Life Satisfaction among married and divorced men and women in Italy

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates gender differences in overall life satisfaction using data from the Italian Time Use Survey. We applied a Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition method, which allows to isolate the part of the differential in the marital status in the life satisfaction level that can be explained by differences in observable characteristics from the part attributable to differences in coefficients. We perform moreover the same analysis by gender. From our results we can affirm that the major part of the differential in the level of satisfaction is attributable to differences in coefficients indicating substantial differences between married and separated subject.

Introduction

Although research into well-being and happiness has increased enormously in recent decades; many of these studies focus on gender differences in life satisfaction of the partners (Wilkening and McGranahan, 1977; Lie and Biblarz, 1993, among others). In several cases, analysts found how marital status and aging influence significantly the perception of well-being of, respectively, male and female partner (e.g. Ball and Robbins, 1986; Meggiolaro and Ongaro, 2014). In particular, married man seems to be more satisfied than the married woman; and this gap increases for aged couples. Instead, divergent results emerge from studies on well-being of divorced or separated partners. In many cases, the organization of the household and the role played by both partners within it play a fundamental role. This aspect reflects on the distribution of time between partners and on how much the diversity in the use of time between men and women affects their respectively perceived wellbeing (e.g. Krueger et al. 2009).

This paper presents the results of an attempt to relate socioeconomic status, family status and social participation (explained by information on the use of time) to an index of life satisfaction measuring partners' well-being. A differential analysis is provided performing a comparison between married (or cohabiting) and divorced (or separated) subjects. Our aim is to evaluate how a different marital status influence the results of the subjective well-being prediction specifying covariates explaining subjective life satisfaction. To do this we use cross-sectional data selected from the Italian Time Use Survey for the year 2013. The use of cross-sectional data makes difficult to identify the dynamic aspects of change in marital status, however we try to compensate this limitation by performing a counterfactual analysis by applying a Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition approach. This decomposition procedure allows us to better evaluate, unlike traditional regression methods, how much the difference in well-being between married and divorced people depends on different socio-demographic characteristics of the subjects, and how much rather depends on their different marital status.

Data and Methods

To understand whether the differences in the overall life satisfaction between married men and women and separated or divorced counterparts are driven by differences in the observable characteristics or by the differences in unobservable components, we used the Blinder-Oaxaca (B.O.) decomposition (Blinder 1973; Oaxaca 1973). This estimation technique allows us to divide the outcome between two groups into a part that is "explained" by differences in subjective characteristics (e.g. age, education) and into a residual part that cannot be explained by observed

covariates ("unexplained"). In particular, we applied the three-fold decomposition (Jann, 2008), of the difference in mean outcomes for married (M) and divorced (D) people:

$$R = E(Y_M) - E(Y_D) = (\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_D)\hat{\beta}_D + \bar{X}_D\left(\hat{\beta}_M - \hat{\beta}_D\right) + (\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_D)\left(\hat{\beta}_M - \hat{\beta}_D\right) \quad (1)$$

$$\underbrace{\phantom{(\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_D)\hat{\beta}_D}}_{\text{Endowments Eff.}} \quad \underbrace{\phantom{\bar{X}_D(\hat{\beta}_M - \hat{\beta}_D)}}_{\text{Coefficients Eff.}} \quad \underbrace{\phantom{(\bar{X}_M - \bar{X}_D)(\hat{\beta}_M - \hat{\beta}_D)}}_{\text{Interaction effect}}$$

Where E(Y) denotes the expected value of the outcome variable (overall life satisfaction). The first term of Equation 1 represents the Endowments Effect and explains the differences due to covariates characteristics (such as education, age, sex, the number of household components, the time use, etc.) and it can be interpreted as how would the predicted outcome of a divorced have changed if he/she had the same endowments as an married person. The second term, Coefficients Effect, represents the structural changes in the coefficients of the covariates between the two groups. This term shows how the predicted outcome for divorced would have changed if the divorced had the same unobserved characteristics as a married. Finally, Interaction effect allow us to take into account the fact that differences in endowments and coefficients between married and divorced exist simultaneously. It shows how the predicted outcome of divorced would have changed if he/she had the same observable and unobservable characteristics as the married.

In our study we use data from the Italian Time Use Survey for the year 2013, carried out by the Italian statistical office (ISTAT). The sample selected is formed by 15962 Italian and foreign women (n. 10280) and men (n. 9374) aged 25 – 64, married or divorced. More details on the sample characteristics for men and women are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the study sample

