

The Diffusion of Cohabitation Among Young Women in Europe

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Abstract

In my doctoral project it is argued that, beside the role of institutional contexts, social influence is crucial to explain the differences in the rapid and uneven rise in cohabitation through Europe in the last decades. The social influence focussed here upon is linked to the changing level of ongoing practice in each country through time. Two contextual mechanisms that are likely to convey the diffusion of cohabitation are discussed. Their influence is tested through the use of exponential rate models with time varying covariates, with controls for known individual-level risk factors. Six countries are chosen for their differences along institutional contexts, timing and speed in cohabitation rise. National data from FFS¹ retrospective surveys are used. Preliminary results show that the diffusion process considerably affect the likelihood of cohabiting, which is mainly driven by peer-groups influences. No insights for intergenerational mechanisms are found. The core finding is that cohabitation is indeed ‘contagious’ and that the shape of this influence varies across countries reflecting their institutional contexts.

¹ Family and Fertility Surveys.

1. Diffusion process and longitudinal approach: the nature of the research question.

Over the last forty years non-marital cohabitation as a strategy to form a new family has gained in importance -though with different tempo and levels- all over Europe, becoming more and more an option for partnering to individuals in transition to adulthood. In the early 1960s, cohabitation was exceptional in most European countries (Blossfeld 1995) and was even rare in Sweden, a country where cohabitation has old roots (Trost 1979; Hoem 1995). Today, forty years later, cohabitation has not only fundamentally changed its social meaning (Manting 1996) but has become a commonplace in most European countries, particularly among the younger generation (Mills 2000). There are, however, also great differences in the extent and meaning of cohabitation among European countries (Prinz 1995; Kiernan 1999).

In Southern Europe, cohabitation is today still rare and practised only by a small group, typically people living in urban areas, or, in the case of Italy, living in the northern parts of the country (Prinz 1995; Pinelli and De Rose 1995). In many Central European countries like West Germany and the Netherlands cohabitation has become a kind of a socially accepted, short-term prelude to marriage and it is typically transformed into marriage when couples have a child (De Jong Gierveld and Liefbroer 1995; Liefbroer 1999; Mills 2000; Mills and Trovato 2001; Blossfeld et al. 1999; Blossfeld and Mills 2001). In other countries such as (the former socialist) East Germany, Austria, France, Great Britain, Finland or Norway, cohabitation has developed into an accepted alternative to marriage connected with a high rate of extramarital births (Huinink 1995a; Leridon and Toulemon 1995; Toulemon 1997). And finally, in Denmark and Sweden, cohabitation and marital unions seem to have normatively and legally converged to such a degree that for young couples the choice between marriage and cohabitation seems to be solely a matter of private taste, even when children are involved (Hoem 1995; Leth-Sorensen and Rohwer 1997; Duvander 2000).

Which can be said to be the reasons behind this pattern? How can these differences be explained? The purpose of my work is to study the diffusion of cohabitation across successive generations of young women; its shift from a rare and deviant form of partnership to a common and socially accepted union (Trost 1979) - and the concomitant transformation of marriage from a socially prescribed choice to a mere option. The research question is than: “Why did cohabitation emerge through Europe with different times and speeds?” or better “*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?*”

The choice to begin a partnership as a cohabitation is not seen here as a “un-contextual” decision, but rather as 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. They are also tied to singular national contexts by their developing definitions of the available (or ‘proper’) 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 beside individuals varying set of resources².

A large body of sociological and psycho-sociological research has already shown the relevance of actors’ social embeddedness in shaping individuals’ behaviours via the influence of other actors’ behaviours (Åberg forthcoming; Kahan 1997; Kuran 1995; Coleman 1990).

What I argue is that the choice of *when*, but especially *how*, to enter a partnership is neither independent from the social and cultural contexts in which individuals are embedded nor from the welfare systems, for the ways in which they promote specific family forms by allocating to citizens different amounts of responsibilities –and economic or moral costs- to reproduction. It can be argued that ultimately specific national contexts and welfare models are more/less conducive to the spread of new (potentially more flexible and less binding though still allowing to share and household and pull resources, but eventually also less protective) 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.

