

Meanings and attitudes attached to cohabitation in Poland.

Qualitative analyses of the slow diffusion of cohabitation among the young generation

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Abstract

In many European countries, cohabitation has become an increasingly attractive option for the young generation over the last decades. In Poland, by contrast, consensual unions are very rare and young people are a minority in the small group of cohabitants. At the same time, according to surveys young Poles evaluate this living arrangement more favorably than their older counterparts. To solve the puzzle, I investigate the meaning and attitudes young Poles attach to consensual unions. I employ a qualitative methodology and analyze interviews with 48 individuals at the early stages of the family career. The results show that the way in which informal unions are evaluated strongly depends on how they are defined. Cohabitation as a testing period or as a natural stage in the family development is evaluated rather positively, although respondents are not unanimous. When it is considered as an alternative to marriage, the interviewees accept it, but it is clear that they do not desire this choice for themselves. The study shows also, that commitment is the core concept underlying meanings of cohabitation and its evaluation. A deeply internalized value of commitment perpetuates the importance of marriage in Poland.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, consensual unions have started to become an increasingly attractive option for young people in many European countries. Before that time, marriage was universal and took place at a relatively young age, and cohabitation was limited to marginal (mostly deviant or avant-garde) parts of society. This situation has started to change, however. More and more frequently, people enter cohabitation at early ages and increasingly they remain unmarried for the rest of their lives.

The spread of non-marital relationships has occurred at a different pace across Europe (Carmichael, 1995; Kiernan, 2000, 2002; Nazio & Blossfeld, 2003). In the Nordic countries, like Sweden and Denmark, consensual unions are as common as formal marriages. In the Mediterranean region (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain), by contrast, the level of cohabitation is extremely low and there is still no agreement among researchers whether this part of Europe will follow the Nordic example or not (e.g., see Rosina, 2004; Rosina, Fraboni, 2004).

Similar doubts have been expressed for Poland, a country that records one of the lowest levels of cohabitation in Europe. According to the National Census, informal marriages accounted for 2.2% of all marriages in 2002; this compares to 1.7% in 1995 and 1.3% in 1988 (Slany, 2002). The increase from 1988 to 2002 is noticeable, but not impressive. For comparison, in Sweden the share of informal unions climbed from 1% in 1960 to 12% in 1974 over the same length of time at the early stage of cohabitation diffusion (Kwak, 2005). Up to now, the level of cohabitation in Poland has been increasing very slowly.

The Polish case is appealing. Paraphrasing Caldwell (1982), we will never understand the onset of *cohabitation increase* until we understand the nature of stable *low cohabitation* societies. This paper is a response to this objective. I investigate the meanings attached to and the attitudes towards consensual unions among young Poles.

I enrich scarce quantitative data on the cohabitation in Poland with the results of my qualitative research for a better comprehension of the virtual lack of this relationship model in Polish society.

2. Cohabitation in Poland – what do we know?

A mere 1.3% of the Polish population aged 15 or above cohabited in 2002. This group differs from the rest of the population in terms of their socio-economic characteristics.

Cohabitation in Poland seems to be an urban phenomenon – 75% of cohabiting couples live in cities (CSO, 2003). According to Slany (2002), the same distribution was reported in the Micro Census in 1995. Half of the individuals living in informal unions are 40 years of age or older and only 12% of them are younger than 25 (CSO, 2003). In 1995, the share was 55% and 10% respectively (Slany, 2002). This form of relationship is rarely a choice for a first union. Only 35% of the cohabiting couples are formed by never married partners (CSO, 2003). The majority of them consist of at least one partner who has been divorced, separated, or widowed. In most cases, the cohabiting couples also are characterized by a low level of education and an adverse economic situation (Slany, 2002).

Note that slightly more than half of these couples (57% in 1995 and 56% in 2002) have children. While Poland is a Catholic country (90% of the population declare themselves Catholics; CSO, 2003) with still a relatively low level of extramarital births (16% of all births in 2004), this also adds up to a negative image of cohabitants.

Nevertheless, when we analyze the attitudes towards consensual unions expressed by the respondents in the surveys, two main features are noticeable. Firstly, the approval for this kind of living arrangement has been growing with time. Secondly, it is higher among the younger part of the Polish population.

The questionnaire entitled “Family and Changing Gender Roles” was distributed in Poland in 1994 and 2002 as part of the International Social Survey Program. Among other things, the respondents were faced with the following statements concerning cohabitation, “It is good when people who intend to get marry live together for some time beforehand” and “A couple can cohabit even if they do not intend to get married”. Figure 1 below presents approval of the two statements in 1994 and 2002. An increase of 8% was recorded for both of them.

