

VU Research Portal

The different meanings of cohabitation across Europe

Hiekel, N.

2014

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Hiekel, N. (2014). *The different meanings of cohabitation across Europe: How cohabiters view their unions and differ in their plans and behaviors*. Amsterdam University Press.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

5. Marriage and separation risks among German cohabiters: Differences between types of cohabiters¹

5.1. Introduction

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

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

¹ This chapter was co-authored with prof. dr. Aart C. Liefbroer and dr. Anne-Rigt Poortman. A different version of this chapter is currently under review. A slightly different version of this chapter has been presented at the Dutch Demography Day, November 2013, Utrecht, the Netherlands.

cultural context. In contexts where cohabitation is widespread, cohabitation has been found to be increasingly favored as a normative step in the transition to marriage (Liefbroer and Billari, 2010). In Scandinavian countries, for instance, a marriage that is not preceded by cohabitation constitutes a marginal behavior that is practiced almost exclusively by individuals with particular religious convictions (Hoem and Hoem, 1988). In contexts where cohabitation is not that common, cohabitation will constitute a deviant behavior. In such a context, cohabiters are likely to be a selective group of individuals. Consequently, the meanings attached to cohabitation and their associations with marriage and separation might differ between contexts in which many people cohabit and contexts where cohabitation is marginal (Kiernan, 2002a).

Germany is an interesting case to study contextual variation in the meaning of cohabitation and its association with relationship transitions. Despite aligned institutional and political conditions since the German reunification in 1990, Eastern and Western Germany differ in the prevalence of childbearing within cohabitation (Huinink, Kreyenfeld and Trappe, 2012). Moreover, cohabiters in Western Germany are more likely to marry than their Eastern German counterparts (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2005). Cohabiting unions in Eastern Germany have also been found to be more stable than those in Western Germany (Bastin, Kreyenfeld and Schnor, 2012). This suggests that cohabitation is more diffused and socially accepted in Eastern than in Western Germany (Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). Our second research question therefore was: Do Eastern and Western Germans attach different meanings to cohabitation, and does the association between the meaning of cohabitation and the transition to marriage and separation differ between East and West?

We used survey data from the German Family Panel (*Pairfam*) and the supplementary study “Demographic differences in the life course dynamics in Eastern and Western Germany” (*DemoDiff*). These surveys allowed us to follow cohabiters over a period of two to three years. We examine Eastern and Western German cohabiting men and women born between 1971 and 1973 and between 1981 and 1983. To answer our research questions, we constructed a typology of the meaning of cohabitation and assessed its association with marriage and separation by means of competing risk analysis, controlling for other relevant demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the population.

5.2. Theoretical framework

5.2.1. *The meanings of cohabitation*

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

Second, cohabiters –although envisaging marrying one day– might not feel ready yet to marry. Some cohabiters may want to test their relationship first and find out whether the dating partner is a suitable potential spouse (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Klijzing, 1992; Seltzer, 2004). Cohabitation is then seen as an ideal testing ground for marriage because it offers all the advantages of co-residence without having yet to commit to marital expectations (Clarkberg *et al.*, 1995) as well as a guarantee of relatively easy way out if the relationship does not work. Others might not feel ready yet to marry because their economic situation prevents them from getting married at this time (Baizán and Martín-García, 2006; Gibson-Davis, 2009; Gibson-Davis *et al.*, 2005; Kalmijn, 2011; Kravdal, 1999). High wedding costs might be a reason to postpone marriage (Kravdal, 1997; Manning and Smock, 2002), but also study enrollment or the absence of job security might be perceived as incompatible with the idea of getting married (Clarkberg, 1999; Oppenheimer, 1988; 2003).

Third, cohabiters may hold indifferent or negative attitudes towards the institution of marriage, but still envisage marrying in the future (Hiekel *et al.*, 2012). Institutional theories have stressed the role of social pressure to conform to social norms in explaining the persistence and continued popularity of marriage in contemporary societies (Cherlin, 2004). Cohabiters in this category plan to marry in order to please their family, friends or society in general. In addition, economic theories of marriage have generally portrayed marriage as a rational choice that is pursued when the benefits derived from marriage are higher than the benefits of staying unmarried. These cohabiters thus intend to marry for practical reasons (*i.e.* taxation laws, child custody

laws, etc.) despite their indifferent or negative opinion about the institution of marriage. This group of cohabiters has been labeled “conformists” and has been found to behave similar to cohabiters viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, for instance in terms of fertility intentions (Hiekel and Castro-Martín, 2013).

