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Research Article

Disagreements among cohabiting and married couples in 22 European countries

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	248
2	Background and hypotheses	249
2.1	Disagreements within cohabiting and married relationships	249
2.2	Country context	252
2.3	Hypotheses	253
3	Methods	254
3.1	Data	254
3.2	Measures	255
3.2.1	Dependent variables	255
3.2.2	Independent variables	255
3.3	Analytical strategy	258
4	Results	258
4.1	Descriptive results	258
4.2	Multilevel logit models	260
5	Conclusion and discussion	265
6	Acknowledgements	267
	References	269

Disagreements among cohabiting and married couples in 22 European countries

Tanja van der Lippe¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Cross-national research suggests that married people have higher levels of well-being than cohabiting people. However, relationship quality has both positive and negative dimensions. Researchers have paid little attention to disagreements within cohabiting and married couples.

OBJECTIVE

This study aims to improve our understanding of the meaning of cohabitation by examining disagreements within marital and cohabiting relationships. We examine variations in couples' disagreements about housework, paid work and money by country and gender.

METHODS

The data come from the 2004 European Social Survey. We selected respondents living in a heterosexual couple relationship and aged between 18 and 45. In total, the study makes use of data from 22 European countries and 9,657 people. Given that our dependent variable was dichotomous, we estimated multilevel logit models, with (1) disagree and (0) never disagree.

RESULTS

We find that cohabitators had more disagreements about housework, the same disagreements about money, but fewer disagreements about paid work than did married people. These findings could not be explained by socio-economic or demographic measures, nor did we find gender or cross-country differences in the association between union status and conflict.

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CONCLUSIONS

Cohabiting couples have more disagreements about housework but fewer disagreements about paid work than married people. There are no gender or cross-country differences in these associations. The results provide further evidence that the meaning of cohabitation differs from that of marriage, and that this difference remains consistent across nations.

1. Introduction

Cross-national research on differences between cohabitation and marriage has focused mainly on relationship stability and satisfaction (e.g., Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006; Soons and Kalmijn 2009). Such research has consistently found that married couples are often better off than cohabiting couples. However, relationship quality has both positive and negative dimensions (Amato and Rogers 1999; Johnson et al. 1986). Individuals can feel satisfied with their relationship and still fight a lot. We argue that focusing on the positive dimension of relationship quality alone does not tell the full story. To gain more insight into the differences between cohabiting and married couples, we need to focus on conflict as well, since it is difficult to imagine an intimate relationship that does not involve occasional conflict (Miller, Perlman, and Brehm 2007). The aim of this study is to improve our understanding of the meaning of cohabitation by examining disagreements about housework, paid work and money within marital and cohabiting relationships.

The few studies that have examined conflict or disagreements in cohabiting and marital unions are based on US samples. This research indicates that cohabiting couples have higher levels of conflict than married couples (Brown and Booth 1996; Skinner et al. 2002), although this has not always been found for long-term cohabiting couples (Willettts 2006). Other studies suggest lower levels of conflict when cohabiting couples plan to marry (Brown and Booth 1996), and that a high level of conflict makes the relationship less satisfying and stable (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007). Few researchers have examined relationship conflict outside the US or from a cross-national perspective. Ruppanner (2010) examined relationship conflict about housework in 25 European nations using the 2004 European Social Survey. Ruppanner found important cross-country differences in relationship conflicts about housework. As her cross-country results show, men and women in countries with high rates of gender egalitarianism and full-time female labor force participation reported the least housework conflict.

In line with Ruppanner (2010), we argue that conflict must be understood in context. Given the fact that cohabitation has been institutionalized in recent decades in some European countries (Soons and Kalmijn 2009), the association between type of union and disagreement may differ between countries. Studying cross-country differences may also teach us more about the meaning of cohabitation, which is still debated (Huang et al. 2011; Seltzer 2004a). Demographers and sociologists have long been driven by the question of where cohabitation fits in, in union formation processes (see for example Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990), and if it is an incomplete institution (Nock 1995). In addition, it is frequently argued that because cohabitation is without the institutional constraints that accompany marriage, it may offer more freedom to negotiate gender roles (Cherlin 2004). Marriage is a highly gendered institution in which husbands and wives have well-defined expectations of how each gender should behave (Brines 1994). In contrast, research indicates that gender roles are less structured in cohabitive relationships (Batalova and Cohen 2002). Empirical results show that gender is a salient factor in relationship quality among older cohabiting and married couples (Brown and Kawamura 2010), with cohabiting men reporting lower quality in their relationship than married men. Ruppanner (2010), in her analysis of housework conflict, did not specifically differentiate between marital and cohabiting relationships. Nevertheless, the results indicate that women who have never married are more likely to have conflicts about housework than are their married counterparts. No differences were found between married men and men who have never been married. Overall, we expect to find gender differences in perceptions of conflict in cohabiting and married relationships.

