Grasping the Diversity of Cohabitation: Fertility Intentions Among Cohabitors Across Europe

The authors examined the association between different meanings of cohabitation and fertility intentions. Using data from the Generations and Gender Surveys on 5,565 cohabiters from 9 European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, and Russia), they proposed a cohabitation typology based on attitudes toward marriage, intentions to marry, and perceived economic deprivation. Despite substantial variation in the prevalence and types of cohabiting relationships across Europe, cohabitation has become a living arrangement within which childbearing intentions are commonly formed and at times carried out. The authors found that the meaning that cohabiters attached to their union influenced significantly their short-term fertility intentions, net of other covariates. Cohabitors who viewed their unions as a prelude to marriage were the most likely to plan to have a child in the near future, both in Western and Eastern European societies. The association between fertility intentions and marriage intentions was particularly strong among cohabiters who do not as yet have children in common, but it was also present in a more muted form among cohabitating parents.

The findings suggest that, although marriage and childbearing are becoming less closely linked life events, they are not disconnected decisions for a large majority of cohabiters across Europe.

Nonmarital childbearing has increased in most European countries as well as in the United States and Canada largely because of increasing births to cohabiting couples (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Kiernan, 2001; Raley, 2001). Nowadays, about half of all first births in Norway, France, and East Germany; nearly 40% in Austria; and about 25% in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom take place within cohabiting unions (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Even in countries such as Spain, where nonmarital childbearing has traditionally been low, 24% of first births currently occur in cohabiting unions (Castro-Martín, 2010). In Eastern Europe, where conception out of wedlock is more likely to prompt marriage, the proportion of first births to cohabiting parents is generally lower than in Western Europe, but it is still sizable in many countries, such as Bulgaria (22%), Hungary (18%), and Russia (17%; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012).

Prior research suggests that examining the fertility behavior of cohabiters constitutes a promising avenue for understanding the role cohabitation plays in an individual's partnership trajectory, how it is intertwined with marriage, and how it fits into the family system (Kiernan, 2001). Thus far there is no broad consensus as to whether cohabitation is seriously challenging

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the hegemony of the legal and social institution of marriage as the proper setting in which to bear and rear children. Some scholars have emphasized that marriage is increasingly being decoupled from the childbearing process (Kiernan, 2001; Smock & Greenland, 2010), yet others have argued that cohabitation is far from replacing marriage, even in the Scandinavian countries, which are characterized by a very high prevalence of cohabitation and a high proportion of births within cohabiting unions (Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009). Furthermore, although couples are increasingly entering unions by cohabiting rather than marrying directly and in most countries the legal status of the parents' union is not relevant for defining a child's rights, for many couples cohabitation is an alternative to marriage only until children come along (Sassler & Cunningham, 2008). The intention to have children remains a prominent reason to move from cohabitation to marriage (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009). These patterns suggest that marriage might not necessarily become irrelevant in the family formation process but instead be postponed to a later stage in the couple's trajectory.

This article extends prior research on the links between cohabitation and fertility by drawing attention to the different meanings that cohabiters attach to their unions and how these meanings are associated with plans to have a child in the near future. It is widely acknowledged that cohabitation might mean different things to different people and involve various levels of commitment (Bianchi & Casper, 2000; Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). The meaning that cohabiters attach to their unions is likely to be related to the views they have about the appropriate timing, sequencing, and context of childbearing. One could argue that cohabiters who already have joint children apparently view their union as an appropriate setting in which to have and rear children. Studies from the United States nevertheless emphasize a relatively high rate of unintended pregnancies among cohabiting women (Musick, 2002; Sassler, Miller, & Favinger, 2009). Still, cohabiters who already have a child with their partner—intended or unintended—might attach different meanings to cohabitation than cohabiters without joint children. Our first research question, therefore, was this: How do cohabiters with and without

joint children differ in the meanings they attach to cohabitation?

Across Europe, there is substantial variation in the prevalence of cohabitation and the meanings attached to it (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). Heuveline and Timberlake (2004) classified Western and Northern European countries as being more advanced in the societal diffusion of cohabitation than countries in Central and Eastern Europe. In Western and Northern Europe there is also greater provision of institutional support for parents and children irrespective of parents' marital status (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012). As a consequence, certain types of cohabitation might be overrepresented in this part of Europe, such as cohabitation as an end in itself rather than a stepping stone in the marriage process. Our second research question, therefore, was this: How do cohabiters across Europe differ in the meanings they attach to cohabitation?

Identifying different types of cohabitation based on the meaning that cohabiters attach to their unions gives us the opportunity to examine whether the various meanings of cohabitation differ in their association with fertility intentions. We focused on fertility *intentions* within 3 years rather than fertility *behavior* because behavior is influenced by both intentions and constraints, and the latter may prevent goal achievement; hence, behavioral measures cannot adequately tap the perceived desirability of a behavior (Manning, Smock, Dorius, Hernandez, & Mitchel, 2012). When joint children are already present, the intention to have an additional child represents an increasing commitment to the union but is commonly guided by different considerations than the intention to have a first (joint) child (Barber, 2001; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995). Our third research question, therefore, was as follows: How is the meaning attached to cohabitation associated with fertility intentions among cohabiters with and without joint children?

