



# DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

*A peer-reviewed, open-access journal of population sciences*

## **DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

**VOLUME 31, ARTICLE 34, PAGES 1043–1078**

**PUBLISHED 12 NOVEMBER 2014**

<http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol31/34/>

DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2014.31.34

*Research Article*

### **Towards a new understanding of cohabitation: Insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia**

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This publication is part of the Special Collection on “Focus on Partnerships: Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe and Australia,” organized by Guest Editors Brienna Perelli-Harris and Laura Bernardi.

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## **Towards a new understanding of cohabitation: Insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia**

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### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Across the industrialized world, more couples are living together without marrying. Although researchers have compared cohabitation cross-nationally using quantitative data, few have compared union formation using qualitative data.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

We use focus group research to compare social norms of cohabitation and marriage in Australia and nine countries in Europe. We explore questions such as: what is the meaning of cohabitation? To what extent is cohabitation indistinguishable from marriage, a prelude to marriage, or an alternative to being single? Are the meanings of cohabitation similar across countries?

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## **METHODS**

Collaborators conducted seven to eight focus groups in each country using a standardized guideline. They analyzed the discussions with bottom-up coding in each thematic area. They then collated the data in a standardized report. The first and second authors systematically analyzed the reports, with direct input from collaborators.

## **RESULTS**

The results describe a specific picture of union formation in each country. However, three themes emerge in all focus groups: commitment, testing, and freedom. The pervasiveness of these concepts suggests that marriage and cohabitation have distinct meanings, with marriage representing a stronger level of commitment. Cohabitation is a way to test the relationship, and represents freedom. Nonetheless, other discourses emerged, suggesting that cohabitation has multiple meanings.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study illuminates how context shapes partnership formation, but also presents underlying reasons for the development of cohabitation. We find that the increase in cohabitation has not devalued the concept of marriage, but has become a way to preserve marriage as an ideal for long-term commitment.

## **1. Introduction**

The change in family formation throughout Europe over the past few decades has been astounding. Nearly every country in Europe has experienced declines in marriage and increases in cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Klüsener et al. 2013; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Yet the rate of change has not been similar across countries. Some countries have experienced a rapid increase in cohabitation, with premarital cohabitation becoming normal and direct marriage dying out, while others have had very little increase in cohabitation. A growing body of research has used quantitative data to document, describe, and characterize the nature of cohabiting unions in different countries (Andersson and Philipov 2002; Kiernan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Hiekel et al. 2012). While these studies provide important information on the dynamics of union formation at the population level, they can only provide limited insights into the substantive reasons for changes in union formation in different societies. Over all, we have very little understanding of how people talk about cohabitation and marriage in different countries, and the meanings they attribute to these relationships. Therefore, it can be difficult to explain increases in cohabitation and differences between countries

without greater insight into the nature of cohabitation and how it is discussed in different countries.

In this study, we use focus group research to compare discourses about cohabitation and marriage in Australia and nine settings in Europe: Austria, eastern and western Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Russia. Each study setting represents a different pattern of family formation which has been influenced by a unique set of historical, cultural, political and economic developments (see also *Demographic Research Special Collection: Focus on Partnerships* for articles on each country). The nature of the focus group research allows us to compare social norms and attitudes to see which discourses are widespread and which unique to particular countries. To our knowledge, this is the first time in demography that focus group methodology has been employed with the intention of comparing results between countries. The comparative nature of this research highlights similarities across societies and draws out country-specific distinctions.

The similarities and differences across countries help to shed light on the meaning of cohabitation and the extent to which the pathway of family change has been universal. Some researchers, particularly proponents of the Second Demographic Transition explanation, have posited that countries progress through stages: cohabitation starts out as a marginal behavior, becomes more acceptable as a prelude to marriage, and then becomes more widespread as marriage and cohabitation become indistinguishable (van de Kaa 2001; Kiernan 2004; Lesthaeghe 2010; Prinz 1995; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). According to this perspective, shifts in values towards greater autonomy, self-actualization, and freedom lead individuals to reject institutions such as marriage (Lesthaeghe 2010). This shift in values results in a decline in marriage and eventually a situation in which marriage and cohabitation are indistinguishable (van de Kaa 2001).

On the other hand, alternate arguments suggest that cohabitation may not necessarily be a rejection of marriage, but may be chosen because it is a temporary union, better suited for life's uncertainties (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011; McLanahan 2004). In the United States, for example, cohabitation is often found to be an alternative to being single, or more similar to a dating relationship (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; Manning and Smock 2005; Sassler 2004). American cohabitators often "slide" into living together (Manning and Smock 2005), with finances, convenience, and housing more likely to motivate their decisions than the commitment of a long-term relationship (Sassler 2004; Manning and Smock 2005). The U.S. pattern, as well as the negative educational gradient of childbearing throughout Europe (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010), suggests that the increase in cohabitation may not simply be due to a shift in values towards expressive and unconventional values, but may instead be a symptom of increased uncertainty and instability.

Here, our focus group research sheds light on these explanations by investigating a set of broad questions: First, what is the meaning of cohabitation? To what extent do people see it as indistinguishable from marriage, a prelude to marriage, or more similar to a dating relationship? What are the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation and marriage? Why are more and more people living together without marrying? Will marriage disappear? Second, to what extent are the meanings of cohabitation similar across countries? Is there a universal reason for cohabiting or is it context-specific? Do informants in countries with different levels of cohabitation talk about cohabitation in a way that suggests that the development of cohabitation progresses through stages? Or do these conversations suggest a new way of looking at the development of cohabitation?

In order to address these questions, we have analyzed our focus group data and found that three concepts consistently emerge in all focus groups: commitment, testing, and freedom. These concepts help us to understand what cohabitation is, and to what extent cohabitation is an “alternative to being single”, a “prelude to marriage,” or “indistinguishable from marriage” (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). The analysis of these concepts in relationship to the typology also sheds light on the development of cohabitation in different contexts. We find that the ways in which participants talk about these main concepts in different settings do not reflect a general progression through particular stages. Instead, cohabitation has multiple meanings that do not necessarily correspond to the prevalence of cohabitation or its supposed stage of development. Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of the concepts of commitment, testing, and freedom in all focus groups suggests an underlying universal theme: marriage and cohabitation continue to have distinct meanings, with marriage representing a stronger level of commitment, and cohabitation a means to cope with the new reality of relationship uncertainty.

Below we outline how cohabitation is discussed in the literature, with a focus on previous characterizations of cohabitation and general reasons for the increase. We then provide justification for using focus group methodology as a way to elicit information on societal norms and perspectives. We document the general procedures for data collection and the analytic strategy used in the project. We describe how, in each country, the discourses surrounding cohabitation in relation to marriage provide distinct insights into how context shapes and defines union formation behavior. Despite the context-specific details, however, our findings as a whole move us closer towards a new understanding of cohabitation in Europe and Australia.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### **2.1 Different concepts of cohabitation**

The swift emergence of cohabitation has left researchers scrambling to understand what cohabitation is and why it has developed (Smock 2000; Seltzer 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). In trying to define cohabitation, researchers have often compared it to established ways of becoming a couple (Prinz 1995; Kiernan 2004; Hiekel et al. 2012; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Raley 2001; Villeneuve-Gokalp 1991). In some arguments, the implication is that changes in union formation progress through stages (Prinz 1995; Kiernan 2004; van de Kaa 2001; Lethaeghe 2010). Here we briefly outline the main categories used to describe cohabitation – “alternative to marriage,” “prelude to marriage,” and “alternative to being single” – before discussing possible reasons for the increase in cohabitation.

