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Research Article

Free to stay, free to leave: Insights from Poland into the meaning of cohabitation

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Free to stay, free to leave: Insights from Poland into the meaning of cohabitation

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Previous studies have shown that in Poland cohabitation is most of all a transitory step or a testing period before marriage. Polish law does not recognize this living arrangement and it has been portrayed as uncommitted and short-lived. However, few studies have investigated what cohabitation means for relationships, especially with respect to freedom.

OBJECTIVE

We explore how young people in Poland understand and evaluate freedom in cohabitation. We investigate how they view the role freedom plays in couple dynamics and in relationship development.

METHODS

We analyze data from focus group interviews conducted in Warsaw with men and women aged 25–40. We identify passages in which opinions on cohabitation and marriage are discussed, and use bottom-up coding and the constant comparative method to reconstruct different perspectives on the issue of freedom in cohabitation.

RESULTS

The respondents argued that cohabitation offers the partners freedom to leave a union at any time with few repercussions. On the negative side, the freedom related to cohabitation brings insecurity, especially for young mothers. On the positive side, it offers relaxed conditions for testing a relationship, grants partners independence, and

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encourages cohabitators to keep their relationship interesting, precisely because it is fragile and easy to dissolve.

CONCLUSIONS

The open nature of cohabitation offers benefits to partners, but does not provide secure conditions for childbearing. As long as the couple is not planning to have children, however, the benefits of cohabitation are likely to be seen as outweighing the disadvantages.

1. Introduction

In many developed countries marriage has lost ground to cohabitation, and living together before marriage has become a standard element in the process of relationship formation (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Young couples are spending more and more time cohabiting, and a growing number of children are born and raised in informal unions (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). It is therefore not surprising that researchers are increasingly interested in understanding how informal cohabitation differs from marriage, and why some individuals choose this living arrangement instead of marriage.

Researchers frequently notice that the diffusion of cohabitation is associated with the liberalization of social norms and increasing freedom of choice (Ramsøy 1994; Thornton and Philipov 2009; Lesthaeghe 2010), and that unregistered cohabitation might be an attractive option because it gives partners a greater degree of independence and personal freedom in relationships. It is thus assumed that this living arrangement allows for the pursuit of individual goals and self-realization (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). But while it allows partners to sustain their economic as well as their personal independence to a greater extent than they could in marriage (Poortman and Mills 2012; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004), it might also be associated with a lower commitment or even a lower sense of moral obligation between partners (Adams and Jones 1997). Cohabitation might also be perceived as attractive because it provides the couple with an opportunity to test out the relationship without having to enter into long-term commitment (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Murrow and Shi 2010; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). But the lack of legal bonds is associated with a degree of insecurity, which may have a negative impact on the quality of the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman 2009), and which could influence the partners' choices regarding the development of the relationship (e.g., childbearing decisions). All in all, the freedom that is experienced by the partners in an informal union is, in our view, a complex concept, and its meaning depends on a country-specific cultural and institutional

context. Therefore we believe that in order to explain the status of cohabitation and the process of the diffusion of this living arrangement in a given society, we must first understand how that society perceives freedom in the context of couple relationships.

In this paper we explore the concept of freedom offered by cohabitation in the Polish context. Young Poles are engaging in pre-marital cohabitation with increasing frequency, although still less frequently than their counterparts in Western or Northern Europe (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Cohabitation is not legally recognized in Poland, and the country's traditions and social norms strongly support marriage (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007; Mynarska and Matysiak 2010; Soons and Kalmijn 2009). Understanding how young Poles perceive freedom in cohabitation helps us to better understand which factors tend to encourage young people to enter or discourage them from entering into this living arrangement, and which therefore shape the process of cohabitation diffusion in Poland.

In this study we analyze data from focus group interviews with 69 men and women aged 25–40, conducted in Warsaw in 2012. The free nature of cohabitation (related mostly, but not exclusively, to easy union dissolution) was central in the narratives of the interviewees, providing us with rich material on the analyzed topics. Before presenting our study we will provide an overview of how various aspects and consequences of the more open nature of informal unions have been presented in the literature. We will also briefly describe our research context, providing key information on cohabitation in Poland.

2. Literature overview: Freedom in cohabitation

Even though cohabitation has become increasingly widespread, in most countries it still differs from marriage in terms of social and legal recognition. Moreover, the meanings attached to cohabitation and the motives for entering into an informal union are different from those related to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). These discrepancies might be less pronounced in countries where cohabitation is very common and where legal regulations mitigate the differences between the two living arrangements, but in most countries cohabitation remains distinguishable from marriage. Consequently, as we will present it in the following paragraphs, researchers often discuss the uncommitted and open nature of this living arrangement and the various consequences it might have for partners.

First, by entering into a non-marital and informal living arrangement, a couple may benefit from companionship, closeness, and sexual intimacy with a partner without having to make any long-term commitment (Rindfuss and Van den Heuvel 1990; Casper and Bianchi 2002). As partners continue dating and enjoying each other's

company, cohabitation offers them the opportunity to spend more time together, and thus may be seen as a natural stage in the development of the relationship (Manning and Smock 2005; Mynarska and Bernardi 2007). Some studies emphasize the practical benefits of sharing a household with a partner, including convenience, the ability to share housing arrangements, and the potential to save money (Sassler 2004; Lindsay 2000). ‘Co-residential dating’ provides partners with all of the benefits of sharing a household, emotional, physical, and practical. At the same time the partners can avoid having to enter into long-term obligations, and can maintain their personal freedom.

