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

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to provide insights into how religion influences the family formation process. In particular, we analyze the impact of a neighborhood context religiosity on an individual decision to enter cohabitation. We use the data on two European societies where secularization and individualization have not yet reached momentum: Italy and Poland. We combine the empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which the neighborhood may affect the individual decisions on union formation. By means of quantitative multilevel analyses we test how strong these mechanisms are in the general population.

The qualitative analysis identified several mechanisms related, among others, to a lack of social recognition for cohabiting couples and to ostracism in the neighborhood. The quantitative outcomes confirmed that individuals living in social environment where people are very religious tend to make life choices consistent with the norms and beliefs supported by the dominating religion, even if they are not very religious themselves. Importantly, after controlling for territorial characteristics, the role of neighborhood-specific religiosity weakened in the magnitude in Poland and lost its statistical power in Italy. This may indicate that the impact of religion on observed union formation behaviors is indirect: It does seem to influence observed family behaviors through the social pressure to get married and traditions, rather than through the force of Catholic dogmas.

Keywords: cohabitation, union formation, religiosity, social pressure

JEL: J12, Z12, Z13

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I. MOTIVATION

Most religions promote beliefs that are important for the family formation process: the beliefs on the sanctity of marriage or on amorality of extramarital intimate relationships. It is therefore not surprising that the relationship between religiosity and family formation behavior has attracted a lot of attention in demographic research within the last couple of decades. If cohabitation is believed to mean living in a sin, such non-traditional family formation decision would involve remarkable psychological costs for religious people (Lehrer 2004). Indeed, the studies recurrently find that individual religiosity affects the timing, quantum and the union context of fertility (Adsera 2006; Berghammer 2009, 2012; Frejka and Westoff 2008; Lehrer 1996a, 1996b), as well as the type, quality and duration of partnerships (Berghammer 2012; Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Lehrer 2004; Teachman 2002; Marks 2005; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993). However, religiosity may have not only a direct impact on individual-level behavior by promoting specific precepts or dogmas, but also through broader values or norms whose effect on family formation is indirect (Golscheider 1971, McQuillan 2004). Thus, the role of religion in the family formation process should be analyzed considering religiosity not only at individual but also at the neighborhood level (Golscheider 2006).¹

Individual beliefs and internalized norms on how the family life should be organized are shaped by the social context. The social context is important for people's family formation decisions throughout their whole life-course: their individual beliefs may be strengthened and encouraged or inhibited by the neighborhood they live in. In particular, individuals living in religious neighborhoods are likely to be embedded in very specific types of social networks which maintain behavior that is consistent with the prescription of the dominating religion (Smith 2003). The neighborhood-level religiosity may interact with individual religiosity or moderate its effect. The lack of social acceptance for non-marital cohabitation and punitive

¹ Whenever we use one of the following terms: 'neighborhood' or 'community', we mean a social environment, in which an individual lives due to his or her place of the residence. Accordingly, whenever we refer to 'neighborhood-level religiosity' or 'contextual religiosity', we mean the religiosity of people who live in the neighborhood (i.e. in the same residential area) of the given individual.

sanctions for it, imposed in the given neighborhood, may restrict the individual decisions regarding family formation even of not religious people. This effect might be particularly important in neighborhoods characterized by strong social ties and interdependencies between community members (e.g. rural neighborhoods).

There is a large literature providing evidence that social interactions at the neighborhood level do affect family formation behavior (Gault-Sherman and Draper 2012; Keim et al. 2012). However, very few studies consider social interactions which are a product of religious participation. The impact of neighborhood-level religiosity has been analyzed for explaining a decision for abortion (e.g. Adamczyk 2008). Barber (2004) has provided evidence on how the neighborhood context shapes the attitudes toward partnerships, but in this study the social context of neighborhoods is operationalized through variables that correspond to the concept of modernization rather than religiosity. Besides, Barber (2004) focuses on the attitudes rather than on actual partnership behavior. Gault-Sherman and Draper (2012) have examined the impact of neighborhood-level religiosity on cohabitation, but they have used regional rates of cohabitation rather than detailed information of individual-level decisions. The same applies to the study of spatial patterns of religiosity and family formation by Sobotka and Adiguzel (2003) as well as Valkonen et al. (2008). Analyzing aggregate regional data may capture spurious correlations because region-specific religiosity and family formation behavior may result from the same common causes, related to the socioeconomic profiles of region-specific populations. Indeed, some empirical studies using micro-level data reveal that the association between religion and demographic behavior diminishes considerably after controlling for socio-economic characteristics (see Agadjanian 2001 for a review of such studies).

We have identified no studies that would analyze the role of neighborhood-level religiosity for individual-level decisions regarding union formation. This paper aims at filling this gap. We analyze the impact of a religiosity of people living in the given neighborhood on an individual decision to enter cohabitation, and disentangle the neighborhood effects from the

effect of an individual religiosity. We combine the empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of how the local context, and particularly the religiosity in the given neighborhood, may affect the individual decisions on union formation. By means of quantitative analyses we can test how strong these mechanisms are in the general population.

