

The changing meaning of cohabitation in Europe and North America. Signs of convergence?*

The diffusion of cohabitation during the last decades is one of the most striking aspects of wider social changes that have taken place throughout the industrialized world. Over time, the meaning of cohabitation has modified, and changed from being a deviant behavior up to an almost fully accepted one. However, cohabitation has not spread uniformly across countries and the speed of change in the meaning of cohabitation can be radically different. Are cohabitations becoming alternatives to marriage, as predicted by SDT, or are there some persistent differences between countries?

The partner transition

In our paper (Di Giulio, Impicciatore and Sironi, 2014), which we recently presented at the PAA 2014, we aim to look at the pattern in the sequence of events that happen after the start of a cohabitation. Results show that the meaning of cohabitation is evolving in a similar way in different countries in Europe (France, Norway, Italy and Romania) and in the USA. We found a generalized decreasing trend for the occurrence of cohabitation as a pre-marital experience, in which marriage may be already planned at the beginning of the union, and an increasing trend for cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or as a stable union but with no other commitments like marriage or children.

Identifying patterns using a “flexible” approach

The analysis is based on the application of sequence analysis techniques on GGS data focusing on the chain of events that links the start of a union, the birth of the first child and the (possible) end of a union. The great diversity of the characteristics of cohabitation in industrialized countries naturally calls for attempts to reduce the data into suitable schema. Several authors already undertook this task (for a review see Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008, and Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004). However, previous research started from pre-defined model types of cohabitation. Sequence analysis allows us to classify the observed patterns without forcing them in previously arranged categories and to exploit the retrospective viewpoint of the GGP surveys. In this way, we can define typologies

of cohabitation in a more flexible way and without strong prior assumptions. The resulting empirical classification can add some relevant features to the theoretical classifications in the literature. Moreover, the application of multivariate logistic regression models gives us the opportunity to evaluate the propensity to belong to a specific typology by country and year of start of the union.

Going through the change together...

The results confirm that there are typical phases of the evolution of the meaning of cohabitation according to the growing social acceptability of cohabitation, the increasing acceptance of childbearing in cohabiting couples, and the increasing difficulty to tell cohabiting and married couples apart (as seen in Prinz, 1995). Italy and Romania are moving from the stage where cohabitation becomes socially accepted as a prelude to marriage to the stage where cohabitation becomes accepted as a real alternative. Despite the fact that Italy started from a more advanced position, Romania has experienced faster changes. Norway and France have already entered the last phase, where the distinction between marriage and cohabitation becomes meaningless due to convergence of lifestyle, experience of childbearing and equality between partners. The United States is in line with France and Norway but is characterized by cohabitation as a temporary union with high levels of instability. For example, many children are born out of a union, there is a higher propensity to cohabit with children and, most importantly, there is a high probability to break a union with children. This “unstable transition” is completely different from the results obtained for the other countries.

...but remaining different.

Although the evolution of the experience of cohabitation goes through similar stages in the countries, some differences continue to be evident suggesting a persistent diversity of cohabitation meaning across countries. There are still considerable differences in the occurrence of extra-marital unions among countries and signs of convergence of this indicator, as they would have been predicted by the SDT, are not yet evident.

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