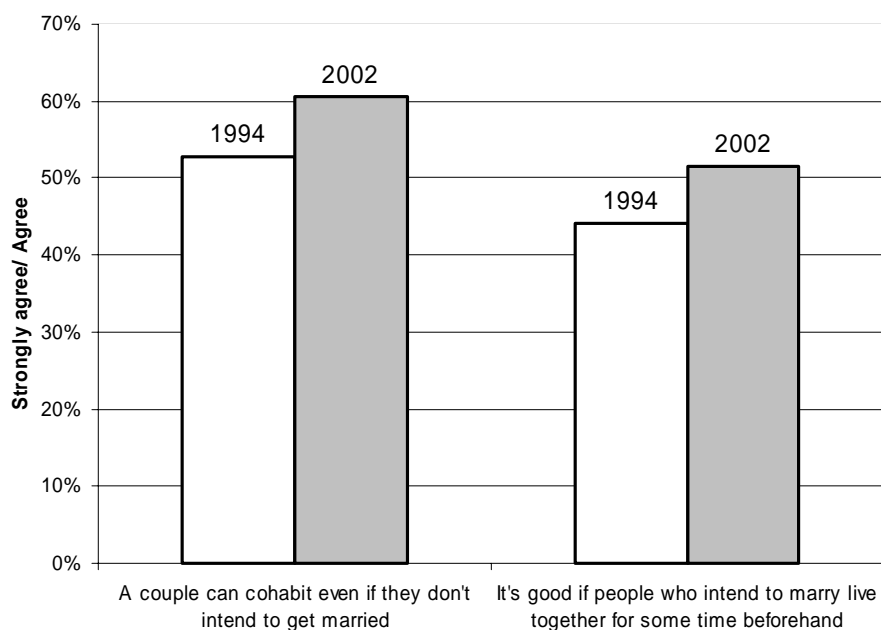


Figure 1: Approval towards cohabitation: 1994 and 2002. Source: ISSP 1994, 2002.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the distribution of the answers to the above questions in 2002 by respondents' age.

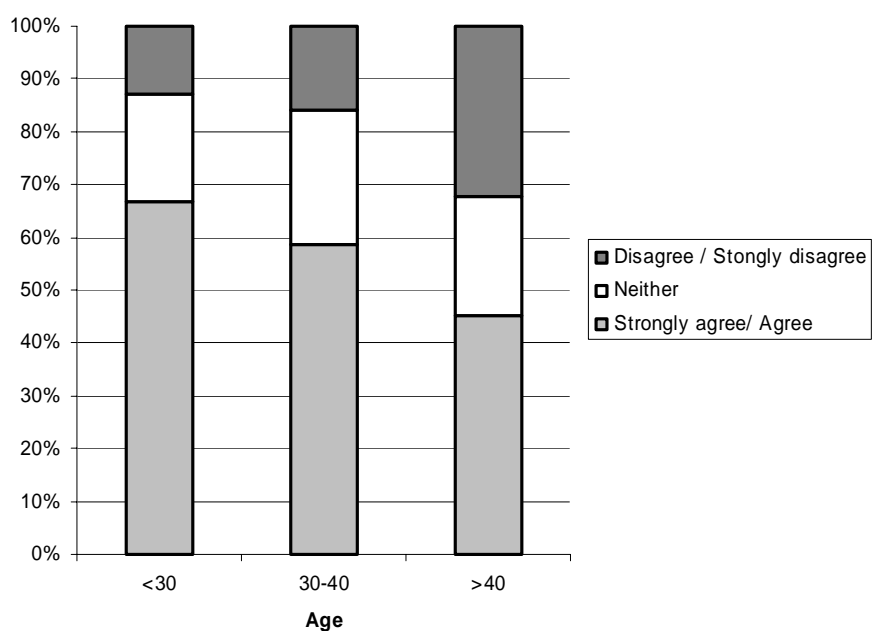


Figure 2: "It's good when people who intend to marry live together for some time beforehand": distribution of answers by respondents' age group. Source: ISSP 2002.

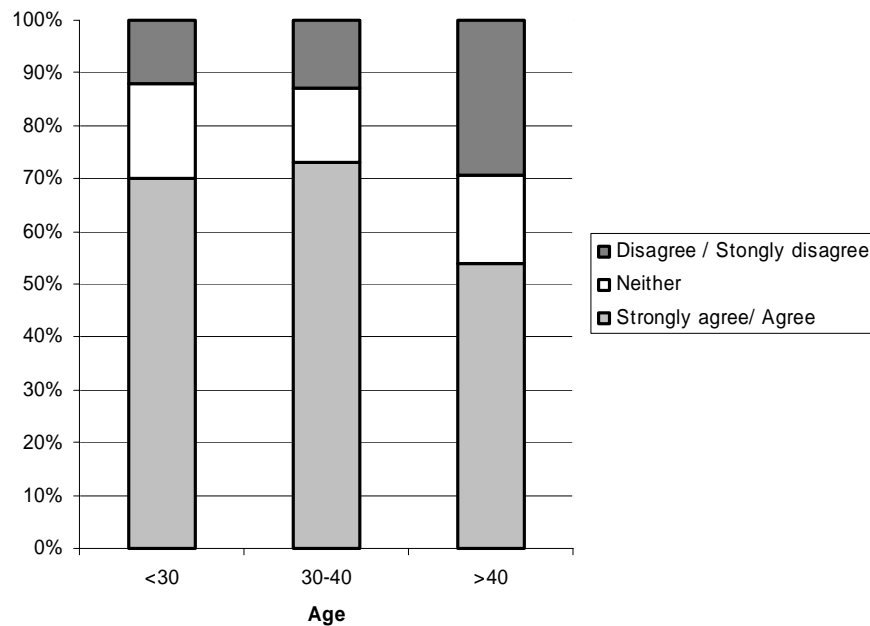


Figure 3: “A couple can cohabit even if they don't intend to get married”, distribution of answers by respondents' age group. Source: ISSP 2002.

Research carried out by Kwak (2005) also shows that young Poles are more liberal in their evaluation of cohabitation, compared to the older generation. In 1999-2000, she conducted a survey that included several items concerning attitudes towards cohabitation, such as, “Informal unions should exist”, “I approve consensual unions”, “I would like to live in informal union”, or “I would approve an informal union of my child”. Consistently, respondents younger than 40 agreed with these statements more frequently than those aged 40 or over.