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

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

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

5.2.2. *The meaning of cohabitation and its association with relationship transitions*

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

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

The transition to separation. Among cohabiters who are in the process of testing their relationship, “bad matches” that are particularly fragile might be overrepresented. Furthermore, qualitative research has shown that economic hardship puts a lot of strains on couples, which increases union instability (Smock *et al.*, 2005). Cohabitors who feel not ready yet to marry therefore might be more likely to dissolve their union than any other type of cohabitation. Cohabitors who refuse the institution of marriage might also reject a bourgeois lifestyle in general, such as a lifelong relationship with one and the same partner. Therefore they might have –although to a lesser extent than the previous group– higher odds to separate than cohabiters who are contemplating marriage. The same might be true for cohabiters who consider marriage irrelevant. Cohabitors who view marriage as a prelude to marriage or who are classified as being conformist may be least likely

to separate, because they have concrete plans to institutionalize their union and may already consider exiting their union as very costly. In sum, we expect cohabiters who are not yet ready to marry to have the highest risk of separation, followed by cohabiters who either refuse marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry, whereas we expect cohabiters viewing their union as a prelude to marriage or who are classified as conformists to have the lowest risk of separation (*Hypothesis 2*).

5.2.3. *Differences between Eastern and Western Germany*

The social and cultural context in Eastern and Western Germany might differ with regard to how cohabiters attach meaning to their union and how this meaning is related to the transition to marriage or separation. Such differences might at least to some extent reflect the different history of unmarried cohabitation in both parts of Germany. Unmarried cohabitation was illegal in former West Germany –the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)– until 1973 and thus very marginally practiced. In former East Germany –the German Democratic Republic (GDR)– by contrast, unmarried cohabitation was socially accepted and either viewed as a stage preceding marriage or as an alternative to it. Certain family policies even encouraged couples to postpone marriage until at least after the first child was born, as they privileged unmarried mothers by permitting a one-year paid maternity leave for their first child (for married women, it was only granted for the second child) as well as preferential treatment in the allocation of day care places (Kreyenfeld, Konietzka and Walke, 2011a).

Having learnt from the previous generations' behavior that cohabitation can take over a lot of functions traditionally reserved for marriage and the institution of marriage being an instrument with which the state interfered into private lives, cohabiting Eastern Germans nowadays might more frequently view their union as an alternative to marriage, either because they refuse its institution or consider it no more than a piece of paper. Western German cohabiters by contrast might enter cohabitation more frequently with the idea that cohabitation is inferior to marriage. They therefore might more frequently view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage or a testing ground, the former expected to be strongly associated with marriage, the latter with separation. Moreover, Western German cohabiters might experience more social pressure to proceed to marriage, regardless of how important they think marriage is. As a consequence, conformism is expected to be more prevalent among cohabiters in Western Germany. Our first hypothesis on East-West differences therefore is: Cohabiters in Eastern Germany are expected to more frequently view their union as an alternative to marriage,

whereas Western German cohabiters are expected to more frequently view their union as a stage in the marriage process (*Hypothesis 3a*).

In addition, differences could exist in the association between the meaning of cohabitation and subsequent relationship transitions between Eastern and Western Germany. In a context where there is a strong preference for marriage, cohabiters are likely to feel more normative pressure to institutionalize their union through marriage, regardless which meaning they attach to their union. Recent qualitative research shows that cohabitation is socially more disapproved of as a long term alternative to marriage in Western Germany, particularly when having children is envisaged (Klärner, 2012). This is particularly relevant for cohabiters who cohabit as an alternative to marriage as their lack of marriage plans and their indifferent or negative attitudes towards marriage are inconsistent with the predominant view on cohabitation and marriage. When cohabitation is largely viewed as inferior to marriage, cohabiting unions might also be more fragile, regardless which meaning is attached to it. Our second hypothesis on East-West differences thus is: Compared to Eastern German cohabiters, the various meanings of cohabitation for Western German cohabiters are expected to be more similar to the most marriage-prone type of cohabitation, *i.e.*, the prelude to marriage-type, in their association with the transition to marriage and more similar to the most separation-prone type of cohabitation, *i.e.* the trial marriage-type in their association with the transition to separation (*Hypothesis 3b*).

