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The impact of cohabitation without marriage on intergenerational contacts. A test of the diffusion theory [1]

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Abstract

In the literature, cohabitation rather than marriage is presented as an indicator of weakening intergenerational ties, either as a cause or an effect. In this paper we compare the frequency of face to face and telephone contacts between parents and their married and unmarried children living with a partner in two countries – Italy and the UK – where the incidence of cohabiting instead of, or before, marrying is very different. Our analysis of empirical evidence, based on an ordered category response multilevel model, does not support the hypothesis that in the former country, where cohabitation is still an exception, differences in parent-adult children contacts between cohabitant and married children are much greater than in the latter, where cohabitation is more common. While in the UK cohabitation does not seem to have an impact on frequency of contacts, in Italy, cohabitation only increases the (marginal) proportion of those who have no visits and lowers slightly that of those who visit on a daily basis against weekly or monthly, but not the frequency of phone contacts. The main difference we found is that cohabitant couples in Italy have a slight tendency to live farther away from their parents than married ones. This affects frequency of face to face contacts. These findings support the thesis that in both countries cohabitation and marriage are becoming increasingly similarly accepted patterns of partnership forms, which do not affect in distinct ways intergenerational relationships, although the differential residential choices of married and cohabitant couples in Italy remains an issue to be explained. Findings also support the thesis that, in Italy, cohabiting instead of marrying is still to some extent a polarized phenomenon: in the majority of cases it is supported, if not rendered possible, by parents, while in a small minority it is accompanied by estrangement.

Introduction

Increasing life expectancy offers in principle the opportunity for unprecedented durations of bi- and even tri-intergenerational relationships. It is possible to become adult and old having both parents alive, to see one's own grand children become adults and even parents, to have all four grandparents throughout one's childhood and, for a while, even a great-grandparent, usually a great grandmother (e.g. Harper 2005, Saraceno 2008). Yet, changes in patterns of family formation and relationships raise concern over the persistence of intergenerational solidarity. Many studies, for instance, have documented that divorce in the parental generation weakens intergenerational ties (e.g. Aquilino 1994 and the review by Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1997; Dykstra 1997; Eggebeen and Knoester 2001; Amato 2003; Kalmin 2008; Albertini and Saraceno 2008), even though more for men than for women. Remarriage, although less studied, seems to have a similar effect (Albertini and Saraceno 2008; van Tilburg and van der Pas 2008). Also cohabitation instead of marriage, representing an institutionally weaker and more instable relationship, may represent a risk for intergenerational relationships and solidarity. Marriage, in fact, has been the traditional means to connect generations, in the dual sense of being the means of legitimate reproduction from one generation to the next over time and of keeping the link with both bloodlines.

Research data on the impact on intergenerational relationships of cohabitation instead of marriage are less systematic and rich than those concerning the impact of divorce and also offer less straightforward evidence. This study intends to contribute to clarify some of the conceptual and methodological problems. It will also offer some evidence on the issue of similarity vs. difference of cohabitation and marriage with regard to contact between parents and adult children in two countries – Italy and the UK

– that differ both in the overall intensity of contacts between parents and adult children and in the degree to which cohabitation is widespread.

It is well known that Italy is among the developed countries with the highest frequency of contacts, largely as a consequence of a closer residential proximity between generations (see e.g. Höllinger and Haller 1990; Reher 1998; Kalmijn and Saraceno 2008). Furthermore, the incidence of (heterosexual) cohabitation without marriage remained fairly stable until recently. It increased between the 1991 and 2001 censuses; but in 2001 it included still only about 4 per cent of all couples. Cohabiting instead of marrying for a long time has involved not the young entering their first partnership, but adults in their mature years who had experienced marriage dissolution. Until 1970, the impossibility to obtain a divorce did not allow remarriage. And the long process through which it can now be obtained imposes a long waiting period during which one cannot remarry.[2] Only in recent years cohabitation has started to involve increasingly the young. Recent data (see Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Gruppo di coordinamento per la demografia 2007) indicate that one every 4 marriages has been preceded by a cohabitation in the younger marriage cohorts and these pre-marital cohabitations have also increased in duration. Marriage, however, is still by large the prevalent means to start living together as a couple, particularly for the first one.

In the UK, cohabitation as a prelude or alternative to marriage has emerged in the seventies and has rapidly risen to being now the most common way to begin a first co-residential union (Ermisch and Di Salvo 1997; Kiernan 2002; Barlow et al. 2001). Among the first co-residential partnerships initiated in the nineties, over three fourths were cohabitations, compared to one third in the seventies (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000). Differently from the Nordic countries, in the UK childbearing is still less frequent, though increasing, in cohabitations than that in marital unions, probably

because the duration of cohabiting unions is comparatively short. Ermish (2005) estimates a median duration of two years in the United Kingdom, after which around half of those initiated in the nineties were converted into marriage and the remaining dissolved. Cohabitations, therefore, in the UK have a marked feature of pre-marital unions.

Given these cross country differences, the research question we address in this paper is twofold: a) whether cohabiting instead of marrying in the children's generation affects the intensity of child-parents contacts; b) whether the impact, if it exists, has the same intensity in the two countries, given both their overall distinct patterns of intergenerational contacts and the different diffusion of cohabitation in the two countries.

Theories and research hypotheses

Two different, but partly interlinked, theoretical approaches lie behind the concern that the growing popularity of cohabitation instead of marriage may weaken intergenerational contacts and solidarity. The first is the individualization theory, in its various versions (Giddens 1992; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002). According to this theory, preference for cohabitation over marriage is the result of growing individualization (Mills 2000). Individuals are no longer willing to enter institutionalised and long term binding relationships. When they enter a couple relationship, they prefer to cohabit, rather than marrying, because they wish to keep their options and their negotiations open (e.g. Wu 2000; Oppenheimer 2003). But this has consequences on intergenerational relationships. Since it is not institutionalized, cohabitation does not construct cross-couple kinship obligations. Each partner does not

feel specific moral or social obligations towards the other partner's family. If each partner keeps in contact with his/her parents separately, overall frequency of contacts will be almost automatically reduced. Even more so, since it is women who, in marriage, often keep – or mediate - contact also between their husbands and their in laws. If in a cohabitation women do not perform this kin work also for their partner (or do it less), the latter's intergenerational relations may be comparatively reduced.

