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Religion and union formation in Italy: Catholic precepts, social pressure, and tradition

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Abstract

Background: Italy is customarily viewed as a traditional Catholic country. At the same time, couples are increasingly living together without marrying. Establishing links between religion and family formation is a complex issue and little is known about specific mechanisms through which religion shapes family change in the country.

Objective: We aim to shed light on which aspects of religion are important in decisions about family formation.

Methods: We analyze data from eight focus group interviews conducted in Florence. In the transcripts we identify any references to religion and systematically compare categories to investigate how religiosity intertwines with relationship choices. We apply bottom-up coding procedures to identify meaning and concepts within three theoretically relevant areas: Catholic precepts, social pressure, and tradition.

Results: Despite the predominance of religion in the studied setting, Italians behave without according much importance to Catholic precepts and dogmas. Religion seems to influence people's family behaviors through social pressures to marry generated by the family of origin and the judgment of 'others'. Tradition also plays an important role.

Conclusions: The widely prevailing pressure of parents and peers and the hedonistic aspects of the traditional Church wedding seem to be more important in partnership formation than Catholic precepts. Thus, we posit that the direct effect of religion on individual choices is overestimated when interpreting the Italian family. In addition, we note the divergence that exists between the lack of state laws concerning consensual unions and the acceptance of cohabitation on an individual basis.

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