

## **Attitudes toward Cohabitation in 28 Countries: Does Marital Status Matter?**

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### *Abstract*

Cohabitation has become a norm in many countries during the last decades. In this research I compare people's attitudes toward cohabitation in 28 nations and explore how current marital status influences these attitudes in countries with high, medium and low cohabitation rates. The analysis shows that there are considerable cross-country differences in the attitudes toward cohabitation that are strongly related to the prevalence of this type of union. Married people are the most conservative. Cohabiting individuals hold the most positive attitudes toward cohabitation, but the difference in the level of approval between cohabitators and married is larger in countries with medium and low cohabitation rates.

Cohabitation has become a norm in many countries during the last decades, and the attitudes toward this form of living arrangement have been changing even faster (Kiernan, 1999; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). There is considerable cross-country variation in both prevalence and level of support for cohabitation. Different micro-level factors can have different relations with people's attitudes toward cohabitation depending on the specific demographic situation, cultural and historical context. Even though much research on cohabitation in countries of Western Europe and North America has been done, few studies are cross-national. Data on cohabitation in Southern and Eastern Europe as well as in Latin America are limited or not readily available to researchers. The proposed research is intended to fill some of these gaps. The goals of this investigation are: 1) to compare attitudes toward cohabitation in 28 countries and 2) to explore how current marital status is related to people's attitudes toward cohabitation in countries with high, medium and low cohabitation rates.

### **Hypotheses**

There are considerable regional variations in the prevalence of cohabitation. Some authors (e.g. Bumpass, 1990) suggest that there may be feedback from demographic behavior to the institution of marriage. Higher divorce or cohabitation rates make this type of behavior more widespread and ordinary and, thus, more acceptable (Manting, 1995; Kiernan, 2004).

*Hypothesis 1: There will be considerable cross-country variation in the degree of approval of cohabitation.*

*Hypothesis 2: On average, people's view of cohabitation will be more positive in countries with higher cohabitation rates.*

On the other hand, positive attitudes toward cohabitation here indicate only that people are “willing” to practice cohabitation (Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoeft, 2001), but other factors must be in effect to transform this willingness into actual behavior. On the micro-level, people who ever cohabited show more approval of cohabitation than those who never did (Cunningham and Thornton, 2005). However, the more common cohabitation is, the less selective of a certain demographic group it becomes. Therefore, the characteristics of cohabitators may become less salient (Manting, 1995). Also, it is likely that in countries with high cohabitation rates, many people who are currently married or single cohabited at some earlier point of their lives. These prior cohabitators are likely to regard cohabitation as normal, even though they are not cohabiting now. Similarly, it is likely that in countries with low cohabitation rates, most people either stay single or marry directly without cohabiting. Therefore, they are expected to be significantly less approving of cohabitation than cohabitators are.

*Hypothesis 3: In countries with relatively high prevalence of cohabitation the differences in the support of cohabitation between currently married, single and cohabiting people will be less pronounced than in countries, in which cohabitation is not very common.*

The higher the cohabitation rates, the smaller the marital status differences in approval of cohabitation. But there is also some evidence that, on average, married people (even those who have cohabited before marriage) tend to be more conservative in their value orientations than single or cohabiting individuals (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004).

### **Data and measures**

I use individual-level data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) “Family and Changing Gender Role III” (2002) for 28 countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA. The dependent variable is a scale constructed from the two questions about cohabitation: “To what extent do you agree or disagree 1) it is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married 2) it is a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first”. The responses ranged from 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree”. For the ease of interpretation I reverse coded and summed the scores of the two items. The resulting scale is a continuous variable ranging from 0 – “strongly disapprove” to 8 – “strongly approve (of cohabitation)” ( $\alpha = 0.756$ ).

The key independent variable, marital status, is constructed from the questions about respondent’s marital status and whether or not he/she has a steady life partner. The five marital status categories were created: married, widowed,

divorced/separated, single/never married, and cohabiting. Cohabitors are those who reported having a steady life partner at the time of the survey. Unfortunately, because of the small number of cases for some marital groups and different categories for some countries, it was impossible to make more specific distinctions (e.g. “single-cohabiting” or “divorced-cohabiting”).

