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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

During the past few decades, unmarried cohabitation has become increasingly prevalent across Europe. The rising importance of cohabitation in the lives of Europeans today constitutes an important feature in a whole array of changes in family and living arrangements, such as the postponement of union formation and childbearing, the decline of marriage, the weakening connection between marriage, sexuality and fertility, and increasing union instability. In public opinion and science alike, cohabitation is often discussed as if all couples who live together without being married do so because of the same underlying reasons and motives. Such a view does not do justice to the complexity of living arrangements in contemporary Europe. Cohabitation does not mean the same thing to all people. And if people cohabit for different reasons, this may have consequences for the kind of decisions they make within their relationship. This dissertation therefore aims at grasping the different meanings of cohabitation across Europe. It identifies different types of cohabitation and studies how sociodemographic characteristics, prior relationship experiences as well as features of the current union are associated with the meaning that cohabiters attach to their union. Moreover, it examines how cohabiters in various types of cohabitation differ in the way they design their relationship, the intentions they have regarding childbearing and their subsequent relationship transitions.

The introduction of this dissertation is structured as follows: In Section 1.2, I present cohort analyses of cohabitation trends and patterns based on a number of European countries that overlap largely with the countries studied in this dissertation. I show how cohabitation has changed and where cohabitation stands in contemporary Europe. This section sets the scene for the dissertation. In Section 1.3, I review the existing literature on the diversity of cohabitation and discuss how previous research explained the changes and the recent variation in patterns and trends of cohabitation. Although this dissertation is on cohabitation in Europe, I also review the cohabitation literature from the United States. The gaps in our knowledge on the diversity of meanings of cohabitation are identified in this section and lead me to Section 1.4, in which I formulate the overarching research questions of this dissertation. In Section 1.5, when discussing the contributions of this dissertation, I carve out the relevance and the innovative power of this study. The research design

and data are presented in Section 1.7 and I conclude with an outline of the dissertation in Section 1.8.

## 1.2. Trends and patterns of unmarried cohabitation across Europe

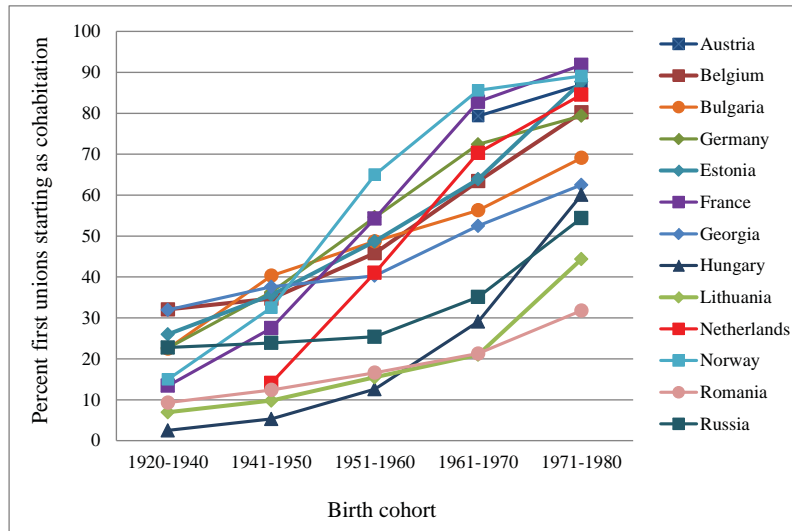
Trends and patterns of unmarried cohabitation have been studied in an increasing body of research comprising of one-country studies (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2008; Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000; Gabrielli and Hoem, 2010; Hoem and Kostova, 2008; Syltevik, 2010) as well as cross-national comparisons (Hoem *et al.*, 2010; Hoem *et al.*, 2009; Kasearu and Kutsar, 2011; Katus *et al.*, 2007; Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamczyk, 2004; Nazio and Blossfeld, 2003; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2012; Philipov and Jasilioniene, 2008; Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008).

Despite marked differences across countries in the pace and magnitude of the change in cohabitation patterns and trends, a majority of studies has identified three trajectories of change, namely (1) the increasing societal diffusion of cohabitation, (2) the increasing permanency of cohabitation, and (3) the increasing relevance of cohabitation as a context to bear and rear children (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008).

### 1.2.1. *The societal diffusion of cohabitation*

The societal diffusion of cohabitation can be understood as an individual-level process by which the practice of unmarried cohabitation is communicated and adopted over time among the members of a society (Rogers, 1983). *Figure 1.1* shows the proportion of first unions that started as unmarried cohabitation rather than direct marriage for a number of European countries and for subsequent birth cohorts. In all countries, the cohort analysis reveals a trend towards cohabitation as the first coresidential union formed among young adults. For each subsequent birth cohort, the number of first unions that started as unmarried cohabitation has been larger than for the previous birth cohort. Countries have had different onsets as well as magnitudes of this increase. In Western and Northern Europe, the proportion of unions that started as unmarried cohabitation has begun to increase sharply for cohorts born after 1951, whereas in many Central and Eastern European countries, the change has set in for cohorts born after 1971. For the most recent birth cohort (1971-1980), cross-national variation in the societal diffusion of cohabitation is largest. Between 32 percent of first unions in Romania and 92 percent of first unions in France started as unmarried cohabitation rather than direct marriage. Cohabitation has diffused more strongly among countries in Western and Northern Europe. For the vast majority of Western and Northern Europeans born after 1971, cohabitation has been the type of first

Figure 1.1. Proportion of first unions that start as unmarried cohabitation, by birth cohort, across Europe



Note: For Austria, only the two youngest birth cohorts are available, for the Netherlands, the oldest birth cohort is not available.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGG 2004-2009), Onderzoek Gezinsvorming (OGV 2008) for the Netherlands, author's calculations.

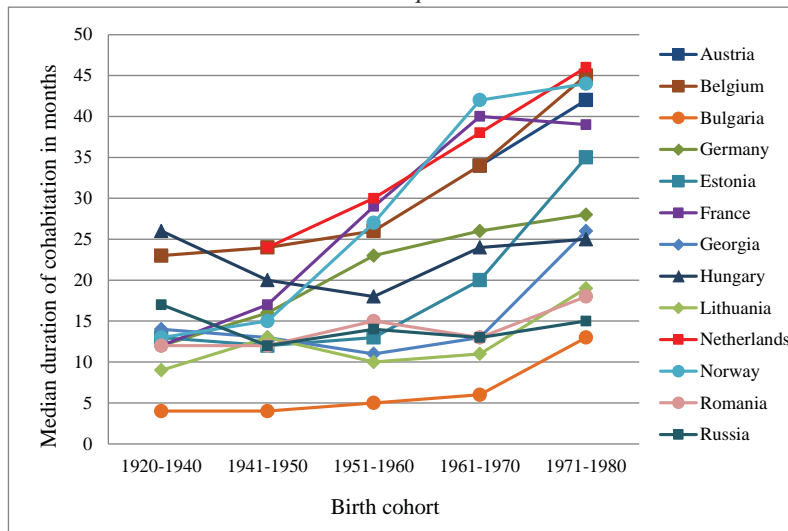
union (79% in Germany, 91% in Norway and 92% in France). Estonia has been following the Northwestern, rather than the Eastern European pattern (90%). Compared to Western Europe, the societal diffusion of cohabitation across Central and Eastern European countries has led to larger variation in this region. Whereas more than half of all first unions of the youngest birth cohort started as unmarried cohabitation in Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary and Russia, the corresponding proportions were 44 percent for Lithuania and 32 percent for Romania.