An important aspect of informal unions that has been mentioned in the literature is that the partners are given the opportunity to test their relationship (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007; Murrow and Shi 2010; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). Living together allows partners to learn more about each other and assess their compatibility. Young people are increasingly willing to move in together before marriage, as they are free to leave if the trial period ends in failure. This process can lessen the danger of having an unhappy marriage that eventually ends in divorce. Thus, young people view pre-marital cohabitation as a means of improving their chances in future marriage, and of “divorce-proofing” their relationship (Manning and Cohen 2012; Kline et al. 2004; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Cohabitation is therefore frequently conceptualized as a “trial marriage” or a “testing period” before marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Seltzer 2000; Kiernan 2004).

Moreover, the free nature of cohabitation might appear attractive to individuals with more egalitarian or liberal attitudes. First, several studies have shown that as cohabiting partners tend to have more independence and personal freedom than married couples, they often experience a greater degree of equality in the partnership; for instance, they experience greater financial autonomy as well as a more equal division of household labor (Brines and Joyner 1999; Baxter 2005; Baxter, Haynes, and Hewitt 2010; Davis, Greenstein, and Gerteisen 2007; Heimdal and Houseknecht 2003; Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014). This arrangement may therefore be especially attractive to individuals who do not want to adhere to traditional gender roles. Second, it might be appealing to those who do not believe in the institution of marriage or who want to express their rejection of the authority identified with the Catholic Church (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Corijn and Manting 2000; Villeneuve-Gokalp 1991).

However, the open nature of cohabitation may discourage partners who seek the security provided by institutionalized partnerships that are regulated by law. Steven Nock described cohabitation as an “incomplete institution” that is “not yet governed by strong consensual norms or formal laws” (Nock 1995, p. 74). In recent years many western countries have introduced laws and policies that recognize cohabitation, or even place it on an equal footing with marriage in some respects or under certain conditions (Bowman 2004; Bradley 2001; Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012).

Nevertheless, non-marital cohabitation generally retains its informal character, and even in countries with registered partnerships the couples in these unions are less financially interdependent than married couples (Poortman and Mills 2012). Consequently, unmarried partners are frequently worse off with respect to property rights, taxation, survivor's pension, inheritance rights, and adoption rights (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). This lack of institutional security is one of the reasons why cohabitation is generally not perceived as being an appropriate setting for childrearing, and why in most developed countries cohabiting couples who want to become parents sooner or later sacrifice the freedom associated with cohabitation and decide to get married (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012).

Moreover, cohabitation has often been described as an "incomplete institution" because in many countries it still lacks the social status of a married union. In some countries there are no commonly used terms to describe a cohabiting partner (Manning and Smock 2005; Mynarska and Bernardi 2007) and there is no term for the non-marital equivalent of an in-law (Nock 1995). Although cohabitation has become increasingly accepted throughout the developed world (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Mynarska and Bernardi 2007) there are still marked differences between countries in terms of attitudes toward informal unions (Soons and Kalmijn 2009). Especially in Catholic countries, such as Poland, where there is a lesser degree of social acceptance of informal unions, cohabitators might continue to experience certain forms of stigmatization. Cohabitation may thus imply not only the partners' independence but also some level of social detachment (Shapiro and Keyes 2008).

Finally, the fact that it is easier to dissolve an informal union than marriage offers freedom but at the same time implies a lack of stability and certainty. Researchers have noted that marriage signals a long-term commitment not only to the partners themselves but also to the wider community (Cherlin 2000, 2009; Mynarska and Bernardi 2007). There is no equivalent declaration in cohabitation, even in countries where it is possible to register a partnership. Informal unions are thus associated with less binding legal and interpersonal commitment (Poortman and Mills 2012). The absence of marital vows might also be associated with a reduced sense of moral obligation (Adams and Jones 1997).

The open nature of cohabitation may also have different effects on the behavior of the partners. Having the freedom to dissolve the union offers the partners the opportunity to prove the quality of their match, but it can be viewed as a source of uncertainty regarding the future prospects of the union. The first possible consequence of this uncertainty is that the partners may avoid making joint investments in couple-specific goods and resources (Brines and Joyner 1999; Drewianka 2006). For example, cohabiting partners may have a lower propensity to have children together and to develop relationships with the other partner's relatives (Hogerbrugge and Dykstra

2009). Couples in informal unions may avoid pooling resources, holding jointly owned property, and adopting a division of responsibilities within and outside of the household in which one of the partners is economically dependent on the other (Lyngstad, Noack, and Tufte 2011). Being in an informal union may also encourage the partners to develop their own skills and interests, rather than sacrificing them for the sake of the joint household. This may have implications for the partners' behavior during conflicts. Partners who are more concerned with their own independence and their own (rather than joint) interests may be less consensus-seeking and less willing to give up some of their own preferences for the sake of resolving problems in their relationship (Cohan and Kleinbaum 2002).

