

To marry or to separate.

The association between meaning of cohabitation and relationship transitions of cohabiters
in different European countries

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Abstract

We propose a typology of different meanings of cohabitation based on cohabiters’ attitudes towards marriage and their intentions to marry. We distinguish five types of cohabitation: cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, because one is not ready yet to marry, as a rejection of marriage, and because one considers marriage irrelevant. Finally, there is a group of cohabiters who plan to marry despite their unfavorable opinion about marriage and we call them conformists. We examine whether the types of cohabitation are differently associated with subsequent marriage and separation in (Austria), France, Germany and Hungary. Using data (N= 2,316) from the Generations and Gender Surveys as well as the German family panel (Pairfam) and a supplementary sample (DemoDiff), we find that cohabiters constitute a heterogeneous group. Competing risk analyses show that cohabiters who consider cohabitation a prelude to marriage or are classified as conformists are indeed most likely to marry and least likely to separate. Cohabiters who refuse marriage or consider it to be irrelevant are least likely to marry but also most likely to dissolve their union. This is a surprising finding as the more permanent types of cohabitation are usually characterized as stable and committed unions. Cohabiters who are not ready yet to marry lie in between both extremes. This suggests on the one hand that they consider marriage important but not necessarily at this point in time and on the other hand that they consist of an overrepresentation of bad matches, hence unions that will rather dissolve than proceed to marriage. Preliminary analyses on cross-national variation suggest that the composition of meanings of cohabitation differs across countries and might be related to the societal diffusion of cohabitation. Moreover, separate country analyses suggest that the meanings of cohabitation are similarly associated with relationship transitions across Europe.

Why studying the link between meaning of cohabitation and the transition to marriage and separation from a comparative perspective?

Nowadays, the majority of young adults experience one or more spells of cohabitation, and cohabitation increasingly takes over functions that were traditionally reserved for marriage, most notably childbearing (Kiernan, 2001; Raley, 2001; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008; Wu, Bumpass & Musick, 2001). This has fueled the scientific debate on the role of cohabitation in the union formation process. This debate has often circled around the question whether cohabitation can be understood as a stage in the marriage process or as an alternative to marriage. Prior research has found that most cohabiters intend to marry (Bumpass, Sweet & Cherlin, 1991; Guzzo, 2009) and do so within a limited period of time (Brown, 2003; Moors & Bernhardt, 2009). Marriage remains an important goal in the lives of many people and is postponed rather than foregone altogether (Noack, Bernhardt & Wiik, 2013). Others have argued that cohabitation challenges the hegemony of the legal and social institution of marriage as it increasingly enters the sphere of reproduction (Smock, 2000). Marriage seems increasingly decoupled from the childbearing process which suggests that cohabitation becomes more relevant as a permanent alternative to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; Perelli-Harris, Kreyenfeld, Sigle-Rushton, Keizer, Lappegard, Jasilioniene, Berghammer & Di Giulio, 2012).

Many studies on cohabitation treated cohabitation as a homogeneous phenomenon. In this study, however, we started from the assumption that cohabitation may mean a different thing to different people. The ways in which cohabiters conceptualize their union and attach meaning to it might explain why some cohabiters proceed to marriage whereas others break up. Therefore, this study examined whether the meaning cohabiters attach to their union is related to how they leave these unions — by marrying or separating. Our first research question is: Is the meaning that cohabiters attach to their union associated with the transition to marriage and separation, and if so, how do the various meanings of cohabitation differ from each other?

We are interested in studying contextual variation in the meanings of cohabitation and their association with relationship transitions. The meaning that cohabiters attach to their union as well as its association with subsequent marriage or separation may depend on the social and cultural context. In countries where cohabitation is widespread, cohabitation might be the normative start of a union, hence selectivity into cohabitation is low. Consequently, the group of cohabiters is very diverse in terms of levels of commitment, the meaning of cohabitation and the

expectations about marriage and separation. Moreover, in these countries, cohabiters experience a higher degree of freedom to make relationship choices in accordance with their individual attitudes towards marriage. For instance, viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage might be associated with lower transitions to marriage in contexts where normative pressure to marry is low or absent. If virtually every union starts as unmarried cohabitation the likelihood of union dissolution might increase and more strongly linked to particular types of cohabitation. Our second research question therefore is: Do cohabiters in different European countries attach different meanings to cohabitation, and does the association between the meaning of cohabitation and the transition to marriage and separation differ across Europe?

