

The changing meaning of cohabitation

An analysis of selected European countries

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Introduction

In most of the Northern and Western European countries cohabitation started to spread since the early 1970s and 1980s. From being a deviant phenomenon it became gradually a widespread and accepted behavior for young people who wanted to start living together.

Unlike in those countries, the Southern European ones were not touched by a massive diffusion of cohabitation, and percentages of cohabiting couples are still among the lowest in Europe. Central and Eastern European countries were largely set apart from the theoretical reasoning for long time, with the justification that family ties have a different structure and meaning in these countries than in the rest of Europe. Most of them experienced the sharpest increase of the proportion of cohabiting couples in Europe after the 1990, however. Is this due to a change in the social meaning of cohabitation (from deviant phenomenon to a socially accepted one) or to other factors?

This paper analyzes the new set of Gender and Generations (GGS) data for the Southern and Eastern countries for which the data are already available (Hungary, Bulgaria and Italy). We will compare the results with earlier survey data from France and Sweden and we will highlight a possible interpretation for the observed trends in the diffusion of cohabitation.

Background and research question

Cohabitation has been spreading in the population during the last thirty years, and this is one of the most striking aspects of wider social changes that have taken place throughout the industrialized world. The sudden gain in the popularity of cohabitation at the beginning of the 1970s as an informal way of starting a union can be explained by several factors. Cultural elements, such as rising individualism and secularism, as well as economic aspects, such as changes brought by industrialization, changes in gender roles, and rising female labor-market participation, may have contributed to its increase (for a review, see Smock, 2000). At the same time, the sexual revolution helped in removing the stigma surrounding premarital sex (Bumpass, 1990).

The main framework in which that innovative behavior has been integrated is the Second Demographic Transition (Van de Kaa, 1987, Lesthaeghe, 1995). According to several authors

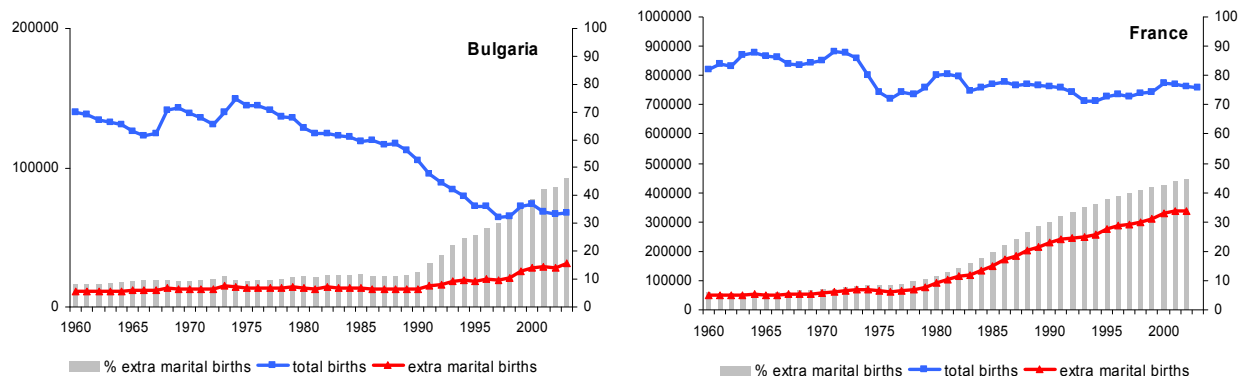
the modern type of cohabitation diffused from the people in the middle and upper social class living in the Northern and some of the Western countries (Wiersma 1983, Lesthaeghe, 1995). According to others, a parallel process was active also in the working class (Bernhardt and Hoem, 1985). In the course of the time the meaning of cohabitation modifies, and can change from being a deviant behavior up to an almost fully accepted one (Manting, 1996). Some typical phases in the development of the phenomenon have been underlined, according to its growing social acceptability, the increasing acceptance of childbearing in cohabiting couples, and the increasing difficulty to tell cohabiting couples apart from married ones. Prinz (1995) distinguishes four typical stages of the development of cohabitation. At the beginning, cohabitation emerges as a deviant phenomenon practiced by a small group of the population (well educated, often previously married, nonconformists living in urban areas). In the second stage, cohabitation becomes socially accepted as a prelude to marriage: young couples consider it as a trial period, and transform the cohabitation into marriage as soon as the desire for children arises. In this stage childbearing is still considered acceptable only in the marriage. In the third stage, cohabitation becomes accepted as an alternative to the marriage and becomes a permanent rather than a temporary union. In this stage childbearing is no longer restricted to marriage. In the last stage cohabitation becomes virtually undistinguishable from marriage with regards to lifestyle, childbearing and equality between partners.