Marriage has been the most common reference category for cohabitation, since marriage has been the central way of organizing families in the Western world. Terms such as “alternative to marriage” or “indistinguishable from marriage” have become common, with unions that last longer more likely to be considered alternative to marriage (Kiernan 2001; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Manning 1993). Indeed, cohabitators are similar to married couples in fundamental ways. Cohabitators share households, usually resulting in economies of scale, and may present themselves socially as a couple (Smock 2000). Increasingly, cohabitation is chosen as a union for second or higher-order partnerships (Galezewska et al. 2013), and children are born into cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). Governments across Europe and in Australia are beginning to grant cohabitators the same legal rights and obligations as married couples, with the duration of the relationship a condition for treatment similar to married couples (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012; Kovacs 2009). Hence, as cohabiting couples stay together longer, they may be considered socially and legally indistinguishable from married couples.

Besides being a long-term arrangement, however, researchers often acknowledge that cohabitation is frequently a period of living together before marriage, using terms such as: “prelude to marriage,” “trial marriage,” or “stage in the marriage process” (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Kiernan 2001; Villeneuve-Gokalp 1991). Some researchers have used retrospective behavioral indicators to calculate the proportion of couples that marry after cohabiting (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). These quantitative studies, however, do not explicitly ask intentions to marry at time of moving in together, and little is known about the meaning of these periods of premarital cohabitation. Premarital cohabitation could be a testing ground for compatibility or simply a waiting period after an engagement proposal, as has been

found in Australian studies (Carmichael and Whittaker 2007). The couple may already be fully committed, or they may be living together primarily as a matter of convenience. Plans to marry, however, usually matter: couples across Europe with plans to marry have greater relationship quality and higher levels of commitment (Wiik et al. 2009; Wiik et al. 2012), and are more likely to pool economic resources (Lyngstad et al. 2011). These findings imply that cohabitation has multiple implications, and that it is impossible to simply characterize cohabitation as a “prelude to marriage.”

Cohabitation has also been considered an “alternative to being single,” (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004), with more similarities between couples who are just dating or “going steady” with a boyfriend or girlfriend than those who are married (Manning and Smock 2005; Carmichael and Whittaker 2007). Heuveline and Timberlake (2004) define the “alternative to single” category as of short duration and ending in union dissolution, but from this definition it is difficult to understand the couple’s reasons for cohabiting. Qualitative research from the U.S., Australia, and Poland suggests that the decision to move in together is often made gradually (Manning and Smock 2005; Carmichael and Whittaker 2007; Mynarska and Bernardi 2007); finances, convenience, and housing may motivate decisions to move in together, rather than decisions about a long-term relationship or marriage (Sassler 2004). For these types of couples, the reasons for living together may be due to convenience or pragmatism rather than a marriage-like bond (Smock 2000; Sassler 2004; Carmichael and Whittaker 2007). One U.S. study also provides a number of reasons why couples continue to live together without marrying: they only want to marry once; they have had a bad experience with their own divorce or that of their parents; they feel that most marriages are unlikely to last; and they think that marriage is hard to exit (Miller et al. 2011). In addition, American cohabitators discuss how they are waiting to marry until their financial circumstances improve, whether by having enough money for a wedding, buying a house, or getting out of debt (Smock et al. 2005). Nonetheless, many of those who have concerns about finances or divorce still usually want to marry at some point in their lives (Miller et al. 2011; Smock et al. 2005). Given that other studies have argued that economic uncertainty may also be important for union formation in Europe, especially at the time of first giving birth (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010), it could be that some of the views found in the U.S. qualitative literature may be similar in Europe and Australia.

## 2.2 Reasons for increases

By providing an alternative to marriage, the increase in cohabitation has fundamentally challenged the institution of marriage (Cherlin 2004). However, it is unclear *why*

cohabitators choose to remain together without marrying. Proponents of the Second Demographic Transition theory argue that the rise in cohabitation is due to shifts in values towards “secular, egalitarian, and anti-authoritarian orientations” (Lesthaeghe 2010: 228). Cohabitators ascribe to values that stress individual autonomy, but also “greater gender symmetry, less intolerance to all types of minorities, .... and breaches of civil morality.” These arguments imply that cohabitators are more oriented towards expressive values such as freedom and individualism, and are likely to reject traditional institutions such as the Church, but also marriage. As these expressive values diffuse throughout societies and across countries, family behavior progresses through a series of stages, resulting in cohabitation becoming indistinguishable from marriage. Supposedly, Northern Europe is the furthest along this trajectory, since this region has the highest levels of cohabitation before marriage and the highest percent of births within cohabitation (Kiernan 2004, Raley 2001). Yet countries in other regions, such as Southern and Eastern Europe, also seem to be following this trend (Lesthaeghe 2010).

Although cohabitation has increased in nearly every European country (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012, Sobotka and Toulemon 2008), it is not clear that the underlying reasons for the increases accord with the arguments of the Second Demographic Transition. Cohabiting couples may not be rejecting marriage altogether, but instead postponing it until later in the life course (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). The reasons for this postponement are not clear, especially because the benefits of marriage are no longer as discernible as before. However, as discussed above with reference to the U.S. literature, cohabitators may not have the resources, whether financial or emotional, to convert their relationships into marriage (Smock et al. 2005, Gibson-Davis et al. 2005, Sassler 2004). This lack of resources may be particularly pronounced for those with the least education and income (McLanahan 2004). More generally, the increase in economic uncertainty as a result of globalization and changes in the labor market may be producing unstable lives that result in couples choosing cohabitation over marriage, especially when deciding to have children (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Hence, the increase in cohabitation may be less about the shift towards new values of self-actualization and rejection of institutions, and more about increases in instability and uncertainty.

Our focus group research is well placed to provide insights into these explanations. By investigating the social norms and attitudes discussed in the focus groups, we can see to what extent cohabitation is displacing marriage, has emerged as a precursor to marriage, or remains a temporary type of relationship. We can also see whether the responses are in accordance with Second Demographic Transition values and predictions about the development of cohabitation occurring in stages, or instead, reflect findings from the U.S. literature, with concerns about financial barriers and uncertainty. Taken as a whole, the discourses that arise in the focus group research will

allow us to better understand how conceptions about cohabitation are context-specific, and which underlying processes in family change appear to be universal.

### **3. Data and procedures**

This research uses focus groups to gain insights into how family norms and attitudes about marriage and cohabitation differ in different settings. A focus group is a small group of individuals (usually 6-8 people) that discusses topics organized around a central theme, with the discussion facilitated by a trained moderator. The goal of focus group research is to explore general norms and perceptions (Morgan 1998). Because focus groups are small, they cannot be truly representative of the population; however, the goal of focus group research is not to provide representative data, but to elicit general social perspectives. Focus group research is essential for understanding setting-specific explanations, filling gaps in knowledge, and generating research hypotheses (Morgan 1998).