The current study builds on existing research on relationship conflict, and examines gender-related variations in disagreements about housework, paid work and money, between cohabiting and married individuals. We further investigate the importance of the country context by comparing and contrasting relationship conflict within cohabiting and married relationships across 22 European countries.

2. Background and hypotheses

2.1 Disagreements within cohabiting and married relationships

It is important to understand the motivations underpinning the decision to cohabit or marry, as they are likely to influence the conduct of the relationship, and in particular the level of conflict within the relationship. Early explanations for differences between cohabiting and marital relationships focused on the select nature of cohabitators (Bennett, Blanc, and Bloom 1985). As cohabitation has become more widespread and as

cohabitators are less often a select group, other explanations have been formulated to gain insight on the differences between cohabitators and married couples. According to the commitment theory, the motivation for cohabitation versus marriage is based on personal dedication and constraint commitment (Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004). Dedication refers to interpersonal commitment associated with a strong desire for the relationship to last into the future (Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2012). Previous research indicates that cohabitation prior to marriage is associated with lower levels of commitment to a partner (Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2004), and that cohabitators as a group tend to value individual freedom more than do their married counterparts (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Thomson and Colella 1992). These findings suggest that cohabitators feel less dedication to their relationships and their partners than married partners do, and this could lead to an increase in conflict. Moreover, compared to marriage, cohabitation can be viewed as an incomplete institution (Nock 1995). There are clear standards of propriety and decorum with respect to married couples, but less so with respect to cohabiting ones (Nock 1995): rules and regulations are less clear for cohabitators than they are for married couples. Since cohabitation is less institutionalized than marriage, cohabitators have to actively negotiate and construct their roles and expectations, which can lead to conflict. Married partners already have a shared understanding of what it means to be a husband or wife, and should presumably have less to disagree about (see also Wilcox and Nock 2006).

Both perspectives thus lead to the expectation that cohabitators will generally experience more conflict with each other than married partners. Previous research has found that cohabitators have lower levels of relationship commitment, and fewer moral, structural and institutional constraints to stay in their relationship than do married couples, resulting in higher levels of conflict overall (Brown and Booth 1996; Nock 1995; Widmer, Kellerhals, and Levy 2006).

The current paper investigates whether or not disagreements between cohabiting and married couples differ depending on the source of the conflict, including disagreements about housework, paid work and money. We also look at possible differences between men and women within cohabiting and married couples. There are a number of reasons why we might expect conflict to differ depending on the source of disagreement. With respect to housework, given that cohabitators are less likely to adhere to traditional gender ideology (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988), value individual freedom more than their married counterparts (Thomson and Colella 1992), and are less inclined to have institutionalized family arrangements (Cunningham 2005), it is likely that they face more conflicts about the division of housework. Although housework patterns are more egalitarian in cohabiting couples, women still perform the vast majority of household chores in both cohabiting and marital contexts (Baxter, Haynes, and Hewitt 2010). This may cause women in cohabiting relationships to be more dissatisfied with

housework than their married counterparts, as the assumption is that the division of labor will be more egalitarian for them than for married women (Miller and Sassler 2010). We might therefore expect cohabiting women to report higher levels of conflict about housework than cohabiting men, and for the gender difference to be larger than it is within married relationships.

Lack of institutionalization and cohabiters' low commitment to relationships would also predict higher conflict for cohabiting couples in case of paid work. However, with respect to paid work, other differences between cohabitation and marriage would predict it to be the other way around, with cohabiters having fewer conflicts. Previous research indicates that cohabiting couples are less traditional in their roles, with cohabiting men working fewer hours and cohabiting women working more hours than do married men and women (Brines and Joyner 1999). This is -at least for cohabiting women- more in line with a less traditional gender ideology, and is therefore likely to result in less conflict. Compared to married men, cohabiting men tend to have more marginal employment, characterized by irregular hours, low-status work, and temporary employment contracts (Clarkberg 1999; Kalmijn 2011; Oppenheimer 2003). Furthermore, uncertainty about men's ability to provide financially for the household may be less of a problem in cohabiting relationships than in marriages (Oppenheimer 2003). This is because deviations from the traditional division are more accepted in cohabiting couples, and cohabiting women are less dependent on a male partner for financial security than are married women (Brines and Joyner 1999). Moreover, given the temporary and trial nature of many cohabiting relationships compared to marital ones, expectations about having solid paid work for men may be lower. All in all, with respect to paid work, the latter two arguments are more likely to be relevant, and we expect that cohabiting couples may have fewer disagreements about paid work than married couples do. With respect to gender-related differences, we expect that, given their relatively insecure employment situation, cohabiting men will report higher levels of conflict about paid work than do cohabiting women. This gender-based difference is expected to be larger than it would be within married relationships, where the position of men is more secure.