The meaning of cohabitation — Proposing a cohabitation typology

Two prominent views on cohabitation have been put forward in the literature: cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. According to the first perspective, cohabitation has become a normative intermediate step on the way to marriage, which remains a highly valued institution. Cohabitation may be a transitory stage in the marriage process for three different reasons (Hiekel, Liefbroer & Poortman, 2012). First, cohabitation can be considered a form of engagement or the last phase of courtship, and thus be viewed as a prelude to marriage in which plans to get married are present (Bianchi & Casper, 2000; Brown & Booth, 1996). It is expected that cohabiters will marry within a relatively short period of time (Brown, 2003; Moors & Bernhardt, 2009).

Second, cohabiters – although envisaging marrying one day - might not feel ready yet to marry. Some cohabiters may want to test their relationship first and find out whether the dating partner is a suitable potential spouse (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Klijzing, 1992; Seltzer, 2004). Cohabitation is then seen as an ideal testing ground for marriage because it offers all the advantages of co-residence without having yet to commit to marital expectations (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg & Waite, 1995) as well as a guarantee of relatively easy way out if the relationship does not work. Others might not feel ready yet to marry because their economic situation prevents them from getting married at this time (Baizán & Martín-García, 2006; Gibson-Davis, 2009; Gibson-Davis, Edin & McLanahan, 2005; Kalmijn, 2011; Kravdal, 1999). High wedding costs might be a reason to postpone marriage (Kravdal, 1997; Manning & Smock, 2002), or

educational enrollment or the absence of job security might be perceived as incompatible with the idea of getting married (Clarkberg, 1999; Oppenheimer, 1988; Oppenheimer, 2003).

Third, cohabiters may hold indifferent or negative attitudes towards the institution of marriage, but still envisage marrying in the future (Hiekel et al., 2012). Institutional theories have stressed the role of social pressure to conform to social norms in explaining the persistence and continued popularity of marriage in contemporary societies (Cherlin, 2004). Cohabiters in this category plan to marry in order to please their family, friends or society in general. In addition, economic theories of marriage have generally portrayed marriage as a rational choice that is pursued when the benefits derived from marriage are higher than the benefits of staying unmarried. These cohabiters thus intend to marry for practical reasons (i.e. taxation laws, child custody laws, etc.) despite their indifferent or negative opinion about the institution of marriage. This group of cohabiters has been labeled “conformists” and has been found to behave very similar to cohabiters viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, for instance in terms of fertility intentions (Hiekel & Castro-Martín, 2013).

The view of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage implies that cohabitation takes over the role and function of the institution of marriage. Instead of as a step on the way to marriage, cohabitation is regarded as an “end in itself”. Two main reasons have been distinguished in the literature. First, cohabiters may reject marriage as a cultural ideal. They might view marriage as an unwarranted interference of the Church or the state in one’s private life or feel otherwise ideologically opposed to the institution of marriage and hence, view cohabitation as a permanent alternative to marriage. They might also view marriage as a bourgeois or outdated institution (Brown & Booth, 1996).

Second, cohabiters may not want to marry because they consider getting marriage as irrelevant. This view does not imply rejection, but rather indifference towards the institution of marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). These couples tend to have neutral attitudes towards the institution of marriage, but they do not perceive any added value of formalizing their relationship. They believe that marriage is “a piece of paper” that would not make any difference for their commitment towards their partner.

In sum, we distinguish five different meanings of cohabitation: cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, as an indication of not being ready yet to marry, as a way to conform, as a refusal of marriage, and cohabitation because marriage is considered irrelevant.

Hypotheses on the association between cohabitation type and relationship transitions

Based on theoretical considerations, we formulate hypotheses on the relationship between different cohabitation types and the propensity to marry or to separate, respectively. We rank the types of cohabitation hierarchically, ranging from the cohabitation type with the highest to the one with the lowest expected likelihood to marry (*Hypothesis 1*) and to separate (*Hypothesis 2*) during the observation period.