A cross-national comparative perspective can greatly extend the scope of our knowledge of the role of cohabitation in the family system by permitting us to examine whether the association between the meaning of cohabitation and fertility intentions is analogous in different contexts. Because of limited sample sizes of specific types of cohabitation in some countries, we focused our comparisons in two large regions:

North–Western and Central–Eastern Europe. For the sake of simplicity, we refer to them as *Western Europe* and *Eastern Europe*, respectively. Despite considerable heterogeneity in family formation dynamics within both regions (Hoem, Kostova, Jasilioniene, & Muresan, 2009; Sobotka, 2008), this geographic division follows the historical nuptiality regimes described by Hajnal (1965)—late and non-universal marriage west of the imaginary line from St. Petersburg, Russia, to Trieste, Italy, and early and almost-universal marriage east of the line—as well as the geopolitical division of Europe in two blocs for more than four decades, during which the pattern of early and almost-universal marriage in Eastern Europe was reinforced through policies such as housing provision for newly wed couples. Studies have shown that the legacy of historical marriage patterns is still identifiable during the Second Demographic Transition (SDT; Puur, Rahnu, Maslauskaitė, Stankuniene, & Zakharov, 2012).

BACKGROUND

The Meaning of Cohabitation

Two prominent views on cohabitation have been put forward in the literature: (a) cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process and (b) cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. According to the first perspective, cohabitation has become a normative step on the way to marriage, which remains a highly valued institution. Four different subtypes may be distinguished. First, cohabitation can be considered as a form of engagement, or the last phase of courtship, and thus a *prelude to marriage* in which couples have firm intentions to marry (Bianchi & Casper, 2000; Brown, 2003; Brown & Booth, 1996). Second, cohabitation can be viewed as a testing ground for marriage. Cohabitation as a *trial marriage* often responds to uncertainties regarding whether the dating partner is a suitable potential spouse (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Seltzer, 2004). Third, the choice of cohabitation might be related to economic constraints rather than preferences (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; Kalmijn, 2011; Kravdal, 1999). For some cohabiters, the costs associated with a wedding could be a barrier to marriage (Kravdal, 1997; Manning & Smock, 2002); for others, employment precariousness or low prospects of financial stability might be perceived as

incompatible with the idea of getting married (Clarkberg, 1999; Oppenheimer, 1988, 2003). These cohabiters possibly consider themselves *too poor to marry* (Kenney & Goldstein, 2012). Fourth, some cohabiters could hold indifferent or negative attitudes toward the institution of marriage but still envision themselves marrying in the future. These cohabiters may plan to marry in order to please their partner, family, friends, or society in general, or they might intend to marry for pragmatic reasons (e.g., taxation and social security benefits, child custody laws) despite their indifference to or negative opinion about the institution of marriage. This group of cohabiters has been labeled *conformists* (Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman, 2012).

The view of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage implies that cohabitation is taking over the role and functions of the institution of marriage. Instead of being a step on the way to marriage, cohabitation is regarded as an end in itself. Two main reasons have been distinguished in the literature. First, some couples might view marriage as an outmoded institution or as an unwarranted interference of the church or the state in one's private life and hence actively choose cohabitation as an ideological *rejection of marriage*. Second, cohabiters may decide not to marry because they consider *marriage irrelevant* for them. This view implies not rejection but rather indifference toward the institution of marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). These couples tend to have neutral attitudes toward marriage, but they do not perceive any added value of formalizing their relationship. They believe that a formal marriage certificate is just "a piece of paper" that would not make any difference regarding their mutual commitment or entitlements.

Differences in Meanings of Cohabitation Between Cohabitors With and Without Joint Children

Cohabiting couples with children are generally assumed not to consider marriage a prerequisite for parenthood. This might be true for some cohabiters who indeed view their union as a suitable context in which to bear and rear children (Sassler & Cunningham, 2008). Cohabiting parents thus might more frequently view their union as an alternative to marriage, either because they reject marriage or consider it

irrelevant, than childless cohabiters may do. Yet one cannot presume that all children born into cohabitation have been intended (Musick, 2002; Sassler et al., 2009). Some cohabiting parents start living together in response to an unintended pregnancy (Raley, 2001; Reed, 2006), and economic constraints might play a relevant role in the deferral of marriage. Qualitative research from the United States has also shown that many poor urban women have children outside of marriage because motherhood is highly valued as a way of providing meaning in their lives as well as to test the relationship with the father of the child (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Hence, there are also reasons to expect cohabiting parents to be more frequently classified as too poor to marry or in a trial marriage. Furthermore, children born into a cohabiting union might change the meaning that cohabiters initially attached to their union, leading to a different composition of cohabitation types among cohabiters with and without children.

Differences in Meanings of Cohabitation Between Eastern and Western Europe

Comparative research has shown wide cross-European variation in the prevalence and meanings of cohabitation (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2011), congruent with cultural explanations of family change. The theory of the SDT assumes that new family behaviors, linked to increasing secularization and individualization, generally spread from the Northern European countries to the rest of the developed world (Lesthaeghe, 1995; van de Kaa, 1987). The shift from direct marriage to cohabitation as the dominant pathway toward family building is one central feature of this transition. Cross-national differences in the prevalence and role of cohabitation have often been explained by societies being at different stages of the SDT (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001, 2002). In Western Europe, unmarried cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing are more socially approved of and legally protected than in Eastern Europe (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen, 2012; Pongracz & Spéder, 2008). Thus, we expected Western European cohabiters to more frequently regard their union as an alternative to marriage and Eastern European cohabiters to more frequently view their union as a prelude to marriage or be classified as conformists.

Association Between the Meaning of Cohabitation and Fertility Intentions

Marriage was traditionally considered a precondition for having children. Nowadays, there is a growing temporal disassociation between marriage and parenthood, but the symbolic link between marriage and childbearing still persists (Holland, 2013; Moors & Bernhardt, 2009; Musick, 2007; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Cohabiters who view their union as a prelude to marriage might hence be the most likely to plan to have a child in the near future. Conformists also envisage marriage, but they do not share the positive attitudes toward marriage with the prelude type of cohabiters. For them, the intention to have a child might be part of the rationale to get married. We expected to find little divergence in fertility intentions between both types of cohabiters.