With respect to money-related conflicts, data from the US indicate that cohabiters face more material hardships than do married couples (Halliday Hardie and Lucas 2010; Lerman 2002). US research suggests that many cohabiting couples are putting off marrying until their earnings and financial stability improve (Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005; Seltzer 2004b). In addition, several studies show that income and money are not pooled and used the same way in cohabiting as in married households. Evidence from the US, Sweden (Heimdal and Houseknecht 2003) and Norway (Lyngstad, Noak, and Tufte 2011) suggests that cohabiting couples are more likely than married couples to keep their money separate. According to a study in the UK, partially pooling money

– as opposed to joint pooling – was most common among childless, cohabiting partners earning different rather than similar amounts (Vogler, Brockmann, and Wiggins 2006). US research suggests that the practice of keeping money separate in cohabiting households may increase levels of material hardship, compared to married households, because there is a less efficient transfer of money for the collective good (Bauman 1999; Lerman 2002). We therefore expect that cohabiting couples have higher levels of conflict about money. Within households, men and women differ in how they spend and allocate money. For example, Pahl (1995) finds that women are more household-focused than men in their spending decisions. They make more sacrifices when money is short, they spend less on themselves, and they spend a higher proportion of their own earnings on children. This will be the case even more for cohabiting couples than for their married counterparts, since married couples have more of a shared understanding of what money should be spent on. Taken together, these core differences between cohabiting and married households in access to and allocation of money suggest that cohabiting men and women have higher levels of perceived disagreement about money than their married counterparts. The fact that women tend to earn less than their male partners and have different spending priorities further suggests that women will perceive more disagreements about money than their male counterparts. Since in cohabiting couples the money is more often kept separate, we expect their gender-related differences to be larger than in marital relationships.

2.2 Country context

The culture and economy of a society may play a significant role in the importance of interpersonal commitment and institutionalization of the union for the disagreements of cohabiting and married couples. Most research comparing conflicts in cohabiting and married couples has been conducted in the US, but cohabitation is a more recent relationship form there than in Europe (Kiernan 2004; Seltzer 2004a). The higher levels of conflict observed among cohabitators in the US may not be true of all European countries. It is well established that cohabitation differs between countries, in terms of its prevalence, duration, and similarity to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). We argue that the country context is an important factor in relationship disagreements in three main ways.

First, the *institutionalization of cohabitation* varies between European countries (Gonzalez, Miret, and Trevino 2010; Soons and Kalmijn 2009). In Sweden and elsewhere, cohabitation is a more accepted phenomenon than in countries such as Italy. In line with Brown (2004), we argue that differences between married and cohabiting couples are larger where cohabitation is less institutionalized – because cohabiting

couples belong to a more select group in these contexts – and that they therefore also differ more in terms of conflict.

Second, *economic development* in a given nation is likely to be associated with financial matters within the couple, and may, specifically, influence disagreements about money and paid work. Given that cohabiting relationships are generally less financially stable than married relationships, this association will be weaker for cohabiting couples living in a country characterized by high levels of welfare. In other words, when the level of economic development is high, we expect to see smaller differences between cohabitation and marriage in the level of conflict.

The third contextual indicator we would like to distinguish has to do with *gender equality* in a country. In more gender-equal societies, there is conclusive evidence of more gender equality in household-related behavior and attitudes at the micro-level, for example, a more equal division of paid and domestic work (Batalova and Cohen 2002). In countries with greater gender equality, married couples are likely to have a more equal division as well, making them similar to cohabiting couples, with less fixed roles. We therefore expect that, in terms of conflict, the differences between married and cohabiting couples are smaller in countries with a gender-egalitarian culture.

2.3 Hypotheses

To summarize, both commitment theory and the notion of cohabitation as an incomplete institution suggest that cohabitators will generally have more disagreements in their relationship than married couples. However, this may vary, depending on the source of disagreement. For disagreements about housework and money, we expect that the lower levels of commitment, the less institutionalized arrangements, and the more gender-egalitarian expectations of cohabitators will result in higher levels of conflict for them than for their married counterparts. For paid work, on the other hand, we expect less conflict amongst cohabiting couples. Cohabiting women more often have paid work than married women. Also, men's paid work may be less important for cohabiting couples, and expectations about having good solid paid work for men may be lower. *Our first hypothesis* therefore reads: cohabiting couples experience more conflict about financial matters and housework but less conflict about paid work than married couples.

