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## The different meanings of cohabitation across Europe

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## 2. Understanding diversity in the meaning of cohabitation across Europe<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Introduction

In the last decades, unmarried cohabitation has become increasingly popular. Nowadays, most people cohabit unmarried at some point in their lives. Little is known, however, about the meaning that cohabiters attach to their relationships and how this may vary across countries. The academic debate circles around the question whether cohabitation serves as a prelude or an alternative to marriage (Casper and Bianchi, 2002; Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Manning and Smock, 2002; Stanley *et al.*, 2004; Willoughby *et al.*, 2012). The former view on cohabitation implies that marriage is still central to people's lives, whereas the latter view suggests that cohabitation is increasingly substituting for marriage. However, many studies on cohabitation tend to ignore such differences in the meaning of cohabitation and compare the cohabiters with individuals in other partnership statuses, such as marriage and singlehood. This is unfortunate as such an undifferentiated view on cohabitation does not do justice to the complexity of contemporary union formation processes, especially when studying countries that differ in the prevalence of cohabitation. There is no single meaning of cohabitation, but it can mean different things to different people. In this study, we focus on the heterogeneity within the group of cohabiters. We argue that more knowledge about the views of cohabiters towards their living arrangement will increase our understanding of the role of cohabitation in an individual's union career and how it relates to marriage. Our first research question is: Which different meanings of cohabitation can we identify and quantify across Europe?

European countries vary in the prevalence of cohabitation, but also in its timing, duration and stability (Kalmijn, 2011; Kasearu and Kutsar, 2011; Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006). Historically, in some countries, it were predominantly the poor who cohabited, whereas in other countries, cohabitation was especially common among those who had been married before or who were ideologically opposed to marriage (Abrams, 1993; Manting, 1996; Trost, 1978; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991). More recent studies focused on the identification of cross-national differences in the predominant

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was co-authored with prof. dr. Aart C. Liefbroer and dr. Anne-Rigt Poortman. A shortened version of this chapter is currently under review. An earlier version of this chapter has been presented at the European Population Conference, June 2012, Stockholm, Sweden

meaning of cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). But also within-country diversity in these meanings may exist: Cohabitation may be more heterogeneous in some countries than in others. Studying this diversity across Europe as well within countries will lead to a better understanding of cross-national differences in findings on cohabitation. Our second research question is therefore: How do countries differ in the prevalence of different meanings of cohabitation?

Many previous studies focused on the role of selection, and hence, examined which characteristics predisposed individuals to opt for unmarried cohabitation. These studies thus argued that cohabiters differ from single as well as married individuals before they enter cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Liefbroer, 1991b). 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, we examine which precursors and correlates differentiate between cohabiters who attach different meanings to their cohabiting relationship. Our third research question therefore is: What are the precursors and correlates of individuals in different types of cohabitation?

We use data from the Generations and Gender Surveys (*GGS*) conducted between 2004 and 2009 on nationally representative samples in different European countries. In Section 2 of this chapter the relevant literature on the meaning of cohabitation is reviewed and how this study builds on previous work. Moreover, cross-national differences in the meanings of cohabitation are discussed and how social norms influence cohabiters in their views upon their unions. Finally, potential precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation are discussed. Section 3 introduces the data that are used: The Generations and Gender Surveys. In Section 4, the indicators used to derive different types of cohabitation are presented. In Section 5, the measurements of potential precursors and correlates of different cohabitation types are presented. In Section 6, the analytical strategy is described. In Section 7, the distributions of different meanings of cohabitation are compared cross-nationally. Furthermore, findings on whether and how individual socio-demographic characteristics, the relationship history and features of the current intimate union are associated with different cohabitation types are presented. In Section 8, the main results of this study are discussed.

## 2.2. Grasping the meaning of cohabitation

The spread of unmarried cohabitation is one of the significant changes in the demographic behavior in contemporary Europe (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008). Increasingly, unions start by cohabitation rather than marriage (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010) and more often, cohabitation enters spheres that used to be exclusively reserved for marriage, most notably childbearing (Kiernan, 2004; Manting, 1996; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2010). Several typologies of the different meanings of cohabitation have been suggested. These typologies emanate from viewing cohabitation either as a stage in the marriage process or an alternative to marriage. Hence, most existing attempts to grasp the meaning of cohabitation aim at understanding how cohabitation relates to marriage. Bianchi and Casper (2000) distinguished four cohabitation types in the United States, based on cohabiters' plans to marry and their anticipated union duration. Willoughby *et al.* (2012) identified five types of cohabiters in a non-representative sample of US-cohabiters based on their engagement status and the expected duration until marriage. Kiernan (2001) has advocated the idea that the societal diffusion of cohabitation implies a progression through four stages. Cohabitation starts as a deviant behavior, becomes acceptable as a period preceding marriage, then becomes an alternative to marriage and finally replaces marriage or at least becomes a "type of marriage" (Prinz, 1995). In its final stage, cohabitation is the norm of union entry, cohabiting unions are stable and very similar to marriage while marriage and childbearing are largely decoupled (Van de Kaa, 2001). The same diffusion model underlies the typology proposed by Heuveline and Timberlake (2004) who distinguished six meanings of cohabitation by further differentiating Kiernan's *prelude to marriage* stage according to the timing of marriage (before or after childbirth). Moreover, they add a type that emphasizes the similarities between cohabitation and singlehood as suggested by Rindfuss and Vandenhevel (1990) who, when discussing the United States context, argued that cohabitation could constitute an alternative to singlehood as commitment to permanency might not be too relevant during the gradual process of moving in together.

The existing typologies who took a country comparative perspective used data from Western European (Kiernan, 2002a) and the EU-15 area countries, respectively (Kiernan, 2002b) or compared the United States to a variety of European countries, as well as Canada and New Zealand (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004). Thus, these typologies characterize countries by one specific meaning of cohabitation depending upon the stage of the country in the diffusion process.

Although the existing attempts to classify cohabiters have been proven to be valuable, we propose an approach that addresses a number of issues that were not covered by these previous classifications. First, by classifying whole countries by one predominant meaning of cohabitation, previous classifications did not address the heterogeneity of cohabitation within a country. Consequently, these typologies have been contested by country specific findings on the meaning of cohabitation. For instance, the view that Norway would have reached the final stage of diffusion where cohabitation is *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 cohabitations that do not break up are converted into marriage at one point in the union career and marriage is the dominant union type for individuals aged 45 (Wiik, 2009). Moreover, 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 *et al.*, 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 cohabiter’s 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 by contrast, cohabitation is largely an urban, post-marital arrangement for those who do not plan to re-marry (Zakharov, 2008). In Hungary however, cohabitation is acceptable as a kind of trial period before the desire to marry one’s partner is realized (Pongracz, 2012). Our methodological approach allows to identify variation between and within countries that have a low prevalence of cohabitation.

Second, most existing cohabitation typologies classify cohabiters on the basis of observable behaviors, such as union duration (Bianchi and Casper, 2000), the route of exit from cohabitation (Kiernan, 2001) as well as the duration of children’s exposure to parental cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004). Drawbacks of these approaches are that they only allow for a retrospective attribution of the meaning of cohabitation, and that inferring meaning from behavior is a rather indirect approach. Alternatively, we try to grasp this meaning by inferring it from responses on subjective questions on how cohabiters think about marriage. Ideally, surveys would include direct questions in which cohabiters are asked why they cohabit. In the absence of such data, we use answers to questions about marriage

intentions and marriage attitudes to derive a relatively parsimonious set of ideal types of cohabitation that capture how cohabiters *currently* view their union. However, we share the limitation of previous studies that we assign a certain meaning of cohabitation based on response patterns on indirect indicators.

Third, previous studies focuses on young adults by linking the meaning of cohabitation exclusively to the family formation process or studied never married only. In this study, we aim to develop a typology that applies to all age groups and to all stages and circumstances of the adult life course.

Finally, previous typologies used data that were limited with respect to time and place. Most were based on data from 10 to 20 years ago. Since then, cohabitation patterns have profoundly changed. Others are based on samples that are not representative for a national population. In addition, mainly Western Europe and the United States have been studied. Less attention has been paid to countries in Central and Eastern Europe –a region that has witnessed significant societal, political, and demographic changes in recent decades.

We distinguish five ideal types of cohabitation. We start from two broad views on cohabitation in the literature: Cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process and as an alternative to marriage.

### 2.2.1. *Cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process*

In this view, marriage remains a valued institution and cohabitation constitutes a stage preceding marriage and may take three forms. First, cohabitation can be a form of engagement or the last phase of courtship, and thus a *prelude to marriage* in which couples anticipate to marry their partner, often having firm intentions to marry (Bianchi and Casper, 2000; Brown, 2003; Brown and Booth, 1996).

