Cohabitation and marriage in Austria: Assessing the individualization thesis across the life course

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Abstract

BACKGROUND
Although cohabitation has spread rapidly in Austria during the past decades, it is more a prelude than an alternative to marriage. The individualization thesis serves as a conceptual framework for explaining the rise of cohabiting unions.

OBJECTIVE
Our aim is to understand what motivates people to cohabit and marry from an individualization perspective. The present study was designed to investigate in which ways key notions of the individualization thesis such as commitment, romantic love and risk are reflected in discourses on cohabitation and marriage.

METHODS
Research is based on data from eight focus group discussions (71 participants) conducted in Vienna, Austria, in 2012. This data was analyzed with the help of qualitative methods.

RESULTS
The focus group participants regarded cohabitation and marriage as different life course strategies. They felt that young adulthood is a period characterized by uncertain external circumstances, in which people build up commitment in cohabitation without feeling limited in terms of opportunities. As dissolving a cohabiting union entails lower costs, the risk posed by this type of union was considered low. The respondents

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associated marriage with security and long-term commitment and saw it as an ideal for a later stage in life. They argued that romantic love and individual satisfaction should prevail throughout the entire marriage. Core terms of the individualization thesis – commitment, romantic love, and risk – were perceived differently between cohabitation and marriage. We conclude that the individualization thesis best fits young adulthood and is less relevant for later life stages.

1. Introduction

Young adults cycle in and out of different living arrangements as they mature. After leaving the parental home, they might live on their own, cohabit with a partner, marry, and have or not have children. These states may alternate and occur repeatedly, making life courses potentially complex. In some countries, family life trajectories of young adults have become more turbulent across cohorts, and life courses are now less similar to one another in most countries (Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007). The term de-standardization was coined to denote a process in which "life states, events and their sequences can become experiences which either characterize an increasingly smaller part of a population or occur at more dispersed ages and with more dispersed durations" (Brückner and Mayer 2005: 32–33). Besides an increased variance in the age of union formation and parenthood, these transitions have also shifted to higher ages (Billari and Liefbroer 2010).

To explain the far-reaching changes in union and family behavior, the studies mentioned so far and others refer to the process of individualization. A core proposition underlying the related theoretical approach is that individuals have become increasingly liberated from requirements formerly imposed on them by class, gender, religion, and the family (e.g., Beck 1992). As a consequence, making decisions about one's life course has become a necessity and standard biographies are replaced by biographies of choice. Moreover, individualization is also the key to the concept of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), which specifically seeks to explain family changes. The SDT assumes that the process of ideational change, including secularization and a rise in post-materialist values, has broadened the range of family forms and behaviors that have become tolerated, e.g., nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing, voluntary childlessness, and divorce. The more advantaged strata of society are considered the vanguards in adopting these values and behaviors (van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988).

This study investigates how individualization is reflected in people's discourses on cohabitation and marriage in order to understand their motivations for entering into

these types of union. Using qualitative data from focus group discussions, it explores in detail how participants refer to the main notions of the individualization thesis when discussing the reasons for cohabitation and marriage. We aim to understand why cohabiting unions have become increasingly popular, why people postpone marriage until their early 30s, and why they eventually decide to marry. The database consists of eight focus groups which were conducted in Vienna in 2012.

While most of the research on cohabitation and marriage is based on quantitative data, several recent studies rely on the qualitative paradigm to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes and meanings attached to these types of partnership. In their interpretations of the findings, some explicitly refer to the individualization concept, but reach inconsistent conclusions. While the individualization approach was found valuable in such contexts as Norway and the United Kingdom (Lewis 2006; Syltevik 2010), its relevance in Poland and the United States was questioned (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007; Kefalas et al. 2011). We study the concept's suitability for Austria. Unlike previous studies that either focused on cohabitation or marriage, our analysis sheds light on both kinds of living arrangements to better understand the role individualization plays in different family forms throughout young adults' life courses.

Regarding the share of cohabitation and nonmarital births in Europe, Austria currently ranks in the upper and middle range, respectively (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Eurostat 2014; Hiekel 2014). In a diffusion model, it may be classified as a country where cohabitation has become a stage of the marriage process but is not (yet) an alternative to marriage (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008; Hiekel 2014). Although Austria is known to be more conservative than other western European countries when it comes to such family-related attitudes as voluntary childlessness (Merz and Liefbroer 2012), divorce of parents with young children (Rijken and Liefbroer 2012), and particularly the employment of preschoolers' mothers (Wernhart and Neuwirth 2007), the acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation and childbearing is comparatively high.[4]

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[4] Compared to other western European countries, approval scores are lower in Austria for voluntary childlessness (27% vs. 19%), divorce when children below age 12 are present (22% vs. 16%), and mothers with a child below the age of three who work full time (45% vs. 32%), while they are higher for cohabitation (42% vs. 45%) and nonmarital childbearing (40% vs. 43%) (own computations based on the European Social Survey 2006/07; approval is defined as 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale; all western European countries included in the data set are considered, i.e., Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom).

2. Individualization and intimate relationships

In an individualized society, people build their biographies by choosing from a large pool of options (Hitzler and Honer 2012). Instead of following a standardized pattern, life courses, including the family domain, have become "messy" (Lewis 2006: 40). Hence individuals can no longer resort to a firm and shared set of meanings. They end up reflecting on their life course trajectories in order to regain the feeling of security, a phenomenon termed "reflexive biography" (Giddens 1991). While the freedom of choice offers them the opportunity to live according to their preferences and to reflect on their way of living, the ambivalence between this freedom and the compulsion to decide creates new challenges (Giddens 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). As every decision is contingent, a decision in favor of one thing implies a decision against something else. Nevertheless, individuals' choices continue to be constrained. Formerly clear, normative pathways through life have been replaced by rules and regulations, i.e., labor market conditions, the education system, social policies, and the infrastructure (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2012).