Cohabitation in Poland paints an ambiguous picture. On the one hand, we see that from the Micro Census in 1995 to the Census in 2002 the number and the main characteristics of couples living in consensual unions did not change substantially. On the other hand, attitudes seem to have changed: The share of young people who approve of non-marital living together is growing. Still, the group that approves cohabitation most strongly stands for a minority among those who cohabit.

This may indicate that the younger and older generations of Poles attach different meanings to this type of living arrangement. Whereas for the older people it is mostly associated with deviant behavior, the younger generation increasingly sees it as an attractive option. These are, however, just speculations. Survey data do not allow us to investigate the definitions and meanings that respondents associate with a phenomenon they evaluate. Therefore, I apply a qualitative approach in order to

study the meanings of and attitudes towards cohabitation in the part of the Polish population that seems to be most puzzling, namely among the young people.

The aim of the study is twofold. Firstly, a qualitative methodology is applied as this can help us to interpret survey results (Caldwell, 1985; Knodel, 1997). This way, we will be able to understand better how cohabitation is perceived and why the positive attitudes expressed by the young people in the surveys do not result in any meaningful changes in their behaviors. This will improve our comprehension of “the stable low cohabitation society context”.

Secondly, the meanings and attitudes connected to cohabitation are important factors in its diffusion process. Understanding them allows for more accurate predictions of future developments in the trends related to this type of union. The theoretical considerations on how meanings and attitudes are interrelated with the cohabitation diffusion are presented in the following section.

3. Cohabitation diffusion – theoretical considerations

Cohabitation can be defined as “an intimate sexual union between two unmarried partners who share the same living quarter for a sustained period of time” (Bacharch, Hindin, Thomson, 2000). There are, however, several kinds of cohabitation. The kind that prevails in a society depends on the stage of cohabitation diffusion, among other things.

Various types of cohabitation can be defined in terms of its duration (Martin, Thery, 2001) or referring to the moment at which it takes place in the life course (Haskey, 2001). They can also be described in terms of the roles and meanings they have, e.g., they can be perceived as a phase before marriage or as an alternative way of living (Kwak, 2005; Villeneuve-Gokalp, 1991).

Considering the various meanings of cohabitation, researchers distinguish four stages of cohabitation diffusion (Prinz, 1995; Kiernan, 2002):

1. cohabitation is a deviant or avant-garde behavior, performed by small, selected groups;
2. cohabitation is treated as a testing period and precedes marriage;
3. cohabitation is perceived as an acceptable alternative to marriage;
4. cohabitation and marriage become indistinguishable.

The threshold for the more rapid cohabitation spread lies between the first and second stage. This is the moment at which consensual unions cease being deviant behavior, performed by a marginal part of the population. Cohabitation starts to gain a new meaning and becomes more popular, especially among the young generation, in the form of a “trial marriage”. Kiernan (2002) terms this new phenomenon the ‘*nubile*’ cohabitation.

As mentioned above, in Poland the first stage of the diffusion process fits best the picture of consensual unions. However, it seems that the meanings attached to cohabitation are different for the younger part of the population. Does this indicate that Poland enters the second stage of the diffusion process?

As cohabitation diffuses, a change in its meanings is accompanied by a change in the attitudes towards it. The spread of any innovative behavior in a society is linked to the diffusion of favorable attitudes towards this behavior (Rogers, 1995). In fact, the proponents of the Second Demographic Transition model suggest that the ideational shift in and the appraisal of new attitudes are the forcing powers *inter alia* behind the cohabitation increase (van de Kaa, 1987).

The ideational shift is connected with a growing need for self-realization and independence, higher individualism (self-orientation), and the secularization and liberalization of norms (Lesthaeghe, 1983, 1991; Lesthaeghe, Surkyn, 1988; Van de Kaa, 1987). If we consider, following Kravdal (1999), that the decision to enter any union is made based on four types of arguments, the ideational change influences all of them. For instance:

- When one considers *quality-of-relationship arguments*, the growing need for self-realization may raise individual expectations. Thus, the importance of the testing role of cohabitation increases.
- As far as *differences-in-quality-owing-to-formal-status* are concerned, higher individualism and the need for independence reduce the attractiveness of marital commitment. Cohabitation becomes attractive because it links the advantages of being single and with being at the same time in a relationship.
- *The wedding-burden* is strongly impacted in two ways. On the one hand secularization can diminish the need for a big and costly wedding party. On the other hand, it can weaken the importance of the wedding in general.
- *Direct-normative-pressure* is influenced profoundly, too. The ideational change implies the liberalization of norms and as a result the pressure eases.

Based on the above considerations, the attitudes are good predictors for cohabitation diffusion. If we know when an ideational shift takes place, then we can foresee when this type of living arrangement will be gaining more and more significance. This is an inevitable consequence (van de Kaa, 2001).

From this perspective, investigating the meanings of and attitudes towards informal unions enables us, first, to locate Poland in the cohabitation diffusion process more precisely. Second, it allows for more reliable predictions to be made about its future development. The question on the future of cohabitation spread in Poland frames the second aim of my study, besides the one to improve the understanding of the current status of this living arrangement.