I used OLS regression models to explore whether marital status significantly influences people’s attitudes toward cohabitation and the relative strength of this factor in 28 countries. The control variables are age, gender, level of education, employment status, and religious observance (frequency of attending religious services).

Because data on the prevalence of cohabitation are limited in many countries, I calculated the cohabitation rates from the ISSP data set<sup>1</sup>, which is reported to be representative of the national populations. Still, the survey results are normally less accurate than the census data.

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<sup>1</sup> The relatively current data on cohabitation can be obtained at least for some European countries, but it takes time to calculate the rates. I’m intending to do this as I continue to work on this paper.

**Table 1. Cohabitation rates and the attitudes toward cohabitation in 28 counties (ISSP, 2002)**

	Country	Cohabitation rate (%)	Cohabitation scale (mean)	Standard deviation	Rank 1 <sup>1</sup>	Rank 2 <sup>2</sup>	Rank difference
High prevalence	1. Sweden	24.06	6.46	1.487	2	3	-1
	2. Finland	18.84	6.05	1.948	4	9	-5
	3. Norway	18.82	5.93	1.705	6	14	-8
	4. Brazil	16.18	5.46	2.959	13	5	8
	5. Denmark	15.77	7.27	1.531	1	1	0
	6. Germany	15.55	5.75	1.676	11	11	0
	7. Netherlands	13.21	5.92	1.485	7	12	-5
	8. France	12.91	6.35	1.832	3	4	-1
Medium prevalence	9. Chile	9.55	5.15	1.871	18	19	-1
	10. New Zealand	9.38	4.92	2.004	22	24	-2
	11. Austria	9.11	6.05	1.700	5	2	3
	12. Great Britain	8.68	5.34	1.745	16	22	-6
	13. Switzerland	8.57	5.84	1.525	9	6	3
	14. Hungary	8.48	5.77	1.860	10	13	-3
	15. Czech Rep	8.02	5.34	2.000	17	20	-3
	16. Belgium	7.61	5.92	1.480	8	7	1
	17. USA	6.83	4.33	2.489	27	27	0
	18. Latvia	6.81	4.94	1.769	21	25	-4
	19. Slovenia	6.59	5.63	1.558	12	8	4
Low prevalence	20. Spain	5.69	5.40	1.740	15	17	-2
	21. Ireland	5.61	4.97	1.878	20	16	4
	22. Australia	3.88	4.99	2.020	19	23	-4
	23. Portugal	3.67	5.43	1.945	14	10	4
	24. N Ireland	3.14	4.71	2.202	24	21	3
	25. Israel	3.05	4.49	2.662	26	26	0
	26. Slovakia	2.74	4.00	2.430	28	28	0
	27. Mexico	2.43	4.60	2.216	25	18	7
	28. Poland	2.36	4.84	1.943	23	15	8

<sup>1</sup> Cohabitation approval country rank

<sup>2</sup> Cohabitation approval country rank after controlling for age, gender, education level, employment status, and religiosity

## Results

Not surprisingly, Sweden has the highest cohabitation rate (24%) followed by Finland, Norway, Brazil and Denmark (Table 1). The lowest cohabitation rates are found in Poland, Mexico, Slovakia, and Israel. Other countries are located somewhere in between. Overall, in countries with high cohabitation rates approval of cohabitation is greater. The Pearson's correlation coefficient between cohabitation rate and the mean approval of cohabitation on country level is .728. However, the highest rate of approval of cohabitation is in Denmark, and it is considerably higher than in Sweden and France that follow. In New Zealand and the US, attitudes toward cohabitation are fairly negative compared to the countries with comparable cohabitation rates. Moreover, after controlling the individual factors (the OLS regression model with country dummy variables, not shown), some countries significantly changed their relative rank: for example, Brazil climbed to the 5<sup>th</sup> place from the 13<sup>th</sup>, Norway dropped from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> place, and Poland and Mexico climbed from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> and from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> position, respectively. This indicates that the differences in demographic composition of national populations greatly figure in the attitudes toward cohabitation on a country-level. The country-level correlation between cohabitation rate and the predicted cohabitation approval after controlling for the individual-level factors is smaller and equals to .572.