As a consequence of individualization, the formation of intimate relationships depends increasingly less on prescribed expectations (such as acting in accordance with the behaviors set for a particular social class) and increasingly more on the script of romantic and sovereign love, which is inherently unstable and risky. "Individualized marriage" based on romantic love, emotional satisfaction, and self-fulfillment has replaced the companionate marriage where satisfaction was "gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent" (Cherlin 2004: 852). Today, the entire marital life course should be based on romantic love (Bulcroft et al. 2000). The decisions of whether, when, and whom to marry, as well as whether and when to dissolve a union, therefore rest with the individual and the couple as social influences have weakened (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). This implies that close relationships have become "a private matter and a private risk" (Lewis 2006: 52). As the decision to marry is made by the couple, the responsibility for the success or failure of the marriage is equally ascribed to them, more than in a context where external constraints determine whether a marriage continues (Bulcroft et al. 2000). The awareness of risk needs to be understood against the backdrop of living in a society with a "divorce culture" (Whitehead 1997).

Intimate relationships have become more contingent, but also more democratic and symmetric (Giddens 1992, 1994). The literature does not indicate whether individualization has led to less commitment and more unstable relationships, or whether relationships continue to be about commitment but have become more fulfilling, self-reflexive, and egalitarian (Bulcroft et al. 2000; Lewis 2006; Syltevik 2010). In an ideal typical way, a relationship is characterized by discourse and mutual

self-disclosure. Giddens coined the term "pure relationship" for a partnership which "is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens 1992: 58). Such a relationship entails greater individual freedom and personal growth for both partners while requiring the continuous evaluation and negotiation of satisfaction in the relationship. A relationship that only lasts as long as both partners derive a personal benefit from it may increase feelings of uncertainty towards each other, while the partners' opportunity to retain their independence by knowing they can end an unsatisfactory marriage might decrease their perception of risk (Bulcroft et al. 2000).

It is important to keep in mind that traditional norms structuring union behavior may be more lenient today but have not faded, just as the institutions enforcing them (social class, gender, and intergenerational relationships) have certainly not become obsolete (Smart 2007; Liefbroer and Billari 2010). These persistent norms affect different groups within a society to varying degrees. For example, in the U.S., pure relationships "best fit middle-class, well-educated, childless adults" (Cherlin 2004: 858), while financial interdependence requires a higher degree of commitment and mutual support in economically disadvantaged couples. This also holds true for parents who share obligations towards their child/ren and have a more gendered division of labor.

In sum, by analyzing differences in the meaning of cohabitation and marriage through the lens of the individualization thesis, we will be able to consider whether this conceptual framework is equally suitable for different types of partnership and different life course stages. Given that cohabitation and marriage are usually successive stages in the life course in Austria, this question is especially pertinent in this context.

3. Trends in cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing in Austria

During the past decades, cohabitation has become a common way of living together. Among women currently close to age 70, only 10% entered a cohabiting union as their first partnership compared to 91% among those around age 30 today (cohorts 1941–45: Prskawetz et al. 2008; cohorts 1980–85: own computations based on the Austrian Generations and Gender Survey 2008/09). This rapid change implies differences in the experiences of the older and younger generations. The current prevalence of cohabitation indicates that it has become a new normative stage in the life course.

Although it has remained an exception as a substitute for marriage,[5] its duration has expanded. While around 80% of cohabiting couples in the earlier cohorts (1941–1945) lived together for up to a year before marrying, today's long-lasting cohabiting unions have become more common (Prskawetz et al. 2008). In the birth cohort 1971–1980, the median duration of first cohabiting unions was around 3.5 years (Hiekel 2014).[6] Along with the spread of childbearing in cohabitation, this indicates a change in the nature of cohabitation, which has turned into an accepted and more marriage-like arrangement. The upward trend in the share of cohabiting families with or without children indicates that cohabitation has continued to rise in Austria. In the past 29 years, it increased almost linearly from 3% (1985) to 14% (2013) (Statistics Austria 2014d). Among all federal states, the highest share of cohabiting couples without children was recorded in Vienna, while it had one of the lowest shares of cohabiting families with children.[7]

Austria has a long history of childbearing outside of marriage. In the 19th century, the share of nonmarital births was among the highest in Europe (Shorter, Knodel, and Van de Walle 1971). The abolition of marriage restrictions in 1868 marked the start of a downward trend that persisted throughout the first half of the 20th century until 1965, when the century's lowest share (11%) was reached (Haslinger 1982). Ever since that time, nonmarital births have risen once more. In 2012, 42% of all children and 53% of all first children were born outside marriage. Hence Austria now ranks in the middle of the European countries (Statistics Austria 2013a: 25; Eurostat 2014). As in most other countries, the less educated are more likely than the higher educated to have their first child in a cohabiting union than in a marriage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). This negative education gradient was already noted for births in the early 1970s (Haslinger 1982) and implies that the less educated adopted this behavior when nonmarital fertility started to spread. There are clear and relatively consistent differences between the Austrian federal states: throughout most of the 20th century, the highest percentages were recorded in Carinthia, Styria, and Salzburg. The variation across Austria is mainly due to past differences in inheritance laws (Kytir and Münz 1986). Today nonmarital childbearing is most frequent in Carinthia and Styria (54% and 50%), while the lowest

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[5] Nevertheless, marriage as an (almost) universal experience is on the decline. Among women aged 65 and older, close to 90% had married, while this figure dropped to 75% among women around age 50 (numbers relate to ever-married women by age 50 and cohorts from 1930–1948 and 1966 respectively; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008).