We use the data on two countries that represent key, but so far unexplored, case studies for our research motivation: Italy and Poland. In both these countries marriage is a dominant living arrangement. A diffusion of cohabitation has been rather slow, although on the rise among the younger generations (Matysiak 2009; Gabrielli & Hoem 2010), and non-marital living together is chosen mainly as a temporary living arrangement. Moreover, both these countries are regarded as extremely religious – secularization have not yet reached momentum in these societies. Importantly, unlike in other European societies, Poland and Italy are also relatively homogenous in terms of religious affiliation, with dominating role of the Roman Catholic Church. In such context, even the least religious individuals might enter cohabitation reluctantly, fearing social sanctions.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Marriage and sexual relations are interwoven in the moral teachings and precepts of most religions (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992). Religious principles dictate a sharp transition from the family of origin to the family of procreation, which leaves little (or no) space for cohabitation. Religion and traditional family patterns are intimately related because no religion provides doctrinal support for cohabitation or for remaining single as possible alternatives to getting married (Oropesa 1996: 52). Religion can have widespread effects on individuals' behaviors, because it shapes the perceived costs and benefits of life course decisions. Since cohabitation publicly acknowledges a sexual relationship, it can be seen in contrast with the Catholic Roman precepts. According to Catholic doctrine, sexual intercourse is appropriate only in the context of marriage, because only in marriage sexuality can express the two fundamental

dimensions of conjugal life: couples' harmony and fertility. In Catholic morality premarital sexual relations are not only disapproved, but they are prohibited. Hence, Catholic people should opt for marriage rather than for cohabitation. Those who wish to marry have to agree on the times and the dynamics of their marriage preparation, growing in intimacy, and preserving the most complete expression of their love to the future conjugal life.

Demographic literature is rich in micro-, meso- and macro- level theoretical concepts that explain the link between religiosity and family formation behaviour (McQuillan 2004; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988; Lesthaeghe 1995). At the micro-level, studies that tested the relationship between religiosity and family patterns found a strong and positive association between religious affiliation and commitment, and conventional sexual values and behavior (e.g., in the U.S.: Thornton and Cambum 1987; Sweet and Bumpass 1990; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; in the Netherlands: Liefbroer and Gierveld 1993). At the meso-level – i.e., the social interaction among individuals – the role of the family of origin is particularly crucial. Young people follow their parents' religious denominations and frequently follow their parents' levels of religious commitment and participation (Löffler 2009). Parents can influence the perceptions and behaviors of their children through their guidance (Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina 2007) and try to discourage their offspring from violating social stigmas, such as behaving against the dominant Catholic doctrine. More generally, we know from previous literature that religious individuals are more likely to choose traditional family forms, which is a socially accepted behavior that brings approval from society, family, and “relevant others” in their social surroundings (Kalmijn 2004). We also know that on the macro-level, we can observe more religious social groups or societies to be slower in adopting new, so far atypical family formation patterns.

What remains unclear is whether there are any processes resulting from specific types of interactions between individuals and the social groups to which they belong. In particular, we know very little about the way that the religiousness of social groups in a specific area of

residence affects life choices of individuals who are not necessarily religious themselves. This research gap has been addressed in a broad way by Fine (2010), who stressed that individual choices are too often viewed in the literature as unrelated to local traditions and culture, even though “action is always generated in response to other actions within a local scene as well as to the local meaning of that scene” (pp.356). In this paper we address how potential interactions between individuals and their social environment affect individuals’ union formation.

As Caltabiano et al. (2006) emphasize, there are some conditions that make religious norms, including those on sexual and union behavior, be followed and have a dynamic feedback on the sense of belonging to community that in turns strengthens obedience to the religious rules. First of all, both individuals and religious communities must perceive the relevance of norms both at individual and collective levels. Second, there must be institutions which are capable of reinforcing these norms and making followers comply with them (McQuillan, 2004). If these conditions are not met, on one hand the norms cannot affect the behavior, on the other hand, the perceived costs of disobedience might be too low to prevent some individuals from breaking them. Similar insights are incorporated in the reference group theory (Brock, Beeghly and Mixon 1983), which argues that individual choices are guided by the norms if there is similarity in status attributes between the individuals and their social environment, so that they can use a group’s values and norms as a point of reference for their own and behavior. Another condition for social influence of the reference group is a continuous interaction of individuals with members of their reference group. Finally, the reference group needs to have significant others, who are highly visible and capable of articulating group norms and values.