Since both *individual* and *contextual* characteristics change *along life-courses* and *across birth cohorts* there is need of an approach that can take into account both these time-related dimensions. It is through the incorporation of a contextual dimension in longitudinal models that a place can be drawn for allowing environmental and conditioning mechanisms along with the diffusion process³. In this framework women’s choice to cohabit will be predicted by knowing their changing position in the developing social context, combined with their time-

² As Boudon (1991?) 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 ($M_i = M_m S M'$). I specifically aim at exploring the contextually linked (micro-level) mechanisms producing the (macro phenomena) diffusion of cohabitation.

varying individual characteristics. It is a combination of these ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ elements that afford women the facility to act and strategically plan their lives, while being simultaneously enabled or constrained by their social context.

In the following sections the relevance of the research question will be assessed (1.1), some of the theories dealing with the phenomena will be discussed (1.2), and an integration in the light of the diffusion approach will be presented (1.3-1.5). The second part will deal with an empirical test of the developed hypotheses: a presentation of the elaborated model (2.1) and of the data-set (2.2), followed by a brief discussion of the preliminary results obtained and of the future (2.3).

1.1 Historical and political relevance

In this frame, investigating the process of emergence of cohabitation practice, its driving mechanisms and country differences, would offer a better understanding of the dynamic shifts during the phase of family formation over time, in a period of declining marriages, later family formation and declining fertility. 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 transition to adulthood, and it is going to spill over onto the likelihood(/timing) to engage in subsequent transitions such as giving birth to children.

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 individuals’ agency. It 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, by trying to disentangle the effect (and shapes) of the ongoing diffusion process from those of age, birth cohort, and of other individual specific factors.

This 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, in fact, a combination of institutional

³ for a discussion of individual level based diffusion models see Strang and Tuma 1993.

factors makes the entrance into the labour market (and thus the acquisition of resources) for the younger generations already more difficult (Bernardi and Nazio 2001; Simò Noguera and Castro Martin and Soro Bonmatì 2001). The parallel initial (or dampened) stage in the diffusion process of cohabitation could thus contribute to explain the postponement of the transition to a partnership coupled with a prolonged stay of youngsters in the parental household. Its reason being the resulting (institutionally hindered) absence of a more flexible, alternative to marriage whose relative low pay-off make unavailable.

1.2 Previous research findings

Existing theories on the rise of cohabiting unions focus on explaining the reasons behind the increased relative convenience of the choice to cohabit as opposed to marry at the individual level. Increasing educational expansion and female labour force participation reducing women's gain from marriage (Becker 1981); or rational reply to growing uncertainty due to changes in the labour market, which affected individual's ability to engage in long term commitment, and thus their convenience in postponing them (Oppenheimer 1994).

Aimed at testing these theories, previous longitudinal studies focussed on the effects of economic and educational resources in entering cohabitation. They pointed 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, Blossfeld and Huinink 1991) as well as -it should be added- by the characteristics of housing markets.

There is however still 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 1999, Prinz 1995). Furthermore only two of three preconditions that have to be simultaneously met to allow the development of behavioural innovations (Lesthaeghe and Neels 2001) have been thoroughly dealt with at present: *readiness* (the potential advantages entailed in the innovative practice must outweigh the costs), *ability* (there must be availability of an option in terms of resources to implement it) and *willingness* (depending on its compatibility with the cultural and normative framework).

This literature provides good insights, but their explanations focus primarily on the set of mechanisms and reasons behind individuals' pursuing of their interests by preferring a cohabitation to a marriage, as linked only to specific individual characteristics. They do not

consider the effect of individuals' embeddedness, where social influence can exercise pressures in limiting or supporting specific actors' choices and intervene in the definition of behavioural options available to individuals (especially across time) when decisions are taken. In the aforementioned theories there is an implicit *assumption that all the range of options are potentially available to all 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 influences may enter individuals' decision processes, allowing for the incorporation of national-specific and time varying theoretically informed contextual factors (cohabitation 'contagiousness') in the study of the diffusion of cohabitation.

1.3 Individual social action and macro level dynamics: the diffusion process.

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 context⁴. For doing this I must take into account and model the process of diffusion of cohabitation through time in each country⁵.

Diffusion is conceived here as an individual level process where previous adoption of a behaviour alters the probability of adoption for the remaining members of the population (Strang 1991). It is thus a learning process where a macro-phenomenon (the increasing spread of a new behaviour) is the result of individuals' actions at micro level (Åberg 2000; Cialdini and Trost 1998; Kahan 1997; Schelling 1978).