[6] Since the mid-1970s, the mean age at first marriage has increased by eight years for both women and men and currently stands at 30 years for women and 32 years for men (Statistics Austria 2014c).

[7] The share of cohabiting families with children below age 15 in the household rose from 1% to 5%, the share of cohabiting families without children in the household increased from 2% to 9%. In 2013, the share of cohabiting families with children below age 15 in the household was 4% in Vienna (5% in the other federal states) and the share of cohabiting families without children in the household was 12% in Vienna (8% in the other federal states).

proportion is seen in Vienna (35%). The nonmarital birth rate is generally lowest in the north-eastern parts of the country: Vienna, Lower Austria, and Burgenland (Statistics Austria 2014e). The low Viennese value may partly be due to the low share of nonmarital births among migrants, who were responsible for 53% of all births in Vienna in 2011; only 20% of all births to migrant mothers were out of marriage, compared to 49% of all births to mothers born in Austria (Statistics Austria 2013b). In the years following childbirth a significant share of cohabiting unions transition into marriage. In the past 25 years, the share of children born outside of marital unions who were legitimized by age 18 oscillated between 40 and 56% with no obvious upward or downward trend, despite an increasing share of births out of wedlock (Klotz and Jaschinski 2013).

The acceptance of cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing went hand in hand with behavioral changes (Wernhart and Neuwirth 2007). Of the population aged 18–65 in 2007, only 9% (strongly) disapproved of living together without being married and 14% disapproved of childbearing when a couple is not married (own computations based on the European Social Survey 2006/07). Rejection is slightly higher in older age groups, men, the less educated, migrants, people living in rural areas, and regular churchgoers.

Legal regulations continue to favor marriage over cohabitation. Once a cohabiting union dissolves, there are no maintenance obligations between the partners (except for the first six weeks after birth). This may be problematic when one of the partners is unemployed or out of the workforce for a lengthy period of time (Fischer-Czermak and Beclin 2012). The situation is different for formerly married partners who may be entitled to spousal maintenance after divorce. Disadvantages for cohabitors also persist in other areas such as entitlement to a survivor's pension, inheritance laws, and income tax (Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012). Children born within and outside of marital unions have the same legal status and right to maintenance. However, married parents automatically have joint custody for their children, even after divorce, while custody for a child born outside of marriage is automatically allocated to the mother, although joint custody can be agreed upon also after separation (Zartler 2012).

To sum up, there is a steady upward trend in Austrian cohabitation and nonmarital births, although cohabitation remains more a prelude than an alternative to marriage. While attitudes in Vienna regarding both cohabitation and nonmarital births tend to be tolerant, the gap in actual behavior is wide: compared to all federal states, Vienna has the highest percent of cohabiting couples without children, but the lowest percent of nonmarital births. Qualitative data can help us to better understand these changing attitudes and behaviors.

4. Data and method

This study is part of a comparative project in which focus groups were conducted in Australia and nine European countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) to show how discourses on cohabitation and marriage differ between countries (see *Demographic Research* Special Collection: Focus on Partnerships). The focus group method concentrates on interactive discussions (Morgan 1996) and is used to get an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and meanings participants voice in a group setting, i.e., "the *group meanings* associated with the given issue" (Bloor et al. 2001: 7 [emphasis in original]). Rather than generating narratives of individuals' experiences (as is done in one-to-one interviews), focus groups allow researchers to explore shared understandings and conceptualizations, as well as contradictions: "Just as focus group data on norms may demonstrate the essential ambiguity of norms, so focus group data on meanings may demonstrate the essential ambivalence of interpretations" (Bloor et al. 2001: 7). Focus groups create the dynamic of a "questioning discourse" (Barbour 2010: 43) in which participants challenge and criticize each other's arguments and justifications.

The data for this research has been collected following the research design developed by the Focus on Partnerships team. Team members collaborated to create a standardized focus group guideline which was used to direct the focus group discussions. For further information on this project, please see Perelli-Harris et al. (2014) or www.nonmarital.org. We conducted eight focus groups with a total of 71 participants in Vienna from January to February of 2012. The respondents were 25–40 years old, lived in Vienna or its vicinity (around one fifth of the Austrian population lives in Vienna) and were Austrian citizens. Some of them had a migration background and might have originated from rural regions. It is a limitation of this study that the focus groups were held in Vienna and that the results may not be generalized to Austria. However, like any other member of Austrian society, the respondents were engaged in the national discourses (e.g., through the media) and subject to national structures (e.g., legal regulations, education system, employment conditions), thus we are confident that our main conclusions hold true for Austria. The focus groups were stratified by sex and education: We conducted two focus groups with less educated women, two with highly educated women, two with less educated men, and two with highly educated men (see Table 1). Higher educated respondents had completed tertiary education or were studying to obtain a tertiary degree. By stratifying focus groups based on the participants' social backgrounds, the discussions could be held among people who were perhaps more similar to each other (Barbour 2010). The participants lived in various union arrangements (single, living apart together, cohabitation, and marriage) and

differed by parenthood status (with or without children); single, cohabiting respondents, and childless persons were overrepresented. We decided not to stratify by relationship history due to their complexity, but this could be considered a limitation because respondents with different experiences might hold different values or social norms.