These ideas are relevant for our research question: it can be argued that individual choices regarding living arrangements can be affected by the norms and values of the community or neighbourhood where individuals live. A common place of residence may be regarded as a common status and in the same time it implies frequent social interactions. In most communities or neighbourhoods one can indicate important figures that form or affect

local opinions and attitudes. However, the reference group theory stresses only one among many mechanisms of social influence (Keim 2011) - the focal point of this theory is social learning, which pertains to information on norms and values that are transmitted through direct communication or through observation of behaviours of the members of the reference group (Montgomery and Casterline 1996). This information actually shapes individual's own attitudes and as a result, the norms of the reference group become internalised into individual's value system. The core of the reference group theory is thus the internationalization of norms shared by a social group.

Another potential mechanism of social influence is related to social pressure: individuals seek to gain approval and avoid conflict within social groups and therefore adopt behaviours which are consistent with the values and norms prevailing in their social environment (Montgomery and Casterline 1996). Norms may be enforced via positive and negative sanctions, which might range from disapproval in oral communication to ostracism and exclusion from the social group (Keim 2011). This implies that a social group to which individuals belong may have important influence on their life choices even if individuals do not necessarily internalise all the norms that are dominant in their social environment.

According to Title (1980) individuals conform to the sanctions when the probability of sanction is high, and especially when the sanction may be imposed by persons close to the individuals, such as friends and associates. Living in a religious neighborhood exposes individuals to greater interpersonal surveillance of behavior, thereby increasing the probability of informal sanction, especially if these neighborhoods are closed and small. Hence, the type of social environment in religious activities may matter when it comes to following religious prescriptions regarding living arrangements.

III. RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY IN ITALY AND POLAND

The pressure to marry stemming from the social surrounding may be of particular importance in countries (and areas within countries) where cohabitation is less accepted. Our

study focuses on Italy and Poland, two countries where attachment to Catholic values and the strong position of the Roman Catholic Church constitute key elements that characterize societies. As in other Southern European societies, Italians are “shaped by the Church and hence strongly committed to the preservation of traditional familyhood” (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 27). In Poland, religiosity is historically rooted, as Catholic Church used to play an important role when it comes to preserving national identity during historical periods when Poland lost its independence (Marody and Mandes 2006).

According to data from ISSP 2008, about 98% of Poles and 95% of Italians were raised in the Catholic religion compared with an average of about 45% in other European countries. In both countries, the Roman Catholic plays an important role for the social life of people living in specific neighborhoods. It has control over some national and local mass media, and hence it exerts a strong influence on public opinion. Moreover, it organizes events and ceremonies that mark the important times of the year, and which draw the community in specific regions together. In Italy, the Catholic Church directly controls one national radio (Vatican Radio), one satellite television (Sat 2000 owned by the Italian Episcopal Conference) and two national newspapers (L'Osservatore Romano, the official Vatican newspaper, and L'Avvenire, the official newspaper of the Italian Episcopal Conference). Catholic organizations control other national mass media such as a national radio station (Radio Maria), magazines, and periodicals at national or local levels. In addition, large number of Catholic television and radio programs are broadcast weekly by all the channels of the Italian state television and radio service (Rai) (Sansonetti 2009). A similar situation can be observed in Poland: Catholic Church manages television canals (TV Trwam, Religia.tv) and radio stations (Radio Maryja, Radio Plus) as well as newspapers (e.g. Gość Niedzielny, Nasz Dziennik, Znak). The church hierarchs actively use these media to express their opinions on issues related directly to family life such as abortion, marriage, stem cell research or in vitro fertilization (Zuba 2010).²

² In Poland, the official presence of Catholic Church in the public sphere was limited until 1989. However,

In addition, the context of family life has been historically permeated by the Catholic Church in Italy and Poland. Interactions with Catholic doctrine start very early in life, already at primary schools, since in both countries the state provides public schools with church-appointed teachers of Catholic religion, and pays the teachers' salaries (Caltabiano et al 2006; Zuba 2010). The birth, marriage, and death of any member of the local community are celebrated or commemorated by public rituals administered by the representatives of the Church. People are expected to take part these celebrations and their participation is necessary for acceptance within the community (Cartocci 1994). The local clergy maintains registers of people who were born in their region, participation in religious events and ceremonies is subject to scrutiny by the clergy and it is recorded in these registers. The effects of this "monitoring" may be felt by individuals in their everyday lives, since the local clergy is in a position to publicly praise them or to undermine their positions in the local community. In this context, we can expect that the social attitudes towards family formation patterns are strongly related to the Catholic dogma and the neighborhood is particularly important for protecting marriage and discouraging cohabitation.

