

The meaning of cohabitation across Europe

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This study investigates the meaning of cohabitation across Europe. Two research questions are addressed: First, are the different meanings of cohabitation identifiable and quantifiable across different European countries? Second, how do countries differ in the meaning of cohabitation? Using data from the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) we applied latent class analyses to test whether we identify the different meanings of cohabitation discussed in the literature in different national contexts. Our sample contains of 10,962 cohabiters between 18 and 79 years old from ten European countries (Georgia, Romania, Hungary, Russia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Austria, Germany, France and Norway). Our results show that there is no single meaning of cohabitation. For most cohabiters, cohabitation is related to marriage. They view their union either as a prelude or an alternative to marriage. Facing economic hardship makes cohabiters not feeling ready to commit to marriage. We find little evidence that cohabitation can serve as an alternative to singlehood. Countries differ in the mix of cohabitation meanings. Predominantly, cohabitation in Eastern Europe seems to be only tolerated if the couple has definite plans to marry or faces obstacles to marry directly. Cohabiters in Western Europe more often cohabit because they ideologically refuse the institution of marriage or consider it irrelevant.

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