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Reflection

Exploring social norms around cohabitation: The life course, individualization, and culture

Introduction to Special Collection: “Focus on Partnerships:
Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe
and Australia”

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This publication is the Introduction to the Special Collection on “Focus on Partnerships: Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe and Australia,” organized by Guest Editors Brienna Perelli-Harris and Laura Bernardi.

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Introduction to Special Collection: “Focus on Partnerships: Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe and Australia”

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Explanations of the increase in cohabitation often rely on the concept of ideational change and shifting social norms. While researchers have investigated cohabitation and the role of social norms from a quantitative perspective, few studies have examined how people discuss the normative context of cohabitation, especially in cross-national comparison.

OBJECTIVE

This article introduces a Special Collection that uses focus group research to compare social norms relating to cohabitation and marriage in 8 countries in Europe. The Introduction explicates the concept of social norms, describes the focus group project, reflects on the method’s advantages and limitations, and summarizes the theoretical and methodological contributions of the project.

METHODS

Collaborators conducted 7–8 focus groups in each country using a standardized questionnaire. They coded each discussion, analyzed the results, and produced a country-specific chapter on a particular theme. They also collaborated on an overview paper that synthesized the overall findings of the project.

RESULTS

The articles provide insights into the meanings of partnership formation in each country. In addition, their findings contribute to three main theoretical themes: 1) life courses, sequencing, and intersections; 2) individualization, freedom, and commitment; and 3) culture, religion, and the persistence of the past.

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CONCLUSIONS

This Special Collection contributes to and challenges current explanations of family change by pointing out how social norms shape partnership behavior. The project informs quantitative research by emphasizing the need for a culturally informed interpretation of demographic behavior. We urge researchers to recognize the multiple meanings of cohabitation within each context and across countries.

1. Introduction

The rise in cohabitation, or two people living together in an intimate union without marriage, has been one of the greatest changes to the Western family over the past few decades. In nearly every country in Europe, cohabitation has shifted from a marginal behavior to one that has become acceptable and normal: in many countries cohabitation is now even the expected way of starting a family (Hiekel 2014; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). The rise in cohabitation has challenged the institution of marriage (Cherlin 2004), leading to uncertainty about the reasons for marriage or whether marriage is even necessary. Coupled with increases in divorce and separation, cohabitation has created greater unpredictability in the life course. In addition, cohabitation has transformed social roles and kin relationships, making it more difficult for others to gauge partners' commitment levels. Cohabitation has also provided a challenge to legal institutions, since unions no longer have clear markers for when serious relationships begin and end (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez Gassen 2012; Manning and Smock 2005). Hence, the increase in cohabitation is changing the nature of partnership formation and dissolution, with implications not only for couples but also for other family members, social networks, state support, and society in general (Sanchez Gassen and Perelli-Harris 2015).

Although cohabitation has increased in nearly all European countries the increase has not been uniform: some countries have experienced rapid increases, with cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation becoming common, while others have experienced only a slow diffusion of cohabitation (Perelli-Harris 2015; Hiekel 2014). For example, in Norway in 2010, 48% of women aged 15-45 living in a partnership were cohabiting, while in Poland only 11% of women were cohabiting (Perelli-Harris 2015). Indeed, the European map of nonmarital fertility is a patchwork, with distinct national borders defining levels of nonmarital fertility in some areas but not in others (Klüsener, Perelli-Harris, and Gassen 2013). This great diversity across Europe raises questions about the social processes that lead to the development of this new behavior. Why have some countries experienced dramatic increases in

cohabitation, while others have not experienced such diffusion? To answer this question it is first imperative that we understand a more basic, but not at all simple, question: what is cohabitation? And second, to what extent does the meaning of cohabitation differ across contexts?

Most of the demographic and sociological research trying to understand cohabitation, both within and between countries, is quantitative, based on survey or register data. This extensive literature has made great strides towards understanding the trends (e.g., Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2015; Hoem et al. 2009; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Andersson and Philipov 2002; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012; Kiernan 2004), correlates (e.g. Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Soons and Kalmijn 2009; Wiik, Keizer, and Lappegård 2012), and effects of partnership formation (e.g., Hiekel and Castro-Martin 2014; Lyngstad et al. 2011; Soons, Liefbroer, Kalmijn 2009). However, most of these studies are primarily the outcome of a structured process of data collection in which respondents fit their answers to predefined alternatives. While such a methodological approach is necessary for measuring the distribution and variation in partnership formation, as well as determinants such as socioeconomic background, it constrains the possibilities of research to predetermined categories and limits the understanding of variation in the meaning of partnership formation. This approach often concludes that differences across countries are simply due to the process of diffusion of a similar type of behavior (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Liefbroer and Dourlejin 2006), without understanding the nuances and complexities of partnerships in different contexts. In addition, such methodology is insufficient to provide substantive interpretations of social norms, attitudes, and meanings related to partnership.

Recent major theoretical explanations of the increase in cohabitation rely on the concept of ideational change that shifts social norms, attitudes, and values (Lesthaeghe 2010; van de Kaa 2001; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Thornton 2001; Thornton, Axinn, and Xie 2008). For example, the Second Demographic Transition perspective insists on the “profound shift in norms and attitudes regarding personal relationships, fertility, and the family that has led to dramatic rapid change in Europeans’ demographic behavior” (van de Kaa 1987: 4). The concept of individualization at the core of the SDT and other key theories (e.g., Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) emphasizes self-realization and freedom as valuable orientations for life course choices and personal relationships. However, a decline in responsibility and engagement with others and society in general have made family ties more vulnerable and temporary, a situation favoring unmarried cohabitation and union dissolution. According to the SDT explanation, changes in family behaviors are driven by changes in value orientations that are culturally specific. In particular, the degree of individualization within a society explains the variation in cohabitation and separation across contexts and predicts the convergence of partnership

behaviors in the long run (Lesthaeghe 2010). While the SDT perspective has been criticized, especially for predictions of unidirectional change (Coleman 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012), it has the merit of drawing attention to the role of cultural change and the dynamics of social norms in explaining demographic behavior.