Table 1:   **Number of focus group (FG) participants by sex and education**

		FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6	FG7	FG8	Total
Sex	Men	10		8			9		10	37
	Women		8		10	8		8		34
Education	Low	10	8			8	9			35
	High			8	10			8	10	36
Total number of participants		10	8	8	10	8	9	8	10	71

We outsourced the recruitment of the focus group members to an opinion research institute. Selectivity of participants based on their specific interest in the research topic was less problematic than with other forms of recruitment, because the panelists took part in focus groups on a wide range of issues. Nonetheless, the institute ensured that respondents had not participated too frequently and also recruited new participants (e.g., via pin boards in supermarkets). We offered each participant a financial incentive amounting to EUR 40. Each focus group lasted for approximately 1.5 hours. The moderator and the two observers present were part of the research team. Besides a number of topics covered in all countries for reasons of comparability (e.g., legal framework, future developments), issues spontaneously introduced by the participants were also welcomed and provided unexpected insights. The respondents seemed to be interested in the topic and the discussions were generally lively.

We tape-recorded and transcribed the focus group discussions verbatim, identifying each speaker individually. We then analyzed the data in teams of two (three researchers were involved) to enlarge the scope of interpretation. By splitting up the text into small parts for coding, we developed a provisional coding frame, which we refined in an iterative process by alternating between the data and the coding frame, until we obtained a set of categories (Barbour 2010). Two principal categories related to individualization emerged for cohabitation: (1) freedom and commitment, and (2) uncertain circumstances. Two further categories were developed with regard to marriage: (3) romantic love and risk, and (4) the couple's decision.

5. Results

For the respondents, both cohabitation and marriage constitute parts of a modern conventional life course, albeit in different stages. While they associated cohabitation with young adulthood,[8] they linked marriage with a later phase in life. In their opinion, marriage should ideally be a permanent status.

We present the results from a young adults' life course perspective by looking at cohabitation and marriage as successive stages. Sections 5.2 and 5.5 contain our findings on the role of individualization.

5.1 Cohabitation as norm in young adulthood

Participants thought that cohabitation in young adulthood is widely accepted by society and raised objections to getting married without having shared a household. They reported that, in general, their families, relatives, and/or peers had not exerted social pressure or imposed constraints when they had started to cohabit. Nonetheless, a few participants reported disapproval from previous neighbors in rural areas, religious people, or their partner's relatives from a different cultural background. Some respondents referred to their Turkish or ex-Yugoslavian migration background and argued that the social and familial pressure not to cohabit or to marry soon after having entered cohabitation is higher for them than for the majority of their Austrian peers. Participants compared the current situation with the past when cohabitation was much less accepted, stating that nowadays people are *"more free"* and there is *"not much pressure"* (FG5, woman, less educated).[9]

While participants readily identified the advantages of cohabitation, their comments on marriage were less positive. They were convinced that marriage limits individual freedom and options and should not be entered into if living conditions are unstable (see Section 5.2). According to some respondents, marriage at a young age *"really is not an issue"* (FG7, woman, highly educated) neither for themselves nor for their peers. Others associated early marriage with negative feelings. They were actually *"put off"* (FG3, man, highly educated) or *"appalled*" (FG7, woman, highly educated) by the idea of getting married at a young age. Among their peers, *"no one would approve"* (FG1, man, less educated) of marriage in young adulthood, which, in fact, *"is almost frowned upon"* (FG5, woman, less educated). The respondents saw young

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[8] Due to the focus of the study and the participants' young age, cohabitation entered in later stages of life (e.g., after a divorce) was rarely discussed.
[9] Quotations from the focus groups are in italics, omissions are indicated by "…".

adulthood as an unstable phase characterized by personal development and major transitions (education, employment, mobility), while they associated marriage with stability. According to them, commitment is gradually built up in cohabitation and partners evaluate whether their union is sufficiently stable for a long-term commitment. As this takes time and is hardly feasible at a young age, the decision to marry was inherently riskier than opting for cohabitation. It therefore does not come as a surprise that respondents rejected short cohabitation periods. One man stated:

To marry after one or two years is ridiculous. (FG1, man, less educated)

Some respondents felt that not adhering to these normative expectations was irresponsible. However, there also seemed to be an upper limit to the length of cohabitation. Respondents considered it *"strange"* (FG6, man, less educated) for a couple to live together for a long period without marrying, as this raises doubts as to the couple's ability to build up a sufficiently strong commitment. Moreover, social pressure will increase, often in the form of questions by parents and relatives who want to know when the couple will finally marry. As soon as peers marry, couples and individuals might feel indirect pressure. This woman said:

My brother has been in a relationship for a long time. Now he will have to deal with marriage, because he actually will soon be the last to be unmarried. (FG7, woman, highly educated)

5.2 Individualization and cohabitation

The participants linked cohabitation with freedom, independence and leaving all doors open. At the same time, they felt that predictable and stable circumstances were a prerequisite for long-term commitments.

