Contextual Conditions and Childbearing in Cohabitation across Europe

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Premarital cohabitation and transition to parenthood within cohabiting unions have increasingly gained ground in Europe, but patterns of union formation and childbearing have developed along different trajectories across countries (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe 2004; Kiernan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). An array of social, economic, and ideational forces has produced variation over time and space, calling for more research about the relationship between contextual factors and family formation decisions. The aim of this paper is to investigate how variation in contextual conditions relates to variation in childbearing in cohabitation across Europe. As far as we are aware this is the first time such a study is carried out at the sub-national regional level covering a large number of European countries.

Theoretical Considerations and Hypotheses

There exists quite extensive regional variation in childbearing within cohabitation in Europe, as is illustrated in figure 1. The map displays the share of first births among partners sharing a household, which occur in cohabitation and not in marriage. The data we are using covers the time-period 2000-2008. There is not only variation between countries, but also between regions within a country. Countries with high regional variation include Germany, Norway, Poland and Russia. Overall, however, the between-country component of variation appears to be more relevant than the within component.

Figure 1: Regional variation in Childbearing in Cohabitation (First Births)

Source: Harmonized Histories, own calculations
Base Map: MPIDR/CGG; partly based on © EuroGeographics for the administrative boundaries
Several authors have shown that individual characteristics are important for the decision to get a child within cohabitation (Billy and Moore, 1992; Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004; Kiernan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). In addition, we believe that also the context in which the individuals are embedded matters in shaping the spatial variation in childbearing within cohabitation (see also Billy and Moore, 1992). In our study we consider four key contextual dimensions.

“Social acceptability of cohabitation” — We expect that children are less likely to be born in cohabitation in regions with lower acceptance of people living together without being married. In a region, where many people disagree with couples cohabiting, it is also more likely that one or both partners are of the opinion people should be married if they live together and get children. However, it might also influence the behaviour of individuals, which are in general open to cohabitation. If they are aware that cohabitation and childbearing in cohabitation is generally perceived as a norm-deviating behaviour in a region, they might decide to pursue with a norm-complying behaviour and marry before the birth of the child.

“Importance of religious norms” — Historically, there is a strong link between religion and marriage. In many areas of Europe marriage was until the 19th century a religious act, in which the state played little role. This only changed when a number of states introduced civil marriage. Though marriage is today in most European countries solely a state act, religious institutions might still play a role in influencing family formation behavior. We expect that in regions where religious values are still wide-spread, people will be more likely to marry prior to conception or childbirth.

“Women’s economic autonomy” — In an environment where women and men have practically equal employment chances women might be less reliant on kin-relations in supplying themselves and their offspring with necessary assets. As a result, marriage might lose its function as a female strategy to secure access to financial assets. We expect that children are more likely to be born in cohabitation in regions that score high on perception of economic independence of men and women.

“Structural economic condition” — It has been argued that social disorganisation and the prevalence of “the culture of poverty” or blocked opportunities might serve to increase the risk of having children outside marriage and thereby childbearing within cohabitation (Billy and Moore, 1992). Also the pattern of disadvantage hypothesis brought forward by Perelli-Harris et al. (2010) argues in that direction. We expect that children are more likely to be born in cohabitation in regions with unfavourable economic conditions.

Data and Methods
We use harmonized individual-level survey data on union formation and fertility behaviour for 15 countries across Europe, made available by the Harmonized Histories Project coordinated by the MPIDR. The contextual data on social norms and values has been derived from the following surveys: European Social Survey; European Value Survey; Generations and Gender Survey. Unemployment data is derived from aggregated information of the EU-SILC surveys as provided in the GGP-Contextual Database (2012).

We employ a logistic multi-level regression model with random intercept in order to explore whether the first birth within a relationship occurs within cohabitation or marriage. We follow an empirical strategy consisting of three steps. First, we estimate the null model to test whether our data do or do not require a multilevel analysis. Second, we estimate a model with only first-level variables (at the individual level). Finally, we estimate a larger model, including both first-, second- and third-level variables (at the regional/country level) allowing us to interpret the variability associated with the context. For each of our contextual variables
we introduce two measures in our models. The first is a “within country” measure for which we take the deviation of the regional value from the country mean. The second is a “between country” measure, for which we use the country mean.

**Results**

In the unconditional (null) model 34% of total unexplained variation whether a first birth occurs in cohabitation or marriage can be attributed to contextual variation. Between-county variation is clearly dominating as 33 percentage points of the 34% are related to differences between countries. This result is in line with findings of Klüsener et al. (2013) who analysed aggregated regional level data on nonmarital fertility. It also supports the view that nation states are still very relevant in shaping demographic behaviour, as e.g. national family legislation, standardized education systems and nation-wide mass media are working towards harmonising norms related to family formation behaviour.

Standardizing our estimates for individual characteristics, the unexplained contextual variation increased to 42%. However, after controlling for contextual covariates, only 4% of the unexplained variation can still be attributed to the context. These results suggest that the contextual variables we selected are able to explain a very large proportion of contextual variation whether a first birth occurs in cohabitation or marriage.

Table 1 shows the results for the contextual variables. Regarding the dimension “acceptability of cohabitation” we found that the deviation of the region from the country mean is significantly positively associated with variation in childbearing within cohabitation: the higher the disapproval of cohabitation, the lower is the likelihood of childbearing in cohabitation. The religious denomination variable is not significant both in the between-country and the within-country dimension. This might partly stem from the fact that in some countries religious denomination is only weakly linked with levels of religiosity (e.g. Bulgaria or France). The perceptions on the economic independence of men and women plays out more at the between-country level. That is, the higher the disagreement in a country that man should be preferred on the labour market if jobs are short, the higher the share of couples that get their first child in cohabitation. For the last dimension, we found that the higher the level of unemployment in terms of deviation from the country mean, the higher the likelihood of childbearing in cohabitation.

| Disagree that it is alright for people to live together without being married | 0.68 | 0.18*** |
| Religious denomination (yes, no) | 1.01 |
| Perceptions on the economic independence of men and women | 6.90*** | 1.22 |
| Unemployment Rate | 0.96 | 1.04** |

**Table 1: Contextual factors affecting childbearing in cohabitation (Odds Ratios). Women, 2000-2008**

Note: *p<0.1 †p<0.05 ‡p<0.01 ††p<0.001. Controlled for: respondent’s gender, age at first birth, educational level, highest level of education achieved before 1st birth, and social background.

Overall, between-country variation in perceptions on the economic autonomy of women are highly positively associated with variation in childbearing in cohabitation. This lends support to the Second Demographic Transition Framework (Lesthaeghe, 2010), which argues that the decrease in marriage is linked to the trend of increasing individual autonomy. On the other hand, we find within countries a positive association between unemployment rates and childbearing within cohabitation, which is in line with the Pattern of Disadvantage
Hypothesis (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010): in times of uncertain economic conditions, the temporary and reversible nature of cohabitation provides an alternative to the commitments of marriage. Thus, both theoretical frameworks, which might appear contradictory at first glance, seem relevant for understanding recent changes in family formation behaviour.

**Basic references**


