
Insights into the Role of
Job Precariousness in Union Formation**

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Uncertain Lives. Insights into the Role of Job Precariousness in Union Formation

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Abstract

The diffusion of temporary job contracts in contemporary European societies has raised concern that these jobs, even while deemed useful for combating unemployment, may also constitute a source of insecurity and precariousness for young workers. Little is known about their possible social and demographic consequences, especially as regards family formation. We focused on this knowledge-gap by examining how job precariousness affects union formation practices in Italy. We studied both genders and combined the empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research. Based on the qualitative evidence, we advanced the hypothesis that cohabitation can be linked to the growing labor market uncertainty while marriage can be linked to stability. The subsequent quantitative analysis provided strong support for this hypothesis in the general population.

Keywords: job precariousness, temporary contracts, family formation, cohabitation, marriage, Italy.

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Introduction

Although presented as the remedy against economic problems and unemployment since the 1990s, the diffusion of new forms of flexible and temporary work contracts has transformed labor market entry and exit conditions, leading to an increasing precariousness of employment careers. Growing uncertainty has become an intrinsic characteristic of contemporary “globalized” societies, caused by deregulation, internationalization, and delocalization (e.g. Blossfeld & Hofmeister, 2006; Blossfeld, Mills, & Bernardi, 2006). From the beginning of the Nineties up to 2012, the share of temporary employment has risen from 10% to 16% in the Euro area (Caroli & Godard, 2013). A growing number of people – the emerging class of “precariat” (Standing, 2011) – are today faced with uncertainty, moving in and out of jobs that give little meaning to their lives.

Recently, uncertainty has spread into the partnership and parenthood domains of young adults’ lives as well (e.g. Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005; Kreyenfeld, Andersson, & Pailhe, 2012; Mills & Blossfeld, 2013). Among other things, economic uncertainty may also affect union formation practices. Addressing how the relationship between economic uncertainty and union formation operates is however complex for at least three, interrelated, reasons. Firstly, deciding whether employment uncertainty can be conceived as an inhibitor or a facilitator of family formation is unclear. On one hand, job precariousness brings in its wake fluctuating incomes due to unstable employment episodes and rapid job changes, and consequently union formation is expected to be postponed. On the other, in their well-cited study, Friedman and colleagues (1994) argue that individuals subject to bleak employment prospects may perceive marriage as an escape route out of a biographical gridlock. Secondly, previous studies focused predominantly on marriage and the role played by cohabitation within this context is vague and still debated (Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010). Finally, European studies on family formation generally focus on women, but there are

reasons to expect gender-specific differences in the manner in which economic uncertainty affects union dynamics (Oppenheimer, 2003).

By adopting a mixed-method approach, this paper aims to provide insights into the influence of job precariousness on the decision of women and men to enter either cohabitation or marriage. The qualitative research – conducted with focus group techniques – provides an in-depth understanding into the mechanisms of how job precariousness may affect individual decisions on union formation. Using quantitative analyses – conducted with event-history techniques – we test how strong these mechanisms are in the general population. We study Italy, where unmarried cohabitation is far less common and less socially acceptable than elsewhere in Europe (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014) and does not yet represent an integral part of family life (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004). We continue by presenting our theoretical considerations and elaborating on the limits of previous research in this area.

We then describe the characteristics of the Italian setting that are important for this study, followed by a presentation of the analytical strategy, a description of results. A concluding discussion closes the paper.

Background

Employment Uncertainty and Family Formation

The nexus between employment uncertainty and family formation practices is multifaceted. At first glance, and in line with the globalization and labor market deregulation perspective (Blossfeld & Hofmeister, 2006; Blossfeld, et al., 2005; Blossfeld, et al., 2006; Mills & Blossfeld, 2013), it is relatively straightforward to suppose that marriage, a resource-intensive and long-term commitment, will be postponed when people face employment uncertainty. Furthermore, the spread of job precariousness jeopardizes financial resources, and may thus act as a barrier to marriage or a wedding ceremony (Livi Bacci, 2008). Nevertheless, according to the narrative inspired by the socio-psychological *uncertainty reduction theory*

developed by Friedman et al. (1994), family formation may serve as a strategy to reduce biographical uncertainty. This theory contends that uncertainty reduction is a universally immanent value and that rational actors will always seek to reduce uncertainty. To this end, “[t]he principal global strategies available to ordinary individuals in the United States in the 1990s are stable careers, marriage, and children” (p. 382). Accordingly, women tend to respond to unfavorable employment prospects by choosing the “alternative career” of wives (and mothers).

In recent years, union formation has been increasingly attained not only through marriage, but also through cohabitation. Hence, reflections about the link between economic uncertainty and union formation need to be extended by adding the role of cohabitation. In this respect, the globalization and labor market deregulation perspective may affect cohabitation in a different way compared to marriage. In deprived groups or in large-scale economic crises, a *pattern of disadvantage* (hereafter POD; Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011; Perelli-Harris, et al., 2010) or a “general milieu of social disorganization” (Billy & Moore, 1992) might emerge. When social disorganization or “blocked opportunities” prevail, societal norms on the “right” order of the life course may lose ground (Bauman, 2005). A possible strategy to reduce life course uncertainty is to enter a union, but in this context, cohabitation may be preferred over marriage in the light of its more uncertain nature (Mills & Blossfeld, 2013: Table 2.1). The temporary and reversible nature of cohabitation may offer an alternative to the commitments of marriage and a living situation that reflects uncertainties resulting from financial constraints (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; P. J. Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). The POD approach seems to recall the *uncertainty reduction* narrative inspired by Friedman and colleagues (1994), but with a shift in its focus from marriage to cohabitation. Individuals with limited options in the labor market are likely to perceive cohabitation as a strategic choice for structuring an otherwise uncertain life course. Marriage is not necessarily rejected, but people