The transition to marriage. Cohabitors who view their union as a prelude to marriage are already contemplating marriage. They might thus be most likely to marry relatively quickly. Conformists also plan to marry, but they do not share the positive attitudes with cohabitors viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage. They might be somewhat less likely to marry as their marital intentions are not in accordance with their attitudes towards the institution of marriage. Some of the cohabitors who are not ready yet to marry are in the process of evaluating their relationship and their relationship commitment is thus expected to be on average lower than that of cohabitors in the previous types of cohabitation. Others might still prioritize graduation, consolidation in the labor market or the accession of material prosperity instead of institutionalizing their unions. Therefore, this group might be less likely to transform a cohabiting union into a marriage compared to cohabitors in the prelude to marriage or the conformist group. Cohabitors who refuse the institution of marriage might be very unlikely to transform their union into a marriage as this would contradict their expressed attitudes towards marriage and their lack of intentions to marry. The transition patterns to marriage might be similar for cohabitors who consider marriage irrelevant as they also lack intentions to marry and do not highly value the institution of marriage. It is however interesting to explore differences between both groups because cohabitors who consider marriage irrelevant are less driven by ideological opposition to marriage than cohabitors who reject marriage. In sum, we expect cohabitors who view their union as a prelude to marriage to have the highest risk of marriage, closely followed by conformists and then cohabitors who do not feel ready yet to marry, whereas we expect cohabitors who refuse the institution of marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry to have the lowest risk of marriage (*Hypothesis 1*).

The transition to separation. Among cohabitors who are in the process of testing their relationship, “bad matches” that are particularly fragile might be overrepresented. Furthermore, qualitative research has shown that economic hardship puts a lot of strains on couples, which

increases union instability (Smock, Manning & Porter, 2005). Cohabitors who feel not ready yet to marry therefore might be more likely to dissolve their union than any other type of cohabitation. Cohabitors who refuse the institution of marriage might also reject a bourgeois lifestyle in general, such as a lifelong relationship with one and the same partner. Therefore they might have — although to a lesser extent than the previous group — higher odds to separate than cohabitors who are contemplating marriage. The same might be true for cohabitors who consider marriage irrelevant. Cohabitors who view marriage as a prelude to marriage or who are classified as being conformist may be least likely to separate, because they have concrete plans to institutionalize their union and may already consider exiting their union as very costly. In sum, we expect cohabitors who are not yet ready to marry to have the highest risk of separation, followed by cohabitors who either refuse marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry, whereas we expect cohabitors viewing their union as a prelude to marriage or who are classified as conformists to have the lowest risk of separation (*Hypothesis 2*).

A comparative perspective – Studying cross-national variation

Comparative research has shown a wide cross-European variation in the prevalence and meanings of cohabitation (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011), congruent with cultural explanations of family change. The Theory of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) assumes that new family behaviors, linked to increasing secularization and individualization, generally spread from the Northern European countries to the rest of the developed world (Lesthaeghe, 1995; van de Kaa, 1987). The shift from direct marriage to cohabitation as the dominant pathway to union formation is one central feature of this transition. Cross-national differences in the prevalence and role of cohabitation have been often explained by societies being situated at different stages of the SDT (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; Kiernan, 2002b).

Cohabitation patterns in France, Germany and Hungary for the birth cohort 1971-1980

The author conducted cohort analyses based on data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (2005/2009) to study cohabitation patterns across Europe. Here, findings for three countries are presented: France, Germany and Hungary. In France and Germany, more than 80% of first unions formed by individuals born between 1971 and 1980 started as cohabitation rather than direct marriage. In France, the median duration of these unions was 38 months with the

majority ending in marriage. The median duration of cohabiting unions in Germany is shorter (22 months) but also most likely to be followed by marriage. Across cohorts the prevalence of premarital cohabitation has been rising and the transition to marriage or separation is increasingly delayed. At the same time however, cohabiting unions have become less stable with an increasing proportion of cohabiting unions having ended by separation after five years of union duration. This increase however is smaller than the decrease in the transition to marriage resulting in overall longer durations of cohabiting unions.

In Hungary, around 60% of first unions of the birth cohort 1971-1980 have started as unmarried cohabitation. The median duration of these unions is similar to Germany just above 20 months and the proportion married after five years of union duration comparable to France, around 25 percent. The proportion of dissolved cohabiting unions after five years of duration is higher in Hungary than in Germany and France.

Contextual variation in the association between meaning of cohabitation and relationship transitions

- *The transition to marriage*

Cohabitation has been found to be increasingly favored as a normative step in the transition to marriage (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010). In Scandinavian countries, for instance, a marriage that is not preceded by cohabitation constitutes a marginal behavior that is practiced almost exclusively by individuals with particular religious convictions (Hoem & Hoem, 1988). Moreover, unmarried cohabitation is more socially approved and legally protected in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012; Pongracz & Spéder, 2008). In contexts where cohabitation is not that common, cohabitation will constitute a deviant behavior. In such a context, cohabiters are likely to be a selective group of individuals. Consequently, the meanings attached to cohabitation might differ between contexts in which many people cohabit and contexts where cohabitation is marginal (Kiernan, 2002a). Western European cohabiters are expected to more frequently regard their union as an alternative to marriage—either for ideological reservations or because they see no added value in getting married—or a trial marriage, whereas Eastern European cohabiters are expected to more frequently view their union as a *prelude to marriage* or be classified as *conformists*, hence planning to marry despite less positive attitudes towards the institution of marriage (*Hypothesis 3a*).