The scheme presented above reflects very closely the development in the meaning of cohabitation that has been observed in Northern and Western and Southern European countries. For instance, Italy is a perfect example of a country in the first stage of the partnership transition, Sweden of a country in the fourth (Prinz, 1995).

The situation of the Eastern European countries, as far as the diffusion and the meaning of cohabitation is concerned, is much more undefined. Until the early 1990s the study of the family systems in Europe excluded almost systematically the Eastern countries, under the assumption that the fundamentally different marriage regimes, demographic structures and forms of familial organization (Hajnal 1965, 1982) warrant their own specific study (Reher, 1998). Before 1990 cohabitation was practically not an option because of the welfare disincentives applied in all the Eastern states (Koytcheva, 2006). After the abrupt change in 1990, many obstacles to the diffusion of cohabitation were removed. The statistics recorded in some countries an almost immediate increase of the share of non-marital births between the births. In some countries this has been interpreted as the effect of the sudden diffusion of the post materialist values and as a part of the broader process that we name the Second Demographic Transition (Sobotka et al., 2003). In other countries, like Bulgaria, the diffusion of post materialist values to broad strata of the population is questioned, but still the share of extramarital births over all births has reached in the last years a value that is experienced only in the Northern countries.

However, it must be underlined that the use of the share of extra marital births as an indicator of the diffusion of cohabitation can lead to wrong conclusions. First, it ignores those cohabitations that do not involve a birth, and second, it can be affected by a drop in marital fertility. Fig. 1 shows the different development of the total births, extramarital births (absolute numbers) and the share of extra marital births in Bulgaria and France. While in France the number of extramarital births have kept increasing in the last two decades even with a constant total number of births, in Bulgaria the sharp increase in the share of extra marital births seems more an artifact, being caused but a relatively stable number of extra marital births in presence of a sudden decrease in the total number of births. Nonetheless, it is not possible to ignore that in Bulgaria the number of extramarital births kept slightly increasing in the last years.

Figure 1 Total births, extramarital births and share of extramarital births on total births, Bulgaria and France 1960-2003



Source: Council of Europe (2004) *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe*.

To understand the differences in the process of diffusion of cohabitation in Western and Eastern European countries one cannot limit the analyses to the official statistics. It is crucial to analyze individual level data about the characteristics of the union(s), the circumstances around the birth of each child, and the socio-economic characteristics of the cohabiters.

We consider important to answer to the following questions:

- Are the modalities to enter a union comparable between (selected) Western and Eastern countries? Have they changed with time/cohorts?
- Is the social background of the cohabiters different between Western and Eastern countries? Did they change with time?
- Are the opinions about cohabitation different between young and old cohorts?

We are especially interested in analyzing the sequence of events that links the start of a union, the birth of the first child and the (possible) end of a union. With this approach, from one side we can evaluate what is the stage that the diffusion of cohabitation reached in Western and, most interestingly, Eastern European countries. From the other side we can question the applicability of the scheme proposed by Prinz (1995) and described above to the Eastern context.

Data and methods

We use the data stemming from the new Gender and Generation Survey (GGS), a comparative survey that has been recently carried out in several European countries. In particular we use data from Bulgaria (2005), Hungary (2001) and Italy (2003). In Bulgaria 12886 individuals aged 18-79 were interviewed, in Hungary 16363 individuals aged 18-75, in Italy 49,451 respondents of all age groups. In the comparative questionnaire special attention was devoted to the collection of the timing of demographic events (leaving parental home, union formation and dissolution, birth of a child) as well as to the investigation of other important aspects related to values and opinions. We will focus our analysis on the characteristics of women and of their partners.

To compare the observed trends in the emergence of cohabitation with other European countries we use the Fertility and Family Survey (FFS) which were conducted in the 1990s for large number of European countries. In particular we will analyze the data from France (respondents interviewed in 1994, aged 20-49) and Sweden (1992-93, age 23-43). For these two countries the GGS data are either not yet available or not existing. The comparison with

two countries that already in the 1990s reached a high stage in the diffusion of cohabitation process is functional to the aim of understanding the differences between family systems.

We will use a sequence analysis approach (for a review see Abbott, 1995, Abbott and Tsay, 2000, Billari, 2001). The sequence analysis, originally proposed by Abbott (1995) allows us to define group of people according to the duration of the time that separate two or more events, and to the order with which the events are experienced.

Each groups of individuals that are similar with respect to the sequences with which they experience the events, will be analyzed according to the socio-economic status of both partners (when available) and their social background, their opinions about cohabitation and their values (including religiosity). We will use a multinomial logistic regression. Special attention will be devoted to the fact that in Bulgaria a not negligible part of the population is not of Bulgarian ethnicity.