Both countries display marked regional variation in the attachment to religion and tradition. Italian Catholicism is diffused everywhere in the country by means of a well-equipped church structure (Castegnaro and Dalla Zuanna 2006) and many associations, groups, communities, or movements are still very active within the Catholic Church (Diotallevi 2002). However, there is an evidence for erosion of religious values in the larger cities and in the northern part of Italy (Cesareo et al., 1995; Castegnaro and Dalla Zuanna 2006). In the South, conformity appears to be greater (Cartocci 1994). The power of tradition, the practice of habit, and the involvement in the religious community make being a member of certain social surrounding particularly compelling there. In Poland, Catholicism is also spread widely across the country, because affiliation with Catholicism remains perceived as a social marker of Polish

after the fall of the Iron Curtain the situation changed remarkably and currently there are no political barriers for religious institutions to participate in the public debate.

identity. However, the focus of religiosity among Poles is on celebrations and rituals rather than on the analysis of the bible. Religious rituals allow people to have a sense of community and express collective sentiments (Marody and Mandes 2005). Related to this, the literature stresses within-country differences in religiosity between urban and rural areas as well as eastern and western regions (Eberhardt 2011; Kolasa-Nowak 2011). Rural areas and regions in the eastern part of Poland are regarded as more traditional and the religious influences are stronger in that part of the country.

IV. DATA AND METHODS

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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

The research agency recruited the respondents, according to the following criteria: 25-40 of age, divided into groups by gender and education attainment. The lower level of education included: primary, vocational, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary educational attainment.

The higher level of education included: women and men who received a bachelor's or a master's degree as well as those with a post-tertiary qualification. In total, eight FGIs were conducted in each country: two with women of low-medium education (Fem, Low edu), two with women with some tertiary education (Fem, High edu), and two with men of low-medium education (Male, Low edu) and two with men with tertiary degree (Male, High edu). Altogether 69 respondents participated in the study in Poland and 58 in Italy. A basic sample characteristics are presented in the table 1 below.

Table 1. Qualitative sample structure.

Variable	Categories	Italy %	Poland %
Gender	Female	50.9	50.7
	Male	49.1	49.3
Marital status (legal)	Single	56.2	52.2
	Married	17.5	47.8
Children	No	68.4	55.1
	Yes	31.6	44.9
Educational level	Low-medium	45.6	50.7
	High	54.4	49.3

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

(1) How the topic of religiosity was discussed in relation to cohabitation? Were the respondents referring to individual- or neighborhood-level religiosity? What kind of social context did they refer to? Did they make reference at the country, region, or rather very local neighborhood?

(2) Did the respondents recognize and describe any mechanisms of how their social environment encourages or discourages individual decisions to cohabit? Were they aware of

these mechanisms? Did they mention any sanctions imposed at the neighborhood level which might be attributed to religion?

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

Even though the opinions expressed during the interviews are not representative to the whole Polish and Italian population, they allow to capture a general social perspective on how religiosity plays a role in a decision to cohabit or to marry. With the focus groups data we are able to explore general norms and social perceptions (Morgan 1998, Kamberelis, Dimitriadis 2000). On the one hand, they allow for formulating hypotheses to be tested with quantitative methods. On the other hand, they suggest socially constructed explanations of the statistical relations.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In the quantitative part of our paper, we draw on the 2009 Italian Multipurpose Household Survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS) and the 2011 Polish Generation and Gender Survey (GGS). These two surveys were conducted in both countries by means of face-to-face interviews in nationally representative samples. The questionnaires of both surveys took into account the guidelines formulated by the international committee that set up the whole Generation and Gender Program (Vikat et al., 2007)³. They provide very detailed information on union formation and childbearing processes and at the same time they are also a valuable source of data on the social background. We restrict the samples to youngest people born in cohorts from 1975-1989 because most variables on individual and neighborhood-level religiosity are cross-sectional. Following standard practice (e.g., Berghammer 2012) by limiting the study to

³ The Italian “variant” of the GGS was conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics in 2003. The 2009 survey is a replication of that previous survey with a more detailed collection of employment and education histories.

selected cohorts we avoid a problem of having a religiosity measured years after a decision to cohabit was made.

We focus on the probability of non-marital cohabitation as a first union. We model the probability of choosing such an informal partnership as opposed to formal marriage by means of a multilevel logit model. Multilevel modeling gives an opportunity to make a proper test of the impact of contextual factors operating at the neighborhood-level on individual choices while controlling for socio-demographic characteristics of individuals living in specific neighborhoods. For example, this approach has been so far applied to examine the impact of religious contextual norms on abortion decisions (Adamczyk 2008) or on adolescent delinquency (Regnerus 2003). In this study, we employ multilevel models in order to test if the neighborhood-level religiosity affects the individual-level decisions on union formation. In particular, given the relevance of the regional dimension, standard errors of the estimates were adjusted for the possible intra-group correlations at the regional level.

The key control variable is the measure of individual-level religiosity. GGS questionnaire includes a question about the frequency of attending religious services in Church. We distinguish people who attend it at least once a week, because in Roman Catholic Church it is required to attend a mass at least once, on Sunday. In FSS 2009 this information was however missing, whereas it was present in the previous round of the survey (FSS 2003). Using a statistical procedure (Abadie et al. 2004) we attributed religion attachment by matching individuals interviewed in 2009 with individuals interviewed in 2003 depending on their main socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, age, education, employment status, marital status and region).