The second approach, the diffusion theory (e.g. Braun and Engelhardt 2004; Palloni 2001), does not treat cohabitation as a uniform phenomenon. Rather, it introduces time and degree of diffusion as important dimensions to understand the meaning of cohabitation (instead of marriage) for the individuals concerned as well as for the surrounding social context, particularly family and kin (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Nazio 2008). When cohabitation instead of marriage is rare and the phenomenon is just beginning, those who choose it perceive themselves and are perceived as transgressors and/or innovators. In this perspective, they may not only be highly individualized, but their behaviour may be difficult to be accepted by their families/parents. After the diffusion of cohabitation has reached a threshold, however, it is no longer perceived as an innovative or transgressing behaviour. Thus it does not require high degrees of individualization in those who enter it. As a consequence, we might expect different patterns of intergenerational relationships according to the stage of diffusion of the phenomenon. More specifically, we may expect more differences in the frequency of intergenerational contacts and patterns of solidarity with their parents between married and cohabitant adult children in countries with a recent and still comparatively small diffusion of cohabitation than in countries where this practice is more widespread and it has been so for some time.

Patterns of access to own housing by the young are also important. In countries where renting is the normal way, cohabiting rather than marrying and degree of diffusion of the former may be irrelevant to access housing. In countries, such as the Southern European ones, where home ownership is widespread and the renting sector tight, parental acceptance may be a crucial requirement in order to obtain financial support towards buying the couple's first housing (e.g. Nazio 2008; Kurz and Blossfeld 2004; Bernardi and Poggio 2004; Poggio 2008; Chiuri and Jappelli 2000). Given the higher cultural legitimacy of marriage in these countries, parents may decide to financially support only children who marry, rather than cohabit. This in turn favours proximity and strengthens intergenerational ties (Tomassini et al. 2007). Barbagli, Castiglione and Dalla Zuanna (2003), argue that this has been generally the case in Italy until recently. Following an increased acceptance of cohabitation by the parental generation among the better educated and living in the Centre-North, however, in these regions and social groups, differences in supporting married and cohabiting children in buying their own dwelling are disappearing. A socially and geographically uneven diffusion of cohabitation might therefore cause a polarization within cohabitant couples (and their parents): between those who are supported in their decision and those who are not because they are perceived as transgressive.

This is precisely the hypothesis formulated in a recent study by Di Giulio and Rosina (2006; see also Rosina and Fraboni 2004), as a variant of the diffusion model. These authors, speaking from the perspective of the Italian case, argue that in countries characterized by strong family ties and weak welfare state, cohabitation may become widespread only when the parental generation demonstrates a clear and supportive acceptance. As a consequence, cohabitation may cause intergenerational tensions when/where it is rare, because the parental generation is not willing to support children

who chose it instead of marriage. But when/where the parental generation is ready to accept it, cohabitation may instead testify to close intergenerational bonds. Given the relevance of parental support for the younger generations in these countries, diffusion of cohabitation is driven not only by peer experience – as in Blossfeld and Nazio's (2003) approach - but also by changes in parental attitudes.

A third, less developed theory of possible differences in the frequency of child-parents contacts between cohabitant and married children equals the consequences of cohabitation to those of divorce, based on the, partly empirically founded, assumption that cohabitations are more unstable than marriages (e.g. Blossfeld et al. 1993; Steele et al. 2005, 2006; Mills 2000; Ermisch 2005; Wu 2000; Kiernan 2002). This theory, however, does not actually concern differences in patterns of intergenerational relationships between cohabitants and married adults, but the higher vulnerability of the former to instability and its consequences on intergenerational relationships. That is, it hypothesizes that, as cohabitation becomes a widespread phenomenon reducing the space for marriage, given its higher vulnerability to break up, more intergenerational relationships will suffer the same kind of limitation or interruption found in the case of divorce.

Empirical evidence on the impact of cohabitation on intergenerational relationships is not only scanty, but also conceptually and methodologically muddled. Studies rarely distinguish between different forms of cohabitation, particularly between those entered as a temporary relationship and those entered as a form of stable life alternative to marriage, those entered when young as the first form of partnership and those entered later in life, often after a marriage. This lack of distinction biases results at two levels (see also Harper 2004; Kiernan 2000). First, a large part of cohabitations involve young people. Cohabitations, therefore, include to a larger degree than marriages people who

are still involved in what developmental psychologists would define the developmental task of distancing themselves from their parents in order to become their own persons. Young newly married couples are also often engaged in defining their own social space, relationships and rituals, marking their difference from their respective parental homes. Once a couple is well established as such, this boundary setting behaviour may appear less necessary and at the same time new needs – the arrival of a child, a parent becoming frail - may affect intergenerational relationships. Furthermore, cohabitations among the young are often temporary and entered as such. Consequently, the partners may not particularly feel involved in each other's family. In order to understand whether cohabitation in the generation of adult children, compared to marriage, has actually a weakening impact on intergenerational relations, therefore, both age and duration must be kept under control. Recent findings by Daatland (2007) for Norway, based on the Norwegian Life Course, Ageing and Generation Study, support this (for children aged 40 and over). They show, in fact, no evidence of difference in the most important dimensions of intergenerational solidarity (contacts, exchange of help, feeling of closeness) for cohabitant and married children *vis a vis* their parents.

Building on this theoretical and empirical background, in the study presented here we wish to test the following three hypotheses.

H. 1. Following the diffusion theory, differences in the frequency of adult child-parents contacts between cohabitant and married children are greater in Italy than in the UK, given the lower diffusion and therefore lower social legitimization of cohabitation in the former country. At the same time, given the different degree of legitimization of cohabitation across regions and social classes, and the high incidence of "cohabitants" who exited a previous marriage, unmarried cohabitants in Italy are a more selected group than in the UK. In particular, they bear the characteristics which favour contacts:

the young, whose cohabitation is accepted and even supported by their parents (Dalla Zuanna, Barbagli and Castiglioni 2003; Di Giulio and Rosina 2006); the formerly married, who are on average older, a condition which is known to be positively associated to contacts with older parents. These characteristics may attenuate the hypothesized higher negative impact, but also cause a sharper distinction than in the UK within cohabitants between those, possibly the majority, who keep in close contact with their parents and those who do not because their choice of living is not accepted.

H. 2. Duration counts. If there are differences at all, we hypothesize that they decrease with duration of cohabitation.

H.3 Also presence of children counts, in so far children have generally a connecting role between generations; and becoming a parent/grandparent may encourage more frequent contacts also in the case of cohabitation of the younger parental couple.

Data and methods

This study is based on two surveys: the Indagine Multiscopo Famiglie e Soggetti sociali (Istat 2006), a survey conducted in November 2003 by the Italian National Statistical Office (ISTAT), which contains also a retrospective section, and on wave 11 (conducted between September 2001 and May 2002) of the British Household Panel Study (Lynn 2007). Both surveys are meant to be representative of their national populations. The Italian survey covered around 24000 households, for an amount of about 50000 individuals. Within it, we selected a sub-sample of 13503 individuals living in 8163 co-resident (married or not married) heterosexual couples (with or without other household members), aged between 25 and 69 years, with at least one living parent, making for 21117 dyadic child-parent relationships. For the British sample, we selected with the same criteria 3389 individuals within 1970 households, amounting to 5496 dyads.