It has been argued that the forerunners in the spread of childbearing within cohabitation were individuals who rejected traditional marriage and challenged its moral and legal hegemony as the only legitimate context for family formation (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988). Cohabiters who view their union as an alternative to marriage, either because they reject marriage or consider it irrelevant, are likely to consider cohabitation a proper setting in which to have and raise children (Guzzo & Hayford, 2014). The absence of marital intentions does not imply low commitment to their union; on the contrary, cohabiters in these types of cohabitation tend to be in stable, long-term relationships (Bianchi & Casper, 2000) and hence prone to make relationship-specific investments such as having children. On the other hand, some cohabiters who reject marriage may be less focused on children or might have chosen cohabitation precisely because having children was not envisaged in their life plans (Haskey, 2013). Overall, we expected this group of cohabiters to be less likely to report fertility intentions than those who view their union as part of the marriage process.

Fertility intentions not only reflect preferences but also take into account actual and expected constraints. Cohabiters who are too poor to marry might view children as part of the costly and therefore postponed marriage project and were thus expected to put childbearing plans on hold until material preconditions are met (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995).

Finally, planning to have a child is unlikely when a couple's relationship horizon is uncertain, such as in a trial marriage. This cohabitation type probably comprises an overrepresentation of bad matches, that is, cohabiting unions with relatively low relationship commitment and potentially high instability that might be more likely to end up separating than starting a family.

In brief, we expected to find a hierarchical ordering of cohabitation types in terms of their relation with fertility intentions, with the prelude-to-marriage type and the conformists being associated with the highest odds of intending to have a child, followed by cohabiters who reject marriage or consider it irrelevant and, at the lower end, couples too poor to marry and those in a trial marriage (*Hypothesis 1*).

The meaning attached to cohabitation probably plays a more prominent role in cohabiters' intentions to have a first than a subsequent joint child, given that cohabiting unions without children in common are more heterogeneous in terms of commitment, stability, and the intertwining of partners' social and economic lives (Brown, 2010). Among cohabiting parents, other factors, such as the number and age of current children and the parents' own experience of parenthood, are expected to have a stronger bearing on fertility intentions than the meaning of cohabitation. The presence of children also blurs the distinction between cohabitation and marriage and is likely to transform these cohabiting unions into marriagelike unions. Hence, we expected differentials in fertility intentions by cohabitation type to be smaller among cohabiting parents than among cohabiters without joint children (*Hypothesis 2*).

The overall prevalence of cohabitation, the social acceptance of childbearing outside marriage, and the institutional support provided to cohabiting parents might influence which types of cohabitation are most strongly associated with short-term childbearing plans. In Western Europe, cohabitation is widely diffused and childbearing within cohabitation commonplace, so the anticipation of future marriage might play a lesser role in shaping childbearing plans. Thus, we expected the fertility intentions of cohabiters who consider their relationship an alternative to marriage and cohabiters who view their union as a prelude to marriage to be more alike in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe (*Hypothesis 3*).

Other Factors Influencing Fertility Intentions

Fertility intentions may be associated with other demographic and socioeconomic factors as well. Some of these factors themselves might be related to the type of cohabitation, thus possibly confounding the association between meaning of cohabitation and intentions to have a(nother) child. The parity specificity of fertility intentions has been largely emphasized (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013). The intention to have a first child marks a crucial transition in one's life course—the decision to become a parent—whereas intentions to have subsequent children are qualitatively different and affected by the experience of parenthood (Dommermuth, Klobas, & Lappegard, 2011). Relationship duration reflects union stability and increasing commitment and hence might be viewed as an asset for having a child together (Bouchard, Lachance-Grzela, & Goguen, 2008). Because of the existence of age norms related to childbearing as well as fecundity limits, we expected to observe an inverted U-shaped relationship between age and fertility intentions (Billari et al., 2010). Highly educated individuals tend to have more resources and better opportunities to balance work and family, and we thus expected them to have higher odds of intending to have a(nother) child than their lower educated counterparts (Gauthier, 2007). In line with prior studies documenting that employment increases the odds of family formation (Kalmijn, 2011; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007), whereas enrollment in education and a lack of consolidation in the labor market leads to a postponement of childbearing aspirations (Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991; Clarkberg et al., 1995), we expected employment to have a positive effect on fertility intentions and school enrollment and unemployment to have a negative effect.

METHOD

Data and Sample

We used data from the Generations and Gender Surveys for nine countries. The Generations and Gender Surveys comprise a set of comparative surveys of a nationally representative sample of the 18- to 79-year-old resident population in each of the participating countries (Vikat et al., 2007). To date, harmonized Wave 1 data collected between 2004 and 2009 are available

for 15 countries: Austria, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, and the Russian Federation. The overall size of the main samples differs from country to country, but in most cases they contain about 10,000 respondents. We used data from Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, and the Russian Federation because the other countries either did not implement or erroneously implemented the question on marital intentions or the question on attitudes toward marriage—crucial indicators for our cohabitation typology. The overall response rates varied from 49.7% in Russia to 78.2% in Bulgaria.

Of all the respondents who shared a household with a partner to whom they were not married ($n = 9,489$), we excluded from the analysis those with a partner of the same or unknown sex ($n = 91$) as well as female respondents older than 45 years ($n = 1,075$) or male respondents with a partner older than 45 years ($n = 957$) in order to cover the fertile years of a woman, considering the prospective nature of the question on fertility intentions (3 years). In addition, we excluded from the analysis respondents who were infertile or had an infertile partner ($n = 444$) or who were pregnant or had a pregnant partner ($n = 381$). The final restriction was intended to exclude respondents who did not provide a valid answer regarding fertility intentions ($n = 242$), with missing data on the key indicators defining the typology of cohabitation—namely, intentions to marry within 3 years ($n = 158$), agreement with the statement that marriage is an outdated institution ($n = 506$) or involves the perception of subjective economic deprivation ($n = 17$)—and with missing data on the control variables ($n = 53$). The high number of missing data on attitudes toward marriage was mainly caused by the way the Norwegian data were collected. In Norway, this question was part of a self-administered questionnaire that respondents were requested to submit via mail after the interview had taken place, and 30% of them ($n = 475$) did not return the questionnaire. Our final analytical sample hence comprised 5,565 cohabiters from nine European countries, ranging from 270 in Romania to 953 in Norway. We distinguished cohabiters without joint children ($n = 3,070$) from cohabiters with at least one joint child ($n = 2,495$). We coded cohabiters in Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania,

Romania, and Russia as living in Eastern Europe and cohabiters in Austria, France, Germany, and Norway as living in Western Europe.