The overall prevalence of cohabitation and the social acceptance of childbearing outside marriage might influence which types of cohabitation are most strongly associated with the transition to marriage. In Western Europe, cohabitation is largely diffused, childbearing within cohabitation commonplace, and norms to get married are low, the transition to marry might not only be lower overall but particularly low for cohabiters who express ideological reservations towards marriage. Eastern European cohabiters might not only be more likely to enter cohabitation with the idea that cohabitation is inferior to marriage but also to quicker move towards marriage, also because in the context they live in, marriage is strongly preferred (*Hypothesis 3b*).

- *The transition to separation*

Compared to the transition to marriage, it is less straightforward to formulate hypotheses on cross-national variation in the link between meaning of cohabitation and union dissolution. In Western Europe where cohabitation has become the normative start of a union, the level of interpersonal commitment within cohabitation is expected to vary larger across the cohabiting population, which consequently, will contain more “bad matches” that are more likely to separate. We could imagine that those cohabiting unions that are not targeted at marriage, hence, viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage are more vulnerable in Eastern Europe where cohabitation is marginal and norms to get married are stronger. This might be due to a stronger selection into these types of unions or the experience of being in a cohabitation type that is socially and normatively disapproved (*Hypothesis 3c*).

Data

The Generations and Gender Survey (*GG5*) is a set of comparative surveys of a nationally representative sample of the 18-79 year old resident population in each of the participating countries (Vikat et al. 2007). To date, harmonized Wave 1 data collected between 2004 and 2009 are available for 15 countries. To date, for five countries Wave 2 data are available: Bulgaria, France, Georgia, Germany and The Netherlands. The evaluation of the data however revealed some problems for the kind of analyses we are aiming to conduct. Bulgaria and Georgia exhibit not only a small number of cohabiters at Wave 1 but particularly low numbers of relationship transitions between the two waves (less than 20 marriage and separations per country!). The Dutch data are lacking an important indicator for the cohabitation typology that we propose.

Attitudes towards the institution of marriage are not measured. Finally, Germany suffers from a remarkable panel attrition rate of around 70% between Wave 1 and Wave 2. In the case of Germany, we make therefore use of four waves of the German family panel “Panel analysis of intimate relationships and family dynamics” (*Pairfam*) (Nauck, Brüderl, Huinink & Walper, 2012) and its supplementary study “Demographic differences in the life course dynamics in Eastern and Western Germany” (*DemoDiff*). *Pairfam*, conducted annually since 2008/2009, is a national sample of the German population (Eastern and Western Germany) that is representative of three birth cohorts: 1971-1973, 1981-1983, and 1991-1993 (Huinink, Brüderl, Nauck, Walper, Castiglioni & Feldhaus, 2011). We additionally used data from the study “Demographic differences in life course dynamics in Eastern and Western Germany” (*DemoDiff*) that has been conceptualized as a supplementary study to the German family panel and utilizes a largely identical set of instruments. The first wave of *DemoDiff* was launched one year after the first wave of *Pairfam* and adds 1,489 respondents living in former East Germany to the two oldest *Pairfam* cohorts. At the time when this study was prepared, the *DemoDiff* data was only available for three waves (Kreyenfeld, Walke, Salzburger, Schnorr, Bastin & Kuhnt, 2013). At the EPC 2014, we will present analyses for at least Austria, France, Germany, and Hungary. In the present extended abstract, we present preliminary analyses for France, Germany and Hungary. *Pairfam* and GGS data do not only cover different age groups but also exhibit different years of the data collection of the first wave: 2005 in France and 2008/09 in Germany. In order to compare findings from *Pairfam* and GGS data, we therefore study men and women aged 18 to 39 at the moment of first data collection who —at the moment of the first interview— were living together with a partner of opposite sex to whom they were not married. Our total analytical sample encompasses n=1,258 German, n=542 French and n=516 Hungarian individuals who we follow over a period of 36 months (GGS) and on average 26 months (*Pairfam*) in order to examine their relationship transitions from cohabitation.