I grouped countries into three categories according to the current cohabitation rate. The first group contains nations with relatively high cohabitation rate (over 10% of the total population age 18 and older) and includes Sweden, Finland, Norway, Brazil, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and France. The second group includes

countries with medium cohabitation rate (between 6 and 10%): Chile, New Zealand, Austria, Great Britain, Switzerland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Belgium, USA, Latvia, and Slovenia. And the third group consists of countries with low cohabitation rate (less than 6%), such as Spain, Ireland, Australia, Portugal, Northern Ireland, Israel, Slovakia, Mexico, and Poland.

To find out whether the association of marital status<sup>2</sup> with approval of cohabitation differ in the groups of countries with different cohabitation rates, I ran a modified pooled regression model with the dummy variables for the level of approval of cohabitation (high, medium, low) instead of country dummies. The results are presented in Table 2.

Overall, net of the individual factors, single people are more supportive of cohabitation than married, and divorced and currently cohabiting are even more approving of cohabitation than single (Model 1). Living in a country with medium or low cohabitation prevalence reduces the mean approval of cohabitation by .629 or .850, respectively.

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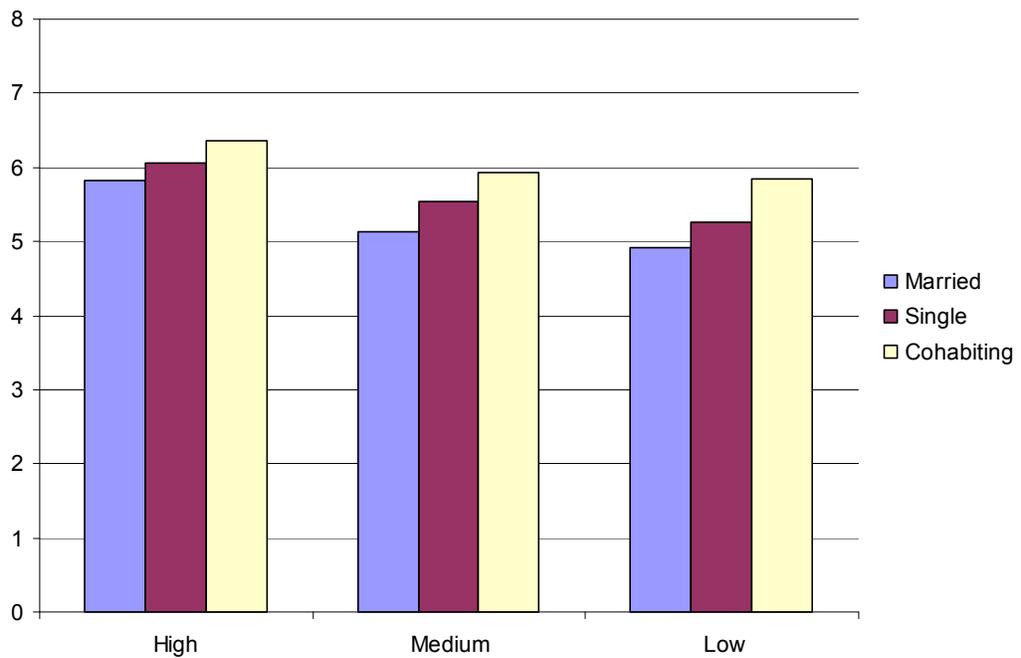
<sup>2</sup> I currently focus my analysis on the three major marital status groups: single, married, and cohabiting.