Given that men and women experience relationships very differently, we expect these associations to differ by gender. Prior research highlights the tensions between gender-egalitarian ideology and inequity in housework and the distribution of money within cohabiting couples, suggesting that women in cohabiting couples may be more likely to report conflicts about housework and money. In contrast, men in cohabiting relationships tend to have less stable and secure employment than married men, and we

expect that cohabiting men may report more conflicts about paid work. *Our second hypothesis* reads: cohabiting women experience more conflict about housework and money than cohabiting men, and this difference is larger than the difference between married men and women; cohabiting men, on the other hand, experience more conflict about paid work than cohabiting women, and this difference is larger than the difference between married women and men.

Country-level characteristics may buffer the influence of cohabitation on disagreements. Cohabiting couples who are surrounded by many other cohabitators will be less likely to have disagreements. When confronted by economic pressures, cohabitators will have more conflicts, but more affluent societies and states with generous welfare schemes will make it easier for cohabiting men and women to avoid conflict. When a society offers greater normative support for less traditional roles, cohabitators are likely to experience fewer conflicts. Summarizing, our *third hypothesis* is: the more institutionalized cohabitation is, the higher the level of economic development and the more gender egalitarian the culture is, the smaller the association of cohabitation with disagreements.

3. Methods

3.1 Data

The data come from the 2004 European Social Survey (ESS), which had a special module on family, work and well-being. We selected respondents who reported living in a heterosexual couple relationship and were aged between 18 and 45. We used data from 22 countries in all, namely Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (N = 10,001)⁴. Response rates differed from 47% in Switzerland to 79% in Greece. We further exclude observations with missing data on the dependent variables (n = 344). Our final analytic sample comprised 9,657 respondents.

We note that US studies often restrict their focus to individuals in relationships of no more than 5 or 10 years duration, due to the fact that cohabiting unions in the US tend to be relatively short lived (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). It appears that cohabiting unions in Europe (average 5 years) are longer in duration than those in the US, nevertheless there are still large gaps between the average durations of cohabiting

⁴ Turkey, Italy, Ukraine and Estonia were not included in the analysis because these countries either had no or very few cases of cohabitation (n<10) or did not have data on some of the dependent variables (such as income).

versus marital unions in Europe. Since we would like to provide a picture of the conflicts of all married and cohabiting couples, we decided to control for relationship duration, instead of restricting the analysis to relationships of a certain duration beforehand. To further examine this issue, all models were re-run on the sample, restricting the relationship duration to less than 10 years. This additional analysis indicated that there were no major differences in the associations between disagreements for cohabitators or married couples for any of the three outcomes in the reduced sample, although the associations do appear to be somewhat smaller.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Dependent variables

Our dependent variables were taken from a series of questions asking how often the respondent disagreed with their partner about a) housework, b) paid work and c) money. For each measure, responses ranged from 1 = never, 2 = less than once a month, 3 = once a month, 4 = several times a month, 5 = once a week, 6 = several times a week, and 7 = every day. A large number of respondents responded that they “never” disagree with their partner for each measure.

We collapsed all other categories in which respondents indicated that they disagreed with their partner (2 = less than once a month to 7 = everyday). Each dependent variable is scored 0 = never disagree and 1 = disagree.⁵

3.2.2 Independent variables

Our key independent variable differentiated between people in cohabitive relationships and people in married relationships (reference). We also included a range of measures to control for differences between cohabiting and married couples in their social and demographic characteristics (see Soons and Kalmijn 2009). Controls were included for gender (1 = female), relationship duration, household income, level of education, whether or not both partners work, if the respondent had been divorced, and whether or not there were children under 12 living in the household.

⁵ In additional analysis, we examined the associations across a 3 category dependent variable differentiating between those who never disagree, compared to occasional and frequent disagreements. In that analysis we found no significant differences between occasional and frequent disagreements, further justifying our decision to retain a dichotomous dependent variable.

Relationship duration was measured in number of years since the respondent first began living with their partner. Household income per month was measured in twelve categories, and was recoded to the middle of each category (lowest category: €75, highest category: €15,000). In the analyses, this variable was centered on the mean. Level of education was measured in five categories: 1 = less than lower secondary education, 2 = lower secondary education completed, 3 = upper secondary education completed, 4 = post-secondary non-tertiary education completed, 5 = tertiary education completed. Dummies for the different levels were included in the models. Two dummy variables were included for the couple's work arrangements: 1 = whether both had a paid job or 2 = neither partner had a paid job, with the reference being the male as the sole earner.