Measurements

Core variables of meaning of cohabitation. Our main independent variable is a typology, constructed by using two indicators, namely (1) attitudes towards the institution of marriage and (2) intentions to marry. By doing so we, we build on previous work (Hiekel et al., 2012). The first indicator used to unravel the different types of cohabitation is how cohabiters think about

the social institution of marriage. The attitude that cohabiters hold towards the institution of marriage is likely to be intertwined with how important it might be for them to get married or, in other words, how they conceptualize their own cohabitating union in relation to marriage. Cohabiters who do not value the institution of marriage might be less likely themselves to make the transition to marriage than those who are in favor of marriage. In Pairfam, respondents have been asked to what extent they personally agree or disagree with the statement “You should get married if you permanently live with your partner”. In the GGS, the corresponding statement was “Marriage is an outdated institution”. In both questionnaires, the level of (dis)agreement was measured with a 5-point scale that ranges from 1=disagree completely to 5=agree completely and the additional answer category “don’t know”. Respondents with values 1 or 2 are classified as disagreeing that marriage is an important social institution. Respondents with a value 4 or 5 are considered to consider marriage an important social institution and respondents with a value 3 or “don’t know” are classified as being indifferent in their opinion about marriage.

The second indicator used to distinguish different types of cohabitation is the intention to get married in the near future. Cohabiters with intentions to marry have been found to be four times as likely to actually marry compared to cohabiters without such intentions (Manning & Smock, 2002). The absence of intentions to marry can mean different things: someone is not ready yet to marry, ideologically refuses marriage or does not consider marriage to be relevant. In Pairfam, cohabiters were asked: “Are you and [name of partner] planning to get married within the next 12 months?” In the GGS, respondents were asked about marriage plans within three years. Respondents who answer “yes, definitely” and “yes, perhaps” are considered to have marriage plans. Those who responded “no”, “probably not” and “no, definitely not” as well as those answering “don’t know” and “we haven’t discussed that yet” are considered not having intentions to marry. An overview of the distribution of the indicators can be found in the annex of this paper, Table A.

By combining these two indicators, we can distinguish five types of cohabiters as illustrated in Table 1: Cohabiters who hold positive attitudes towards the institution of marriage and who intend to marry are classified as viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage. Cohabiters who agree that marriage is important but who do not intend to marry in the near future are considered not being ready yet to marry. Our data does not allow an empirical distinction between those who are not ready yet because they view cohabitation as a trial

marriage and those who feel economic barriers to marry. Cohabitors who hold indifferent or negative attitudes towards marriage but nevertheless report intentions to marry are classified as conformists. Cohabitors with negative attitudes towards marriage who do not intend to marry are classified as rejecting the institution of marriage. Finally, those who hold an indifferent attitude towards marriage and do not intend to marry are considered as viewing marriage as being irrelevant.

Table 1: A typology of different meanings of cohabitation based on two indicators

	positive attitudes towards marriage	intentions to marry
prelude to marriage	Yes	yes
not ready to marry	Yes	no
Conformist	no, undecided	yes
refusal of marriage	no	no
marriage is irrelevant	Undecided	no

Control variables. To avoid a spurious relationship between our explanatory variable and the transition to marriage and separation, we controlled for several characteristics: union duration, age at union formation, educational attainment, employment, gender, prior marriage, and child(ren) with current partner. Union duration, age and the presence of children were time-varying covariates and measured monthly. All other characteristics were time-constant. Union duration was measured in months since the couple started living together and was updated monthly and mean-centered. The age in years at union formation might influence the timing of the transition to marriage and separation, independent from union duration given age norms related to family transitions (Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). The level of educational attainment was generated based on the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 97 (UNESCO, 2006). We distinguish three levels: low, medium, and high. The first category groups people with primary and lower secondary education, the second category comprises upper secondary and post-secondary non-university education and the third category includes all levels of university education. Regarding employment status, we distinguish between employment, unemployment and non-employment (i.e. inactive) as well as being enrolled in education. We consider those respondents as previously married, who report being legally divorced from a previous partner or (a minority) who are still married to a previous partner. For each biological

child of the respondent, information is collected whether the current partner is the biological parent. We distinguish cohabiters who have at least one joint child with the current partner from respondents who are childless or who have at least one child with a previous partner. An overview of the distribution of the control variables can be found in the annex of this paper, Table A.

Hazard models of marriage and separation

We estimated a discrete time multinomial logistic regression model to investigate the relationship transitions of cohabiters (also known as competing risk analysis). We treat marriage and separation as competing events and as a function of respondents' individual characteristics in a given month. The data are organized as a person-period file (Allison, 1984). The duration (time) variable is included in months since the couple started living together and updated monthly. We consider the start of a union as the appropriate starting point of being at risk of marriage versus separation. Cases are right-censored in the month when the respondent was still cohabiting at the moment of the last interview.