Additionally, we control for a range of characteristics of respondents that may affect choosing cohabitation as the form of first union. We include basic demographic characteristics such as age at partnership formation, gender and education attainment. Furthermore, we expect that people from most recent cohorts, who were raised in better educated (and hence more

liberal and open-minded) families are more likely to choose cohabitation rather than marriage as the form of their first union (Di Giulio and Rosina, 2007; Rosina and Fraboni, 2004). Therefore, we control for the cohort in which individuals were born and education attainment of families in which individuals were raised. Additionally, we control for parental divorce, because previous studies have shown that the experience of parental divorce may deter marriage and encourage less binding living arrangements (Kiernan, 1992; Thornton, 1991). Additionally, in a separate specification of our models, we control for regional differences in propensity for cohabitation that may be related to the local culture. Some of the dimensions of this culture, such as attachment to tradition, celebrations and meetings with family and friends, may be actually correlated with religiosity. Moreover, some of the regional customs or traditions may be partly promoted or maintained by the local church. Thus, in this second model specification we included the place of residence (urban vs. rural area) and an indicator for the macro-area or residence. Specifically, in Italy the distinction between southern and northern part of Italy is very relevant (Dalla Zuanna and Righi 1999; Kertzer et al. 2008; Gabrielli and Vignoli 2013). In Poland, the regional differences may be observed if we compare eastern and western regions (Eberhardt 2011; Kolasa-Nowak 2011).

Our key explanatory variable is the contextual variable on religiosity in neighborhoods where respondents live (among adult inhabitants in the place of residence). In Italy, we calculated a corresponding indicator in relatively small areas given by the combination of the region of residence (i.e., the Nuts-1 level) with the size of the municipality within the regions. Namely, if possible, regions are split into: metropolitan area, suburbs of metropolitan area, municipality with less than 2,000 inhab., municipality with 2,001-10,000 inhab., municipality with 10,001-50,000 inhab., municipality with more than 50,000 inhab. For Italy, this results in a total number of 126 areas for which the incidence of neighborhood-level religiosity is computed. We followed a similar procedure for Polish regions to create 72 neighborhood areas.

V. RESULTS

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

In the first step, we explored the content of the Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) to see what kind of references are made when the respondents discuss the role of religion for their decision to cohabit or marry. In the narrative material, we found that they referred to both, individual level religiosity as well as to the contextual influences. These kinds of references were found in Italy and in Poland, in discussions with men and women of different educational level.

At the individual level, the interviewees made a clear link between own religiosity and a higher propensity to marry. As one of the Polish respondents put it, *“for strongly believing people, it’s a natural order of things, that you do get married”* (PL-1, Male, Low edu). This was virtually echoed in the Italian interviews, e.g. *“I’m a religious person, so it is normal for me to get married instead of cohabiting”* (IT-1, Fem, High edu).

The references at the social, contextual level were also present. The respondents in both Italy and Poland recognized that their countries are Catholic and religious and they referred to the Catholic culture and tradition of their countries when they discussed cohabitation and marriage. They unanimously acknowledged that in their opinion the Catholic religion is the main reason for which the cohabitation does not spread faster and marriage remains central in, respectively, Italy and Poland.

For our research, however, it is crucial that the qualitative study allows us to depict how Catholic culture is important for people’s choices between cohabitation and marriage, other than by shaping their individual religiosity.

First of all, in both analyzed contexts, the respondents recurrently discussed the role of “the others”, “other people” or “neighbors” for an individual choice between cohabitation and marriage. For instance, from the Italian FGIs, we learn that a cohabiting couple is not recognized “by the others” in the same way a married couple is. According to the respondents, *“they are not 100% a couple for the others”* (IT-8, Male, Low edu). Another respondent (IT-7, Fem, High edu) said, *“when you cohabit you do not have the same role in society as you would have married”*. In

another interview, the respondent explicitly said that marriage is strongly encouraged by the society,

“Many people get married just because the society is asking them to do it; otherwise their relationship would not be well perceived by the others.” (IT-4, Male, high edu)

This pressure from “others” is evident in the Polish FGIs, too. Interestingly, in the Polish context we could hear some respondents referred more precisely to their neighbors as those, who exert some pressure on them, like in the following discussion,

*-“People around me find my wedding more important than I do;
- Instead of minding their own business they think of me , this is the most important thing for them;
- People are always interested in what they neighbors do, instead of minding their own business.”*
(PL-4, Male, High edu)

Moreover, in the Polish context, the direct pressure from the neighbors was perceived as much more intense when childbearing in cohabitation was concerned. The following argument was brought up in literally all Polish FGIs,

“If I was pregnant, I would do anything to get married. Even for this simple reason: a child goes to school and will be pointed at that he or she doesn’t have a daddy. Meaning: a mum is not married...” (PL-7, Fem, High edu)

That clearly shows how “neighbors’ talking” or “pointing fingers” impact an individual decision to marry. Even if people were able to withstand this kind of pressure, they do not want their (future) child to suffer.