Measurements

The dependent variable, short-term fertility intentions, was derived from the question, “Do you intend to have a child during the next three years?” with the answer categories 1 = “definitely not,” 2 = “probably not,” 3 = “probably yes,” and 4 = “definitely yes.” In Hungary, the only answer categories were 1 = “yes” and 2 = “no,” and in Norway 1 = “definitely yes” and 2 = “definitely no.” We created a dummy variable for fertility intentions coded 1 if positive (“definitely yes,” “probably yes,” or “yes” in Hungary) and 0 if negative (“definitely no,” “probably no,” or “no” in Hungary).

To translate the meanings of cohabitation into an empirically measurable classification, we used three key indicators: (a) attitudes toward the institution of marriage, (b) intentions to get married, and (c) perception of economic deprivation. By doing so, we built extensively on previous work (Hiekel et al., 2012). To measure attitudes toward the institution of marriage, respondents were asked, “To what extent do you agree or disagree that marriage is an outdated institution?” with answers given on a 5-point scale: 1 = “strongly agree,” 2 = “agree,” 3 = “neither agree nor disagree,” 4 = “disagree,” and 5 = “strongly disagree.” Respondents with values of 1 or 2 were classified as having positive attitudes toward the institution of marriage, respondents with values of 4 or 5 were classified as having negative attitudes toward marriage, and respondents with a value of 3 were classified as indifferent in their attitudes toward marriage. To measure marriage intentions, respondents were asked, “Do you intend to marry your partner within the next three years?” In Norway, respondents were asked for their marriage plans within 2 years. Respondents who answered “definitely yes” or “probably yes” were considered to have marriage plans. Those who responded “probably no,” “definitely no,” or “do not know” were classified as having no marital intentions. Norwegian respondents could choose only between “yes” and “no.” In Hungary, a negative answer could only be “no.” Finally, a third indicator was used to capture feelings of economic deprivation. Respondents

FIGURE 1. TYPOLOGY OF COHABITATION.

		Marriage intentions		
		No		Yes
Attitudes towards marriage	Positive	Trial marriage ^a		Prelude to marriage
			Too poor to marry ^a	
	Neutral	Marriage irrelevant		Conformist
	Negative	Reject marriage		

^aRespondent's feelings of economic deprivation are used to distinguish between trial marriage and too poor to marry.

were asked, "Thinking of your household's total monthly income, is your household able to make ends meet?" Responses were made on a 6-point scale that ranged from 1 (*with great difficulty*) to 6 (*very easily*). We classified respondents who answered "with difficulty" or "with great difficulty" as feeling economically deprived.

Combining the three indicators, we distinguished six types of cohabitation (see Figure 1). Cohabitors with positive attitudes toward the institution of marriage and who intended to marry were assumed to view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage. Cohabitors with positive attitudes toward marriage but who had no intentions to marry in the near future were considered not yet being ready to marry. Those who did not feel economically deprived were classified as viewing their cohabiting union as a trial marriage. Those of them who felt economically deprived were classified as being too poor to marry. Cohabitors who held indifferent or negative attitudes toward marriage but nevertheless reported intentions to marry were classified as conformists. Cohabitors with negative attitudes toward marriage and who had no intentions of marrying were classified as rejecting marriage. Finally, those who held an indifferent attitude toward marriage and had no intentions of marrying were classified as considering marriage irrelevant.

We included a number of control variables in the logistic regression models, namely, number of biological children, joint children with the partner, gender, age, union duration, education attainment, employment status, and living

in a country located in Eastern Europe versus Western Europe. For age and union duration, we also included a squared term to test the nonlinearity of the relationship. The data provide an internationally comparable measure of *education attainment* using the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO, 2006). We distinguished three levels: 1 = primary and lower secondary education, 2 = upper secondary and postsecondary nonuniversity education, and 3 = all levels of university education. We also distinguished among 1 = employed, 2 = not employed, and 3 = enrolled in education.

Analytical Strategy

First, we calculated descriptive statistics on the prevalence of cohabitation, the proportion of cohabitors with joint biological children, and the share of cohabitors with intentions to have a(nother) child, as well as the typology indicators and the distribution of meanings of cohabitation for each country included in the present study. Second, we compared the prevailing meanings of cohabitation between cohabitors with and without joint children as well as between Eastern and Western European countries. Third, we conducted binary logistic regression analyses for cohabitors with and without joint children separately and examined the association between the meaning attached to cohabitation and the odds of intending to have a(nother) child, pooling data from the nine countries. Before pooling the data, we ran logit models separately by country (results not shown). Despite the low statistical power of some of these models due to small numbers of observations in some countries, we found no differences in the association between the covariates and the dependent variable across the countries pooled for the analyses. Fourth, we tested the interaction between cohabitation type and parental status to examine the magnitude of the difference in fertility intentions of cohabitors with and without joint children. Finally, to explore the possibility of contextual variation in the association between the meaning of cohabitation and fertility intentions, we tested the interaction between cohabitation types and living in Eastern or Western Europe for cohabitors with and without children separately.