First, we present descriptive findings on the incidence and type of relationship transition. Second, we show results from a multivariate analysis testing the association between meaning of cohabitation and the transition to marriage or separation for each country separately. Effect parameters (expressed as relative risks) indicate the odds ratio of each of the possible transitions (marriage versus separation) as competing risks relative to the reference category, which is the absence of any transition (still cohabiting at end of observation).

Preliminary results

Table 2 shows the distribution of different meanings of cohabitation measured at the first interview and, for each cohabitation type, the proportion that is married, separated or still cohabiting at the end of observation.

Of all 800 relationship transitions that occur during the observation period, the majority are marriages (67%) whereas a minority are separations (33%). Marriage is most frequent among cohabiters who view their union as a prelude to marriage or are classified as being conformist. Cohabiters who either refuse the institution of marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry, most frequently do not undergo any relationship transitions at all, but nevertheless have the highest

incidence of separation, ranging between 14% in Germany and 19% in Hungary. One interesting exception are cohabiters who refuse marriage in France who have a much lower union dissolution rate.

Table 2 Distribution of different meanings of cohabitation at first interview and relationship transition by end of observation

		1 st interview		End of observation							
		Cohabiting		Married		Separated		Cohabiting		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Germany	Prelude to marriage	176	14.0	89	50.6	11	6.3	76	43.2	176	100.0
	Not ready to marry	140	11.1	33	23.6	14	10.0	93	66.4	140	100.0
	Conformist	314	25.0	149	47.5	17	5.4	148	47.1	314	100.0
	Refusal of marriage	409	32.5	40	9.8	58	14.2	311	76.0	409	100.0
	Marriage is not relevant	219	17.4	34	15.5	30	13.7	155	70.8	219	100.0
	Total	1,258	100.0	345	27.4	130	10.3	783	62.2	1,258	100.0
France	Prelude to marriage	155	28.6	54	34.8	8	5.2	93	60.0	155	100.0
	Not ready to marry	138	25.5	15	10.9	13	9.4	110	79.7	138	100.0
	Conformist	68	12.6	17	25.0	0	0.0	51	75.0	68	100.0
	Refusal of marriage	98	18.1	3	3.1	4	4.1	91	92.9	98	100.0
	Marriage is irrelevant	83	15.3	6	7.2	13	15.7	64	77.1	83	100.0
	Total	542	100.0	95	17.5	38	7.0	409	75.5	542	100.0
Hungary	Prelude to marriage	159	30.8	54	34.0	25	15.7	61	54.3	159	100.0
	Not ready to marry	38	7.4	6	15.8	11	29.0	21	55.3	38	100.0
	Conformist	196	38.0	33	16.8	36	18.4	127	64.8	196	100.0
	Refusal of marriage	76	14.7	3	4.0	12	15.8	61	80.3	76	100.0
	Marriage is irrelevant	47	9.1	3	6.4	9	19.2	35	74.5	47	100.0
	Total	516	100.0	99	19.2	93	18.0	324	62.8	516	100.0

Table 3 displays the results from three discrete time multinomial logistic regression models where we examine the association between the meanings of cohabitation and the transition to marriage and separation for the three countries. These models reveal first, that the meaning of cohabitation is clearly associated with the transition to marriage in each of the countries. Taking cohabiters viewing cohabitation as prelude to marriage as the reference group, cohabiters in nearly all of the other types of cohabitation are less likely to make the transition to marriage.

Cohabitors who are classified as conformists do not differ significantly from the reference group in Germany and Hungary but are less likely to marry in France. The Hungarian results, although mirroring the findings for the other countries, do not reach statistical significance which might be explained by the lower number of observations in these cohabitation types. Changing the reference category reveals that cohabiters who refuse the institution of marriage are significantly less likely to marry than cohabiters who do not consider it relevant to get married. We thus find support for Hypothesis 1 that the various meanings of cohabitation are differently associated with the transition to marriage and can be ranked hierarchically. As expected, viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is associated with the highest risk of marriage, followed by conformists and those who are not ready to marry. Viewing cohabitation as a refusal of marriage or considering it irrelevant to marry is associated with the lowest risk of marriage.