might decide to postpone the wedding until their future prospects are clearer (Perelli-Harris, et al., 2010). In empirical research, the POD narrative is usually operationalized by focusing on individual educational qualifications (Perelli-Harris, et al., 2010). In recent years, in fact, individuals with lower education have had to struggle more with reduced job security and diminished wage protection than their better educated counterparts. For instance, education has become increasingly important for successfully negotiating the new globalized and technologically oriented labor force (Kohler, Billari, & Ortega, 2002).

The POD develops along a trajectory that differs from the perhaps more prominent and more developed theoretical framework of the *second demographic transition* (hereafter SDT; Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987). The SDT explains the diffusion of new family patterns, such as cohabitation, by building on structural changes (modernization, the growth of the welfare state, the rise of higher education) and cultural changes (secularization, the rise of individualistic values, the importance of self-expression and self-fulfillment). Based on the theoretical considerations of the SDT, one might expect the highly educated to be at the forefront in adopting new behaviors such as cohabitation, because they may hold more liberal values and be more resistant to prevailing social stigmas.

Limits of Previous Findings

Several studies, both American and European, have found a higher frequency of cohabitation among the better educated (e.g., Glick & Spanier, 1980; Kiernan & Lelièvre, 1995; Spanier, 1983), in line with the SDT theory. By contrast, other studies, especially recent ones from the US (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; A. Smock & Manning, 2004) and Europe (Koytcheva & Philipov, 2008; Lappegard, Klüsener, & Vignoli, 2014), have reported an inverse association between cohabitation and education. These recent findings have often been interpreted as a symptom of the emergence of the POD (Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011).

Education has frequently been considered a valid proxy of labor market characteristics and prospects. Nevertheless, employment uncertainty is increasingly characterizing contemporary labor markets all over Europe, irrespective of individual educational status. In order to cope with changing labor markets and increasing uncertainty, some young adults have adopted new strategies, for example prolonged education (Kohler, et al., 2002; McLanahan, 2004). What is more, there is some evidence that those who are better educated are also the ones who are most affected by the rise in precarious forms of employment (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009). Thus, to properly assess the existence of a POD one should ideally also look at the type of employment, rather than focusing solely on educational differentials.

Another limit of previous studies is that they generally look at women. Nonetheless, in order to explore in-depth the emergence of a POD, researchers need to focus on both genders. In many male breadwinner societies, it is especially the unstable labor market position of the male partner in the couple that potentially has the triggering effect on family formation dynamics (Oppenheimer, 2003). In particular, the destabilization of the male partner in the labor market, which brings about a natural crisis of the male breadwinner model, may prompt couples to delay or forgo marriage in favor of cohabitation (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997).

In short, a proper empirical test of the effects of growing employment uncertainty on the diffusion of unmarried cohabitation, aimed at uncovering symptoms of the POD, should ideally use fine-tuned measurements of the labor market status while also studying both genders. This paper follows these recommendations by focusing on the link between job precariousness and the practice of cohabitation and marriage among women and men in Italy.

Developments in the labor market and union formation in Italy

The process of labor market flexibilization began in Italy with the introduction of the so-called work-and-training contracts (1983–1984), followed by a weakening of the strict rules

for fixed term contracts (L.56/1987), which were subsequently made increasingly more convenient for firms (L.451/1994; L.608/1996). The major step in the process of labor market deregulation/segmentation was taken in 1997 (“Treu Law”, L.196/1997), while the following “Biagi Law” (L.30/2003) gave further impulse to the spread of “flexible” forms of employment, far less “protective” for the worker than before, when typically unlimited jobs used to be the rule (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009; Bernardi & Nazio, 2005).

In Italy, the spreading of flexible and temporary contractual forms has been the highest in Europe over the last decade (OECD data). According the Italian National Statistical Office (ISTAT, 2014), in 2013 about 12 million people had permanent full-time contract, whereas self-employed people amounted to more than 5 million. The largest share of precarious contacts is represented by fixed-term (i.e. temporary) arrangements, which involved about 13% of workers (more than 2 million of people), followed by atypical contracts (i.e. project-based or contingent works), which involved almost 400 thousands workers (1.7% of total). The traditional division between “insiders” and “outsiders” in the Italian labor market has been reinforced (Ferrera, 2000): The former are typically older male workers with long-term contracts and solid guarantees in case of unemployment; the latter are mostly young, or women, with precarious jobs, low pay, and very limited (or altogether nonexistent) safety nets for their unemployed periods.

Italy represents a relevant case study also from a gender perspective. According to the 2012 EU-SILC data, there is marked gender inequality in the labor market. Women’s participation, although on the rise, is still relatively low (i.e. the employment rate for the 15-64 age range is about 47%) and the diffusion of job precariousness is gendered (i.e. the proportion of temporary employees over the total number of workers is 6 percentage points higher among women). Over 50% of employed women in Italy work in professions characterized overall by

higher precariousness and inferior job conditions, such as minor prestige, lower wages, and fewer responsibilities (Pirani & Salvini, 2015).