Culture tends to be incorporated into explanations of social change in two major ways, one based on value orientations and the other on social norms. Models of culture that focus on value orientations often portray culture as an aggregation of stable preferences that reproduce themselves through the socialization of each new generation. These models contrast cultural differences at a given point in time, but do not account for cultural change (Morris et al. 2015). Cultural influences on behavior are dynamic and contingent, both in how individuals form and alter attitudes and how norms, practices, and institutions change over time. Alternative models of culture focus on social norms rather than values. Even though norms are related to values, they are dynamically conceptualized as context-specific, socially accepted patterns of behavior, or prescriptive and proscriptive statements that function as regulators of behavior. Social norms explain the regularities in social behavior, as well as behavioral variation across space and time (Elster 1989), and shape partnership behavior (Settersten and Mayer 1997). Empirical investigation into social norms and partnership has primarily been limited to quantitative analyses of closed-format questions in surveys (e.g., Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014). Answers to questions such as “is marriage an outdated institution?” “is there a minimum age to marry?” or “how much do you approve if someone lives with a partner he or she is not married to?” capture individual or general attitudes and indicate the existence of social norms and their strength (the proportion of individuals giving the same answer). While survey data can provide a sense of general agreement with certain statements at the population level, they are less useful in teasing out the interdependencies between different social norms and understanding how people view social norms associated with partnership formation. Focus group discussions are well-suited to provide insights into the discourses around prevailing norms or attitudes. The open format of focus group questions and the social interaction involved in a group discussion allow participants to develop arguments and reflect on social norms.

The current Special Collection, *Focus on Partnerships: Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe and Australia*, contributes to our understanding of social norms that shape partnership behavior with a cross-national research project employing focus groups. A focus group is a small group of individuals (6–8 people) that discusses topics organized around a central theme, with the discussion facilitated by a trained moderator (Morgan 1998). This format allows participants to discuss and interact with each other and to express meanings and attitudes in a relatively open setting. Focus group research aims to facilitate the understanding of

culturally and linguistically diverse groups, without engaging in a full anthropological approach (Bernardi and Hutter 2007). This research is not meant to be analyzed in isolation from other types of research, but is intended to be a complementary and parallel source of information.

To our knowledge, this is the first time focus group research on family formation has been conducted cross-nationally, with a coordinated approach and standardized design and discussion guidelines. Previous qualitative research has led to important insights into cohabitation and marriage in individual countries (e.g., Manning and Smock 2005; Miller et al. 2011; Mynarska and Bernardi 2007; Syltevik 2010; Le Goff and Ryser 2010; Sessler 2004; Lindsay 2000; Jamieson et al. 2002; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Reed 2006), but most of this research relied on in-depth interviews, did not focus on social norms, and did not compare results across countries. A qualitative project coordinated from the outset and following a common research design did compare childbearing decision-making across countries (Bernardi, Mynarska, and Rossier 2015); however, this research was based on in-depth interviews and did not capture general social norms and attitudes in the same way a focus group does. Focus groups have the distinctive advantage that social norms appear more clearly than in other qualitative methods through the interaction between respondents, who support and sanction each other.

This Special Collection presents the results of this project in medium-sized cities in eight European countries: Vienna, Austria (Berghammer, Fliegenschnee, and Schmidt 2014); Florence, Italy (Vignoli and Salvini 2014); Rotterdam, the Netherlands (Hiekel and Keizer 2015); Oslo, Norway (Lappegard and Noack 2015); Warsaw, Poland (Mynarska, Baranowska-Rataj, and Matysiak 2014); Moscow, Russia (Isupova 2015); Southampton, the United Kingdom (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, and Trevena 2015); and Rostock, Germany (Klärner 2015). (For brevity, we refer throughout this introduction to the countries rather than the cities or authors). Each country team contributed an article to the Special Collection based on their focus group results, providing insight into union formation in their own country, but also concentrating on a particular theoretical topic. In addition, the project members collaborated on an overview article that compares the results of the focus groups across these eight cities as well as Sydney, Australia, and Lübeck, Germany (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). The overview article moves us towards a deeper understanding of cohabitation by finding that three themes consistently recur in the discussions: commitment, testing, and freedom. The authors argue that overall, “the increase in cohabitation has not devalued the concept of marriage, but counter-intuitively cohabitation has become a way to preserve and protect marriage as an ideal for long-term commitment and emotional closeness.” (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014: 1070) At the same time, however, the overview article contrasts the unique contexts of the different countries, especially the contexts

which seem to have similar cultural and religious backgrounds but have subtly different results. The Special Collection goes even further towards describing how context matters, by providing greater detail of the discourses on each country's particular situation.

In this introduction we will summarize the contribution of the Special Collection both theoretically and methodologically. First, because social norms are key to the focus group research and understanding social change in general, we will explicate the concept of social norms, clarify how social norms relate to individual attitudes, and discuss the ways in which they contribute to the understanding of differences in partnership types across contexts. Second, we describe the focus group project and reflect on the advantages and limitations of using this method comparatively. Third, we discuss how the articles' findings contribute to three main theoretical themes: the life course, individualization, and culture. These themes challenge prominent explanations of family change and provide nuances to our understanding of cohabitation. As a whole, the special collection provides unique insights into partnership behavior and how it is shaped by social norms, and also into broader aspects relevant to sociological inquiry and qualitative comparative research.

2. Social norms and cohabitation

The examination of social norms has been a key aim in the social sciences. Definitions of social norms vary across disciplines, ranging from the most objective definition in economics, where norms are objective patterns of behavior in a given social setting (Akerlof 1976) to the most subjective reading of norms in psychology, where norms are coincident with subjective beliefs, perceptions, and expectations (Ajzen 1991, Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, Ajzen and Fishbein 2005). Anthropologists describe variations in social norms across cultures; sociologists focus on their social function as regulators of behavior; psychologists emphasize their contribution to the motivation to act; legal scientists and economists highlight their signaling power; and philosophers consider them the unintentional result of self-fulfilling expectations that people create in interaction with each other (Bicchieri 2006).