Second, cohabitation might be a testing ground for marriage and thus a *trial marriage* that responds to uncertainties whether the dating partner is a suitable potential spouse (Klijzing, 1992; Seltzer, 2004). Cohabitation offers the advantages of co-residence with an intimate partner, without having to commit as yet to expected marital roles (Clarkberg *et al.*, 1995). Existent typologies did either not distinguish between cohabitation as a *prelude to marriage* and a *trial marriage*, used either the one or the other label for a similar type of cohabitation or did not clearly state the difference in the nature of both types. In our view, both groups share a positive attitude towards marriage but differ in the anticipation of marriage. Whereas the former group has already decided to get married, the latter is evaluating the relationship.

Third, it has been argued that economic considerations shape the marriage decision (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985; Hoem, 1986; Kravdal, 1999; Oppenheimer, 1988) and cohabitation might serve as a second best option when marriage is not (yet) feasible. Individuals with few economic resources are more likely to cohabit (Kalmijn 2011; Kravdal 1999; Manning and Smock 2002). Some might not be able to afford the costs for the wedding (Kravdal, 1997), whereas others might not feel sufficiently economically consolidated to warrant the step to marriage with its inherent role expectations and the mutual claim on each other's property (Clarkberg, 1999; Oppenheimer, 1988, 2003). For instance, being enrolled in education is perceived as incompatible with the role of a spouse (Blossfeld and Huinink, 1991). In addition, marriage is often associated with having children – an expensive undertaking for which financial means need to be accumulated first (Clarkberg *et al.*, 1995). According to this view, some cohabit because they are *too poor to marry*.

### 2.2.2. *Cohabitation as an alternative to marriage*

A contrasting view on cohabitation understands it as an alternative to marriage. It suggests that marriage is losing its dominant status and cohabitation increasingly substitutes for it. Two main reasons are mentioned in the literature.

First and foremost, individuals may cohabit out of an ideological *refusal of marriage*. Cohabitors in this type view marriage as a bourgeois and outdated institution (Casper and Bianchi, 2002), are in stable long-term relationships (Bianchi and Casper, 2000), value personal autonomy and have liberal attitudes with regard to gender roles and the division of labor (Clarkberg *et al.*, 1995).

Second, cohabiters may feel that *marriage is not relevant* for them. They do not reject marriage for ideological reasons; they just do not consider it important to get married. Marriage would not make any difference for their commitment and feelings towards their partner; they might even feel that they are in a way married, just not in the legal sense. This type of cohabitation has been described by Kiernan (2002a) who identified it as the last stage of the diffusion process of cohabitation.

### 2.2.3. *Differences in the meaning of cohabitation across Europe*

Previous research on the meaning of cohabitation mainly focused on Western Europe as well as the United States and Canada. Little attention has been paid to countries situated in Central and Eastern Europe that relatively recently witnessed a dramatic increase in unmarried cohabitation (Sobotka, 2003). Historically, marriage patterns in Northern and Western Europe differed from other parts of Europe (Thornton, 2005). Hajnal (1965) suggested a

geographical division of Europe into two marriage regimes by drawing an imaginary line from St. Petersburg to Trieste. He described marriage west of the line as *late and non-universal* and east of the line as *early and nearly universal*. This divide has been endorsed by the geopolitical division of Europe by the Iron Curtain for more than four decades. Until the political transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Central and Eastern Europe was largely isolated from Western and Northern Europe, where in turn dramatic changes in demographic behavior have occurred since the late 1960s. Often, these changes have been attributed to value and attitudinal shifts (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Van de Kaa, 1987). Increasing secularization, weakening family ties, and growing individualization would have boosted the spread of cohabitation and its rising significance as an institution of family formation during the so-called second demographic transition.

During the societal, political and economic transformation of the institutional structure of Central and Eastern Europe, many of the countries in that region experienced an ideational change that led to the embracement of the values, attitudes and lifestyle of the West as a synonym of “development, progress and the good life to be” (Thornton and Philipov, 2009 pp. 135). This transformation would have led to the “westernization of demographic patterns” in this region (Sobotka, 2003 pp. 476) as people had more opportunities and a greater deal of freedom in making choices over their lives.

The cultural explanation with its focus on shifts in individual preferences provides one framework to explain cross-national variation in the meanings of cohabitation. Its basic idea is that positive attitudes towards unmarried cohabitation are spreading from Northern European countries to the rest of Europe. Cross-national differences in the meaning of cohabitation are explained by countries being situated at different stages of this transition (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; 2002b). As a consequence of Western and Northern Europe being further advanced in the societal diffusion of cohabitation than Central and Eastern Europe, certain cohabitation types may be overrepresented in Western and Northern Europe, such as viewing cohabitation as an “end in itself” rather than a stepping stone in the marriage process. Cohabitors may also be a more diverse group in these countries leading to a larger diversity of the cohabitation typology. The lower diffusion and societal approval of cohabitation in Central and Eastern Europe may result in cohabitation serving mostly as a temporary stage and diversity in the meanings of cohabitation being low.

Cultural factors may not be the only ones to explain European differences in cohabitation patterns. It is also debated whether the rising significance of unmarried cohabitation in Central and Eastern Europe might be a consequence of increased economic uncertainty and social disintegration. The economic explanation emphasizes the constraints that individuals experience in the process of union formation. The turmoil of the fall of the Iron Curtain might have decreased individuals' confidence in making commitments to largely irreversible demographic decisions such as marriage and childbearing (Kohler *et al.*, 2002). Increased economic uncertainty may lead people to postpone marriage, particularly those who enter the labor market or are in unstable and low paid employment. Studies on union formation processes in Central and Eastern Europe have shown a positive educational gradient of entry into marriage (Bradatan and Kulcsar, 2008; Gerber and Berman, 2010; Hoem and Kostova, 2008; Kantorova, 2004) and argued that these educational differences can be attributed to economic inequality rather than ideational change. Several country specific studies on cohabitation in this region found that cohabitation is more prevalent among the lower social strata of society (Kotycheva and Philipov, 2008; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2010; Potancokova, Vano, Pilinská and Jurcova, 2008; Spéder and Kamarás, 2008) although some of these studies conclude that, for younger birth cohorts, educational differences in the choice of union type become smaller. Following the economic argument, one could explain cross-national variation in the mix of cohabitation types by economic variation across countries. If cohabitation is a consequence of economic disadvantage, the "too poor to marry" type would be more prevalent in less prosperous Central and Eastern Europe than in wealthier Western and Northern Europe (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985; Hoem, 1986).

In a context where poverty is widespread, economic conditions may be however not that essential in how cohabitation is viewed upon. This may be particularly true when traditional norms about marriage have persisted and cohabitation is disapproved off as a long term alternative to marriage. When social norms to marry are strong, financial obstacles might be lower, for instance because parents are willing to pay for their children's wedding or it is more common to have a less elaborate wedding festivity.

The previous argument illustrates that attaching meaning to one's cohabiting union does not happen in a social vacuum but relates to social norms about cohabitation and marriage in the social environment. The existence and influence of such group-held beliefs about appropriate behavior can affect cohabiters' views on their union in two ways. First, social norms are internalized during the lifelong process of socialization and might thus be

replicated when individual attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation are formed (Barber, Axinn and Thornton, 2002). Hence, in a context where traditional norms towards cohabitation and marriage prevail, individuals may be more likely to hold the same values. Second, individuals also respond to social norms independently of their own attitudes and thus show conformity to widely accepted behavior in their social environment (Liefbroer, Gerritsen and De Jong Gierveld, 1994). Social norms, transmitted through social control and pressure might lead to conformism. Thus, in contexts with strong traditional norms about union formation, people might be less likely to enter cohabitation and to proceed faster to marriage, if they happen to cohabit (Thornton *et al.*, 2007).

#### 2.2.4. *Precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation*

When cohabitation started to emerge, many studies focused on the role of selection by arguing that cohabiters differ from individuals in other union types before they enter cohabitation (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Kiernan, 2001). When cohabitation becomes an increasingly heterogeneous phenomenon in terms of meanings attached to it, individuals entering different types of cohabitation might increasingly differ in individual characteristics and the nature of their relationship. In order to give consideration to the increasing diversity of cohabitation in contemporary societies, we suggest studying precursors and correlates of different types of cohabitation rather than the entry into cohabitation in general.

