

The meaning of cohabitation and marriage across European societies

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Extended abstract

The spectacular increase of cohabitation during recent decades is one of the most striking characteristics of the demographic change in family life that modern societies have experienced since “the golden age of marriage” in the 1960s. Before then, unmarried cohabitation was a rare phenomenon, but nowadays, the majority of Europeans is cohabiting at some stage of their life course (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2005). Although cohabitation has become a common part of the union formation process, relatively little is known about the meaning that cohabitants attach to their relationship and how this varies across countries. This paper aims at grasping the meaning of cohabitation across different socio-cultural contexts. We define the “meaning of the relationship” as the intentions and expectations that people have about their relationship, such as their intentions to marry and their expectations about chances of separation. Intentions to marry and expectations about the stability of the relationship reveal cohabiting partners’ commitment. We argue that these intentions and expectations are at the heart of the difference between marriage and cohabitation. Moreover, the meaning of the relationship tells us something about the role of the union for the individual life course as well as its function in the course of an intimate relationship. We therefore look at variation among cohabiters in terms of their marital intentions and perceived stability and how this heterogeneity differs across countries. Cross-national differences in the heterogeneity among cohabiters not only show individual variation, but also how the meaning of cohabitation differs across countries (Seltzer, 2004). For instance, in some countries most cohabitants may have plans to marry and perceive of high relationship stability, whereas in other countries most cohabiters may have no plans and report a low relationship stability – signifying that in the former countries cohabiters are more committed to their partner than in the latter ones. This will be the first study to examine cohabiters’ intentions and expectations from a cross-national perspective. Besides looking at intentions and expectations of cohabiters, we also examine the meaning of marriage. Although it is usually assumed that married couples are more committed than cohabiters, we contend that this may vary across individuals and across countries as well. No research has yet examined such variation among married couples. We examine the individual and cross-national variation among married couples by looking at their expectations about relationship stability and whether marriage is meant to be for ever. For both cohabiting and married couples we will also explore basic social-demographic correlates of commitment and how these vary across countries.

Previous research and contributions

Family scholars have argued that the most important difference between marriage and cohabitation - besides legal differences - is the shorter time horizon of cohabitation (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Waite & Gallagher, 2000): cohabitants are believed to be less committed to their partner and the relationship than married couples. The many differences that are observed between marriage and cohabitation, for example with respect to their relationship stability, quality and internal arrangements (Seltzer, 2004; Smock, 2000) are believed to arise in part from differences in commitment. Other reasons why marriage differs from cohabitation, may be that different kinds of people select themselves into marriage versus cohabitation or the legal differences between marriage and cohabitation.

Prior studies suggest three possibilities how cohabitants “make sense” of their relationship. First, cohabitation might be a prelude to marriage (Manting, 1996; Smock, 2000). Hence, cohabitation is viewed as a transitory stage in the union formation process, a so-called “trial marriage”, in which information about the partner as a potential spouse is collected based on which the decision to either marry or break-up will be made. Second, cohabitation can be viewed as a permanent alternative to marriage for those who have no intentions to marry their partner but who are nevertheless very committed to their partner (Prinz, 1995). This vision can be explained by increased individualization with its emphasis on autonomy, flexibility and independence. In this context, authors speak of the emergence of “pure” relationships (Giddens, 1992) or “liquid love” (Bauman, 2003). A third view on the meaning of cohabitation is to view it as an alternative to being single (Rindfuss & Vandenhoevel, 1990). It “represents an extension of the dating and sexual relationships and its ideology does not

include permanence” (Smock 2000: 8). This last view implies the lowest commitment among cohabitants. The second view implies the most commitment, and the first is somewhere in between.