5.2.1 Freedom and commitment

Participants frequently argued that it is easier to remain free and independent in cohabitation than in marriage. They felt more mentally free in cohabitation because they viewed marriage as a more *"serious"* matter (FG3, man, highly educated), a tighter unit, which has *"something irrevocable about it"* (FG1, man, less educated). One man worried that turning cohabitation into marriage might kill the *"element of ease and naturalness and no-strings-attached"* feeling (FG8, man, highly educated) in the

relationship. Another informant was concerned she might *"lose myself in the relationship"* (FG5, woman, less educated). Some claimed that modern individuals (want to) primarily define themselves as individuals and less by their relationships. Besides mental barriers to marrying, the respondents also discussed practical consequences, for instance, that cohabitors do not want to *"put everything together"*, but rather keep their belongings apart: *"This is mine and this is yours"* (FG2, woman, less educated). In addition, many respondents felt that the social environment has different expectations of cohabiting and married couples. Cohabiting couples were thought to be under less pressure to have children or to always attend social events together without someone getting suspicious: *"Is there something wrong with the relationship?"* (FG3, man, highly educated). One man argued that *"you are no longer seen as individuals but as a married couple"* (FG3, man, highly educated). However, some respondents said they had not noted any differences between cohabitation and marriage in these respects.

According to the participants, the urge for freedom is rooted in the growth of opportunities. They pointed out that, nowadays, it is possible to go abroad, easily meet partners through the internet and be financially independent by obtaining a good education and a high-status job. Indeed, living abroad without the partner was considered more feasible in a cohabiting union. Consecutive relationships and formerly adverse types of partnership such as cohabitation and living apart together are now tolerated. In a marriage, *"one might miss out on something"* (FG6, man, less educated). Participants thought that this increase in opportunities is particularly relevant for women.

Another point raised in connection with freedom was that ending cohabitation is much easier than going through a divorce. Participants perceived fewer mental barriers since a cohabiting union is not expected to last forever. Cohabitation break-up involves less stigmatization by the social environment, lower costs, and no lengthy legal procedure. People living in cohabitation have a kind of *"loophole"* (FG6, man, less educated), whereas entering a marriage entails a considerably higher risk. Both male and female participants estimated the financial risk of a divorce to be much higher for men than for women, because men usually are the main breadwinners and have to pay maintenance for their children and (potentially) for their former spouses.[10] If one

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[10] There was, however, no awareness that women shoulder the largest part of unpaid work. Women in Austria do almost twice as many hours of unpaid work per week as men, i.e., childcare, care for elderly, and housework (Ghassemi and Kronsteiner-Mann 2009). As a consequence of the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work, single mothers are among the groups with the highest risk of poverty. Before social transfers, 53% of one-parent households are at risk of poverty as compared to 30% thereafter. The poverty risk for the population at large is 14% (data refer to 2012; Statistics Austria 2014a).

partner is no longer satisfied, cohabitation is terminated sooner than a marriage, as one woman stated clearly:

Your own life is more important to you and, okay, it doesn't work, so you leave. (FG2, woman, less educated)

As the partners' plans and interests might change, the option to dissolve a union was important. One man explicitly put it:

I am also in favor of a temporary life partnership, and I personally think mobility is an important issue. You develop, you never stop learning, and your interests change. (FG3, man, highly educated)

Moreover, some participants cautioned that one could never be sure whether they were currently with the right partner. They argued that cohabitors felt they had not definitely given up the idea to have other partners.

The participants' discussions reflected all three types of commitment described in the literature (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston 1999; Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2012). Personal commitment refers to the dedication to the partner and the desire to continue the relationship; "to think of one another as us, rather than simply you and me" (Kefalas et al. 2011: 864). Most participants in the focus groups argued that cohabiting unions entail less personal commitment and the moral commitment is based on different values when it comes to dissolving a cohabitation or marriage. The informants did not connect cohabitation with the expectation that the relationship would last forever, which was different to how they discussed the ideal of marriage. Structural commitment denotes practical obstacles (such as joint investments, a difficult termination procedure) and social pressure (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston 1999). The participants argued that leaving a marriage is more difficult for practical reasons and because of social expectations. A key difference is that cohabitation is a private commitment while marriage is publicly declared at the wedding in front of the couple's family, relatives and friends (Cherlin 2004).

5.2.2 Uncertain circumstances

Young adulthood is not only a phase for entering relationships and starting families. During this period, individuals also complete their education and enter the labor market.

These transitions are increasingly postponed as ever more people obtain higher degrees and leave the education system at higher ages.[11] The respondents seldom considered marriage while studying nor during the insecure stage of getting established on the labor market, which frequently entails temporary contracts, a change of employers and the expectation to be geographically mobile. One participant referred to this turbulent phase as *"everything is sort of a temporary solution"* (FG4, woman, highly educated). Respondents thought it was hard to make a lifelong commitment when you are only able to plan a few years ahead. Decisions about marriage involve both partners, which implies that both of them must be in a sufficiently stable position. Highly educated participants typically mentioned the postponement of marriage due to uncertain circumstances, while their less educated peers had already passed through this phase at a younger age. Only highly educated men referred to their role as provider: They considered a stable position that permits them to financially maintain their family a prerequisite for marriage. One highly educated man expressed this sentiment as:

> *When very many criteria are fulfilled ... then one can dare to think about marriage and children in the long term, only when one has achieved a certain level of security*. (FG3, man, highly educated)

Some participants reckoned that uncertainty is not restricted to young adulthood but that we live in *"fast moving times"* (FG3, man, highly educated) and that this zeitgeist of fast pace is more compatible with a less binding type of partnership such as cohabitation. On the other hand, respondents evaluated a stable element in life positively, precisely because they perceived other things as ever changing. As this woman said:

> *Especially in these times, it is quite nice to have such an element of reliability that somewhat balances this fast pace.* (FG7, woman, highly educated)

The individualization thesis takes into account the "institutional controls and constraints" (Beck-Gernsheim 1998: 56) of the educational system and the labor market. For instance, the flexibility and mobility required at the workplace and the spread of dual earner parents have put pressure on family life. Our findings show how these circumstances constrain individuals' decision-making on union formation.