The literature on selection into cohabitation provides robust cross-national evidence that younger, more secular and those individuals living in urban areas are more likely to cohabit but findings concerning the association between education attainment as well as employment status and cohabitation are less congruent. The *level of education attainment* has been argued to be a cultural resource that fosters progressiveness towards new living arrangements such as cohabitation (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988) and could therefore mean that highly educated are overrepresented among cohabiters viewing their union as a prelude to marriage. Education is however also a material resource that facilitates a smoother integration in the labor market which in turn has been found to promote the transition to marriage (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001). Consequently, the recent increase in cohabitation has been interpreted as a consequence of economic disadvantage (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2012; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2010) of those with low education attainment or in precarious *employment* (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2005; Goldstein and Kenney, 2001; McDonald, 2006; Oppenheimer, 1988). It could therefore also be that highly educated and employed cohabiters are

overrepresented among cohabiters who view their union as a prelude to marriage, whereas lowly educated and non-employed cohabiters are more likely to be too poor to marry or view their union as an alternative to marriage.

Existing studies also suggest that there is an association between prior union history and the entry into cohabitation. Individuals who are *divorced* have been found to be more inclined to cohabit (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). The experience of a divorce might result in a heightened reluctance to institutionalize the present relationship in order to avoid the repetition of failure and disappointment. Previously divorced individuals could also have lost their faith in the institution of marriage or not consider it relevant to re-marry. *Widowed* individuals could see fewer benefits in remarriage than others. Cohabitation could be useful to protect their financial benefits (*i.e.* widow pension), tax privileges and inheritance. Moreover, widowed cohabiters might consider themselves “too old” to get married again (King and Scott, 2005) or the idea of remarriage might inspire feelings of disloyalty towards the deceased spouse (Bulcroft and O’Connor, 1986). Especially older women might not be willing to give up their new-found independence and recommit to the demands that they associate with a traditional marriage (Davidson, 2001; Hatch, 1995; Lopata, 1986). It is less clear, how having *cohabited in the past* is related to how cohabiters view upon their union. Lichter and Qian (2008) found that serial cohabitation was negatively associated with the transition to marriage. The meaning that cohabiters attach to their current union could also depend on whether they have *children from previous union*. Children could discourage remarriage for various reasons. When children are young, they might object to remarriage because they do not agree with the partner choice of their parent. Older children could raise concerns about the inheritance (De Jong Gierveld and Peeters, 2003). The new partner in turn could be less inclined to marry in order to avoid commitment to and responsibility for children that are not his or her biological offspring. These findings lead to the expectation that cohabiters with a more complex union history are more likely to view their union as an alternative to marriage, either because they reject the institution of marriage or consider marriage irrelevant.

Other studies have addressed the question whether cohabiters have different relationships than married couples (Brines and Joyner, 1999). Differences between cohabiters and married have been argued to result from inherent differences between cohabitation and marriage, for instance in the level of interpersonal commitment (Rhoades *et al.*, 2010; Stanley *et al.*, 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). In general it is assumed that cohabiting unions are characterized by lower levels of *relationship satisfaction* than marriages (Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Still, among cohabiters variation might exist in their level of commitment. We expect relationship satisfaction to be lowest among cohabiters in a trial marriage as this group might be overrepresented by “bad matches”. *Joint biological children* with the current partner can be viewed as a relationship specific investment that increases the commitment between cohabiting partners (England and Farkas, 1986). Cohabiting parents might therefore be overrepresented among the more permanent types of cohabitation that do not aspire marriage. Finally, *union duration* might differentiate between cohabitation types. Union duration might be longer among cohabiters in the more permanent types of cohabitation in which the union is viewed as an alternative to marriage.

The diffusion model of cohabitation –cohabitation starting as a marginal behavior and ultimately being “indistinguishable from marriage” (Kiernan, 2002a)– suggests that selection into different types of cohabitation and the level of commitment within cohabiting unions might vary at different stages of the societal diffusion of cohabitation. Prior research has therefore expanded the selection and commitment 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, cohabiters become a more diverse group given the weaker selection into cohabitation (Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006; Schoen, 1992).

Building on the existing literature, we explore whether these characteristics of cohabiters and their unions, respectively, are associated with the meaning that cohabiters attach to their relationship. We moreover explore whether we find differences in the association between precursors and correlates of cohabitation and the meaning attached to cohabitation across Europe and compare Western and Northern with Central and Eastern Europe as two regions that differ in the societal diffusion of cohabitation. By doing so, we introduce more complexity in the study of cohabitation but we argue that this will increase our understanding of the actual complexity of cohabitation in contemporary Europe.

### 2.3. Data

We use data from the Generations and Gender Surveys on ten countries. The 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, Wave 1 data collected between 2004 and 2009 is 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 samples differs by country but most surveys contain about 10,000 respondents. We had to exclude Australia, Belgium, Estonia, Italy and the Netherlands from our analysis, as crucial variables for our analysis were not collected in these countries. The age range of the Austrian sample differs from other countries because only individuals aged 18 to 45 were interviewed. The overall response rates vary between 49 percent in Russia and 78 percent in Bulgaria.

Of all respondents living with a partner ( $n = 70,108$ ) we excluded those who are married to this partner ( $n = 59,630$ ), those with an unknown marital status ( $n = 77$ ), those with a partner of the same sex ( $n = 87$ ), and those whose partners' sex was unknown ( $n = 4$ ). As will be explained in more detail in the next section, we used three empirical indicators to distinguish different types of cohabitation, namely marital intentions, attitudes towards marriage and subjective feelings of economic deprivation. We limited our analysis to cohabiters who have valid data on these three indicators that form our cohabitation typology. In Norway, the question on marital attitudes was part of a self-administered questionnaire that respondents were requested to return via mail and 30 percent did not. Overall, missing data on the explaining variables were rare ( $< 2\%$ ) and those cases excluded from the analysis. In France, when someone else was present during the interview, the question on relationship satisfaction was not asked resulting in an item non-response of 30 percent. Additional analyses with "missing" as an additional category led to virtually similar results as presented here (results available upon request). Our final analytical sample contains 9,113 men and women who cohabit with a partner, ranging from 449 in Romania and 1,571 in Norway.

### 2.4. Distinguishing different types of cohabitation

In order to translate our theoretical typology of cohabitation developed in the theory section into an empirically measurable classification, we use three key indicators, namely (1) intentions to marry, (2) attitudes towards the institution

of marriage and (3) subjective economic deprivation, to distinguish between types of cohabitation (*Table 2.1*).

A number of previous studies have stressed the importance of marital intentions to understand cohabiters' behaviors (Ciabattari, 2004; Guzzo, 2009; Manning and Smock, 2002; Wiik, Bernhardt and Noack, 2010). The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that intentions predict subsequent behavior. Cohabiters with marital intentions have been found to be four times as likely to actually marry within three years than cohabiters without marriage plans (Manning and Smock, 2002). Additionally paying attention to attitudes towards the institution of marriage, however, is particularly relevant to understand how cohabiters without clear marital intentions view their unions. As Coast (2009) noted, the absence of marital intentions can mean different things: The ideological rejection of the institution of marriage, an assessment that the current partner is not a suitable potential spouse but no opposition to marriage *per se*, or that one is not yet contemplating marriage. The attitude one holds about the institution of marriage is likely to be intertwined with how relevant it is for oneself to get married. Cohabiters who consider marriage an outdated institution might be less likely to marry themselves than cohabiters who are in favor of the institution of marriage. Taking into account marital attitudes is not only important to further distinguish the group of cohabiters who do not intend to marry soon, but also among those who intend to marry. Cohabiters with positive attitudes towards marriage might have different relationships than cohabiters who share the intention to marry but do not value the institution of marriage. For the latter group, the expectation to make the transition to marriage might be an expression of a perceived absence of alternatives to marriage.

Intentions to get married in the near future have been measured by asking: "Do you intend to marry your partner within the next three years?" In Norway, respondents were asked for marriage plans within two years. Respondents who answered *definitely yes* or *probably yes* are considered to have marriage plans. Those who responded *probably no*, *definitely no* or *does not know* are treated as having no marital intentions. Norwegian respondents could only choose between *yes* and *no*. In Hungary a negative answer could only be *no*. Between 17 percent of respondents in Norway and 74 percent in Romania report having plans to marry in the near future.

Attitudes towards marriage were measured by the level of agreement towards the statement "Marriage is an outdated institution" on a 5-point Likert scale

Table 2.1. Percentage (weighted) distribution of key indicators defining different meanings of cohabitation, by country ( $N = 9,113$ )

	Western and Northern Europe					Central and Eastern Europe				
	Austria*	Germany	France	Norway	Bulgaria	Georgia	Hungary	Lithuania	Romania	Russia
Marital intentions	47.5	33.2	37.1	17.3	42.8	79.7	52.1	61.8	74.1	47.2
Mar. not outdated	43.4	48.8	50.9	40.7	27.3	82.2	40.6	33.6	49.4	52.6
Mar. is outdated	25.5	27.0	26.8	22.3	48.1	9.3	32.2	29.7	17.5	24.3
Undecided	31.2	24.2	22.3	37.0	24.6	8.5	27.6	36.7	33.1	23.2
Econ. deprived	6.0	13.2	25.3	2.7	74.2	58.7	19.0	15.1	42.6	50.9
<i>N</i>	879	748	1,173	1,571	840	906	1,148	562	449	837

Note: Table includes weighted percentages and unweighted number of cases  
 \*different age range (18–45)

(1= *strongly agree*, 3= *neither agree nor disagree*, 5= *strongly disagree*). Respondents with values 1 or 2 are classified as agreeing that marriage is an outdated institution. Those with values 4 or 5 are considered to disagree and respondents with a value 3 are classified as being indifferent about marriage. Agreement is particularly low in Georgia (9%) and Romania (18%) and highest in Bulgaria where almost half of the respondents consider marriage outdated.