Social norms may be based on objective or subjective grounds (Morris et al. 2015). Widespread behavioral regularities and beliefs constitute objective social norms. Both are perpetuated in a given social setting, because individuals in repeated interaction experience the acceptance of a given behavior and contribute to transmitting and enforcing shared beliefs and attitudes. Social interactions are therefore facilitated by compliance with norms, and social norms are reinforced in social interactions. In this sense, social norms, as the shared and accepted standards of behavior of a given social

group, contribute to the regulation of society. Norms can also be descriptive or perceived as injunctive. Descriptive norms refer to the assumptions or interpretations of action based on the perception of others' behavior in a given situation. Injunctive norms are related to the perception of social approval or disapproval attached to a given behavior. Since people want to avoid the latter and enhance the former, expectations about others' attitudes shape behavior. When normative expectations converge, a norm is instituted (Bicchieri and Chavez 2010).

Social norms can also be seen as shared statements about prescriptions (what one should do) or proscriptions (what one should not do) of a given behavior (Billari and Liefbroer 2007). Norms can be associated with sanctions, which are either positive (encouraging the taking up of a given conduct) or negative (discouraging the behavior by teasing, stigmatization, or social exclusion). People approve or disapprove of others' behavior and may deliver rewards and punishments (Marini 1984; Settersten and Hägestad 1996; Bernardi 2003). When social norms are institutionalized, sanctions may be inscribed into the legal system, or the related sanctions may go beyond the level of informal conventions or approval and lead to social exclusion. Religious norms can be regarded in a similar fashion and considered as non-negotiable as laws. In both cases, practices are formalized and embedded in public discourse and societal structures. Yet sanctions do not always need to be applied for individuals to conform to social norms, since norms are often internalized (Heckhausen 1999). Social norms may vary in the extent to which they are shared across social groups. Therefore we talk about the strength of a social norm, reflecting the share of people that hold the norm and are willing to sanction transgressions (Finch and Mason 1993). This implies that even norms that are not universal may influence the behavior of those who do not share the norm at the individual level.

Social norms related to life course transitions define the type, the timing, and the order of events, giving cultural guidelines for organizing and regulating the transitions (Heckhausen 1999; Settersten and Hägestad 1996). On the one hand, social norms are still highly relevant to family behavior, even in societies that are characterized by high degrees of individualization (Billari and Liefbroer 2010). On the other hand, social norms are dynamic and respond to the interaction between individual experiences and social responses (Bachrach, Hindin, and Thomson 2000); both experiences and social responses (changing the structure of incentives and disincentives to practice a certain behavior) contribute to and arise from changes in society (Lindbeck 1997; Heuveline and Timberlake 2004).

In quantitative research, social norms are often evaluated through the measurement of attitudes (Liefbroer and Billari 2010). Yet attitudes differ from norms, since they are individual dispositions and not shared by a given social group. Attitudes are individual and "relatively enduring organizations of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies"

(Hogg and Vaughan 2005, p. 150) within specific situations. Attitudes are related to social norms when a significant number of individuals hold similar attitudes: if an attitude is prevalent it is likely to generate a social norm. Attitudes are also used as an indication of the strength of a social norm, measured by the proportion of people that share a given attitude: the higher the proportion, the more it is related to social expectations and the approval of a given course of action, and the stronger the corresponding social norm.

Social norms have important consequences for partnership behaviors and contribute to shaping them (Settersten and Mayer 1997). Social norms regarding cohabitation may prescribe or proscribe a given type of union; for instance, prescribe direct marriage and proscribe cohabitation. In addition, social norms may be more specific and refer to the age at which cohabitation is appropriate (norms on timing). They may address whether cohabitation should be combined with other life course stages; for instance, marrying while at university. They may also address the order of cohabitation and marriage; for example, sanctioning pre-marital cohabitation but not long-term cohabitation, or suggesting the order of other domains such as employment and childbearing (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, and Trevena 2015). Social norms about the form of partnership may become weaker if transitions into and out of partnerships become less salient markers for the life course. For example, the transition into first union (regardless of whether cohabitation or marriage) is now perceived as the least important marker of adulthood across 25 European countries (Spéder, Murinkó, and Settersten 2014), which may be related to decreased union stability or a greater emphasis on independence: instead, respondents reported that leaving the parental home and starting employment are the most important markers of adulthood.

The dynamic nature of social norms and their changing relevance over time suggest that during particular historical periods, social norms shift and behaviors become more or less regulated, emancipated, accepted, and performed. Norms are either substituted with other norms or they fade away and leave room for a plurality of alternative norms and behaviors (Bicchieri 2006; Mackie 1996). In order to capture the variation of social norms across contexts and to better understand how norms govern partnership behavior, we need to empirically research the discourses about partnership in society. Thus, the contributors to this special collection have moved away from individual-based surveys and closed-format questions to adopt an approach that privileges open questions and allows for interaction: focus group discussions.

3. The Focus Group Project

This project was proposed as one stream of research from Perelli-Harris's European Research Council-funded Starting Grant CHILDCOHAB. The CHILDCOHAB grant has studied cohabitation and childbearing in cohabitation from a number of methodological perspectives, including quantitative demographic methods and comparative policy analysis (see www.nomarital.org). The function of the focus groups was to provide in-depth, substantive insights into discourses surrounding cohabitation and marriage in different countries.

The focus group research followed standard research procedures, although exact practices differed slightly from country to country. Drawing on qualitative research from the U.S. (Reed 2006; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2006; Manning and Smock 2005) and quantitative explanations and findings from Europe (e.g., Lesthaeghe 2010, Perelli-Harris et al. 2010), Perelli-Harris developed a standardized guideline to investigate whether similar findings arose in Europe and Australia. The collaborators then met at a workshop to fine-tune the questionnaire and ensure that it captured key concepts in each country. The guidelines asked participants why people were increasingly living together without marrying; what were the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation and marriage; whether there was any point in time when people should get married or if there were obstacles to marriage; the role of religion, children, and policies in partnership decision-making; how people in their country think about marriage relative to those in other countries; and whether marriage will be around in 50 years (for full interview guidelines, see Appendix in Perelli-Harris et al. 2014, this Special Collection). Each country team translated the questionnaire from English into the majority language of the country. Because the nature of the focus group makes it difficult to stick to an exact script, many of the discussions addressed questions in different sequences. Nonetheless, all focus groups touched upon the main topics and questions specified in the questionnaire.