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[11] In 2011/12, the median age at completing a bachelor's or master's degree at an Austrian university was 24 and 27 years, respectively (Statistics Austria 2014b: 65).

5.3 Turning to marriage

While some participants stated that they had always wanted to marry and thought they would definitely do so one day, many others reported that they had become more positive about marriage or supposed they might do so at some point. As one man stated:

> *I could imagine reaching an age ... around 40, 45 or something like this, when I'll think differently about marriage.* (FG3, man, highly educated)

Arguments for this (expected) new desire for marriage were advancing age, long duration of a cohabitation or partnership, friends marrying, having stable living conditions, or planning to have children. According to informants, issues relating to biological and social age are sex-specific: As women's biological clock is ticking, marriage becomes more important for them once they have reached a certain age. Social age norms also encourage earlier union formation for women. In general, participants felt that the decision to marry is difficult, complex and contingent on many preconditions. As this man declared, it is *"a combination of hundreds of variables"* (FG8, man, highly educated). Some participants failed to state reasons for turning their thoughts towards marriage, using expressions such as:

> *I have always been the one to say ... I won't ever marry, definitely not. Somehow it simply happened.* (FG8, man, highly educated)

Over time, they had warmed to the idea of being married themselves. However, participants thought that the decision to marry is contingent upon both partners feeling ready for marriage, which might be difficult to achieve.

Women and men differed in the way they recounted their orientation towards marriage. A change of opinion was more frequently reported by and about men. Women believed that men want to settle down at some point in their lives, with marriage being a convenient option. Men *"come home after these wild times"* (FG5, woman, less educated) and after *"this phase of sowing their wild oats ... actually they sort of want to be in a safe harbor"* (FG1, man, less educated). Some women had always believed they would marry someday. The participants assumed that women cling to the childhood picture of a dream wedding in white and push for marriage more often than men. However, the participants' personal narrations sometimes contradicted these concepts of gender.

Previous research from the U.S. and Germany has found that couples usually do not start cohabitation with a clear intention to marry (Manning and Smock 2005; Lois and Kopp 2011), but rather "develop a marriage mentality" gradually (Kefalas et al. 2011: 867). This mentality also hinges on such external factors as having achieved a

stable financial situation and employment (as shown in the previous section), leading Cherlin to assert that marriage is a "marker of prestige" (2004: 855). Our focus group participants reported a keener interest in marriage among women, which is in line with the finding from Norway that men are more hesitant to marry than women (Reneflot 2006). However, American research on gender differences also indicates that men initiate the progression towards marriage (Sassler and Miller 2011), and that the male partner's happiness and marriage plans are more decisive for the actual transition from cohabitation to marriage than those of the female partner (Brown 2000). These results have to be seen against the backdrop of the tradition that men propose marriage.

5.4 Marriage as ideal in adulthood

Most respondents considered marriage the ideal form of partnership once one has found the "right partner" to spend their life with. Unlike cohabitation, which they linked with a specific period in life, marriage is regarded as a permanent arrangement characterized by stability and security. According to these participants, marriage implies the couple will be there to emotionally and financially care for one another, which allows them to build a future together. This type of partnership is a better shield against union dissolution than cohabitation, because the hurdle for leaving is higher. As one woman said:

> *When we argue, our marriage holds the whole situation together, one searches much more actively for solutions and possibilities of living together.* (FG5, woman, less educated)

The participants also acknowledged the legal security of marriage, even though their familiarity with the pertinent laws was often vague and erroneous. They pointed out stability and long-term commitment as essential elements for childrearing and spoke of marriage and children as parts of the same concept. This man expressed this sentiment as:

> *The motivation to marry and pass on this feeling of home ... that you have experienced, to your own children.* (FG6, man, less educated)

While some respondents were convinced that, by offering more stability, marriage is better for children than cohabitation, others argued that there is no difference as long as the parents have a good relationship. The following dialogue illustrates these different perceptions:

- Of course, when you have children, marriage makes the commitment clearer.
- Do you really think so? Strictly speaking that's a self-deception. Either I feel
secure with the partner or I don't. Marriage or children play no role in that.
And likewise for the child, either we are able to bring up the child together
and give it security – marriage won't change anything I think. (FG4, woman,
highly educated)

Respondents widely agreed that it matters little whether marriage or a child come first, and that children should not be the reason for marrying. However, if the relationship works and children are planned, it is a good time to think about marriage. The respondents thought that in individualized marriages the quality of the partnership is given priority over external factors (including pregnancy). Deferring marriage to external factors might increase the risk inherent in the marriage decision. In their opinion, marriage is a safeguard for mothers who typically stay home for two to three years after the birth of a child and return to the labor market on a part-time basis. In the respondents' view, women depend on being taken care of by their male partner during this time.

In particular for the male respondents, marriage stands for being grown up and mature while indicating a *"stable personality"* and *"that one can take responsibility"* (FG3, man, highly educated). In the past, marriage was seen as the proper, respected, and decent way of living together. Participants argued that some of these connotations linger on, and several higher educated men were convinced that being married signals these positive traits to employers and colleagues, thus increasing their status.

The discussion showed that cohabitation is thought to involve fewer risks in young adulthood, but that this perception changes and marriage is viewed as the less contingent and more stable option in later stages of life. Cherlin claims that marriage remains attractive because of "enforceable trust" (2004: 854). Since marriage vows are exchanged in front of others, there is a lower risk that this commitment will be broken. However, the growing social acceptance of divorce erodes this advantage over cohabitation.