In parallel to labor market development, family formation practices have also changed over the last decades in Italy. Whereas at the beginning of the '90s, unmarried cohabitation was only practiced by about 2% of couples, ten years later this percentage had doubled, and in the second decade of the 21st century, more than 10 out of 100 couples lived in non-marital cohabitation. Currently, in some regions of Northern Italy the number of cohabitators reaches 20%. In less than 20 years, the number of cohabiting unions has increased from about 200,000 to more than 1 million (ISTAT, 2012). Italian research on the possible negative consequences of precarious employment for the workers' economic situation and future career prospects is abundant (e.g., Barbieri & Scherer, 2009). Much less is known about its possible social and demographic consequences, such as family formation (Schröder, 2006). In the following sections, we aim to gain insights into the connections between the emergence of cohabitation and the concomitant rise in employment uncertainty in contemporary Italy.

Method

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative investigation draws from focus group interviews (FGIs) conducted in line with the research design developed by the international research project "Focus on Partnerships". Team members collaborated to create a standardized focus group guideline, which was used to direct the focus group discussions¹. The goal of the FGIs was to provide information on general norms and perceptions regarding cohabitation and marriage. The interview guidelines included numerous questions concerning cohabitation and marriage such as (dis)advantages of living together outside marriage, motivations for marriage, and barriers to marriage. More importantly for this paper, the role of employment uncertainty was explicitly

¹ For further information on this project, please see www.nonmarital.org.

investigated. The main advantage of focus group methodology over individual in-depth interviews is that it gives the chance to study people in a more natural conversation situation.

We conducted FGIs in Florence from February to April 2012. Recruitment of the participants was carried out via the distribution of brochures and advertisements in cinemas, universities, sport clubs, shopping malls, and so on. The participants received an incentive of 20 Euros. They were 25-40 years of age and divided into groups by gender and level of education. The higher level of education included women and men with a bachelor's or a master's degree as well as those with a post-tertiary qualification. The lower level of education included primary, vocational, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education. In total, eight FGIs were conducted: two with women of low-medium education, two with women with tertiary education, two with men of low-medium education, and two with men with tertiary education. Altogether, 58 informants participated in the study, with an average number of 7-8 participants per FGI. In accordance with the project guidelines, focus groups were not stratified by partnership or parenthood status, as partnership histories can be inherently complicated, and it was unclear how to categorize those who experienced premarital cohabitation, separation or divorce, remarriage, and so forth.

The aim of our qualitative analysis was to explore mechanisms through which employment uncertainty might be important for the decision to cohabit or marry. We identified all passages where motivation to marry or cohabit were discussed in the transcripts. We applied bottom-up coding procedures to this material to identify main themes appearing in discussions. Special attention was paid to any reference to precarious forms of employment and the categories were systematically compared to investigate the mechanisms via which employment uncertainty intertwines with relationship choices.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis was based on retrospective data stemming from the 2009 Household Multipurpose Survey Family and Social Subjects (FSS). This survey was conducted by ISTAT on a sample of about 24,000 households, corresponding to approximately 50,000 individuals of all ages. The overall response rate of the survey was greater than 80%. The 2009 FSS covered detailed information on men's and women's partnership and employment histories recorded on a monthly basis – including information on the type of contract in each employment spell.

The empirical analysis was based on methods of event-history analysis and was structured in two parts. We initially looked at the transition to the first heterosexual union for men and women. The analytical sample consisted of 10,304 men and 10,675 women born between 1950 and 1985, those especially involved in new partnership behaviors compared to older cohorts. The baseline duration was the time elapsing from the age of 16 to marriage or cohabitation, whichever came first. Following standard practice, we considered the entry into first marriage or cohabitation as two distinct processes or competing risks – i.e., the occurrence of one event removed the individual from the possibility of experiencing the other (e.g., Berrington & Diamond, 2000). We censored the remaining observations at the time of the interview (November 2009). The baseline hazard had a piecewise-constant specification, with constant two-year intervals from the age of 16 to the age of 46 years, and then a single interval after 46, when the risk of entering into the first union is very low and virtually constant.

In order to provide us with a comprehensive picture of family formation practices, we then studied the transition from cohabitation to marriage. The baseline duration was the time elapsing from the start of cohabitation as a first union to marriage; we censored the remaining observation at the time of the interview. Also in this additional set of analysis, the baseline

hazard had a piecewise-constant specification, with constant two-year intervals until the relative risk became negligible.

Our core explanatory (time-varying) variable was the type of employment that we categorized into “non-employment”, “permanent employment”, “self-employment”, “temporary employment” and “atypical job”. Both “temporary employment” and “atypical job” identify precarious forms of employment, with the latter being the least protected employment condition. We controlled our estimates for a set of potential confounders. These included educational level (a time-varying variable grouped into “in education”, “primary education”, “upper-secondary education”, “tertiary education”, where the last three labels refer to the highest educational level of those categories) and calendar time. The purpose of the latter time-varying variable was to reflect key appointments in the flexibilization of the Italian labor market: the entry into force of the Treu Law (1997) and the Biagi Law (2003).

We adjusted the estimates by intra-group correlation (at the level of the region). This approach specifies that the standard errors allow for (regional) intragroup correlation, relaxing the usual requirement that the observations are independent. That is, the observations are independent across clusters (i.e. regions) but not within clusters. In this way, we acknowledge that there may be important similarities in patterns of union formation and their correlates among respondents living in the same region. In addition, we included a covariate for the area of residence² (divided into three categories: “North”, “Center”, and “South/Islands”) in the final model specification. The composition of the sample is reported in the Appendix (Table A1).