5.3. Methods

5.3.1. Study design and sample

The study used survey data from three waves of the German family panel “Panel analysis of intimate relationships and family dynamics” (*Pairfam*) (Nauck *et al.*, 2012). *Pairfam*, 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). 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. A detailed description of the study can be found in Huinink *et al.* (2011). We additionally used data from the study “Demographic differences in life course dynamics in Eastern and Western Germany” (*DemoDiff*) that has been conceptualized as a supplementary study to the German family panel and utilizes a largely identical set of

instruments. The first wave of *DemoDiff* was launched one year after the first wave of *Pairfam* and adds 1,489 respondents living in former East Germany (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 only available for two waves (Kreyenfeld *et al.*, 2011b). For our study, we included women and men born between 1971 and 1973 as well as between 1981 and 1983, who –at the time of the first wave– lived with an opposite sex partner to whom they were not married. Our total analytical sample encompasses 1,278 individuals, of which 613 were born in former East Germany and 665 were born in former West Germany.

5.3.2. Measures

Core variables of meaning of cohabitation. Our main independent variable is a typology, constructed by using two indicators, namely (1) attitudes towards the institution of marriage and (2) intentions to marry. By doing so we, we build on previous work (Hiekel *et al.*, 2012). The first indicator used to unravel the different types of cohabitation is how cohabiters think about the social institution of marriage. The attitude that cohabiters hold towards the institution of marriage is likely to be intertwined with how important it might be for them to get married or, in other words, how they conceptualize their own cohabitating union in relation to marriage. Cohabiters who do not value the institution of marriage might be less likely themselves to make the transition to marriage than those who are in favor of marriage. Respondents have been asked to what extent they personally agree or disagree with the statement “You should get married if you permanently live with your partner”. The 5-point scale ranges from 1 = disagree completely to 5 = agree completely and the additional answer category “don’t know”. Respondents with values 1 or 2 are classified as disagreeing that marriage is an important social institution. Respondents with a value 4 or 5 are considered to consider marriage an important social institution and respondents with a value 3 or “don’t know” are classified as being indifferent in their opinion about marriage.

The second indicator used to distinguish different types of cohabitation is the intention to get married in the near future. Cohabiters with intentions to marry have been found to be four times as likely to actually marry compared to cohabiters without such intentions (Manning and Smock, 2002). The absence of intentions to marry can mean different things: someone is not ready yet to marry, ideologically refuses marriage or does not consider marriage to be relevant. Cohabiters were asked: “Are you and [name of partner] planning

to get married within the next 12 months?” Respondents who answer “yes, definitely” and “yes, perhaps” are considered to have marriage plans. Those who responded “no”, “probably not” and “no, definitely not” as well as those answering “don’t know” and “we haven’t discussed that yet” are considered not having intentions to marry. An overview of the distribution of the indicators can be found in the annex of this chapter in *Table Annex A.5.a*.

By combining these two indicators, we can distinguish five types of cohabiters as illustrated in *Table 5.1*: Cohabiters who hold positive attitudes towards the institution of marriage and who intend to marry are classified as viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage. Cohabiters who agree that marriage is important but who do not intend to marry in the near future are considered not being ready yet to marry. Our data do not allow an empirical distinction between those who are not ready yet because they view cohabitation as a trial marriage and those who feel economic barriers to marry. Cohabiters who hold indifferent or negative attitudes towards marriage but nevertheless report intentions to marry are classified as conformists. Cohabiters with negative attitudes towards marriage who do not intend to marry are classified as rejecting the institution of marriage. Finally, those who hold an indifferent attitude towards marriage and do not intend to marry are considered as viewing marriage as being irrelevant.

Born in Western Germany. In order to compare Eastern and Western German cohabiters, we use an indicator whether the respondent was born in Western Germany. We note a large overlap between region of birth and region of residence. In case of within-country migration after birth, it is more frequently that Eastern Germans have moved to Western Germany than the other way around. Please note that 70 from the 661 respondents classified as being born in former Western Germany moved to Germany after their birth,

Table 5.1. A typology of different meanings of cohabitation based on two indicators

	Positive attitudes towards marriage	Intentions to marry
Prelude to marriage	yes	yes
Not ready to marry	yes	no
Conformist	no, undecided	yes
Refusal of marriage	no	no
Marriage is irrelevant	undecided	no

mainly from countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Respondents born outside Germany more often live in Western Germany. Additional analysis showed that the results presented here would not change if we would have used place of residence rather than place of birth or if we would have dropped respondents born outside Germany from the analysis (results available upon request).

