Marriage and Cohabitation under Uncertainty: The Role of Narratives of the Future during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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NARRATIVES

The Great Demographic Recession

The Uncertainty/Family Dynamics Nexus

- Growing interest on the role of economic uncertainty for family dynamics

    – Globalization → **labor market deregulation** (Mills and Blossfeld 2013)

    – **Great recession** and related fertility decline in Western countries (Sobotka et al. 2011)

- In such a contemporary scenario, the **COVID-19 pandemic** and its outbreak responses escalated uncertainty at the core of public debate and personal lives

- **COVID-induced (economic) uncertainty** might strongly affect family life courses

- In this paper we address its impact on **union formation practices** through an **on-line survey experiment**, which allows for an assessment of causation

Marriage and Cohabitation in Uncertain Times

Second Demographic Transition

- Accounts for the diffusion of cohabitation and the decline of marriage by stressing the role of **ideational factors**
- **No role** for the rise of (economic) **uncertainty**

Pattern of Disadvantage (POD) hypothesis (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011)

- Among **socioeconomically deprived groups** – e.g., lower educated – or during periods of economic crisis, cohabitation may be preferred over marriage because it is temporary and more easily reversible

→ One might hypothesize that COVID-induced uncertainty would be **negatively associated with marriage** and **positively associated with cohabitation** decisions

Conceptualization of (Economic) Uncertainty

- Several studies analyzed how family formation behavior depends on

  - Current and past **(un)employment condition** (Kreyenfeld et al. 2012)

  - Experiences of **temporary contracts** (Mills and Blossfeld 2013)

  - **Perceptions of insecurity** of current labor market status (Fahlén and Oláh 2018)

- That is, existing studies on the role of uncertainty account for the influence of **previous** or **current socioeconomic situation**

- But uncertainty primarily means a lack of clarity about *future prospects* (Beckert 2016)

- The **Narrative Framework** (Vignoli, Bazzani et al. 2020; Vignoli, Guetto et al. 2020) provides the concepts necessary to operationalize the influence of the future

Narratives of the Future

- When people face an uncertain situation, they take into account past experiences and present status, but also **future *expectations***

  – The **expected duration of the COVID-19 emergency** and its socioeconomic consequences may influence family plans

- Also, humans may shift from the expected course of action thanks to their imaginative capacity. A ***family imaginary*** is related to the type of family that people **wish to have in their future**

  – Even during the difficulties of the COVID-19 emergency, individuals with a positive family imaginary may decide to cohabit or to get married

- **Expectations and imaginaries** are part of **personal narratives of the future** that influence family decisions, over and above previous and current socioeconomic status.

  – Strong influence of **media-channeled narratives** on the evolution of the pandemic and the time before the return to "normality"

Italy & COVID-19

- The **first severe case of COVID-19 pandemic** in the Western world

- The **longest complete lockdown** experience (2 months in total)

- At the end of April 2020, Italy had about 25,000 deaths due to COVID-19

- Very **strong role of media**: daily, at 6 p.m., Italians gathered in front of the TV for the official updates on the pandemic

- The TV **announcements of the President Conte** had more than 70% of share

Sampling and Data Collection

- **On-line survey** at the premises of the international survey company **Lucid** (high academic reputation for its quality and rigor)

- Combination of **longitudinal survey** (follow-up in the next months) & **experimental approach**

- **Analytical sample**: **1,846** individuals in a **romantic relationship** of not less than three-months duration **without being married**.

  ➢ **750** were **cohabiting**, **1,096** were **living apart together (LAT)**

- Data collected **during the lockdown**: April 25 – May 1 2020

- We used **quota sampling** on men and women **aged 20-40**

  ➢ Based on data from the Italian national statistical office, we have set **quotas** for **gender, age, and region** (Centre and South) **or province** (North) of residence

The Experimental Design

- Respondents were exposed to a mock news bulletin concerning the **expected end of the pandemic emergency**

    - A few days before data collection the Italian Prime Minister announced a **task force of academics and other prominent experts** to address the COVID-19 emergency

    - Respondents were eventually **debriefed** about the fictitious nature of the information they received

- Respondents were **randomly assigned** one of five treatments, each presenting a **different expected duration** before the return to normality

- We then asked them about their **union intentions** (marriage and cohabitation) in the next three years **in light of the expected duration of the emergency**