At the country level, we investigated the effect of gender equity, GDP, and country cohabitation rates. As a measure of gender equality in a country, we used the United Nations' Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which is based on estimates of women's relative economic income, participation in high-paying positions with economic power, and access to professional and parliamentary positions. No GEM score was available for Luxembourg and France. To keep these countries in the analyses, the missing score was replaced by the average GEM score (.70) and a dummy was added for missing scores. GDP figures were taken from International Monetary Fund statistics (2011) and divided by 1000. Based on the 2004 ESS, country cohabitation rates were measured by averaging the level of cohabitation across each country. In the models, all country-level variables were centered on the mean. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for model covariates, pooled data across all countries

	Mean/%	SD	Range
Age	35.44	6.30	18 – 45
Female	56		
Relationship duration	10.25	6.76	0 – 34
Household income	2945.76	2382.00	75 – 15000
Missing household income	18		
Highest level education:			
Isced 1	6		
Isced 2	14		
Isced 3	48		
Isced 4	3		
Isced 5 and 6	29		
Couple work status:			
Single earner	32		
Both paid job	63		
Neither paid job	5		
Ever divorced	7		
Child under 12	64		
Country level variables:			
Gender Equity Measure	0.09	0.30	0 – 1
Country GDP	0.22	10.70	-16.64 – 36.36
Country cohabitation rate	29.86	15.00	9.1 – 59.1
Total N	9,657		

3.3 Analytical strategy

We estimated four multilevel random intercept models for all three dependent variables where individuals (level 1) were nested within countries (level 2) (Snijders and Bosker 1999). Given that our dependent variable was dichotomous, we estimated multilevel logit models. The first model is a baseline model, including cohabitation versus marriage and gender. In the second model, we added the individual-level control variables. To test gender differences between cohabiting and married couples, we included an interaction between gender and cohabitation in Model 3. In Model 4, we added the country level variables to Model 2.

To further test for country-level differences in the gap between cohabitators and married people, we undertook two additional analyses. First, we examined whether, and to what extent, there was country-level variation in the gap between disagreements for cohabitators and married people for all dependent variables by adding a random coefficient to cohabitation. Second, in models where the country-level variation in disagreements reached statistical significance, we performed cross-level interactions between the three country-level measures (GDP, GEM and cohabitation percentage) and cohabitation.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive results

Table 2 compares the cohabitation rates in the different countries, as well as the disagreements about housework, paid work and money across all countries. Cohabitation rates differed considerably between countries, from 3% in Greece to 37% in Norway and 50% in Sweden. Of all the dependent variables, the respondents were most likely to report that they had disagreements about housework; 62% of the sample disagreed with their partner about housework compared to 42% about paid work and 55% about money. The level of disagreement also varied considerably between countries. Men and women in Greece reported the fewest disagreements with respect to all three disagreement categories. The percentage of disagreement about housework, paid work, and money was among the highest in Finland and Norway.

Table 2: Proportion cohabiting and disagreement about housework, paid work and money, by country

Country	N	Cohabiting		Housework	Paid work	Money
		%	Disagreements (yes)	Disagreements (yes)	Disagreements (yes)	Disagreements (yes)
Austria	472	21	59	35	54	
Belgium	474	27	68	42	57	
Switzerland	546	18	58	39	50	
Czech Republic	521	13	69	55	66	
Germany	613	21	70	35	64	
Denmark	404	31	74	45	59	
Spain	382	10	49	40	39	
Finland	524	33	90	65	80	
France	454	34	48	46	45	
Great Britain	439	28	62	47	64	
Greece	533	3	28	22	37	
Hungary	330	14	46	33	46	
Ireland	434	13	47	31	43	
Iceland	150	37	81	69	71	
Luxemburg	414	17	57	36	45	
Netherlands	461	26	62	34	54	
Norway	526	37	81	49	71	
Poland	422	4	72	47	57	
Portugal	438	5	36	32	37	
Sweden	511	50	76	44	56	
Slovenia	302	18	62	36	51	
Slovakia	307	4	67	55	61	
Total	9,657	22	62	42	55	

4.2 Multilevel logit models

Table 3 presents the results for disagreements about housework. The results of Model 1 indicate that cohabitators were more likely than married people to report disagreements about housework than to never disagree about housework. Women were significantly less likely than men to report disagreements about housework. While the magnitude of the associations was attenuated, these overall results remained consistent after including the controls for socio-economic and demographic characteristics in Model 2. In Model 3, where we included an interaction between gender and cohabitation, the significant associations remained consistent, but the interaction term was not significant. Contrary to our expectations, this indicates that there are no significant gender differences in the association between cohabitation or marriage and the level of disagreement about housework. In the final model (Model 4), we included the country-level measures. The results for the association between cohabitation and level of disagreement remained the same. Only the cohabitation rate was marginally significantly related to more conflict for cohabiting couples. In countries with higher levels of cohabitation, respondents were more likely to report disagreements with their partner about housework. This suggests a lower tolerance of highly gendered domestic roles in countries with less traditional relationship norms. In all models for disagreements about housework, the country-level variance (level 2) was significant, suggesting that the level of disagreement differed across countries. However, contrary to our expectations, additional analyses (not shown) suggest that the gap in disagreements between cohabitators and married people did not differ significantly between countries, and none of the cross-level interactions were significant.