Variables	All (n. 15,962)		Married or cohabiting (n. 13,509)		Divorced or separated (n. 2,453)			
	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Life satisfaction	7.03	1.66	7.12	1.61	6.50	1.79	0	10
Woman	0.54	0.50	0.53	0.50	0.59	0.49	0	1
Age_25_34	0.09	0.28	0.09	0.29	0.06	0.23	0	1
Age_35_44	0.26	0.44	0.26	0.44	0.27	0.44	0	1
Age_45_54	0.36	0.48	0.35	0.48	0.41	0.49	0	1
Age_55_64	0.30	0.46	0.30	0.46	0.27	0.44	0	1
Education (years of school)	11.37	3.94	11.27	3.94	11.91	3.89	2	18
South and Islands	0.40	0.49	0.41	0.49	0.32	0.47	0	1
Number of household components	3.23	1.19	3.44	1.06	2.09	1.23	1	9
Italian	0.91	0.28	0.92	0.27	0.85	0.36	0	1
Worker	0.67	0.47	0.65	0.48	0.76	0.42	0	1
Support:he/she can rely, in case of need, on some people (excluding cohabiting family members) (Yes)	0.82	0.38	0.82	0.38	0.82	0.38	0	1
Non-cohabiting children (Yes)	0.31	0.46	0.28	0.45	0.47	0.50	0	1
Economic situation (excellent or adequate)	0.60	0.49	0.62	0.49	0.49	0.50	0	1
Meet friends during leisure time at least once a week (Yes)	0.61	0.49	0.61	0.49	0.67	0.47	0	1
Stress	0.74	0.44	0.71	0.45	0.74	0.44	0	1
Unpaid work	247	187.7	201	163.0	240	185	0	1160 (820)
Socializing	87	95.1	96	105.1	88.1	96.8	0	760 (790)
Level of agreement with the four items:								
Man devotes to economic needs, woman to family care[a]	2.32	1.00	2.34	1.00	2.24	1.00	1	4
Gender equality in housework[b]	2.09	0.82	2.09	0.82	2.06	0.84	1	4
Gender equality in the child gets sick[b]	1.89	0.82	1.89	0.82	1.88	0.82	1	4
Men perform domestic tasks just as well as women[b]	2.62	0.92	2.62	0.92	2.57	0.92	1	4
Men perform childcare just as well as women[b]	2.33	0.87	2.33	0.87	2.35	0.88	1	4

Note: [a] 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3=Agree, 4= Strongly Agree; [b] 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Disagree, 4= Strongly Disagree

The independent variable in our analysis is the overall life satisfaction. Life satisfaction in the Use of time survey is measured by asking: ''Overall, to what degree are you satisfied with your life now?'' Answers are provided along a 10-point scale, with 0 being not satisfied at all and 10 being completely satisfied. In general, statistical differences in the overall life satisfaction exist between married/cohabiting persons and divorced (7.12 and 6.50, respectively, pvalue=0.000, Ttest=17.28). The independent variable used are the age of the respondent, the Italian macro region of residence (Area:1= South and Island, 0= North), the presence of one or more sons in the family (Sons: 1=yes, 0=no), the sex of the respondent (*Woman*: 1=Yes, 0= Otherwise), the education level of the subject measured as years of school, if he/she is a worker (Worker: 1=Yes, 0= Otherwise), the number of household components (House), the citizenship of the subject (Italian: 1=Yes, 0= Otherwise), if the subject meets friends during leisure time at least once a week (Friends: 1=Yes, 0= Otherwise), if the subject has non-cohabiting children (Non-cohabiting children: 1=Yes, 0= Otherwise), the judgment about the economic resources (economics situation: 1= excellent or adequate, 0= otherwise), the time devoted to unpaid work (Unpaid work), the time devoted to socializing activities (Socializing), if the subject fell stressed (Stress: 1=yes; 0= No) and finally a dummy variable that identifies if the subject is more or less traditional about the gender and familistic attitudes (Egalitarian: 1=Yes, 0= Otherwise).

This last variable was constructed performing a clustering procedure (Caltabiano et al., 2016) using the following five items: 1)It is better for the family that man devotes himself mainly to economic needs, and the woman dedicates herself to the care of the home; 2) If both partners work full-time, the man must perform the same amount of housework as the woman; 3) If both parents work and the child gets sick, parents should take turns to stay at home and take care of the child; 4) Men perform domestic tasks just as well as women; 5) Men perform childcare just as well as women.

The degree of agreement is expressed by the interviewees on a four-item scale from 1) strongly agree to 4) strongly disagree. For the first question item scale was reversed.

A K-means clustering's algorithm is used and the Calinski–Harabasz pseudo-*F* test is applied to determine the optimal number of clusters (2 cluster, F-*test* =6567.32). Moreover, before to implement the clustering procedure, we have tested the reliability, or internal consistency of the items with a specific Cronbach'alpha test and we obtain a value of 0.66 (Cronbach, 1951).

Finally, performing our clustering procedure, we obtain the division of the subjects in two groups. One group formed by subject that are more agree with the statements and generally are characterized by a more egalitarian attitude. A second group includes the subjects that agree to the gender and familistic ideology. We use these results to construct the dummy variable "Egalitarian" equal to one if the subject belongs to the group of partners with more egalitarian attitudes.

Results

In the first step of our analysis we have estimated the outcome through an OLS model to understand if the regression coefficient vector, β, differed systematically between married and divorced people. We have estimated the same model considering not only the full sample but also splitting the sample by gender. In Table 2 we report the results of the OLS estimates of the life satisfaction score of both male and female partners distinguishing by their marital status (married or divorced). In general, the perceived well-being decreases for aged subject and increases for subjects with egalitarian attitudes. In particular, egalitarian attitudes influence positively more the well-being of married women than the divorced one's. Moreover, the education level and the Italian citizenship influence positively the overall life satisfaction, as well as having a good friendship network on which to rely and meet friends. Only for divorced women these last two factors do not seem to be relevant.