### 1.2.2. The permanency of cohabitation

The increasing permanency of cohabitation implies that the duration of cohabiting unions has been rising. Figure 1.2 shows the median duration (in months)<sup>1</sup> of first cohabiting unions for five subsequent birth cohorts across different European countries.

<sup>1</sup> The median duration gives the number of months that half of all first cohabiting unions in a given country and a given birth cohort lasts. The median is more meaningful than the mean in this case as the mean is biased upwards as it is influenced by particular long union durations.

Figure 1.2. Median duration of first cohabiting union, by birth cohort, across Europe



Note: For Austria, only the two youngest birth cohorts are available, for the Netherlands, the oldest birth cohort is not available.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS 2004-2009), Onderzoek Gezinsvorming (OGV 2008) for the Netherlands, author's calculations.

The median duration of cohabitation has increased in all countries. Again, countries have had different onsets and magnitudes of this increase. For Norway, France and the Netherlands, the median duration of cohabitation has begun to increase already for cohorts born after 1951. In Belgium and Germany, the increase has started for the birth cohort 1961-1970 and in the majority of Central and Eastern European countries it has set in for cohorts born after 1971. The strongest increase in the permanency of cohabitation has taken place in the Netherlands and Norway, where the median union duration between the oldest and the youngest birth cohort has increased by 46 and 31 months, respectively. The duration of cohabiting unions has by contrast hardly changed in Russia, Romania and Hungary. For the most recent birth cohort (1971-1980), the cross-national variation in the permanency of cohabitation has been largest, ranging between 13 months in Bulgaria and 46 months in the Netherlands.

There are three possible mechanisms behind the increase in the duration of cohabiting unions. First, the increasing duration of cohabiting unions might

have been due to an increasing postponement of marriage. This would mean that cohabiters in the younger birth cohorts have been as likely to marry their partner as cohabiters of older birth cohorts, but they have done so increasingly later during their relationship. Second, cohabiters who have broken up with their partner did so increasingly later in the course of their relationship. This would mean that the share of cohabiting unions which have ended by separation did not change for subsequent birth cohorts but union dissolutions have been postponed. Third, cohabiters in the younger birth cohorts have been increasingly likely to forego marriage altogether, staying longer in cohabiting unions neither transformed into marriage nor ended by separation.

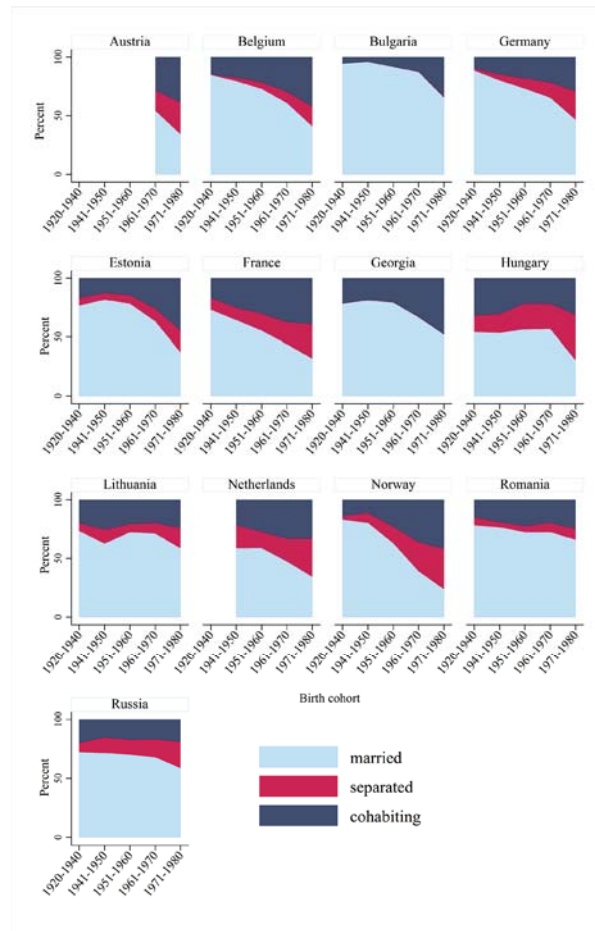
*Figure 1.3* shows what has happened to the first cohabiting union five years after the couple started living together<sup>2</sup>. I first discuss the findings with regard to the transition to marriage. Between 73 percent (France, Russia) and 95 percent (Bulgaria) of all first cohabiting unions in the oldest birth cohorts have been transformed into marriage within five years. One exception is Hungary, where cohabiters in the oldest birth cohort have moved into marriage at a much slower pace<sup>3</sup>. In all countries, there has been a decrease in the proportion of cohabiters who married their partner within the first 5 years of the union. This decrease has been largest in Norway where the proportion dropped from 83 to 24 percent. Also Belgium, Germany, Estonia, and France have experienced a sharp decline in marriages formed within five years of unmarried cohabitation. For the youngest birth cohort, less than half of all first cohabiting unions have been transformed into a marriage after five years. In countries in Central and Eastern Europe, this decrease has been moderate and in the case of Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, and Lithuania is characterized by a sharp drop for the youngest birth cohort. Still for the youngest birth cohort, in all Central and Eastern European countries, with the exception of Hungary, more than half of all first cohabiting unions have been transformed into a marriage within five years of union. With regard to

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<sup>2</sup> When studying relationship transitions of cohabiters, marriage and separation constitute two competing events. The occurrence of one event precludes or alters the probability of occurrence of the other event. Using the user-written Stata command `stcomp` (Coviello, V. and M. Boggess, (2004). Cumulative incidence estimation in the presence of competing risks. *The Stata Journal*, 4, 103-112.), I calculate the cumulative incidence, a function that appropriately estimates the probability of marriage and separation at each month of union duration until 60 months (5 years), for each country and each birth cohort.

<sup>3</sup> Please note that for the oldest two birth cohorts, less than five percent of all unions started by unmarried cohabitation in Hungary (*Figure 1.1*), and consequently the number of observations is small. It is likely that this group consists of individuals with very particular characteristics.

Figure 1.3. Union status after five years of cohabitation. Cumulative incidence of marriage and separation as two competing events



Note: For Austria, only the two youngest birth cohorts are available, for the Netherlands, the oldest birth cohort is not available

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGG 2004-2009), Onderzoek Gezinsvorming (OGV 2008) for the Netherlands, author's calculations.

the transition to marriage, I conclude that the share of cohabiters who moved into marriage within five years overall has decreased but in the majority of countries, marriage has been still the most prevalent relationship outcome after five years of union duration. Hence, the increasing permanency of

cohabiting unions has to a substantive extent been due to the increasing postponement of marriage.