However, the uncertainty about the future of the partnership may also have a seemingly contradictory effect, in that it may encourage the partners to put considerable effort into keeping the union attractive for both parties. Because the partners do not take the stability of the union for granted, they may work hard on a daily basis to make the relationship last. Thus, compared to married couples, cohabiting couples may invest more time, energy, and financial resources in the partnership (Drewianka 2004; Grossbard-Shechtman 1982; Grossbard-Shechtman 1993), and display emotional and physical affection and intimacy more frequently (Hsueh, Morrison, and Doss 2009).

All in all, the freedom and independence offered by cohabitation and the informal, deinstitutionalized character of this type of union can be beneficial to the partners, but – as the literature overview shows – it also holds various risks for a couple. The open nature of cohabitation may have mixed effects on the behavior and interactions of the partners toward each other, as well as toward the partners' relatives. The freedom that cohabitation offers is likely to be a particularly relevant factor in young people's choices and actions in countries where cohabiting and married couples have totally different legal and social statuses. In this paper we investigate such a country, and explore how the open nature of cohabitation is perceived in Poland.

3. The Polish context

Even though Poland is not 'immune' to the spread of cohabitation (Matysiak 2009), this living arrangement is still much less common in Poland than in other European countries (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008; Hoem et al. 2010; Kasearu and Kutsar 2011). According to cross-sectional data, non-marital unions make up just 3% to 6% of all unions in Poland (depending on the data source, Kasearu and Kutsar 2011; Soons and Kalmijn 2009; Matysiak and Mynarska 2014). Nevertheless, growing numbers of Polish people are cohabiting for at least a short period of time. The newest estimates based on retrospective data from the Generations and Gender Survey have indicated

that the proportion of entries into unions that took the form of cohabiting arrangements increased from 26% in the early 1990s to 60.5% in the second half of the 2000s (Matysiak and Mynarska 2014). These cohabiting unions are, however, quite short, and are often transformed into marriages. Moreover, in the qualitative narrations of young Poles, cohabitation has been portrayed as a transitory step or a testing period before marriage (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007).

Marriage still represents the highest stage in the development of a relationship. The majority of Poles want to get married and strongly value marriage (Pongracz and Spéder 2008), viewing it as a signifier that a relationship has passed the test and has proved good enough to be converted into a permanent commitment (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007). Moreover, most Poles believe that marriage, not cohabitation, is the proper context for childbearing (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007; Mynarska and Matysiak 2010). Even though the share of extra-marital births has increased in Poland, the majority of women who become pregnant while in an informal union decide to marry before or soon after the child is born. In the years 2006–2010 conceptions in cohabitation accounted for 23% of all conceptions in unions, but only 9% of children were born and raised by cohabiting parents up to the age of two (Matysiak and Mynarska 2014). Individuals who remain in an informal union for a longer period of time or who have a child in cohabitation usually have some legal, material, or personal constraints that prevent them from marrying (Matysiak and Mynarska 2014; Kasearu and Kutsar 2011).

Cohabitation in Poland is not only rare and temporary: it is also not recognized under Polish law (Matysiak and Wrona 2010; Stępień-Sporek and Ryznar 2010). Cohabiting partners have neither special rights nor obligations that stem from living together. Unlike married couples, cohabiting couples cannot benefit from the option to file their income taxes jointly or to co-insure the non-working partner, nor do they have the right to claim financial support from their partner if they lose their job or face financial problems. Cohabiting fathers do not automatically acquire fatherhood status, as it is the case in marriage, but instead have to declare their fatherhood in court and obtain the mother's consent. No rights are granted to cohabiting partners in the case of death or union disruption. Consequently, a cohabiting partner cannot inherit property from his or her deceased partner or collect survivor pensions or alimonies. Furthermore, there are no special rules that regulate the division of property and goods after separation. Thus, cohabiting couples who want to separate have to refer to general property law, which puts the less affluent partner in an inferior position. The lack of legal recognition of cohabitation in Polish law implies that cohabiting partners can separate without any legal consequences or any need to undergo official procedures. Marital partners, by contrast, have to obtain the consent of the partner if they want to exit the union and get a divorce. In 2012 the median duration of divorce proceedings

was around four months, but for around 12% of couples it took more than a year to obtain a legal divorce (Styrc 2010; CSO 2013).

In the absence of regulations that define the rights and obligations of partners living in non-marital unions, cohabiting partners may try to clarify their arrangement by signing a private contract. The contract can regulate personal relations between partners, such as the power of attorney or the distribution of property after the breakdown of the union, but only if the rights of third parties are not affected (Stępień-Sporek and Ryznar 2010). Thus in practice such a contract has very limited powers when regulating issues such as inheritance (Matysiak and Wrona 2010). Furthermore, it cannot give cohabitators rights that are legally guaranteed only to spouses, such as alimony or joint taxation rights.