- And analyzed changes with respect to **previously stated intentions**

In the next screen we will provide you with up-to-date forecasts concerning the evolution of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Within the last few days there haven't been substantial variations in the number of contagions, hospitalizations, and deaths. The task force composed by leading experts of the Coronavirus pandemic eventually obtained sure predictions about the future of the pandemic in Italy.
The experts predict that the Coronavirus pandemic emergency will last X before a return to normality

5 randomized scenarios for X 3 months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years, more than 2 years

Considering that the Coronavirus pandemic emergency will last X, do you plan to marry/cohabit in the next 3 years?

| 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Definitely not   Definitely yes
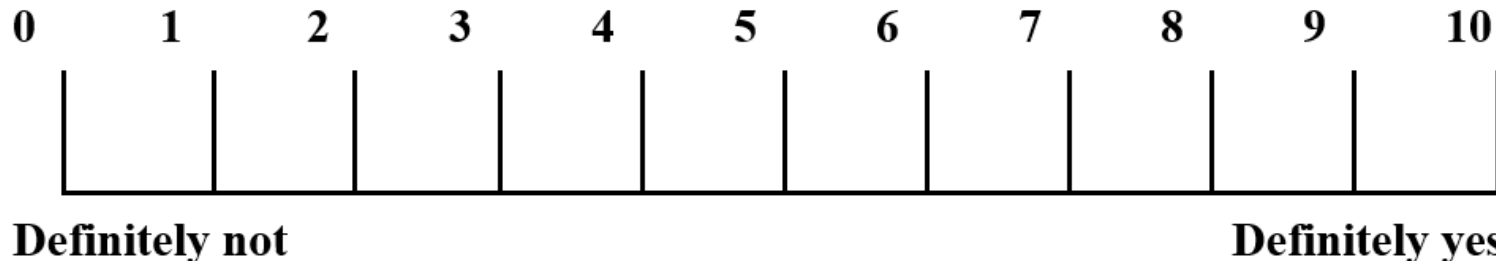
Methods – Cohabitation intentions

➤ **OLS** regression applied to the 1,096 respondents in a **LAT relationship**:

$$\Delta Cohabitation\_intentions_{t1-t} = Treatment + Imaginary +$$

$$+ Cohabitation\_intentions_t + Recall +$$

$$+ Xb \quad (1)$$

- **t1** = Post-treatment, **t** = Interview
- **Treatment**: dummies for randomized scenarios
- **Imaginary**: 0/10 variable on importance attached **to cohabit** with the partner
- **Recall**: dummy variable taking the value 1 for those respondents who were not able to recall exactly which type of scenario
- **Xb**: set of control variables

➤ Model is also estimated **by sex** and **education** (no tertiary/tertiary)

Methods – Marriage intentions

➢ **OLS** regression applied to the 1,846 respondents in a **relationship**:

$$\Delta Marriage\_intentions_{t1-t} = Treatment + Imaginary +$$
$$+ Marriage\_intentions_t + Recall + Cohabiting +$$
$$+ Xb \quad (2)$$

- **Imaginary**: 0/10 variable on importance attached **to marrying** their partner
- **Cohabiting**: dummy variable distinguishing respondents who are **cohabiting** form those who are in a **LAT relationship**

➢ Model is also estimated **by sex** and **education** (no tertiary/tertiary)

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Cohabitation

Change in cohabitation intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
	Pooled	*Controls*	*Males*	*Females*	*No tertiary*	*Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	0.091					
	(0.237)					
12 months	0.076					
	(0.236)					
2 years	-0.026					
	(0.235)					
>2 years	0.305					
	(0.233)					
Imaginary (cohabit)	0.364***					
	(0.042)					
Cohabit intentions$_t$	-0.507***	-				
	(0.033)					
Recall	-0.427**					
	(0.213)					
Obs.	1096					
R-squared	0.265					

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Cohabitation

Change in cohabitation intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
	Pooled	*Controls*	*Males*	*Females*	*No tertiary*	*Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	0.091	0.039				
	(0.237)	(0.235)				
12 months	0.076	-0.048				
	(0.236)	(0.234)				
2 years	-0.026	-0.076				
	(0.235)	(0.233)				
>2 years	0.305	0.296				
	(0.233)	(0.230)				
Imaginary (cohabit)	0.364***	0.379***				
	(0.042)	(0.042)				
Cohabit intentions$_t$	-0.507***	-0.553***				
	(0.033)	(0.036)				
Recall	-0.427**	-0.435**				
	(0.213)	(0.213)				
Obs.	1096	1096				
R-squared	0.265	0.304				