Control variables. To avoid a spurious relationship between our explanatory variable and the transition to marriage and separation, we controlled for several characteristics: union duration, age, age at union formation, level of education attainment, employment, gender, prior marriage, child(ren) with current partner, child(ren) with a prior partner and religiosity. Union duration and age were time-varying covariates and measured monthly. All other characteristics were time-constant and measured at first interview. Union duration was measured in months since the couple started living together and was updated monthly and mean-centered. The age in years at union formation might influence the timing of the transition to marriage and separation, independent from union duration given age norms related to family transitions (Settersten and Hagestad, 1996). The level of education attainment was generated 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 and lower secondary education, the second category comprises upper secondary and post-secondary non-university education and the third category includes all levels of university education. Regarding employment status, we distinguish between fulltime employment, part-time employment, no employment, and enrolled in education. Employed and self-employed respondents with weekly working hours of 36 hours and more are considered being fulltime employed, with less than 36 hours being considered part-time employed. The category “not employed” comprises all respondents enrolled in vocational training, who are unemployed, doing internships, in occasional, marginal and irregular employment, housewives, disabled respondents and those on leave. As male and female employment patterns in Germany differ, we combined the information on employment status with gender of the respondent. German women are much more likely to work part time than their male counterparts. Indeed, we find very few men being part time employed ($n = 19$). For men, we therefore collapse the categories part time employed and not employed. We consider those respondents as previously married, who report being legally divorced from a previous partner or who are still married to a previous partner. Having children with a cohabiting partner might be an expression of not viewing marriage as a prerequisite for having a child. For

each biological child of the respondent, information is collected whether the current partner is the biological parent. We distinguish cohabiters who have at least one joint child with the current partner from respondents who are childless or who have at least one child with a previous partner. Religiousness was measured as a combination of religious denomination and the frequency of visiting religious services. As the distribution of the derived variable “religiousness” was skewed, we created a dummy variable that distinguishes religious respondents (visiting religious services at least several times a year) from non-religious respondents. An overview of the distribution of the control variables can be found in the annex of this chapter in *Table Annex A.5.a*.

Hazard models of marriage and separation

We estimated a discrete time multinomial logistic regression model to investigate the relationship transitions of cohabiters (also known as competing risk analysis). We treat marriage and separation as competing events and as a function of respondents’ individual characteristics in a given month. The data are organized as a person-period file (Allison, 1984). The respondents in our sample enter the risk set at the moment of the first interview (Wave 1 of data collection). At the moment of first interview, the unions of the respondents differ in their duration. We include the duration (time) variable of our hazard models as months of union duration and update this value at each successive month of observation (Guo, 1993). For instance, a respondent who started cohabiting 24 months before the first interview enters the risk set at the moment of the interview with a value 24 on the duration variable that increases by one at each successive month of observation until the event occurs or right-censoring applies. In the majority of right-censored cases, this is the moment of the third interview. In a minority of cases, respondents were only observed for two waves. We expect union duration to have a reversed u-shaped effect on both types of relationship transitions. Both the risk of marriage and separation are expected to initially increase with union duration and start to decrease at a given time. Therefore we also include the squared and the cubic term of union duration into our model.

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

5.4. Results

Table 5.2 shows the distribution of different meanings of cohabitation measured at the first interview and, for each cohabitation type, the proportion that is married, separated or still cohabiting at the end of observation. These results are presented for the total sample, as well as for Eastern and Western German cohabiters separately.

Among all German cohabiters, the largest group (32%) views cohabitation as a refusal of the institution of marriage, a quarter is classified as being conformist and 18 percent do not consider it relevant to get married. 14 percent view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage and the smallest group comprises of cohabiters who consider themselves as not being ready yet to marry (11%). Of all of the 351 relationship transitions that occur during the observation period, the vast majority are marriages (75%). Marriage is most frequent among cohabiters who view their union as a prelude to marriage or are classified as being conformist. Cohabiters who either refuse the institution of marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry, most frequently do not undergo any relationship transitions at all, but nevertheless have the highest incidence of separation, (9 and 8%). These patterns are echoed in the subsamples of Eastern and Western German cohabiters, yet we also find some clear differences between east and west Germany. As expected (*Hypothesis 3a*), Western German cohabiters more frequently view their union as a prelude to marriage or feel that they are not ready yet to marry and less frequently refuse the institution of marriage or consider it irrelevant to marry. In contrast to our hypothesis, we find Eastern Germans to more often being classified as conformist.

