

Diffusion of cohabitation as new living arrangement.

1. Theory/model

1.1 Research question

In the early 1960s non-marital cohabitation was exceptional in most European countries (Blossfeld: 1995), while today it has not only emerged and spread through Europe with great differences in timing and speed, but it has also fundamentally changed its social meaning (Manting: 1996). Cohabitation appeared and became a diffused practice in Scandinavian countries at first, followed by continental Europe and at last, only very recently, it begins to be an option for partnering in south European countries. Which is the mechanism behind this pattern? How can these differences be explained?

“Why did cohabitation emerge through Europe with different times and speeds?” or else “What drives the diffusion of cohabitation in these countries and, if there is divergence in the diffusion process, which forces could be responsible for it?”

1.2 Historical/Political relevance

Investigating the process of emergence of cohabitation practice, its driving mechanisms and country differences, it would offer a better understanding of the dynamic shifts during the phase of family formation over time, in a period of declining marriages and later family formation. It is particularly relevant since the decision to initiate a partnership (meaning with this the sharing of an household by a couple in an intimate relation) it is very likely the first step in the process of family formation, which is going to spill over other dimensions of living and onto the likelihood/timing in engaging in subsequent transitions such as giving birth to children.

It is not a “un-contextual” decision, but it is rather a choice nested within the set of resources and constrains (whether perceived or not) affecting individuals’ agency. This set of constrains are not only individual specific (such as the amount of resources -both economical and educational- available along the life course) but also tied to singular national contexts by the developing definitions of the available behavioural options and opportunities. Indeed, in the definition of the situation in which actors develop their strategies, the legal framework and the social normative pressure are also intervening components (through providing supports, incentives, persuasion strength, etc.) beside individuals varying set of resources¹.

What I argue is that the choice of *when*, but especially *how*, to enter a partnership is not independent from the national and cultural contexts in which individuals are embedded, as well as from the welfare systems for the ways in which they promote specific family forms by allocating citizens’ different amounts of responsibilities –and costs- to reproduction via ongoing policies. It can be

¹ As Boudon underlines discussing Weber’s paradigm of action: a social phenomenon (M) is a function of individual’s actions (*m*), which depend on the actor’s situation (S), which in turn is influenced by macro-social factors (M’). Or, in other terms, in order to explain a phenomenon (such as the form of partnership chosen: here cohabitation instead of a direct entry into marriage) it is necessary to specify all the terms of the relation between actors and their (varying through time and space) contexts of action ($M_i = MmSM'$). I aim at exploring specifically the contextually linked micro-level mechanisms producing the (macro phenomena) diffusion of cohabitation practice.

argued that ultimately specific national contexts and welfare models are more/less conducive to the spread of new (potentially more flexible and less binding) family forms such as cohabitation. My intent is thus to analyse the extent to which the institutional and normative contexts affect the rate and the form of the diffusion process of cohabitation and may lead to a path dependent development in each nation.

1.3 Theoretical relevance

There is a lack of theories aimed at explaining this pattern at the aggregate level departing from micro-level mechanisms (for a macro-level explanation of cohabitation diffusion process see Kiernan: 1993, Roussel: 1992, Prinz: 1995). Existing individual level theories focus on explaining the reasons behind the relative convenience of the choice to cohabit as opposed to marry (changes in the LM affecting men's ability to engage in long term commitment and increasing labour force participation, as well as educational expansion, affecting women's gain from marriage, see Becker: 1981, Oppenheimer: 1994), but they do not refer to cultural aspects or societal influences intervening in the definition of behavioural options available to individuals (especially across time) when decisions are taken.

In other terms they address only the first of the three preconditions that have to be simultaneously met to allow the development of behavioural innovations (Coale: 1973, Lesthaeghe and Neels: 2001): readiness (the potential advantages entailed in the innovative practice must outweigh the costs), willingness (depending on its compatibility with the cultural and normative framework) and ability (there must be availability of an option in terms of resources to implement it).

The third precondition is dealt with in previous longitudinal studies on the effects of economic resources in entering cohabitation, which point out at national specific effects, where entrance into unions is governed to a large extent by organisational rules and institutional structures in the educational and employment systems (Blossfeld: 1990, 1992, Blossfeld and Huinink: 1991; Billari 2001) as well as -it should be added- by the characteristics of housing markets.

This literature provides us with good insights, but these explanations are partial in ignoring the effects of actors' social embeddedness. They focus only on the set of reasons behind individuals' pursuing of their interests by preferring to enter the partnership through a cohabitation to a marriage under certain individual conditions. They do not consider however the effect of societal influence, by which contextual constrains and their perceptions can exercise pressures to limit or incentive specific actors' choices. In these theories there is an implicit assumption that all the range of options are available to individuals to the same extent across time and space. I would like to release this assumption by describing and modelling the mechanisms by which environmental influence enters individuals' decision processes, allowing for the incorporation of national-specific and time varying contextual factors in the study of the diffusion of cohabitation.