The two surveys are comparable to a large extent, although the items addressing similar topics are not always identical. The Italian survey offers also a wider set of information.

We use an ordered category response multilevel model, which comprises three levels (beside that of the responses): the dyadic relationships of children to their living parents (level 1); the adult children themselves (level 2); and the couple (married vs. cohabitant) they are part of (level 3). The two dependent variables of the multinomial models are the frequency of individuals' visits and phone calls to non co-resident parents: measured on a five points scale ranging between 1=never and 5=daily. Given the slight difference between the two national originally six points scales[3], we have homogenised the values in a five points scale as follows: 1=never, 2=several times a year or less often for the UK/several times a year for Italy, 3=at least once a month in the UK/ several times a month in Italy, 4=at least once a week in the UK/ weekly or several times a week in Italy, 5=daily.

Figure I presents the distribution of frequencies of these variables by marital status of the individuals. As expected, irrespective of the type of couple, Italians visit and phone to their parents more frequently than the British: 78 per cent of the former visit their parents at least once a week, against around 50 per cent of the latter. This difference is mirrored by the closer proximity in which Italians live with respect to British: 76 per cent of the former live within a distance of 16 Km., whereas only 61 per cent of the latter live within half an hour from their parents. Unfortunately the two surveys used two different measures to assess distance, which make them only partly comparable.

[Figure I around here]

The variables adopted for the analyses can be distinguished between the three levels at which they are specified.

At level 1 (dyads), the variables are: the daughter-mother dyads (reference), the daughter-father dyads, the son-mother and son-father dyads; parents' age (ranging from 40 to 101 and centred around 70 for Italy; ranging between 42 and 100 and centred around 64 for the UK); two measures of the distance between children and each of their parents. The first is measured on a scale from 1 to 7 for Italy (other flat, same building; within 1 km.; same city; other city <16 km.; other city 16-50 km.; other city >50 km.; abroad) and 1 to 6 for the UK (< 15 minutes; 15-30 minutes; 30 minutes-1 hour; 1-2 hours; > 2 hours; abroad). It is centred at 3=living in the same city for Italy and 2=15-30 minutes for the UK. The second measure is operationalised *via* two dummies for medium (1/2 to 2 hours for the UK and 16-50 Km. for Italy) and large (above 2 hours or 50 Km. for UK and Italy respectively) distances. In addition, we have a set of dummy variables linked to the parental household characteristics. The reference category is living in couple without children for Italy and living in couple for the UK. The other categories are living with a partner with children, living alone, living without the spouse/partner, but with children, or living in other condition (mostly a retirement home) for Italy. For the UK, given the fewer available information, they include only living alone and living in other condition (including with other children, if applicable). Finally, we consider the frequency of phone calls to one's own parent, measured in a scale from 1 to 6 for the UK (the same as for visits and distance, centred around the average value 4=at least once a month) and on a scale from 1 to 6 for Italy (the same as for visits, centred around the average value 3=some times a month).

At level 2 (adult children), we have included: age at interview (ranging from 25 to 69, centred around the averages of 42 years for Italy and 37 years for the UK); level of

education measured on a scale from 1 (PhD) to 9 (illiterate) for Italy (centred around the average value of 5=higher education for 2-3 years after compulsory education) and from 1 (University or CNAA Higher Degree) to 13 (no qualification) for the UK (centred around the average value of 7=GCE O levels or equivalent[4]); whether the respondent is working (inactive or unemployed is the reference category) and, for the UK only, whether he/she is working on a part-time basis (working full-time becomes the reference); whether the respondent has living siblings and, for Italy only, their number.

At level 3 (couples) we used: duration of cohabitation/marriage measured in months, but expressed in years[5] and centred around the mean value for cohabiting unions which ranges from 0 to 47.6 years for Italy (with an average duration of 6 years for cohabiting couples and 16.3 for married ones) and from 0 to 50 years for the UK (with average duration of 4 and 11.5 for cohabitant and married respectively); type of union (cohabitation or marital); presence of children below 16 years of age for the UK, and between 0 to 2 years for Italy[6]; and the region of residence of the couple (with different specifications for Italy and the UK).

In addition to these indicators available for both countries, we also controlled for a few country specific variables.[7]

Table I reports some descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables used in the analyses for the two countries.

[Table I around here]

Table II reports the frequency for three of the central variables used in the analyses: the frequency of visits and phone calls (in their original format), and the distance. These figures highlight a substantial difference between the Italian and the British contexts:

although most children, overall, tend to live quite close to their parents (over 60 per cent live within half an hour reach or within 16 km. in both countries, as shown in the bolded figures in the upper part of Table II), Britons tend to phone their parents less frequently (on average), and to visit them more sparingly. For example, over 28 per cent of British adult children, compared to 12 per cent of Italian ones, visit their parents less often than monthly. At the opposite extreme, 37 per cent of Italians compared to about 11 per cent of the British declare to visit them on a daily basis. As expected, the correlation between the frequency of visits and distance is -0.69 for the UK and -0.72 for Italy, confirming what already known in the literature, i.e. that physical proximity is an important factor in maintaining face-to-face contacts between adult children and their parents.[8] The correlation between visits and phone calls, however, is 0.48 for the UK but only 0.02 for Italy, and the correlation between the frequency of phone calls and the distance to one own' parents is -0.12 for the UK and 0.16 for Italy. These figures suggest that, if all kinds of contacts are taken into consideration, the association between distance and contacts is more complex than if only face-to-face contacts are considered.

[Table II around here]

On the background of these general cross country differences in patterns of children-parents contacts, we tested our hypotheses concerning differences in the intra-country impact of cohabitation vs. marriage.

Results

Tables III and IV present the results of a series of ordered multinomial models for Italy and the United Kingdom, respectively (log odds and standard errors are reported in the

tables). Ordered multinomial models work with cumulative probabilities, i.e. the probability that a certain response crosses each threshold. Here the reference category is the highest frequency registered “daily contacts”. Thus, negative coefficients will indicate a lower cumulative probability of being found in the other categories below (with a lower frequency of contacts). Negative coefficients will than express a higher frequency of contacts and in turn, positive coefficients will indicate a lower frequency of visits or phone calls. For both countries, Model 1 includes, beside the country specific controls, a series of controls for the educational level, the type of union, the duration of the (co-living) relationship, the age of the respondents and that of their parents, the sex of each member of the child-parent dyad, the parental residential situation, employment status and presence of other siblings. First of all, the dyads variables show that in both countries daughters tend to visit their parents more frequently than sons, and more often their mothers than their fathers. This effect remains across models and is stronger for telephone contacts (Models 4 and 5) than for visits.