Nearly every site had eight focus groups, with the exception of the Netherlands (seven, due to recruitment issues). The sites were generally chosen for convenience and are not representative of the entire country. Each country team followed their own recruitment procedures depending on resources and the situation. For example, four teams used recruitment agencies, two recruited participants through newspapers and fliers, and the remainder used a combination of the two strategies (see each article for details). The country teams using recruitment agencies had the least difficulty in finding participants; however, it is important to acknowledge that these respondents may be more familiar with focus group research. In some countries, such as the UK and the Netherlands, the research teams had difficulties in convincing low-educated men to

participate in the research and had to employ snowball sampling, increase incentives, and/or reduce the number of focus groups.

Country teams only chose participants who were citizens of their country, but these may not have been of the dominant ethnicity, which may have influenced the outcomes, especially in high immigrant cities such as Rotterdam and Sydney. Overall, however, we did not find ethnicity to be a major theme that emerged in the focus groups. The Focus Group project also set out to examine gender and socio-economic differences by stratifying the focus groups by sex and education (two high female, two high male, two low female, two low male). The stratification procedures promoted a more relaxed and open environment within the groups. For most of the focus groups, differences in responses by men and women and across educational levels were relatively minor or vague and ended up not being a salient way to demarcate responses. Also, the small sample size made us wary of making general conclusions about differences by socio-economic status. Nonetheless, the distinctions in a few countries appeared to be stark and noteworthy. In the UK and the Netherlands, for example, the more highly educated expressed a desire to marry before having children, while the less educated said it was more common for people not to marry before having children. Thus, further analysis may reveal additional differences across gender and education.

Each of our focus group discussions lasted about 90 minutes. Focus group moderators reported that the participants generally enjoyed the discussions, but the interaction between participants was also influenced by cultural customs. For example, in the UK, participants seemed reluctant to critique others' decisions, while in Russia the participants relished a good debate. Focus group teams also noticed that the less-educated participants sometimes had a harder time discussing abstract issues and were more likely to refer to their own or relatives' experiences.

After conducting the focus groups, collaborators transcribed the focus groups in the participants' native language. They coded and synthesized the results according to a standardized format and produced a "country report" in English, which was used in the analyses for the overview article (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). The teams then further coded and analyzed their data to produce each of the articles in the Special Collection. They each chose a theme that reflected the major insights that arose in the discussions and addressed major themes in the literature on cohabitation and marriage.

3.1 What have we learned from this methodology?

Our methodological approach has several distinct advantages. First, because the focus group guidelines were written in advance and followed throughout each discussion, we were able to ensure similar coverage of topics and concepts in all countries. The

standardized guideline and country reports made it possible to compare and contrast responses across countries; for example, perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of cohabitation in each country. The standardized country reports also facilitated coding across common themes in the data. However, rather than simply limiting the comparison of the findings issuing from such a top-down approach to the coding, we also allowed themes to emerge organically from the data in a more open bottom-up approach. Although theoretical explanations guided the design of the focus group questionnaire, the aim of the analysis was to allow new explanations to arise from the data. Hence, we allowed the data to ‘speak for itself’, which also provided the opportunity to push innovative theories forward, rather than simply testing previous explanations. Finally, our broad coverage of countries also allowed us to compare and contrast responses in countries that had different levels of cohabitation, from Italy and Poland to Norway and Eastern Germany.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the focus group methodology, especially with regards to generalization and representation. Our focus groups were only conducted in major cities, which may not be representative of opinions in other parts of the country. The participants had to make an effort to go somewhere at a particular time to partake in the focus groups. The opinions may be skewed towards those who were talkative or willing to express their opinions. On the other hand, a group discussion with strangers may have inhibited participants from speaking freely, especially about certain topics such as finances. Finally, because of the variety of relationship experiences across the life course, we were unable to incorporate the role of participants’ relationship history in the analysis. We could not simply classify participants as cohabiting or married because they may have previously experienced cohabitation or union dissolution and multiple partnerships, but denoting complete union experiences was too complex. Thus, it is important to recognize that the focus group research reports on the general attitudes and social norms that arose in the discussions, but that they have been influenced and colored by the experiences of the individuals who took part in the discussions.

Nonetheless, focus group discussions are the best available method to capture discourses about partnership, since they provide empirical evidence of arguments for and against different behaviors. Such arguments can indicate that a norm is stable, consistent with other norms in the society, and possibly the direction in which norms are evolving. The open format of questions combined with a data collection that encourages social interaction provides a ‘close-to-real’ exchange, in which behaviors, prescriptions, and proscriptions are questioned or defended.

4. Cross-cutting themes and links to theories

The articles in this Special Collection provide insight into the meanings of partnership formation within each country and across countries. We see, for example, how cohabitation tends to be oriented towards individual freedom in Poland; cohabitation has become nearly equivalent to marriage with respect to childbearing in Norway; and how marriage has become less relevant in Eastern Germany. These general findings reflect cohabitation levels in the different countries, but the individual chapters provide further nuances of partnership formation in each setting. In addition, the overview chapter draws specific comparisons between countries and finds unexpected similarities and differences, such as a common life course perspective in German-speaking countries (Austria and Germany), but different roles of religion in Catholic countries (Italy and Poland).