Table 3 also illustrates that the meaning of cohabitation is associated with the transition to separation, although the low number of transitions causes some rather strong effects to be statistically not significant. Taking cohabiters who view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage as the reference category, cohabiters in any other type of cohabitation have a higher odds ratio to break up. We thus find some support for Hypothesis 2 on the association between meaning of cohabitation and separation. As expected, “marriage-minded” cohabiters (i.e. prelude to marriage, conformists) are least likely to separate. One exception is France where conformists are more prone to break up than cohabiters in the reference category. Against our expectations, cohabiters who view their union as an alternative to marriage are most prone to break up their relationships in Germany and Hungary. Cohabitors who are not yet ready to marry lie in between these two extremes in Germany but do not differ statistically significantly from any other type of cohabitation. In Hungary, they are most likely to experience a union dissolution. Those rejecting marriage have a higher risk to separate than the prelude-to-marriage group as well as conformists in Germany and Hungary albeit they do not differ from those considering marriage irrelevant. In France, we find no differences between these groups but a very weak but highly significant negative effect of considering marriage irrelevant on separation (low n!)

Adding the control variables has not altered the effect of the typology (not shown). The meanings attached to cohabitation are thus associated with subsequent relationship transitions, net of other covariates that are associated with the transition to marriage and separation. The age at which respondents started to cohabit is marginally positively related to the odds of marriage in

Germany, negative associated in Hungary and in France. Only in France, it is marginally negative associated with the odds of separation. The level of educational attainment shows a positive gradient for marriage and a negative gradient for separation (Hungary is an exception where this effect is positive and statistically significant). The employment status is not associated with either relationship transition in this model with the exception that students have a lower risk to marry in Germany and unemployed or respondents in education are more likely to separate in Hungary. Having been previously married does not have an impact on the transition to marriage or separation. Cohabiting couples with joint children have a lower risk to marry in Germany and Hungary and a lower risk to separate in Hungary. Longer union durations are associated with a slowly decreasing odds ratio of marriage.

Table 3 Discrete-time multinomial logistic regression analysis of the transition to marriage or separation among cohabiting respondents in three European countries, separate analysis, Relative risks

	Germany		France		Hungary	
	marriage	separation	marriage	separation	marriage	separation
Union duration (CDY)	1.05 *	0.99	0.97	0.96	0.86 *	1.08 †
CDY ²	0.97 ***	0.97 **	0.99	1.01	1.00	1.00
CDY ³	1.00 ***	1.00 **	1.00	1.00	1.00	0.99 *
Age at start cohabitation	1.02 †	1.00	0.98	0.92 †	0.95 *	0.98
Education (ref.: Primary education)						
Secondary education	1.42 †	0.65	2.72	0.56	2.44	2.34 *
Higher education	1.46 †	0.59	2.98 †	0.65	4.91 *	3.14 **
Employment (ref.: employed)						
Unemployed/inactive in labor market	0.99	1.03	0.55	0.58	0.52	2.18 *
In education	1.11	0.87	1.26	0.54	1.01	2.51 **
Previously married (ref.: never married)	1.28	0.65	0.71	1.14	1.15	0.71
Joint child(ren) with partner (ref.: no)	0.77 *	0.74	0.83	0.89	0.43 *	0.51 *
Cohabitation typology (ref.: Prelude to marriage)						
Not ready to marry	0.40 ***	1.32	0.28 ***	1.56	0.57	2.03 *
Conformist	0.70 †	0.84	0.20 ***	2.87 *	0.41	1.31
Refusal of marriage	0.14 ***	1.97 **	0.09 ***	0.79	0.31 *	1.30
Marriage is not relevant	0.21 ***	1.71	0.70	0.01 ***	0.59 **	1.23
<i>Constant</i>	0.02 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.02 ***	0.10 ***	0.00 ***

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. † p ≤ 0.1

Discussion

In this study, we examined why some cohabiters marry, whereas others break up their relationships. We aimed at investigating how relationship transitions are influenced by the way in which cohabiters attach meaning to their unions. We were furthermore interested whether the relationship transitions of cohabiters would differ across European countries.

Our first key finding is that cohabiters are a heterogeneous group whose relationship behavior differs markedly. Cohabiters differ in the meaning they attach to their union and the odds of marrying vary accordingly, net of union duration, age, educational attainment, employment situation, union duration, age at start union, prior marriage, and the presence of joint children. Between 20% of Hungarian and about half of the German cohabiters in our sample view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, either because they refuse the institution, which constitutes the largest group, or because they consider it irrelevant to marry. These cohabiters are least likely to marry. But even some of them do marry, suggesting that there might be even incentives for them to legalize their union. A large minority (almost 40 percent) of German and French and the majority (70%) of Hungarian cohabiters are very much oriented towards marriage, either because they consider cohabitation as a prelude to marriage or because they succumb to normative pressure. These are the types of cohabitation that are most likely to marry. Cohabiters who are not ready yet to marry occupy a position in between, suggesting that marriage is relevant in their lives but they are unsure whether the current partner or this particular moment in their life is the right one for proceeding to marriage.