The collaborators on this project conducted focus group research in medium to large cities in the following countries: Australia (Sydney), Austria (Vienna), Italy (Florence), the Netherlands (Rotterdam), Norway (Oslo), Poland (Warsaw), Russia (Moscow), and the United Kingdom (Southampton). Two sites were chosen in Germany, because of very different patterns of marriage and cohabitation in eastern (Rostock) and western (Lübeck) Germany. In general, cities were chosen as a matter of convenience, but also to standardize based on urban opinions. The urban population is often the forerunner of new behaviors; studies show that cohabitation tends to be higher in urban areas, and new family formation behaviors often diffuse from urban to rural areas (Klüsener et al. 2013). For brevity, we refer to countries when referring to the results in each study, but we acknowledge that the responses are not representative of the entire country.

Nearly every country team conducted eight focus groups, with the exception of the Netherlands (7) due to recruitment issues (see Table 1). Because the focus of the research is on decisions made early in adulthood and often with respect to first partnerships, we chose participants between the ages of 25 and 40. We acknowledge, however, that this age range may bias the results towards a conception of cohabitation more prevalent among young adults; attitudes may be very different for older adults choosing between cohabitation and marriage later in life. In addition, informants were screened to ensure they were citizens of the country, although not necessarily of the predominant ethnicity. Because of the complexity of union formation, we did not distinguish between having children or union status; informants may have previously married, cohabited, divorced, or never been in a partnership. We did, however, stratify

the groups by gender and education, (those with and without a university degree), resulting in 2 groups of each type (highly educated women, highly educated men, less educated women, less educated men; in the Netherlands there was only one group of less educated men). We used this strategy for two reasons: 1) in order to promote a more relaxed and open environment within the groups and 2) to elicit differences between different groups of informants. Overall, differences by education were noticeable in only a few countries; therefore, we do not elaborate on those differences in this paper, except when they are very pronounced (see also the chapters on England and the Netherlands). We leave in-depth analyses of education and gender for future papers.

**Table 1: Number of focus groups and participants in each country**

Country	Number of focus groups	Total N of participants
Australia (Sydney)	8	67
Austria (Vienna)	8	71
England (Southampton)	8	59
East Germany (Rostock)	8	74
West Germany (Luebeck)	8	41
Italy (Florence)	8	58
Netherlands (Rotterdam)	7	29
Norway (Oslo)	8	56
Poland (Warsaw)	8	69
Russia (Moscow)	8	64

Each country team followed their own recruitment procedures depending on resources and situation. For example, four teams used recruitment agencies, two recruited participants through newspapers and flyers posted in public spaces, and the remainder used a combination of the two strategies (see articles in *Demographic Research Special Collection: Focus on Partnerships* for details for each country). Participants were provided with incentives, the amount of which differed across settings. The country teams also decided who would moderate the focus groups; usually a lead member of the research team moderated, with an assistant taking notes. The project team created a moderator training guide for all moderators to follow, which included suggestions for probing and how to involve all participants. Nonetheless, the moderators could have had different styles, leading to differences or biases across settings.

Each focus group team followed a standard focus group guide (see appendix) drafted by the first author and then finalized during a workshop. The focus group guide addressed a series of themes, including the reasons for the increase in people living together unmarried, the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation and marriage, obstacles to marrying and motivations to marry, and the appropriate life stage to marry – for example, when buying a house. We also examined the role of children and government policies in potentially prompting marriage, as well as perceptions about the future of marriage (see appendix). Each focus group lasted about 90 minutes. Because of the nature of focus group discussions, it is impossible to stick to an exact script, and many of the discussions addressed questions in different sequences. Nonetheless, all focus groups touched upon the main topics and addressed the questions included in the focus group guide. After all focus groups were completed in a country, country team members transcribed the recorded focus groups in the participants' native language. While this approach meant that the results were not directly comparable across countries, and differences could be attributed to translation issues, it ensured that native speakers were responsible for the analysis and interpretation of each focus group, thereby reducing misinterpretation due to nuances of language.

#### **4. Analytic strategy**

In the first step, each country team coded and analyzed its results according to a standardized format to produce a “country report” in English. The format of the country report closely followed the structure of the interview guideline. For each topic covered in the guideline, country teams had to locate relevant material in their narrative data and describe what was discussed in the groups. Each country report provides rich extracts and quotes from the original discussions, translated into English. These reports were used for the analyses in this paper.

Although one approach to presenting the findings would be to systematically compare each section of the country reports and report on similarities and differences, the findings would not necessarily reflect the most important themes emerging from the discussions. Therefore, in order to derive the most salient themes raised in each country and increase the validity of the findings, the following procedure was adopted. The first author read and summarized the country reports to construct a concise picture of cohabitation in each country. Next, we identified sections of the reports that would be of interest for this particular analysis, concentrating on those where informants discussed: (1) reasons for the increase in cohabitation in their countries; (2) advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation; (3) barriers and motivations to marry. The second author coded these sections in NVivo, a software package that facilitates qualitative

data analysis, and used a bottom up approach to derive the main themes emerging from the focus groups. The first author reviewed the content of the central thematic categories against the initial summaries of the reports. The first and second authors discussed the main themes, comparing countries in relationship to them. The combination of two authors comparing the country reports in different ways but working in parallel and exchanging their findings allowed for checking the validity of interpretations. If the primary authors had any questions about the country teams' findings, they queried these collaborators by e-mail and telephone. Following this procedure, a description of the key findings was prepared. All country team authors then read and commented on this to ensure the accuracy of the results for their country. Key findings are discussed below. Although there may be challenges in how to interpret qualitative data from cross-national research, this close communication and collaboration reduced mistakes in interpretation and increased validity.

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 The uniqueness of discourse**

One of the most striking findings from this research is how the results from each country describe a vivid picture of union formation specific to that context. To provide a general sense of how cohabitation varies across countries, Table 2 presents the percent of women born 1970–79 (1971–73 in Germany) who have ever cohabited by the time of the interview in each country (Harmonized Histories, see [www.nonmarital.org](http://www.nonmarital.org) for a description of each survey). Although the year of interview differs by survey (2003–2009), and the estimates may not accurately capture the behavior of young people, the cohort roughly corresponds to the focus group participants. We can see from the table that the percent ever cohabiting is highest in Norway and lowest in Italy, demonstrating the range of variation in partnership formation across our study countries. Note that estimates in Germany may be higher than in other countries, because they only include older cohorts, who would have had more time to enter any type of partnership by the date of survey (2008–2012). Nonetheless, the table provides basic information about the prevalence of cohabitation in these countries.

**Table 2: Main perception of cohabitation and marriage in each country**

Country	Main perception of cohabitation and marriage from the FG research	Percent of 1970–79 cohort to have ever cohabited by time of survey <sup>1</sup>
Italy	Cohabitation represents a low-level commitment and was associated with the concept of “freedom.” Marriage seen as important for religion, but because of tradition and family pressure.	14%
Poland	Cohabitation is easy to end, and respondents are able to leave at any time. Religion and security were mentioned frequently with respect to marriage.	17%
Russia	Respondents discussed issues about trust, responsibility, and freedom with respect to both cohabitation and marriage. The three-tier system was mentioned: 1) cohabitation; 2) official registration of marriage; 3) church wedding.	52%
Netherlands	Cohabitation is a test relationship, with fewer financial risks and greater freedom. Participants mentioned that it is a response to divorce.	64%
United Kingdom	Whether or not to marry is a personal decision, but the highly educated want to marry before kids, while cohabitation is the norm for the less educated.	67%
Western Germany <sup>2</sup>	Cohabitation is for self-fulfillment earlier in life, but marriage is for security and is socially expected when having children.	73%
Austria	Respondents took a life-course perspective: cohabitation is for younger ages, while marriage is a more responsible, mature relationship.	79%
Australia	Despite increases in cohabitation, marriage is still an important institution.	NA
Norway	Not many differences between cohabitation and marriage, but marriage is often about romance and love.	80%
Eastern Germany <sup>2</sup>	Participants expressed a low desire for marriage; marriage and cohabitation are equivalent, but some decide to marry for personal reasons.	82%

Note: Weights applied where available.