Beyond reporting on the focus group findings, each article in the Special Collection engages with a specific theme and theoretical perspective. The themes emerged organically as one of the main topics in the focus group studies, and they link directly to prominent streams of literature that are especially important within each country. For example, much of the research on the diffusion of cohabitation in Italy discusses religion and parents (Schröder 2008); commitment is a common theme in the UK qualitative literature (e.g., Duncan, Barlow, and James 2005; Jamieson et al. 2002; Carter 2012); and trust in institutions is an important topic in Russia, especially because it is so low (Belianin and Zinchenko 2010). Note, however, that while each article focuses on a specific theme, many of the themes are overlapping and can be found in multiple articles.

In this introduction we have organized the theoretical links from the articles into three main domains: 1) life courses, sequences, and intersections; 2) individualization, freedom, commitment, and uncertainty; and 3) culture, religion, and the persistence of the past. The first domain focuses on demographic aspects of family formation such as partnership states, transitions, and intersections between different life events. This domain draws on the life course perspective, which has become fundamental to demographic and sociological research over the past few decades (Mayer 2009). The life course perspective posits that human lives unfold across the life course and prior events influence later life outcomes (Mayer 2009). Different life domains and decision-making processes interact: for example, people move in together in anticipation of childbearing. In addition, demographers have become interested in the timing and sequencing of different events as the life course becomes increasingly de-standardized (Elzinga and Liefbroer 2007). Using quantitative data, demographers have studied the role of age and sequencing norms on the timing of fertility, cohabitation, and marriage, which may result in delayed family formation and new family sequences (Liefbroer and

Billari 2010; Holland and de Valk 2015). Several articles in the Special Collection provide insights into the reasons for cohabitation occurring in a particular order relative to other life events, as well as the role of cohabitation within general partnership trajectories (see also Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2015).

The second domain – individualization, freedom, commitment, and uncertainty – focuses on theories related to ideational and value change as well as the rise in risk and uncertainty. The individualization thesis was developed by European sociologists to explain the decline in traditional behavior and the increase in non-standard biographies (e.g., Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) and, as discussed above, it has been crucial for one of the main demographic theories of the past decades: the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe et al. 2010). According to the individualization thesis, today intimate relationships depend less on prescribed expectations or social norms and increasingly on romantic love and individual choice. Cohabitation is ideally suited to these new behaviors as it provides flexibility, a focus on self-fulfillment, and the freedom to leave an unsatisfying relationship. However, individualized relationships are also inherently risky, since individuals may experience the discord of union dissolution if their partners are unhappy. In addition, the rise in uncertainty due to job loss, temporary contracts, job mobility, and globalization has exacerbated individual risk. The temporary and reversible nature of cohabitation has allowed individuals to cope with this uncertainty by avoiding the commitment of marriage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Nonetheless, the persistence of commitment has arisen as a counterpoint to the individualization and uncertainty theses, with recent work questioning whether there really has been a decline in commitment, to what extent cohabitation has been a response to this decline, or if commitment in cohabitation may now be similar to that in marriage (Jamieson et al. 2002). The articles from the Special Collection weigh in on these arguments by providing a perspective based on social norms and discourses on partnership.

The third theme addresses theories of cultural and historical change, including the role of institutions such as religion and the state. Cultural change has been at the core of understanding the diffusion of new demographic behaviors across countries (Klüsener, Perelli-Harris, and Sanchez Gassen 2013; Watkins 1990; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 1988). One of the main cultural factors posited to promote the decline in marriage and rise of cohabitation has been secularization (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004). The decline in religion has been instrumental in changing family behaviors, but how it does so is less understood. In addition, culture and historical path dependencies have shaped state institutions that may support certain types of living arrangement and not others. For example, the state may support young people leaving home at a young age, as in Norway, privilege the male breadwinner model, as in Austria and Germany (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez Gassen 2012), or rely more directly on families to support

individuals, as in Italy (De Rose, Racioppi, and Zanatta 2008). State support may be concretely reflected in laws and regulations that either privilege marriage or treat cohabitation and marriage the same (Perelli-Harris and Sanchez Gassen 2012). Thus understanding how macro-level social and cultural institutions influence social norms and discourses is very important for understanding the meanings of cohabitation across countries. All of the articles in the Special Collection address the cultural and institutional specificities of their particular context; however, below we highlight several articles which have culture and historical social change as their focus.

4.1 Life courses, sequences, and intersections

The concept of the life course emerged repeatedly throughout our focus groups, either explicitly when respondents referred to partnership behavior at younger and older ages, or implicitly when discussing the sequencing of family experiences. For example, in the Austrian focus groups, participants implicitly drew on their perception of the life course as they discussed how cohabitation is ideal for young adults, when freedom and independence are highly valued, and marriage is preferable later in life when individuals desire stability and less risk (Berghammer, Fliegenschnee, and Schmidt 2014). This important finding suggests that individuals in Austria do not think about cohabitation and marriage as alternatives per se, but as relationships that are appropriate at successive stages of the life course. The discussions demonstrated how Austrians tend to think about their lives as they unfold, and how different types of union tend to be appropriate at different ages.

The focus groups also addressed social norms about the new sequencing of family events and how they are interconnected. With previous research in mind, we had explicitly asked focus group participants whether there was a “specific point in people’s lives when they should get married”. Note that this question targeted social norms by including the word “should”. With the exception of Italians and Poles, who advised marriage before childbearing, most focus group participants were reluctant to prescribe a specific point for marriage, indicating that the sequence or timing of marriage is no longer normative in most countries. The UK article addressed this finding directly by focusing on the intersection between the sequence of family events and perspectives on commitment (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, and Trevena 2015). Berrington, Perelli-Harris, and Trevena (2015) find that the traditional sequence of marriage, home ownership, and childbearing are no longer relevant to a large segment of the population, which has led to a shift in how personal commitment is expressed within partnerships. As other indicators of commitment such as childbearing and housing have become more important in defining a relationship, cohabitation and marriage have begun to take on new meanings.

