

Cohabitation and gender: Is freedom masculine and commitment feminine?

Monika Mynarska, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

Ann Berrington, University of Southampton, U.K.

Ann Evans, Australian National University, Australia

Olga Isupova, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

Renske Keizer, Erasmus University Rotterdam and University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Andreas Klärner, University of Rostock, Germany

Trude Lappegård, Statistics Norway

Brienna Perelli-Harris, University of Southampton, U.K.

Eva-Maria Schmidt, University of Vienna, Austria

Daniele Vignoli, University of Florence, Italy

Introduction

The prevalence of non-marital cohabitation continues to increase in most developed countries: young couples cohabit more often, for a longer period of time, and they also have children in informal unions with an increasing frequency (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). As diffusion of cohabitation continues and a growing number of families are formed by unmarried partners, the reasons for, and the consequences of, people's choices to cohabit or to marry remain central in demographic and social research. Scholars analyse different forms of and different meanings attached to cohabitation (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel, Liefbroer, & Poortman, 2014; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014), and they compare cohabitation with marriage comprehensively (Barlow & Probert, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996; Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012).

In comparisons of marriage and cohabitation, themes of commitment and freedom recurrently appeared in the literature. At times, they are treated as two sides of the same coin: a greater personal freedom and independence in cohabitation is contrasted with a greater commitment in marriage (Adams & Jones, 1997; Brines & Joyner, 1999; Poortman & Mills, 2012; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009). Other authors refer to other types of freedom, for instance linking an increasing popularity of cohabitation with a greater freedom from social norms (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Thornton & Philipov, 2009). In our recent study, we analysed a set of cross-national qualitative data and found that people identify numerous dimensions of commitment and freedom as they discuss differences between cohabitation and marriage (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014). In this paper, we aim to advance this research by taking a gendered perspective on these dimensions.

Our research goal is to investigate whether commitment and freedom—related to different types of unions—are discussed differently in relation to men and women? Are there any differences in how the meanings of commitment and freedom are socially constructed in relation to gender?

American qualitative studies show that such gender differences can be indeed expected (Huang, Smock, Manning, & Bergstrom-Lynch, 2011; Sassler & Miller, 2011). We have a unique opportunity to analyse this topic in a cross-national, comparative perspective, looking at data from countries that are characterised by

different attitudes and gender roles. This comparative study design can also generate new insights into how shifts in gender roles and diffusion of cohabitation are intertwined.

Method & Sample

We use data collected in the project Focus on Partnership (coordinated by Brienna Perelli-Harris). In the project, 79 focus group interviews (FGIs) were conducted in ten cities across Europe and Australia (see table below): 40 with women and 39 with men. The participants discussed differences between cohabitation and marriage, reasons for choosing one union type over the other as well as consequences of this choice. Details on the method and sample can be found in Perelli-Harris et al. (2014).

Locations of the focus groups and number of participants:

Australia (Sydney), N = 67	Italy (Florence), N = 58
Austria (Vienna), N = 71	Netherlands (Rotterdam), N = 40
England (Southampton), N = 59	Norway (Oslo), N = 56
East Germany (Rostock), N = 74	Poland (Warsaw), N = 69
West Germany (Lübeck), N = 41	Russia (Moscow), N = 64
Total: 79 focus groups, N = 599	

Analyses

In our study, we will systematically analyse narrations on cohabitation and marriage in all settings, in order to see what aspects of freedom and commitment are mentioned and how they are discussed in relation to gender? First, the analyses will be performed for each country according to uniform procedures, outlined by the first author. Each author will be responsible for analysing the interviews from his or her country or origin, in a local language. Each author will then prepare a standardised report in English. The first author will collate the data and compare the findings across the countries. The comparative analyses will be conducted in close collaboration with all authors to assure validity of the interpretations. A similar procedure has been successfully adapted for previous comparative analyses for the collected focus group material (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014).

In our previous research we identified several dimensions of commitment (e.g., related to security and stability of a relationship, to the public declaration and recognition of commitment as well as to emotional commitment) and of freedom (e.g., freedom from traditional gender roles, freedom to choose a type of a union, freedom to pursue individual goals, a financial as well as sexual freedom). For each country, we will analyse which dimensions are central and how they are perceived for men and women. We will compare how the topics are discussed by men and women but, more importantly, we will compare how they are presented in relation to men and women (in relation to their choices regarding cohabitation or marriage, to their well-being in a union, etc.).

Preliminary findings

The preliminary analyses have already revealed some interesting patterns. We found that that different dimensions of freedom in non-marital unions were discussed in relation to men's and women's motivations to cohabit. For instance, some informants argued that men chose cohabitation to preserve more sexual freedom as well as to avoid taking responsibility for a partner. For women, freedom in cohabitation was instead related to financial independence, freedom from traditional gender roles, and an ability to give priority to their self-realisation. In some cases, for instance in Poland, these reasons were also assessed differently. While men's reasons were evaluated negatively, women's reasons were seen as a positive sign

of their emancipation and empowerment. In the paper, we will verify whether similar evaluations are shared across all analysed settings.

Similarly, some differences were identified in how commitment was discussed in relation to men and women. For instance, quite universally across the analysed settings, the importance of a symbolic commitment (the role of the wedding) was perceived (by women and men) as more important for women. Moreover, our data suggest that commitment is expressed differently by men and by women. For instance, men show commitment by taking financial responsibility for a woman and (future) children.

In the paper, we will describe the aspects of freedom and commitment—revealed in our data—and show how they relate to gender in our informants' perspective. We will investigate cross-country differences in how freedom and commitment are constructed for men and women and link these differences to cultural and institutional characteristics of the studied settings.

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