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We also tested to what extent the diffusion of cohabitation could explain any differences across countries. We expected that cohabitation and marriage would become more similar as the percent of first births within cohabitation increased, as has been found in studies of subjective well-being (Soons and Kalmijn 2009). However, the relationship between the prevalence of cohabitation and cohabitators' behavior was not linear. Instead, the relationship turned out to be an inverted U. The findings imply that initially, when childbearing within cohabitation was still marginal, as in Italy, cohabiting women had significantly lower second conception risks. As first births within cohabitation increased, the difference in second conception risks for cohabiting and married women narrowed. Then, when more than a quarter of first births occurred within cohabitation, the difference between cohabitation and marriage increased again. When the percent of first births in cohabitation reached its maximum (55%), second conception rates for cohabitation and marriage were most dissimilar.

This finding suggests that the relationship between the diffusion of cohabitation and changing behavior is not straightforward. As cohabitation increases, it does not simply become indistinguishable from marriage. Instead, context-specific mechanisms preserve distinctions between cohabitation and marriage. Country-specific explanations, including the cultural, socio-economic, and policy environment may be better at explaining differences than a simple model of diffusion. In addition, even though countries may have similar outcomes, the reasons underlying the outcomes may differ. For example, the Catholic Church

may play a role in countries such as Poland and Lithuania, but in more secular countries like Austria, state policies favoring the breadwinner model may encourage marriage.

Nevertheless, this study shows that in many countries of Western Europe and the United States, cohabiting and married couples do have different fertility behaviors after having had one child together. Second conception risks within cohabitation are much lower, indicating that cohabitation should not be considered “an alternative to marriage” or “indistinguishable from marriage” (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). We urge researchers, particularly in Western Europe, to recognize this distinction in their models and note that the two types of unions appear to be substantially different, regardless of length of union. On the other hand, cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage are clearly connected, with decisions about each occurring jointly (Wu and Musick 2008, Steele et al 2005a). Cohabitors can marry and then have behaviors indistinguishable from those who married earlier in the relationship. Therefore, it is important to study the interplay between cohabitation and marriage to better understand how these two types of relationship are evolving.

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