Table 1. *Percentage Distribution of Indicators Used in the Cohabitation Typology, Meanings of Cohabitation, and Characteristics of Cohabitors by Country, for Cohabitors 18–45 years (N = 5,565)*

Indicator	Western Europe				Eastern Europe				
	Austria	France	Germany	Norway	Bulgaria	Hungary	Lithuania	Romania	Russia
Typology indicators									
Agreement: Marriage outdated	26.0	26.4	26.4	21.5	49.6	33.6	29.8	19.5	26.6
Disagreement: Marriage outdated	43.9	51.8	48.7	43.7	26.1	38.5	34.5	49.1	48.4
Intentions to marry (3 years)	49.4	41.3	39.9	19.3	48.2	65.6	72.6	85.7	58.0
Feels economically deprived	5.1	24.5	15.9	2.8	72.7	16.5	12.6	42.0	47.9
Meanings of cohabitation									
Prelude to marriage	29.1	28.7	23.2	12.1	17.8	31.1	27.5	42.6	28.5
Trial marriage	15.3	17.4	21.6	31.2	1.6	7.0	5.7	1.1	7.4
Too poor to marry	0.7	6.2	2.7	0.9	6.9	1.2	1.4	3.7	12.2
Conformists	20.1	12.6	14.4	6.9	30.3	38.8	45.0	40.4	29.4
Rejection of marriage	17.5	20.0	20.3	19.7	31.5	15.0	10.4	5.2	12.9
Marriage is irrelevant	17.4	15.0	17.8	29.2	12.0	9.0	10.1	7.0	9.6
Fertility intentions by cohabitation type									
Prelude to marriage	69.1	59.0	61.3	58.3	57.9	71.2	59.4	48.7	57.3
Trial marriage	37.6	39.2	20.4	45.1	10.0	34.6	42.9	33.3	23.5
Too poor to marry	40.0	26.4	23.1	22.2	22.7	11.1	20.0	10.0	19.6
Conformists	59.1	54.2	56.5	50.0	53.1	61.8	60.6	37.6	50.4
Rejection of marriage	27.6	27.7	15.5	30.9	28.2	28.2	15.8	14.3	27.1
Marriage is irrelevant	33.8	33.9	11.8	30.9	29.9	38.6	16.2	10.5	20.5
General characteristics of cohabitation									
Cohabitors with fertility intentions	48.7	42.9	32.6	39.9	40.6	55.1	49.6	38.2	40.7
Cohabitors among all coresident unions	30.9	33.6	20.4	38.6	16.3	22.2	18.2	7.6	19.7
Cohabitors with at least one joint biological child	38.1	51.6	31.4	54.4	66.8	32.9	25.6	51.1	39.2
<i>n</i>	766	849	478	953	641	782	367	270	459

RESULTS

Some general indicators of the diffusion of cohabitation and the profile of cohabiters in each of the countries under study are reported in Table 1. There was considerable diversity in the prevalence of cohabitation across countries,

ranging from 8% (Romania) to 39% (Norway) of all coresident unions, but it was generally higher in our Western European sample (32%) than in our Eastern European sample (16%). Remarkably, a substantial proportion of cohabiting unions involved joint biological children,

ranging from one quarter in Lithuania to more than half in France, Norway, Bulgaria, and Romania. Intentions to have a(nother) child within 3 years were also remarkably high among cohabiters, ranging from 33% in Germany to 55% in Hungary.

Also shown in Table 1 is the percentage distribution of the indicators used to build the cohabitation typology for each of the countries included in the study. Marital intentions were most frequent among Romanian cohabiters (86%) and least frequent among Norwegians (19%) and in general more frequent in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. In all countries except Bulgaria there were more cohabiters with positive attitudes toward marriage than cohabiters who considered it an outdated institution. The share of economically deprived cohabiters was particularly high in Bulgaria (73%) but also sizable in Russia (48%) and Romania (42%).

On the basis of these indicators, the resulting mix of cohabitation types is presented in Table 1. In all countries, cohabitation was a heterogeneous phenomenon, with a variety of meanings attached to it. A substantial proportion of cohabiters viewed their union as a prelude to marriage, except in Norway, where this proportion was only 12%. Cohabitation as a trial marriage was relatively common in Western Europe, in particular in Norway (31%), but rare in Eastern Europe. Although a large proportion of cohabiters reported difficulties making ends meet in several Eastern European countries, many of them still planned to marry; hence, cohabiters classified as too poor to marry were relatively scarce, though more common in Eastern Europe. Conformism was clearly more widespread in Eastern European countries, ranging from 30% in Russia and Bulgaria to 45% in Lithuania. By contrast, cohabitation as an alternative to marriage was more widespread in Western European countries, with the exception of Bulgaria, where a surprisingly high percentage of cohabiters rejected the institution of marriage (32%).

Cohabiting parents were expected to differ from their childless counterparts in the meanings they attach to cohabitation. The data in Table 2 confirm that the prevalence of each cohabitation type, except the conformist type, differed significantly between the two groups. Cohabiters with joint children less frequently viewed their union as a prelude to marriage or a trial marriage. In turn, they more frequently rejected the institution of marriage or considered marriage

Table 2. *Percentage Distribution of Cohabiters Without (n = 3,070) and With Joint Children (n = 2,495) by Meanings of Cohabitation*

Meaning of cohabitation	Without joint children	With joint children
Prelude to marriage	30.3	18.7 ^a
Trial marriage	16.1	11.8 ^a
Too poor to marry	2.6	4.9 ^a
Conformist	23.3	22.9
Rejection of marriage	13.7	24.0 ^a
Marriage irrelevant	14.0	17.6 ^a
Total	100.0	100.0

^aDifferences between cohabiters with and without joint children by meaning of cohabitation tested using chi-square statistics, results significant at $p < .001$.

irrelevant compared to cohabiters without joint children. They were also overrepresented among cohabiters too poor to marry.