This point was also brought out directly in contexts with high levels of childbearing within cohabitation: Norway and Eastern Germany. In Norway the significance of partnerships now often depends on children rather than marriage: becoming a parent is a more serious commitment than marriage, since parenthood bonds the parents together for the rest of their lives, while a partnership can be ended (Lappégard and Noack 2015). Because marriage is no longer normative, Norwegians have greater flexibility when deciding whether to marry. However, in Norway marriage has not necessarily become irrelevant, and for some its symbolic value has become even more important as a way to demonstrate love. Marriage has become a personal choice, sometimes linked to having a child, but not at all mandatory. This finding was similar in Eastern Germany, in that partnerships were more often defined by childbearing than marriage; however, unlike in the UK and Norway, Eastern Germans generally expressed a low desire to marry, even when the couple had children (Klärner 2015). Some mentioned that marriage provides legal protections when a couple has children, but this reason was of little importance for most, who struggled to provide reasons for marrying at all.

The role of divorce also emerged repeatedly as an important catalyst for changes in partnership formation. For example, the article on the Netherlands found that high divorce rates seem to have influenced Dutch perspectives on cohabitation and marriage (Hiekel and Keizer 2015). Dutch participants discussed how cohabitation was a risk-reduction strategy to avoid divorce, and yet marriage was still seen by many as a symbol of utmost commitment. Cohabitation was viewed as a strategy to test the compatibility between partners before moving on to a more serious legal commitment. Thus the increase in divorce altered the perception that marriage is a life-long relationship, paving the way for the increase in cohabitation, but at the same time not necessarily leading to a devaluation of marriage. The articles on the UK, Eastern Germany, and Italy also emphasized the perception that cohabitation is a way to avoid the high legal and emotional costs of divorce. Yet the implications of this trend differed substantially in the three countries: in the UK, marriage was generally seen as “the real deal” and cohabitation as a way to test the relationship, although some relationships did not end in marriage; in Italy, marriage was usually the ultimate goal, with strong cohabiting relationships naturally ending in marriage; in Eastern Germany, however, respondents discussed how the potential negative consequences of divorce meant that marriage should be avoided altogether. Thus the articles in this Special Collection provide a better understanding of how interrelated family processes, such as union dissolution and childbearing, are changing the meaning of marriage and cohabitation, but in different ways depending on the context.

4.2 Individualization, freedom, and commitment

Several of the articles in this Special Collection directly address and challenge the individualization hypothesis, arguing that it only applies in certain circumstances or that it needs to be refined. Berghammer, Fliegenschnee, and Schmidt (2014) find that in Austria the individualization thesis tends to apply best in early adulthood when young people are pursuing a range of opportunities, value freedom, and are more likely to choose cohabitation, as described above. As people mature, they become less oriented towards the self, because older adults value security, commitment, and mutual support, which is more likely to occur in marriage. Although the institution of marriage itself has become more individualized, with new gender roles, women's employment, and equality in the household, the notion that individuals can leave marriage for their own personal benefit is generally eschewed. Thus, although individuals are becoming more focused on themselves in young adulthood, in the long-term they continue to value stability, and it is at older ages when the individualization thesis becomes less relevant.

The Dutch article also directly grapples with the individualization thesis, especially the conflict between the freedom of “do-it-yourself biographies” and the personal responsibility for any relationship failure (Hiekel and Keizer 2015). This conflict implies a new risk in relationship formation, a risk that individuals are aware of and may attempt to reduce by choosing cohabitation over marriage. Cohabitation can either be a testing-ground for a relationship to determine whether it is of high enough quality to convert to marriage, or a way to reject marriage altogether in order to avoid divorce. In this way, cohabitation is evidence of increasing individualization in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, as in Austria, the authors found that Dutch respondents made a distinction between cohabitation and marriage, generally describing cohabitation as inferior to marriage in terms of interpersonal commitment and economic dependence and sometimes stressing the emotional and symbolic distinctiveness of marriage. Hence, despite the increase in individualization, individuals still valued the concept of a committed, stable couple, which they believed marriage was better at signifying.

Related to individualization is the concept of freedom. The Polish article explored several dimensions of freedom in order to better understand the open nature of cohabitation (Mynarska, Baranowska-Rataj, and Matysiak 2014). These dimensions include the ability to “pack a suitcase and go”, the fidelity and loyalty of the partners, and the ability to maintain independence in everyday life, especially for women. This made cohabitation attractive in some ways, especially as a trial period for marriage, but in the end marriage was preferred for long-term relationships, suggesting that individualization was not driving union formation in Poland. In Russia, focus group respondents contrasted freedom with fidelity and trust and put a gendered spin on the concepts (Isupova 2015). While freedom was important for both male and female “ideological cohabitants” who were opposed to marriage on principle, for others

freedom in cohabitation was mainly beneficial for men who wanted to be able to explore different sexual relationships. The freedom of cohabitation was in contrast to the fidelity of marriage: the participants discussed the extent to which spouses could be each other's "property", implying sexual exclusivity but also security and protection, especially for women. Freedom in cohabitation was also important to women: in cohabitation women did not need to work as hard on domestic chores as in marriage. Hence, although cohabitation in Russia does provide freedom, as posited by the individualization thesis, traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity remain pervasive and colored by Russia's specific cultural context (see below for further discussion).

Finally, the UK article challenges the individualization thesis directly by exploring its opposite: commitment to another person. Berrington, Perelli-Harris, and Trevena (2015) find that commitment still remains at the core of relationships, regardless of whether they are cohabiting or married. However, the type of commitment appears to differ by relationship type. Participants generally agreed that personal commitment could be equally high in cohabiting and married relationships, although many still said that marriage was associated with being "wholly committed". Moral and structural commitment, on the other hand, tended to be higher in marriage, reflecting the greater emotional, financial, and social costs of divorcing rather than separating. Nonetheless, having children or buying a home together could lead to structural commitment and could be greater signs of commitment than marriage. As discussed above, the new sequencing of family events has meant that the meaning of commitment has shifted, and for many is no longer defined primarily through marriage.