In a diffusion perspective a behaviour depends (also) on the way in which the same choices have been previously taken by other individuals in the same situation (Strang 1991, Coleman 1990, Granovetter 1985). In this frame decisions to cohabit interact with and reinforce each other. When cohabitation is widespread indeed little stigma, moral or reputational cost are attached to it. Social influence (the tendency to conform one's own conduct to that of other individuals⁶) acts in affecting individuals' conduct given actors' perceptions of each others' values, beliefs and behaviours. Such perceptions are often drawn by inference from other

⁴ And along with it the witnessed 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.

⁵ The diffusion process is thought to be nationally bounded given the common sharing of a language, cultural and political history, beyond the unique institutional frame.

⁶ Some of the explanations of social influence refer to (1) individual rationality of conforming to behaviour of other individuals (Coleman, 1990 pp. 197-240); (2) reputational benefits of conforming to social norms (Kuran:

individuals' enacted behaviours, which serve as references and examples. Since the individuals' assessment of value and 'costs' attached to cohabitation are endogenously related to their beliefs about attitudes and intentions of others, propensities to cohabit will reinforce each other (Kahan 1997).

When adoption is socially meaningful, it can be easily thought of individuals as making different choices cognitively available to each other, developing shared understandings, and exploring the consequences of innovative behaviours through each other's experience. Learning from the experience of others appears in this respect a sensible and even optimal strategy where means-ends relationships are not well understood, they defy calculation or behaviours are subject to social normative pressure. What I argue is that the social systems self-generate pressures toward change as an increased proportion of the members of the system adopt cohabitation and, along with this increasing adoption trend, it changes also the meaning attached to it. This happens when eventually a point in the diffusion of the new practice is reached at which cohabiting becomes institutionalised and regularised part of the adopters' ongoing operations. The norms of the system towards cohabitation will change over time, together with its increasing adoptions and, as the diffusion process proceeds, cohabitation is gradually incorporated into the life-stream of the social system (Rogers 1983).

It is, in fact, not unrealistic to think that a youngster faced with the decision to partner who refrains from cohabiting on moral grounds might be influenced by the proportion of cohabiters among those who he/she perceive 'similar' to him/her. Normative pressure against cohabitation is, in fact, likely to weaken the more are the individuals who enact its practice. A new potential cohabiter would therefore be likely to experience fewer moral or normative qualms if there was a great proportion of cohabiters in the social context than if there was a little (Kuran 1995).

But the diffusion of cohabitation among young women is a highly complex time-related process. A characteristic of cohabitation before entry (if ever) into marriage is that the time-span of potential adoption for each generation is highly concentrated on the period of transition from youth to adulthood.

[see Figure 1]

1995, pp. 24-37); (3) deep-rooted affinity between individuals that causes them to value conformity in its own (Jones: 1984).

Figure 1 presents a stylised picture of the complex dynamics involved in the diffusion of pre-marital cohabitation among young women. There is a continuous inflow of birth cohorts over time who are entering into the life stage “ready for partnership formation” and thus are becoming members of the risk set of potential adopters; and, at the same time, there is also a continuous outflow, because some young women adopt cohabitation or marry and therefore also leave the risk-set⁷. This means that, in the case of pre-marital cohabitation, potential adoption is typically confined to a specific window in the life course and the population of potential adopters is highly dynamic over time. These peculiarities of the adoption process have significant consequences for the mechanisms that drive the diffusion process of pre-marital cohabitation among young women over time.

1.4 Time related specificity of diffusion process of cohabitation: contextual mechanisms.

This approach aims at investigating with accuracy the mechanisms, and modelling their effects, through which the diffusion process occur, taking into account the specificity and complexity of the time related characteristics of the process. As anticipated, the individual’s rate of adoption of cohabitation is conceived as a function, among individual-level factors, of prior adoptions by other actors in the social system. The overall shape and speed of the macro level diffusion process of cohabitation is thought to be a resultant of the influences exercised by both individual-level risks factors (where institutional settings affect the decisional context) and by the social contexts (age and cohort specific measures of the level of cohabitation practice in the society) in which individual’s frame their actions.

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 individuals⁸ and along

⁷ Dotted lines describe the inflow to and outflow from the risk set given the variable ages at which these entries and exits take place.

⁸ Over historical time, in fact, each new birth cohort which enters into the phase of “being ready” for a partnership encounters an increasingly greater proportion of previous adopters from previous cohorts, and experiences cohabitation as a decreasingly deviant and more acceptable living arrangement right from the beginning.

with their ageing process⁹, so as to capture the relative content of ‘risk/uncertainty’ attached to its adoption at each point in time for each social actor¹⁰.