NA: Data currently not available.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Harmonized Histories database: See [www.nonmarital.org](http://www.nonmarital.org) for more details.

Generations and Gender Surveys in Austria (2008–09), Italy (2003), Norway (2007–8), and Russia (2004); Fertility and Family Survey in the Netherlands (2003); British Household Panel Survey for the United Kingdom (2005–2006); Poland Employment, Family, and Education Survey (2006);

<sup>2</sup> Western and eastern German data come from pairfam, which interviewed women born 1971–73 (2008–2012)

Table 2 also summarizes the main concepts associated with cohabitation from the focus group research (see also country-specific articles in this *Special Collection*). While some concepts are similar, each country can still be defined through its dominant themes and in a distinct way. Although Poland and Italy both have had a slow increase in cohabitation and are very similar in several important aspects, they still have particular themes running through their focus groups. In the Italian focus groups, cohabitation seems to be increasing, because couples want to test the functioning of their relationship in everyday life. In the Polish focus groups, the reasons for cohabiting were similar, but the emphasis was more oriented towards cohabitation being an unstable relationship that is easy to break. In both samples, the role of religion, and especially the Catholic Church, was central to discussions about marriage. In Poland this emphasis leaned towards Catholic heritage and religiosity, while in Italy, the emphasis was slightly more towards the tradition of marriage and family. This finding is in accordance with other studies that argue that religion is one of the reasons for the slow increase of cohabitation in Italy (de Rose et al. 2008) and Poland (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007), but provides more detail about how religion operates in this setting.

In German-speaking regions, focus group participants saw cohabitation as a pre-marital stage of life, characterized by self-fulfillment and freedom, whereas by and large marriage was for later in the life course. In Austria, informants described cohabitation as short-lived and flexible – something to do when young – while marriage was a “secure haven in a fast-moving world.” In western Germany, informants suggested that cohabitation was not only associated with self-fulfillment and individualization, but also the part of the life course when it was appropriate to try out multiple partners. As in Austria, the wedding in western Germany signified financial and emotional stability, and marriage was considered a protection which provides safety, especially for the wife and children. Hence, the contrast between cohabitation as an immature stage in the early life course compared to the responsibility of settling down and marrying at a later age was more pronounced in these countries. These results may reflect the long-standing reliance on the breadwinner model, which relies more heavily on women’s dependence on men, especially through marriage. Marriage is a form of protection, and policies aimed at preserving marriage and the breadwinner model, for example, exempting married couples from taxes, reinforce the strength of the marital institution (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012).

Some aspects of the discussion in eastern Germany were similar to those in western Germany and Austria and others differed greatly. The focus of relationships was more on the present, with commitment being restricted to the current moment, while in western Germany and Austria, relationships were considered to be more long-term and based on the future. Hence, marriage was a stronger sign of commitment in western Germany and Austria, because it was “until death do us part,” while in eastern

Germany the focus seemed to be more pragmatic and on the present rather than the future, thereby making marriage less necessary. For most participants in eastern Germany, marriage is seen as irrelevant and not changing the essence of the couple's relationship. These differences may be due to entrenched socio-cultural patterns in western Germany compared to the pronounced social change that occurred under socialism in eastern Germany.

The Netherlands has a great variety of legal arrangements for couples, such as registered partnerships, cohabitation contracts, and prenuptial agreements, which may ease the process of divorce. This environment may be reflected in how Dutch informants viewed cohabitation – often explaining that the increase in cohabitation was a response to increases in divorce. While marriage was seen as the “complete package,” informants did not state a particular right time to marry; in particular, having children should not be a main motivating factor. British informants expressed a similar level of tolerance to cohabitation and having children while cohabiting, with informants stressing liberal attitudes to different living arrangements. Nonetheless, more and less educated informants in the UK expressed different personal choices for marriage and cohabitation. The more highly educated tended to think that marriage was best for raising (their own) children. In contrast, the less educated saw cohabitation, including childrearing within cohabitation, as more normal. While the less educated still viewed marriage as an ideal, marriage was sometimes difficult to achieve, and in the end “nobody cares.” The Australian informants were similar to the English in that while living together with someone was not taboo, marriage was still considered an ideal, with the expectation that marriage would be for life.

In Russia, focus group participants linked cohabitation and marriage to the concepts of trust, responsibility and freedom. Interestingly, both long-term committed cohabitators and those who highly valued marriage discussed how their type of relationship represented the ultimate level of trust, while those who were less committed to their type of union were skeptical of relationships in general. Orthodox Christian informants referred to a three-stage model of relationships, with cohabitation the best option initially, followed by a registered official marriage, and finally the church wedding, which represented absolute commitment.

Finally, in Norway, participants saw cohabitation and marriage as fundamentally indistinguishable, especially when children were involved. Marriage, however, was still valued as a symbol of love, romance, and a sign of commitment. Increasingly, marriage was being postponed to later in life, but when couples did marry, it was to celebrate - perhaps even to celebrate having survived the period with young children. Thus today, even though many Norwegians may not be getting around to marrying early in the life course, our results suggest that Norwegians are unlikely to be rejecting marriage outright. On the whole, these examples indicate how a country's social and cultural

environment shapes decisions about marriage and cohabitation, but also how these types of unions are perceived and understood across countries.

## **5.2 Common themes**

Although unique discourses resounded in each country, distinct themes also emerged in nearly every context, indicating that informants in each setting refer to the same concepts when talking about the meaning of cohabitation.<sup>11</sup> The themes that emerged help to better understand how well previous studies describing and classifying cohabitation reflect what individuals say in Europe and Australia. In particular, the themes help to understand to what extent cohabitation is indistinguishable from marriage, whether cohabitation may be a prelude to marriage or a stage in the marriage process, or on the other hand, to what extent cohabitation is more like being single or dating. Each of the themes that emerge helps to shed light on whether these categories of cohabitation really exist. The three main concepts arose spontaneously in each set of focus groups, as informants discussed reasons for increasing cohabitation, advantages or disadvantages of cohabitation, as well as motivations for or barriers to marriage. At one point in the focus group guidelines, we did specifically probe about whether or not lack of commitment may prevent some couples from marrying, but the topic of commitment arose much earlier in the discussions and continued to be discussed long afterwards.

We find three main concepts to emerge in all settings: commitment, testing, and freedom. In the following sections, we will explore how people understand and define these concepts and illustrate their multidimensionality. We do not intend to systematically compare the countries in relation to these concepts or discuss the frequency that they arose in the focus groups, because this would be going beyond the limitations of the focus group methodology. Instead, the advantage of focus group research is to be able to capture the meanings of these concepts as perceived by the focus group participants. In this way, we can get a better grasp of the role that cohabitation plays in union formation.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that we do not explicitly address the meaning or definition of marriage in this paper, because it would require extensive additional analysis and interpretation, as well as change the focus of this paper, which is on cohabitation.

