The Perils of "Reading History Sideways": Is Unmarried Cohabitation Really a Moving Target?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT for the EPC

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Background

Several authors argued that unmarried cohabitating unions are a "moving target" (Seltzer 2000: 1247). Some scholars proposed that the meaning of unmarried cohabitation changes with its rising diffusion in a population, typically evolving from a "marginal phenomenon" over a "prelude to marriage" phase and a legitimate "alternative to marriage" to finally become "indistinguishable" from marriage (e.g., Kiernan 2004, Sobotka, Toulemon 2008).

These theories share the emphasis on gradual – and presumably universal – change: countries shall evolve around the same path, only at a different pace and/or with a delayed starting point; i.e., they operate within the so-called "developmental paradigm" of family change and thus face the peril of "reading history sideways" (Thorton, 2001). Their ability to inform cross-country comparisons and to illustrate developments over time is based on very strong (and untested) assumptions. As Thorton (2001) pointed out, such an approach can result in a bias because it is ethnocentrically built around the suggested "highest stage of development", which is – depending on which cohabitation typology is examined – Nordic countries or France (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Hiekel et al., 2014). Central and Eastern European countries are then seen as "catching up" with these role-model countries.

While several authors (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012, Di Giulio et al., 2019) challenge the idea that there is a unified pattern of cohabitation following the level of cohabitation diffusion in the given country, their arguments are based on objective indicators of union situation (childbirth, marriage, and separation). In this presentation, we turn our attention to a more subjective typology of unmarried cohabitations (see Hiekel et al., 2014). Changes (in the subjective typology of unmarried cohabitations) over time within one society have not been investigated to the present date.

Aim and research questions

Our aim in this presentation is to see if the position of unmarried cohabitation in the broader landscape of family change evolves over time. Our analysis operates with one common typology of unmarried cohabitations (Hiekel et al., 2014) and examines it across two different time points.

We ask: Did the number of people living in different types of unmarried cohabitations indeed change as predicted by the developmental paradigm? Do we indeed see a declining number of cohabitations that serve as prelude to marriage and an increase in the number of cohabitations that are "indistinguishable from marriage", for instance?

Context

Czechia is an interesting test case as its recent, multi-faceted population change was concentrated in a relatively brief period of time after 1989. Up until the 1989, family life was mostly a monothematic experience characterised by early and almost universal marriage and the two-child family ideal

(Sobotka et al., 2003). That changed with the fall of socialism, which was followed by swift demographic changes, such as a rise in divorce rates, decreased nuptiality and fertility rates, a rise in unmarried cohabitation or a rise of age at the first marriage (Sobotka et al., 2003).

The proportion of cohabitors has been increasing since the 1990s. Among all co-residential unions inspected in 1991, only 3.5 % were unmarried cohabitations. This proportion increased to 5.4 % in 2001, and finally, the 2011 census registered 11.2 % cohabitations among all coresidential unions (Czech Statistical Office, 2014). Modal cohabitation type changed from a post-divorce to a pre-marital arrangement (Zeman, 2003, Czech Statistical Office, 2014). Yet, short premarital cohabitations existed even before 1989 (Paloncyová and Šťastná, 2012). In fact, the share of cohabitations among all first unions surpassed the 50% mark around the 1970 birth cohort (Kreidl & Štípková 2012: Graph 1) and continued to grow up to 70 % among women born around 1975 (Paloncyová & Šťastná, 2012: Graph 1). Young people (15–17-year-olds born between 1991 and 1993) surveyed in 2008 showed a clear preference for unmarried cohabitation as the first co-residential union (Katrňák et al., 2010).

Data and variables

Our analysis is based on the GGS (Generations and Gender Survey) data from Czechia. We use two samples, one from 2005 (GGS I.) and one from 2020-2022 (GGS II.) to carry out the comparison. GGS I. included 10,006 respondents. GGS II. (including its large-scale pilot) yielded 7,053 respondents (5,740 from the main sample and 1,313 from the pilot). Because our conceptualization of various cohabitation types relies – to a large extent – on subjective and attitudinal questions, we can only study cohabitations that existed at the time of the survey interview. We cannot utilize information from the partnership histories. As a result, we use these datasets as cross-sectional.

Our analysis proceeds in steps: to document the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation, we use the full sample (15,778 respondents), to document the share of coresident unions that are unmarried, we use a coresident sample (N=9,559). The final analytical sample – that we use to map of the incidence of various cohabitation types – consists of 1,722 cohabitors (649 from 2005 and 1073 from 2020-2022).

Cohabitation typology

To create the variable for the subjective typology of cohabitation according to Hiekel et al. (2014), we use three variables: 1) the intention to get married, 2) the attitude toward the institution of marriage, and 3) the expression of economic hardship.