4. Method and sample

The objectives of my research can be achieved by applying a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods allow for the comprehension of processes leading to an observed event, its meaning and context (Maxwell, 1996). This approach is especially useful for exploring multidimensional, complex phenomena, which are still not well understood. The need for a qualitative approach in research on cohabitation has been acknowledged (Carmichael, 1995) also in the Polish context (Slany, 2002).

The qualitative research label covers a wide range of methods. and for the purposes of this study I conducted semi-structured interviews.

A guideline of a semi-structured interview covers several topic areas (Flick, 2002), each of which is introduced by a wide, narrative question followed by some in-depth, detailed ones. An area of each question is initially defined by the theoretical background and previous research; however, the questions are formulated in a general, narrative form. This allows an interviewer to remain open to the respondent's story.

The interview guideline for my research consists of six general topics, covering (1) the biography and life situation of the respondent; (2) the history and status of the relationship; (3) the history of the fertility desires and intentions; (4) the experiences of or value-orientations connected to being a parent; (5) the impact of political and economical transformation on family and fertility plans; (6) future plans and fears. The second section is of main interest for the purpose of the current analyses. It covers questions about the respondent's attitudes towards cohabitation as

well as his or her experiences with and intentions concerning it. This part provides most data, however all passages referring to the topic under investigation are analyzed, no matter when they appear in the course of the interview.

I conducted 48 interviews with young people – mostly couples – at the subsequent stages of their family careers, namely:

- singles or partners living apart together (LAT relationship, still dating), ages 20-28: 11 interviews (1 single, 4 LAT couples, 2 females in LAT relationships);
- partners living together, childless, female partner's age 22-30: in cohabitation – 7 interviews (3 couples and 1 female cohabiting), married – 16 interviews (8 couples);
- partners living together, 1 child, female partner's age 26-30: in cohabitation – 4 interviews (2 couples), married – 10 interviews (5 couples).

Because the aim of the study is to investigate the innovative, *nubile* form of cohabitation, the sample is limited to the group of people most liable to adopt modern attitudes and behaviors. In particular, I interviewed people living in Warsaw, who are exposed to the modern and cosmopolitan climate of a capital city. The respondents are also educated better than the overall population, as only two educational subgroups were defined: up to high school exams (mostly secondary education) or higher (studying, Bachelor's or Master Degree). The above characteristics are typical for "early knowers of innovations" (Rogers, 1995, pp. 166-7), who are a starting point for the diffusion of any new attitudes and behaviors. The detailed structure of the sample is presented in Appendix 1.

5. Results

Cohabitation spreads when people perceive its advantages as surpassing its disadvantages and when they evaluate it as an attractive option among other possible behaviors (Rogers, 1995). Thus, a full understanding of the meanings of cohabitation is not possible, unless one considers it together with other available forms of relationship – especially marriage, which is still universal in Poland. However, I present the meanings and attitudes connected to living in wedlock only to a limited scope, i.e. I discuss the aspects of marriage that are most strongly contrasted with consensual unions.

During interview, the respondents talk about their experiences, observations, and opinions connected to cohabitation and marriage. They present some images of these types of unions. One of the roles the researcher is facing is to define and categorize them. By constant comparisons within and between cases, and noting patterns and regularities, the researcher can identify and code (label) the main themes and concepts in the given data (Charmaz, 2000). “Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles, Huberman, 1994, p. 56). The next step is to recreate the network of concepts and recognize the relations between them (Flick, 2002). Figure 4 depicts the network of concepts related to cohabitation and marriage as I reconstructed it from the interviews in the study. In the following sections I will describe the elements of the network in detail.