Previous research suggests that levels of commitment among cohabiters are likely to vary across countries and individuals. Studies for example show that European countries differ in the prevalence of cohabitation but also in its timing, duration and stability (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). Other studies have come up with typologies of cohabitants, which are most often based on their demographic behavior, such as whether there are children born in cohabitation or whether the partners had been married before (Berrington, 2004; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Kiernan & Estaugh, 1993). For example, Heuveline and Timberlake (2005) propose a typology distinguishing six ideal types of cohabitation for its role in the family formation process and examine how this typology applies to four different countries. However, we believe that typologies based on fertility decisions and other demographic behavior are of limited use in understanding the differences in the meaning of cohabitation across countries, because differences in behavior are *the result* of differences in the meaning of cohabitation. Drawing typologies from indicators that describe the nature of cohabitation, thus intentions, expectations and attitudes as well as describing the background characteristics of cohabiting individuals will shed light on what cohabitation actually means in different contemporary societies. So far, there are only a few studies that look at cohabiters’ intentions and expectations, mostly by looking at people’s marital intentions, however none of them is comparative in nature (Brown & Booth, 1996; Mynarska & Bernardi, 2007; Poortman & Mills, 2008; Syltevik, 2010). We contribute to the literature by studying several indicators of commitment among cohabitants in different Western and Eastern European countries.

Although some scholars have argued that the meaning of marriage may have changed over time (Cherlin, 2004), marriage is commonly assumed to be less heterogeneous than cohabitation. Only a few studies make a distinction within the group of married couples, and if they do, they distinguish between those who did and did not cohabit before marriage (Demaris & Rao, 1992; Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Poortman & Mills, 2008). It may however be that not all married couples are very committed to their partner and the extent to which married couples do may vary across countries as well. We contribute to the literature by exploring this possibility as well, by looking at the expectations of married couples in different countries and their correlates.

Research Questions

Our aim is to study heterogeneity among cohabitants and married persons from a comparative perspective. Therefore, we formulate the following research questions:

1. Do cohabitants and married couples differ with regard to commitment towards the partner and does this vary across different countries?

Commitment is captured by people’s intentions, expectations and attitudes about their relationship. Previous national studies have shown that entry into cohabitation and marriage as well as commitment towards the relationship is influenced by demographical, cultural and life course related variables (Wiik et al. 2009; Smock, 2000). These could be for instance age, religiosity, partnership duration, previous marriage, presence of children. We therefore ask:

2. What are the correlates of different levels of commitment among cohabiters and married couples and do these differ across countries?

We will explore which characteristics are associated with the level of commitment among cohabiters and married persons. We focus on basic social-demographic characteristics: age, gender, education, union duration, presence of children, first or second union and religiosity. The associations will tell us something about selection into different types of cohabitation and marriage (e.g., religiosity, education) and their place and function in the life course (e.g., duration, children, union order), and how these patterns differ across countries.

Data and Methodology

Using data from ten national Gender and Generation Surveys (GGS 2005/2006) characterised by different levels of cohabitation (i.e., Georgia, Romania, Hungary, the Russian Federation, Bulgaria, France, Netherlands, Germany, a German- Turkish subsample of the German GGS and Norway) we

examine levels of commitment among cohabiting and married couples. The Generations and Gender Programme (GGP) is a system of national GGS-surveys and contextual databases, which include several Eastern European countries for which elsewhere no data on cohabitation are available. The analysis is based on a sample of 59.449 married and 9.839 cohabiting respondents.

Measurements

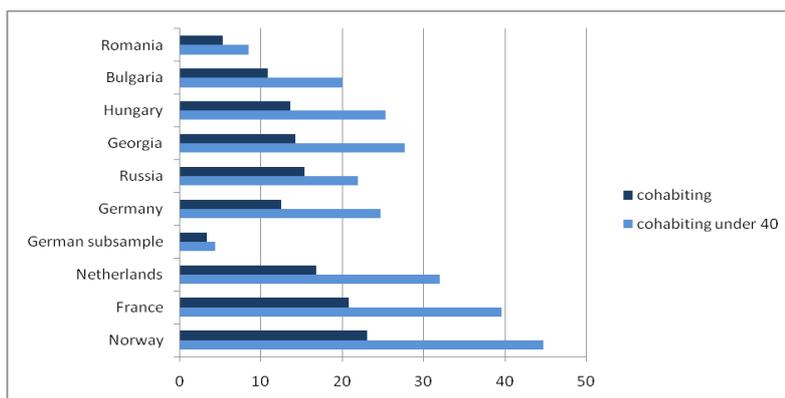
Commitment among cohabitants is measured in two ways. First, information about *marital intentions* is collected because they mirror the individual attachment to the partner and the perceived long-term horizon of the relationship. Respondents in an intimate relationship (be it cohabiting or not) have been asked whether they intend to marry their partner within the next three years. Secondly, the GGS measures *the perceived relationship stability*. Respondents with a partner have been asked whether or not they considered a separation from their partner in the last 12 months. This last item is also used to measure commitment among married respondents. In addition, their commitment is measured by their agreement with the statement whether *marriage is meant to be forever* (ranging from 1 to 5).