Our second main finding is that the meaning of cohabitation — net of other covariates — is associated with the odds ratio of separation. As expected, cohabiters who view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage or those who are classified as conformists are least likely to break up. The presence of marriage plans express their strong commitment and high costs of leaving the union. We expected cohabiters who were not yet ready to marry to have the highest odds of breaking up. We find evidence for this assumption in the Hungarian data. In Germany and France, although this group has indeed higher odds of separating than the previous two groups, the difference is not statistically significant. Against our expectations, we find cohabiters viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage to have the highest odds of separating in Germany and Hungary, and there is no difference those who consider cohabitation to be an alternative because they ideologically oppose to marriage and those who do so because marriage is considered to be

irrelevant. However, only for the refusal group in Germany (which is a large group) the effect reaches statistical significance. These findings suggest that cohabiters who hold negative attitudes towards the institution of marriage, and are not willing to conform to traditional family expectations, might also be more likely to be weakly committed towards the relationship itself.

We acknowledge a number of limitations of this study. Just as other panel studies that do not follow cohabiters from the start of the union onwards; we cannot effectively address the question of left truncation. Respondents were selected in our sample when they were cohabiting at the time of the first interview. Cohabiters in our sample are therefore to some extent a selective group because cohabiters who are very likely to break up, and cohabiters who quickly move to marriage, are underrepresented in the panel. This could to some extent explain why the group of cohabiters who refuse the institution of marriage is so large in a Germany where marriage is persistently popular and 63% of German men and 69% of German women marry at least once in their lifetime (Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung 2013). To some degree, though, we accommodate for this selectivity by controlling for union duration.

Another limitation concerns the indicators defining our cohabitation typology. The item to measure whether respondents value the institution of marriage or not differs across the data sets. In the Pairfam questionnaire the statement “*You should get married if you permanently live with your partner*” is not as strong as one would want to. Also, we could not distinguish between cohabiters who are not ready to marry because of economic reasons and those who are still uncertain about their partner. However, even though our indicators are suboptimal, our cohabitation typology revealed meaningful differences in union formation behavior between different groups of cohabiters

Overall, this study provides important insights into the role of cohabitation in union formation and dissolution processes. We clearly show that cohabitation means different things to different people and that their relationship behavior varies markedly. In all countries included in this study so far, all of the distinguished types of cohabitation comprise a substantial part of the population. The fact that some cohabiters who oppose the institution of marriage are still marrying suggests that there might be social pressures at work that lead marriage to remain a pretty central element in the family system in contemporary Europe.

To Do

- Including GGS Austria Wave 1 and Wave 2
- Testing Hypothesis 3a, 3b and 3c
- Developing theoretical framework for cross-national comparison

ANNEX

Table A: Distribution of variables

	Germany		France		Hungary	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Indicators for cohabitation typology</i>						
Positive attitudes towards marriage	316	25.1	293	54.1	197	38.2
Indifferent attitudes towards marriage	390	31.0	125	23.1	154	29.8
Negative attitudes towards marriage	552	43.9	124	22.8	165	32.0
Marital intentions within 12 months	768	61.1	223	41.2	355	68.8
<i>Socio-economic characteristics</i>						
Primary/lower secondary education	154	12.2	69	12.7	84	16.3
Upper/post-secondary education	751	59.7	262	48.3	322	62.4
University education	353	28.1	211	38.9	110	21.3
Employed	842	66.9	444	81.9	437	84.7
Unemployed/ not employed	295	23.5	71	13.1	64	12.5
Enrolled in education	121	9.6	27	5.0	15	2.9
<i>Socio-demographic and life course characteristics</i>						
Median cohabitation duration at Wave 1 in years (SD)		3.4 (3.8)		4.6 (5.0)		2.7 (4.6)
Median age at start cohabitation (SD)		25.0 (4.9)		24.0 (4.6)		24.0 (5.2)
Female	684	54.4	327	60.3	299	58.0
Previously married	150	11.9	33	6.1	91	17.6
Joint child(ren) with current partner	455	36.2	279	51.5	189	36.6
Number of observations	1,258		542		516	
Person-months	28,155		17,039		19,357	
GGs (Fr, Hun) Pairfam (D)						

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