² The area of residence was collected at the time of the interview. However, it is relatively trouble-free to use the macro-area of residence as a time-constant covariate because Italian internal mobility has been low over recent decades and mainly relegated within short distances only (Reynaud & Conti, 2011).

Results

Qualitative Findings

In this section, we present explorative insights from the qualitative analysis. We explored the content of the FGIs to see what kinds of references are made when the respondents discuss the role of employment uncertainty underlying their decision to cohabit or marry. According to our findings, employment instability and job precariousness that characterize contemporary labor markets increase the uncertainty and intensify the difficulties experienced by young people in their transition to adulthood, when they start their employment careers, try to strengthen their economic position, and begin to consider family formation. Informants treat their position on the labor market as an urgent issue. There is a generalized need for greater stability in the labor market, as this male participant pointed out:

“I graduated, but I’m currently unemployed, I even accepted to carry out several unpaid training periods ... we are this new generation that lives hoping in God, holding only temporary contracts: Everything is postponed until a moment of stability in life...” (FG 4; man, high education)

When partners have jobs of unlimited duration, they can get married. As one informant stated, *“it is important to have at least one permanent job, at least one fixed point in life!”* (FG 8; man, low education). Another informant put this very clearly:

“The right moment to get married arrives with a stable job! I’m 32, but I continue to get one-year contracts only, so with my partner we say: we’ll get married as soon as we have a secure point in our life. In fact, I don’t even know if I’ll still live in Florence next year ... and this is the fault of my job!” (FG 1; woman, high education)

The spread of job precariousness seems to affect the decision to marry also by acting as a financial barrier to the wedding ceremony. The traditional ceremony is often imagined as quite expensive which can be a direct cause of postponement of marriage until the couple is economically “ready”. Some people reported that the cost of the ceremony depends on what a couple expects: One can have a small or large ceremony. Nevertheless, the general feeling was that even a small ceremony requires considerable financial investment:

“Getting married is expensive! I married in April at a small ceremony, with only few people and simple catering at my place. But we still had to spend money and not everybody can afford it.” (FG 1; woman, high education)

On the other hand, the same reasons that are perceived as inhibitors to marriage are also mentioned among the major motivations beyond the choice to cohabit. The following quote is representative of this state of affairs:

“People cohabit due to money shortages, definitely, and due to precarious working conditions. These reasons are more important than anything else!” (FG 5; woman; low education).

Uncertainty on the labor market is associated with uncertainty in private life, where cohabitation is preferred to a more “stable” marriage. In fact, cohabiting is easier to disrupt than marriage and may be seen as an opportunity to test the functioning of a relationship, “*a sort of test*”. Especially for some males, cohabitation is attractive because this condition meets the desire to keep some personal independence while marriage represents a frightening ultimate commitment. For example, one participant argued:

“With cohabitation there are no problems if you decide to split, you just need to say “thanks and goodbye”, and that’s it!” (FG 3; man, high education)

When both partners have reached a permanent employment status, then the “right time” to also reach a permanent status in their relationship seems to follow soon after, in a sort of “time-squeeze”. The following quote is representative of this situation:

“Stable job for him, stable job for myself, 4 months later we got married, 9 months later I was pregnant... we were ready! I mean: finally we have some protection, we have some rights... we can go!” (FG 1; woman, high education)

In short, many voices claim that the “right time” to get married is when a stable job is obtained, for at least one member of the couple (and preferably the male partner). Hence, as one informant clearly stated:

“If you have a permanent job, then you can also make a permanent choice!” (FG 2; woman, high education)

In all, informants believe that economic circumstances matter for marriage. Firstly, having a stable contract is commonly perceived as a prerequisite for marriage, backed by the

consideration that marriage embodies economic security. Secondly, participants, especially romantically involved participants, view not having “enough money” – using a term borrowed from Smock et al. 2006 – to afford a “proper” wedding as a barrier to marriage. Based on the qualitative section of our study, we can therefore advance the hypothesis that marriage is linked to employment stability, while cohabitation is linked to employment uncertainty.

This hypothesis hardly reconciles with former interpretations of the Italian setting. Previous papers, in fact, have argued that the transition to marriage is more advantageous than the choice of cohabitation in Italy (Di Giulio & Rosina, 2007; Schröder, 2006) because parents are more likely to support their adult offspring when they decide on conventional and socially accepted living arrangements such as marriage (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004). The choice of informal unions might be more cost-intensive as in this case parents tend to withdraw from supporting their adult children (Di Giulio & Rosina, 2007; Schröder, 2006). Besides, the Italian welfare state does not provide support for young adults and the institutional organization of welfare is largely based on (if not delegated to) the family, which serves as the primary social safety net (Ferrera, 2000). The natural consequence of this state of affairs is that during turbulent economic times young individuals who are confronted with economic hardships tend to opt for marriage rather than cohabitation because of the fear of losing the indispensable support of their family. This economic support is particularly important for the more disadvantaged segments of the population, who are more inclined to opt for marriage to preserve parental economic help. From this perspective, in line with the SDT narrative, cohabitation is expected to be more popular among the better-off, who posit themselves at the forefront of the diffusion of this (new) type of living arrangement. Thus, based on current knowledge of the Italian setting, it can be assumed that labor market uncertainty facilitates entry into marriage and inhibits entry into cohabitation.