Finally, how cohabiters view their union does not just depend on their preferences but also on perceived constraints. Facing a difficult economic situation might lead people to postpone any further institutionalization of their union although they aspire to marry one day. To capture subjective economic deprivation we used responses to the question: “Thinking of your household’s total monthly income, is your household able to make ends meet ...” The 6-point scale ranges from *with great difficulty to very easily*. We consider respondents who answer *with (great) difficulty* as feeling economically deprived. Feelings of economic deprivation are more frequent in Central and Eastern Europe (with the exception of Hungary and Lithuania) than in Western and Northern Europe. Nevertheless, even in the latter countries, between 3 percent in Norway and 25 percent in France have trouble making ends meet.

Table 2.2 illustrates how we construct an empirical classification of cohabiters based on their responses to our three main indicators. Cohabiters who have marriage plans in the near future and disagree that marriage is an outdated institution are classified as viewing cohabitation as a *prelude to marriage*. Cohabiters who have no marital intentions in the near future and do not consider marriage outdated are grouped into a category “not ready yet”. Reasons for not feeling ready yet could be related to preferences as well as to perceived constraints. Those who *do not* feel economically deprived are classified into the *trial marriage* type of cohabitation. Cohabiters who *do* feel economically deprived are classified as belonging to the group that is *too poor to marry*. Feelings of economic deprivation are not relevant in distinguishing other types of cohabitation. Cohabiters who have no marital intentions and consider marriage an outdated institution are classified as *refusing marriage*. Finally, cohabiters without intentions to get married but who are indifferent about marriage are classified as considering *marriage irrelevant*.

Table 2.2. An empirical typology of different meanings of cohabitation based on three indicators

	Intends to marry within three years	Agrees that marriage is outdated	Has trouble making ends meet
Prelude to marriage	yes	no	not relevant <sup>a</sup>
Trial marriage	no	no	no
Too poor to marry	no	no	yes
Refusal of marriage	no	yes	not relevant <sup>1</sup>
Marriage is irrelevant	no	neutral	not relevant <sup>1</sup>

Note: <sup>a</sup>This indicator is not used to classify respondents in that type of cohabitation

## 2.5. Measurements of precursors and correlates

### 2.5.1. Sociodemographic characteristics

*Education attainment.* The data provide an international comparable measure of level of education attainment based on the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO, 2006). We distinguish three levels: *Low*, *medium* and *high*. The first category groups people with primary (either complete or incomplete) and lower secondary education, the second category comprises upper secondary and post-secondary non-university education and the third category includes respondents with a lower or upper tertiary university education.

*Employment status.* We distinguish individuals in paid employment from individuals without employment (unemployed and non-employed), and individuals enrolled in education.

*Age.* We include age and age squared as continuous variables measured in years to identify non-linear effects of age. The analyses control for gender which is included as a dummy variable taking the value 1 if the respondent is female.

### 2.5.2. Union history

Respondents were asked about intimate relationships prior to the current relationship and to report children from past unions. We include a number of variables that distinguish respondents by whether they have been *cohabiting*, *married*, or *widowed* previously as well as by whether the respondent has at least one biological child from a prior relationship living in the household. Each of these variables has been coded to take the value 1 if the situation is true for the respondent.

### 2.5.3. *Characteristics of the current relationship*

A variable is created that takes the value 1 if the respondents reports at least one *joint biological child* with the current partner that lives in the household. The *relationship satisfaction* is assessed by the question “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?” The Likert scale ranges from 1= *not at all satisfied* to 11= *completely satisfied* and has been implemented as a continuous variable. The *union duration* has been measured as the time in years between the date when the couple started to live together and the interview and is included as a continuous variable.

## 2.6. Analytical strategy

We deductively defined a typology of different meanings of cohabitation and assigned each respondent to one of the types based on his or her response pattern on the key indicators distinguishing the cohabitation types. In order to answer our first research question we compare the distributions of different cohabitation types within and across ten European countries. In order to answer our second research question on cross-national differences in cohabitation patterns, we calculate the proportion of cohabiters among all co-resident partnerships as well as a measure of entropy (=amount of variation of the typology) for each country. We then discuss patterns and variations in the distribution of different meanings within and across countries.

In order to answer our final research question on the precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation, we conduct multinomial logistic regression analyses with the meanings of cohabitation as different outcome categories for two pooled data sets (Western/Northern Europe and Central/Eastern Europe) with country dummies. To make the results section more readable, we use the terms “Western Europe” and “Eastern Europe” in the following.

## 2.7. Results

2.7.1. *The prevalence of different meanings of cohabitation across Europe*  
Table 2.3 shows the percentage distribution of different meanings of cohabitation for each country in our study. The large majority of cohabiters views cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process rather than as an alternative to marriage. Across countries, we identify between half of the cohabiters (Norway) and virtually all cohabiters (Georgia) as belonging to

Table 2.3. Percentage (weighted) distribution of different meanings of cohabitation, measure of variation (entropy), by country ( $N = 9,113$ )

	Western and Northern Europe					Central and Eastern Europe				
	Austria*	Germany	France	Norway	Bulgaria	Georgia	Hungary	Lithuania	Romania	Russia
Prelude to marriage	27.0	24.8	20.2	10.5	16.0	66.0	24.2	23.2	39.0	25.9
Trial marriage	15.2	19.3	26.4	29.3	1.7	5.7	13.4	8.1	5.2	9.8
Too poor to marry	1.2	6.8	2.2	0.9	9.6	10.5	2.6	2.4	5.2	16.9
Refusal of marriage	17.9	21.5	21.0	20.5	32.3	2.1	19.3	13.6	4.8	14.5
Marriage irrelevant	18.3	15.4	17.1	31.9	13.7	1.9	12.7	14.2	10.7	11.6
Conformist	20.5	12.3	13.0	6.9	26.8	13.7	27.9	38.7	35.0	21.3
Entropy typology <sup>a</sup>	0.74	0.76	0.76	0.71	0.67	0.45	0.72	0.68	0.6	0.73
Cohabitation rate <sup>b</sup>	30.2	19.7	12.2	23.0	10.8	14.2	13.6	11.4	5.3	15.4
<i>N</i>	879	1,173	748	1,571	840	906	1,148	562	449	837

Note: <sup>a</sup> Measure of variation of different cohabitation types;

<sup>b</sup> Proportion cohabiters among all couples in co-resident unions.

Table includes weighted percentages and unweighted number of cases.

\*different age range (18-45 years).

one of the subclasses of cohabitation viewed as a precursor to marriage. Among those, most cohabiters have plans to get married in the near future. Cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is most prevalent in Georgia (66%) and Romania (39%), whereas in Western European countries, their proportion varies between 11 percent (Norway) and 27 percent (Austria). With the exception of Hungary where 13 percent of cohabiters are in a trial marriage, this type of cohabitation comprises less than ten percent of all cohabiters in Eastern Europe, and is thus lower compared to cohabiters in the Western European countries (15 to 29%). In each of the countries at least a small group of cohabiters is classified as being too poor to marry and their proportion is largest in Russia (17%).

The prevalence of viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage because one refuses the institution of marriage varies strongly across countries and is most common in Bulgaria where one third of all cohabiters agree with the statement that marriage is an outdated institution and does not plan to get married in the near future. In Georgia and Romania by contrast, only a small minority cohabits as a refusal of marriage (2 and 5%, respectively). The largest proportion of cohabiters considering marriage irrelevant is found in the Norwegian sample (32%), whereas in all other countries, this proportion is maximum 18 percent (Austria).

Although the majority of respondents in all countries could be classified into one these five theoretically-based types, we surprisingly also find a significant proportion of cohabiters who do not fit this classification, a group that is too large to form a residual category. These are respondents who feel ideologically disconnected from marriage by either agreeing that it is an outdated institution or being indifferent to it (*i.e.* “neither agree nor disagree”). At the same time, though, they still have plans to get married in the near future. We suggest classifying these cohabiters as *conformists*. Cohabiters in this category might intend to marry in order to please their family, friends or society in general. They might also have incentives to get married. Such rational reasons might be tax benefits or legal protection of the union despite holding an unfavorable opinion about the institution of marriage. Conformism is more prevalent among cohabiters in Eastern Europe and ranges between 14 percent (Georgia) and 39 percent (Lithuania).