We were also interested in assessing whether differences in the societal diffusion of cohabitation across Europe would imply that Eastern and Western European cohabiters diverged in the meanings attached to cohabitation. The data in Table 3 show that cohabitation types oriented toward marriage (the "prelude to marriage" group and the conformists) tended to prevail in Eastern Europe. Among cohabiters without joint children, Eastern Europeans less often viewed

Table 3. *Percentage Distribution of Cohabiters Without (n = 3,070) and With Joint Children (n = 2,495) in Eastern and Western Europe by Meanings of Cohabitation*

Meanings of cohabitation	Without joint children		With joint children	
	Eastern Europe	Western Europe	Eastern Europe	Western Europe
Prelude to marriage	35.2	26.1 ^a	18.5	18.8
Trial marriage	5.7	25.0 ^a	3.8	18.1 ^a
Too poor to marry	3.1	2.3	7.3	3.1 ^a
Conformist	36.4	12.0 ^a	34.1	14.2 ^a
Rejection of marriage	11.7	15.4 ^a	24.1	24.0
Marriage irrelevant	8.0	19.2 ^a	12.2	21.9 ^a
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	1,422	1,648	1,097	1,398

^aDifferences between Eastern and Western European cohabiters by meaning of cohabitation tested using chi-square statistics, results significant at $p < .001$.

their union as an alternative to marriage or as a trial marriage than their Western European counterparts. Among cohabiters with joint children, differentials were smaller. The proportion of cohabitating relationships classified as a prelude to marriage and as rejecting marriage were similar in Eastern and Western Europe, but cohabiting parents in Eastern Europe were less likely to view their union as a trial marriage or consider marriage irrelevant, and they were more likely to be classified as conformists or as too poor to marry than their Western European counterparts.

In Table 4 we present the results of two separate logistic regression models on 3,070 cohabiters without joint children and 2,495 cohabiters with joint children, pooling data from the nine countries of the study and controlling for potentially relevant covariates. During the analysis, we first estimated a model including only the cohabitation typology and a dummy

variable indicating whether the cohabiter lived in Eastern Europe, and in a second step we added the rest of the covariates. Including the control variables in the model did not alter the statistical associations between type of cohabitation and fertility intentions (although the effect size became slightly attenuated). Because of space limitations, Table 4 shows the results of only the full models.

The results of these analyses confirm that, for both cohabiters without and with joint children, the meaning that cohabiters attached to their union had an important bearing on their fertility intentions. Hypothesis 1 suggested a hierarchical order of cohabitation types in their relation to fertility intentions, with the prelude-to-marriage type being associated with the highest odds of intending a child and the trial marriage type with the lowest. The findings partially supported this hypothesis. Across Europe and regardless of whether children in common were present or not,

Table 4. *Logistic Regression Results Predicting Intentions to Have a Child Within 3 Years, for Cohabiters Without Joint Children (n = 3,070) and Cohabiters With Joint Children (n = 2,495)*

Predictor	Cohabiters without joint child(ren) ^a			Cohabiters with joint child(ren) ^b		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR
Meaning of cohabitation (prelude to marriage omitted)						
Trial marriage	-1.28***	0.13	0.28	-0.46**	0.19	0.63
Too poor to marry	-1.52***	0.27	0.22	-0.68**	0.29	0.50
Conformist	-0.12	0.12	0.89	-0.07	0.15	0.93
Rejection of marriage	-1.50***	0.14	0.22	-0.71***	0.16	0.49
Marriage is irrelevant	-1.37***	0.14	0.25	-0.73***	0.15	0.48
Number of biological children						
1	-0.97***	0.16	0.38			
2+	-2.06***	0.26	0.13	-1.77***	0.12	0.17
Female (male omitted)	0.24**	0.09	1.27	-0.22**	0.11	0.80
Age	0.43***	0.05	1.54	0.30***	0.08	1.35
Age squared	-0.01***	0.00	0.99	-0.01***	0.00	0.99
Union duration	0.04	0.03	0.96	-0.02	0.04	0.98
Union duration squared	-0.00	0.01	1.00	-0.00	0.02	1.00
Living in Eastern Europe (Western Europe omitted)	0.12	0.09	1.13	-0.69***	0.12	0.50
Education (primary education omitted)						
Secondary education	0.03	0.13	1.03	0.01	0.14	1.01
Tertiary education	0.26 [†]	0.15	1.29	0.23	0.18	1.26
Employment (employed omitted)						
Unemployed/not employed	0.15	0.14	1.17	0.06	0.14	1.06
Enrolled in education	-0.85***	0.15	0.43	-0.26	0.39	0.77
Constant	-5.19	0.84		-2.51	1.23	
Log likelihood	-1,750.99			-1,136.57		

Note: OR = odds ratio

^a*df* = 17. ^b*df* = 16.

[†]*p* < .10. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

cohabitors who viewed cohabitation as a prelude to marriage (the reference category) had indeed the highest odds of intending to have a(nother) child in the next 3 years, and conformists did not differ significantly from them. Also in line with our expectations, cohabitors who attached other meanings to their union had significantly lower odds of reporting short-term fertility intentions. We found nevertheless that those types of cohabitation in which marriage plans were not present did not significantly differ from each other in their association with fertility intentions. In brief, there were considerable differences between cohabitation types regarding fertility intentions, but they did not follow exactly the hierarchical order we had presumed.