Cohabiting rather than being married does seem to have a negative effect on the frequency of visits only in Italy. Type of cohabitation (whether as a first partnership or after the end of a marriage) does not make any difference *per se*, whereas in both countries the age of the parents, controlling for children’s age, has a boosting effect on visits: the negative coefficient means that each further year of the parent makes it *less likely* to be found in a *lower* category of frequency of visits. Symmetrically, children’s older age, controlling for parental age, has a depressing effect on visits (positive coefficient). As expected, both parental and children’s need (of which respectively parental older, and children younger age are a proxy) are predictors of the frequency of visits. Model 2 integrates measures of distance to the parents, which – in both countries

- display the expected pattern: a lower frequency of visits for higher distances (linearly increasing effect). In Italy, this effect grows stronger with the distance (above 16 Km. distance, and even more so if the distance exceeds 50 km., parents and children are far more likely to visit each other only monthly or less frequently).

Distance seems also to account for much of the variability initially observed at both the individuals' and dyads' levels. In the fixed part of the model, we can observe how controlling for distance reduces dramatically the effect of cohabitation in Italy. In particular, in Italy, after controlling for distance, the model reveals how the residual effect of cohabitation is confined mainly to a higher probability to "never" visit each other - an instance that concerns less than 1.5 per cent of the sampled population-, and a slightly higher one to visit "at least weekly or monthly". In addition, we find no evidence of a distinct effect of distance for cohabiting compared to married couples (interaction effect) in either country, once distance is controlled for. This finding lends itself to a not easy interpretation and shifts the research question concerning differences between cohabitant and married children from frequency of visits to choices concerning patterns of proximity. In order to empirically test the hypothesis that residential patterns are a way in which Italian cohabiting children deal with the possible relational consequences of a behaviour, which is still somewhat deviant from the norm, we would however need different data. The available data indicate, however, that couples who cohabit following a marital break-up of one or both partners tend to live farther away from their parents than young (likely pre-marital) cohabitant couples. Thus, a greater distance may be the consequence of life course events and decisions independent from the form of partnership. Furthermore, the incidence of unmarried cohabitant couples is, as hypothesized, higher in the Central-Northern Regions, where also married children tend to live farther away, than in the South. The greater distance from their parents of

children in a cohabiting partnership, in Italy, compared to married ones, therefore, is partly due to the skewed geographical distribution of the former. In the UK there is no such difference in distance between married and cohabitant children.

Contrary to our expectations and Daatland's (2007) findings, in neither country duration of the relationship, once controlled for the age of both children and parents, seems to foster the frequency of visits. On the contrary, it reduces it very slightly in Italy. Children's education does not seem to matter for the frequency of visits both for married and cohabitant children (i.e. there is no significant interaction effect). In Italy, also parental education has no effect. In this respect, we find no support for Rosina and Frabboni's (2004) suggestion that better educated parents are more likely to support their children's decision to cohabit instead of /before marrying, therefore creating better conditions for close intergenerational relationships.

Model 3 incorporates a further control for the frequency of phone calls. In the fixed part, we can observe that, in both countries, parents living in "other circumstances" (rather than alone or in couple) receive fewer visits. Most of these arrangements comprise people residing in old people homes. Since our data are not longitudinal, we do not know whether the lower frequency of contact is the cause or the consequence of this residential solution.

As hypothesized, the presence of other children in the parent's household reduces the number of visits by non co-resident – married or cohabiting with a partner - children (data available only for Italy). Less expected is the lower frequency of visits in the case of parents living alone in the UK. Both in the UK and Italy, however, parents living alone are likely to receive more phone calls from their children than those residing with a partner and/or children, irrespective of the marital status of the latter (Model 5).

In both countries, we also find that both married and cohabitant children who call their parents more often are less likely to see them rarely and this effect is stronger in the case of cohabiting children (interaction effect in Model 3). The higher salience of phone calls as predictor of the visits for cohabiting than for married children might be interpreted as indicating a higher heterogeneity of family cultures and relationships in the case of married than cohabiting children. The latter seem to be more polarized between those having intense – face to face and voice – contacts and those having looser, more distant contacts.

As expected, the presence of young children increases the frequency of visits in both countries (Models 1-3) and also on phone calls in Italy (Models 4 and 5), for both married and cohabiting children.

After controlling for the remaining available predictors, we still find no difference between cohabitant and married couples in the UK with respect to the frequency of visits.

Models 4 and 5, reproduce Models 2 and 3, but predicting a different dependent variable: the frequency of telephone contacts. The type of union entered has no predictive effect in either country. Nor, again, does children's education influence the behaviour of cohabiters differently from that of married couples. Interestingly, the negative effect of the interaction between distance and cohabiting (only) in Italy points to a compensation, by cohabiters, of a slightly reduced frequency of visits (due to higher distance) with a relatively higher frequency of phone contacts. The higher propensity of Italian cohabiters to phone less than married children if they visit less frequently (interaction effect; not significant in the UK) points again to a polarization within cohabitants in Italy: between a majority who do not differ from the married, probably

due to the support they receive from their parents in their choices, and a small minority who instead seem more estranged (i.e. they tend to both call and visit less than married).

Discussion

Our findings support the hypothesis that, due to the different degree of diffusion, intensity of contacts differs between married children and children who cohabit with a partner without being married in Italy, but not in the UK. This difference, however, is relatively small, is to a great degree mediated by distance and, as hypothesized, is the result of a polarization within unmarried children cohabiting with a partner.

Cohabiting children, in Italy, tend to live more frequently farther away from their parents than married ones, therefore they also tend to have fewer face to face contacts. The wider average distance between parents' and children's households in Italy in case the latter cohabit without marriage with a partner is far from meaningless for our research question. With the data available, however, we can but make some informed hypotheses. On the one hand, greater distance seems the consequence of both a higher presence among cohabiters of individuals with a previous marriage history, and a higher incidence of cohabitation in the Northern and Central parts of the country (where average distance is higher for both cohabiting and married children). On the other hand, in a context where cohabitation is (was) little legitimised and supported, it might be easier, both for the young and for those exiting from a marriage (or entering a partnership with a person who was not yet divorced) to live far away, in order to avoid reciprocal embarrassment and tensions within the kinship network, as well as community gossip. Particularly for the young, living in a different city because of study or job, weakens family and social control and may ease the decision to cohabit as a more or less temporary arrangement. We find support for this hypothesis in that the

difference in average distance between married and cohabiting children is higher in the South, where cohabiting without marriage is less common, thus offering support both to the diffusion and to the polarization thesis. Finally, parents are more willing to help buy an apartment – the main way through which a young couple accesses to a lodging in Italy - when children marry rather than cohabit. Children who choose to cohabit must therefore more often than those who marry look for an apartment only based on their individual ability to avail themselves of – renting or buying - market opportunities: without being supported by their parents' resources, but also without being constrained by the latter's preferences, including those concerning proximity.