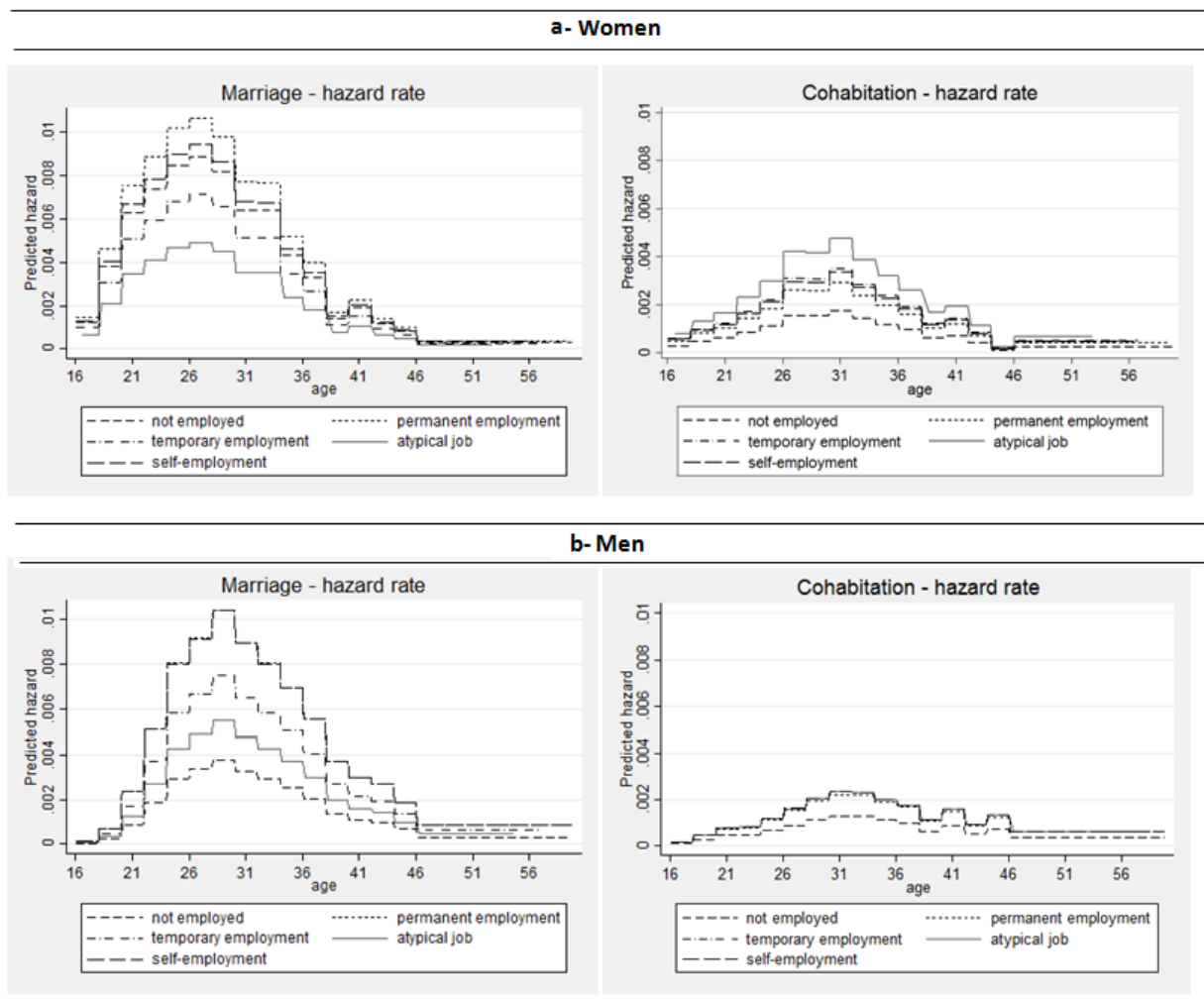
Our qualitative exploration challenges this “classical” expectation. Our findings instead suggest an opposite mechanism, in which employment uncertainty is positively associated with cohabitation and negatively with marriage. In the following quantitative analysis, we examine to what extent this new mechanism, suggested by the qualitative section of the study, is maintained at the population level.

Quantitative findings

Figure 1a-b displays the hazards of entry into marriage and cohabitation only controlling for the type of contract. The relative risks for entry into marriage are at their lowest when women are experiencing the most unstable forms of employment – the aforementioned atypical jobs. On the other hand, women in atypical jobs are also those characterized by the highest relative risks of entering cohabitation. A similar situation is also observed among the male population. As expected, the lowest relative risks of entering marriage are found for the non-employed, followed by men faced with precarious work contracts (temporary and atypical). Men’s relative risks of entering cohabitation do not significantly differ with their employment status: Any type of employment is associated with a higher cohabitation risk compared to non-employment. Thus, the hypothesis developed through the qualitative analysis – i.e. that marriage is linked to employment stability, while cohabitation is linked to employment uncertainty – seems to be confirmed for the overall population.

A gender-specific difference is worth noting. Employed men are always more likely to form a union, either cohabitation or a marriage, irrespective of their employment security. Conversely, in line with the (still) unbalanced gender arrangements that characterize the Italian society, employed women (apart from those who possess a permanent job) tend to be less likely to marry than those who do not work.

Figure 1 Timing of entry into marriage and cohabitation by employment status in Italy for (a) women and (b) men. Results of a piecewise-constant event history competing risk model.



Source: Our processing of FSS 2009 data.