As expected, several of the controls were found to be important for disagreements about housework. The longer the relationship duration, the less likely respondents were to report disagreements. Respondents with higher household income were also less likely to report disagreements. In general, those with higher levels of education were more likely to report disagreements than those with the lowest level of education. In households in which both partners were in a paid job, respondents reported increased levels of disagreements about housework. As expected, the presence of primary school children increased the likelihood of respondents reporting disagreements about housework.

Table 3: Multilevel logit models (MCMC) of the association between disagreements about housework by relationship status for 22 countries (ESS 2004)

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Married (ref)								
Cohabiting	0.19***	.06	0.18***	.07	0.22*	.09	0.17*	.07
Female	-0.12*	.05	-0.11*	.05	-0.10*	.05	-0.12*	.05
Cohabiting * Female					-0.08	.11		
Country-level measures								
GEM							2.19	1.7
GDP							-0.16	.01
Country cohabitation %							0.02+	.01
Relationship duration			-0.01**	.00	-0.01**	.00	-0.01**	.00
Household income			-0.00	.00	-0.00	.00	-0.00	.00
Household income missing (1=yes)			-0.29***	.06	-0.29***	.06	-0.29***	.06
Education:								
Isced 1								
Isced 2			0.07	.11	0.07	.11	0.06	.11
Isced 3			0.29**	.11	0.29**	.11	0.29**	.10
Isced 4			0.36*	.17	0.36*	.17	0.36*	.17
Isced 5 and 6			0.61***	.11	0.61***	.11	0.61***	.11
Couple employment status:								
sole earner								
both paid job			0.26***	.05	0.27***	.05	0.27***	.05
neither paid job			0.04	.12	0.04	.13	0.04	.13
Ever divorced			-0.15	.09	-0.15	.09	-0.15	.09
Child < 12 in household (1=yes)			0.21***	.05	0.21***	.05	0.21***	.05
Constant (level 1)	0.56***	.15	0.17	.19	0.13	.20	-0.40	.36
Country-level variance (level 2)	0.51**	.17	0.45**	.16	0.45**	.16	0.27*	.11
N	9,657		9,657		9,657		9,657	

+ p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p≤.01; ***p≤.001

Table 4 presents the results for disagreements about paid work. The results of Model 1 suggest that cohabitators were less likely than married people to report disagreements about paid work. This is consistent with our expectations. In addition, women were less likely than men to report disagreements with their partner about paid work. In Model 2, the magnitude of the coefficients is attenuated, but the finding that cohabitators had lower levels of disagreement about paid work remained consistent after including the controls in the model. In Model 3, the gender interaction with cohabitation was not significant; however, the inclusion of this interaction increased the standard error for the association between cohabitation and disagreement, making the association non-significant. In the final model, which included country-level measures, the results were similar to those in Model 1 and Model 2, where cohabitators and women reported lower levels of disagreement than married people and men. Respondents were also likely to report somewhat more conflicts about paid work in countries with higher levels of cohabitation. The significant level 2 country-level variance for paid work indicates that countries differ in level of disagreement, but additional analysis suggests that the gap between cohabitators and married people does not differ significantly between countries and none of the cross-level interactions were significant.

Many of the control variables were important for disagreements about paid work. Interestingly, the higher the level of household income, the more couples were likely to disagree about paid work. This may be due to one or both partners working longer hours. There were mixed results for educational level, but the significant associations indicated that, in general, more highly educated respondents were more likely to report disagreements about paid work. The presence of a child under 12 meant more disagreement about paid work.

The results for disagreements about money are presented in Table 5. In Model 1, the association between cohabitation and disagreements about money was not significant. After including the controls in Model 2, the differences between cohabitators and married people became significant. The inclusion of the gender-interaction term in Model 3 resulted in the associations between cohabitation and disagreements about money becoming non-significant, and the interaction term was also not significant. In the final model, which included the country-level measures, the cohabitation rate at country level was marginally significant. The results for level 2 country-level variance suggested significant differences between countries in terms of disagreements, but additional analysis shows that the differences between cohabitators and married people did not vary by country and none of the cross-level interactions were significant.

Other variables that were associated with disagreements were household income, where a higher level of household income decreased the likelihood of disagreements. Having children under the age of 12 in the household increased the likelihood of respondents reporting disagreements with their partner about money.