The discussion of commitment was not unique to the UK; indeed, commitment was a central theme in all countries and was one of the main themes of the overview chapter. In most countries, respondents expressed the opinion that marriage implies a higher level of commitment, although again, children and housing could signify even higher levels of commitment. On the other hand, freedom and independence were also frequently mentioned as a benefit of cohabitation. Since cohabitation was most often referred to as a testing ground, the freedom to leave the union was clearly very important, but so was the freedom to travel independently, keep finances separate, and maintain a separate identity. However, freedom and commitment were opposite sides of the same coin: "Freedom was usually not taken to the extreme that people do not recognize the value of commitment that a long-term relationship entails." (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014: 1067). Thus, while the emphasis on freedom and the increase in individualization are important to understanding family change today, this Focus Group project repeatedly underscores the fundamental commitment that two people can make to each other.

4.3 Culture, religion, and the persistence of the past

The role of culture in partnership formation was, of course, ubiquitous in every article, as it shapes and defines the particularity of partnership formation in each context. However, some articles addressed specific aspects of culture and described the social processes that influence partnership decision-making. For example, the primary subject of the Italian chapter was the Catholic religion, which infuses and defines familial interactions, as has been noted in many studies on fertility and cohabitation (De Rose, Racioppi, Zanatta 2008; De Rose and Vignoli 2011). Using focus group methods, Vignoli and Salvini (2014) delve into how religion influences decisions about cohabitation and marriage. The authors identified three main mechanisms through which religion can operate: Catholic precepts, social pressure, and tradition. They found that moral precepts and dogma, for example, proscriptions about sex or living together outside of marriage, were rarely mentioned in the focus group discussions as reasons not to cohabit. Instead, social pressure to marry was key, operating through the family of origin and the opinions of “others” who encouraged marriage over long-term cohabitation. The church wedding was also an important ritual that symbolizes the importance of tradition and cultural history. Thus, the Italian case represents one in which tradition and culture maintain traditional family values, but not necessarily because of the direct influence of religious doctrine or church attendance.

The Russia article also drew out aspects of culture related to religion and the church wedding, but in a slightly different way than in Italy. In Russia, relationships often progress along a three-tier system of union formation that implies higher levels of commitment with each step: first couples cohabit, then they marry in a civil ceremony, and finally they marry in the Orthodox Church, when “commitment becomes virtually absolute”. (Isupova 2015: 359). Paradoxically, Orthodox Christianity does not encourage this kind of sequencing; full commitment sanctioned by the Church is required from the start. Isupova (2015) speculates that the three-tier system does not necessarily indicate deep belief or tradition but is an instrumental use of religion that has emerged more recently. She links this cultural development with the issue of anomie and trust, a topic which emerged repeatedly in the Russian focus groups and reflects the general state of Russian society. In an anomic society, individuals have difficulty trusting each other and institutions, and the lack of trust can extend to intimate partners and relationships. She found that the level of trust was higher for the couples who had directly married but could also be high for long-term, committed cohabiting couples; those in between tended to have low levels of trust. In addition, trust can increase as relationships progress, as demonstrated with the three-tier system of union formation. Thus lack of trust may be one of the main reasons for the development of cohabitation in Russia.

In Eastern Germany, post-socialist cultural developments are changing the meaning of marriage and leading to a preference for cohabitation (Klärner 2015). Eastern Germans increasingly think marriage is irrelevant, or just a “paper” that provides little indication of the strength of the relationship. Focus group participants said the indifference to marriage was due to the lack of religiosity in Eastern Germany (note the contrast with post-socialist Russia mentioned above, where religion is on the rise). They also spoke of globalization and new economic conditions, which lead to feelings of uncertainty that may influence decisions about marriage. However, the Eastern Germans also expressed a general awareness of a change in the way of life since the time of the German Democratic Republic. They repeatedly referred to situations in the past and the experiences of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, when marriage was expected at an early age and motivated by incentives such as apartments and other state subsidies. Without these expectations or incentives, marriage was felt to be less important for today’s couples. Indeed, the decline in the state’s role in marriage, coupled with high levels of divorce, uncertainty, and individualization, seems to have eroded the meaning of marriage in Eastern Germany. Thus, the Eastern German article demonstrates the importance of cultural memory and the “persistence of the past” in shaping social norms and attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation. In general, each of the articles in this Special Collection present case studies in how cultural and social processes shape meanings of marriage and cohabitation across time and space. Although it may be tempting to assume that the underlying causes of partnership change are uni-directional and universal, these articles demonstrate how each context is unique.

5. Conclusions

This focus group project has provided new insight into how social norms reflect, condition, and shape partnership behavior. Social norms are key to understanding how cultures operate and how social change occurs. In conjunction with individual attitudes and values, social norms have been crucial in some of the most prominent explanations of family change. Theories that stress the importance of ideational change and increasing individualization imply that different contexts have different social norms and that these norms change differentially over time (van de Kaa 2001; Lesthaeghe 2010; Thornton 2001). Hence, examining and digging into social norms is essential for understanding family change cross-nationally. While some initiatives have successfully examined social norms using survey data (Settersten and Hägestad 1996; Billari and Liefbroer 2007; Holland and de Valk 2015), until now demographic researchers have not conducted in-depth analyses of how people talk about cohabitation and marriage,

especially in a cross-national comparative perspective. Therefore, this project and the articles published in the Special Collection allow us to better understand how social norms differ and influence partnership behavior across countries, thereby enhancing and challenging current explanations of changes in the family.

Overall, the Special Collection has several theoretical and methodological contributions and implications, both for our understanding of partnership behavior and future research. First, the articles in the collection make important findings related to the concept of the life course and the changing sequencing of life events. In Austria, for example, we find that people generally think that cohabitation is ideal for young adults, while marriage is for later in the life course. In Norway, partnerships are now more defined by whether they include children, with marriage now primarily considered an optional celebration of the partnership. In many countries, divorce appears to have been a catalyst for the increase in cohabitation, especially in the Netherlands, where relationships have become more risky.