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** *p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1*

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Cohabitation

Change in cohabitation intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**	**M5**	**M6**
	Pooled	*Controls*	*Males*	*Females*	*No tertiary*	*Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	0.091	0.039	0.117	-0.066		
	(0.237)	(0.235)	(0.337)	(0.331)		
12 months	0.076	-0.048	0.325	-0.420		
	(0.236)	(0.234)	(0.349)	(0.327)		
2 years	-0.026	-0.076	0.127	-0.298		
	(0.235)	(0.233)	(0.359)	(0.311)		
>2 years	0.305	0.296	0.551*	-0.019		
	(0.233)	(0.230)	(0.325)	(0.325)		
Imaginary (cohabit)	0.364***	0.379***	0.412***	0.347***		
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.055)	(0.062)		
Cohabit intentions$_t$	-0.507***	-0.553***	-0.558***	-0.538***		
	(0.033)	(0.036)	(0.050)	(0.050)		
Recall	-0.427**	-0.435**	-0.538*	-0.328		
	(0.213)	(0.213)	(0.289)	(0.314)		
Obs.	1096	1096	544	552		
R-squared	0.265	0.304	0.317	0.329		

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Cohabitation

Change in cohabitation intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
	Pooled	*Controls*	*Males*	*Females*	*No tertiary*	*Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	0.091	0.039	0.117	-0.066	0.531*	-0.517
	(0.237)	(0.235)	(0.337)	(0.331)	(0.319)	(0.342)
12 months	0.076	-0.048	0.325	-0.420	0.253	-0.401
	(0.236)	(0.234)	(0.349)	(0.327)	(0.360)	(0.308)
2 years	-0.026	-0.076	0.127	-0.298	0.303	-0.543*
	(0.235)	(0.233)	(0.359)	(0.311)	(0.342)	(0.324)
>2 years	0.305	0.296	0.551*	-0.019	0.446	0.004
	(0.233)	(0.230)	(0.325)	(0.325)	(0.333)	(0.329)
Imaginary (cohabit)	0.364***	0.379***	0.412***	0.347***	0.368***	0.406***
	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.055)	(0.062)	(0.063)	(0.053)
Cohabit intentions$_t$	-0.507***	-0.553***	-0.558***	-0.538***	-0.542***	-0.581***
	(0.033)	(0.036)	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.051)	(0.049)
Recall	-0.427**	-0.435**	-0.538*	-0.328	-0.786**	0.062
	(0.213)	(0.213)	(0.289)	(0.314)	(0.314)	(0.278)
Obs.	1096	1096	544	552	577	519
R-squared	0.265	0.304	0.317	0.329	0.303	0.347

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Marriage

Change in marriage intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1 *Pooled*	M2 *Controls*	M3 *Males*	M4 *Females*	M5 *No tertiary*	M6 *Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	-0.068					
	(0.159)					
12 months	-0.399**					
	(0.170)					
2 years	-0.628***					
	(0.170)					
>2 years	-0.694***					
	(0.184)					
Imaginary (marriage)	0.311***					
	(0.022)					
Marriage intentions$_t$	-0.467***					
	(0.023)					
Recall	0.221					
	(0.192)					
Cohabiting	0.319***					
	(0.115)					
Obs.	1846					
R-squared	0.256					

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Marriage

Change in marriage intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1 *Pooled*	**M2** *Controls*	**M3** *Males*	**M4** *Females*	**M5** *No tertiary*	**M6** *Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	-0.068	-0.080				
	(0.159)	(0.156)				
12 months	-0.399**	-0.498***				
	(0.170)	(0.167)				
2 years	-0.628***	-0.608***				
	(0.170)	(0.166)				
>2 years	-0.694***	-0.711***				
	(0.184)	(0.179)				
Imaginary (marriage)	0.311***	0.340***				
	(0.022)	(0.023)				
Marriage intentions$_t$	-0.467***	-0.523***				
	(0.023)	(0.024)				
Recall	0.221	0.160				
	(0.192)	(0.189)				
Cohabiting	0.319***	0.051				
	(0.115)	(0.123)				
Obs.	1846	1846				
R-squared	0.256	0.305				

