

The Changing Meaning of Cohabitation: an Analysis of Selected European Countries

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Introduction

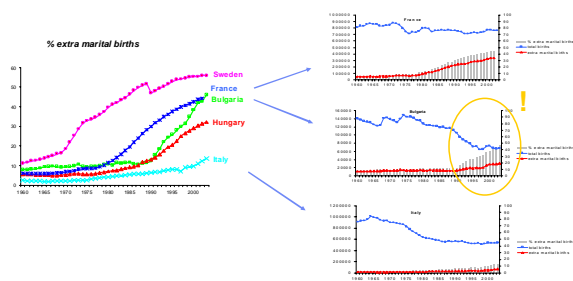
In most of the northern and western European countries cohabitation started to spread since the early 1970s and 1980s. Unlike those countries, the southern European ones were not touched by a massive diffusion of cohabitation. Most of the central and eastern European countries experienced the sharpest increase of the proportion of cohabiting couples in Europe after the 1990.

Aim of the study: We are especially interested in analyzing the sequence of events that links the start of a union, the birth of the first child and the (possibly) end of a union. With this approach we can evaluate what is the stage that the diffusion of cohabitation reached in western and, most interestingly, in eastern European countries. From the other side we can question the applicability to broader contexts of the scheme proposed by Prinz (1995) described in Schema 1.

SCHEMA 1 – STAGES OF THE DIFFUSION OF COHABITATION

- 1) No diffusion:** cohabitation is chosen by people who have no chances to marry
- 2) Start of diffusion:** the new behavior starts to spread between the "trend setters", it is still viewed as a deviant behavior
- 3) Cohabitation starts to spread in all the strata of the population,** but it has still a **different meaning than marriage**, above as far as children are concerned
- 4) Marriage and cohabitation have the same meaning:** fertility is not different between the two unions.

FIGURE 1 – PERCENTAGE OF EXTRA MARITAL BIRTHS, TOTAL NUMBER OF BIRTHS AND NUMBER OF BIRTHS OUTSIDE MARRIAGE



The use of the share of extra marital births as an indicator of the diffusion of cohabitation can lead to wrong conclusions. First, it ignores those cohabitations that do not involve a birth, and second, it can be affected by a drop in marital fertility. Figure 1 shows the different development of the total births, extramarital births (absolute numbers) and the share of extra marital births in France, Bulgaria and Italy. While in France the number of extramarital births have kept increasing in the last two decades even with a constant total number of births, in Bulgaria the sharp increase in the share of extra marital births seems more an artifact being caused by a relatively stable number of extra marital births in presence of a sudden decrease in the total number of births. Nonetheless, it is not possible to ignore that in Bulgaria the number of extramarital births kept slightly increasing in the last years.

Data

"Gender and Generations" Surveys:
- Bulgaria, 2005 (12886 respondents, age 18-79)
- Italy, 2003 (49541 respondents, irrespective of age)

"Family and Fertility" Surveys:
- France, 1994 (5000 respondents, age 20-49)

We select only women, and restrict to their first union.

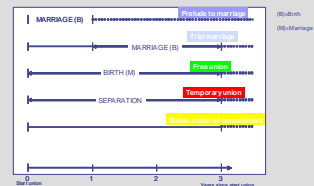


A comparison of methods: a descriptive schema vs. a sequence analysis approach

We analyze the sequence of events happening month by month in the first 3 years since the start of the informal union, and in particular we focus on the celebration of the marriage (if any), the arrival of the first child (if any) and the separation from the first partner (if any). We compare the results between different generations and summarize the sequence of events obtained with two different methods:

A) Descriptive schema

Following the proposal of Villeneuve-Gokalp (1991) we distinguish between five different profiles of cohabitation, according to what event (marriage, birth of a child or separation) happens, and how it is related to the others:



B) Sequence analysis

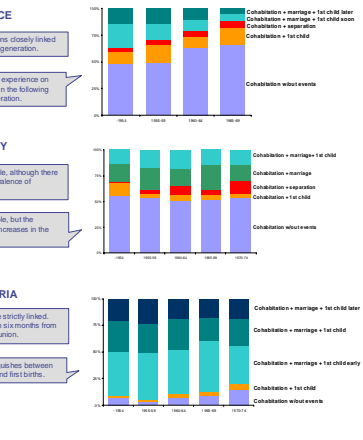
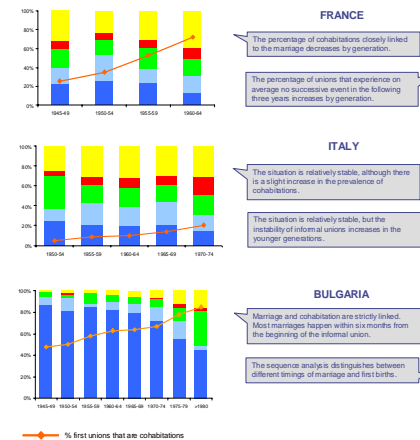
The sequence analysis, originally proposed by Abbott (1995) allows us to define group of people according to the duration of the time that separate two or more events, and to the order with which the events are experienced. It compares all the sequences observed in the data and compute a measure of dissimilarity based on the number of basic operations (insertion, deletion or substitution of an item) that are necessary to transform one sequence of states in the other (optimal matching).

It is then possible to group similar sequences by means of cluster analysis techniques (hierarchical cluster – Ward linkage).

The software used for the sequence analysis is Stata 9.1, that recently included an advanced tool for performing the optimal matching algorithm and for visual analysis of sequences (Brzinsky-Fay C. et al., 2006).

Results

FIGURE 2 – TYPE OF COHABITATIONS BY COUNTRY AND GENERATION



Conclusions

A changing meaning? A dynamic change in the behavior of the generations is visible only for France, where cohabitation started to spread gradually long time ago. For Italy and Bulgaria we notice a substantial stability of the behavior between generations. However, the two countries are characterized by different stages in the process of diffusion of cohabitation.

Differences between methods: The purely descriptive approach forces the data in guidelines that are strongly influenced by the researcher. On the other side, the interpretation of the results and of the meaning of the groups is straightforward. The sequence analysis produces groupings that are suggested by the data. However, it can be difficult to assess the meaning of the belonging to a particular group. The researcher has some freedom in the choice of the optimal matching parameters, the clustering methods and the number of groups to consider.

Future steps: It is still not clear if the cohabitations start to diffuse from the upper or the lower social status strata of the population, and how much this depends on the different institutional, social and economic context of the countries. In a successive step we plan to include in the analysis the characteristics of the respondent (education level, opinion about cohabitation, family background) that are likely to influence the belonging to a particular group rather than another. We expect that the results will be different across generations and countries.

References

Selected references:
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- Brzinsky-Fay C. et al. (2006) Sequence analysis with Stata, The Stata Journal, vol. 6, n. 4: 435-460.
- Prinz C. (1995), Cohabiting, Married or Single, Avebury, England.
- Villeneuve-Gokalp C. (1991), From marriage to informal union: recent changes in the behaviour of French couples, Population, An English Selection, Vol. 3, 81-111.

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