Preliminary and expected results

Preliminary analysis of GGS data on Bulgaria and Hungary show interesting results. The analysis was performed using a simple descriptive approach. Following the proposal of Villeneuve-Gokalp (1991) we classify the cohabitations in different types according to the events that happen in the first three years from the start of the first union. Villeneuve Gokalp (1991) distinguishes between five different profiles of cohabitation. The partners may consider that the decision to live together represents a commitment. In this case the cohabitation is a temporary situation that will lead to a wedding. In particular it precedes the marriage but does not replace it. If the marriage is already planned at the beginning of the cohabitation we will speak of a “prelude to marriage”. If the couple uses the cohabitation experience to decide if they are suitable for a formal commitment then we will speak of “trial marriage”. On the other side, cohabitation can be unconnected to any plan to marry, and it can represent a way of living together without committing oneself. For couples who separate after short time we can speak of “temporary union”. When the situation continued, we speak of “stable union without commitment” (neither children nor marriage in the first three years of cohabitation). Finally, if the couple behaves “as though they were married” having children without caring about marrying we speak of “free union”. From the practical point of view the classification is based on the timing of the events: start of a union, birth of a child (if any), marriage (if any) and separation (if any).

Table 1 shows the results of the classification for Bulgaria and Hungary, according to the year when the union started (before or after 1991). The prevalence of cohabitation in the first unions is very high both in Bulgaria (72.2%) and in Hungary (41.9) for the first unions that started after 1991. Anyway it must be underlined that Bulgaria and Hungary differ greatly both for the situation before 1991, and for the type of cohabitations that they experienced. In Bulgaria the prevalence of cohabitations between the first unions was already very high before 1991. Anyway they are represented essentially by the “prelude to marriage” type. Before 1991 83.7% of the women that started a cohabitation got married within one year, and the vast majority already in the first 6 months. After 1991 the percentage is reduced to 62.4% and 50.1%, respectively. In Hungary, on the contrary, cohabitations were not common before 1991. 60% of cohabiters were almost equally split in the “prelude to marriage” type and in the “stable union without commitment” type. After 1991 the share of cohabitations that are closely connected with a subsequent marriage, thus belonging to the earliest stage of cohabitation in the classification proposed by Prinz (1995), notably decreases.

These results contrast with the results from the FFS data on Sweden and France (not shown). In the two Western countries the gradual development of the cohabitation from a deviant

phenomenon to a wider accepted one and the process of growing acceptance of childbearing inside cohabitation are much smoother.

Table 1 Classification of cohabitations in Bulgaria and Hungary, according to the year of start of the union and the typology proposed by Villeneuve Gokalp (1991)

<i>Union started:</i>	Bulgaria		Hungary	
	<i>before 1991</i>	<i>after 1991</i>	<i>before 1991</i>	<i>after 1991</i>
Prelude to marriage	83.7	62.4	35.3	20.0
<i>Marriage in first 6 months</i>	<i>71.7</i>	<i>50.1</i>	<i>23.1</i>	<i>10.1</i>
Trial marriage	8.2	12.9	14.5	14.4
Free union	5.5	12.0	12.1	12.7
Temporary union	0.3	2.4	9.1	16.1
Stable union w/out committment	2.5	10.3	29.0	36.8
Total cohabitations	1496	700	428	416
% cohabitations on total unions	51.9	72.2	7.3	41.9

Source: own elaboration on GGS data

In synthesis, from one side it seems that the cohabitation means something different in Western and Eastern European countries. Suffice to say that it is very difficult to label a phenomenon as deviant when it is experienced by more than the half of the population, as it happens in Bulgaria. From the other side the classification provided by Prinz (1995) and partially operationalized in the classification proposed by Villeneuve-Gokalp (1991) seems to suit better to the Western countries. This happens because the process of diffusion of cohabitation has been active since a long time in Western Europe, but was stimulated by a sudden political, social and economic change in Eastern Europe. The cohabitation in Western countries emerged together with the cultural revolution in the 1960s, including sexual revolution, rise of feminist movements, spread of postmaterialist values. However, in the case of Eastern countries cohabitation raised as a result of the change in the political regime and to a great extent due to the influence of the Western lifestyle (Koytcheva, 2006).

Further analysis will concentrate on two main goals. From one side, it is important to overcome the oversimplification of the patterns that link cohabitation, birth and marriage that is evident in the operationalization proposed by Villeneuve-Gokalp (1991). The sequence analysis approach will permit to classify the observed pattern without forcing them in previously arranged categories. From another side it is necessary to highlight the characteristics of the cohabiters to understand the changing meaning and context of cohabitation in a comparative perspective. It is not yet clear, in fact, if cohabitation starts to diffuse from the upper or the lower social status strata of the population, and if the social background of the cohabiters changes through countries and through cohorts.

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