### 5.2.1 Commitment

Commitment was a major theme that arose repeatedly in all countries, especially as a way to distinguish between cohabitation and marriage. Focus group informants usually said that the commitment level in marriage was greater than in cohabitation, even in places with widespread cohabitation, such as Norway and eastern Germany. Commitment was a dominant theme in Austria, Australia, and the UK, but was relatively less central to discussions in Italy, eastern and western Germany, and the Netherlands. However, related themes were discussed; for example, safety and security were a main topic of discussion in Poland and western Germany. Therefore, although the concept of commitment was present in all countries, the ways informants talked about commitment differed substantially across countries.

In several countries commitment itself was the major distinguishing factor between marriage and cohabitation. In Australia, informants used terms such as “*one hundred percent commitment*” or “*life-long union*” to indicate that the commitment level in marriage went beyond that of cohabitation. One Australian informant admitted:

*My superficial instinct, and it is a horrible judgment and even to say it out loud it just sounds, like it's against everything I actually believe, but if somebody said this is my wife or this is my girlfriend, if you're asking me specifically how do I judge their commitment I'm always going to assume that wife is more committed than girlfriend.*

This sentiment was also expressed in Austria, where marriage was described as more binding and serious. In Russia, marriage was seen by some informants as a relationship of “*higher quality*” that was more committed and “*closed*.” In the UK, some discussed marriage as the “*ultimate commitment*” and “*a real statement*.” The UK informants said that marriage creates the feeling that “*you're in it for the long haul now*,” and it is simply “*more difficult to get out of*.” Thus, marriage in these countries is usually considered a commitment for the long-term, a fundamental difference from the perception of cohabiting unions.

Beyond these general assertions that commitment was important for marriage, the concept also emerged along several specific dimensions: security and stability; emotional commitment; and the role of the public, friends, and relatives through the declaration of commitment marriage entails. In several countries, the primary way of discussing commitment was with reference to emotional terminology. In Austria, eastern and western Germany, for example, marriage implied emotional safety and security. In the Netherlands, informants contrasted marriage with cohabitation by talking about the higher costs of separating:

*The costs of breaking up are just so much higher, in both a symbolic, a financial and in an emotional way when you get married. When you decide to marry and to propose, it has to be something magical. You then say 'I am really, really sure that I want to be with you for a very long time. I am sure to such an extent that I want to commit myself to you, a commitment which when ended will cost us both a lot'.*

Few of the countries' informants directly talked about love, another emotional dimension of commitment. This was perhaps because love between spouses was a given. In Poland, when one participant mentioned that love was not a topic of discussion, the others reacted that love was such an obvious reason it did not need to be discussed. Love was mentioned obliquely in other countries, but was not a dominant theme. However, in Norway, love and romance emerged as one of the main reasons for marrying. Many Norwegian participants considered marriage the greatest declaration of love, something intended to last forever. Marriage is not only more committed; it is also about doing something romantic, thereby strengthening the relationship.

*We married after eleven years, but there is no difference in status and commitment. It's just to celebrate. We have survived the period with young children, so this is to celebrate love.*

In other countries, commitment was implied through terms such as safety, stability, and security. Multiple dimensions of security arose in the UK and in western Germany. For example, security can signify feeling emotionally secure in a relationship; feeling financially secure; security for your children; or the security of not being alone when you grow old. This western German informant summarizes the importance of security when he married his wife and before he had children:

*[marriage] it is not only an obligation, but at the same time you are developing a secure legal framework, and you are entitled to rights. And that was important to me, to create a secure legal framework for my wife and my child before I start a family... it is marriage that provides not only the legal, but also the moral framework for this.*

The concepts of security and safety also arose repeatedly in Poland, where the official wedding vows and declaration imply a "higher" stage of relationship progression. Also, some women in Poland perceive marriage as a protection against infidelity, "a sense of moral obligation," which seems to be missing in cohabitation. In Italy, however, the concept of emotional security or safety did not emerge in the focus

group discussions. Cohabitation was seen as having a “*low-level of commitment*,” especially among the less educated, but for them this was generally seen in a positive light as a way to avoid the “*scarring*” physical and emotional costs of separation after marriage. Thus, although Poland and Italy seem to be similar in many respects, they appeared to differ in the extent to which security and safety was raised as an advantage of marriage.

Often informants mentioned that the commitment of marriage was much more serious because it was a public declaration, or made before loved ones; this sentiment was expressed in one way or another in all countries. In some countries, such as Italy, informants said that it was important to marry in Church in order to be married in the eyes of God. This also came up among less educated men in the Netherlands, who thought a marriage was real only if sealed by the Church and in front of family and friends. In Russia, the Orthodox Christian informants distinguished between a marriage registered with the authorities and a marriage sanctified by a religious ceremony, with the latter reflecting much deeper commitment. All in all, declaring ones’ commitment in public was raised as a strong distinguishing factor between marriage and cohabitation, even though some argued that such a public display was not necessary. One Italian informant disagreed with the necessity to make a public statement: “*why should they marry? For the others? For the family? The commitment is personal!*”

In several countries, the fear of commitment associated with marriage was one reason given for why cohabitation had become more prevalent over the past few decades. Men, in particular, were mentioned as having a fear of commitment in Australia, eastern and western Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and Norway. In most of these countries, informants recounted scenarios of friends (or even themselves) not wanting to commit to marriage, even though their girlfriends did. In the Netherlands, more highly educated men said that some people do not want to commit to their partner forever; they just want to commit to their partner in the here and now. In the UK, participants would not generalize that cohabitation is a sign of lack of true commitment to one’s partner, but they did acknowledge (when probed) that this might be the reason why some couples do not marry.

Often the fear of commitment is linked to the increase in divorce and the perception that more marriages now end in divorce. In the Netherlands, all focus group participants agreed that one of the main reasons for the decline in marriage was the consequences of divorce, which were perceived to be larger than the consequences of “merely” separating. In Austria, some informants pointed out that marriage was no guarantee for a lifelong relationship, and therefore marriage was not linked with stronger commitment or security. In Germany (both west and east), informants admitted to fearing both the financial and psychological consequences of divorce. German informants stressed that divorce is expensive and complex and in many cases associated

with anger, stress and bureaucratic obstacles. Hence, cohabitation is a much better option, with less commitment, greater freedom, and easier to dissolve for any reason.

Despite the emphasis on commitment and romance, participants in some countries were quick to point out that other factors were just as important as signs of commitment. Although many Norwegian informants thought marriage was a declaration of love, buying a house was a greater commitment, and having children together was far more binding. In eastern Germany, children were also seen as the ultimate commitment. More highly educated men in the Netherlands suggested that children are the emotional commitment to a relationship, while marriage is merely a practical commitment. In the UK, informants also said the mortgage and children were greater signs of commitment, but this was not expressed as strongly as in Norway or eastern Germany; one UK participant responded :

*Even though they [cohabitators] are committed because they might have a mortgage and they've got a child ..., in their head [they] probably feel that they're not committed because they haven't actually got married.*

Finally, it is important to point out that in nearly every country, some participants disagreed that cohabitation means a lack of commitment. Long-term cohabitators, sometimes called “ideological cohabitators” were present in focus groups in Russia, Italy, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Australia. These informants often asserted that “*marriage was just a piece of paper*” or objected to the idea that their commitment within a cohabiting union was less than those who were married. One Russian informant stated, “*I do not need witnesses.*” These informants rejected marriage and in many cases argued that cohabitation represented a stronger commitment than marriage, because it implicitly provided the freedom to leave at any time. As this UK informant said,

*In a way it's – if you are together and you're not married it almost says more, doesn't it, because you're not together because of that bit of paper, you're together because you're together.*

In the UK, this view was predominantly voiced by the less educated informants and related to the idea that marriage does not mean anything anymore. In Italy, on the other hand, this idea that cohabitation was a stronger commitment than marriage was more common among the higher educated informants, suggesting that they were rejecting the institution of marriage as argued by the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe 2010). Nonetheless, in all countries the view that cohabitation represents a stronger commitment than marriage tended to be a minority viewpoint, except in

Norway and eastern Germany, where having children together represented a stronger commitment than marriage. In Norway, as mentioned above, informants argued that children and a mortgage are greater signs of a couples' commitment, and therefore cohabitation and marriage were in this sense indistinguishable. In eastern Germany, however, most informants did not find marriage a relevant step at all. In many cases, marriage-like partnerships substituted for marriage itself, with little difference in commitment, especially when children were involved.