Cohabitation in Poland is less socially acceptable than it is in many other European countries. International surveys such as the Population Policy Acceptance Study (Pongracz and Spéder 2008), the International Social Survey (Liefbroer and Fokkema 2008), and the European Social Survey (Aassve, Sironi, and Bassi 2013) have consistently found that Polish respondents were less likely to agree with statements such as “it is acceptable for a couple to live together without intending to get married” than respondents in other developed countries. In in-depth interviews, Polish respondents observed that their families do not recognize cohabiting partners as a ‘real couple’ and that in the Polish language there are no positive expressions to describe a cohabiting union (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007).

In sum, even if cohabitation is becoming more frequent in Poland, it is still subordinate to marriage, and clearly remains an ‘incomplete institution’. Consequently, Poland provides a very interesting context for analyzing how the non-institutionalized and free character of informal cohabitation is perceived, and what role this concept plays in the process of union formation. The freedom that cohabitation offers has not yet been investigated in Poland. Explorations of the perception of freedom have also been relatively rare in the existing studies on cohabitation, as they have tended to concentrate on the concept of commitment instead. In our view, shifting the focus from commitment to freedom provides us with new perspectives on why individuals choose to enter informal unions. Consequently, this approach may provide us with new explanations of the position and the role of cohabitation in Polish society. In our study the following research questions are posed: How do young Poles understand and evaluate freedom in cohabitation? What meaning does this concept have? How are the negative and the positive aspects of freedom defined in the Polish context? And, finally, how do young Poles view the role freedom plays in couple dynamics and relationship development?

4. Data and methods

In this study we use narrative material from eight focus group (FG) interviews which were carried out in Poland (Warsaw) in March 2012. The data were collected following research design developed by the Focus on Partnership team. The team members collaborated to create a standardized focus group guideline, which was used to direct the focus group discussions. The sample selection criteria were uniform across the countries. For further information on this project, please see Perelli-Harris et al. (2014) or www.nonmarital.org.

The FGs in Poland were organized with support from a research agency, ARC Rynek i Opinia. The agency started recruitment using their own contact database, contacting individuals who had participated in the past in market research or social studies conducted by the agency, who were between the ages of 25 and 40, and who lived in or near Warsaw. The individuals were asked to participate in the study or to refer the recruiter to another person in the given age range (a snowball method). Individuals who had participated in qualitative market research in the previous 12 months or more than twice in the past were excluded from the sample. Only people of Polish origin were included in the study.

The sample was stratified by gender and education to allow us to compare the views of men and women and of individuals with higher and lower levels of educational attainment. Individuals with only primary, vocational, lower-secondary, upper-secondary (general or professional), or post-secondary (non-tertiary) education were assigned to the lower level, while individuals with tertiary (BA/MA) or post-tertiary education were assigned to the higher level. Four FGs were organized for each education level, two with male respondents and two with female respondents. In total 69 respondents for eight focus groups were recruited. Each group included eight or nine participants with various union statuses, some of whom had children and some of whom were childless. Each respondent received approximately 20 EUR for participation. The basic characteristics of the respondents in each group are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

		FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	FG6	FG7	FG8	total
Gender	Men	8	–	9	–	9	8	–	–	34
	Women	–	9	–	9	–	–	9	8	35
Education	Medium/low	8	9	9	9	–	–	–	–	35
	High	–	–	–	–	9	8	9	8	34
Marital status	Single/divorced	4	4	2	6	5	4	6	4	35
	Married	4	5	7	3	4	4	3	4	34
Parity	Childless	4	4	4	7	5	5	6	3	38
	Parent	4	5	5	2	4	3	3	5	31
Total N of participants		8	9	9	9	9	8	9	8	69

The mean ages of the men and women in the sample were exactly the same: 32.2. Even though marital status and parity were not among the recruitment criteria, we were able to include respondents with different family situations in the sample: About half of the respondents were married at the time of the study, and of the unmarried individuals thirteen were in a relationship (eight were cohabiting and five were ‘living apart together’). Slightly more than half of the participants were childless. Only four of the married respondents were childless, and among the unmarried participants only one was a single parent. While we do not have detailed information on the respondents’ partnership histories, during the discussion several of the married respondents revealed that they had cohabited in the past. Since the focus groups were conducted in order to help us better understand general social views on informal unions among young Poles, it was of benefit to the study that the sample included both respondents who had and had not cohabited in the past.

The FGs were conducted at the premises of the research agency by a Polish-speaking researcher who was involved in the Focus on Partnership project. The standardized focus group guideline covered topics such as the disadvantages and advantages of living together without being married, the motivations for and the barriers to getting married, and the policies and laws related to cohabitation and marriage (see: Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). Each FG was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The text was coded in NVivo using a combination of top-down and bottom-up coding. In the first step the moderator coded the material according to the guideline questions (coding by questions). Next, open coding was performed and a table was prepared that summarized all of the issues mentioned in response to each question and in each group. For instance, a table on the disadvantages of cohabitation included all of the arguments brought up by the participants in response to the question on this issue. For each point that was mentioned the most representative quotes were also included.

A comparison of these tables allowed us to identify recurring themes and to explore the relationship between them (constant comparative method, Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1965). Two themes were dominant in the respondents' remarks, recurring in reaction to different questions and discussed in various contexts: (1) the role of the Catholic religion/traditions in the union formation process; and (2) the perception that a cohabiting union is easy to terminate ("one is free to leave at any time"). This paper draws on the material related to the latter theme.