Table 5.3 displays the results from three discrete time multinomial logistic regression models where we examine the association between the meanings of cohabitation and the transition to marriage and separation. Model 1 includes only the cohabitation typology in order to examine whether the meaning of cohabitation is associated with the transition to marriage and separation. In Model 2, we add the control variables as well as a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was born in Western Germany. In Model 3, we include interaction terms between the West dummy and each of the cohabitation types. This model can be used to examine whether the meaning of cohabitation is differently associated with marriage and separation transitions in Eastern and Western Germany.

Model 1 reveals first, that the meaning of cohabitation is clearly associated with the transition to marriage. Taking cohabiters viewing cohabitation as prelude to marriage as the reference group, cohabiters in nearly all of the

Table 5.3. Stepwise discrete-time multinomial logistic regression analysis of the transition to marriage and separation among cohabiting respondents in Germany ($N = 1,278$)

dependent (ref.: no transition)	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	marriage	separation	marriage	separation	marriage	separation
Cohabitation duration (CDY)						
CDY ²			1.22***	1.10*	1.23***	1.09*
CDY ³			0.95***	0.98**	0.95***	0.97**
Age at start cohabitation			1.00***	1.00	1.00***	1.00
Education (ref.: Primary education)			1.05**	1.02	1.05***	1.02
Secondary education			1.49**	0.47**	1.52**	0.47**
Higher education			1.47*	0.41**	1.47*	0.41**
Employment (ref.: Male, fulltime employed)						
Male, part time/not employed			0.63*	0.96	0.62	0.99
Male, in education			0.98	0.60	1.01	0.61
Female, fulltime employed			0.97	1.06	0.97	1.08
Female, part time employed			0.83	0.80	0.81	0.83
Female, not employed			1.29	1.02	1.28	1.05
Female, in education			1.28	0.51	1.22	0.53
1.30			0.73	1.27	0.74	
Previously married (ref.: Never married)			0.76**	0.55**	0.76**	0.55*
Joint child(ren) with partner (ref.: No)			1.44**	1.20	1.43**	1.20
Religious (ref.: Not religious)			1.59***	0.84	2.07**	0.45
Born in Western Germany (ref.: No)						
Cohabitation typology (ref.: Prelude to marriage)						
Not ready to marry	0.30***	1.59	0.30***	1.57	0.40**	1.18
Conformist	0.92	1.22	0.74*	1.29	0.94	0.88
Refusal of marriage	0.16***	2.30**	0.12***	2.53*	0.23***	1.64
Marriage is not relevant	0.20***	1.88	0.18***	2.03	0.09***	1.70

Interaction terms (ref.: Prelude*West)			
Not ready to marry*West			0.68
Conformist*West			1.77
Refusal of marriage*West			2.12
Marriage is irrelevant*West			0.38**
			2.30
			2.53
			1.41
<i>Chi square</i>	148.20	356.96	360.84
<i>Log-Likelihood</i>	-1942.63	-1881.64	-1876.35
<i>Model pseudo R²</i>	0.04	0.07	0.07

Notes: For the transition to marriage, *not ready to marry* differs from all other types at least at the .05 level; *conformists* differ from all other types except *prelude to marriage* at least at the 0.05 level; *refusal of marriage* differs from all other types except *marriage is irrelevant* at least at the 0.05 level; *marriage is irrelevant* differs from all other types except *refusal of marriage* at least at the 0.05 level (Model 1 and Model 2, without interaction effects). For the transition to separation, *conformists* differ from *refusal of marriage* at the 0.05 level. *Refusal of marriage* and considering *marriage irrelevant* do not differ from each other (Model 1 and Model 2, without interaction effects).