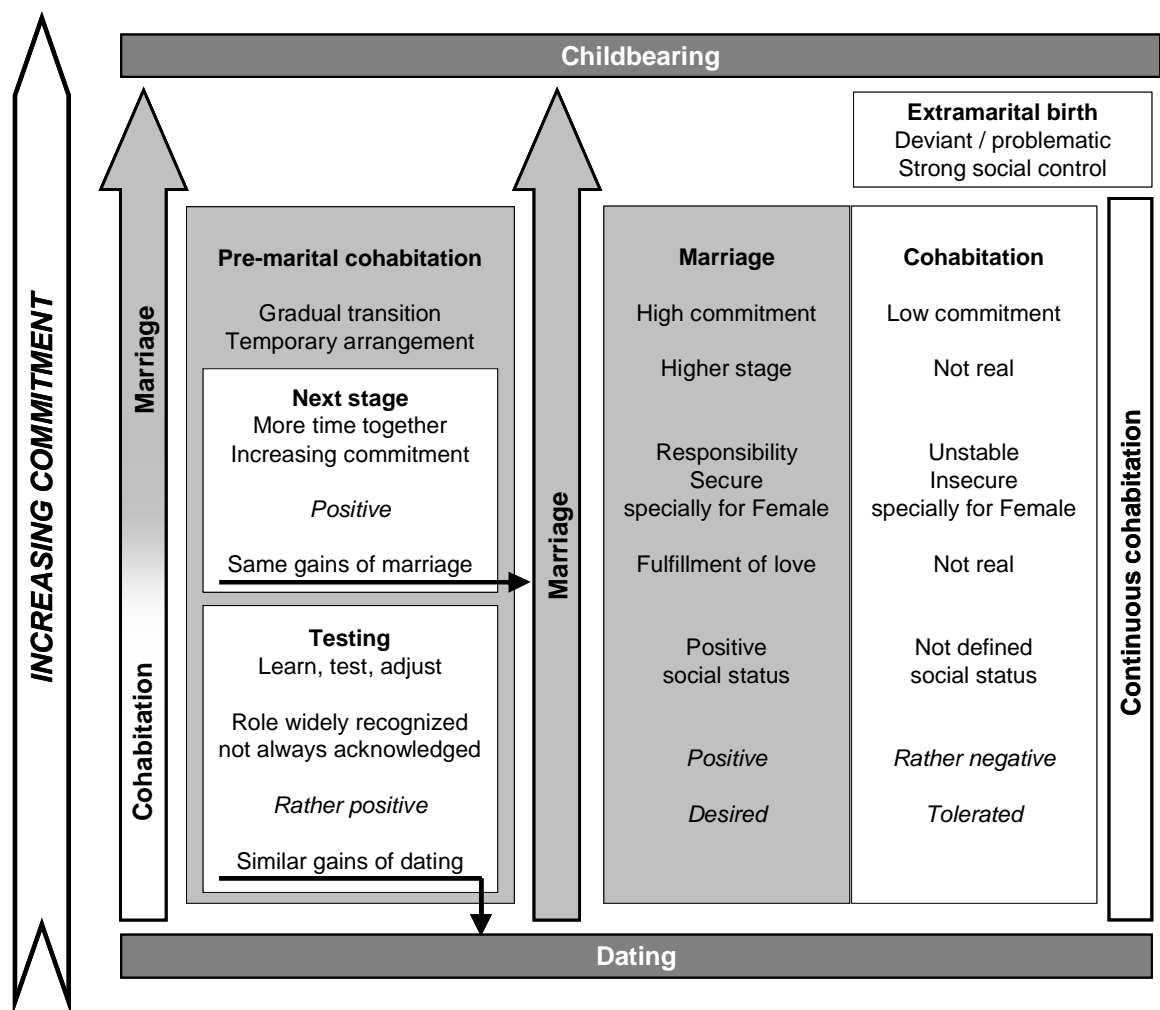


Figure 4: Network of concepts related to cohabitation and marriage. Three paths of relationship development: premarital cohabitation – marriage; direct marriage, continuous cohabitation – meanings and evaluation of concepts.

5.1.The meanings of cohabitation

Two main meanings of cohabitation are perceived by the respondents: It is seen as a trial period or as a next step in the relationship development.

Testing

Cohabitation gives partners the opportunity to learn, test, check, and possibly adjust to each other before the decision to marry is made. Cohabitation is the stage of relationship at which partners “*learn about their advantages and disadvantages*”. It is the time at which “*you can get to know each other largely and avoid some conflicts later on*”. The “avoiding later on” is possible because during this period people adjust to each other, they “*learn how to treat each other and other person’s habits*”. But most frequently, “avoiding conflicts” means separation. As one of the respondents says “*Only if you live together, you can get to know this person truly, and see, whether he or she is the right one for the next stage of your life. Or for the rest of your life*”.

The respondents differ in how strongly they stress the testing role of cohabitation. On the one end of the continuum we can place people who strongly emphasize that “*you do not really know the other person until you live together for some time*”. The next group is defined by those who acknowledge the trial role of living together prior to wedding, but they believe this is not the only way to test and adjust. In their opinion, people get to know each other well already while dating, they do so by spending a lot of time together, talking, and being honest to each other. Thus, living together is perceived to be very similar to living apart and dating. Consensual union is treated as an option “*for those couples that don’t see each other very often*”. The third group and the other extreme of the continuum is formed by the respondents who for various reasons deny the probing role of premarital cohabitation. For instance, they claim that “*people get to know each other during their whole life*” or that only “*marriage is a real test itself*”.

Next step in the relationship

The second meaning of cohabitation is connected to the union formation process. Some respondents perceive the act of moving in together as entering the next level of the relationship. They present it as “*the natural consequence of two people*

being together". They see it as a normal way of relationship development, "*first staying over night, spending more time together, doing some everyday things together more and more often*" until the moment is reached at which it becomes "*difficult to part from each other*" and the couple moves in together for good.

Treating cohabitation as the next stage in the relationship development is also reflected in the process, in which the decision for this living arrangement is made. Or rather, I should say "is not made" because for most of the couples the transition to cohabitation is a long and gradual process. Two quotes from the interviews illustrate this best,

"He was staying at my place for some time, sometimes it was all mixed up and he was staying for so long that I didn't really know whether he was living in with me or not"

"He was coming, then he stayed, then he was going back to his [parental] home once a week, to get some things. And then I woke up and I had more of his things in my closet than mine. And so it happened"

This long-lasting transition period is a prevailing model among the interviewees that ever experienced cohabitation. I noticed also among the couples still living apart at the moment of the interview that this process is ongoing. Some of the respondents even consider themselves cohabiting, although they spend only a few days during the week in the apartment and one of the partners officially lives with his or her family of origin.

The decision to move in together takes the form of "a big step", mostly for some external reasons, e.g., it arises from an opportunity to cheaply rent or buy a flat, a decision to work abroad together for some time, a necessity to leave one's parental home or it arises from a pregnancy.

The notion of cohabitation as a trial period or as a natural step in the relationship development varies among the respondents. For some of them, cohabitation means mostly testing. The others emphasize the aspect of relationship development and argue against the testing role, "*We didn't treat this as any kind of test; we simply very strongly wanted to [be together]*". Yet commonly, the experience of consensual union is a mixture of both: getting closer and probing each other.