The intention to get married were measured by the question, "Do you intend to marry your partner during the next three years?" **The attitude towards the institution of marriage** was measured by the level of agreement with the statement, "Marriage is an outdated institution". The answers were measured on a five-point scale with the options of "strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree", and "strongly disagree" in both datasets. The indicator for **the expression of economic hardship** was measured by the question, "Thinking of your household's total monthly income, is your household able to make ends meet …" with the choice from the answers: "with great difficulty", "with difficulty", "with some difficulty", "fairly easily", "easily", and" very easily". For the sake of the typology, only individuals who answered "with (great) difficulty" are classified as feeling economically deprived.

The combination of the indicators creates the variable of the subjective typology that consists of five categories of ideal types of cohabitation meanings. Table 1 presents an overview of the combination of the main indicators that create each ideal type (for further reference, see Hiekel et al., 2014 and the chapters 1.2 and 1.3 of this thesis).

Table 1. Operationalisation of the subjective typology of cohabitation. Adapted from Hiekel et al. (2014)

Broad cohabitation meaning	Ideal cohabitation type	Intention to marry within 3 years	Agrees marriage is outdated	Has trouble making ends meet
Forerunner of marriage – most likely to get married	Prelude to marriage	Yes	No	Not used
	Conformist	Yes	Yes / Neutral	Not used
Forerunner of marriage – possibly getting married	Trial marriage	No	No	No
	Economic reasons	No	No	Yes
Alternative to marriage – unlikely to get married	Refusal of marriage	No	Yes	Not used
	Marriage is irrelevant	No	Neutral	Not used

Control variables

Respondent's sex, age, and education were used as control as was the length of coresidence with current partner.

Results

Between 2005 and 2021, the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation in the 18-69 population grew from 9 % to 19 %. Among coresident partners, the share of cohabitors increased from 15 % to 27 %.
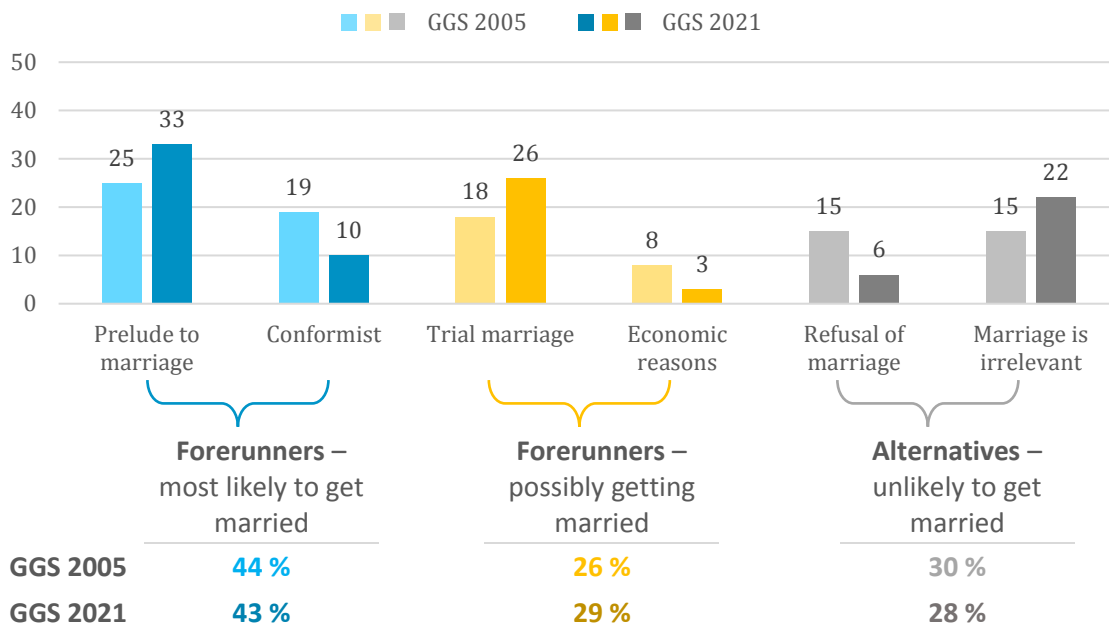
While the distribution of various cohabitation types changed between 2005 and 2022, this change is not really in line with the developmental paradigm. We observe a modest grow of cohabitations that are either "trial marriages" (from 25 % to 33 %) or "trial marriages" (from 18 % to 26 %), but we see little grow in the number of cohabitations that would be "alternatives" to marriage (see Figure 1).

It appears that in 2021, unmarried cohabitations still primarily served as "prelude to marriage". The presence of the more "advanced" cohabitation types did not change.

Implications

We challenge the idea that cohabitation is a "moving target" and propose that we should be more careful in operating with the "developmental paradigm" when studying family change.

Figure 1. Percent (weighted) distribution of cohabitation types in time. Czech cohabitors aged 18–69 years. Data from GGS 2005 (N=649[a]) and GGS 2021 (N=1,073[a])

	Forerunners – most likely to get married	Forerunners – possibly getting married	Alternatives – unlikely to get married
GGS 2005	44 %	26 %	30 %
GGS 2021	43 %	29 %	28 %

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