In order to put these findings into perspective, Table 2.3 also shows for each country the proportion of cohabiters among all individuals with a partner living in the same household. Cohabitation is marginal in Romania (5%), followed by Bulgaria and Lithuania (11%), Hungary and Georgia (14%) and

Russia (15%). In Western Europe, between 12 percent (Germany) and 23 percent (Norway) of all co-resident partnerships are cohabitations. The high cohabitation rate in Austria (30%) is at least partially caused by the smaller age range covered by the Austrian *GGG* that results in an overrepresentation of younger age groups, which are more likely to cohabit.

When relating our findings on the distribution of different types of cohabitation to the cohabitation rates on the country level, it shows that –as expected– cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is more prevalent in countries where cohabitation rates are low, such as Romania, Georgia, and Lithuania and in turn relatively rare in Norway where cohabitation is highly diffused. In Western Europe, where overall more people cohabit, more cohabiters attach other meanings to their unions, particularly viewing cohabitation as a trial marriage, as a refusal of marriage or considering marriage as being irrelevant. As expected, these meanings are rather uncommon in Eastern European countries, although there are exceptions. For instance, despite the rather low prevalence of cohabitation in Bulgaria, one third of the cohabiters refuse marriage. Conformism is more common in Eastern European countries where overall cohabitation rates are low.

In the background section, we suggested that more diversity in the meaning of cohabitation could be observed in countries that have progressed further in the diffusion of cohabitation. To examine this, we calculated a measure of entropy of the cohabitation typology (Billari, 2001)<sup>2</sup>. This is a measure of variation that ranges from 0 to 1, the latter implying maximal variation of types. In the case of high entropy, an equal number of cohabiters have been assigned to each of the different types of cohabitation. By contrast, low entropy implies that one meaning of cohabitation dominates among cohabiters in a country. In our study, the measure of variation ranges from .48 in Georgia to .75 in France and Russia. In Georgia, the entropy is lowest because virtually all cohabiters are classified as being in the prelude to marriage type. In Romania, where cohabitation rates are lowest, the entropy of the typology is rather low as well. This is because two different meanings of cohabitation are dominant, namely cohabitation as a prelude to marriage and conformism. In Hungary and Russia, the entropy is highest among countries in Eastern Europe and comparable to that in the countries of Western Europe. The different meanings of cohabitation are more equally distributed in their prevalence. The entropy is smaller in Norway than in Western European countries, because many cohabiters consider *marriage irrelevant*. Diversity

<sup>2</sup> The entropy of the cohabitation typology by country is defined as the negative sum of the proportion of cohabiters assigned to each meaning of cohabitation multiplied by its logarithm

$$0 \leq H_c = -\sum_i^k p_i \log(p_i) \leq \log(k).$$

in the meanings of cohabiters is thus lowest in countries where cohabitation is marginal (Romania) as well as in countries where it is strongly diffused (Norway). The heterogeneity is largest in Western European countries with medium levels of cohabitation.

### 2.7.2. *Precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation*

*Table 2.4* presents the descriptive results of potential precursors and correlates of different meanings of cohabitation. In Western Europe, the proportion of cohabiters having attained university education is higher than in Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria and Romania, around half of all cohabiters have completed only primary or lower secondary education. In all countries, the majority is employed. Non-employment is highest in Bulgaria, Georgia and Romania. In Germany and Lithuania, the minority of cohabiters who are enrolled in education is highest (9 and 10%, respectively). Having cohabited with a prior partner is more common in Western Europe. The proportion divorced is larger in Eastern Europe. The group of widowers is small in all countries but largest among Russian cohabiters (12%). Cohabiting unions in Eastern Europe more often involve children from prior unions. A significant proportion of cohabiting unions involve joint biological children, their proportion being lowest in Germany (23%) and highest in Georgia (78%). Very high levels of relationship satisfaction are reported in Austria but the age range is lower in this country. It is particularly low in France but note that the question on relationship satisfaction was not asked in France when someone else was present at the interview (often respondent's partner), resulting in 30 percent non-response. In Romania and Russia, the median age of cohabiters is 36 and 38 years old, respectively. It is lower in all other countries. In Georgia and Romania, cohabiting unions are particularly long unions with a median duration of eight years. In Western Europe, women are slightly overrepresented and vice versa in Eastern Europe, Russia being an exception.

Below, we present results based on a multinomial logistic regression model for 4,371 respondents in Western Europe and 4,742 cohabiters in Eastern Europe. We tested whether the meaning of cohabitation is associated with a number of socio-demographic characteristics, events in the union history and characteristics of the current relationship. We present both multinomial logistic regression models in the annex of this book, *Table Annex A.2a* for Western Europe and *Table Annex A.2b* for Eastern Europe<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> We performed a Likelihood ratio test to examine whether we could collapse any of the outcome categories. The test concludes that we can reject the null hypothesis at the .001 level that any pair of the six outcome categories is indistinguishable for both the Western and the Eastern European pooled data.

*Table 2.4. Percentage (weighted) distribution of sociodemographic characteristics, union history and characteristics of the current union that are potentially associated with the meaning of cohabitation (N = 9,113)*

	Western and Northern Europe					Central and Eastern Europe				
	Aus*	Ger	Fra	Nor	Bul	Geo	Hun	Lith	Rom	Rus
Primary/lower secondary education	8.0	17.1	21.1	21.2	49.3	12.4	20.8	17.5	52.3	15.1
Upper secondary/post-sec. education	72.3	61.1	48.7	44.5	39.5	61.1	63.6	58.8	39.9	55.7
Lower/upper tertiary university education	19.8	21.8	30.3	34.3	11.2	26.5	15.7	23.7	7.8	29.2
Employed	91.3	65.1	74.6	81.4	49.9	49.4	71.0	73.3	54.9	66.2
Unemployed/not employed	5.1	25.5	21.3	11.1	48.8	48.6	27.1	16.6	53.5	31.6
Enrolled in education	3.6	9.4	4.1	7.5	1.3	2.0	1.9	10.1	1.6	3.2
Prior cohabitation	28.8	17.2	21.7	30.0	6.4	2.4	14.7	7.4	7.5	15.4
Prior divorce	10.0	20.5	17.9	22.7	24.5	5.9	39.7	29.5	31.7	46.4
Prior widowhood	0.0	6.0	2.3	1.6	6.0	1.6	6.1	5.8	7.7	12.0
Biological children from prior union	6.7	6.9	8.0	10.8	7.1	1.7	12.3	10.5	9.2	21.8
With biological child(ren)	40.4	23.3	46.3	44.4	55.0	78.1	30.5	23.5	43.3	30.1
High relationship satisfaction	59.4	43.4	17.5 <sup>a</sup>	36.8	44.4	45.4	38.7	28.7	26.5	34.5
Union duration (median)	5.0	4.0	6.0	7.0	6.0	8.0	5.0	3.0	8.0	5.0
Age at interview (median)	31.0	34.0	34.0	36.0	30.0	34.0	32.0	29.0	38.0	36.0
Female	55.7	50.4	50.7	57.6	47.9	44.2	49.9	46.4	48.8	56.3
N	879	748	1,173	1,571	840	906	1,148	562	449	837

Note: Austria, Germany, France, Norway, Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Russia.

Table includes weighted percentages and unweighted number of cases.

\*different age range (18-45 years).

<sup>a</sup>30 percent non response because question was not asked when someone else present during the interview.

Multinomial logistic regression models are hard to interpret because the coefficients only compare odds ratios. In order to ease interpretation and make our key results more tangible we calculate the predicted probability of belonging to each of the cohabitation types for respondent for which we fix the covariates at specific values<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Sociodemographic characteristics*

There is a clear association between education attainment and how cohabiters view their union. To illustrate this association, we calculate predicted probabilities of being classified in each of the six cohabitation types at three levels of education attainment for an “ideal type” of cohabiter. The histograms in *Figure 2.1* show the predicted distribution of cohabitation types by level of education attainment for a woman in her first union, without children whereas age, employment status, union duration, and relationship satisfaction are held at their mean value, for Western and Eastern Europe separately. The predicted probabilities for men with the same characteristics are largely similar in their patterns (results not shown).