One or more of these reasons, and not simply that of a deterioration of child-parent relationships, may explain why children who cohabit live at a greater distance from their parents than married ones in Italy. What we wish to point out is that distance, particularly in Italy, is not a neutral choice with regard to intergenerational relationships. If it may be prompted and even forced because of labour market demands, its different distribution according to the couple's status suggests that something having to do with this status and its impact on intergenerational relationships is at play. At the same time, contrary to our hypothesis, the negative impact of cohabitation on contacts is very reduced for visits and absent for phone calls. Even when living at a distance, cohabitant couples tend to keep as frequently in contact with their parents as married ones, at least via phone. Overall, after controlling for distance, Italian cohabiters are slightly less likely to visit their parents on a daily or weekly basis (compensated by more frequent phone calls), and the quota of those who never have contact with their parents, although small, is higher than among married children. This finding offers further support to the hypothesis of a polarization within cohabitant couples in Italy.

Our second hypothesis has been disconfirmed: in both countries, duration of union does not increase frequency of contacts. Our third hypothesis, concerning the positive impact of grandchildren, is confirmed for very young children, for both cohabiting and married couples and for all types of contacts in both countries. Thus, if duration of union does not matter, having a young child does. Cohabitant couples, however, in these two countries, have less often children than married ones.

To conclude, our data do not offer substantive ground for the individualization thesis, according to which cohabiting instead of marrying weakens intergenerational relationships. They offer a limited evidence for the diffusion thesis, in so far differences in frequency of contacts between cohabiting and married children and their parents are found in Italy, but not in the UK. This effect, however, weakens to a large extent once controlling for distance. They also offer some evidence for the selectivity and polarization-within cohabitant couples thesis for Italy. Finally, an unforeseen result of our study is the different roles played by distance in the residential choices of married and cohabitant couples in Italy. We cannot exclude that this might be, at least partly, the result of different strategic choices with regard to the intensity of relationships and boundary setting with their parents. But in order to transform this suspicion in a testable hypothesis longitudinal data containing also measures of quality of the relationships would be required.

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[2] One must first obtain a legal separation, and then wait for at least three years (five until 1987) before applying for a divorce. As a consequence, there is a time period of at least 4-5 years between the actual end of a marriage and it legal dissolution.

[3] In the Italian case the original six point scale comprised more categories towards high frequencies of visits (daily; several times a week; weekly; several times a month; several times a year; never), whereas the British scale comprised more categories

towards the lower frequencies (daily; at least once a week; at least once a month; several times a year; less often; never)

[4] This category comprises in detail: O Levels (pre 1975), O Level grades A-C (1975 or later), GCSE grades A-C, CSE grade 1, Scottish O Grades (pass or bands A-C or 1-3), Scottish School Leaving Certificate Lower Grade, School Certificate or Matric, Scottish Standard Grade Level 1-3 or City & Guilds Certificate (Craft /Intermediate /Ordinary /Part I)

[5] In the British case, this variable was built from the reconstruction of partnership histories collected in waves 2 and 3, in combination with information collected in all waves until the 11th. In case of discordant or missing information for one of the partners, the most recent (available) information was chosen.

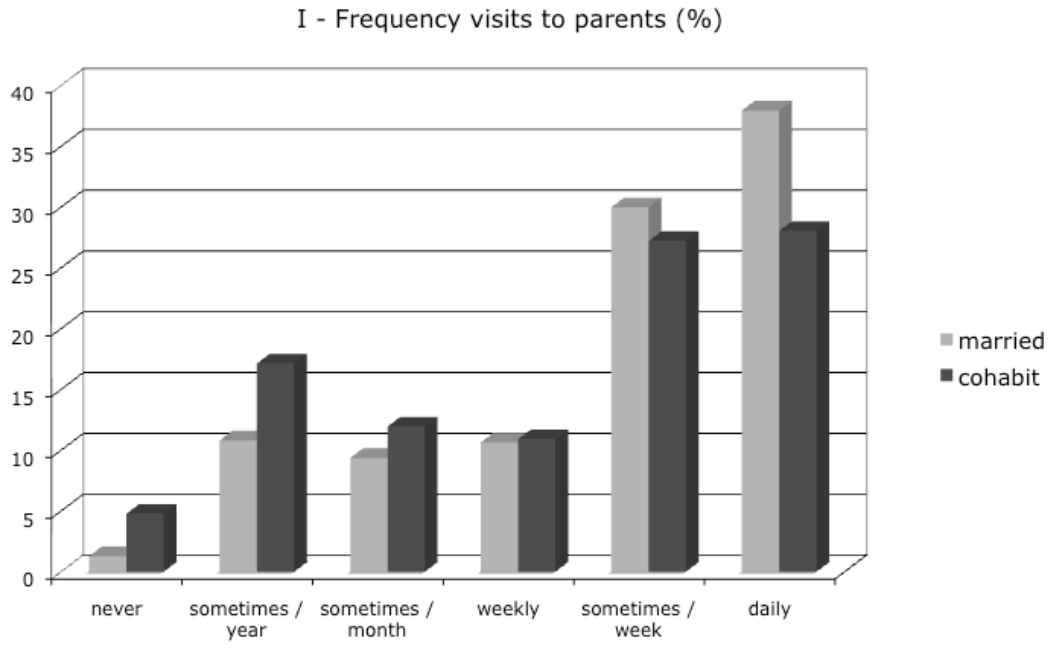
[6] Different specifications have also been tested in the models in the Italian case, comprising the number of children below 18 and different thresholds for the age of smallest child.

[7] For the UK, at level 2 we tested a measure of self-assessed health status of the respondent over the past 12 months (measured on a 5 points scale), when judged as poor or very poor (reference being very good, good or fair). A similar control was implemented in the analyses for Italy too, but is not included in the models presented here because it never proved statistically significant. For Italy, at level 1 we tested the educational level of the parents on a scale from 1 to 9 (as for children's education, but centred around the average value of 7=elementary education) and parental poor health status as assessed by his/her child; at level 2, we tested whether, since living independently from the parental family, the respondent reported having incurred into "serious economic difficulties" and if so, whether he/she received some help from his/her parents. For Italy, at level 3 (couple), we also used a control for the urban/rural

character of the place of residence (Metropolis and suburban areas as the reference, cities of less than 10.000 inhabitants, and an intermediate category of urban centres with more than 10.000 inhabitants)

[8] This observation, however, as well as our results, may suffer from the endogeneity bias of either omitted variables (e.g. emotional closeness) or reverse causality (e.g. an higher distance preferred and pursued because of disrupted relationship, or as a means to decrease the frequency of contacts; or in turn a shorter distance fostered by an increased need, willingness or desire to support either the children or the parents) More on this issue in the discussion of the results.