I move to the discussion of the findings with regard to separation in the same figure. For the oldest birth cohort, a minority of first cohabitations has ended by separation. Only in France and Hungary, the proportion of separations has exceeded ten percent of all first cohabitations. The cohort analysis reveals substantial variation across countries. In two countries –Bulgaria and Georgia– separation has been a negligible outcome of first cohabiting unions, well below one percent for all birth cohorts and therefore almost invisible in the corresponding graphs in Figure 1.3. This is because most cohabiting unions have been rather quickly transformed into a marriage. In other Central and Eastern European countries (including Estonia), the proportion of separations within the first five years of a union has increased, in particular for the youngest birth cohort. In Western Europe already for the older birth cohorts, separations within the first five years of union duration have been more frequent compared to Eastern Europe but the increase has been particularly sharp for the youngest birth cohort as well. With regard to the incidence of separation within the first five years of cohabitation, I conclude that the proportion of unions ending by separation has increased, rather than decreased over subsequent birth cohorts. Although it is still the least prevalent relationship status after five years of union duration, recently, more cohabiting unions have ended by separation than in the past.

As a consequence of the trends and patterns of relationship transitions described in the previous section, in some –but not all– countries, the proportion of cohabiters still cohabiting after five years of union duration has increased over subsequent birth cohorts. Cohabiting unions that have lasted longer than five years are much less common among the oldest birth cohort in all countries and vary between 6 percent in Bulgaria and 20 percent in Russia and Lithuania. Over subsequent birth cohorts, there has been little change observed in Russia and Lithuania, neither Hungary. In all other countries however, the proportion of cohabiting unions being still intact and not transformed into marriage after five years has increased. In Western Europe, this increase started for the oldest birth cohort, and has risen steeply, particularly for the youngest birth cohort. In those Central and Eastern European countries where a substantial increase in long term cohabiting unions has been observed (Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia and Romania), the onset has been as early as for birth cohorts born after 1951. For the youngest birth cohort, cross-country variation has been still substantial but smaller than for the oldest birth cohort. Between around 20 percent (Lithuania, Romania, Russia) and 42 percent (Belgium, Norway) of first cohabiting unions have been still intact after 5 years of union duration.

Summarizing my findings presented in Figure 1.3, I conclude that the increasing permanency of cohabitation has been largely driven by an increasing postponement of marriage. At the same time, more cohabiting unions have been dissolved within the first five years of the union. This increase has however been smaller than the decrease in marriage, resulting in overall longer union durations. Finally, since there have been also more cohabiting unions that have not undergone any relationship transition, the permanency of cohabitation has increased.

*1.2.3. The relevance of cohabitation as a childbearing context*

The increasing relevance of cohabitation as a context in which children are born and raised means that marriage has been losing its absolute privilege as the appropriate setting for childbearing and childrearing. The proportion of children born to cohabiting couples has risen. *Table 1.1* presents the relationship status of women who gave birth to their first biological child across countries for five subsequent birth cohorts. The vast majority of women born between 1920 and 1940 have been married at the birth of their first child: This proportion ranged between 79 percent in Germany and 94 percent in Hungary. This proportion has decreased in all countries for subsequent birth cohorts but since the pace of this decrease differs, there is large cross-national variation among Europeans in the youngest birth cohort. Among women born between 1971 and 1980, less than half of all first births in Austria, France, Norway and Estonia have occurred within a marriage. In Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania and Russia between 71 and 84 percent of women have been married at their first birth. Belgium, Georgia and Germany have been situated in between with proportions of 55-, 56- and 61 percent, respectively.

In almost all countries, the increase in non-marital childbearing has been largely due to increasing births to cohabiting women. Particularly for the youngest birth cohort, the proportion of first births within cohabitation has (more than) doubled compared to the preceding birth cohort. Russia and Lithuania are exceptions where the decrease of births within marriage has been also due to a larger number of births to single mothers.

In most countries, the number of first births to single mothers has fluctuated around a similar proportion over subsequent birth cohorts; often well below ten percent of all first births. In Germany, the number of births to single mothers has decreased from 19 percent for oldest birth cohort to 12 percent for the youngest birth cohort but this proportion is still the highest among all the countries studied here.



### **1.3. Understanding the diversity of unmarried cohabitation. A literature review**

The previous section has shown that cohabitation patterns have changed during the last couple of decades. People increasingly often live together before they eventually marry. An increasing number of cohabiters move to marriage at slower pace or do not marry at all. A growing proportion of cohabiting unions involve joint children. These trends and patterns have shown a large cross-national variation in their onset, magnitude and pace of change. The increasing popularity of cohabitation and in particular its large cross-national variation for the most recent birth cohorts has led to the emergence of an extensive body of demographic research. These studies have aimed at understanding the rise and the diversity of cohabitation in contemporary societies.

#### *1.3.1. The second demographic transition theory*

Most prominent, the theoretical framework of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) has been used to describe and explain the rise in cohabitation and the cross-national diversity in family and living arrangements in contemporary Europe (Hoem and Kostova, 2008; Lesthaeghe and Neidert, 2006; Raley, 2001; Sobotka, 2008; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004; Van de Kaa, 2001). Adherents of the SDT have argued that new demographic behaviors spread from the Northern and Western European countries to the rest of the developed world (Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa, 1986; Van de Kaa, 1987). The characteristic features of the SDT have been a postponement and a de-standardization of life course transitions and as a consequence, the pluralization of family life. These changes have been displayed in declining marriage rates, rising divorce rates, below-replacement fertility and the spread of unmarried cohabitation and its rising significance as a setting of family formation. Within the theoretical framework of the SDT, it has been argued that a shift in values and attitudes concerning family life would have driven these changes in demographic behavior. Demographic choices related to union and family formation have been argued to be increasingly guided by personal value orientations that emphasize self-realization, autonomy and tolerance towards the diversity of choices. New demographic behaviors thus would constitute the manifestation of life style choices related to these changing values and attitudes (Lesthaeghe, 1995). Highly educated individuals have been considered to be at the vanguard of this ideational shift (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988).

*Table I.1. Relationship status of women at birth of their first child, by birth cohort, across Europe*

		1920-1940	1941-1950	1951-1960	1961-1970	1971-1980
Austria	married				57.0	48.1
	cohabiting				29.7	41.6
	single				13.3	10.4
Belgium	married	91.1	90.3	86.4	77.8	54.7
	cohabiting	4.7	5.1	8.1	16.0	39.8
	single	4.3	4.6	5.6	6.2	5.6
Bulgaria	married	89.4	88.5	84.6	84.6	71.1
	cohabiting	5.5	7.4	9.8	12.2	25.0
	single	5.1	4.1	5.6	3.2	4.0
Germany	married	78.5	80.5	77.5	70.6	61.6
	cohabiting	2.5	4.9	11.0	18.4	26.9
	single	19.1	14.6	11.5	11.0	11.5
Estonia	married	86.6	82.7	79.0	66.2	42.4
	cohabiting	8.9	10.7	13.0	25.6	50.0
	single	6.5	6.6	8.1	8.2	7.6
France	married	88.1	86.5	75.0	56.8	42.4
	cohabiting	3.0	5.5	17.8	35.4	50.4
	single	9.0	8.0	7.2	7.9	7.2
Georgia	married	80.1	79.6	78.0	72.5	55.9
	cohabiting	15.5	16.2	17.1	24.2	40.6
	single	4.4	4.2	4.9	3.4	3.5
Hungary	married	94.0	93.9	91.3	86.2	75.6
	cohabiting	0.7	1.8	3.2	7.6	17.8
	single	5.3	4.5	5.5	6.2	6.6