Two mechanisms related to social influence are distinguished as potentially driving the diffusion process:

1) **knowledge-awareness** (*pre-cohort adoption*)

By which every new birth cohort experiences an increasing proportion of ‘cohabiters’ among previous birth-cohorts, and thus a bigger incidence of the phenomenon. Young women will then experience cohabitation as less deviant (or stigmatised) and more socially accepted right from the beginning. Mass-media channels will increasingly disseminate knowledge-awareness on the growing popularity of cohabitation among older birth cohorts and enhance social acceptability of non-marital cohabitation. Strang and Meyer (1993) call the information that helps people to understand the new private living arrangement of non-marital cohabitation as ‘theorisation.’

This mechanisms is expected to have a comparatively small effect at the beginning of the process, when behavioural norms have to be violated and there is an high degree of uncertainty, which require reinforcing influences.

2) **direct social modelling** (*peer group adoption*)

By this mechanism attitudes towards cohabitation are confirmed through direct experiences made by *similar* others, who constitute concrete examples (vicarious trials). It is not necessarily operated through direct interpersonal contacts, but it rather relates to the perception of the behaviour *proper* to the occupants of a individual’s position. This mechanisms is more related to persuasion where peer behaviours are taken as a reference model: ‘*structural equivalence*’ (Burt 1987).

This mechanism is expected to exercise a bigger effect on the spread of cohabitation, especially in presence of conflict standards or behavioural models (Bandura 1977). Its strength is expected to grow in time as peer experiences cumulate.

⁹ An increasing acceptance goes also along the life course, as with historical time more and more people may be likely to engage in the practice. 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.

¹⁰ 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).

1.5 Hypotheses: socio-demographic factors and the influences of institutional contexts

Reflecting the different institutional contexts, there are for individuals different set of incentives and obstacles in the choice between marrying and cohabiting in each country. Past research has shown that in modern societies the readiness of young women to form marital or non-marital unions over the life course is influenced by institutional characteristics of the educational and employment systems (Blossfeld 1990; Corijn 2001a).

Several domains are distinguished in the literature where mechanisms influencing the relative convenience for one of the other choice to take place.

a) the normative context:

Where prevalent values act as a guide and standard, defining what is appropriate and *possible*. With regard to cohabitation, social norms can operate at different levels: Country, religious community and local systems.

Traditional familiar norms in Italy and Spain are thought to constitute a big inertial force in the process of diffusion cohabitation. In (ex-socialist) East Germany the political context did not favour social change. Religiosity should have a positive effect on entry into marriage and a negative effect on the diffusion of cohabitation in catholic countries (Italy and Spain) since it is incompatible with Roman Catholic values of marriage (Wu 2000), whereas no effect is expected in the secularised East Germany. With regard to local systems, we expect ecological effects of *city size* and *region* (Lesthaeghe and Neels 2001). Small and medium sized cities should be more traditional with regard to family values. Controls for these three dimensions are inserted in the empirical models.

b) educational expansion:

With educational expansion it has increased the duration of *educational participation* of young people. Since it involves a high degree of economic dependency is expected to have a strong negative effect on entrance into marriage, smaller into cohabitation. No effect is expected in East Germany where it was easier to combine study and family. More difficult to predict the net effect of educational attainment once educational participation is controlled for (cumulation of human capital), since are lacking controls for unemployment.

c) affordable housing (rental market):

Since buying a house involves a long-term binding commitment, in countries where there is a small renting market and a lack of public housing (Italy and Spain), the convenience of cohabitation as compared to marriage is expected to reduce. An incentive not to marry or to postpone was in East Germany since the middle 1970s a policy aimed at stimulating fertility, by which the socialist state increasingly allowed unmarried couples to get access to housing and generously supported young unmarried women with children (Huinink and Wagner 1995). In West Germany finding independent housing financed through parental support, own (part-time) work or with the help of subsidies of the welfare state seems not to have been a problem for adolescents and young adults (Kuijsten 1996).

d) (growing uncertainty in) labour markets:

Growing (economic) uncertainty increases efficiency and rationality of cohabitation (Oppenheimer 1988, 1994) since it is a more flexible solution that allows the postponement of long-term binding commitments in face of a prolonged search for optimal matching and cumulation of resources. This does not however entirely apply to south European Countries, where the welfare systems move the cost of unemployment risk to families (scarce protection), increasing youngsters' dependence from parental families. In East Germany this should not have been an influential before reunification took place (full employment).

e) women's employment and changes in gender roles:

Gender role specialisation implies that the small nuclear union is particularly vulnerable to the temporary (through unemployment, illness) or permanent (through separation, death) loss of a unique individual who provides an essential function – at home or in the labour market (Oppenheimer 1994). A traditional gender-specific division of work would thus entail a considerable loss in flexibility and women's employment can be viewed as a highly adaptive family strategy in a modern society, rather than as a threat to the union as a social institution (Becker 1981).

Previous research has shown that in West Germany it is probably not so much the form of union but the birth of a child that triggers a more traditional gender-specific division of work within households (Blossfeld and Drobnic 2001). A negative effect of women's labour force participation on the rate of entry into marriage and no effect on the adoption of informal cohabitation in West Germany are thus expected.

Given the importance of the male-breadwinner family model and a comparatively traditional division of work within the family in Italy and Spain, there might be a more substantial

relative advantage of cohabitation compared to formal marriage particularly for working women. A negative effect on marriage and a positive on cohabitation are thus expected here. In dual-earner societies, like the former East Germany, women's gainful employment was standard and the female partner's income was a significant determinant of the living standard and the 'lifestyle' of couples, therefore, women's labour force participation should have no effect on the rate of marital or non-marital unions.

These hypotheses will be tested in the empirical analyses, together with the mechanisms linked to the diffusion process.

2. **Research design: combining micro and macro in a comparative perspective**

2.1 Methodology: Event history models and diffusion

Given the breadth and nature of the research question and of the phenomena investigated the research design is a comparative case study for several countries, chosen for their differences along both the diffusion process (timing, development and stage) and different characteristics of their 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 models. These models are chosen given the key role of temporal ordering, the intrinsic nature of the behaviour, the presence of time-varying covariates and the right censoring of the process. As previously illustrated, the adoption of cohabitation (before entry - if ever - into marriage) is a very specific type of diffusion process (see Figure 1).

As discussed in paragraph 1.5, I assume two different mechanisms to be driving the diffusion of informal cohabitation in the population: knowledge-awareness and direct social modelling. At each point in time t , *knowledge-awareness* (P_c) is measured by the cumulative proportion of prior adopters from previous birth cohorts at each age, and *direct social modelling* (P_g) is measured as the cumulative proportion of prior adopters belonging to the women's own birth cohort at each age:

$$P_g = \frac{\sum_{i=c} \sum_{j<t} m_{ij}}{N_c} * 100 \qquad P_c = \frac{\sum_{i<c} \sum_{j<t} n_{ij}}{N_p(t)} * 100$$

Where c indicates the birth cohort; t is woman's age; m_{ij} is the number of prior adopters within the woman's own birth cohort at age t ; N_c is the total number of women in the woman's own birth cohort; n_{ij} is the number of prior adopters among older birth cohorts at age t ; and $N_p(t)$ is the number of women belonging to older birth cohorts at age t . In order to allow for the non-linearity in the relationships, I used a third degree polynomial. This specification was selected among various functional forms as the theoretically most satisfying and statistically best one (in terms of likelihood ratio tests, see Blossfeld, Rohwer: 2002, 98). The model to be applied results thus as follows:

$$r_R(t) = \exp(\alpha'x(t)) * \exp(\beta_1 P_g + \beta_2 P_g^2 + \beta_3 P_g^3) * \exp(\gamma_1 P_c + \gamma_2 P_c^2 + \gamma_3 P_c^3)$$

Where $r_R(t)$ is the instantaneous propensity that a woman moves from non-adoption to adoption at time t , and the $\alpha'x(t)$ term incorporates time-constant and time-dependent individuals' heterogeneity on the women's likelihood to adopt cohabitation. Here are maintained controls for the intrinsic propensity of women to enter a union as affected by her age and by organisational rules and institutional structures of the educational and employment systems. In particular, as suggested by the literature, I take into consideration women's changing age, their time-dependent enrolment in the educational system, the connected progressive upgrading of their educational attainment levels, and their changing employment participation.