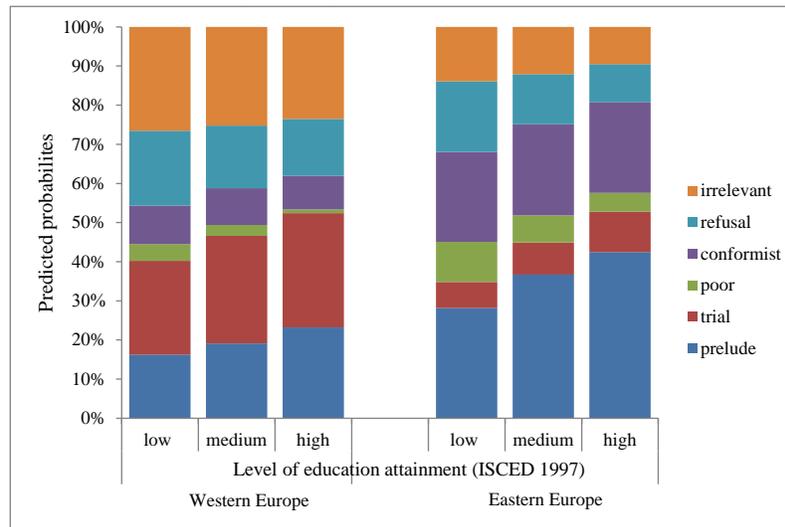
In Western Europe, the higher the level of education attainment, the more likely she views her union as a *prelude to marriage* or a *trial marriage*. Among lower educated women, the predicted proportion of cohabiters who consider *marriage irrelevant* or refuse the institution of marriage is larger than among the higher educated. Being classified as being *too poor to marry* is overall little likely in Western Europe but more likely among low educated women. The predicted probabilities to be classified as conformist do not vary by education attainment and range around nine percent.

In Eastern Europe, although the broad patterns of the association between education and cohabitation types are similar, differences between women with a high and low level of education attainment are larger than it is the case for Western Europe. Moreover, the distribution of cohabitation types looks different given the overall differences in the prevalence of each meaning of cohabitation. Already among women with the lowest level of education attainment, the predicted probability that she views her union as a prelude to marriage is higher than among Western European women with a high education. Among highly educated women in Eastern Europe, the expected proportion of women viewing their union as a prelude to marriage is more than 40 percent (compared to 28% in the lowest education group). The

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<sup>4</sup> We make use of the command margins in Stata 12 (Stata Corp. 2012) The reason that we do not follow the practice of fixing all covariates at their means is that our model contains predominantly dummy variables and someone can only be, for instance, either female or male, but not x percent female and y percent male.

Figure 2.1. Predicted probabilities of different meanings of cohabitation by level of education attainment



Note: Women in their first union, without biological children, other covariates fixed at their mean.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS 2004-2009), author's calculations.

predicted probability of viewing cohabitation as a *trial marriage* is lower compared to Western Europe in all education groups but largest among those with a university degree. The predicted probability of being classified as conformists does not differ across education groups but is with around 20 percent more than twice as large as in Western Europe. Viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, and in particular for refusing the institution of marriage, is more likely among cohabiters with a lower level of education attainment.

Our findings that the higher educated are overrepresented among those who view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage are in line with findings that education is positively associated with the odds of marriage once schooling is completed (Goldstein and Kenney, 2001; Oppenheimer, 2003). Once these preconditions of marriage are accomplished, highly educated individuals quickly catch up and marry, also because they are more attractive candidates in the marriage market compared to their less educated counterparts. The large overrepresentation of low educated among those viewing their union as an alternative to marriage is at odds with the predictions from the SDT

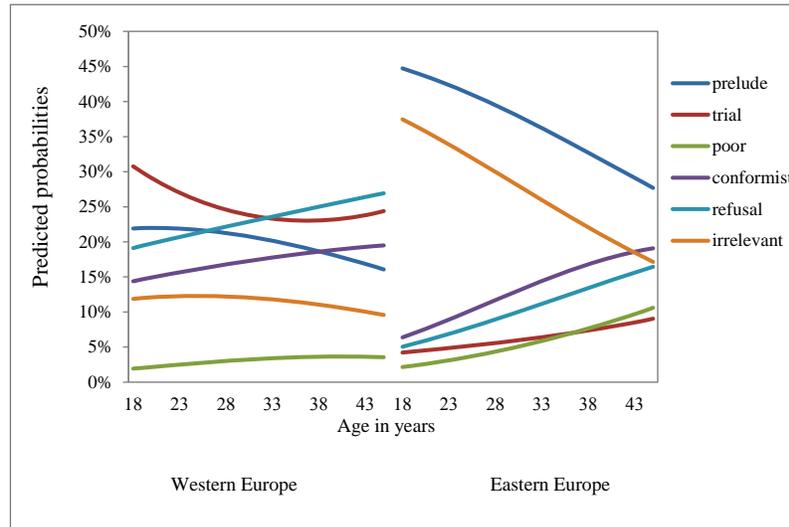
framework in which it is argued that education is a cultural resource that is positively associated with progressiveness towards alternative living arrangements.

We find only little empirical evidence for an association between employment status and the meaning attached to cohabitation. Western European cohabiters who are unemployed or enrolled in education are more likely to be classified as being too poor to marry, compared to being in a prelude to marriage. This is in line with findings that being enrolled in education is viewed as incompatible with the role of a spouse and leads to postponement of marriage (Blossfeld and Huinink, 1991; Blossfeld *et al.*, 2005; Hobcraft and Kiernan, 1995) and suggests that marriage need a more sound footing than cohabitation and marriage is envisaged once one is established in the labor market (Kalmijn, 2011; Thornton *et al.*, 2007).

The views on cohabitation vary by age. This relationship is illustrated in *Figure 2.2* which shows the predicted probabilities for each type of cohabitation when age increases from 18 to 45 years for an “ideal type” female cohabiter. We reduced the age range when calculating these predicted probabilities as Austria covers only respondents 18 to 45 years and overall, the number of observations of cohabiters above age 50 in some types of cohabitation is very small increasing the error of these predicted probabilities.

In Western Europe, the predicted probability to view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage slightly increases between 18 and 30 years and then slowly decreases with increasing age. The slightly u-shaped curve of the predicted probabilities of viewing cohabitation as a trial marriage in the Western European data suggest a non-linear association between this type of cohabitation and age. Until the mid-thirties, the predicted probability of viewing cohabitation as a trial marriage decreases and subsequently increases again. In Eastern Europe however, the predicted probability of viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is highest for the young ages and linearly decreases with age, whereas for viewing cohabitation as trial marriage, we observe a linear increase with age. This means that the term trial marriage might be a little misleading for these cohabiters as not having marital intentions and being positive about marriage as it might indicate a more permanent cohabitation type for older age groups in Eastern Europe. Another interesting finding is the association between age and being too poor to marry in European comparison. In Western Europe, there is no association between the two variables. In Eastern Europe by contrast, older cohabiters are more likely facing economic obstacles to get married. This finding suggests, that being too poor to marry might permanently hinder cohabiters in Eastern

Figure 2.2. Predicted probabilities of different meanings of cohabitation by age



Note: Women in their first union, without biological children, with secondary level of education, other covariates fixed at their mean.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS 2004-2009), author's calculations.

Europe from getting married and thus that this type of cohabitation constitutes more an alternative to marriage than a stage in the marriage process in these contexts. In both Western and Eastern Europe, differences in the association between viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (*i.e.*, marriage is refused or considered irrelevant) are small and for both types of cohabitation, the predicted probability of group membership increases with age.

#### *Union history*

We find some empirical evidence that experiences of earlier cohabitation, divorce, widowhood or the presence of biological children from a former partner are associated with the meaning cohabiters attach to their current cohabiting union. The experience of widowhood significantly increases the probability that the current cohabiting union is a trial marriage. Although re-partnered, it could be that widowed individuals do not feel like rushing into a new marriage. It could also be that the label "trial marriage" (*i.e.* not having marital intentions, not considering marriage outdated) is somehow misleading for widowed respondents. Someone, whose marriage ended

involuntarily by the death of a spouse, is unlikely to agree that marriage is an outdated institution. The absence of marriage plans of widowed cohabiters might actually mean that they are not planning to commit again to marriage at all and their current cohabiting union in reality is a permanent alternative to remarriage. This interpretation is supported by the finding that widowhood increases the odds of considering marriage irrelevant and decreases the odds of rejecting marriage. Divorcees in Eastern Europe are more likely to be classified in a trial marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry, rather than viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage. In Western Europe, the meaning of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is more ideology-driven for divorced cohabiters. They are more likely to reject marriage and less likely to consider marriage irrelevant than their non-divorced counterparts. Cohabiters in Eastern Europe who have cohabited earlier are more likely being classified as being too poor to marry, suggesting some cautious evidence for the idea that serial cohabitation is more prevalent among the more disadvantaged social groups (Lichter and Qian, 2008).