Even though in the above quotes on the impact of neighbors or “the others” religion is not explicitly mentioned, the discussion on social pressure was always held in reference to the Catholic tradition and culture of the countries. Moreover, in both countries a pressure stemming directly from the Church or the religion was also discussed. The Italian respondents referred to

this kind of pressure at a more general, abstract level. In the interviews, they discussed how *“marrying becomes something expected because of the culture, because of the religion”* (IT-7, Male, Low edu).

Similar voices were heard in the FGIs conducted in Poland, too. As one respondent put it, *“tradition says that you have to have a Church wedding above all”* (PL-2, Fem, Low edu). But additionally, in the Polish case respondents reported some more tangible pressure from the Church, exerted directly by the priests. The respondents mentioned that priests might “point their fingers” at unmarried people at the Church or they would not visit one’s home after Christmas⁴. Moreover, once again, the most feared sanctions from the priests were related to having a child in cohabitation. The Polish respondents quite unanimously recognized that one of the key reasons why people marry is because they want to baptize their (future) children. They describe numerous examples of how Catholic priests refused to baptize a child born out of wedlock. This seems to be a very important mechanism, in which the Church protects the sanctity of marriage.

In the final step, we analyzed whether the respondents noticed any differences in how religious environment may influence people’s choices in different settings. Importantly, the key difference between Italy and Poland is revealed here. In Poland, the respondents recurrently and unanimously say that religiosity and mechanisms of social control have greater impact on decision to marry in rural areas. They say that in small villages the role of religion is particularly strong and local society impacts individual choices with greater power. *“In a small village (...) everyone points a finger at you”* (PL-5, Male, Hi edu) or *“a priest can say at the Church that this person has been living with a girl for three years and they are not married yet”* (PL-6, Male, Hi edu) and people fear such stigmatization. In respondents’ opinion, the pressure is weaker in the big cities because of the greater anonymity. People do not know each other well, they are not aware

⁴ It is a custom in Poland that priests are visiting homes around the Christmas time, to bless the households, and to pray and talk with people at their own homes.

of their neighbors' living arrangements. As one respondent put it, *"in bigger cities, one is more anonymous, people are not watching you that closely"* (PL-2, Fem, Low edu).

Interestingly, such comments were absent in the Italian FGIs. Instead, the respondents constantly referred to South-North division, saying that a role of religion is more powerful in the southern regions of the country, because South is simply more religious and more attached to the traditional values. In the narrations, we find the statements similar to the following one,

"Religious fundamentalism is particularly strong in Southern Italian regions. I come from the South, and I know!" (IT-5, Fem, Low edu)

To sum up, in the qualitative part of our study we found that the respondents recognize the role of both, individual- and neighborhood-level religiosity on a personal choice between cohabitation and marriage. We were able to identify several different mechanisms of how religiosity of the respondents' surrounding may influence their decision to marry instead of cohabiting. The interviewees were concerned with a lack of social recognition for cohabiting couples and with a possible stigmatization from "the others" or "the neighbors". They were also worried about the actual sanctions imposed by Catholic priests, who – in fact – might be important social actors in the religious societies. A great variety of sanctions are also imposed at the family level, by parents or grandparents, but describing these mechanism goes beyond the scope of this paper and we are leaving the familial influence for future studies.

But even though in both Italy and Poland religiosity is highly important and the respondents recognize social pressure to marry instead of cohabiting in both settings, there are marked differences between them. In the Polish context, the pressure seems more tangible: it is exerted by precise people (e.g. neighbors or priests) in very concrete situations. Consequently, anonymity of a big city offers some protection against these influences. The Italian respondents spoke about the pressure in a more abstract way. For them, it was more about a general perception in society, about what religion and tradition impose. If this is experienced this way, anonymity of a big city will not change people's sense of a moral obligation to marry.

In the quantitative part we will be able to examine to what extent the neighborhood-level religiosity may actually influence people's choices between cohabitation and marriage. In addition, the quantitative analysis aims to test the role of the key territorial differences as emerged during the FGIs; namely, we verify the importance of the urban-rural dichotomy for on union formation practices.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

In Table 2 the outcomes of the estimated multilevel models are reported both for Italy and Poland. Note that we present two model specifications: in model 1, along several covariates, we introduce contextual-level religiosity and, in model 2, we also introduce territorial fixed effects controls for the urban vs. rural area of residence and the macro-region of residence.

