

Towards a better understanding of cohabitation: *Insights from focus groups in 10 settings in Europe and Australia*

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The meaning of cohabitation

- What is cohabitation?
 - How do people talk about cohabitation and marriage?
 - Are cohabiting unions the same as marital unions?
 - What are the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation and marriage? Barriers and motivations to marry?
- Is the meaning of cohabitation the same across countries?

Understanding cohabitation

What is it?

- Alternative to marriage
- Prelude to marriage
- Alternative to single

Why did it increase?

- Ideational change: rejection of institutions such as marriage (Lesthaeghe 2010)
- Changes in ideas coupled with increases in uncertainty (e.g. economic) (Perelli-Harris et al 2010, McLanahan 2004, Cherlin 2009)

Motivation for using focus groups

- Survey or official registry data is superficial and only answers certain questions
- Aim of focus groups is to elicit general social norms and perceptions
- Can inform the development of survey questions

Focus groups

Sydney (Ann Evans)	Oslo (Trude Lappegard)
Vienna (Caroline Berghammer)	Rotterdam (Renske Keizer)
Moscow (Olga Isupova)	Warsaw (Monika Mynarska)
Florence (Daniele Vignoli)	Southampton (Ann Berrington)
Rostock (Andreas Klaerner)	Luebeck (Andreas Klaerner)

- Participants aged 25-40
- 8 focus groups in each setting
 - Male/female; high/low education
- 8-10 participants in each focus group; 90 min. long

Standard focus group guideline

- Intro: reasons why fewer people are marrying
- Advantages/disadvantages of marriage and cohabitation
- Motivations for marriage
- Barriers to marriage
- Influence of children
- Role of policies
- How does your country compare to others?
- What is the future of marriage?

Analytic strategy

- Country teams transcribed and coded focus groups in their own language and wrote standard reports in English
- Monika Mynarska and I coded, analyzed, and summarized country reports
- Limitations:
 - Not representative
 - Different levels of interpretation

Unique portrait of cohabitation and marriage

- **Poland:** cohabitation means easy to separate, able to leave at any time
- **Italy:** cohabitation implies low-level commitment, concept of “freedom,”
- **Netherlands:** cohabitation is a test relationship, fewer financial risks, freedom, response to divorce
- **Austria:** life-course perspective: cohabitation is for younger ages, while marriage is a more responsible, mature relationship
- **Western Germany:** cohabitation is a pre-marital stage of life, marriage is a special sign of love
- **Australia:** despite increases in cohabitation, marriage is important
- **United Kingdom:** personal decision whether to marry, but highly educated want to marry before kids, while cohabitation is the norm for lower educated
- **Russia:** issue is about trust, responsibility, and freedom
- **Norway:** not many differences between cohabitation and marriage, but marriage is often about “romance”
- **Eastern Germany:** Low desire for marriage

What have we learned through the country comparisons?

Differences when similarities expected:

- Italy-Poland comparison
 - Religion has different meanings for union formation in different settings

Similarities when differences expected:

- Austria-Western/Eastern Germany:
 - Similar lifecourse perspective

Marriage means commitment

- “100% commitment,” “life-long commitment”
(Australia, UK, Austria, Russia)
- Emotional security (Austria, East and West Germany)
- Love, romance (Norway)
- Other dimensions of safety and security (UK, Poland)
- Public declaration of commitment (UK, Austria, Poland, Norway)
- Church (Italy, low-educated in Netherlands, 3-stage commitment in Russia)
- Overall, cohabitation and marriage differ in the level of commitment

Other dimensions of commitment

- Fear of commitment, especially by men (nearly everywhere)
- Linked to increase in divorce (Netherlands, Austria, Germany)
- Other factors (childbearing, mortgage) more important sign of commitment (UK and Netherlands, but especially Norway)
- Ideological cohabitators (Russia, Italy, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Australia), but usually a minority
- Marriage-like partnerships substituted for marriage with little difference in commitment (Eastern Germany)

Cohabitation is a testing ground

- Seen as an advantage to avoid divorce
 - “Try before you buy” (Australia, UK) Test driving a car (Netherlands)
 - “Wise thing to do” (Austria) Mandatory (Norway)
 - Find out partners’ flaws before marrying them
- Cohabitation can not simply be a prelude to marriage, because so many relationships break up

Cohabitation means freedom

- Opposite side of the coin from commitment
- Independence, self-fulfillment (Austria, Western Germany, Netherlands, UK, Russia)
- Freedom to continue searching for the right partner
 - Spatial and job mobility (Austria, Germany)
 - Allows for cheating (Poland)
- Financial freedom, freedom to travel (Netherlands, Australia, UK, Norway)
- Freedom to choose whether to marry (Norway)
- Cohabitation is a relationship for here and now

Conclusions

Is cohabitation an **alternative to marriage**?

- No - commitment is one of the defining distinctions between cohabitation and marriage
 - although other factors (mortgage or childbearing) could be greater signs of commitment in some countries

Is cohabitation a **prelude to marriage**?

- Sometimes - cohabitation is a period to test relationships
 - but many relationships fail before marriage

Is cohabitation an **alternative to single**?

- More often- cohabitation is associated with freedom and independence

Conclusions from the focus group research

- Marriage is not likely to disappear, but the institution is changing, and divorce rates are likely to stay high.
- For most, marriage still provides value as a higher emotional bond.
 - Lesthaeghe's focus on the increase in expressive values without acknowledging emotional ties misses elements of contemporary union formation.
 - Note that few participants talked about how marriage was unattainable for those with fewer financial resources.
- Given high divorce rates, cohabitation seems to have emerged as a way to test relationships, and protect the value of marriage.

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