However, no matter how cohabitation is treated, it is **always** perceived as a temporary arrangement and a step towards marriage. Each relationship concludes in

wedlock. *“When we decided to be together, we simply knew, somehow subconsciously, that we will get married eventually”* says one of the respondents.

5.2. Cohabitation vs. marriage

Comparing cohabitation and marriage, we can investigate if it is plausible for these living arrangements to be perceived as equal alternatives to some extent. To my respondents, the situation of living together in or out of wedlock differs in many aspects. The level of stability and commitment is the factor that contrasts these forms of union most strongly.

Cohabitation is perceived as something unstable and insecure. This is the stage at which people are likely to break up *“because they have an open gate and they can walk out at any time”*. They have *“no commitments and can separate easily”* and this kind of union *“falls apart faster”* compared to marriage. As one of the respondents explains, *“This relationship, which is not sealed with this paper, is not stable. Because one of the parents could get the impression that he or she is free and not a member of the family. And if any problems arise, it would be easier to blow the marriage out from the inside.”*

On the other end, marriage is perceived as *“commitment”*, *“obligation”* and as *“having new, shared responsibilities”*. It is *“a final ring to hold everything together”*.

The respondents elaborate on these aspects frequently. The following quotes are representative of the perceived commitment in marriage, in contrast to the quotes on cohabitation,

“Marriage is cementing [the relationship] additionally, it is as simple as that. This stupid paper is difficult to break. I don’t know. These are my impressions, my feelings. It keeps me in a bit.”

“Before marriage there is this feeling that it is possible to turn back, to leave, move out. And in marriage, if there’s something wrong, then one has to fix it and care a lot.”

Both male and female interviewees recognize that this issue is more important for women. For men, *“generally, statistically it is of lower significance”*. For women, getting married means *“security”* and it is a way in which a man can *“make her feel more certain, make her know that [he] supports her and loves her”*.

The binding role of marriage is connected to the issue of marital vows, made *“in front of people, in front of God, in Church”*. That brings in another difference

between the living arrangements discussed. The Catholic Church regards heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate kind of union. Cohabitation is not approved because it implies extramarital sex, which is considered a sin.

Most of my respondents declare to be Catholics and emphasize the importance of church wedding and marital vows. At the same time, all of them have experienced premarital sex and only in two cases did this fact result in any kind of moral dilemmas when considering cohabitation. A strong statement like, *“I felt dirty”* is found only in one interview. In most cases, this issue is not even mentioned.

It seems that the interviewees decide in favor of a Church wedding for reasons other than religiosity. In fact, few consider themselves religious. Firstly, they want to enter the marital bond for reasons of having a traditional setting. One of the female respondents says, *“I’m a very romantic person and I always knew that I wanted to have this setting, this white dress, this vow. It’s perhaps the only party in the whole life when you have your closest family and friends together (...) the most beautiful day in my life”*. Some respondents admit explicitly that *“we had the Church wedding purely and simply because this setting is really beautiful”*.

For our second point we come back to the issue of commitment. One of the respondents says, *“In my opinion, Church marriage is more binding than the state one. I don’t know why, but I think that’s the way it is. The state marriage... I can go, pay for the divorce and I’m free and that’s it. But there is no divorce in Church. And that’s why it is more binding”*. The Church wedding is held by my respondents to be a beautiful ritual in which they are tied securely to each other. From this perspective, the key aspect that differentiates marriage and cohabitation is, in fact, again: commitment.

Another meaningful distinction between formal and informal unions is made by the way in which they are perceived in society. Note that the Polish language has no proper expression to describe people living in informal union. The word “partner” seems strange and people living in consensual unions are frequently called “friends” or even just “acquaintances”. Their status in society does not differ meaningfully from the one they had when they were dating, without sharing a household. The respondents mention frequently that marriage gives them the right to *“call each other husband and wife”* and that it *“sanctions their relationship in front of the family.”*

The different perception of cohabitation and marriage is reflected also by the system of social norms and directives. Although social pressure for relationship legalization does not seem to be very powerful, I recorded cases when cohabitation was very difficult because of parents' disapproval or when a partner "*moved out a few times, because [he] couldn't stand the pressure*" of the family. However, these are extreme cases and the most frequent question parents and family ask is simply, "*Are you planning [to marry], or are you not? Do you want to?*", and the young couples do not perceive this to be a strong determinant in their choices.

Nevertheless, social influence becomes strong and more tangible when it comes to childbearing. When a child is born out of wedlock, social control does not only mean that "*the neighbors start talking*". There are problem at Church, because "*the priests say: sorry, first the wedding, then we can talk about baptizing the child*". There are everyday troubles for the parents. One respondent gives an example of a colleague, who "*couldn't pick up his kid from school. They didn't let him because he is not the 'real' father*". Being non-married parents also means that "*this child would be somehow stigmatized one day*" in school or in the peer group. People also predict legal problems "*in case anything happens*".

It is clear from the interviews that marriage and parenthood are inseparable. Children are needed to complete the marriage, "*Marriage without a child is not a marriage*", it is "*just a couple with a paper*". And marriage is the main condition for having children. One of the respondents says, "*We knew that when we want to have a child – then we need to fix a wedding*". All in all, marriage is seen as the only approved space for childbearing. This is the last, but substantial difference between formal and informal unions.

Even in the rare cases when the individuals perceive cohabitation and marriage equal as far as the level of commitment is concerned, they acknowledge the different social status these family forms have. And especially when considering childbearing.