1.4 Proposed alternative theoretical solution

My explanation aims at adding a focus on the different meanings (and costs) that the choice to cohabit has (had) in different countries and has (had) through time within the same national-cultural

context². In this formulation of the diffusion process the individual's rate of adoption of cohabitation is conceived as a function, among individual-level time varying factors, of prior adoptions by other actors in the social system.

In this perspective two sets of factors affecting individual's choice are thus taken into account: individual (educational level and enrolment, employment status, religiosity, etc.) and contextual (age and cohort specific measures of the level of cohabitation practice in the society) specific. This approach aims at investigating with accuracy the mechanisms, and modelling their effects, through which the diffusion process occur, taking into account the complexity of the time related characteristics of the process.

Cohabitation is conceived in this respect as an innovative behavioural option for entering a partnership, at the time in which it emerged within a national context. Its degree of 'innovativeness' is than allowed to vary for different birth cohorts of individuals³ and along with their ageing process⁴, so as to capture the relative content of 'risk/uncertainty' attached to its adoption at each point in time for each social actor⁵.

1.5 Theoretical significance and policy implications

This innovative approach would allow to shade light on the mechanisms behind the changing set of constrains in individuals' choices for partnering, stressing the relevance of institutional contexts in framing individual agency.

Trying to disentangle the effects of the diffusion process from those of age, birth cohort, and other individual specific factors, this study would provide with a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms and factors affecting partnership behaviours for youngsters, as well as helping to account for cross-country variations.

This deeper level of analysis, highlighting micro-macro level mechanisms would also help to consider in a broader perspective the consequences of a more limited/extensive range of strategies in facing life course transitions. As a result, a wider comprehension of the Mediterranean cluster of countries and their low level fertility patterns could take place, and thus the space for public intervention more clearly assessed. In these countries, where a combination of institutional factors makes the entrance into the labour market (and thus the acquisition of resources) for the younger generations already more difficult, the initial stage of the parallel process of cohabitation diffusion might contribute to explain the postponement of the transition to a partnership, because of its resulting in an absence of a yet available, more flexible, alternative to marriage.

² And along with it witness the parallel Law development aimed at disciplining, and progressively legally framing, the status, entitlements (from partner/welfare) and obligations (to partner/children) attached to cohabiting unions.

³ Over historical time, in fact, each new birth cohort who enters into the phase of being ready for a partnership encounters and increasingly greater proportion of previous adopters from previous cohorts, and experiences cohabitation as a decreasingly deviant and more socially acceptable living arrangement right from the beginning, as well as along its life course.

⁴ In this perspective there is not only a continuous inflow of new generations entering the risk set, but there is also a continuous outflow of people since decisions to enter a partnership (being it through cohabitation or marriage) are taken at different points in time along individuals' life courses.

⁵ I limit my analysis to the first partnership formation, thus focussing on the transition to adulthood for youngsters, with the intent to clearly capture the 'innovative' content of the choice to cohabit as a free-will way of forming a partnership, without including post-marital cohabitation which could follow different dynamics and/or hide different mechanisms (e.g. religious constrains, welfare eligibility rules, tax benefits, and so forth).

2. Research design

2.1 Research design

Given the breadth and nature of the research question and of the phenomena investigated the research design is a comparative method for several countries, chosen for their differences along both the diffusion processes and the institutional contexts.

The project will explore marriage behaviours and model the diffusion process of cohabitation at the individual level by making use of event history analysis technique.

An effort will be made to assess who are, and what distinguishes, the for-runners and late-comers in adopting the cohabitation practice in each country. Particular attention will be addressed in describing country specificities, trends and policies which will be used for a theoretically informed interpretation of the results.

2.2 Sample and data

I plan to study 5 to 6 countries, very likely West and East Germany, Italy, France, Spain, The Netherlands (when data made available) and Sweden⁶, making use of the Fertility and Family Surveys data-set. Great Britain would be added when comparable data were found. The choice for these countries lies in the desire to cover the widest possible spectrum of European welfare regimes, as well as the range of different timing and speeds in the increased numbers of cohabitation in the last decades.

The period covered ranges between the late '60s and the early nineties, a time when the major changes in family formation through cohabitation took place in Europe (with the only exception of the Nordic Countries).

⁶ France: ca. 4800 respondents in age range 20-49 interviewed between Jan. and Apr. 1994.

Germany (East/West): ca. 10000 respondents in age range 20-39 interviewed in Jul. 1992.

Italy: ca. 6000 respondents in age range 20-49 interviewed between Nov. 1995 and Jan. 1996.

The Netherlands: ca. 8200 respondents in age range 18-42 interviewed between Feb. and Jun. 1993.

Spain: ca. 6000 respondents in age range 18-49 interviewed between Nov. 1994 and Nov. 1995

Sweden: ca. 5000 respondents in age range 23-43 interviewed between Jan. and Oct. 1995.