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

other types of cohabitation are less likely to make the transition to marriage. Only cohabiters who are classified as conformists do not differ significantly from the reference group. Changing the reference category reveals that cohabiters who are not ready to marry have significantly lower odds to marry during the observation period than cohabiters in either a prelude to marriage or those who are classified as conformists, but yet have higher odds to make the transition to marriage compared to cohabiters who either refuse the institution of marriage or do not consider it relevant to marry. Also, cohabiters who refuse marriage do not differ significantly from those who consider marriage irrelevant, yet both groups have significantly lower odds of marrying than any of the other types of cohabiters. We thus find support for Hypothesis 1 that the various meanings of cohabitation are differently associated with the transition to marriage and can be ranked hierarchically. As expected, viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage is associated with the highest risk of marriage, followed by conformists and those who are not ready to marry. Viewing cohabitation as a refusal of marriage or considering it irrelevant to marry is associated with the lowest risk of marriage.

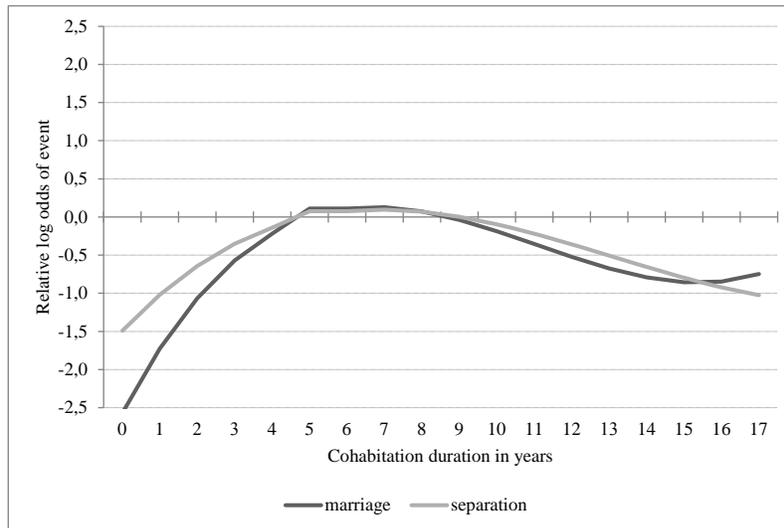
Model 1 also illustrates that the meaning of cohabitation is associated with the transition to separation, although the low number of transitions causes some rather strong effects to not be statistically significant. Taking cohabiters who view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage as the reference category, cohabiters in any other type of cohabitation have a higher odds ratio to break up. Only for cohabiters refusing marriage, this result is statistically significant. We thus find some support for Hypothesis 2 on the association between meaning of cohabitation and separation. As expected, “marriage-minded” cohabiters (*i.e.* prelude to marriage, conformists) are least likely to separate. Against our expectations, cohabiters who view their union as an alternative to marriage are most prone to break up their relationships. Cohabiters who are not yet ready to marry lie in between these two extremes but do not differ statistically significant from any other type of cohabitation. Those rejecting marriage have a higher risk to separate than the prelude-to-marriage group as well as conformists albeit they do not differ from those considering marriage irrelevant.

Adding the control variables in Model 2 does not alter the effect of the typology. The meanings attached to cohabitation are thus associated with subsequent relationship transitions, net of other covariates that are associated with the transition to marriage and separation. The age at which respondents started to cohabit is positively related to the odds of marriage but not associated with the odds of separation. The level of education attainment shows a positive gradient for marriage and a negative gradient for separation.

Compared to cohabiters with primary education, cohabiters with secondary or higher education have a higher risk to marry and a lower risk to separate. The employment status by gender of the respondent is not associated with either relationship transition in this model with the exception that men who are part time or not employed have a lower risk to marry compared to fulltime employed men. Having been previously married does not have an impact on the transition to marriage or separation. Cohabiting couples with joint children have a lower risk to marry as well as a lower risk to separate than cohabiters without joint children. Religious cohabiters have a higher risk to marry their partner compared to non-religious cohabiters but do not differ in odds to separate.

Figure 5.1 shows the relative odds ratio of the patterns of marriage and separation as a function of years since the cohabitation started and is based on the beta coefficients for cohabitation duration, its squared as well as cubic term presented in Model 2. The curves show that both the odds ratio of getting married and to separate increase during the first years of cohabitation. Cohabiters in our sample have the highest odds ratio to marry after having lived together for five to seven years. Longer union durations are

Figure 5.1. Relative log odds of marriage and separation by cohabitation duration



associated with a slowly decreasing odds ratio of marriage. The relative risk of separation is also highest for cohabiters living together five to seven years. The curve indicating the subsequent decrease in the odds ratio of breaking up is a little gentler than that of marriage.