5.3. The evaluation of cohabitation

In the previous sections, I have explored the meanings of cohabitation. Some of the meanings are clearly associated with good or bad attitudes, others are more ambiguous. In this section, I will investigate the evaluation of consensual unions in detail.

The attitudes towards cohabitation are, in general, very complex. But it is clear that the respondents evaluate this living arrangement differently, depending on the meaning they attach to it.

Premarital living together, seen as an interim stage and leading to marriage, is in general perceived favorably. The respondents say that *"it's worth to live together before marriage"*, *"it's good"* and it makes for a *"a super experience."* However, some of the seemingly favorable opinions are expressed in a peculiar way.

The respondents talk about cohabitation as *"nothing bad"*, or something they would *"not forbid"* their children to do (but they would not encourage them to do it). Some respondents are *"not completely sure that this is good"*. Cohabitation is perceived as advantageous, but not universally, and it *"depends on the couple"* whether it is a beneficial choice or not. One of the interviewees says, *"I suspect that only in 30% of the cases this is a right decision."*

The perception of cohabitation as a trial period is ambiguous and attitudes towards this form of testing vary, too. Most of the respondents evaluate it positively, saying that *"it is important to check first"* and that *"one needs to know each other and it's good to live together for some time."* Some find this probing stage necessary and believe that *"being together and getting married and only then moving in together is nonsense."* The lack of a trial period may impact the stability of the future marriage, as *"divorce results from the fact that people didn't get to know each other well."* From this perspective, premarital cohabitation is advantageous, because it improves the future relationship and lowers the risk of divorce.

However, at times the negative aspects of this meaning of premarital cohabitation is mentioned, *"This learning before the wedding leads to the situation when after the wedding it looks like an old marriage. There is no fascination, no surprising each other any more."* The probing period is sometimes evaluated ambivalently, because it may be interpreted as a sign that partners do not love each other strongly enough to marry. The story of one of the respondents is a perfect exemplification here, *"With my ex-girlfriend, we were supposed to marry and I left her two months before the wedding. We lived together for 11 months and (...) checked whether we wanted this, whether it is fine for us. But with B. [current wife] I didn't have any kind of objections"*. And so they married directly.

When the respondents treat moving in together as a natural step in the development of their relationship, their evaluation of this stage is more

unequivocal. Here, the main advantage of cohabitation relates to the fact that couple can spend more time together. My interviewees talk about these aspects enthusiastically, *“It was a marvelous feeling, that we were always together”, “even when I finished work late, she would be already at home, waiting for me, super, purely wonderful”*. However, although these features make cohabitation appealing, the same positive emotions and feelings are connected to living together after marriage. It is not the consensual union itself that is attractive, but the fact of sharing living space and being closer to each other.

“There are pros and cons to any arrangement” but even when the respondents are skeptical and not completely sure about the advantages of living together before marriage, they generally speak in favor of such choice. The situation changes rapidly when the interviewees are asked to consider the issue of remaining in consensual union instead of getting married.

They do not criticize or condemn such behavior openly. They accept it, tolerate it, but it is clear from the interviews that this is not the choice they would dream of for themselves. On the one hand, they say that this is *“everybody’s personal issue”* and that they *“would not criticize people living together or even having a child”* out of wedlock. On the other hand, they *“can’t imagine living like that in the long run.”* They want to *“develop, move on”*, turn their lives to *“the next right path”*, which is marriage.

Marriage is evaluated positively as *“a sign of real love”* and *“fulfillment of the feeling of love”*. One of the respondents puts it explicitly, *“If we talk about real love, we talk about marriage”*. The word “real”, in fact, is used frequently when this form of union is concerned, *“Only after marriage can one talk about a real couple”*, marriage constitutes the moment of *“forming the real family.”* Does this indicate that everything before was not real?

When we consider cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, some attitudes towards this living arrangement can be inferred from the above opinions on wedlock. But there are also other, direct indicators. When my interviewees speak about cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, they use noticeably different, more negative expressions. One respondent gives an example of a couple that has *“lived together for six years and they are still not married”*, and she concludes, *“He simply doesn’t respect the woman”*. The interviewees start using disrespectful labels for that sort of

unions. They use words like “*concubine*” or “*concubinage*” and they sometimes spontaneously add a comment like, “*They speak about ‘concubinage’ in police announcements and it sounds dreadful*”. The Polish idiom “*to live at a cat’s paw*” (“*żyć na kocią łapę*”) is used by some of the interviewees. This expression is very pejorative, similarly to another Polish expression, “*to live together with a cycling license*” (“*żyć na kartę rowerową*”). These idioms describe consensual unions as insecure and not serious.

The attitudes become even more extreme, when it comes to childbearing. One of the interviewees reasons that marriage is needed for a child in order “*not to make this life abnormal, as it is crazy enough to live nowadays*”. This indicates that giving birth out of wedlock is perceived as something not normal.

The majority of respondents accept extra-marital cohabitation, but none of them finds it attractive. One of the respondents expresses this clearly, “*Would you like to be with somebody without getting married? I guess you could. You could, but you don’t feel that bond then*”. So, again it all comes down to the issue of commitment. Commitment and binding are desirable, because “*when one decides for the relationship, it is **not** to leave any kind of gates open.*”

Marriage remains to be more desirable than cohabitation also because of the social recognition it brings. As I discussed above, marital union is perceived differently in society (and by the respondents themselves). Therefore, even if the respondents do not desire marriage *per se*, they want to comply with social norms. As one of the interviewees expresses, “*I am not an avant-garde type of person and I would like to live according to the role-models and expectations*”.