Figure I. Distribution of frequency visits to one's own parents



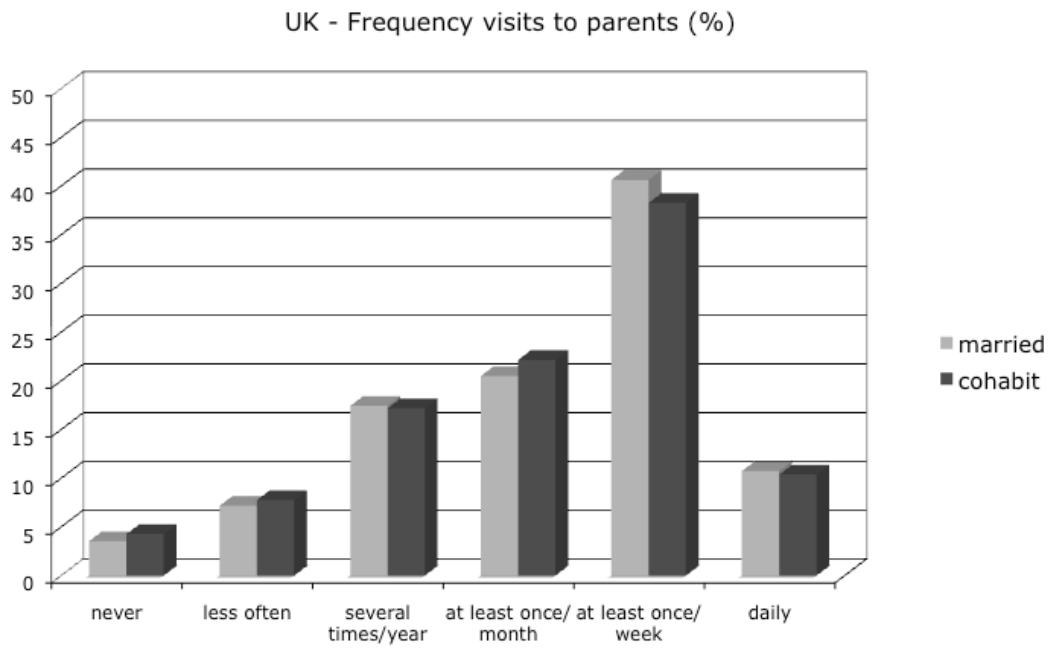


Table I. Descriptive statistics: relative frequencies (%) or means (standard deviations)

	United Kingdom			Italy	
Dyads					
she-her mother	28,5	%	she-her mother	31,8	%
she-her father	22,9	%	she-her father	21,3	%
he-his mother	27,2	%	he-his mother	27,6	%
he-his father	21,4	%	he-his father	18,3	%
Cohabit	21,01	%		4,56	%
Duration union yrs.	11,6 (9,7)			16,3	
(married=4312)			(married=20154)	(10,1)	
Duration union yrs.	4,1 (3,7)			6,0 (5,5)	
(cohabit=1147)			(cohabit=963)		
Duration union yrs.	10,0 (9,3)			15,8	
(all=5459)			(all=21117)	(10,1)	
Parent's age	65,9 (10,0)			70,2 (9,7)	
Respondent's age	38,5 (8,6)			41,7 (8,8)	
Resp. educational level	5,6 (3,0)			5,0 (1,5)	
Region					
London	6,5	%	North-West	20,7	%
Sounth-East	19,5	%	North-East	21,0	%
South-West	9,0	%	Centre	17,8	%
Centre	44,4	%	South & Islands	40,5	%
North	20,6	%			%
Parent's living arrangement					
Lives in couple	61,2	%	In couple with child(ren)	22,1	%
Lives alone	20,6	%	In couple without children	48,3	%
Lives other	18,2	%	Lives alone	14,1	%
			Lives alone with child(ren)	7,9	%
			Lives other	7,6	%
Works	82,5	%		69,1	%
Has children <3 yrs.	18,6	%		17,0	%
Has siblings	89,4	%		88,2	%
Respondent's health			**Parent's poor health**		
Good	74,6	%	Good	86,0	%
Fair	18,6	%	Fair	7,7	%
Poor	6,8	%	Bad	6,3	%
			City size		
			Metropolis & suburbs	18,1	%
			10-50000+	43,4	%
			<10000	38,5	%
			Parent's educ. lev.	6,7 (1,3)	
			Number of siblings	2,1 (1,8)	
			Ever need economic help	12,8	%
			Received econ. aid parents	6,8	%

Total N=5459 for UK, Total N=21117 for Italy (unless otherwise specified)

Table II. Descriptive statistics

	United Kingdom			Italy	
Distance					
< 15 min.s	**40,9**	%	other flat same building	**11,5**	%
15-30 min.s	**20,5**	%	within 1 km.	**26,2**	%
30 min.s - 1 hour	11,2	%	same city	**23,8**	%
1-2 hours	9,7	%	other city <16 km.	**14,6**	%
> 2 hours	14,5	%	other city 16-50 km.	9,2	%
abroad	3,2	%	other city >50 km.	11,6	%
			abroad	3,2	%
Frequency of visits					
never	3,7	%	never	1,4	%
less often	7,3	%	sometimes /year	11,1	%
several times/year	17,4	%	sometimes /month	9,5	%
at least once/month	20,9	%	*weekly*	10,7	%
at least once/week	40,1	%	*sometimes /week*	29,9	%
daily	**10,6**	%	daily	**37,5**	%
Freq. of phone calls					
never	7,4	%	never	13,5	%
less often	3,9	%	sometimes /year	3,0	%
several times/year	5,2	%	sometimes /month	8,0	%
at least once/month	16,3	%	weekly	**8,9**	%
at least once/week	**50,5**	%	*sometimes /week*	**34,5**	%
daily	**16,7**	%	daily	**32,1**	%

Total N=5459 for UK, Total N=21117 for Italy

Table III. UK: Multinomial random effect models for frequency of visits & phone calls to parents