Model 2 also reveals whether Western German cohabiters differ from their Eastern German counterparts in their risk to marry or to separate. Indeed, cohabiters born in Western Germany have a higher risk to marry. For separation we do not find an association with being born in Western Germany. In order to examine whether the association between the meaning of cohabitation and the transition to marriage and separation differs between Eastern and Western Germans, we estimated a final logistic regression model in which we included interaction terms between “born in Western Germany” and each of the five cohabitation types (Table 5.3, Model 3). The analysis reveals that there is little evidence that the meaning of cohabitation is differently associated with the transition to marriage and separation. This is in contrast to our expectations formulated in Hypothesis 3b. We assumed that the presence of stronger marriage norms in Western Germany would increase the normative pressure to marry on all cohabiters resulting in more similar transition patterns to marriage between the different types of cohabitation. We suggested that such norms might be especially relevant for cohabiters who refuse the institution of marriage as their meaning of cohabitation in particular is at odds with the predominant view upon cohabitation and marriage. Indeed, we find the only statistical significant difference between Eastern and Western Germany to refer to cohabiters who refuse the institution of marriage. In contrast to our expectations however, we find that the differences between cohabiters refusing marriage and those viewing cohabitation as a prelude to marriage are larger (rather than smaller) in Western Germany than in Eastern Germany.

5.5. Discussion

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

Our first key finding is that cohabiters are a heterogeneous group whose relationship behavior differs markedly. Cohabiters differ in the meaning they

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

Our second main finding is that the meaning of cohabitation –net of other covariates– is associated with the odds ratio of separation. As expected, cohabiters who view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage or those who are classified as conformists are least likely to break up. The presence of marriage plans express their strong commitment and high costs of leaving the union. We expected cohabiters who were not yet ready to marry to have the highest odds of breaking up. Although this group has indeed higher odds of separating than the previous two groups, the difference is not statistically significant. Against our expectations, we find cohabiters viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage to have the highest odds of separating, and there is no difference those who consider cohabitation to be an alternative because they ideologically oppose to marriage and those who do so because marriage is considered to be irrelevant. These findings suggest that cohabiters who hold negative attitudes towards the institution of marriage, and are not willing to conform to traditional family expectations, might also be more likely to be weakly committed towards the relationship itself.

A third major finding of this study is that Eastern and Western German cohabiters differ in the mix of meanings attached to cohabitation as well as the way in which a rejection of marriage is associated with the transition to marry. Cohabitation in Western Germany is more often viewed as a stage in the marriage process which is in line with prior findings that Western German cohabiters are more likely and faster to institutionalize their union through marriage (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2005). Eastern German cohabiters

more often view their union as an alternative to marriage which is reflected in the higher rate of childbearing within cohabitation in Eastern Germany (Huinink *et al.*, 2012).

Against our expectations, we find that, compared to the prelude-to-marriage group, Western German cohabiters who reject marriage are even less likely to marry than their Eastern German counterparts are. This finding suggests that in Western Germany, refusing the institution of marriage constitutes a particular deviant behavior. In a context with strong norms favoring marriage, such as Western Germany, cohabiters who refuse marriage may be particularly “resistant” to marriage and cohabitation might be a truly alternative life style for them. Cohabiters in Eastern Germany might be more pragmatic in responding to incentives to get married.

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

Another limitation concerns the indicators defining our cohabitation typology. The item to measure whether respondents value the institution of marriage or not (“it is important to marry if one permanently wants to stay with a partner”) is not as strong as one would want to. Also, we could not distinguish between cohabiters who are not ready to marry because of economic reasons and those who are still uncertain about their partner. However, even though our indicators are suboptimal, our cohabitation typology revealed meaningful differences in union formation behavior between different groups of cohabiters.

Overall, this study provides important insights into the role of cohabitation in union formation and dissolution processes. We clearly show that cohabitation means different things to different people and that their relationship behavior

varies markedly. In Germany, all of the distinguished types of cohabitation comprise a substantial part of the population, with half of the population considering cohabitation to be an intermediate step before marriage and who act upon this by marrying. The fact that some cohabiters who oppose the institution of marriage are still marrying suggests that there might be social pressures at work that lead marriage to remain a pretty central element in the family system in contemporary Germany. Also the differences between Western and Eastern Germany suggest that context matters. Future research is needed to reveal what cohabitation means in other countries and how the meaning of cohabitation is associated with marriage and separation.