The results from the multilevel models confirm that in both countries people born in the youngest cohorts have higher propensity to choose cohabitation rather than marriage. Note that the pattern is insignificant in Italy, however. This confirms the results from previous studies on trends in diffusion of cohabitation in Poland and Italy (Matysiak and Mynarska 2010; Gabrielli and Hoem 2010; Gabrielli and Vignoli 2013). We also note that the age at which the partnership has been formed affects the choice of union type. Individuals, who form partnership later in life, tend to marry directly rather than cohabit. Regarding the effect of other socio-demographic variables, women have lower propensity to choose informal unions than men. As compared to the reference group of tertiary educated, the highest propensity to enter informal unions can be observed among people who still participate in education. Regarding those, who completed education, we can note a negative educational gradient in propensity for informal union arrangements in Poland, while a positive educational gradient is observed in Italy. Polish individuals, who attained only primary, vocational or secondary education, are more likely to choose cohabitation than the tertiary educated. This finding goes in line with the conclusions of Matysiak (2009) and Mynarska and Matysiak (2010) about the educational gradient of diffusion of nonstandard family arrangements in Poland. On the contrary, in Italy, a positive gradient is

observed. This corroborates recent findings by Gabrielli and Vignoli (2013), who also suggest, however, that in recent years a leveling-off in educational differentials is into play in Italy.

Our results highlight an important effect of social background. Individuals, who were raised in better educated - and hence more liberal and open-minded - families are more likely to choose cohabitation rather than marriage as the form of their first union. This finding is also consistent with previous research on the propensity for cohabitation in Poland and Italy (Di Giulio and Rosina, 2007; Rosina and Fraboni, 2004). Moreover, in line with previous studies on the impact of parental background on the children's life course choices (Kiernan, 1992; Thornton, 1991), we find that parental divorce discourages from marriage and increases propensity to choose cohabitation in the first union.

Individual religiosity, as measured by the frequency of attending religious services, is associated with choosing marriage rather than cohabitation in the first union. This finding has been also well grounded in the literature on the influence of individual-level religiosity on partnership choices (Berghammer 2012; Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Lehrer 2004; Teachman 2002; Marks 2005; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993). However, even after controlling for individual religiosity, we note a clear impact of the religiosity of people who live in the same neighborhood. In regions where a high proportion of "neighbors" attend church regularly, the propensity to enter cohabitation rather than marriage is significantly lower than in less religious areas (cp. Table 2, model 1). This confirms our key hypothesis that individuals living in social environment where people are very religious tend to make life choices consistent with the norms and beliefs supported by the dominating religion.

Furthermore, we investigated to what extent the impact of region-specific differences in propensity for cohabitation may be related to the local culture. We assumed that in many Polish and Italian regions, especially in the small villages and in regions that are located in eastern part of Poland or in the South of Italy, the local culture may be strongly interrelated with religion, affecting individual life choices in a similar way. Indeed, we can observe that individuals living in

Polish rural areas and in regions located in the eastern part of Poland as well as those living in southern part of Italy are less likely to cohabit. This corroborates the findings from the qualitative part of our research. Interestingly, we can note that after controlling for the region-specific fixed effects, the role of neighborhood-specific religiosity becomes statistically insignificant in Italy and weakens in its magnitude in Poland. This may indicate that the role of local culture may be more important for individual union formation patterns than the role of religion *per se*. It should be stressed, that the key dimensions of this culture, such as the attachment to tradition, celebrations and meetings with family and friends, are actually strongly correlated with religiosity in both countries. However, it seems that social norms and traditions – shaped by religion – have a more important impact on the union formation practices than religious dogmas as such.

Table 2. The impact of religiosity on cohabitation – the results from multilevel models

	POLAND				ITALY				
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		
	coef.	se	coef.	se	coef.	se	coef.	se	
Year of birth (ref. 1975-1979)									
1980-1984	0.71***	0.10	0.70***	0.10	0,25	0,11	0.23*	0,11	
1985-1989	0.95***	0.13	0.95***	0.13	0,33	0,23	0.29	0,25	
Age at 1st partnership formation (ref. 15-19)									
20-24	-0.27*	0.14	-0.28**	0.14	-0.58***	0,21	-0.62***	0,23	
25-29	-0.34**	0.17	-0.35**	0.17	-0.81***	0,22	-0.85***	0,24	
30-34	-0.10	0.25	-0.11	0.25	-1.01***	0,28	-0.99***	0,29	
Gender (ref. men)									
Women	-0.20**	0.09	-0.20**	0.09	-0.63***	0,10	-0.64***	0,10	
Highest level of education at 1st partnership (ref. tertiary)									
Secondary	0.57***	0.16	0.56***	0.16	-0.31	0,20	-0.26	0,19	
Vocational	0.36**	0.15	0.35**	0.15	-0.019	0,14	-0.08	0,14	
Primary	0.39**	0.18	0.39**	0.18	-0.58***	0,22	-0.49**	0,20	
In education	0.75***	0.24	0.79***	0.24	0.55**	0,25	0.57**	0,26	
Parental education (ref. at least one tertiary educated parent)									
No parent with tertiary education	-0.18	0.13	-0.17	0.13	-0.28	0,22	-0.18	0,21	
Parents' divorce when the child was aged 15 (ref. no divorce)									
Parental divorce till child's age 15	0.23	0.16	0.23	0.16	0.73***	0,14	0.65***	0,13	
Frequency of attending church (ref. less than weekly)									