It should be noted that while the respondents discussed the open nature of cohabitation, they frequently contrasted it with the committed nature of marriage. While our focus in this paper is on cohabitation, some references to marriage will of course be necessary.

5. Results

5.1 How is freedom in cohabitation understood?

It was apparent from the FGs that the respondents view freedom in cohabitation primarily as the ability to leave the relationship easily whenever they want to. According to the participants, if a couple lives together without being married "*it's easier to walk away*", a partner can "*pack a suitcase*" and go, and the partners have "*an easy way out*". The respondents focused on three aspects of cohabitation in particular: the lack of legal formalities at separation, the reduced sense of moral obligation, and the partners' greater degree of independence.

First and foremost, the respondents agreed that cohabitation is easy to terminate because the dissolution does not involve any formalities; i.e., the partners are legally free to leave at any time and can do so without difficulty. Marital dissolution was perceived very differently. The respondents agreed that divorce is associated with more stress and hassle, and in all of the FGs there was some discussion about the problems related to divorce. The participants argued that if you wish to terminate a marriage "*you have to go to a court, and you have to prove your grounds for divorce*"; "*you have to file for a divorce, wait, pay loads of money*"; "*there are tons of official papers*"; and you have to be willing to discuss "*very personal things in public*". Several respondents provided real-life examples of long and painful divorces, emphasizing that a couple that decides to get divorced has "*a long and difficult path ahead*".

Meanwhile, most of the respondents indicated that they believe cohabitation offers an effortless way out of a union:

There are no formalities, no divorce, no lawsuit, no lawyers, no washing your dirty linen in public. (FG3, man, low/medium educated)

Without unnecessary formalities (...) less fighting, and no need to wait for a court hearing for more than a year. (FG4, woman, low/medium educated)

Similar statements were made in all of the groups, and the vast majority of the respondents shared these views. Only one respondent (a highly educated woman) tried to argue that it is not easy to leave a cohabiting union that has existed for a long period of time, especially when the couple have joint children. Other participants acknowledged that it is more difficult to separate when children are involved, but nonetheless argued that separation is still much easier in cohabitation. Importantly, with the aforementioned exception, the respondents did not spontaneously bring up the topic of separation in an informal union where children were involved. When they spoke of leaving a non-marital partner they did not mention children, and it was clear that a cohabiting union is perceived as being childless. Thus, according to most of the respondents, leaving an informal union is easy. In one group, a female respondent put it quite bluntly:

Unless they have a mortgage together, but otherwise he packs his stuff and leaves. There is no divorce, no need to divide things... It's like they have never been together. (FG7, women, highly educated)

A few other issues also arose when the respondents discussed freedom in cohabitation. The interviewees spoke of basic issues such as the fidelity and loyalty of the partners, but also of the division of household tasks and the ability to spend money freely. These topics were not dominant in the narratives, but they were discussed in detail in two focus groups with women (one with a lower and one with a higher level of education). They also appeared to be of varying degrees of personal importance to the respondents. We describe them briefly below, to show the complexity of the concept of freedom.

First, the women argued that marriage offers some protection against cheating, some moral obligation that is absent in cohabitation. According to our female respondents, a man with a wedding ring on his finger feels “*morally, internally*” obliged. The women complained that cohabiting men may claim that they are single (“*free*”), and may even seek out sexual encounters. Examples of work-related trips were given, as in the following quote:

You are right, it is necessary to put a wedding ring on a man's hand, because... well... They are aware that they are not free [=single] then. Otherwise, he goes on a team-building trip at work and he says he is free. (FG8, woman, highly educated)

Although women mainly discussed the issue of infidelity in relation to men's behavior, one respondent spoke in more general terms, applying it to both sexes:

There are people who live together, and they don't have this wedding ring yet, so they think they can be unfaithful because he/she is not married yet. (FG2, woman, low/medium educated)

Second, some female respondents perceived cohabitation as being a more open relationship because a cohabiting woman can maintain her independence in everyday life. For instance, a woman in an informal union does not need to consult her partner before going out or spending money. As one respondent put it:

I'm independent. I buy my own clothes, my shoes, my bags with my own money. (FG8, woman, highly educated)

Another respondent remarked that, unlike a wife, a woman in an informal union is not obliged to cook or clean:

It's what a husband expects, a wife must clean and cook. And I'm not like that, I am not going to cook dinners and all this stuff. (FG2, woman, low/medium educated)

Apparently, cohabitation may be seen as offering women a more free and emancipated lifestyle.

The lack of legal obligations, the reduced sense of moral obligation, and women's independence were the three key aspects of freedom discussed by the respondents. Was the free nature of cohabitation generally perceived as being attractive? Or did the participants see more risks than benefits? We answer these questions in the following section.

5.2 Testing and binding – How and why is freedom attractive?

Informants generally perceived the open nature of cohabitation and the ease with which these unions can be terminated as attractive, especially in the context of relationship testing. Cohabitation was mainly seen as a trial period during which partners get to know each other better and find out whether they can live together successfully. As couples do not consider having children at this stage, cohabitation offers couples a risk-free opportunity to test their relationship.