6. Summary and discussion

My respondents are a selected sample of people who are most likely than others to adapt modern attitude and behavior. In the picture drawn by them, cohabitation is perceived mostly as a test or a natural, interim step in the family formation process. Its trial role is commonly recognized, but there is no consensus as to whether the “probing period” is useful and desirable. The fact that moving in with a partner means spending more time together and that it requires more involvement is evaluated positively. However, the attitudes are connected purely to the aspect of sharing the household and they concern in the same extent cohabitation and marriage.

It makes cohabitation more appealing than living apart, but marriage remains equally attractive in that respect. The respondents are tolerant towards couples who do not marry at all, but they still find wedlock desirable. This applies especially when it comes to childbearing. Extramarital births are still perceived to some extent as deviant, or at least problematic.

The higher importance of marriage is also the result of social pressure and the Catholic faith. However, when the young people provide reasons for their choices, they rarely refer to these aspects directly. As far as relationship formation is concerned, the key issue is commitment. They want to develop their relationship and reach a higher level, based on a stable and secure marriage.

From this picture it is clear that living in and out of wedlock has different meanings to different people and is not perceived equally attractive. Even for those who strongly support cohabitation, marriage means something more. Although, it is sometimes difficult for them to explain this. As one of the respondents puts it, *“If we were not married I would, of course, still consider us as a loving family but something would be missing then”*.

From my study we can clearly see that the growing approval towards consensual unions, expressed in the surveys, does not necessarily mean that this living arrangement becomes a very tempting option for young people. My respondents find premarital cohabitation attractive to some extent. However, when it comes to making a life-long choice between formal and informal union, cohabitation is acceptable, but marriage remains the desirable goal. My study shows that it is very important to clearly differentiate between various meanings of cohabitation in the surveys. It is also crucial to distinguish between tolerance toward consensual unions and their favorable evaluation. These distinctions allow for capturing better the phenomenon of cohabitation in quantitative analyses.

The aim of my study was also to investigate the meanings of and attitudes towards informal unions in relation to the cohabitation diffusion process. Clearly, living together without being married is perceived as a premarital stage. The respondents share relatively positive attitudes towards premarital cohabitation and they express the opinion that it is a necessary test or even a natural step in the development of their relationship. This indicates that the second stage of cohabitation diffusion (Prinz, 1995) has already started in Poland, at least in the modern, urban setting. Still, the country is at the very beginning of this stage, as even in this context

some aspects of premarital cohabitation happens to be evaluated ambiguously or even negatively.

It was argued in the literature that the dissemination of informal unions is the result of an ideational shift: a wide alteration in norms and attitudes (Lesthaeghe, Surkyn, 1988; van de Kaa, 1987). In Poland, the picture of these changes is very compound.

First, some, although very weak, liberalization of norms can be observed. It is indicated by a clear approval of premarital sex and cohabitation, and tolerance towards long-term consensual unions. The increasing tolerance for life choices that are not traditional provides some ground for cohabitation diffusion. Still, we need to remember that the norm forbidding extramarital births remains rigid.

Second, it is argued that in most Western European countries the spread of cohabitation is connected to growing individualism and a growing desire for independence (Lesthaeghe, Surkyn, 1988; van de Kaa, 1987, 2001), but this does not apply to Poland. To my respondents, the highest value is commitment.

Naturally, it is feasible that the very positive evaluation of marital commitment is a product of the Catholic culture of Poland. However, this causal relation does not necessarily exist in young people's minds. The evaluation is deeply internalized and it is unlikely that the process of secularization will change this easily. Strong internalization is clearly one of the reasons why marriage does not lose its power in Poland.

However, because the young people aim at a stable and happy marriage, they acknowledge the testing role of cohabitation or even find it natural to live together beforehand. The paths of family formation are changing, incorporating the stage of premarital cohabitation. I conclude that this form of cohabitation will become more common, although marriage remains very strong.

It is possible that with time people will start perceiving other rewards coming from cohabitation. When they notice the advantages of not entering a binding union and instead remaining in consensual union, maybe they will become more reluctant to marry? These are just speculations, but I find it feasible that individualization and self-orientation to some extent appear to be the result of premarital living together and that it may trigger the next transition in the cohabitation diffusion: when this living arrangement becomes an equal alternative to marriage.

Even if the above assumptions turn out to be true for Poland, the meanings and attitudes attached to cohabitation currently make me doubt that consensual unions will become indistinguishable from marriage in the next decades. Non-marital cohabitation is likely to retain its interim character.

Poland appears to be at the critical stage for cohabitation diffusion, and this makes the country an extremely interesting case. We can observe in this country the onset of changes to union formation that in many European countries have been occurring already for a few decades. If we study it very carefully, we may be able to capture and understand the whole process of cohabitation diffusion.

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Appendix 1

Sample structure

Number of respondents by gender, marital status, parity, and education.

	Parity 0			Parity 1		<i>Subtotal</i>		Total
Educ. level	Single/ LAT	Cohab.	Married	Cohab.	Married	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	
Lower	3 1F / 2M	3 2F / 1M	4 1F / 3M	3 1F / 2M	7 3F / 4M	8	12	20
Higher	8 6F / 2M	4 2F / 2M	12 7F / 5M	1 1F	3 1F / 2M	17	11	28
<i>F</i>	7	4	8	2	4	n = 48		
<i>M</i>	4	3	8	2	6			
Total	11	7	16	4	10			