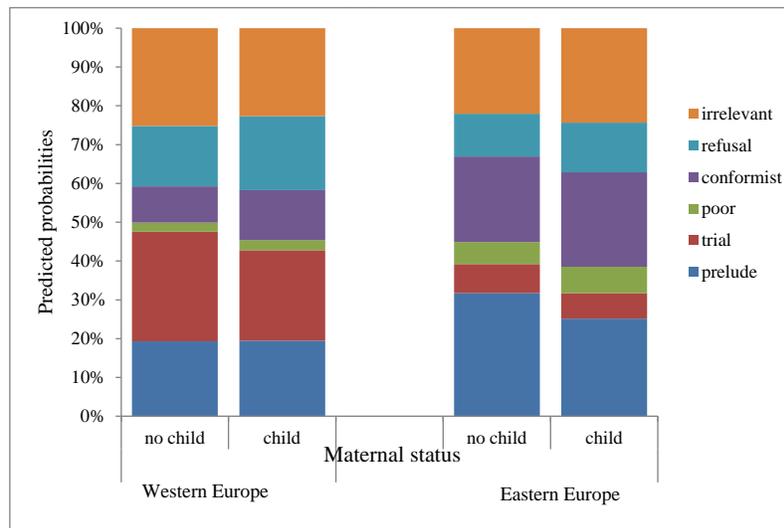
#### *Characteristics of the current relationship*

Having joint biological children living in the household is associated with the meaning attached to cohabitation. The multinomial logistic regression revealed that differences between the prelude to marriage– group and all other groups are larger in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe (Table A.2b). *Figure 2.3* shows the predicted probabilities of different meanings of cohabitation for an “ideal type” female cohabiter (first union, secondary education, in employment, other covariates fixed at their mean) with and without a joint biological child with the cohabiting partner. The results for men with the same characteristics do not differ from these findings (not shown). In Western Europe, the largest difference by parental status is that cohabiting mothers have a lower predicted probability than childless women to view their union as a trial marriage. A joint biological child increases the predicted probability that a woman views their union as a refusal of marriage or is classified as conformist. Marriage is more likely to be irrelevant when the couple does not have children.

In contrast, we find a strongly decreased predicted probability for cohabiting mothers in Eastern Europe to view their union as a prelude to marriage. When an Eastern European cohabiting woman has a child with her partner, she is more likely to be classified as a conformist. This suggests that parenthood and marriage are strongly and normatively intertwined in Eastern Europe.

We find some evidence for the presumption that some cohabiters who already have a joint child view their type of union as a suitable context to bear and rear children. Having children with the current partner is a

Figure 2.3. Predicted probabilities of different meanings of cohabitation by maternal status



Note: Women in their first union, with secondary level of education, other covariates fixed at their mean.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS 2004-2009), author's calculations.

relationship specific investment and signals commitment to the partner. Yet one cannot presume that all children born into cohabitation have been intended as some cohabiting parents might have started living together in response to an unintended pregnancy (Raley, 2001; Reed, 2006). A relatively large proportion of cohabiting parents envisage marriage which suggests that getting married is part of the family building process, although not necessarily preceding childbearing. Economic constraints seem to play a minor role in differentiating childless cohabiters and cohabiting parents. Across Europe, the presence of children however increases the probability that cohabiters plan to marry despite an unfavorable or undecided opinion about the institution of marriage. Prior research has shown that children turn parents into conformists (Ryder, 1965). It is likely, that considerations of the legal protection of common children might play a role, as well as that someone is more willing to acknowledge his or her partner's urge to marry when children are already involved.

We find that the relationship satisfaction is associated with the meaning that cohabiters attach to their union. This relationship is illustrated in *Figure 2.4* which shows the predicted probabilities for each type of cohabitation

when relationship satisfaction increases from “not satisfied at all” to “very satisfied” for an “ideal type” female cohabiter.

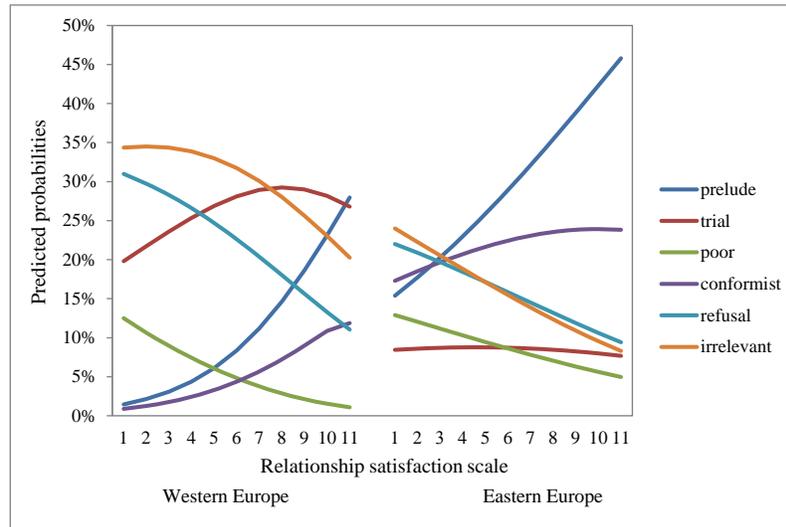
First of all, the figure shows that among cohabiters with a very low relationship satisfaction, differences in the expected probability to view cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process and to view it as an alternative to marriage are much larger in Western Europe compared to Eastern Europe.

In Western Europe, the predicted probability to view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is highest when relationship satisfaction is low. Viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage or being classified as conformist is lowest when relationship satisfaction is low. The most satisfied cohabiters in Western Europe are as likely to view their union as a prelude to marriage as to consider it irrelevant to marry. We also observe identical predicted probabilities for the very happy cohabiters to either view their union as a refusal of marriage or being classified as conformists. High relationship satisfaction is negatively associated with being too poor to marry. Interestingly, the predicted probabilities of belonging to one of the two groups of cohabiters not being ready yet to marry (too poor vs. trial marriage) differs largest among highly satisfied cohabiters.

In Eastern Europe, cohabiters viewing their union as a prelude to marriage comprise a specific group that differs in its association with relationship satisfaction from all other groups. With increasing relationship satisfaction the probability to be classified into this type of cohabitation increases steeply. Among the highly satisfied, viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is the most prevalent meaning attached to cohabitation. There is hardly any difference between refusal of marriage and considering marriage irrelevant in their association with relationship satisfaction. The more satisfied, the less likely cohabitation is viewed as an alternative to marriage. This finding seems at odds with the assumption that these relationships are stable and long term unions (Bianchi and Casper, 2000). Prior research found that relationship satisfaction decreases over the course of an intimate relationship (Lucas and Clark, 2006; Zimmermann and Easterlin, 2006) which might be an explanation why less happy couples are selected into the more “permanent” cohabitation types. Differences between trial marriage and too poor to marry and their association with relationship satisfaction are rather small.

Finally, the longer a cohabiting union exists, the more likely these cohabiters view their union as anything else than a prelude to marriage. This is in line with studies that show that cohabiters who plan to marry do so within a rather short time frame from starting to co-reside (Brown, 2003; Bumpass and Lu, 2000).

Figure 2.4. Predicted probabilities of different meanings of cohabitation by level of relationship satisfaction (1=very unsatisfied, 11=very satisfied)



Note: Women in their first union, without biological children, with secondary level of education, other covariates fixed at their mean.

Source: Generations and Gender Surveys (GGG 2004-2009), author's calculations.

## 2.8. Discussion

This study aimed to increase our understanding of why people cohabit. We built a typology about the different meanings of cohabitation based on the existing literature. We used cross-national comparable data for ten European countries to examine which different types of cohabitation we can empirically distinguish.

Most cohabiters view their union as a transitory stage in the marriage process. Some of them have already firm wedding plans; others are still testing their relationship or are in the process of establishing the economic preconditions to think about marriage. These findings underscore previous work that suggests that cohabitation is not about to replace marriage for the majority of cohabiters (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010; Brown and Booth, 1996). Marriage remains an important institution and an aim in the lives of many people. The findings confirm that cohabitation nevertheless has become an increasingly normative step in the process of union formation in many countries (Liefbroer and Billari, 2009). In particular in societies where

marriage is no longer universal and the costs and prevalence of divorce are high, cohabitation offers the opportunity to live together with an intimate partner, experiencing and enduring the challenges of everyday life while securing a relatively easy way out if the relationship finally does not work.