Preliminary descriptive results

Prevalence of cohabitation across Europe

European countries vary a lot in the prevalence of cohabitation. Figure 1 shows the proportion of cohabitants among all individuals in a co-resident relationships as well as the proportion of cohabitants who are younger than 40 years old.

Figure 1: Proportion of cohabitants (under the age of 40) among all respondents in co-resident relationships across countries



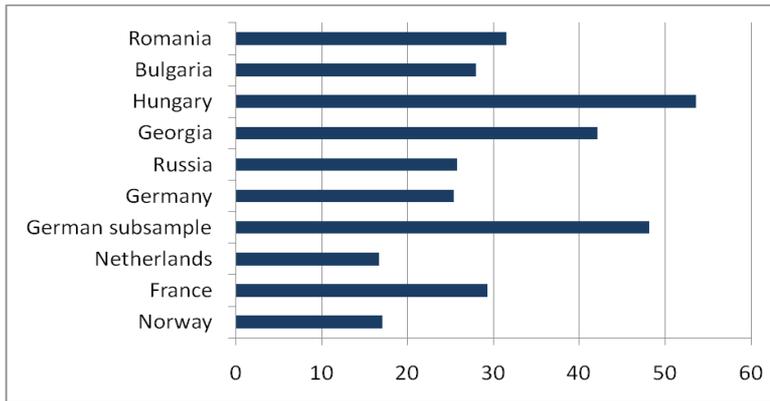
Source: Generations and Gender Surveys, Wave 1, calculated by the authors

Whereas cohabitation is a quite rare phenomenon in Romania where 5 % of all co-resident unions are cohabiting relationships, unmarried cohabitation is the union type of almost one quarter of all co-resident couples in Norway. Cohabitation is more prevalent among co-resident individuals who are younger than 40 years old. With the exception of Romania, Russia and the German- Turkish subsample, the proportion of cohabitants under 40 years old is (almost) twice as large and varies between 20 percent in Bulgaria and almost every second co-resident relationship in Norway.

Marital intentions of cohabitants across Europe

Marital intentions capture the commitment towards the partner. The absence of marital intentions can have three reasons: First, a lack of interest in marriage for ideological reasons that oppose marriage. Second, the current partner is considered to be not a feasible marriage partner although one is generally marriage- minded. Third, one is too young to think about marriage or the relationship is of too short duration that marriage is considered. Figure 2 shows the proportion of cohabitants who intend to marry their partner within the next three years.

Figure 2: Proportion of cohabitants with intentions to marry across countries



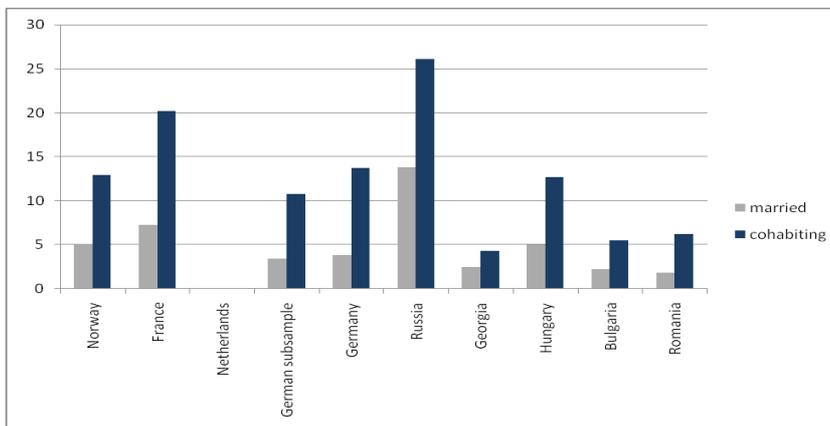
Source: Generations and Gender Surveys, Wave 1, calculated by the authors

Marital intentions are more frequent among cohabitants in Eastern Europe. For a large number of cohabitants in these countries, cohabitation seems to be a stage in the marriage process. The remarkable low proportion of cohabitants with plans to marry in the Netherlands and Norway could indicate either very low commitment among cohabitants or high commitment if they perceive their cohabiting union as a permanent alternative to marriage, because marital intentions do not only reflect commitment to the partner but may also mirror attitudes towards marriage in general. Therefore, we need only to disentangle the commitment to the current relationship from attitudes towards the institution of marriage. We do so by looking at subjective relationship stability (see below).