*When I'm together with my partner for such a long time, then marriage will not change the partnership by itself. I do not feel more connected to him or the like. If I did not before, then the marriage can't manage this, too. And if I want to stay together with him and I'm happy with him, then I will not say marriage caps it all off.*

Despite these exceptions, commitment still emerged in all countries as one of the major factors distinguishing marriage from cohabitation. Although commitment was not directly probed as an advantage of marriage in the focus groups, the concept and its related themes of emotional security and stability were repeatedly discussed and debated in all focus groups. This suggests that in most countries, marriage continues to be one of the main indicators of a couple's commitment to the relationship. Despite the increase in divorce, marriage generally signifies a greater degree of commitment than cohabitation, implying that cohabitation is not a true "alternative to marriage."

### **5.2.2 Testing the relationship**

If, overall, marriage can be distinguished from cohabitation by level of commitment, then it remains to be seen why people cohabit. Here another universal idea emerged: the idea that cohabitation is a phase for testing the relationship. Terms such as "*trial marriage*," "*test*" or "*test period*" arose frequently throughout all focus groups. Regardless of how widespread cohabitation has become, this period of living together unmarried has emerged as a way to try out the relationship.

In general, testing was seen as a benefit, allowing the partners to get to know each other and learn each other's habits. From this viewpoint, testing is oriented towards relationship building and alleviates the risk of divorce. In most countries, this testing period emerged as one of the advantages of cohabitation, especially because of the ease of dissolving a union if the relationship did not work out. In the UK, the ability to test the relationship was provided as one of the main advantages of cohabitation, and informants talked about how couples should "*test the waters*." In the Netherlands,

informants even joked that the period of living together was similar to test-driving a car or trying out a subscription before committing. In Australia informants advised that people “*try before you buy.*”

*I think that's important, because when you live together a lot of things you won't see when you were dating because you live apart... his habits, what he likes to eat, what he doesn't like to eat, what he likes to do in the bathroom... you can't imagine it until you really live together, and then you have to start thinking of how you're going to cope with it.*

In Poland and Italy, where marriage is the preferred long-term union, the opportunity to test the relationship was heralded as a benefit and stated as the primary reason why cohabitation had increased. In Austria, cohabitation was recommended as a wise thing to do before marriage, even for years. In Russia, cohabitation was considered a good or advisable stage on the way to officially registering the marriage and eventually marrying in church. In Norway, where cohabitation is the norm, this test period was seen as mandatory, and lack of commitment could be a reason for ending a partnership. Interestingly, in eastern Germany, one informant mentioned that because she and her partner were religious (Catholic), they needed to test their relationship for a long time in order to make sure they fit together before making the life-long commitment of marriage. Therefore, having a period to test out the relationship was primarily discussed as a positive development.

All in all, these findings provide evidence that the concept of cohabitation as a “testing period” is pervasive in all countries. The assumption was that cohabitation was not the endpoint in the relationship and that commitment needed to increase and in most cases, depending on country, result in marriage. In some countries, informants said that couples may move in together with the hope of marrying. Nonetheless, cohabitation cannot strictly be considered a “prelude to marriage,” because some cohabiting relationships dissolve. Many informants referred to situations when one partner found the other unsuitable for a relationship only after living together. In addition, informants did not mention that couples should have concrete plans to marry when they move in together; none described cohabitation as part of an engagement period. Therefore, it is inaccurate to *only* consider cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process or as a prelude to marriage, because many cohabiting couples may not make it to the next step.

### **5.2.3 Freedom**

The findings about cohabitation as a testing ground already suggest that couples have the freedom to leave a cohabiting union at any time, but the emphasis on freedom and independence in the focus groups imbues cohabitation with even more and varied meanings. Of course, in many ways freedom is the opposite side of the coin from commitment and simply implies that cohabitation is what marriage is not. Yet the way that informants discuss the concept of freedom in relation to cohabitation provides more nuanced meanings that differ across countries. In several countries we find that informants specifically saw marriage as limiting freedom. In Austria and western Germany, informants argued that they valued freedom highly; therefore cohabitation, as a more flexible relationship, allowed for greater self-fulfillment, at least until later in the life course, when it was time to settle down. In the UK and the Netherlands, cohabitation provided individuals with more scope to maintain a feeling of personal freedom and their own identity, especially important for women, who no longer needed to take their partners' surnames. In Russia, focus group informants even said that marriage "enslaves" men, by requiring too many duties of them. Women in Russia also said they did not want to be too attached "to the next man in their life," especially after divorce or a bad relationship experience. Hence, many saw cohabitation as an option for individuals, especially women, to maintain their general freedom and independence, while marriage was much more constraining.

In most countries, informants also talked about how marriage prohibits being with other partners. This viewpoint implies that cohabitation is much more like being single or in a dating relationship, with the possibility of moving from one partner to the next. Informants in several countries explicitly stated that cohabitators have more opportunities to leave their current partners or seek out new partners. In eastern and western Germany, cohabitation's flexibility allowed partners greater spatial mobility in seeking employment, which might result in meeting a new girlfriend or boyfriend. In Austria, informants said that new internet technology provided greater opportunity to seek out a new or better partner. Informants in Russia also said that cohabitation was more flexible, allowing openness to a new partner who happened to come along. Indeed, some Russian informants said the desire for freedom might lead couples to reject marriage, despite sharing 'real romantic love,' because they were strongly in favor of an open relationship with the possibility of other sexual partners. Finally, Polish informants implied that without a wedding ring, men felt free to claim to be single, for example during business trips. Hence, in Poland cohabitation may allow greater opportunity to cheat on one's partner, implying that cohabitation is a less moral relationship than marriage.

Besides the ability to move on more easily to other partners, informants in many countries referred to specific aspects of freedom that defined cohabitation. Financial or

economic independence came up in Norway, the Netherlands, Australia, and the UK, but the dimensions addressed differed. In the Netherlands, informants said cohabitation provided the opportunity to keep finances separate and to avoid the other person's economic risks or debts. In Australia, some women felt that finances were less likely to "get so intertwined" in cohabiting relationships, making it easier for women to maintain a higher level of independence both within relationships and after they broke down. In Norway, economic independence came up, but with the idea that it could still be maintained in long-term, committed partnerships. In the Netherlands, informants mentioned that cohabitation provided more freedom to travel alone without consulting a partner. In Austria and Germany, informants talked about how cohabitation provided more opportunities for spatial and job mobility; this was particularly important given the changing job market and "fast pace of life." Therefore, one of the benefits of cohabitation was the freedom to pursue one's own lifestyle and remain independent.