Second, several articles approached the individualization thesis head on, challenging it in several ways. As discussed above with regards to Austria, since cohabitation is preferred earlier in the life course and marriage is recommended for later, the individualization thesis seems to be more relevant in early adulthood than later adulthood, when responsibilities tend to accrue. In Poland, individualization does not seem to be spreading as rapidly: while Polish focus groups discussed how cohabitation was associated with freedom, the social norm clearly was still to enter into a long-term marriage. The UK article challenged the individualization thesis by focusing on commitment: the authors found that personal commitment appears to be growing for many cohabiting unions and in some cases is becoming similar to marriage. Nonetheless, commitment levels continue to differentiate between marriage and cohabitation. Indeed, these sentiments were present in all countries' focus groups (with the exception of Eastern Germany), as discussed in the overview paper, and suggest that individualization has not overtaken the need for emotional and personal commitment.

Third, the Special Collection emphasizes the enduring role of culture and history in defining partnership patterns. Previous studies have provided general correlations between partnership formation and various aspects of culture (Kalmijn 2013; Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014), but our focus groups reveal specific mechanisms and social norms that reflect culture. In Italy, for example, previous studies linked religion to the slow diffusion of cohabitation; however, our Italian focus group study found that social pressure and tradition were most important for maintaining the prominence of marriage, not necessarily Catholic dogma. In Russia the issue of trust arose repeatedly, as well as the three-tier system of union formation, both cultural signifiers that did not appear in other contexts. And in Eastern Germany, focus group participants were very aware of the role of historical memory and social change: they frequently discussed

how marriage was important during the Socialist era when state subsidies encouraged marriage, but had lost importance in the new context of individual freedom and economic uncertainty.

Taken as a whole, this project reveals that the meaning attributed to partnership arrangements is a moving target. Although demographers are well aware that the life course is being de-standardized, the pluralization of meanings associated with various family types, in particular cohabitation, has not been adequately theorized or emphasized. Researchers have attempted to categorize countries according to different types of cohabitation, e.g., alternative to being single, prelude to marriage, and alternative to marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004); however, as discussed in the overview paper, these categories are not sufficient to reflect the multiple meanings of cohabitation, nor can countries be classified according to a single category. Meanings change in a way that may be related to the timing of other life course transitions (e.g., childbearing and separation). They are also contingent on other life course domains, for example, education, employment, other family members, friends, and activities. Thus the meaning of cohabitation must be understood in the context of multidimensional life courses and in dialogue with other domains.

The use of cross-national focus groups allows us to triangulate between statistical data and substantive interpretations and should not be considered in isolation. We are well aware of the limitations of the focus group methodology, especially with respect to its lack of representation, selectivity of those willing to participate, favoring of those with a louder voice, and the possible conformity of responses according to social politeness. The focus group discussions were composed of individuals with their own partnership experiences; thus when discussing the answers to the questions, participants were reflecting on their own biographies and attitudes rather than directly describing widespread social norms. Although here we emphasize the role of culture and context, individuals are not always aware of macro-level influences on their own lives: thus it is the researchers' task to extract the normative discourses that emerge during the focus groups.

Our qualitative research has several important findings that are very relevant to quantitative research. First, our findings suggest the need for greater nuances in the interpretation of what cohabitation is. Previous qualitative US research has described how couples often slide into cohabitation, complicating the measurement of union starting dates (Manning and Smock 2005). Here we show that the multiple meanings of cohabitation, especially given the variation in commitment, make it difficult to even know what the entrance into and duration of cohabitation means. The focus group research raises issues for researchers because it emphasizes the heterogeneity in the meaning of cohabitation, for individuals, sub-groups, and at different stages of the life course. Many studies compare cohabitators and married people without acknowledging

the fluidity between the two categories. Cohabitation and marriage are not either-or statuses, but can change, both within a relationship and across the life course and according to the influence of other life domains.

Many quantitative measures reflect averages, means, and central tendencies, and have little room for complexity (see Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2015, Billari 2005). Demographers should strive to develop methods for analyzing complexity (e.g., latent class growth curves, sequence analysis, multi-state techniques, see Mikolai and Lyons-Amos 2015, Barban and Billari 2012), but also recognize the pluralization of meanings when interpreting the results of classic demographic techniques. Such complexity calls for developing innovative ways to measure what seems to matter in partnerships when people choose when and whether to marry (e.g., trust, commitment, risk, and celebration).

In addition, our findings suggest the need for a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances when interpreting the diffusion of cohabitation across Europe. The importance of culture is often lost in cross-national analyses of survey data. Behaviors may be reduced to a single meaning of cohabitation, without recognizing cultural processes. Analyses using multi-level models can be constrained by the use of superficial economic and policy indicators, and while these models may find that certain indicators are significant, it is not always easy to understand the relevance of the indicators without paying attention to context-specific details. Thus qualitative research can enrich this picture and help with the interpretation of quantitative findings.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the evolving meaning of cohabitation and partnership behavior can have consequences for individuals and the fabric of society in general. Thus far we have only alluded to whether cohabitation represents a private choice for individuals or has implications for society as a whole. Yet when individual behaviors are invested with a public discourse or carry a value for the society as a whole, they acquire social meaning. On the one hand, the differences between cohabitation and marriage may have substantial implications for social welfare (e.g., union stability, children's outcomes, well-being), especially since cohabitation is often not as well-recognized in the legal system as marriage, which may have implications for how states support vulnerable individuals (Sanchez Gassen and Perelli-Harris 2015). On the other hand, cohabitation contributes to family diversity and may indicate greater acceptance of alternative lifestyles. Further research on the social meanings and consequences of cohabitation and marriage would provide important insights into what is at stake in different contexts when we observe changes in partnerships.

To conclude, this special collection has moved us towards a better understanding of the plethora of social norms and meanings surrounding cohabitation, especially given the macro-level context that contributes to shaping them. This type of work is essential for understanding the micro-macro link of demographic processes, because it links

individual decision-making to the macro-level context through social norms and discourses. The way that people talk about cohabitation, marriage, and family formation differs in many ways across these countries, reflecting not only the different levels of cohabitation and childbearing within cohabitation but also the different cultural and historical institutions which influence partnership decision-making. Hence, while we may observe universal trends that are changing human behavior everywhere, the way in which the behaviors change in each context is still unique.

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