A minority of cohabiters in this study do not intend to marry, are positive about the institution of marriage and report trouble making ends meet. Facing economic hardship seems to induce cohabiters to think that they are not yet ready to commit to marriage. Following earlier work by Bernhardt and Hoem (1985), we argue that the popular assumption that cohabitation emerged mainly as an elite phenomenon of highly educated individualists might actually not be the whole story. People also settle for cohabitation as a second best option when they do not yet have accomplished preconditions for marriage that are related to employment, career goals and material wealth (Kalmijn, 2011; Kravdal, 1999). In some Eastern European countries, more than half of all cohabiters report having trouble to make ends meet (Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia). This finding is not surprising as poverty in the post-communist countries is widespread. Consequently, economic prosperity is lower in this part of Europe and endemic among larger parts of the population rather than limited to cohabiters. Though many report having difficulties to make ends meet, the proportion who is classified as “too poor to marry” is actually low, though higher than in Western Europe. Our interpretation is that in a context where poverty is widespread and traditional norms towards marriage prevail, economic preconditions of marriage might not be that central in how cohabitation is viewed upon. In Western Europe, very few cohabiters are classified as too poor to marry as well. At the same time, the costs of a wedding or economic insecurity are prominent arguments in the literature on reasons why cohabiters in prosperous countries postpone marriage (Blossfeld and Huinink, 1991; Kohler *et al.*, 2002; Kravdal, 1999; Wiik, 2009). Social expectations about the event of a wedding are indeed high in Western Europe and consequently increase the costs of getting married, despite or maybe even because norms to marry are relatively weak. In Western Europe, economic preconditions to marry might be more difficult to grasp, even with subjective measurements of economic prosperity. We could imagine that cohabiters, who do not consider themselves economically deprived, still have to decide whether to spend their assets on a wedding or to pay the mortgage for house for instance – plans that time wise might coincide. It could thus be that some cohabiters in Northwestern Europe who are classified as being in a trial marriage, might postpone marriage for economic reasons, although they do not report having trouble to make ends meet. Our finding that only a minority is classified as being too poor to marry

thus should certainly not be interpreted as if economic constraints would be irrelevant for understanding the diversity of cohabitation. Economic deprivation is a multidimensional phenomenon and challenging to measure appropriately with the instruments usually available in survey data.

We identify two groups of cohabiters who might never marry their cohabiting partner. Some of them consider the institution of marriage an outdated institution and report no plans to marry in the near future. Others do not intend to marry either, but at the same time do not have a strong opinion about marriage. For these cohabiters it is very likely that cohabitation replaces marriage as a long term living arrangement. Not the marital status, but the fact of co-residence defines them as a long term, committed couple relationship. Viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is more widespread in Western Europe. Sociologists have posited an individualization of intimate relationships occurring in contemporary Western societies in which partners value individual autonomy and self-realization. In order to maintain individual autonomy and the ease of leaving a union that is no longer considered self-fulfilling, Western Europeans might be more likely to cohabit and view it as a rejection of traditional marriage. At the same time, many Western European countries have experienced a blurring of the differences between the legal responsibilities, rights and social expectations of marriage and cohabitation. This might have eased the emergence of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage in which people build up long term commitment and form families without viewing a need to have a marriage license.

A similar argument has been brought forward by previous typologies that have placed cohabitation as an alternative to marriage at later stages of the diffusion process of cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). Other scholars, by contrary, have described the ideological opposition to marriage as the motivation of the avant-garde to practice cohabitation, for instance in the Netherlands (Manting, 1996). Hence, this view on cohabitation would be also found at early stages of the diffusion of cohabitation. Our study of within-country diversity in the meanings of cohabitation revealed that indeed, ideologically motivated cohabitation can be found in countries where cohabitation is marginal, though less than in high cohabitation countries. The high proportion of cohabiters in Bulgaria who ideologically refuse marriage despite that less than 11 percent of co-resident unions are cohabitations, is an exception and has been previously mentioned in the literature (Hoem and Kostova, 2008).

Another central result of this study is that we identify a sixth type of cohabitation that has so far not been discussed in the literature. A considerably large group of cohabiters plan to marry although they consider marriage an outdated institution or do not have a strong opinion about marriage. We termed this group as “conformists”. This group is particularly large in some countries of Central and Eastern Europe and thus more than a residual group. This finding clearly shows that the fact that marriage is a prominent social institution that still strongly influences how cohabiters think about their unions, even those who are not in favor of marriage. As a result, some cohabiters plan to marry by obeying social norms or pleasing relevant others despite personally having a less favorable opinion about the institution of marriage. In addition, the result suggests that rational considerations such as the legal recognition of the union or the protection of children, property or inheritance might play an important role in the decision to marry.

A further major finding is that countries differ in the proportion of cohabiters in the different cohabitation types. Cohabitation is more likely to serve as an alternative to marriage in Western and Northern Europe where a larger share of the population is cohabiting. In countries where cohabitation is less widespread (such as Romania and Georgia) a lower diversity of meanings of cohabitation is observed and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is very uncommon.

We discussed in the theory section that it is not entirely clear how the refusal of marriage-type of cohabitation fits into the diffusion model of cohabitation. Whereas around every fifth cohabiter in Western and Northern Europe has been classified into this type, diversity is larger across Central and Eastern European countries. The proportion of cohabiters refusing the institution of marriage is negligible in Georgia and Romania, but is largest in Bulgaria where the overall proportion of couples cohabiting is rather small as well. This finding suggests that cohabitation as a refusal of marriage can also be relevant in countries that are situated at early stages of the diffusion process of cohabitation, but predominantly emerges when cohabitation has become more widespread.

A final goal of this chapter was to identify the main precursors and correlates of the different cohabitation types. Our findings suggest that cohabitation is an increasingly diverse phenomenon. Cohabiters of all age groups, all levels of education attainment, in different employment situations, and with different life course experiences cohabit. Some of them moved in together only very recently, others cohabit with their partner decades-long. Some of

them have children, others have not. These socio-demographic characteristics (in particular age and education) as well as characteristics of the cohabiting union related to commitment (joint child, relationship satisfaction and union duration) differentiate between different meanings attached to cohabitation. By contrast, the prior union history is hardly associated with different types of cohabitation, although it has been previously found to select people into cohabitation in the first place (Bumpass and Lu, 2000 for divorce). Thus, we find clear evidence for selection effects into different types of cohabitation. This is important as the question of who is entering cohabitation is becoming obsolete when cohabitation is largely diffused in a society. Understanding the selection into different types of cohabitation and their different nature is however an increasingly relevant research topic in order to understand the future role of cohabitation in union formation processes and family formation.

When examining characteristics that are associated with meanings of cohabitation using cross-sectional data, we cannot handle issues of reverse causality. For instance, the positive association between relationship satisfaction and viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage might mean that high commitment fosters marriage plans, but could also mean that wedding plans increase the satisfaction that cohabiters derive from their relationship. Only longitudinal data can effectively address these issues.

Several promising avenues for future research could be suggested. Future research should both examine the current and lifetime experience of cohabitation (Seltzer, 2004). Such studies may show that cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process is even more prevalent than we show in our study. Since the prelude to marriage type of cohabitation is probably transformed into marriage at a higher rate than other types of cohabitation, cross-sectional studies underestimate the lifetime prevalence of this meaning of cohabitation. We might also overestimate the prevalence of cohabiting unions that constitute an alternative to marriage. They have an on average longer union duration and thus a higher chance to be selected into our sample. As Kiernan (2001) noted, cohabitation –even more than marriage– should be conceptualized as a process rather than an event. Individual longitudinal data on cohabitation –and on its meaning– would enable us to account for this. Our typology is a snapshot of the *current* meaning that cohabiters attach to their relationship. Individuals however might change their minds concerning the purpose of living together (Seltzer, 2004). Many of the “long term cohabitations” with partners highly committed to each other might have started as “provisional cohabitations” (Théry, 1998) characterized by

a lack of commitment and low exit costs where partners have little sense of common property (Martin and Théry, 2001).

Another promising avenue of future research is to focus on life-course differences. Certain types of cohabitation could be more relevant for older cohabiters than others. For instance, cohabiters in the older age groups were more likely to view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage because they do not consider it relevant (anymore) to get married (King and Scott, 2005). Older cohabiters are likely to have been married in the past and might not be willing to give up their new-found independence or recommit to the demands of traditional marriage (Davidson, 2001; Hatch, 1995; Lopata, 1986). It could also be that older cohabiters see fewer benefits in marriage. Cohabitation could be useful to protect their financial benefits (*e.g.* widow pension), tax privileges or inheritance.

Moreover, it is important to realize that we inferred the meaning of cohabitation from response patterns on key indicators that are suggested to define different types of cohabitation. An interesting alternative approach could be to explicitly ask people why they cohabit in order to obtain a more direct measure of the meaning of cohabitation. Finally, our findings suggest that a fuller explanation of country differences in the meaning of cohabitation asks for identifying cross-national variation in cultural values and norms regarding union formation and marriage, the economic benefits of marriage and the legal differences between cohabitation and marriage.