Although our focus was on the association between the meaning of cohabitation and fertility intentions, other covariates also influenced the intentions to have a(nother) child, and we briefly report associations that were statistically relevant. For cohabitors without shared children, having children with a prior partner reduced the odds of intending to have a child within the current relationship. For cohabitors with joint children, those who already had two or more children—joint or not—were less likely to intend to have another child. Age showed a curvilinear association with fertility intentions. The effect of union duration was not statistically significant after age was included in the model. Women had higher odds of reporting fertility intentions than men when they did not yet have children in common with their current partner, but the opposite was true when they had joint children. Contrary to our expectations, education attainment and employment status did not appear to have a significant impact on cohabitors' fertility intentions once we controlled for other covariates. Only being enrolled in education reduced significantly the odds of intending to have a child among cohabitors without joint children.

The separate analyses of cohabitors with and without joint children suggested that the strength of the association between the meaning of cohabitation and fertility intentions was weaker among cohabiting parents than among cohabitors without joint children. To assess the magnitude and significance of these differences, we estimated a logistic regression model on the whole sample, including interaction terms between cohabitation types and a variable indicating whether the respondent had at least one joint child with the current

partner (see Table 5). The interactions were statistically significant, and the results confirmed Hypothesis 2, which anticipated less variation in fertility intentions by cohabitation types among cohabiting parents than among cohabitors without joint children.

Finally, we were interested in examining whether the cohabitation typology was similarly associated with fertility intentions in Eastern and Western Europe. We ran two additional logistic regression models for cohabitors with and without joint children separately, including interaction terms between cohabitation types and the variable distinguishing Eastern European from Western European cohabitors (see Table 6). None of the interaction terms turned out to be statistically significant, suggesting that the meaning cohabitors attach to their union was similarly associated with fertility intentions in Western and Eastern Europe. Hypothesis 3 hence could not be confirmed. This result

Table 5. *Main and Interaction Effects of Meaning of Cohabitation and Presence of Joint Children on Cohabitors' Intention to Have a Child Within 3 Years (N = 5,565)*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Meaning of cohabitation (prelude to marriage omitted)			
Trial marriage	−1.40***	0.13	0.25
Too poor to marry	−1.51***	0.27	0.22
Conformist	−0.07	0.11	0.93
Rejection of marriage	−1.53***	0.14	0.22
Marriage is irrelevant	−1.41***	0.14	0.24
Respondent has joint child(ren) with current partner	−0.41	0.19	0.87
Interaction terms			
Joint children × Trial marriage	0.99***	0.22	2.69
Joint children × Too poor to marry	0.74†	0.39	2.10
Joint children × Conformist	−0.05	0.19	0.95
Joint children × Rejection of marriage	0.80***	0.21	2.22
Joint children × Marriage irrelevant	0.72**	0.22	2.05
Constant	−3.86***	0.68	
Log likelihood	1,781.57		

Note: *df* = 23. The results are based on analyses of pooled data from nine countries. Control variables are the same as in Table 4. *OR* = odds ratio.

†*p* < .10. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 6. Main and Interaction Effects of Meaning of Cohabitation and Living in Eastern Europe on Cohabitors' Intentions to Have a Child Within Three Years, for Cohabitors Without Joint Children (n = 3,070) and Cohabitors With Joint Children (n = 2,495)

Predictor	Cohabitors without joint child(ren) ^a			Cohabitors with joint child(ren) ^b		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
Meaning of cohabitation (prelude to marriage omitted)						
Trial marriage	-1.35***	0.16	0.26	-0.44**	0.22	0.65
Too poor to marry	-1.65***	0.39	0.19	-0.60	0.45	0.55
Conformist	-0.20	0.20	0.82	0.10	0.23	1.10
Rejection of marriage	-1.67***	0.18	0.19	0.58***	0.21	0.38
Marriage is irrelevant	-1.52***	0.17	0.22	0.46***	0.22	0.42
Respondent is living in Eastern Europe	-0.04	0.16	0.96	-0.79***	0.23	0.45
Interaction terms						
Trial marriage × East	0.05	0.31	1.05	-0.48	0.52	0.62
Too poor to marry × East	0.25	0.54	1.29	-0.11	0.60	0.90
Conformist × East	0.15	0.15	1.17	-0.22	0.31	0.80
Rejection of marriage × East	0.37	0.27	1.44	0.58†	0.32	1.79
Marriage is irrelevant × East	0.40	0.29	1.49	0.46	0.22	1.59
Constant	-5.08***			-2.46**		
Log likelihood	-1749.46			-1131.60		

Note: These results are based on analyses of pooled data from nine countries. Control variables are the same as in Table 4.

^adf = 22. ^bdf = 21.

†p < .10. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

was not consistent with the SDT narrative, which predicted that the link between marriage intentions and childbearing intentions should be weaker in Western Europe. With regard to divergences in fertility intentions between Eastern and Western European cohabiters, Table 6 shows that differences were not significant among cohabiters without joint children, once the composition by cohabitation types was controlled for. By contrast, the odds of intending to have another child were around 50% lower among cohabiters with joint children in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. This pattern might be linked to the very low fertility of Eastern European countries.

DISCUSSION

This study of current cohabiters from nine European countries makes a number of important contributions to comparative research on the diversity of cohabitation and its role in the family formation process. We proposed a typology that was aimed at grasping the different meanings cohabiters attach to their unions and portraying the prevalence of various forms of cohabitation

across Europe. On the basis of this typology, we examined the linkages between the meaning of cohabitation and short-term fertility intentions, taking into consideration potential differences between cohabiters with and without joint children and potential divergence between Eastern and Western Europe.