**Table 2. Unstandardized OLS regression coefficients: Attitudes toward cohabitation**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Gender ( <i>Male</i> ) – <i>reference group</i>	-	-
Female	.109**	.108**
Education level	.027**	.027**
Attendance of religious services	-.415**	-.413**
Marital status ( <i>Married</i> )	-	-
Widowed	-.028	.018
Divorced/Separated	.420**	.425**
Single/Never married	.343**	.226**
Cohabiting	.691**	.544**
Age ( <i>18-24</i> )	-	-
25-34	-.080	-.079
35-44	-.151**	-.151**
45-54	-.314**	-.315**
55-64	-.568**	-.570**
65+	-1.012**	-1.015**
Employment status ( <i>All others</i> )	-	-
Currently employed	.093**	.090**
Cohabitation rate ( <i>High</i> )	-	-
Medium	-.629**	-.700**
Low	-.850**	-.905**
Interaction terms		
Single*Medium		.199**
Single*Low		.118
Cohabiting*Medium		.270**
Cohabiting*Low		.375**
(Constant)	6.670	6.715
R squared	.227	.227
<i>N</i>	33,184	33,184

\* statistically significant at .05 level

\*\* statistically significant at .001 level



**Graph 1. Predicted mean level of approval of cohabitation in countries with high, medium, and low prevalence of cohabitation.**

Then, the interaction terms between the group level of approval of cohabitation and marital status were included in the model (Model 2). All interaction coefficients, except one, are statistically significant at .001 level, which means that the effect of marital status on attitudes toward cohabitation is different in groups of countries with high and medium/low cohabitation rates. However, adding the interactions does not improve model fit, which means that the effects are not that much different. The models with or without the interactions explain about 27% of the variation in attitudes toward cohabitation.

To demonstrate the effect of marital status on attitudes toward cohabitation in countries with different prevalence of cohabitation I calculated the predicted means (Graph 1). The general pattern is the same: cohabitators are the most approving of cohabitation, married are the least approving, and single/never married are located somewhere in between. However, as predicted, the effect of marital status is somewhat smaller in countries with high cohabitation rates. In countries with low cohabitation rates, the difference in the mean approval of cohabitation between cohabitators and married is the largest. Indeed, the mean approval of cohabitation by cohabitators in countries with low prevalence of cohabitation is about the same as that of married people in countries with high prevalence of cohabitation.

### **Conclusion**

As was expected, the cross-country differences in the prevalence and the level of support of cohabitation are substantial, and there is a strong link between these indicators on the country-level. The results for the European nations are by and large consistent with the previous research (Kiernan, 1996). But this research also allows us to compare relatively under-investigated countries, such as Brazil, Chile, Mexico, to Nordic and European countries. The data show that the cohabitation rate is relatively high in Brazil (16.18%) and the attitudes toward cohabitation are fairly positive (the mean is 5.46), but large individual differences exist (the standard deviation is 2.959). Chile looks more like one of the countries in the medium-level group, and Mexico is more similar to one of the countries in the low-level group.

However, the development of cohabitation in Latin America could be very different from that of European countries, and it needs to be investigated further.

Current marital status is strongly associated with individual attitudes toward cohabitation. Overall, married people are more conservative than single, and those currently cohabiting are the most approving of cohabitation. But the salience of this factor decreases with the increased prevalence of cohabitation as was expected. In countries with low cohabitation rates, the cohabitators stand apart as a group. They comprise a small percent of the total population, their behavior is non-conformist, and their attitudes on cohabitation are significantly more favorable than those of married and single persons within their nations. And even in countries with relatively high cohabitation rates, the distinctions remain, but perhaps for other reasons because the meaning of cohabitation in these countries might be different (Manting, 1996; Seltzer, 2004;). One of the possible explanations is that in countries where cohabitation is nearly universal, marriage becomes self-selective, e.g., people who decided to marry are those who dislike cohabitation (or at least value marriage more). Unfortunately, the ISSP data is cross-sectional, and it do not contain the information about previous cohabitation experience of the respondents nor parental cohabitation/divorce experience, which is necessary to make clearer distinctions between the effects of life-course events, intergenerational transmission, current marital status and the overall prevalence of cohabitation. Further research on the links between the meaning, the prevalence and the attitudes toward cohabitation in different societies is needed.

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