Besides the strong link between marriage and stability, participants also discussed marriage in terms of normality. Marriage *"simply belongs to life"* (FG6, man, less educated) and *"you have achieved what you are expected to accomplish in life"* (FG5, woman, less educated). Since marriage has been the dominant way of living together for centuries, the participants considered it an established form of partnership, which has a strong bearing on present-day desires to marry. This view is similar to a concept termed "marriage naturalists" by Kefalas and colleagues (2011).

5.5 Individualization and contemporary marriages

In the previous section we have shown that the traditional notions of marriage as an arrangement providing security and protection against risk as well as being a regular part of life have been maintained. In the following two subsections, we will look at the elements of the individualization thesis that the participants identified in contemporary marriages.

5.5.1 Romantic love and risk

Participants saw love as the foundation of marriage and described it in very emotional terms, e.g., the *"ideal of love that really works"* (FG3, man, highly educated) and *"still the biggest proof of love"* (FG1, man, less educated). Some felt that marriage indicates a closer and more intense partnership than cohabitation. One man argued that cohabiting couples do not marry *"because they also think that maybe they don't really love their partner"* (FG1, man, less educated). Many referred to the idea of marriage as *"beautiful"*. It was seen as something *"special"*; two people vow to stay together for the rest of their lives despite high divorce rates and little social or economic need. Seen from this viewpoint, marriage has become more meaningful and its value has increased over time. While the arrival of a child and legal or financial advantages might play a role in the immediate decision to marry, these were not valid reasons for the respondents, as this woman expressed:

> In fact, the first question would be: are the emotions in synch, is the personal relationship quality okay? (FG7, women, highly educated)

At the same time, they had second thoughts about emotions as a sound basis for a relationship, because love is *"quite a fleeting feeling after all"* (FG7, woman, highly educated).

Participants asserted that the emotional requirements for entering a marriage have become higher and that keeping up a marriage has become more demanding than in the past. In their view, getting individual satisfaction now constitutes the basis for continuing a relationship, which means that a couple has to reflect and work on it. In past marriages, the mutual obligation of wife and husband who complemented each other in their tasks was significantly stronger, while emotional satisfaction was less important. The participants gave many examples of couples in their parents' or grandparents' generation who stayed in unsatisfactory marriages, for instance:

> *Even as a child I sensed that my mother actually wanted to get divorced, but she never did.* (FG7, woman, highly educated)

Some respondents regretted that they lacked models of happy, long-standing marriages, but they nevertheless adhered to the ideal notion of marriage. At times, respondents deemed contemporary expectations too difficult to fulfill and a source of disappointment. One woman explained there is the risk *"that demands rise to a level which is no longer realistic ... how can I expect to find the perfect man when I myself am not perfect?"* (FG4, woman, highly educated)

Respondents highlighted the divorce option as another key difference between past and contemporary marriages. In this respect, contemporary marriage has become more similar to cohabitation, which in turn, makes the decision to marry harder. Many participants had experienced the divorce of their parents (or other relatives or close friends) and were strongly aware that a marriage often does not last a lifetime. In view of this contingency, some explained that they kept aloof. Marriage or the partner *"can make your life more beautiful ... but basically, you are most important to yourself"* (FG4, woman, highly educated). Some respondents stressed the importance of maintaining (financial) independence to keep the option to leave open. Given the high demands outlined above and the fragile nature of marriages, respondents concluded that living together happily is *"enormously difficult"* (FG4, woman, highly educated). Historical accounts support the view that the perceptions and expectations of marriage started to change around the 1960s (Bulcroft et al. 2000; Cherlin 2004). Before this turning point, conjugal love was vital for entering a marriage, while matrimony operated within the strict boundaries of class and status and family life focused more on motherhood than on conjugal love. In contemporary marriages, love is expected to prevail throughout (Bulcroft et al. 2000).

5.5.2 The couple's decision

The discussions showed that contemporary marriages are based on a conscious and careful decision and only entered into once a number of preconditions have been met. By continuing cohabitation, the partners are not forced to come to an agreement. Participants compared the current situation with the past when more social control was exerted and the choice was not as free and voluntary. In the past, there was simply *"no*

other option" (FG3, man, highly educated) than to marry young, particularly when children arrived.[12] One man explained:

> *There were many marriages that nobody had actually wanted like this, but especially because there was a child, they simply had to marry, even though it was not what the two wanted.* (FG3, man, highly educated)

Respondents felt that today, getting married is a decision made by the individual or the couple. Although some had experienced family meddling, they dismissed it as an inappropriate, albeit sometimes successful intervention. They felt indirectly pressured when many of their friends and peers got married. Social influence might, however, be more important in the timing of a wedding rather than the decision to marry. Compared to the past, religion now plays a negligible role in the marriage decision. Nevertheless, some participants still considered a church wedding important[13], though not for genuinely religious reasons but mainly because of the ceremonial setting. One woman said:

> *I think there is no comparable ritual in society nowadays. There are alternative things like shaman wedding rituals, but they are simply not as established.* (FG7, woman, highly educated)

The respondents also noted that the formal and standardized wedding ritual has become an individualized ceremony.

Although marriages have definitely turned into an "elective relationship" (Beck-Gernsheim 1998: 54), the focus group discussions showed that the social dimension of the decision to marry is still significant. Smart and Shipman have presented family and kinship as a context for decisions and choices; they argued that even when the marriage decision is perceived to be a free choice, there is attentiveness to the family (Smart and Shipman 2004).