The first key contribution of the current study is the attempt to grasp the diversity of cohabitating relationships across Europe. We showed how nine European countries differ in the prevalence of different types of unmarried cohabitation, the proportion of cohabiting parents, and the prevalence of childbearing intentions among cohabiters. We also showed that, across Europe, cohabitation is a heterogeneous phenomenon with various meanings attached to it. Some cohabiters were very much oriented toward marriage, either because the institution was central in their view of family life or because they succumbed to normative pressures. Others viewed cohabitation as an end in itself, because they either ideologically rejected marriage or considered it irrelevant. Yet others would like to proceed to marriage but are still evaluating their

relationship or consider themselves too poor to marry. In Eastern Europe, cohabiters seem to lean more toward marriage. The proportion of cohabiters who viewed their union as a stage in the marriage process or who planned to marry despite holding unfavorable attitudes toward the institution of marriage was significantly higher in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Viewing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage and as a trial marriage was less widespread in Eastern Europe.

Despite large differences in the overall prevalence of unmarried cohabitation and in the legal rights and responsibilities granted to cohabiting couples, we found that, across Europe—and countries of the former Soviet bloc are no exception—a significant proportion of cohabiters already have children with their current partner. The relatively large share of cohabiting parents in Eastern European countries might seem at odds with the diffusion stages implied by the SDT framework. It could be, however, that a significant proportion of Eastern European cohabiters with joint children adopted the strategy to postpone marriage longer than parenthood, given the strong and relatively low age norms for first parenthood in these countries, as prior research in the Polish context suggests (Mynarska, 2010).

The second key finding of the current study is that the various meanings that cohabiters attach to their unions influence short-term fertility intentions differently, net of other covariates. This result confirms prior research emphasizing the importance of taking into consideration the heterogeneity of meanings, motives, and functions of cohabitation when trying to elucidate its role in the family system (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001). In line with our hypothesis, cohabiters who viewed their union as a prelude to marriage were clearly more likely to report intentions to have a(nother) child than cohabiters in any other cohabitation type except for the group we labeled *conformists* because they planned to marry despite their unfavorable opinion about the institution of marriage. An important implication of this finding is that, across Europe, cohabiters' intentions to have a child are still closely associated with plans to get married. This result corroborates prior research showing that the anticipation of marriage increases cohabiters' willingness to make relationship-specific investments, such as planning for and having children, to

further strengthen the commitment between the partners (Musick, 2007).

The third main finding is that cohabiters with and without joint children differed in the meanings they attached to cohabitation as well as in the association between cohabitation type and fertility intentions. Cohabiters with joint children were overrepresented not only among those who viewed their union as an alternative to marriage (i.e., rejection or irrelevance of marriage) but also among those who were too poor to marry. The aspiration to marriage was less central for cohabiters with joint children, suggesting that they would be more likely to consider cohabitation an appropriate setting for childrearing. As expected, we also found evidence of a weaker association between the meaning of cohabitation and the intention to have another child among cohabiting parents than among cohabiters who did not have a child in common. The coefficients in the model for cohabiters with joint children indicate that the number of children already born is much more relevant in explaining the intention to have an additional child than the meaning attached to cohabitation.

Finally, the way in which a particular meaning of cohabitation is associated with the likelihood of having fertility intentions was largely similar across Europe. Although Eastern European cohabiters with joint children were less likely to intend to have another child than their Western European counterparts, the association between cohabitation type and fertility intentions was analogous across Europe. In particular, the link between the anticipation of marriage and the intention to have a child was strong across contexts. Cohabiters who perceived their union as having a long-term perspective, who did not feel too poor to marry, who valued the institution of marriage, and in particular those who planned to marry in the near future were more prone to intend to have a child. The cohabitation typology proposed to grasp the diversity of meanings of cohabitation across Europe is thus a useful tool to understand differences in the fertility intentions of cohabiters in various contexts.

It is important to acknowledge a number of limitations of the present study. First, we relied on cross-sectional data. Our classification of cohabiters into different types of cohabitation is a snapshot of the current state of the cohabiting union. Both the meaning of cohabitation and fertility intentions could change over each

respondent's individual life course as well as over the course of an intimate relationship. Measuring the meaning of cohabitation and intentions to have a child at the same point in time implies that we cannot effectively address processes of selection as well as reverse causality that could be at play. Individuals who do not intend to have any (more) children could opt for cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, the latter being normatively more strongly associated with having children. In turn, cohabiters who want to have children might be more likely to view their current union as a stage in the process toward marriage and thus select themselves into cohabitation types that favor marriage. Finally, intending to have a child could encourage cohabiters to pursue plans to marry. Only longitudinal data could effectively address these issues.

Second, we relied on individual data when measuring the fertility intentions of cohabiters. Although intentions to have a child can be understood as an individual desire that might differ from one's partner's, in reality they often incorporate to some extent the partner's view on having children (Testa, 2012; Thomson, 1997). Data on fertility intentions of both partners would have enabled us to get a better grasp of the dyadic nature of reproductive decision making in cohabiting unions, but couple-level data are not available in the Generations and Gender Surveys.

Finally, although we relied on large data sets, our sample of cohabiters, in particular in Eastern European countries, was still rather small, and some of the meanings of cohabitation identified are relatively marginal. Although we are aware of the drawbacks of pooling the data of countries that still vary largely in the diffusion of cohabitation and its role in the family formation process (Puur et al., 2012), we did so in order to increase the statistical power of our analysis. If more countries were available, multilevel analyses would have enabled us to get a better grasp of the complex links among country contexts, meanings of cohabitation, and fertility intentions (Stegmuller, 2013).

This study shows that grasping the diversity of cohabitation by distinguishing the different meanings attached to it is a promising avenue for future research on the links between cohabitation and marriage and between cohabitation and fertility. Cohabitation means different things

to different people, and understanding how it is intertwined with the intention to have a child could expand our understanding of the role of cohabitation within the family system. Given the recent release of first Wave 2 data of the Generations and Gender Surveys, future research might examine how cohabiters in different types of cohabitation succeed in accomplishing their fertility intentions, or how the conception or birth of a child fosters the transition to marriage or changes the meaning attached to cohabitation in different European contexts.

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