Table 4: Multilevel logit models (MCMC) of the association between disagreements about paid work by relationship status for 22 countries (ESS 2004)

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Married (ref)								
Cohabiting	-0.16**	.05	-0.13*	.06	-0.15	.08	-0.14*	.06
Female	-0.16**	.04	-0.17***	.04	-0.17***	.05	-0.17***	.04
Cohabiting * Female					0.05	.10		
Country-level measures								
GEM							-0.02	.01
GDP							0.01	1.5
Country cohabitation %							0.02+	.01
Relationship duration			-0.00	.00	-0.00	.00	-0.00	.00
Household income			0.00**	.00	0.00**	.00	0.00**	.00
Household income missing (1=yes)			-0.13*	.06	-0.31*	.06	-0.12*	.06
Education:								
Isced 1								
Isced 2			-0.03	.12	-0.02	.12	-0.04	.11
Isced 3			0.25*	.11	0.26*	.11	0.24*	.11
Isced 4			0.04	.17	0.04	.17	0.02	.17
Isced 5 and 6			0.58***	.11	0.58***	.11	0.56***	.11
Couple employment status:								
Sole earner								
Both paid job			0.01	.05	0.01	.05	0.01	.05
Neither paid job			-0.06	.13	-0.06	.13	-0.06	.12
Ever divorced			-0.06	.09	-0.06	.09	-0.06	.09
Child < 12 in household (1=yes)			0.14**	.05	0.14**	.05	0.14**	.05
Constant (level 1)	-0.18	.11	-0.61***	.16	-0.62***	.16	-1.08**	.34
Country-level variance (level 2)	0.24**	.09	0.21**	.08	0.21**	.08	0.18*	.07
N	9,657		9,657		9,657		9,657	

+ p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p≤.01; ***p≤.001

Table 5: Multilevel logit models (MCMC) of the association between disagreements about money by relationship status for 22 countries (ESS 2004)

	MODEL 1		MODEL 2		MODEL 3		MODEL 4	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Married (ref)								
Cohabiting	0.10	.05	0.12*	.06	0.09	.08	0.11	.06
Female	-0.08	.04	-0.07	.04	-0.08	.04	-0.07	.04
Cohabiting * Female					0.07	.10		
Country-level measures								
GEM							-0.01	.01
GDP							1.32	1.3
Country cohabitation %							0.02+	.01
Relationship duration			-0.00	.00	-0.00	.00	-0.00	.00
Household income			-0.00***	.00	-0.00**	.00	-0.00**	.00
Household income missing (1=yes)			-0.24***	.06	-0.24***	.06	-0.23***	.06
Education:								
Isced 1								
Isced 2			-0.04	.11	-0.02	.12	-0.03	.11
Isced 3			0.04	.10	0.26	.11	0.04	.10
Isced 4			0.19	.16	0.04	.17	0.20	.16
Isced 5 and 6			0.15	.11	0.58	.11	0.16	.11
Couple employment status:								
Sole earner								
Both paid job			-0.04	.05	-0.04	.05	-0.04	.05
Neither paid job			0.13	.12	0.13	.12	0.13	.12
Ever divorced			-0.03	.09	-0.04	.09	-0.03	.09
Child < 12 in household (1=yes)			0.15***	.05	0.15***	.05	0.16***	.05
Constant (level 1)	0.30*	.11	0.23	.17	0.23	.16	0.21	.29
Country-level variance (level 2)	0.26**	.09	0.25**	.09	0.25**	.09	0.17*	.07
N	9,657		9,657		9,657		9,657	

+ p≤.10; *p≤.05; **p≤.01; ***p≤.001

5. Conclusion and discussion

Empirical research on married and cohabiting couples has typically focused on differences in positive aspects of couples' relationships, such as relationship satisfaction and well-being. We have argued that we can improve our understanding of the meaning of cohabitation by looking at disagreements within marital and cohabiting relationships. If cohabitators are likely to be less committed to the relationship than their married counterparts, if their relationship is less institutionalized, and if they are more gender egalitarian, these things will be visible in their disagreements. While previous research has generally found that cohabitators have more conflicts than married couples, we expected that the level of disagreement might vary depending on the issue involved. We therefore examined three different outcomes. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that disagreements between cohabitators and married people differ between men and women, and vary across countries depending on the diffusion of cohabitation, the level of gender equity within the country, and economic conditions. Using data from the European Social Survey, we examined differences in couples' disagreements about the division of housework, paid work and money in 22 European countries. In summary, the results provided partial support for our first hypothesis, i.e. that cohabiting couples experience more disagreement about housework but less so about paid work; the results concerning disagreements about money suggested no strong or consistent associations. The second hypothesis, concerning gender differences within cohabiting and married couples in level of disagreement, was not supported, nor was the third hypothesis concerning cross-country differences between married and cohabiting couples in level of disagreement.