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[12] The share of shotgun marriages, i.e., extramarital conceptions resulting in marriages before birth, fell drastically from close to 60% in 1970 to 20% in 2005 (Prskawetz et al. 2008).

[13] Of the total of 37,545 marriages contracted in 2010, 12,643 were Roman Catholic weddings (Austrian Bishops' Conference 2012). While the year of the civil and the religious wedding may differ, the share of church weddings can roughly be estimated at one third of all weddings. This number is remarkable in view of the fact that 26% of all weddings involved no Catholic partner and that 34% were higher-order marriages for at least one spouse and thus could not be celebrated in the Catholic church without dispense (Statistics Austria 2012: 79 and 83).

6. Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to explore the meanings attached to cohabitation and marriage from an individualization perspective based on discussions in focus groups. A central finding of this study is that our Viennese focus group participants considered cohabitation and marriage to be different life course strategies. Depending on a person's stage in the life course, these types of unions serve different purposes and people attach different meanings to them.

Our results lead us to conclude that the individualization thesis, established almost 30 years ago, remains important for understanding contemporary conjugal and family behavior. However, it does not seem appropriate for the entire life course, but most suitable for the phase of young adulthood.

Cohabitation represents freedom and independence in young adulthood. People build up commitment in cohabitation without feeling limited in terms of opportunities. Cohabitation signifies greater individualism than marriage, because the commitment only concerns the couple (Syltevik 2010). Many respondents thought that personal commitment (i.e., attraction and couple identity) is less pronounced in cohabitation and the commitment not to leave a cohabiting union is lower. They felt that cohabitation does not rule out the possibility to have other partners in the future. The participants also speculated that cohabitation might entail weaker feelings of romantic love. On the other hand, they argued that love might be more genuine in a cohabitation arrangement and the absence of external strings might motivate partners to make more efforts to keep the relationship going. Cohabitation is also a response to uncertain circumstances. The respondents deemed a stable and predictable situation important for a long-term commitment. They considered cohabitation in young adulthood to be less risky than marriage as the costs of separation are lower. In a similar vein, Huang and colleagues see cohabitation in the U.S. as a "risk management strategy" (2011: 896), and Syltevik speaks of Norwegian cohabitation as "accommodating the risky side of love" (2010: 458).

Marriage in Austria, on the other hand, was regarded as a sign of maturity and associated with stability. Unlike for earlier life stages, our study participants connected marriage in adulthood with less risk and higher stability, which they considered very important when children are present and partners plan to make long-term investments in a joint life. The discussions showed that people may develop an interest in marriage later in their lives. As traditional gender roles are still in place, the need for security seems to be particularly relevant for women. Respondents viewed romantic love as the uncontested basis for marriage. Although many respondents thought that marriage entails a higher commitment, some were nevertheless anxious to keep a measure of mental and financial independence in marriage. Respondents considered the risk of

modern marriages to be higher and more incalculable than in the past, because romantic love and personal satisfaction are inherently unstable. In addition, the decision to enter or end an intimate relationship has become a private matter and the couple's responsibility. Nevertheless, the discussions showed that (indirect) social pressure from family and friends remains relevant for the marriage decision and that strong age norms guide behavior (e.g., Smart and Shipman 2004; Liefbroer and Billari 2010). The literature from North America and Norway (Bulcroft et al. 2000; Syltevik 2010) highlights two main discrepancies concerning romantic love and commitment, which also became apparent in Austrian discussions. First of all, lasting romantic love is highly desired and idealized, precisely because other domains of life are categorized as rational and insecure. In view of the high risk of union dissolution, participants were, however, also rather skeptical as to whether this is an achievable goal. Second, the wish for deep commitment to the partner is in conflict with the need to monitor the relationship (in terms of own satisfaction, met expectations and better options elsewhere) and maintain one's independence. Cohabitation may be interpreted as one way of dealing with these discrepancies.

In conclusion, the concept of individualization seems to be most applicable to the phase of young adulthood, where freedom and open opportunities are most appreciated. Later in life, security, commitment and mutual support become more important – although contemporary marriages are more individualized than in the past. People thus still value marriage, although in later adulthood. It has not simply become one among many other partnership arrangements and continues to stand for stability and normality. Marriage remains a strong ideal even though cohabiting unions have increased in duration and have become more and more accepted as long-standing arrangements, which are also suitable for raising children.

As both types of unions continue to be part of most people's life courses, they "are not so much alternatives as part of a continuum" (Lewis 2006: 52). In view of the fact that, in many countries, the majority of the population enters cohabitation as a first partnership form and marries later (although there are vast differences in transition rates), our findings could also be valid in other contexts. Understanding cohabitation and marriage as successive stages rather than alternatives has important methodological implications. Since these two arrangements are typical of different life stages and differ in both meaning and duration, it seems difficult to classify them as two different types of partnership, i.e., cohabitation versus marriage.

As cohabitation and nonmarital fertility increase in Austria, it is important to quantitatively monitor this social change (along with possible changes in the related discourse) and policy responses. Here, using focus groups designed to represent socially shared meanings, we provided an in-depth analysis of the complex meanings attributed to cohabitation and marriage. We found that key notions of the individualization thesis

such as commitment, romantic love, and risk have different meanings in cohabitation and marriage and we conclude that the individualization thesis best fits young adulthood. It would be valuable to complement the method of focus groups with one-to-one interviews on individual motivations and perceptions to refine our insights, in particular with respect to couples' decision-making processes as well as the scope and channels of social influence.

7. Acknowledgements

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