Note: Estimates are adjusted for intra-cluster (i.e. regional) correlation.

In the next step, we included the educational attainment, area of residence, and calendar time in our models (Table 1a-b; full model results in Appendix, Table A3-A4). Confirming previous bivariate evidence, women holding an atypical contract display a higher relative risk of entering cohabitation than those who are not employed (and also those who have more stable jobs), net of all other confounders. We also note that women with temporary jobs are characterized by significantly lower hazards of marriage. In Figure 1, we showed how women with atypical jobs are those characterized by the lowest relative risks to entry into marriage; this effect is only weakly significant after controlling our estimates for educational attainment,

area of residence, and calendar time. In particular, this effect is partly mediated by the calendar period, which reflects the growing employment uncertainty over recent years³.

Looking at men, the results can be read in a similar fashion. We found that those experiencing precarious employment conditions (fixed-term employment and atypical contractual forms) are significantly more likely to enter marriage than non-employed men, but they also display a lower risk of marrying than men with permanent jobs. Namely, the relative risk to enter into marriage decreases as employment precariousness increases. In parallel, the lowest hazards of cohabitation can be found among non-employed men, while self-employment, temporary and permanent employment increase the risks of cohabitation compared to the non-employed. Again, the role of job precariousness seems to be partly mitigated by calendar time.

An additional analysis looked at the role of the type of employment on the transition from cohabitation to marriage (Table 2; full model results in Appendix, Table A5). For women, the relative risks of getting married do not vary according to the type of contract. In contrast, for men, the relative risk of marrying increases by 65% after having obtained a permanent job. Hence, cohabiting couples seem to be facilitated in their transition to marriage when the male partner gets a permanent position. This finding is in line with our qualitative exploration: Couples starting cohabitation are able to support themselves economically, but decide to take a more “stable”, “permanent” commitment like marriage as soon as he finds “permanent” employment.

Overall, our quantitative findings support the hypothesis, advanced by the previous qualitative exploration: We showed that labor market uncertainty promotes entry into cohabitation. Interestingly, our outcomes illustrate very little differentials per educational level

³ Accordingly, a model where we excluded only calendar time (not shown here, but available upon request) revealed that the impact of an atypical working condition had a significant detrimental effect on marriage risks.

(see Appendix, Table A3, A4, A5). Differences per educational qualification did not emerge from our models also excluding the employment status (results not shown). These outcomes confirm our opinion that researchers should not limit their investigation to the mere role of education when they seek to test the function of economic factors on patterns of union formation.

Table 1 Relative risks of entry into marriage and cohabitation per employment status in Italy for (a) women and (b) men. Results of a competing risk piecewise-constant event history model.

	Entry into marriage			Entry into cohabitation		
	hazard ratio	st error	p-value	hazard ratio	st error	p-value
a – Women						
Employment status						
not employed	1.000			1.000		
permanent employment	0.966	0.038	0.375	1.161	0.128	0.175
temporary employment	0.742	0.040	0.000	1.411	0.227	0.033
atypical job	0.753	0.121	0.076	1.680	0.305	0.004
self-employment	0.915	0.063	0.199	1.348	0.215	0.062
b – Men						
	Entry into marriage			Entry into cohabitation		
	hazard ratio	st error	p-value	hazard ratio	st error	p-value
Employment status						
not employed	1.000			1.000		
permanent employment	2.568	0.162	0.000	1.480	0.118	0.000
temporary employment	1.866	0.193	0.000	1.690	0.207	0.000
atypical job	1.687	0.340	0.009	1.440	0.429	0.221
self-employment	2.496	0.183	0.000	1.635	0.150	0.000

Note: Results are controlled for the time elapsed since age 16, respondent's education, area of residence, and calendar time. Estimates are adjusted for intra-cluster (i.e. regional) correlation.

Table 2 Relative risks of the transition from cohabitation to marriage per employment status in Italy for women and men. Results of a piecewise-constant event history model.

	Women			Men		
	hazard ratio	std error	p-value	hazard ratio	std error	p-value
Employment status						
not employed	1.000			1.000		
permanent employment	0.986	0.093	0.885	1.651	0.239	0.001
temporary employment	0.831	0.119	0.196	1.336	0.189	0.041
atypical job	0.981	0.245	0.940	1.474	0.722	0.428
self-employment	0.977	0.130	0.864	1.312	0.215	0.096

Note: Results are controlled for the time elapsed since entry into cohabitation, respondent's education, area of residence, and calendar time. Estimates are adjusted for intra-cluster (i.e. regional) correlation.

Concluding discussion

In the social landscape of Europe, life has recently become increasingly uncertain in the labor market sphere (Blossfeld, et al., 2005; Kohler, et al., 2002; Kreyenfeld, et al., 2012; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008; Vignoli, Drefahl, & De Santis, 2012; Vignoli, Rinesi, & Mussino, 2013). Very little is known about the nexus between the growing employment uncertainty and family union practices. In our study, we addressed this knowledge-gap utilizing Italy as a meaningful case-study. A first qualitative exploration conducted through focus group research allowed us to advance the hypothesis – new for the Italian setting – that cohabitation can be linked to the growing labor market uncertainty while marriage can be linked to stability. A subsequent quantitative analysis provided strong support for this hypothesis in the general population.