These findings were relatively stable and were not explained by a range of socio-economic and demographic measures. Consistent with the idea of cohabitation being a less committed and institutionalized relationship, cohabitators were more likely to report disagreements about housework than married people. This may be due to more tensions between gender-egalitarian ideals and women's greater contribution to housework in cohabiting relationships than for married couples. The fact that the finding was reversed for paid work, with married couples having more disagreements about paid work than cohabiting couples, does not provide direct evidence for the idea of commitment and incomplete institutionalization, but is more in line with gender ideology. Cohabiting couples have less traditional points of view, and dividing paid work in a more egalitarian manner is consistent with these less traditional expectations. In other words, it is possible that the gender-egalitarian ideals combined with greater equality in labor market participation for cohabitators reduces the likelihood of disagreements about paid work. Although cohabitators are more likely to keep their money separate, they appear not to have more disagreements about money than married couples. The practice of

keeping their money separate might also imply that there is less need to discuss money issues.

In general there was little support for our second hypothesis, i.e. that there would be gender differences in the association between marriage or cohabitation and each of the dependent variables. We found some gender differences in reported conflict, but not in line with our expectations. We did not find evidence in the European Social Survey data for any gender difference within married or cohabiting relationships. Our notion that there would be gender differences in the experience of a cohabiting or married relationship – in other words, differences in “his” and “her” expectations of the relationship, as often found in other studies (Fowers 1991; Waller and McLanahan 2005) – is probably not true for disagreements. Gender differences do exist, but they are unaffected by whether the couple is married or cohabiting: women report less conflict than men about housework and paid work.

In addition to examining differences in conflict between married and cohabiting couples, we also examined cross-country differences in Europe. To date, most of the research examining conflict in cohabiting and married couples has concentrated on the US, but some European countries have a longer history of cohabitation that might make cohabiting more comparable to marriage in terms of disagreements. However, our findings suggest another conclusion: although variations exist in the level of disagreement about the three issues studied in 22 European countries, the gap in the level of disagreement between married and cohabiting couples was similar across all countries. Differences in economic situation, culture and cohabitation rates between countries were not related to differences between cohabitators and married couples for the three types of disagreements. This finding differs from comparative studies on the well-being of married and cohabiting couples in Europe (Soons and Kalmijn 2009): they found that in countries where cohabitation is more institutionalized, such as in Norway or Finland, there is no significant difference in well-being between cohabiting and married people. Overall, our results suggest that a country’s cohabitation rate had a marginally significant association with disagreements, although this was not related to differences in disagreements between cohabiting and married people. Consistent with Ruppanner (2010), we conclude that it is important to consider the country context when studying disagreements. In subsequent research, therefore, it would be of interest to select specific countries that reflect large variations in rates of cohabitation, such as Sweden, Norway, Great Britain, Switzerland and Greece. A more detailed analysis of these countries, similar to that of Crompton and Lyonette (2006), might teach us more about what precise contextual factors influence disagreements within cohabiting and married couples.

This study is not without its limitations. One of the limitations of the ESS dataset is that it is not longitudinal panel data, which impedes a determination of causal

directions. Selection based on disagreement cannot be ruled out. People who are by nature more conflict-minded might not choose marriage but may prefer to cohabit. To learn more about causality, we need panel data with an oversampling of cohabitators. In years to come, the Gender and Generations Survey (a panel of respondents between the ages of 18 and 79 in several European countries) can fill this gap (<http://www.ggp-i.org/>).

Another limitation is related to the dependent measures. The conflict measures query overall disagreement, without identifying who initiates the conflict (see also Ruppanner 2010). This implies that we are not able to establish whether men or women are more likely to disagree with the other sex, but can only discuss who is most likely to *report* conflicts. There are a number of differences between men and women in their reports of conflict, making it worthwhile to study disagreements in depth, preferably using data from couples. Moreover, other types of disagreement might be worth investigating. Disagreements about family life, for example about children's upbringing, family outings, the holiday destination, and food choices, might offer us more insight into the way cohabiting and married couples function in their daily family life. Nevertheless, this paper takes the first step towards understanding conflicts in married and cohabiting relationships in European countries.

Despite these limitations, our findings give reason to highlight the importance of the negative dimension of relationship quality. Conflict is a natural and even inevitable aspect of most ongoing close relationships (Canary, Cupach, and Messman 1995). Our analysis has shown that not all forms of disagreement are more frequent in cohabiting relationships. Cohabitators have significantly more conflicts about housework but significantly fewer conflicts about paid work than married couples, and the two groups do not differ with respect to conflicts about money. Unlike Soons and Kalmijn (2009), who studied individual well-being, we were not able to detect cross-country variation in levels of disagreement. Different mechanisms may well be at stake for relationship satisfaction and relationship conflict, although it should be noted that our non-significant findings may also be related to differences in samples and the problem of small numbers in some groups compared to Soons and Kalmijn (2009). Individual well-being (i.e. happiness and life satisfaction) may be quite different from relationship satisfaction or the level of disagreement in the relationship, which is more of a couple-level dynamic measure, rather than a measure of individual well-being.

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