The testing role of cohabitation was cited by the respondents as being a key benefit of this living arrangement, and one of the central reasons why consensual unions are becoming increasingly common in Poland. In their view, pre-marital cohabitation is a stage in which the partners are attempting to enter into a more serious relationship, as they move from “*seeing each other twice a week*” to “*solving problems together*”. But at the same time they still have the opportunity to leave the relationship without any damaging consequences. Statements like the following were made in all of the groups:

People want to get to know each other better and to grow into a decision to marry, and maybe they want to have an option for an easy way out of this relationship. (FG2, woman, low/medium educated)

Living together before a wedding creates this opportunity to get to know each other better. And it gives time to think about it and to make the right decision... (FG6, man, highly educated)

While marriage might be viewed as a sign that the trial has succeeded, breaking up is a natural, expected, and accepted consequence if it fails. In this sense, cohabitation allows the partners to make a wise, informed choice for their future, and allows them “*to eliminate mistakes*”.

As participants strongly emphasized the testing character of pre-marital cohabitation, they generally evaluated cohabitation favorably as allowing for an easy way out. But the participants also stressed that such a testing period should not last too long, and that the freedom related to cohabitation may become disadvantageous as the union persists and the couple grows older, accumulates possessions, and has children. At some point in the discussion the moderator explicitly asked the respondents about the rights of married and unmarried partners at separation. The respondents noted that a cohabiting woman would suffer more than a married woman in the event of a separation if there had been a “*traditional*” division of household tasks, and if the woman and her children depended financially on the male partner. If the informal union was terminated, such a woman would be left on her own and “*she has nothing at this moment*”. By contrast, “*marriage gives you something, you are entitled to half of all possessions*”

and also to maintenance payments from the ex-husband⁴. The following quote is representative of how the respondents spoke about this issue:

There is greater financial security in the case of marriage. At least people believe so. That if there is has been a wedding, there is the support. (FG6, man, highly educated)

This gendered perspective is also reflected in the fact that the women in our sample said they perceive cohabitation as being more convenient for men. The ability to leave at any time and the lack of moral obligation to a partner is seen as attractive for men. The women argued that:

It is easier particularly for men in such relationships, because they can always walk away. (FG2, woman, low/medium educated)

In the interviews we found passages illustrating that women in particular believe it is extremely easy for a man to leave an informal union even if a child is involved. The following quote comes from the discussion with highly educated women:

He doesn't even need to pay really, he can just say: Bye! And you can just go on looking for him. He doesn't have to... during a divorce there is a court to decide – for instance – with whom a child stays. And [in cohabitation] there is no such thing. He just walks away. He can say 'Bye' and he doesn't even need to see a child at all. Nothing. (FG7, woman, highly educated)

Even though some of the women argued that this depends on the individuals involved, and that even in cohabitation the partners can make fair arrangements upon separation, the dominant discourse indicated that the women believe that consensual unions are more insecure for women with children. Notably, in two of the groups (men with lower levels of education and women with higher levels of education) some of the respondents asserted that when children are involved marriage is also beneficial to the man, because a cohabiting father might face considerable difficulties in gaining the right to see his child after the partners separate. This point was made even though Polish law does not make any distinction in parental rights based on the parents' marital status.

⁴ In theory, maintenance payments can be paid by women as well as by men. Nonetheless, in Poland they are usually paid to women, and in the FGs this aspect was discussed only in relation to women's material security.

In general, while both the men and the women agreed that pregnancy should not be a reason to get married – and that they do not favor so-called “shotgun weddings” – they also agreed that marriage is the proper context for childbearing. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to present this topic in detail, but it should be emphasized that the respondents universally agreed that if the partners love each other and are planning a future together, they should get married before having a child. The decisions to have a child and to get married are intertwined, according to the interviewees.

To sum up, the open nature of cohabitation is evaluated differently at different stages of a relationship’s development. It is considered attractive and beneficial while the relationship is being tested. But with time the partners are expected to want the increased levels of commitment and of mutual responsibility that only come from marriage. In particular, marriage is deemed important for women in the context of childbearing.

5.3 “Trying harder” in a relationship – Freedom and the relationship between the partners

In the last section we will describe the respondents’ views on how the freedom offered by cohabitation influences couple dynamics and the interactions between partners. Again, both the negative and the positive consequences of freedom were discussed.