Response:	Model 1 visit	SE	Model 2 visit	SE	Model 3 visit	SE	Model 4 phone	SE	Model 5 phone	SE
Fixed Part										
Constant [<=never]	-6,075	0,302	-5,568	0,301	-5,345	0,317	-4,172	0,208	-5,226	0,226
Constant [<=yearly]	-2,769	0,286	-4,182	0,280	-3,415	0,287	-3,347	0,197	-4,000	0,205
Constant [<=monthly]	-1,015	0,284	-2,068	0,272	-0,928	0,279	-2,457	0,194	-2,888	0,200
Constant[<=weekly]	2,521	0,287	2,117	0,298	3,525	0,307	0,166	0,191	0,157	0,195
Dyad: she-her mother (ref.)										
Dyad: she-her father	0,679	0,084	0,722	0,091	0,183	0,095	1,243	0,078	1,079	0,081
Dyad: he-his mother	0,773	0,116	1,026	0,113	0,536	0,117	1,334	0,085	1,076	0,087
Dyad: he-his father	1,028	0,122	1,332	0,120	0,560	0,126	1,833	0,091	1,491	0,093
Cohabits [<=never]	0,358	0,262	0,109	0,252	-0,225	0,303	-0,021	0,152	-0,239	0,213
Cohabits [<=yearly]	0,155	0,185	0,024	0,189	0,042	0,204	-0,174	0,129	-0,344	0,174
Cohabits [<=monthly]	0,179	0,179	-0,096	0,167	0,097	0,181	-0,122	0,116	-0,189	0,148
Cohabits [<=weekly]	-0,004	0,213	-0,381	0,202	0,048	0,235	-0,100	0,128	-0,033	0,136
Cohabits (after marriage)	-0,423	0,229	-0,167	0,208	-0,265	0,212	0,108	0,146	0,160	0,151
Educational level (centred)	-0,158	0,018	-0,011	0,017	-0,029	0,017	0,012	0,012	0,020	0,012
Education*cohabit	0,022	0,041	0,013	0,038	-0,007	0,039	0,019	0,026	0,017	0,027
Duration union (yrs.; centred)	-0,021	0,007	-0,012	0,007	-0,013	0,007	-0,003	0,005	0,002	0,005
Parent age (centred)	-0,027	0,008	-0,036	0,008	-0,034	0,008	-0,022	0,006	-0,011	0,006
Child age (centred)	0,064	0,011	0,038	0,011	0,029	0,011	0,031	0,008	0,018	0,008
Region: London (ref.)										
Region: Sounth-East	0,061	0,217	0,572	0,200	0,400	0,203	0,417	0,140	0,238	0,143
Region: South-West	-0,085	0,247	0,467	0,228	0,282	0,231	0,358	0,160	0,214	0,162
Region: Centre	-0,712	0,202	0,238	0,188	0,064	0,190	0,237	0,132	0,140	0,134
Region: North	-1,164	0,216	-0,020	0,200	-0,220	0,203	0,180	0,141	0,204	0,143
Parent lives in couple (ref.)										
Parent lives alone	0,394	0,116	0,296	0,109	0,309	0,111	-0,026	0,079	-0,185	0,081
Parent lives other	1,550	0,119	1,217	0,113	0,713	0,117	0,956	0,079	0,541	0,083
Employment: non employed (ref.)										
Employment: works	-0,001	0,141	0,314	0,130	0,392	0,132	-0,007	0,091	-0,103	0,093
Employed * part-time	-0,237	0,140	-0,301	0,130	-0,373	0,132	0,046	0,090	0,147	0,093
Siblings (yes)	0,638	0,150	0,513	0,138	0,395	0,140	0,394	0,098	0,262	0,100
Respondent health: good (ref.)										
Respondent health: poor	0,316	0,191	0,396	0,175	0,406	0,178	0,080	0,123	-0,044	0,126
Respondent health: fair	-0,041	0,122	-0,045	0,111	-0,043	0,113	0,028	0,078	0,037	0,080
Has child(ren) 0-2 years (yes)	-0,307	0,138	-0,427	0,123	-0,366	0,125	-0,269	0,087	-0,147	0,089
Distance (centred)[<=never]			1,383	0,177	1,219	0,201	0,228	0,103	-0,511	0,125

Distance (centred)[<=yearly]			1,626	0,110	1,678	0,118	0,318	0,067	-0,205	0,073
Distance (centred)[<=monthly]			1,903	0,103	1,888	0,109	0,423	0,066	-0,161	0,071
Distance (centred)[<=weekly]			2,080	0,173	1,975	0,176	0,633	0,069	-0,042	0,075
Distance (1/2-2 hrs.)[<=never]			-3,258	0,447	-2,583	0,490	-1,275	0,268	-0,897	0,306
Distance (1/2-2 hrs.)[<=yearly]			-1,065	0,248	-0,728	0,265	-1,012	0,175	-1,149	0,185
Distance (1/2-2 hrs.)[<=monthly]			-0,375	0,230	-0,096	0,242	-0,720	0,160	-0,767	0,170
Distance (1/2-2 hrs.)[<=weekly]			0,213	0,594	0,473	0,600	-0,360	0,183	-0,150	0,189
Distance (>2 hrs.)[<=never]			-4,382	0,695	-3,773	0,792	-1,450	0,415	-0,473	0,485
Distance (>2 hrs.)[<=year./month./week.]			-0,036	0,414	0,335	0,436	-0,890	0,257	-0,922	0,267
Cohabit * Distance (centr.)			-0,057	0,083	-0,058	0,089	0,033	0,049	-0,014	0,067
Frequency phone calls (centred)					-0,931	0,037				
Cohabit * Freq. phone calls (centr.)					-0,300	0,080				
Freq. visits (centred)									-1,478	0,051
Cohabit * Freq. visits (centr.)									-0,161	0,110
Random Part										
Level: couples										
Variance	0,661	0,192	0,212	0,160	0,119	0,166	0,221	0,077	0,212	0,081
Level: individuals										
Variance	4,021	0,238	2,690	0,209	2,757	0,219	0,468	0,097	0,451	0,102
Units: couples	1965		1965		1965		1965		1965	
Units: individuals	3372		3372		3372		3372		3372	
Units: parents (dyads)	5459		5459		5459		5459		5459	
Units: responses	21836		21836		21836		21836		21836	

Table IV. Italy: Multinomial random effect models for frequency of visits & phone calls to parents