Lithuania	married	89.5	88.6	89.0	86.5	80.4
	cohabiting	2.8	2.3	3.9	5.3	9.7
	single	7.8	9.1	7.1	8.3	9.9
Netherlands	married		92.2	92.6	79.2	65.7
	cohabiting		1.6	4.4	16.5	29.9
	single		6.3	3.0	4.3	4.4
Norway	married	88.9	85.6	66.2	44.1	33.1
	cohabiting	3.1	6.2	20.6	46.7	58.6
	single	8.0	8.2	13.3	9.1	8.3
Romania	married	89.6	88.2	87.5	88.8	83.6
	cohabiting	3.1	4.1	6.6	7.5	12.2
	single	7.3	7.7	5.9	3.7	4.2
Russia	married	81.8	82.8	82.6	78.6	74.4
	cohabiting	11.3	10.3	10.5	12.6	16.8
	single	6.9	6.9	6.9	8.8	8.9

Note: For Austria, only the two youngest birth cohorts are available, for the Netherlands, the oldest birth cohort is not available.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGG 2004-2009), Onderzoek Gezinsvorming (OGV 2008) for the Netherlands, author's calculations.

According to the SDT theory, at different points in time and at different speeds, all populations experience the consequences of increasing secularization, weakening family ties, and growing individualization. In this framework, country differences in the trends and patterns of unmarried cohabitation have been explained by countries being at different stages of this transition (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; 2002a). The Scandinavian countries have been claimed to be the forerunners of the SDT. Norway has been described as “cohabitation land” (Syltevik, 2010) where almost everyone cohabits before eventually marrying, the social acceptance of unmarried cohabitation is nearly universal and the majority of the population favors an equal treatment of long-term cohabitation and marriage (Eriksen, 2001). Cohabitors who live together for at least two years and those who have children have largely the same rights and obligations as married individuals (Noack, Bernhardt and Wiik, 2013).

Western Europe has followed the Scandinavian countries suit. France and the Netherlands have been considered contexts in which cohabitation enjoys more legal protection than in other (Western) European countries (Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen, 2012). In 1999, the *Loi sur la Concubinage et le Pacte Civil de Solidarité* (PACS) has been promulgated in France enabling cohabiters to register their partnership which, in legal terms, largely equates their union with legal marriage. In the Netherlands, registering a partnership is possible since 1998 (Poortman and Mills, 2012). Between 1996 and 2012 in the United Kingdom, the proportion of cohabiters among the total population has increased from 7 to 12 percent, making cohabitation the fastest growing living arrangement in the United Kingdom (Office of National Statistics, 2012). So-called ‘common law marriage’ does not exist in the United Kingdom, although according to estimates from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2006), the majority of cohabiters believes that they would obtain the same legal rights as married couples after some time of cohabitation. In Germany, unmarried cohabitation has become popular among younger age groups as a way to start a union but is not legally recognized. Differences between the Western and the Eastern part of Germany have been identified with regard to the role of cohabitation in the family system. In Western Germany, the propensity to marry has remained strong and linked to childbearing intentions (Klärner, 2012). In Eastern Germany, by contrast, unmarried cohabitation has become a common living arrangement often involving children (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2005).

Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have been considered to be at an earlier stage of the SDT. A number of studies have reported that marriage

and cohabitation rates began to change in Russia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia and Hungary well before the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2008; Gerber and Berman, 2010; Hoem *et al.*, 2009; Katus *et al.*, 2007). Estonia has been argued to follow the Scandinavian pattern rather than that of other Baltic countries (Katus *et al.*, 2007). Other CEE countries, such as Lithuania and Romania have experienced such changes only very recently (Hoem, Muresan and Haragas, 2013; Maslauskaitė, 2011). During the societal, political and economic transformation of the institutional structure of Central and Eastern Europe which cumulated in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this region moved closer to the structure of Western Europe. State socialist regimes were replaced by capitalistic institutions and market economies, many countries held free elections and an ideational change has been argued to facilitated the spread of Western culture and ideas at a tearing pace. The lifestyle of the West was a synonym of “development, progress and the good life to be” (Thornton and Philipov, 2009 pp. 135). Qualitative data have supported the notion that people in this region perceived a greater deal of freedom and opportunities in making choices over their lives (Kon, 1995 cited in Berger and Berman, 2010). Nevertheless, in the majority of these countries, cohabitation is still considered marginal and practiced by individuals with particular characteristics that have been argued to select them into cohabitation.

Southern Europe has been repeatedly regarded as defying the predictions of the SDT, as despite lowest-low levels of fertility and the postponement of childbearing and marriage, the diffusion of unmarried cohabitation has remained slow until the mid-1990s. Southern Europeans have prolonged coresidence with their parents, have postponed union formation and the transition to first union and first birth has often coincided (Baizán, Aassve and Billari, 2003; Billari *et al.*, 2002). Since then, cohabitation has diffused particularly among younger, non-religious, employed adults in urban areas, and in the case of Italy in the Northern and Central parts of the country (Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras and Martín-García, 2008; Gabrielli and Hoem, 2010). Whereas in Italy, highly educated have been found being still overrepresented among cohabiters (Gabrielli and Hoem, 2010), Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín (2013) have concluded that cohabitation has spread to all educational strata of the Spanish society. Survey estimates have shown that more than one third of Spanish women born after 1970 has chosen cohabitation as the first union type (Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín, 2013). Both in Italy and Spain, it has been found that pregnancy increases the risk of marriage more than entering into cohabitation, especially for childless women (Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín,

2013; Gabrielli and Hoem, 2010), indicating that cohabitation is largely regarded as a phase before marriage and family formation, rather than a permanent alternative to it. Spanish survey data have revealed however that in 2006, 39 percent of cohabiting unions involved joint biological children below age 18 (Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín, 2013).

The ideas of the theoretical framework of the SDT have provoked three types of criticism. First, the presupposition of the SDT theory, that the highly educated would be at the vanguard of long term cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation, has been challenged by a number of studies finding a negative educational gradient for cohabitation for the United States (Carlson, McLanahan and England, 2004; Goldstein and Kenney, 2001; Smock, Manning and Porter, 2005), Latin America (Castro-Martín, 2002), Hungary (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2008), the Czech Republic (Kantorova, 2004), Russia (Gerber and Berman, 2010) and Bulgaria (Hoem and Kostova, 2008) as well as for childbearing within cohabitation for the United States and a number of European countries (Upchurch, Lillard and Panis, 2002; Ventura, 2009). It has been criticized that the focus on ideational changes as the mechanism behind changes in demographic behavior has ignored economic factors that might also explain the rise in cohabitation as well as the selection into cohabitation and meanings attached to it.