Attending the church weekly or more often	-1.01***	0.09	-1.00***	0.09	-0.33***	0,09	-0.27***	0,09
Contextual religiosity (ref. low share)								
medium share	-0.64***	0.21	-0.40**	0.19	-0,036	0,21	0.11	0,25
high share	-1.17***	0.26	-0.63**	0.26	-0.68**	0,32	0.04	0,37
Place of residence (ref. urban)								
rural			-0.66***	0.18			0,06	0,17
Regional division of residence (ref. PL: West, IT: North and Centre)								
PL: East; IT: South and Islands			-0.53***	0.20			-1.16***	0,34
Constant	0.60**	0.29	0.61**	0.2	1.31**	0,45	1.29**	0,51
Log likelihood	-1726.47		-1718.41		-1602,28		-1547,9	
N	2921		2921		2576		2576	

Note: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. The contextual variable “Attending church weekly or more often” is subdivided into low, medium, and high share according to proper country-specific cut-off points: up to 40%, between 40 and 60%, and over 60% for Poland; up to 30%, between 30 and 40%, and over 40% for Italy.

VI. DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

There is a plethora of empirical evidence suggesting a meaningful influence of individual-level religiosity on partnership choices. The potential contextual influences of religious participation on family formation practices have been so far largely ignored. This paper addresses that oversight providing insights into how religion influences the family formation processes. In particular, we analyzed the impact of a neighborhood context religiosity on an individual decision to enter cohabitation, and disentangled the neighborhood effect from the effect of an individual religiosity. We used data on two European societies where secularization and individualization have not yet reached momentum: Italy and Poland. We combine the empirical evidence from both qualitative and quantitative research.

The qualitative research provided insights into the mechanisms of how the neighborhood may affect the individual decisions on union formation. The results suggest that, beside the role of individual level religiosity, in both countries individuals also attach importance to the contextual-level influences. We identified several different mechanisms of how religiosity of the respondents’ surrounding may influence their decision to marry instead of cohabiting. The interviewees were especially concerned with a lack of social recognition for cohabiting couples

and with a possible stigmatization by “the others” or “the neighbors”. In Poland, people felt that during any kind of events in the neighborhood during which the religion plays an important role, such as baptizing or the first Holy Communion of a child, visiting the home by a priest during Christmas, their marriage status can be exposed and condemned by the local priest and by the community. In fact, sanctions seem more tangible when childbearing is involved and it seems that a child makes a couple even more fragile with respect to external influences. They feel more obliged to marry as they feel responsible for the youngest member of the family and they do not want the social sanctions to impact their offspring. In Italy, the ideas of the social sanctions related to the marriage status were more abstract. Italians stressed that cohabitation means a lower position in the hierarchy of the local society and meets general social disapproval.

Moreover, the analysis of the FGIs ventured that the impact of social sanctions may vary in different regional contexts. In Poland, the respondents recurrently and unanimously said that religiosity and mechanisms of social control have greater impact on decision to cohabit or marry in rural areas. The anonymity of a big city offers some protection against the neighbors’ looks and comments or the priest’s condemnation. Instead, in Italy, the impact of religion and Catholic culture seems more abstract. Consequently, the respondents constantly referred to South-North division, saying that a role of religion is more powerful in the southern regions of the country, because South is more religious and more attached to the traditional values.

Then, by means of quantitative multilevel analyses we tested how strongly the mechanisms that we observed during the FGIs work in the general population. The quantitative outcomes confirmed that individuals living in social environment where people are very religious tend to make life choices consistent with the norms and beliefs supported by the dominating religion, even if they are not very religious themselves. Furthermore, in line with qualitative findings, we also found that individuals living in Polish rural areas and in regions located in the eastern part of Poland as well as those living in southern part of Italy are less likely to cohabit. What is more, after controlling for these territorial characteristics, the role of neighborhood-specific religiosity

weakened in the magnitude or lost its statistical power. This may indicate that social norms and traditions that are shaped by religion, rather than religious dogmas themselves, have a direct effect on the observed union formation behaviors. Hence, our findings support the view expressed by Caltabiano et al. (2006) that marriage choices in countries such as Italy or Poland may be in fact more of a tribute to tradition, habits and parents' wishes – that are strongly related to religiousness - rather than to be the conscious consequence of religious values.

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