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Marriage

Change in marriage intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
	Pooled	*Controls*	*Males*	*Females*	*No tertiary*	*Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	-0.068	-0.080	0.187	-0.283		
	(0.159)	(0.156)	(0.230)	(0.213)		
12 months	-0.399**	-0.498***	-0.300	-0.678***		
	(0.170)	(0.167)	(0.224)	(0.247)		
2 years	-0.628***	-0.608***	-0.578**	-0.656***		
	(0.170)	(0.166)	(0.232)	(0.235)		
>2 years	-0.694***	-0.711***	-0.501**	-0.879***		
	(0.184)	(0.179)	(0.234)	(0.276)		
Imaginary (marriage)	0.311***	0.340***	0.294***	0.383***		
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.032)		
Marriage intentions$_t$	-0.467***	-0.523***	-0.454***	-0.577***		
	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.033)		
Recall	0.221	0.160	0.138	0.162		
	(0.192)	(0.189)	(0.235)	(0.299)		
Cohabiting	0.319***	0.051	0.069	-0.029		
	(0.115)	(0.123)	(0.168)	(0.182)		
Obs.	1846	1846	861	985		
R-squared	0.256	0.305	0.289	0.338		

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The *Causal Impact* of a New Narrative on Marriage

Change in marriage intentions after the treatment, by different scenarios

	M1 *Pooled*	M2 *Controls*	M3 *Males*	M4 *Females*	M5 *No tertiary*	M6 *Tertiary*
Treatment (ref.: 3 months)						
6 months	-0.068	-0.080	0.187	-0.283	-0.150	-0.015
	(0.159)	(0.156)	(0.230)	(0.213)	(0.211)	(0.229)
12 months	-0.399**	-0.498***	-0.300	-0.678***	-0.550**	-0.521**
	(0.170)	(0.167)	(0.224)	(0.247)	(0.231)	(0.244)
2 years	-0.628***	-0.608***	-0.578**	-0.656***	-0.787***	-0.519**
	(0.170)	(0.166)	(0.232)	(0.235)	(0.228)	(0.245)
>2 years	-0.694***	-0.711***	-0.501**	-0.879***	-0.933***	-0.523*
	(0.184)	(0.179)	(0.234)	(0.276)	(0.239)	(0.270)
Imaginary (marriage)	0.311***	0.340***	0.294***	0.383***	0.309***	0.390***
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.033)
Marriage intentions$_t$	-0.467***	-0.523***	-0.454***	-0.577***	-0.489***	-0.565***
	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.035)
Recall	0.221	0.160	0.138	0.162	0.003	0.418
	(0.192)	(0.189)	(0.235)	(0.299)	(0.251)	(0.289)
Cohabiting	0.319***	0.051	0.069	-0.029	0.030	0.043
	(0.115)	(0.123)	(0.168)	(0.182)	(0.169)	(0.187)
Obs.	1846	1846	861	985	1035	811
R-squared	0.256	0.305	0.289	0.338	0.288	0.354

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Additional models

- Stronger treatment effects on marriage intentions among **women without tertiary education**

  - Coefficients associated to the different scenarios are -.50*, -.80**, -97***, and -1.30***

- No differences by **area of residence** (North vs. South)

- **Multinomial logistic regression** on the probability of decreasing, increasing or holding the same marriage intentions before and after the treatment

  - those exposed to the worse scenario vs. most optimistic scenario are **10 p.p. more likely to have decreased** their pre-treatment marriage intentions, and are **11 p.p. less likely to have increased** them

Conclusions

- Our results support the **POD-like** argument that **cohabitation** – in contrast to marriage – is **more compatible with the uncertainties** of today's world

  - Respondents exposed to the more pessimistic treatment scenarios may have anticipated **possible job losses** due to government restrictions, and **shrinking household income**

  - This may hold especially true **for low-educated women**

- Regardless of the mechanism, **a simple narrative of rising future uncertainty** was sufficient to negatively influence marriage intentions, regardless of respondents' socioeconomic status

- → We provide evidence of a **causal impact of shared narratives of the future on union intentions**

Thank you for your attention!

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