Second, the idea of countries following a standard path of development implies that despite the different pace and magnitude of change, European countries might reach a common developmental stage of convergence in living arrangements in the future (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van de Kaa, 1987). Often, cross-sectional data for different countries has been analyzed as if the variation across space was a proxy for variation across time. Most prominently, Thornton (2001) has criticized such “developmental idealism” as “reading history sideways” and condemned it as “ethnocentric in presuming that Western societies were superior to those outside the West” (Thornton, 2001 pp. 450). Although growing diversity across countries can be accommodated in the theoretical framework of the SDT by arguing that the different onset of the transition temporarily increases the diversity between forerunners and laggards of the SDT, the notion of a unidirectional development has been vividly debated (Kuijsten, 1996).

Finally, the SDT has been criticized for making too simplistic interpretations of the role of cohabitation in contemporary societies. The diffusion model of cohabitation allows broadly classifying countries with regard to the spread of cohabitation but it does not tell anything about the selection into cohabitation

as well as the reasons and motives for which cohabiters enter such unions. In order to understand the changing phenomenon of cohabitation, prior studies have predominantly focused on the role of selection and examined which characteristics predisposed individuals to opt for unmarried cohabitation. These studies have argued that cohabiters differ from single as well as married individuals before they enter into cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Liefbroer, 1991a). Other studies have emphasized that the experience of cohabitation itself and the meaning attached to it might cause certain consequences and outcomes (Brines and Joyner, 1999; Brown and Booth, 1996; Stanley *et al.*, 2010). Based on these studies, several attempts have been made to grasp the heterogeneity of the cohabitating population by suggesting cohabitation typologies that distinguish different meanings of cohabitation. Below, I discuss these strands of literature that have challenged the ideas of the SDT theory or have built on them.

### *1.3.2. Cohabitation as a consequence of economic disadvantage*

One strand of literature has focused on economic developments as the driving forces behind the change in cohabitation patterns. Proponents of the “new home economics” have argued that the increased participation of women in higher education and their stronger participation in the labor market account for delayed marriage, motherhood and increasing union instability (Becker, 1981). Oppenheimer (1988; 2003) has suggested that, rather than well-educated women’s increased economic autonomy, the most important shift over the past few decades would have been the decrease in men’s earning power, in particular for men with low levels of education attainment. A marriage is costly, not only in terms of the expenditures for a wedding (Kravdal, 1999; Smock *et al.*, 2005) but also due to the perception that marriage requires a financially sound footing (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001; Oppenheimer, 1988). Growing economic insecurity through deregulation of labor markets, globalization and most recently a global financial crisis has changed and constrained the economic conditions of young adults in Europe (Blossfeld, Mills and Klijzing, 2005; McDonald, 2006). These changes have been argued to make young adult’s future less predictable, and thus have increased the perceived risk of early family commitments (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2010). One strategy of young adults would have been to extend periods of (higher) education (Kohler, Billari and Ortega, 2002). School or university enrollment however is perceived to be incompatible with the role of a spouse, let alone, with parenthood (Blossfeld and Huinink, 1991). Marriage might thus be out of reach for those in precarious and low paid employment and cohabitation for them could serve as a second best option when marriage is not (yet) feasible (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite, 1995; Kalmijn, 2011).

Cohabitation is also linked to childbearing as most of the increase in non-marital childbearing is due to increasing births to cohabiting couples (Kiernan, 2001; Raley, 2001). The literature has suggested a negative educational gradient in non-marital childbearing, both to cohabiting and single mothers (Upchurch *et al.*, 2002; Ventura, 2009) as well as further negative outcomes for unmarried mothers such as higher poverty rates and welfare dependency (Lichter, Graefe and Brown, 2003). Moreover, cohabitation has been found to be associated with poor relationship outcomes that might also negatively affect children born in cohabiting unions, such as poor relationship quality (Brown and Booth, 1996), high union instability (Brines and Joyner, 1999), physical violence and abuse (Kenney and McLanahan, 2006). Qualitative research from the United States has also shown that many poor urban women have children outside marriage because motherhood is highly valued as a way to prove oneself in life and attach meaning to one's existence, as well as to test the relationship with the father of the child (Edin and Kefalas, 2005).

Historically, extramarital fertility was normatively discouraged and socially stigmatized in Europe. The institution of marriage kept the monopoly over the regulation of sex, the bearing and rearing of children, and the transmission of resources from the older to the younger generation (Coontz, 2004). Births out of wedlock were considered illegitimate and devoid of rights, although the contribution of non-marital fertility to overall fertility levels was far from trivial (Laslett, Oosterveen and Smith, 1980). Non-marital childbearing occurred predominantly among the most disadvantaged societal groups (Kiernan, 2004). When non-marital childbearing started to increase in Europe during the late 1970s and early 1980s, women with a higher level of education attainment have had a higher risk of childbearing within cohabitation, suggesting that the highly educated were the forerunners in the increase in childbearing within cohabitation (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2010). The economic development during the 1980s and 1990s has increased the uncertainty and risk particularly for the least educated. As a consequence, the educational gradient of childbearing within cohabitation has become negative. Highly educated individuals in contemporary Europe are more likely to have their first child within marriage rather than within cohabitation. The recent increase in childbearing within cohabitation in Europe therefore has been interpreted as a "pattern of disadvantage" (Perelli-Harris and Gerber, 2011; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2012; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2010).

### 1.3.3. *Final developmental stage of convergence?*

The underlying idea of the SDT on the societal diffusion of cohabitation is that of convergence as the final stage of development. At one point, the "more



advanced” Scandinavian countries will slow their pace in which cohabitation is spreading or reach a final stage of diffusion in which cohabitation and marriage would be “indistinguishable” (Kiernan, 2001). The “less advanced” countries will keep their pace of change. The result would be convergence of cohabitation patterns, and in a broader sense, a truly “European” family system (Roussel, 1992). The notion that ultimately, country differences in cohabitation patterns would disappear, has been vividly debated (Kuijsten, 1996).

It has been argued that the cross-national diversity of family forms has not solely been driven by countries being at different stages of the SDT, but that persistent cultural differences exist that will prevent cross-national convergence in the demographic landscape of the future. Reher (1998) has focused on differences in family ties across Western and Southern Europe. Family ties are defined as the “strength and resilience of family loyalties, allegiances, and authority” (pp. 203). Whereas the Scandinavian countries as well as Western Europe are characterized by weak family ties, family systems in Southern European countries are characterized by strong family ties. He has argued that although “external indicators of the family and family forms are converging” (*i.e.*, increasing importance of within-household solidarity, decreasing relevance of the extended family, declining fertility, increasing non-marital childbearing), a country’s own specific historical trajectory and type of family system will contribute to the “specific contours of the present and the future” (pp. 221). Other authors have emphasized the role of various actors in the development of welfare policies, such as political parties and national governments. Within the welfare state literature, the “frozen welfare state landscape” scenario has been proposed in which national institutions and the country specific historical context have been argued to mediate the impact of global forces on the society, resulting in persistent or even increasing cross-national differences (Esping-Andersen, 1994). Gauthier (2002) has suggested that family policies also mirror cultural specific views on family life that are shaped by “national institutions, histories and political make-up” (pp. 467). She found that state support for working parents and families has increased in many countries since the 1970s but persistently differs in its magnitude. From her findings, one can conclude that predominant political and historical beliefs about family life have led to different national policy responses to global demographic challenges. If individual decisions concerning union and family formation are influenced by family policies in place, cross-national divergence, rather than convergence can be expected.