First, the respondents agreed that during the trial period it is expected and accepted that a cohabiting couple will separate if their relationship does not work out, and that the partners may choose to separate quickly rather than to attempt to resolve their problems and differences. According to the respondents, cohabitation offers the partners a risk-free opportunity to test their relationship, but they warned that this arrangement may discourage partners from making an effort to “save” their relationship. Thus, the respondents appear to believe that cohabiting partners may be more likely than married couples to separate if they experience minor problems that could have otherwise been resolved. In one group, the women discussed this issue in the following way:

- *It is easier to make this decision about breaking up [in cohabitation], otherwise a person might still try to fight for it;*
- *Sometimes you just get upset and simply walk out;*
- *You don’t think it through. A small issue and that’s it...;*
- *These are reasons that can make you break up, but maybe or most likely you would not divorce because of them. (FG7, women, highly educated)*

The contrast to marriage is apparent here. The respondents generally observed that married partners are less likely than cohabiting partners to give up easily when conflicts or problems arise. According to the interviewees, married couples “*try harder*” to resolve the conflict and to prevent union dissolution. The following quotes are representative of our respondents’ opinions:

There is less responsibility for the relationship [in cohabitation] somehow. As we said before, it is easier to walk away. If something is falling apart, one puts in less effort. I think that in marriage, one tries harder. (FG8, woman, highly educated)

If people are more conservative, being married might encourage them to put in more effort if a crisis arises. (FG5, man, highly educated)

The respondents further noted that efforts to save the relationship might be more important when children are involved. Once again, a link between marriage and childbearing was revealed.

But the open nature of cohabitation could have another effect. The respondents noted that, because an informal union is less secure and is easy to dissolve, the partners need to make ongoing efforts to keep the relationship attractive, and to avoid the problems that might lead to separation. These issues were discussed in four of the groups (women with high and low levels of education, men with high levels of education).

I think that people maybe are trying harder [in cohabitation], because it’s not like I don’t have to make any effort anymore because he is my husband already, he is and he will be. You always have to care about the other person. But I think that sometimes people think that it’s my wife or husband so I can put on 20 kg now. (FG7, woman, highly educated)

People let go of more things [in marriage] and it affects a relationship very badly. People rest on their laurels, stop caring, once they are married. And otherwise, they are not so sure of themselves. (FG5, man, highly educated)

Interestingly, the phrase “*trying harder*” reappears in a new context. Previously the respondents had said that married couples “*try harder*” to resolve their problems in order to avoid divorce. Here, a cohabiting couple “*tries harder*” not to resolve conflict, but to avoid it. The “*trying harder*” in cohabitation is implemented before the conflicts arise, and is meant to ensure that the partners remain attractive to each other. The

respondents mentioned superficial behaviors that might change if the partners start feeling too secure: e.g., the partners might stop watching their weight and start dressing “sloppily”, the woman might stop wearing make-up, and the man might start drinking beer in front of the TV. But the respondents also spoke in more general terms of “working harder” or being “more dedicated” in cohabitation. According to the participants, if a cohabiting partner does not “try harder”, the other partner “packs up in two days”; while in marriage the partners “let themselves go” and “stop caring”. Getting married carries the risk of falling into a “routine” and a “gray reality”, while cohabitation resembles dating in some respects. The assumption that cohabiting partners have to make an effort to please each other was appealing to some of the respondents, both men and women.

Moreover, the fear of “routine” was mentioned by a number of the respondents when they were asked why some people continue to cohabit for a long time and do not get married. While the dominant reaction to this question was that these couples believe that they “do not need a piece of paper”, several participants spoke of a possible fear that getting married would negatively affect the relationship, as in the following examples:

If everything is ok, this wedding is not really needed, because it's all good. Maybe they are afraid of getting into a routine, getting bored of each other. (FG7, woman, highly educated)

Sometimes they may be afraid that this piece of paper will change something for the worse. A kind of commitment to be together for the rest of their lives, it's like being condemned to be with each other. This pressure of time, I'm afraid it is counterproductive. (FG4, woman, low/medium educated)

6. Summary and discussion

While the diverging dynamics of the diffusion of cohabitation across European societies are very well documented (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008), the underlying mechanisms beyond the different speeds at which this diffusion is occurring are much less understood. We know very little about how couples think and feel about the advantages and disadvantages of choosing specific living arrangements, and how these views translate into the frequency of cohabitation. In this article we have provided some insight into people’s perceptions and attitudes regarding non-marital unions, with a focus on one of the key characteristics of cohabitation: freedom in a relationship.

Our results suggest that freedom in a partnership has a number of important dimensions. According to our respondents, cohabitation offers considerable freedom to leave at any time with few repercussions. This is primarily because cohabitation does not entail a legal bond, but also because partners in informal unions are assumed to have a reduced sense of moral obligation and a higher degree of independence. It is apparent that consensual unions are perceived as being less committed and less stable. But the respondents cited several reasons why this might in fact be beneficial, even in the context of relationship development.

According to the respondents, the biggest advantage of cohabitation is that it offers relaxed conditions for testing a relationship. The respondents see the testing role of cohabitation as being very important. Living together allows the partners to make more informed choices regarding their relationship and improves their chances of having a happy marriage. As the negative aspects of divorce were widely discussed and were clearly characterized as being undesirable, it appears that pre-marital cohabitation is seen as a way of 'divorce-proofing' a marriage. In fact, most of the recent studies that have controlled for selection into cohabitation of people in poor-quality relationships (i.e., relationships with a high propensity to dissolve because of unobserved characteristics of the partners) have shown that marriages formed by previously cohabiting partners are less likely to be disrupted than those that are not preceded by non-marital cohabitation (Kulu and Boyle 2010; Reinhold 2010; Manning and Cohen 2012). Living together is therefore an important stage in the relationship development process. The belief that cohabitation is very easy to terminate strongly encourages young adults to make use of this stage. Our interviewees perceive living together as being a risk-free (or at least low-risk) opportunity to avoid making serious life mistakes, and especially to avoid having to endure the financially and emotionally exhausting legal proceedings associated with divorce. Consequently, people are increasingly willing to enter into pre-marital cohabitation arrangements. The respondents acknowledged this explicitly, saying that the testing role of cohabitation is the most important reason why non-marital unions have become more common in Poland.