This individual-level diffusion model does not require the assumption that diffusion occurs only through interpersonal contacts. Thus, it is not only direct conversation and immediate personal contacts to near peers that count but also the perception of the practice proper for people at the same age ('structural equivalence', see Burt: 1987). There is accordingly no assumption of a complete mixing of social members that would imply that there is a complete, pair-wise interaction between prior and potential adopters. Rather, a distinction between individuals is made on the basis of their age and birth cohorts in defining the diffusion covariates in the model. This model also does not make the assumption that there is a constant and permanent ceiling on the number of potential adopters in the social system. The number of potential adopters is indeed increasing over time because there is a continuous inflow of new birth cohorts of women entering into the risk set. In addition, there is no implicit assumption that the innovative behaviour does not change its meaning over the diffusion process. Instead,

I assume that the meaning and character of cohabitation is subject to change and that *knowledge-awareness* and *direct social modelling* might change their effects over time.

I am going to estimate an exponential competing risk model (with time constant and time dependent variables) for both women's marriage rate and women's rate of adoption of cohabitation since cohabitation and marriage constitute alternative choices in the process of family formation. Using the same covariates, I can thus compare the effects of these variables on the marriage rate and the rate of adoption of cohabitation.

I plan to make also an effort to assess who are, and what distinguishes, the for-runners and late-comers in adopting the cohabitation practice in each country. I will address particular attention in describing country specificity, trends and policies which will be used for a theoretically informed interpretation of the results.

2.2 Sample and data

I plan to study 6 countries: West Germany, East Germany, Italy, Spain, France, and Sweden, making use of the national Fertility and Family Surveys data-set.

After birth cohort selection, cleaning and consistency checks, the histories of the following number of women (with the reported number of events taking place) are analysed¹¹:

	Cohabit.	Marr.
Italy (1995, 4824 women, 20-49 years, 1947-76)	214	2072
East Germany (1992, 3012 women, 20-39 years, 1953-73)	868	1092
West Germany (1992, 2984 women, 20-39 years, 1953-73)	895	638
Spain (1994, 4021 women, 18-49 years, 1946-78)	257	1914
Sweden (1995, 3318 women, years 23-43, 1950/55/60/65/70)	2664	307
France (1994, 2944 women, 20-49 years 1945-74)	1524	1039

The choice for these countries lies in the desire to cover the widest possible spectrum of European welfare regimes¹², as well as the range of different timing and speeds in the increased numbers of cohabitation in the last decades.

¹¹ For Sweden and France are reported here the number of individuals and events taking place before the selection on the first event, the birth cohorts and the age range of interest.

¹² Comparable data for Great Britain were not found.

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 where it began a little earlier).

I have selected in each country a common sample of women born between 1954 and 1973 (in the Swedish case, where the diffusion process began earlier, the 1950 birth cohort may also be retained), whose educational, job (a complete record of the job histories is missing for France), fertility and partnership histories were observed from 15 up to 39 years of age¹³.

2.3 Provisional results (Conclusions)

As discussed, I am interested in two different aspects of the diffusion process: knowledge-awareness (measured as the cumulative experiences of older cohorts) and direct social modelling (measured as cumulative experiences of peers within the same birth cohort).

[See Figures 2 and 3]

Figure 2 describes the changes in *cumulative proportions of pre-cohort adoption* in five of the six¹⁴ countries in analysis across age for the birth cohorts 1954-73. In France, West and East Germany it is apparent that each successive birth cohort of women encounters a higher proportion of prior cohabitation practice right from the beginning of exposure at age 15. In other words, across birth cohorts there seems to be an increasing level of social acceptance of cohabitation for each younger birth cohort so that cohabitation can progressively be considered as a less deviant form of partnership. This trend continues to rise during the life course of each birth cohort of women as seen from the birth cohorts trajectories. However, compared to these countries, the diffusion of cohabitation develops differently in Italy and Spain. Although there is here also an increasing proportion of cohabitation practice, the differences between birth cohorts are not very marked and the increase of cumulative pre-cohort experience over the life course is very small. Thus, in Italy *cumulative pre-cohort adoption* reaches its maximum already at about 7%, in Spain at 11%, whereas in East

¹³ In my analyses the observation begins for each birth cohort of women at age 15 and ends with the event of entry into cohabitation, or for right-censored cases, with the date of entry into a marital union or the date of interview or age 39, whichever occurs first.

¹⁴ Given the sampling structure of the FFS for Sweden it has not been possible to compute these measures.