#### *1.3.4. Grasping the diversity of cohabitation*

When cohabitation started to emerge, many studies have aimed at understanding the phenomenon by focusing on the characteristics of cohabiters. There has been robust cross-national evidence found that individuals who are younger, more secular and living in urban areas as well as those who have experienced a parental divorce are overrepresented among cohabiters but findings on the association between education, employment and cohabitation have been less consistent across countries (Kiernan, 2001; Thornton, Axinn and Xie, 2007). In the context of the United States but also some post-communist European countries, cohabiters have been found to be of lower socio-economic status (often measured in level of education attainment or income). In many Western European countries, cohabitation has been spread through all educational strata although cohabiters with a high level of education attainment have been found to be more likely to make the transition to marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Sobotka, 2008).

Selection into cohabitation might depend on the level of societal diffusion of cohabitation. Following the SDT argument, Kiernan (2001) has advocated the idea that the societal diffusion of cohabitation implies a progression through several stages. Cohabitation starts as a marginal behavior, becomes acceptable as a period preceding marriage and finally replaces marriage or at least becomes a “type of marriage” (Prinz, 1995). The final stage is characterized by unmarried cohabitation being the norm of union entry, cohabiting unions being stable, widespread and very similar to marriage and marriage and childbearing and -rearing being largely decoupled (Van de Kaa, 2001). Building on this diffusion model of cohabitation, others have expanded the selection argument. When cohabitation is marginal because only very few people cohabit and norms related to cohabitation are strongly dismissive, cohabiters constitute a selective part of the society. When cohabitation spreads to larger segments of the population, selection into cohabitation becomes weaker and consequently, cohabiters become more diverse (Klijzing, 1992; Schoen, 1992). When virtually all unions start by unmarried cohabitation –as this is the case in Sweden for instance–, differences between cohabiters and those marrying directly grow larger again as the latter group of laggards or rejecters of the innovative behavior constitute a selective group of individuals with particular characteristics, such as particular religious convictions (Hoem and Hoem, 1988). Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006) have showed a U-shaped association between selection into cohabitation and societal diffusion of cohabitation when they studied for a number of European countries, whether spouses who cohabited before marriage have a higher risk of divorce than spouses who married directly.

Other studies have addressed the question whether cohabiters have different relationships than married couples. Differences between cohabiters and married have been claimed to result from inherent differences between cohabitation and marriage, for instance in the level of interpersonal commitment (Rhoades, Stanley and Markman, 2010; Stanley, Whitton and Markman, 2004). It has been argued that the most important difference between cohabitation and marriage is –besides the legal differences– that cohabiters face a higher level of insecurity about the relationship’s future, because cohabitation lacks strong institutional and normative rules as well as the public affirmation of the marriage vow (Brines and Joyner, 1999; Cherlin, 2004; Winkler, 1997). The level of diffusion of cohabitation could also result in cross-national variation in the magnitude of inherent differences between cohabitation and marriage with regard to commitment and union stability. Brines and Joyner (1999) have hypothesized that in contexts where cohabiting unions share about the same level of legal protection as married unions, cohabiting unions might be characterized by higher levels of commitment and consequently, higher union stability.

The societal diffusion of cohabitation inspired a scientific debate on the role of cohabitation in the family formation process in contemporary Europe in which no consensus has been reached. Underlying the diffusion model of cohabitation are two broad views on cohabitation: Cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. The debate has thus circled around the question whether cohabitation is simply a change in sequencing norms concerning the order of life course events or whether cohabitation is challenging the hegemony of the legal and social institution of marriage. Viewing cohabitation as a stage in the process of marriage implies that cohabitation accounts for the postponement of marriage in the individual life course as premarital cohabitation becomes increasingly normative. The view that cohabitation is an alternative to marriage suggests that cohabitation is increasingly substituting for marriage and entering spheres that were exclusively “reserved” for marriage (Manting, 1996). Rindfuss and Vandenhuevel (1990), when discussing the context of the United States, have suggested that cohabitation may not be related to marriage at all but constitutes an alternative to singlehood as commitment to permanency might not exist during the gradual process of moving in together. Despite the broad agreement that cohabitation is a heterogeneous phenomenon and cohabitation means different things to different people, attempts to grasp the diversity of cohabitation and account for the heterogeneity of cohabitation in cross-national studies on cohabitation have been rare (see Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001 for exceptions). Most studies have treated

cohabiters as a homogeneous group. Cohabitation however does not mean the same thing to all people and cohabitation does not happen in a social vacuum but is shaped in its meaning by the present norms and attitudes in a society.

Several typologies have been suggested to classify cohabiters (Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Manning and Smock, 2002; Stanley *et al.*, 2004; Willoughby, Carroll and Busby, 2012). Bianchi and Casper (2000) have proposed a typology of four different meanings of cohabitation relevant in the United States, based on cohabiters' plans to marry and their anticipated union duration. Willoughby and colleagues (2012) have identified five different types of cohabiters in a non-representative sample of US-cohabiters based on their engagement status and the expected duration until marriage and compared them to engaged and non-engaged dating couples in terms of relationship outcomes. Other studies have suggested typologies that place countries at different stages of a diffusion process of cohabitation and characterize countries as being dominated by one specific meaning of cohabitation depending upon the stage they were in (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan 2001; 2002a). In her empirical classification of countries, Kiernan (2001) has emphasized that the likelihood of non-marital childbearing depends on the dominant meaning of cohabitation in a country. Heuveline and Timberlake (2004) have built their typology on the prevalence of cohabitation and the expected duration of children's exposure to cohabitation and distinguished six different meanings of cohabitation along the lines of a diffusion model of cohabitation ranging from cohabitation being "marginal" to "indistinguishable from marriage". Classifying countries as being dominated by one specific meaning of cohabitation as well as the notion of convergence underlying these diffusion typologies has been contested by country specific findings on the meaning and nature of cohabitation. The view that countries such as Norway would have reached the final stage of diffusion and cohabitation being *indistinguishable from marriage* (Kiernan, 2001) has been challenged by findings that although premarital cohabitation is considered the norm before Norwegians (eventually) become parents and marry, most cohabiting unions that do not end by separation have been converted into marriage at one point in the course of a couple's trajectory and marriage is the dominant union type for individuals aged 45 or older in Norway (Wiik, 2009). This indicates that cohabiters must either have incentives to marry at one point or attach a superior symbolic meaning to marriage. Moreover, just as in other countries, Norwegian cohabiters –even those with joint children– are more likely to separate than married couples (Jensen and Clausen, 2003)

and cohabitation is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and commitment than married unions (Wiik, Bernhardt and Noack, 2009). In addition, countries that would be classified as being characterized by the same predominant meaning of cohabitation –namely that cohabitation is “marginal”– might differ largely in cohabiters’ typical motivations to enter these unions. In the majority of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, cohabitation rates are low compared to Western and Northern Europe. Still, in Bulgaria for instance, cohabitation has a long standing tradition. In rural areas, couples start cohabiting after engagement, often in the house of one set of parents (Hoem and Kostova, 2008). In Russia however, cohabitation is largely a post-marital phenomenon and divorced individuals, particular from urban areas, are overrepresented among cohabiters (Zakharov, 2008). In Hungary, cohabitation is acceptable as a kind of trial period before the desire to marry one’s partner is realized (Pongracz, 2012). More specific typologies are needed that take into consideration both cross- and within-country variation and the changing nature of cohabitation. The selection as well as the commitment argument can then be extended to examine whether cohabiters in different types differ with regard to selection variables as well as commitment and whether the association between antecedents and consequences of attaching a certain meaning to cohabitation are the same in contexts that vary by level of institutionalization of cohabitation.