This is the central, but not the only benefit of the freedom associated with cohabitation that the participants in the study commented upon. Our respondents observed that the awareness that each partner can leave the union easily can make living together somewhat more exciting, at least for some individuals. According to the interviewees, it may motivate the partners to remain attractive to each other, and to avoid falling into a dull routine. Apparently, cohabitation is perceived as being a period of courting, when people are committed to showing their best side to their partner. It is assumed that the partners will make an effort to keep their relationship interesting, precisely because it is fragile and easy to dissolve. Some may even fear the transition to marriage because, in addition to stability, it might bring stagnation, routine, and

unwelcome changes in the partner's behavior. To the best of our knowledge, none of the previous qualitative studies on the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation has found that this feature of cohabitation can be perceived as being attractive. In fact, two studies – one conducted in the US (Huang et al. 2011) and one in Norway (Reneflot 2006) – have found that romantic love is more likely to be extinguished when a couple starts living together.

In addition, some of the women respondents argued that one advantage of cohabitation is that, unlike in marriage, the female partner is not expected to take over the household duties. This egalitarian feature of cohabitation makes it attractive to some women, but it should be stressed that this issue was mentioned in only two focus groups.

Clearly, the results from this study indicate that the respondents feel some ambivalence about marital commitment, as marriage might bring stagnation and routine and could impose traditional gender roles on women. This ambivalence was not dominant in the responses in the current study, but it was completely absent in the qualitative in-depth interviews conducted eight years ago with individuals with similar demographic characteristics (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007). Interestingly, in the previous study some respondents challenged the testing role of cohabitation, while marital commitment was universally evaluated as being positive and desirable. In the current inquiry, carried out almost a decade later, there seems to have been a slight shift in attitudes: the respondents acknowledged the probationary role of pre-marital unions, while pointing out a few cracks in the perfect image of marriage. As the respondents in both of these studies were urban and relatively young, future quantitative investigations should examine whether the pattern we observed reveals a more general shift in attitudes in Polish society.

While the freedom offered by cohabitation was evaluated positively, most of the respondents agreed that an informal union is not the right context for childbearing. Because cohabitation is easy to terminate, cohabiting couples do not accumulate joint possessions and avoid situations in which one of the partners – usually the woman – becomes economically dependent on the other party. As long as couples are childless, this economic freedom may be appreciated. But a young cohabiting mother might feel pressured to remain economically independent of her partner. In the Polish context, a woman may perceive this financial independence as being threatening when she wishes to become a mother. In Poland the options for couples with small children of dividing up the tasks within and outside of the household are limited. The conditions for combining work and family duties are poor, and conservative attitudes toward gender roles continue to prevail (Lück and Hofäcker 2003; Matysiak and Węziak-Białowska 2013). Consequently, it is assumed that a mother and her children will depend to a large extent on the male partner's income. As the law does not recognize cohabitation and the

rights and obligations of partners are not legally established, this arrangement is considered too insecure for childbearing. The respondents recognized this insecurity, emphasizing repeatedly that non-marital cohabitation is positive only if it is a temporary arrangement, and that the union should be formalized if the trial period of cohabitation is successful.

All in all, our study showed that there are a number of important aspects of cohabitation that are perceived as advantages. It suggests that pre-marital cohabitation may be increasingly attractive precisely because it does not require a strong commitment: specifically, that the open nature of cohabitation offers good conditions for partners to test out their relationship, while avoiding falling into a routine or a non-egalitarian division of gender roles. Nonetheless, as long as cohabitation remains an incomplete institution – unrecognized by law and accepted reluctantly by society – and does not provide secure conditions for childrearing, it is likely to remain a temporary living arrangement.

We hypothesize, however, that not only the frequency but also the duration of cohabitation is likely to increase. As long as parenthood is not planned, the benefits of cohabitation that are related to freedom in a relationship may be seen as outweighing the disadvantages. Consequently, some childless couples might choose to remain unmarried until they decide to have a child, even if they believe that their relationship has been sufficiently tested. As Poles increasingly postpone parenthood and choose to remain childless it is likely that the decision to marry will continue to shift to later ages, resulting in longer periods of cohabitation. These hypotheses should be carefully tested in future quantitative studies, and decision-making processes about cohabitation and marriage should be further examined in qualitative interviews.

Our study shows that a more in-depth explication of the meaning of freedom is important for understanding the role cohabitation plays in society. We have shown that freedom is a complex and multidimensional concept. In other contexts the uncommitted nature of informal unions will be seen differently, and other aspects of freedom will be stressed (compare Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). Understanding this diversity is important in explaining the differences in the nature of cohabitation across countries.

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