Although the concept of freedom was often discussed as central to the individual's life and within the context of a cohabiting relationship, the concept of freedom also arose with respect to societal obligations and pressures. In this paper we do not directly present discussions related to external pressures from friends and relatives, but it is important to note that the expansion of freedom can be a result of the decline in social pressures to marry. For example, in Norway the concept of freedom arose in the focus groups as an advantage of cohabitation, but with a different connotation to the freedom mentioned in other countries. Cohabitation allows couples to have the freedom to choose to marry, but they do not have to marry if they do not want to. Norwegian informants saw this as a privilege for their generation, who now had more options for making their own decisions. In Italy the "ideological cohabitators" also mentioned that cohabitation provided the option to live together without social pressure, but this sentiment was not widespread. In Poland, western Germany, and the Netherlands, freedom came up specifically with reference to women's emancipation and the freedom for women not to have to take on traditional roles. In this sense, freedom also refers to a decline in pressure to adhere to social norms and helps to explain the increase in cohabitation.

Hence, the concept of freedom is essential for understanding the meaning of cohabitation in these countries. Although cohabitation may end up being a long-term situation, it implicitly allows for greater freedom than marriage. Beyond that, however, the concept of freedom implies an ability to move on to new partners, maintain one's own independent identity, travel on one's own, and preserve financial independence. Overall, this concept suggests that cohabitation is much more similar to a dating relationship, only with partners who live together. Nonetheless, the specific dimensions of how freedom is discussed can be seen across countries. In Austria, western and eastern Germany, the concept of freedom primarily applies to a stage of life, suggesting

that cohabitation is more like a dating period before settling down in marriage. In the Netherlands, Australia, western Germany, and the UK, the discussion of freedom implies more of an emphasis on individualization, personal freedom, freedom to travel, and women's independence. The concept of women's independence was also brought up in Poland. Finally, in Norway, the concept of freedom represents the opportunity to choose what to do with one's own life without social pressure. Here, cohabiting relationships may move out of the dating phase of the relationship and into a more permanent situation, but nonetheless, freedom is still crucial to understanding cohabitation.

## **6. Conclusions**

The findings from this cross-national focus group research provide insights into the meaning of cohabitation that go beyond simple comparisons between cohabitation and marriage or assumptions that cohabitation is a prelude to marriage or an alternative to being single. First, by and large, the focus group discussions in all countries emphasized the value of marriage, with the exception of eastern Germany where marriage was seen as less relevant. This dominant opinion suggests that marriage is not likely to disappear, as suggested by proponents of the Second Demographic Transition (e.g., van de Kaa 2001), and indeed when directly asked at the end of the focus groups, most informants stated that they did not predict that marriage would die out in the next fifty years. Nonetheless, many predicted further changes to the institution of marriage and a continuation of high levels of divorce.

Second, the main themes emerging from the focus groups help to better understand what cohabitation is. Although many studies, especially in countries where cohabitation is widespread, assume that cohabiting and marital unions are the same, the discussions in our focus groups suggest that persistent differences remain. The discourses surrounding commitment imply that marriage requires a higher level of commitment and represents "the real deal." While in some settings, children and housing may signify higher levels of commitment, the commitment of marriage is not necessarily devalued, taking on other symbolic meanings – for example, the expression of love and romance. The emphasis on commitment was pervasive, despite the acknowledgment of high levels of divorce. Hence, commitment emerged as one of the primary distinctions between cohabitation and marriage in all settings, although the degree of the distinction depended on setting.

Given the importance of commitment for marriage, testing the relationship arose as one of the main ways that couples make sure their commitment is high enough for marriage. In all countries, testing was seen as one of the main advantages of

cohabitation, especially in order to avoid divorce. Cohabitation provides an opportunity for couples to make sure that they are compatible without having to go through a divorce if they are not, which almost always has higher costs than moving out when not married. Thus, cohabitation usually makes it easier to leave if all goes wrong. Although this conceptualization of cohabitation could be considered similar to the concepts of “prelude to marriage” or “trial marriage,” the emphasis on the temporary or impermanent nature of the relationship suggests that early in the relationship, cohabitation is only a minor step beyond dating. It also raises the question of whether the predominant European and Australian conceptions of cohabitation may not be so dissimilar to the prevailing American image of cohabiting as an “alternative to single,” especially when thinking of the general increase in relationship uncertainty.

Beyond being a way to test the relationship, however, cohabitation is central to the idea of freedom to choose to marry or not. It is also associated with many aspects of freedom, such as personal freedom and identity, the freedom to travel and keep finances separate, and freedom from social pressures to marry (especially for women). Therefore, the discussion about freedom is another way that cohabitation and marriage can be seen as quite distinct. The emphasis on freedom and independence are indeed values associated with the increase in cohabitation as proposed by the Second Demographic Transition theory. However, Lesthaeghe (2010) tends to imply that freedom and independence are associated with Maslowian higher-order needs such as “freedom of expression, participation and emancipation, self-realization and autonomy, recognition.” (Lesthaeghe 2010: 213) These values tend to be cognitive or political domains that do not necessarily play into people’s conscious choices with respect to union formation. Some of the aspects discussed are clearly related to this conception of the SDT, for example personal freedom, the freedom to live one’s own life, freedom to travel or freedom to make one’s own financial decisions. Informants in focus groups everywhere also expressed tolerance of other people’s decisions and lifestyle choices. However, the discussion of freedom did not occur without a discussion of commitment. Freedom was usually not taken to the extreme that people do not recognize the value of commitment that a long-term relationship entails. Hence Lesthaeghe and collaborators’ focus on the increase in expressive values without acknowledging the importance of emotional bonds misses some significant elements of contemporary union formation.

Note that although the concept of testing came up repeatedly in the focus groups, issues relating to *economic* uncertainty were relatively rare. With the exception of participants in some countries discussing the high costs of a wedding, most did not mention financial barriers to marriage. Unlike U.S. qualitative research, which stresses the importance of stable financial situations in decisions to move from cohabitation to marriage (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Smock et al. 2005), European and Australian focus group participants rarely mentioned the need for economic stability before marriage.

This brings into question whether increasing uncertainty associated with temporary employment and job instability (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010) explains the increase in cohabitation outside of the United States. Nonetheless, our focus group research differs in design from the U.S. studies, which conducted in-depth interviews with individuals; because the goal of our research was to elicit general social attitudes, personal, perhaps stigmatized, reasons for cohabiting rather than marrying may not have been raised. Also, some of these opinions may have been restricted to the least educated, who may be less likely to marry due to financial uncertainty and job instability, as described by the negative educational gradient of childbearing in cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Although our groups were stratified by education, we found few educational differences between groups (for exceptions, see papers on the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in this *Special Collection*). However, previous U.S. studies reported on the attitudes of working or low-income informants (Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Smock et al. 2005); interviews with low-income informants in Europe or Australia may indeed reveal that financial considerations play a role.