#### **1.4. Research aims and general research questions**

The goal of this dissertation is to increase our understanding of the diversity of meanings of cohabitation across contemporary Europe. The majority of Europeans nowadays experience one or more spells of cohabitation and cohabitation takes over functions that were traditionally reserved for marriage, most notably childbearing (Kiernan, 2001; Raley, 2001; Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008; Wu, Bumpass and Musick, 2001). The theoretical framework of the SDT offers a useful framework to describe the changes in cohabitation patterns and to broadly classify countries according to the level of societal diffusion of cohabitation. It is however limited in its ability to include economic change that populations are facing and is restricted in the way that within-country differences can be incorporated. The decreasing selectivity into cohabitation –the phenomenon that larger parts of the population enter into cohabitation– implies a growing diversity of the cohabiting population. Grasping this diversity across, but also within countries is a promising approach to gain more insight in the phenomenon of cohabitation in contemporary Europe.

The first aim of this dissertation is to propose a cohabitation typology that is based on how cohabiters view their cohabiting unions. The first research question therefore is:

1. *What are the different meanings attached to cohabitation across Europe today?*

The typology incorporates ideas from both theories on ideational as well as economic change to grasp the meanings of cohabitation. The proposed typology thus acknowledges that the meaning of cohabitation might be influenced both by peoples' preferences as well as constraints. In addition, it allows identifying and quantifying not only cross-country variation in the meanings of cohabitation but also differences among cohabiters within one country.

The second research aim addresses precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation. As the literature review has shown, many previous studies focused on the role of selection, and hence, examined which characteristics predisposed individuals to opt for unmarried cohabitation. Other studies emphasized that the experience of cohabitation itself and the meaning attached to it might cause certain consequences and outcomes (Brown and Booth, 1996; Stanley *et al.*, 2010; Willoughby *et al.*, 2012). Building on this literature, this dissertation examines whether cohabiters with different characteristics are overrepresented in specific types of cohabitation. Moreover, it is explored whether countries differ in the association between precursors and correlates and the meanings attached to cohabitation. This leads to the second research question:

2. *What are the individual and couple characteristics of individuals in different types of cohabitation and how do these precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation vary across Europe?*

The study of individual and couple characteristics in their association with the meaning of cohabitation across countries allows identifying distinct profiles of cohabiters in the different types of cohabitation as well as exploring cross-national variation in the precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation.

The third research aim concerns differences in the intentions and behaviors of cohabiters in various types of cohabitation. Prior research extensively studied the relationship outcomes of cohabiting unions and compared cohabiters with individuals in other union types. Diversity within the group of cohabiters, however, has largely been disregarded. Cohabiters in different

types of cohabitation might differ substantially in what they seek from their unions and the way they organize their relationship.

Increasing childbearing within cohabitation has been identified as a major feature of change in cohabitation patterns and trends. At the same time, cross-national variation in childbearing within cohabitation has been found to be large (see Figure 1.2). Therefore, the role of cohabitation in the family system has attained tremendous scholarly attention. Whether some cohabiters intend to have children and others do not might be associated with the meaning of their union. The reasons and motives behind cohabitation might give insight why some cohabiters consider childbearing feasible in terms of timing, sequencing and context and how the country context shapes this association. Therefore, this dissertation investigates whether different types of cohabiters differ in their plans regarding having children and how this association might vary across countries.

Moreover, cohabiters in different types of cohabitation might differ in the extent to which they intertwine their economical lives. Whether couples keep money separate or pool their income and how these money management strategies differ by union type will advance our knowledge on how cohabiters and married differ in the way they solve the potential conflict between interpersonal solidarity and individual autonomy. This dissertation examines how much of the variation might be explained by differences in the commitment as well as the heterogeneity of both union types and how this relationship differs across countries.

Finally, the role of cohabitation in the relationship trajectory is examined. Some cohabiters marry, while others break up and again others, stay cohabiting. This dissertation studies whether the meaning of cohabitation in the present is associated with the transition to marriage and separation in the future. In this study, we focus on the German context and examine variation between Eastern and Western Germany in the link between cohabitation type and relationship transitions. The third research question answered in this dissertation therefore is:

- 3. Do cohabiters who attach different meanings to their cohabiting union differ in their fertility intentions, in the way they organize household income, and in their subsequent relationship trajectory (i.e. marriage or separation)?*

### **1.5. Contributions of this dissertation**

This dissertation aims at advancing our knowledge about unmarried cohabitation in contemporary Europe in a number of ways. The process of the diffusion of cohabitation is still unfolding and the meaning of cohabitation is thus a rapidly moving target of study. Most of the existing attempts to grasp the diversity of meanings of cohabitation in Europe are based on data from ten to twenty years ago. Since then, cohabitation patterns have profoundly changed.

The first contribution of this dissertation is an up-to date analysis of trends and patterns of cohabitation across a number of European countries that shows where cohabitation stands in contemporary Europe.

The second contribution is that this dissertation proposes a typology of ideal types of cohabitation that incorporates the dominant views on cohabitation in the existing literature. The proposed typology expands on the existing literature in four respects. First, although it is widely acknowledged that people enter into cohabitation for a large variety of reasons and cohabiters thus constitute a heterogeneous group, most studies tended to ignore the differences in the meaning of cohabitation. This study illustrates that such an undifferentiated view on cohabitation does not do justice to the complexity of contemporary union formation processes and living arrangements, especially when studying countries that differ in the diffusion of cohabitation. Second, the proposed cohabitation typology explicitly addresses within-country heterogeneity in the mix of different meanings of cohabitation. Rather than classifying countries as being dominated by one specific meaning of cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001), this study allows identifying and quantifying across– but also within-country variation in the meanings attached to cohabitation. This study reveals that context matters by providing evidence that the country context shapes norms and beliefs concerning cohabitation and influences how cohabiters view upon their unions. It is shown that the mix of meanings of cohabitation is less diverse in countries with very low as well as very high levels of diffusion of cohabitation. Third, in contrast to some existing cohabitation typologies, this typology refrains from using cohabiter's behaviors as empirical indicators of the meaning attached to cohabitation. Most studies take the union duration (Bianchi and Casper, 2000), the route of exit from cohabitation (marriage *vs.* separation) as well as the time of children's exposure to parental cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004) as indicators of the meaning attached to cohabitation. These are behavioral consequences of a certain meaning and



allow only for an indirect and retrospective attribution of meaning attached to cohabitation. The typology proposed in this dissertation uses measurements of subjective statements concerning marriage plans, attitudes towards the institution of marriage and feelings of economic deprivation as empirical indicators to capture how cohabiters currently conceptualize their union. Finally, prior attempts to grasp the meaning of cohabitation predominantly focused on women, never married cohabiters or younger age groups and link the meaning of cohabitation solely to family formation processes (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Willoughby *et al.*, 2012). The proposed typology in this dissertation can be applied to all cohabiting unions, including those of adult women *and men* as well as of older individuals and those with complex union histories or who do not have intentions (anymore) to have children.