Overall, our findings support the idea that cohabitation – in contrast to marriage – is more compatible with the new demands of today's labor market, such as mobility, flexibility, and the resulting uncertainty. According to this view, cohabitation appears to be an adequate alternative to marriage, since it allows for living together without taking on long-term responsibilities that are usually associated with an enduring union. Our qualitative and quantitative findings provide evidence for this conjecture for the Italian case and contribute to our understanding of the implications of recent labor market developments on family formation practices. Given the contemporary economic fluctuations in Europe, we expect that labor market uncertainty will continue to represent a potent factor influencing the choice of the type of union in the years to come.

In addition, our findings add to Italian literature on union formation. Traditional calculations make it feasible to expect that labor market uncertainty will promote entry into marriage rather than the transition into cohabitation because parents are more likely to support their adult offspring when they decide to marry, and during turbulent economic times parental

support is especially important. In contrast with these predictions, our mixed-method findings instead suggest the emergence of a POD as a driver of the spread of cohabitation. Young Italians faced with blocked opportunities might prefer cohabitation to marriage due to its lower level of commitment; alternatively, they might decide to postpone marriage until their outlook on life is more optimistic.

Our findings also provide insights from a gender perspective. Overall, we found a gender-specific difference in the association between job precariousness and marriage. A possible interpretation lies in the peculiarities of the Italian labor market and is embedded in the asymmetric gender context we are dealing with. In Italy, where women are the main caregivers and men act primarily as household providers, the economic well-being of the household depends mainly on the market performance of the man. On average, women earn less than men, and *his* employment stability is therefore crucial to ensure the economic success of the couple. Despite a gendered diffusion of job precariousness in Italy, young men are now also confronted with a worsening of their economic situation, thus demolishing the "first pillar" of Italian families (i.e. a male partner with a stable and well-paid job).

Furthermore, and counter-intuitively, our results seem to posit men as the most disadvantaged gender in times of rising uncertainty. For a woman, being outside the labor market can be seen as both a choice and a constraint, but those who do not work are also the ones with elevated hazards of entry into marriage. Thus, even if they do not work, women may benefit from a stronger family environment and financial protection. On the other hand, a rather more disadvantaged pattern seems to emerge for not-employed men: Not only do they not work, but they also display the smallest hazards of union formation, so that the disadvantage spread from economic sphere to other life domains as well.

Despite the rich and large-scale retrospective survey used in the quantitative section of the study, our research design has some limitations. First, we could not differentiate non-

employment spells from unemployment and inactivity. This may be problematic especially for women, for whom the distinction between being unemployed and being a homemaker is crucial. Second, we had to code “self-employment” as a broad, distinct category. Nevertheless, within this condition old-fashioned self-employment arrangements coexist with new situations where people are forced to opt for self-employment as an alternative to a permanent contract. In this vein, Adsera (2004) claims that the emergence of self-employment in Southern Europe may be seen as a symptom of rising employment uncertainty.

Despite these limitations, our study provides fresh insights into the role of job precariousness in family formation practices. For many years the dominant view of the spreading of cohabitation in Europe was inspired by the SDT narrative. Only recently has a different explanation, derived partly from U.S. qualitative literature (e.g., Gibson-Davis, et al., 2005; A. Smock & Manning, 2004), begun to gain ground (Perelli-Harris & Gerber, 2011; Perelli-Harris, et al., 2010). Our findings, in line with the POD perspective, envision economic uncertainty as a potent driving force of union formation dynamics in Italy. Previous studies have focused on the role of education as an indicator of economic uncertainty, and stressed its influence on fertility and family formation practices. We suggest that other factors, such as the role of job precariousness, may be equally – or even more – crucial. Consequently, we suggest that the availability of variables on employment uncertainty should be seriously considered in the design of future surveys.

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Appendix

Table A1 Exposures (person-months) and occurrences; Italy, women.

Covariates	Exposure		Marriage occurrences		Cohabitation occurrences	
	abs. val.	%	abs. val.	%	abs. val.	%
Employment						
not employed	828,002	62.23	3.934	54.43	561	39.93
permanent employment	363,692	27.33	2.537	35.10	566	40.28
temporary employment	73,687	5.54	363	5.02	138	9.82
atypical job	9,920	0.75	37	0.51	31	2.21
self-employment	55,316	4.16	356	4.93	109	7.76
Educational attainment						
upper-secondary education	396,946	29.83	2.800	38.74	574	40.85
in education	451,108	33.90	705	9.76	263	18.72
primary education	407,911	30.66	3.189	44.13	388	27.62
tertiary education	74,652	5.61	533	7.38	180	12.81
Macroarea of residence						
North of Italy	551,577	41.45	2.815	38.95	866	61.64
Center of Italy	234,738	17.64	1.280	17.71	281	20.00
South of Italy	544,302	40.91	3.132	43.34	258	18.36
Calendar time						
more than 3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	761,837	57.25	4.976	68.85	446	31.74
3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	125,398	9.42	520	7.20	137	9.75
between the entry into force of the Treu Law and the entry into force of the Biagi Law	240,510	18.08	980	13.56	393	27.97
3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	103,553	7.78	405	5.60	261	18.58
more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	99,319	7.46	346	4.79	168	11.96

Table A2 Exposures (person-months) and occurrences; Italy, men.