	Model 1	SE	Model 2	SE	Model 3	SE	Model 4	SE	Model 5	SE
Response:	visit		visit		visit		phone		phone	
Fixed Part										
Constant [<=never]	-7,043	0,169	-7,196	0,180	-7,041	0,182	-5,418	0,149	-5,249	0,150
Constant [<=yearly]	-3,564	0,149	-5,685	0,151	-5,502	0,152	-4,864	0,147	-4,693	0,148
Constant [<=monthly]	-2,049	0,147	-3,920	0,140	-3,705	0,141	-3,829	0,145	-3,642	0,145
Constant[<=weekly]	1,435	0,147	0,427	0,135	0,669	0,137	-0,223	0,141	0,031	0,141
Dyad: she-her mother (ref.)										
Dyad: she-her father	0,336	0,048	0,366	0,052	0,332	0,052	0,514	0,048	0,460	0,049
Dyad: he-his mother	0,254	0,067	0,684	0,063	0,599	0,064	1,134	0,062	1,044	0,063
Dyad: he-his father	0,409	0,073	0,796	0,070	0,692	0,071	1,339	0,069	1,231	0,069
Cohabits [<=never]	1,690	0,285	1,463	0,310	1,265	0,327	0,450	0,220	0,254	0,224
Cohabits [<=yearly]	1,063	0,201	0,518	0,262	0,472	0,269	0,268	0,212	0,111	0,216
Cohabits [<=monthly]	0,926	0,189	0,377	0,213	0,472	0,216	0,276	0,197	0,214	0,200
Cohabits [<=weekly]	0,649	0,192	0,180	0,179	0,323	0,182	0,256	0,192	0,351	0,197
Cohabits (after marriage)	0,341	0,284	0,234	0,255	0,265	0,257	-0,195	0,272	-0,291	0,275
Parent educational level (centred)	-0,043	0,022	0,008	0,022	-0,002	0,022	0,102	0,022	0,100	0,022
Educational level (centred)	-0,075	0,023	0,000	0,021	-0,013	0,021	0,185	0,022	0,188	0,022
Education*cohabit	0,112	0,094	0,098	0,084	0,015	0,086	0,138	0,091	0,097	0,091
Duration union (yrs.; centred)	0,007	0,006	0,021	0,006	0,020	0,006	0,013	0,006	0,009	0,006
Parent age (centred)	-0,035	0,005	-0,026	0,004	-0,026	0,004	-0,001	0,004	0,003	0,004
Child age (centred)	0,027	0,008	0,005	0,007	0,006	0,008	-0,010	0,008	-0,011	0,008
City size: Metropolis & suburbs (ref.)										
City size: 10-50.000+	-0,542	0,083	-0,454	0,074	-0,474	0,074	0,658	0,082	0,816	0,082
City size <10.000	-0,997	0,085	-0,928	0,077	-1,001	0,077	0,167	0,080	0,246	0,080
Region: North-West (ref.)										
Region: North-East	0,108	0,091	0,180	0,082	0,138	0,082	0,557	0,087	0,543	0,087
Region: Centre	-0,087	0,095	0,121	0,086	0,122	0,086	0,084	0,092	0,078	0,092
Region: South & Islands	-1,057	0,082	-0,182	0,075	-0,183	0,075	0,030	0,079	0,074	0,079
Parent lives in couple no child(ren) (ref.)										
Parent lives couple with child(ren)	-0,076	0,076	0,033	0,068	0,030	0,068	0,005	0,070	-0,010	0,070
Parent lives alone	0,011	0,076	0,108	0,071	0,114	0,071	-0,116	0,071	-0,139	0,072
Parent lives alone with child(ren)	0,436	0,094	0,341	0,088	0,342	0,088	0,059	0,089	0,006	0,089
Parent lives other	1,335	0,231	1,130	0,215	0,894	0,217	2,692	0,219	2,586	0,220
Employment: non employed (ref.)										

Employment: works	-0,314	0,070	-0,052	0,063	-0,037	0,063	-0,132	0,065	-0,131	0,065
Siblings (yes)	0,032	0,097	0,108	0,088	0,100	0,088	-0,024	0,089	-0,043	0,089
Number of siblings	0,311	0,018	0,159	0,016	0,151	0,016	0,130	0,017	0,106	0,017
Parent's poor health: good (ref.)										
Parent's poor health: fair	-0,126	0,091	-0,072	0,087	-0,055	0,087	0,179	0,091	0,226	0,091
Parent's poor health: bad	-0,350	0,097	-0,337	0,095	-0,369	0,095	-0,127	0,086	-0,113	0,086
Has child(ren) 0-2 years (yes)	-0,039	0,089	-0,234	0,079	-0,220	0,079	-0,284	0,085	-0,258	0,085
Ever needed economic aid	0,424	0,115	0,345	0,104	0,328	0,105	0,136	0,108	0,062	0,108
Received econ. aid from parents	-0,490	0,154	-0,584	0,140	-0,555	0,140	-0,274	0,143	-0,153	0,144
Distance (centred)[<=never]			0,890	0,122	0,873	0,124	-1,345	0,043	-1,592	0,045
Distance (centred)[<=yearly]			0,918	0,079	0,922	0,079	-1,287	0,040	-1,527	0,042
Distance (centred)[<=monthly]			1,164	0,054	1,210	0,054	-1,083	0,037	-1,304	0,039
Distance (centred)[<=weekly]			1,397	0,034	1,492	0,035	-0,375	0,035	-0,552	0,037
Distance (16-50 Km.)[<=never]			-1,264	0,371	-1,259	0,380	1,760	0,208	1,718	0,211
Distance (16-50 Km.)[<=yearly]			-0,656	0,219	-0,658	0,222	1,793	0,185	1,760	0,188
Distance (16-50 Km.)[<=monthly]			0,326	0,143	0,265	0,144	1,780	0,152	1,759	0,154
Distance (16-50 Km.)[<=weekly]			0,041	0,155	-0,125	0,155	0,907	0,131	0,847	0,132
Distance (>50 Km.)[<=never]			-0,469	0,434	-0,457	0,446	3,081	0,227	2,521	0,231
Distance (>50 Km.)[<=yearly]			3,245	0,265	3,239	0,267	3,447	0,198	2,871	0,202
Distance (>50 Km.)[<=monthly]			3,273	0,198	3,129	0,199	4,136	0,165	3,514	0,169
Distance (>50 Km.)[<=weekly]			0,567	0,220	0,249	0,222	2,521	0,155	1,767	0,160
Cohabit * Distance (centr.)			-0,104	0,083	-0,052	0,084	0,085	0,069	-0,200	0,099
Frequency phone calls (centred)					-0,161	0,016				
Cohabit * Freq. phone calls (centr.)					-0,343	0,073				
Freq. visits (centred)									-0,731	0,037
Cohabit * Freq. visits (centr.)									-0,604	0,147
Random Part										
Level: couples										
Variance	1,548	0,138	1,088	0,113	1,030	0,114	1,959	0,121	1,842	0,122
Level: individuals										
Variance	5,390	0,159	3,192	0,132	3,281	0,133	3,710	0,128	3,791	0,131
Units: couples	8163		8163		8163		8163		8163	
Units: individuals	13503		13503		13503		13503		13503	
Units: parents (dyads)	21117		21117		21117		21117		21117	
Units: responses	84468		84468		84468		84468		84468	