Thus, it is important to recognize that union formation and perspectives on cohabitation continue to be heterogeneous within countries. All focus groups in every country had participants who expressed opinions that differed from the majority, reflecting the diversity and de-standardization of perspectives. Some informants, especially in eastern Germany, asserted that marriage was irrelevant or that their relationships would not change if they did marry. In other cases, people were not opposed to marriage *per se*, but simply had not gotten around to it or had other priorities. For example, as the duration of the relationship increases, cohabitation can take on more permanence and involve other traditional functions of marriage such as buying a home together (Holland 2012), joining finances (Lyngstad et al. 2010) or having children (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). Thus, the period of living together without marrying can extend into the future without marriage, because couples do not see an urgent need to marry. This raises questions about whether people have different needs to demonstrate commitment through marriage, either as a public statement or as a personal expression of love, and how this differs across countries.

Another central finding of our project is how the similarities and differences across settings can shed light on the role of historical and cultural patterns in shaping behavior. For instance, the similarities between focus groups conducted in Italy and Poland suggest that religion plays a strong role in shaping the view of cohabitation, but in different ways. The striking similarities between focus group discussions in Austria, and western and eastern German reveal cultural influences, but certain differences in eastern German responses also point to discontinuities from the past. Nonetheless, it is difficult to directly link cultural practices with responses solely using this focus group method; further detailed research is needed to fully understand how culture, history, and

policies shape and define cohabitation behavior (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). In any case, our research does not support the notion that family change occurs in “stages of development” (Kiernan 2004; van de Kaa 2001; Prinz 1995). We find greater nuances in how cohabitation emerges in different settings and across different dimensions, and yet we find that cohabitation is generally perceived as a testing period and that marriage is not eschewed. Hence, although cohabitation is likely to increase, countries could just as easily experience a marriage revival, as has been found in Sweden (Ohlsson-Wijk 2011), providing evidence that changes in union formation are not unidirectional.

Note again that our study is not and does not purport to be representative of the countries or even the cities in which the focus groups were conducted. We refer to countries in the paper for brevity, but the focus groups were conducted in particular cities that may not represent average opinions in the country. In addition, countries vary across urban-rural areas and regions, and indeed regions bordering state lines could have more similar patterns of union formation than regions on the far sides of a country (Klüsener et al. 2013). Also, the main themes that arose in the focus groups depend on the composition of the samples, and therefore may be biased towards those willing to express their opinions. In addition, variation across countries could be due to different recruitment approaches and moderators, languages and the processes of translation, as well as coding and analytic strategies which could have led to misunderstandings in interpretation. The results are to some degree subject to the interpretation of the authors and need to be further validated. Nonetheless, the focus groups provide general insights into social norms surrounding cohabitation and its increase, and it would be difficult to gain these insights using other methods.

One of the most common reasons for conducting focus group research is to develop concepts to be tested in cross-national survey research (Manning and Smock 2005). As proposed in Manning and Smock (2005), it is important for quantitative researchers to think about cohabitation as a fluid period, or a testing ground, that may or may not transition to marriage. In addition, our research raises many questions to be tested in surveys at national level, for example: Is marriage a sign of higher emotional commitment (love) than living together for a long time? What symbolizes a greater level of commitment: marriage, children, or buying a house together? Do you feel like you need to marry in order to show your partner your commitment? What aspects of commitment (emotional, social, legal) are important? Would you like to marry in order to plan a life-long future together? Would you recommend cohabiting before marriage in order to test the relationship? Would you recommend that couples marry at some point or could they just go on living together as long as they are happy? We hope this research not only contributes to our theoretical understanding of cohabitation, but contributes to future quantitative research directions.

In conclusion, we find a similar thread running through all of our focus groups that sheds light on the increase in cohabitation everywhere. In most instances, participants do not think about cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or as an alternative to being single. Instead, the relationship between cohabitation and marriage seems more fluid, with attitudes about different union states changing across the life course. The continued emphasis on the commitment of marriage in the focus groups implies that marriage still has value in itself and that cohabitation is a way to test the relationship. Marriage represents a way for couples to think about their long-term future together, while cohabitation allows couples time to make sure that they want to be together in the future. Rather surprisingly, we find that the increase in cohabitation has not devalued the concept of marriage, but counter-intuitively cohabitation has become a way to preserve and protect marriage as an ideal for long-term commitment and emotional closeness. Nonetheless, people are now free to choose when they want to commit to marriage, without societal pressure. Thus, future research needs to investigate what underlies differences in commitment and what may prompt marriage or prevent couples from marrying – especially in order to explain the wide variation across countries and by socio-economic class.

## **7. Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by Brienna Perelli-Harris's ERC Starting grant CHILDCOHAB, Trude Lappegard's grant from the Research Council of Norway (202442/S20), Ann Evans' grant from the Australian Research Council (DP110104439), Renske Keizer's grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO MaGW VENI grant number 016.125.054), Monika Mynarska's grant from the National Science Centre, Poland (DEC-2013/08/M/HS4/00440), and the ESRC Centre for Population Change Award, UK (ES/K007394/1). We thank Laura Bernardi, Jeroen Spijker, Christine Percheski, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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## Appendix 1: English version of focus group guidelines

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### Introduction (10 mins)

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Let's introduce ourselves. Please tell me

- where you're from,
  - if you're single/living with someone/married,
  - whether you have children
- 

Family life has been changing, and more and more couples are living together without marrying. (I'm going to call this "living together" to make it shorter.) In this focus group, we would like to hear your opinions about couple relationships and family life. During the focus group I will ask some questions that I would like you to discuss.

---

### Ground rules

- group discussion, share views, we'd like to hear from everyone
  - no right/wrong answers
  - discuss with one another but don't interrupt
  - name tags
  - we're recording because...
  - confidentiality
  - food/drink
  - mobile phones
- 

### Opening question

As we mentioned, more and more couples are living together without marrying. Why do you think this is happening?

**Probe:**

- Have you lived together with a partner without marrying? Why or why not?
- 

### Disadvantages/advantages of living together without marriage

What are the advantages and disadvantages of living together without being married?

- Let's start with the advantages.
  - Now the disadvantages.
-

### **Motivations for marriage**

- Why do people still get married?
- What is the role of other people in society, for example parents and friends, in influencing people's decisions to get married?
- What is the role of the Church and religion?
- How much does a previous personal experience influence whether people get married?
- Is there a specific point in people's lives when they should get married? When?

#### **Probe:**

- Having children – before getting pregnant/ before a birth/ when children are young?
  - Later in life? (why?)
  - When they want to own a house together?
- 

### **Not getting married**

- Why do you think couples who have been together for a few years don't get married?

#### **Probe:**

- Cost of a wedding?
  - Want to buy a house?
  - Stable job? Live in the same place?
  - Not committed to each other?
  - No need to get married?
- 

### **Children**

- Should people get married if they have children?

#### **Probe:**

- Children's well-being,
  - Mothers may feel vulnerable
  - Fathers living with their partner without being married - are they at a legal disadvantage?
-

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**Policies and laws**

- Are there any laws or benefits in your country that encourage people to get married?  
e.g. taxes, health insurance, pension benefits, welfare benefits favor non-married couples, parental rights, residence, property
- Do couples living together have the same rights as married people after they break up?
- To what extent do people consider laws and benefits when they decide to get married?

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**Comparison**

- People in other countries around Europe have different attitudes and opinions about marriage and living together. What do you think people in (your country) think about marriage compared to in other countries?

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**Institution**

- In 50 years, do you think people will still get married? Why or why not?

- 
- Do you have anything else you would like to add?

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**Back up question**

- In the newspapers it's often reported, more people who live together without getting married are more likely to break up. Why do you think this is the case?
-