Covariates	Exposure		Marriage occurrences		Cohabitation occurrences	
	abs. val.	%	abs. val.	%	abs. val.	%
Employment						
not employed	763,108	44.93	884	14.70	311	21.79
permanent employment	625,976	36.85	3,534	58.75	726	50.88
temporary employment	103,996	6.12	380	6.32	114	7.99
atypical job	9,870	0.58	34	0.57	14	0.98
self-employment	195,571	11.51	1,183	19.67	262	18.36
Educational attainment						
upper-secondary education	528,187	31.10	2,402	39.93	581	40.71
in education	432,899	25.49	376	6.25	189	13.24
primary education	664,277	39.11	2,804	46.62	528	37.00
tertiary education	73,158	4.31	433	7.20	129	9.04
Macroarea of residence						
North of Italy	713,665	42.02	2,338	38.87	857	60.06
Center of Italy	296,761	17.47	1,051	17.47	280	19.62
South of Italy	688,095	40.51	2,626	43.66	290	20.32
Calendar time						
more than 3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	965,640	56.85	3,797	63.13	416	29.15
3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	158,791	9.35	498	8.28	139	9.74
between the entry into force of the Treu Law and the entry into force of the Biagi Law	302,593	17.82	934	15.53	419	29.36
3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	134,920	7.94	412	6.85	256	17.94
more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	136,577	8.04	374	6.22	197	13.81

Table A3 Full model results for the entry into cohabitation or marriage; Italy, women.

Covariates	Entry into marriage			Entry into cohabitation		
	hazard ratio	std error	p-value	hazard ratio	std error	p-value
Employment						
not employed	1.000			1.000		
permanent employment	0.966	0.038	0.375	1.161	0.128	0.175
temporary employment	0.742	0.040	0.000	1.411	0.227	0.033
atypical job	0.753	0.121	0.076	1.680	0.305	0.004
self-employment	0.915	0.063	0.199	1.348	0.215	0.062
Educational attainment						
upper-secondary education	1.000			1.000		
in education	0.316	0.018	0.000	0.631	0.075	0.000
primary education	1.301	0.047	0.000	1.028	0.078	0.720
tertiary education	1.097	0.040	0.012	1.184	0.121	0.100
Macroarea of residence						
North of Italy	1.000			1.000		
Center of Italy	1.095	0.057	0.081	0.765	0.097	0.035
South of Italy	1.132	0.056	0.013	0.306	0.062	0.000
Calendar time						
more than 3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	1.000			1.000		
3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law between the entry into force of the Treu Law and the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.560	0.026	0.000	1.589	0.164	0.000
3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.563	0.025	0.000	2.397	0.197	0.000
more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.512	0.030	0.000	3.520	0.356	0.000
more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.445	0.035	0.000	2.253	0.307	0.000

Note: Estimates are adjusted for intra-cluster (i.e., regional) correlation.

Table A4 Full model results for the entry into cohabitation or marriage; Italy, men.

Covariates	Entry into marriage			Entry into cohabitation		
	hazard ratio	std error	p-value	hazard ratio	std error	p-value
Employment						
not employed	1.000			1.000		
permanent employment	2.568	0.162	0.000	1.480	0.118	0.000
temporary employment	1.866	0.193	0.000	1.690	0.207	0.000
atypical job	1.687	0.340	0.009	1.440	0.429	0.221
self-employment	2.496	0.183	0.000	1.635	0.150	0.000
Educational attainment						
upper-secondary education	1.000			1.000		
in education	0.657	0.021	0.000	0.993	0.110	0.950
primary education	1.125	0.045	0.003	1.039	0.084	0.636
tertiary education	1.061	0.066	0.338	1.210	0.103	0.025
Macroarea of residence						
North of Italy	1.000			1.000		
Center of Italy	1.129	0.051	0.007	0.803	0.108	0.104
South of Italy	1.384	0.090	0.000	0.363	0.064	0.000
Calendar time						
more than 3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	1.000			1.000		
3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law between the entry into force of the Treu Law and the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.564	0.033	0.000	1.581	0.152	0.000
3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.461	0.023	0.000	3.063	0.383	0.000
more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.368	0.024	0.000	2.194	0.115	0.000

Note: Estimates are adjusted for intra-cluster (i.e., regional) correlation.

Table A5 Full model results for the transition from cohabitation to marriage; Italy, women and Men.

Covariates	Women			Men		
	hazard ratio	std error	p-value	hazard ratio	std error	p-value
Employment						
not employed	1.000			1.000		
permanent employment	0.986	0.093	0.885	1.651	0.239	0.001
temporary employment	0.831	0.119	0.196	1.336	0.189	0.041
atypical job	0.981	0.245	0.940	1.474	0.722	0.428
self-employment	0.977	0.130	0.864	1.312	0.215	0.096
Educational attainment						
upper-secondary education	1.000			1.000		
in education	0.765	0.127	0.108	0.574	0.099	0.001
primary education	0.971	0.088	0.743	1.048	0.086	0.571
tertiary education	1.422	0.181	0.006	1.310	0.183	0.054
Macroarea of residence						
North of Italy	1.000			1.000		
Center of Italy	1.179	0.085	0.023	1.033	0.070	0.635
South of Italy	1.191	0.137	0.127	1.172	0.102	0.068
Calendar time						
more than 3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	1.000			1.000		
3 years before the entry into force of the Treu Law	0.960	0.129	0.759	0.785	0.130	0.143
between the entry into force of the Treu Law and the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.829	0.087	0.074	0.888	0.082	0.201
3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	0.907	0.109	0.416	0.858	0.085	0.122
more than 3 years after the entry into force of the Biagi Law	1.095	0.125	0.425	0.911	0.152	0.579

Note: Estimates are adjusted for intra-cluster (i.e., regional) correlation.