Tab.2 Overall life satisfaction: OLS Estimation results by marital status and gender

Overall life satisfaction	All				Woman				Man			
	Married		Divorced		Married		Divorced		Married		Divorced	
	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p	Coeff.	p
Woman	0.05		0.10									
Age: 35-44	-0.17	***	-0.06		-0.13	*	-0.06		-0.19	*	-0.08	
45-54	-0.33	***	-0.23		-0.30	***	-0.27		-0.35	***	-0.22	
55-64	-0.37	***	-0.18		-0.42	***	-0.25		-0.26	**	-0.12	
Education (years of school)	0.01	***	0.03	**	0.01	**	0.03	*	0.01	*	0.02	
South and Islands	-0.09	***	-0.17	*	-0.07		-0.22	*	-0.13	**	-0.12	
Number of household components	0.04	**	0.03		0.04	*	0.01		0.03		0.06	
Italian	0.28	***	0.44	***	0.23	***	0.36	**	0.32	***	0.63	***
Worker	0.22	***	0.32	***	0.09	*	0.29	**	0.47	***	0.39	**
Support	0.24	***	0.28	**	0.24	***	0.29	*	0.23	***	0.28	*
Non-cohabiting children (Yes)	0.06		0.05		0.06		0.14		0.07		-0.09	
Economic situation (excellent or adequate)	0.66	***	0.77	***	0.60	***	0.71	***	0.71	***	0.84	***
Friends	0.21	***	0.20	**	0.25	***	0.12		0.18	***	0.31	**
Egalitarian	0.16	***	0.18	**	0.17	***	0.08		0.18	***	0.34	***
Stress	0.97	***	1.21	***	0.99	***	1.27	***	0.93	***	1.13	***
Unpaid work	0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00		0.00	
Socializing	0.001	***	0.001		0.001	***	0.001		0.001	*	0.001	
Constant	5.13	***	3.87	***	5.24	***	4.07	***	4.97	***	3.62	***
N	13509		2453		7122		1450		6387		1003	
R²	0.16		0.21		0.16		0.20		0.17		0.24	

Note: p.value: *** <0.0001; ** < 0.01; * < 0.05.

In the second step of our analysis we have estimated of the overall life satisfaction differentials using the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition technique (three-fold), with divorced people's life satisfaction structure as reference point (eq.1). The results of the B.O. decomposition (Tab. 3), show that in general married or cohabiting people reported a significantly greater degree of overall life satisfaction (7.12) than did divorced or separated (6.50). Splitting the full sample by gender, the results do not change, also if the subgroup of divorced women reported the lowest level of satisfaction.

Table 3 Estimation results of the three-fold decomposition

Overall Life Satisfaction	Full sample			Women			Men		
	Coef.	Std. Err.	p	Coef.	Std. Err.	p	Coef.	Std. Err.	p
Overall									
Group_1: Married or cohabiting	7.12	0.01	***	7.13	0.02	***	7.12	0.02	***
Group_2: Divorced or separated	6.50	0.04	***	6.47	0.05	***	6.55	0.05	***
Difference	0.62	0.04	***	0.66	0.05	***	0.57	0.06	***
Endowments	0.12	0.05	*	0.14	0.06	*	0.13	0.08	
Coefficients	0.51	0.04	***	0.49	0.05	***	0.54	0.06	***
Interaction	0.00	0.05		0.03	0.06		-0.10	0.09	

Note: p.value: *** <0.0001; ** < 0.01; * < 0.05.

From the results of the decomposition, the "coefficients" component prevails on the "endowment" component, this implies that the effect of observed socio-economic covariates is less relevant than the effect of latent factors that modify the structural differences between the two groups of married and divorced subjects, respectively. With regard to the endowment component, i.e. the effect on well-being of socio-economic and cultural characteristics of each subject, time devoted to socialization and egalitarian attitudes of the subjects influence positively the well-being, especially of married women. Economic condition of the household and education level affect also positively life satisfaction of both men and women. This circumstance supports the idea that by influencing the covariates through ad hoc policies, we can reduce over

time both the wellbeing differential between groups so as the perceived dissatisfaction of the subjects belonging to the less-endowed group.

Conclusion

Several studies found that divorce led to an increase in depressive affect and a decline in well-being (Menaghan and Lieberman, 1986) and the importance of the perceived social support as an indirect important resource that influence the psychological well-being of people after divorce (Kołodziej-Zaleska and Przybyła-Basista, 2016)

Also our results suggest that the gap in the level of satisfaction due to the different marital status, depends, in a prominent manner, by the condition of being divorced. This gap could be depending also by latent factors such as drive to psychological distress, for the which could be necessary implement the supporting policy and practice designs that ultimately will promote wellness for divorced people.

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