Subjective Relationship Stability

Someone who considers breaking up with his/her partner is less committed to this relationship than someone who does not think about separation. Figure 3 shows the proportion of cohabitants and spouses who report to have thought about breaking up with their partner across countries.

Figure 3: Proportion of cohabitants and married respondents who have thought about separation from their partner in the previous 12 months



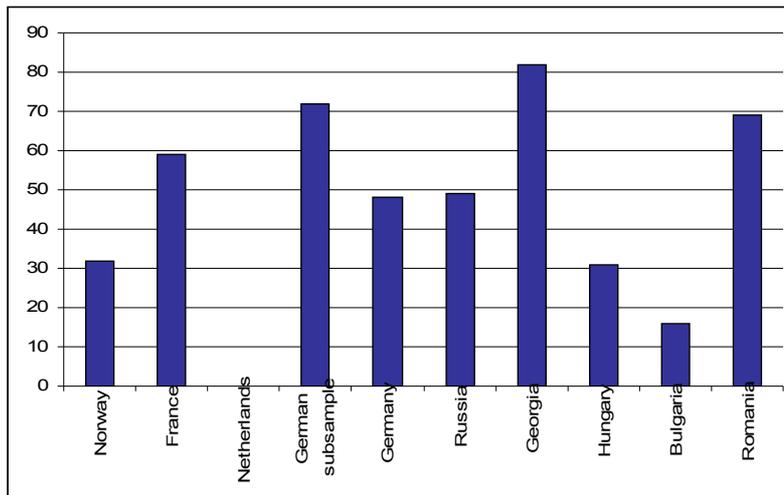
Source: Generations and Gender Surveys, Wave 1, calculated by the authors (Dutch GGS does not provide information about break up thoughts)

In all countries, cohabitants report more frequently than married respondents that they have thought about separation. However, the prevalence of break-up thoughts among cohabitants differs also remarkably across countries. In countries like Norway, France and Germany, where cohabitation is very common, a higher proportion of cohabitants report having considered a separation from the partner. In Georgia, Bulgaria and Romania this is true for a smaller proportion of cohabitants. Russia is an exceptional case since an outstanding high number of both married and cohabiting respondents report low relationship stability compared to the other countries. This indicates that relationships per se are less stable in Russia than in other countries. Not reported in this graph is that cohabitants who intend to marry differ much less (in Norway but also in Georgia there is hardly any difference) from married couples than their counterparts without marriage plans.

Permanence of marriage

Figure 4 shows that spouses across countries differ in their attitudes towards the permanence of marriage. In Georgia and Romania where marriage norms are strong and divorce rates are low, spouses agree more often that marriage is meant to be forever. In Russia, Hungary and Bulgaria where marriage norms are high and divorce rates are high as well, respondents are more reluctant to agree that marriage should never be ended. In countries where marriage norms are low the decision to marry might be a more committed one than in a context where everyone marries. Therefore, French spouses agree more remarkable frequently that marriage should be permanent.

Figure 4: Proportion of married individuals that agree with the statement: "Marriage is a lifelong relationship and should never be ended."



Source: Generations and Gender Surveys, Wave 1, calculated by the authors (Dutch GGS does not provide information about the agreement towards this statement)

Brief outline of further research

In further analyses, we will develop a typology of cohabitants and married persons based on their intentions and expectations about their relationship. We are going to build the typology along two dimensions of commitment: Cohabitants are going to be differentiated by their marital intentions and the reported relationship stability. Spouses are distinguished by the evaluation of their marriage as stable and by their opinion about the permanence of marriage in general. It will be tested which individual characteristics and life course related events shape the likelihood to be categorized in one of the cohabitation and marriage types, respectively.

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