Germany it reaches it at 36%, in West Germany at 43% and in France at 64%. This description suggests that in Italy and Spain even for younger birth cohorts of women, the adoption of cohabitation is still an uncommon practice and thus remains a kind of deviant behaviour.

Figure 3 displays the *cumulative proportion of peer group adoption* for the six countries, measured as the proportion of prior adopters within each birth cohort. Starting from zero, cohabitation is introduced in each birth cohort by a few people who might serve as examples. It is then adopted at a rapidly accelerating rate with increasing age, which rises and then gradually slows down and finally stabilises at a specific level. The resulting distribution of cumulative adoptions over age can generally be described as taking the form of an S-shaped curve. There are, however, important differences in the shapes of the curves among birth cohorts and the overall levels reached by the youngest cohorts in the three countries. The maximum cumulative proportion of peer group adoption is reached in Sweden with 87%, followed by France with 78%, West Germany where is about 50%, East Germany with 40%, Spain lagging behind with 17% and Italy with about 10%.

What is interesting to notice are the steep of the slopes (pointing at an earlier vs. later partnership formation across Countries and birth cohorts) and the relative distances of the curves from each other (pointing at the tempo of the diffusion process). Again Figure 3 clearly indicates that the diffusion of cohabitation seems to be overall slower and somehow blocked in the south European countries.

Preliminary event history analysis were already conducted for West Germany, East Germany, Italy and Spain. As discussed, I present the preliminary results of a competing risks model for both women's entry into first marriage and two models for the transition to cohabitation (a symmetric model and an improved one by insertion of the illustrated covariates).

These analyses comprise controls at the individual level for: age, birth cohort, having completed the education (thus exited the educational system), changing educational attainments, religious affiliation, region (in the case of Italy), being employed and size of the locality where grown up [See tables 1 and 2].

Here below are synthesised the results achieved at the present stage:

Transition to marriage

	West Germany	East Germany	Italy	Spain
<i>Out of education</i>	++	x	++	++
<i>Being employed</i>	-	x	-	--
<i>Religiosity</i>	+	x	+	+
<i>Residence up to 15</i>	Big -	Big -	x	Big +
<i>Region</i>	n.a.	n.a.	x	n.a.
<i>Birth cohort</i>	-(since 1956)	-(since 1960)	-(since 1965)	-(since 1971)

Diffusion of cohabitation

	West Germany	East Germany	Italy	Spain
<i>Out of education</i>	+	x	++	++
<i>Being employed</i>	-	x	+	x
<i>Religiosity</i>	-	-	--	--
<i>Residence up to 15</i>	Middle +	x	Big +	x
<i>Region</i>	n.a.	n.a.	Centre – South --	n.a.
<i>Birth cohort</i>	+-	+	x	+
<i>Pre-cohort</i>	x	x	x	(x)
<i>Peer group</i>	See figure 4	See figure 4	See figure 4	See figure 4

- Cohabitation in Italy is restricted to population sub-groups: secularised women, who finished their studies, live in the North, work, and grew in big urban centres. Diffusion process seems blocked.
- In West Germany cohabitation is an ‘attractive’ alternative as compared to marriage (housing market, welfare)
- In East Germany comparatively young ages at marriage and cohabitation (higher predictability and security in life courses). Big incentives to cohabitation 1970s-1989, growing unemployment after.
- In Spain latest decline in marriage, recent and fast rise in cohabitation, although still very low (similarity with Italy but process passed the threshold).
- No autonomous cohort trend remains after introducing *diffusion* covariates.
- There seem not to be an intergenerational mechanism at play in the diffusion process, cohabitation rather driven by “peer” models.
- Diffusion process begins with groups of innovators (specific interest), it spills over to the entire population and accelerates after a threshold (30% EG, 40% WG, 15% SP)

Beyond the extension of these analyses to the remaining countries, further refinements are planned by the addition of several time-varying and time-constant variables. Specifically, I think to insert an indicator on the presence of a not miscarried pregnancy (after the third

month: Blossfeld et al 1999), a control for the state of “(economic) independence” from the family of origin (by an indicator of having already left the parental house: “single state”, particularly relevant for the Mediterranean countries) as well as –eventually- the father’s educational level (as a proxy of class of origin), and an indicator for having experienced a parental divorce (Clausen 1991; Corijn 2001b).

It is finally foreseen a joint model where all the countries will be pulled together.

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