The third contribution of this dissertation is to expand the literature on selection into cohabitation. Current cohabiters might share many characteristics with the forerunners several decades ago but might also differ in important aspects. As cohabitation becomes more prevalent, not only the reasons and motives with which people enter into cohabitation might become more diverse. As larger parts of the population experiences cohabitation, the variation in the characteristics of cohabiters might increase as well. Building on the existing literature that individuals with particular characteristics and life course experiences select themselves into cohabitation this dissertation offers insights into the association between individual and couple characteristics and the meaning attached to cohabitation in contexts of increasing prevalence of cohabitation. In addition, the cross-national comparative approach reveals that across countries, individuals with largely similar characteristics select themselves into different types of cohabitation.

The final contribution of this dissertation is that it shows that the meaning of cohabitation is associated with intentions and behaviors, both at present and in the future. The study reveals that cohabiters in different types of cohabitation not only display different ways to organize their relationships (*i.e.* in terms of money management) and vary in their plans in the present (*i.e.* having children) but also that the current meaning of cohabitation has implications for relationship trajectories in the future (*i.e.* marriage and separation). Context dependencies play a larger role in some relationship outcomes than in others.

## 1.6. Research design and data

The analyses presented in this dissertation are predominantly based on quantitative data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Surveys (*GGS*). For the longitudinal analysis in Chapter 5, I use panel data from three waves of the German family panel “Panel analysis of intimate relationships and family dynamics” (*Pairfam*) as well as panel data from two waves of the panel survey “Demographic differences in life course dynamics in Eastern and Western Germany” (*DemoDiff*).

### 1.6.1. *The Generations and Gender Surveys*

To identify and quantify meanings attached to cohabitation across different European countries, cross-national comparative cross-sectional data are needed that cover a variety of countries, the whole adult life course as well as women and men. The data moreover must contain empirical indicators that allow grasping the meaning of cohabitation as questions on motives and reasons for cohabitation are not implemented in many cross-nationally comparative surveys. In order to examine whether cohabiters who attach different meanings to cohabitation vary in their money management strategies as well as in their fertility intentions, information on the organization and anticipated future of relationships is needed as well. The Generations and Gender Surveys (*GGS*) 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: Austria, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania and the Russian Federation. The overall size of the main samples differs by country but in most cases it is about 10,000 respondents. The overall response rates varied from 49.7 percent in Russia to 78.2 percent in Bulgaria. The data contain the necessary information to address the research questions. Therefore, most of the analyses presented in this dissertation are based on *GGS* data.

A cross-sectional design, however, might be affected by selectivity problems. Cohabitation is not a random event but likely to be associated with particular characteristics as discussed in Section 1.3. Moreover, cohabiters who are very likely to break up, and cohabiters who quickly move to marriage, are underrepresented in our sample. This kind of selectivity might lead to an overestimation of stable and committed types of cohabitation. To partially overcome this selectivity inherent to the cross-sectional design, the analyses control for a large number of individual characteristics that might be both

associated with the entry into cohabitation as well as with the meaning attached to the union.

### 1.6.2. *The German Family Panel*

To study the effect of different meanings of cohabitation on subsequent relationship transitions (marriage or separation), longitudinal data are needed. Prospective panel data are ideal as they offer the advantage of measuring the meaning attached to cohabitation and to observe cohabiters' subsequent relationship transitions. The *GGS* was designed as a panel, allowing this kind of longitudinal analysis. However, at the time of conducting this study, panel data for very few *GGS* data were yet available. Therefore, I decided to focus on panel data from Germany that do not allow for cross-national comparison but also for an interesting within-country comparison, as Eastern and Western Germany have such diverse institutional histories. The German Family Panel *Pairfam* "Panel analysis of intimate relationships and family dynamics", conducted annually, 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 *et al.*, 2011; Nauck *et al.*, 2012). The first wave was conducted in 2008/09 with 12,402 respondents (response rate of 37%) of which 9,069 were re-interviewed in 2009 and 7,901 were re-interviewed in 2010. The study "Demographic differences in life course dynamics in Eastern and Western Germany" (*DemoDiff*) 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 (response rate of 29%) to the two oldest *Pairfam* cohorts of which 1,173 respondents have been re-interviewed in 2010/11. At the time when this study was prepared, the *DemoDiff* data was available for two waves (Kreyenfeld *et al.*, 2011b). It is possible to replicate the cohabitation typology developed with the *GGS* data in a slightly modified way.

## 1.7. Outline of the dissertation

The research questions formulated in Section 1.4 are addressed in four empirical chapters, three of which use a cross-sectional design and apply a cross-national comparative perspective, and one analyzing longitudinal data for one country. It should be noted that due to the nature of a cumulative PhD thesis, some repetition throughout this dissertation is inevitable. Chapters 2 to 5 form independent, stand-alone pieces of research. The dissertation is organized as follows:

Research question 1 on the different meanings of cohabitation across Europe is answered in Chapter 2. A typology of ideal types of cohabitation is developed that incorporates the dominant views on cohabitation in the existing literature. Using survey data from nine countries situated in Northern, Western, Central and Eastern Europe, cohabiters are classified into these types of cohabitation based on their response patterns on empirical indicators grasping the meaning they attach to cohabitation.

Research question 2 on the precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation is answered in the same chapter. It is shown how age, level of education attainment, fulltime employment, the prior relationship history (prior cohabitation, divorce, widowhood), the presence of children as well as the duration of the union and the satisfaction derived from it, are associated with different meanings of cohabitation.

Research question 3 on differences in the intentions and behavior of cohabiters is answered in Chapters 3 to 5. Each chapter focuses on a different outcome of cohabitation. Chapter 3 examines the intentions to have a child within three years for cohabiters with and without joint biological children and shows that the meaning attached to cohabitation is similarly associated with fertility intentions across Europe. Chapter 4 implements a simplified cohabitation typology by distinguishing cohabiters with intentions to marry from those without wedding plans and compares their money management strategies to married couples who cohabited before marriage or married directly. Chapter 5 uses a slightly modified version of the typology proposed in Chapter 2 and studies the relationship transitions of cohabiters in Eastern and Western Germany. It is shown that the meaning attached to cohabitation is associated with subsequent marriage and separation.

In Chapter 6, I conclude my dissertation by summarizing the main findings and discussing their implications and limitations. Finally, I suggest avenues for future research.