

- [Articles](#)
 - [Current Volume](#)
 - [Older Volumes](#)
 - [Editor's Choice](#)
 - [Replicable Articles](#)
 - [by Author](#)
 - [by Subject](#)
 - [Search](#)
- [Special Collections](#)
 - [About Special Collections](#)
 - [All Special Collections](#)
- [for Authors](#)
 - [General Information](#)
 - [Submission Guidelines](#)
 - [Peer Review and Publication](#)
 - [Copyright Information](#)
 - [Review Process](#)
 - [Submit a Paper](#)
 - [Submit a Letter](#)
 - [My Author Account](#)
- [for Readers](#)
 - [Get Email Alerts](#)
 - [How to cite DR](#)
- [About the Journal](#)
 - [Purpose](#)
 - [From the Publisher and Editor](#)
 - [Who's Who](#)
 - [Our Reviewers](#)
 - [Contact Us](#)
 - [Copyright & Legal](#)
 - [Privacy Policy](#)

Search DR journal and we

[Volume 31](#) - Article 34 | Pages 1043–1078

Towards a new understanding of cohabitation: Insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia

By [Brienna Perelli-Harris](#), [Monika Mynarska](#), [Ann Berrington](#), [Caroline Berghammer](#), [Ann Evans](#), [Olga Isupova](#), [Renske Keizer](#), [Andreas Klärner](#), [Trude Lappegård](#), [Daniele Vignoli](#)

[Download PDF](#) [Submit a Response Letter](#)



Date received: 27 Nov 2013

Date published: 12 Nov 2014

Word count: 10384

Keywords: [cohabitation](#), [Europe](#), [family](#), [marriage](#), [partnership](#), [relationships](#), [unions](#)

DOI: [10.4054/DemRes.2014.31.34](#)

Weblink: [You will find all publications in this Special Collection "Focus on Partnerships: Discourses on cohabitation and marriage throughout Europe and Australia" at http://www.demographic-research.org/special/17/](#)

Abstract

Background: Across the industrialized world, more couples are living together without marrying. Although researchers have compared cohabitation cross-nationally using quantitative data, few have compared union formation using qualitative data.

Objective: We use focus group research to compare social norms of cohabitation and marriage in Australia and nine countries in Europe. We explore questions such as: what is the meaning of cohabitation? To what extent is cohabitation indistinguishable from marriage, a prelude to marriage, or an alternative to being single? Are the meanings of cohabitation similar across countries?

Methods: Collaborators conducted seven to eight focus groups in each country using a standardized guideline. They analyzed the discussions with bottom-up coding in each thematic area. They then collated the data in a standardized report. The first and second authors systematically analyzed the reports, with direct input from collaborators.

Results: The results describe a specific picture of union formation in each country. However, three themes emerge in all focus groups: commitment, testing, and freedom. The pervasiveness of these concepts suggests that marriage and cohabitation have distinct meanings, with marriage representing a stronger level of commitment. Cohabitation is a way to test the relationship, and represents freedom. Nonetheless, other discourses emerged, suggesting that cohabitation has multiple meanings.

Conclusions: This study illuminates how context shapes partnership formation, but also presents underlying reasons for the development of cohabitation. We find that the increase in cohabitation has not devalued the concept of marriage, but has become a way to preserve marriage as an ideal for long-term commitment.

Author's Affiliation

[Brienna Perelli-Harris](#) - University of Southampton, United Kingdom [[Email](#)]

[Monika Mynarska](#) - Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie, Poland [[Email](#)]

[Ann Berrington](#) - University of Southampton, United Kingdom [[Email](#)]

[Caroline Berghammer](#) - Universität Wien, Austria [[Email](#)]

[Ann Evans](#) - Australian National University, Australia [[Email](#)]

[Olga Isupova](#) - National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Russian Federation [[Email](#)]

[Renske Keizer](#) - Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Netherlands [[Email](#)]

[Andreas Klärner](#) - Johann Heinrich von Thünen-Institut, Germany [[Email](#)]

[Trude Lappegård](#) - Universitetet i Oslo, Norway [[Email](#)]

[Daniele Vignoli](#) - Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy [[Email](#)]

Other articles by the same author/authors in Demographic Research

» [The role of education in the intersection of partnership transitions and motherhood in Europe and the United States](#)

Volume 39 - Article 27

» [The positive impact of women's employment on divorce: Context, selection, or anticipation?](#)

Volume 38 - Article 37

» [Can a cash transfer to families change fertility behaviour?](#)

Volume 38 - Article 33

» [Introduction to the Special Collection on Finding Work-Life Balance: History, Determinants, and Consequences of New Bread-Winning Models in the Industrialized World](#)

Volume 37 - Article 26

» [Cross-national differences in women's repartnering behaviour in Europe: The role of individual demographic characteristics](#)

Volume 37 - Article 8

» [On the normative foundations of marriage and cohabitation: Results from group discussions in eastern and western Germany](#)

Volume 36 - Article 53

» [Uncertain lives: Insights into the role of job precariousness in union formation in Italy](#)

Volume 35 - Article 10

» [The fertility of recent migrants to England and Wales](#)

Volume 34 - Article 36

- » [Educational differences in timing and quantum of childbearing in Britain: A study of cohorts born 1940–1969](#)
Volume 33 - Article 26
- » [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"](#)
Volume 33 - Article 25
- » [Commitment and the changing sequence of cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage: Insights from qualitative research in the UK](#)
Volume 33 - Article 12
- » [The low importance of marriage in eastern Germany - social norms and the role of peoples' perceptions of the past](#)
Volume 33 - Article 9
- » [Changes in partnership patterns across the life course: An examination of 14 countries in Europe and the United States](#)
Volume 33 - Article 6
- » [Educational differences in early childbearing: A cross-national comparative study](#)
Volume 33 - Article 3
- » [Trust, responsibility, and freedom: Focus-group research on contemporary patterns of union formation in Russia](#)
Volume 32 - Article 11
- » [Risk-avoidance or utmost commitment: Dutch focus group research on views on cohabitation and marriage](#)
Volume 32 - Article 10
- » [The link between parenthood and partnership in contemporary Norway - Findings from focus group research](#)
Volume 32 - Article 9
- » [Cohabitation and marriage in Austria: Assessing the individualization thesis across the life course](#)
Volume 31 - Article 37
- » [Free to stay, free to leave: Insights from Poland into the meaning of cohabitation](#)
Volume 31 - Article 36
- » [Religion and union formation in Italy: Catholic precepts, social pressure, and tradition](#)
Volume 31 - Article 35
- » [Social networks and fertility](#)
Volume 30 - Article 22
- » [Whose job instability affects the likelihood of becoming a parent in Italy? A tale of two partners](#)
Volume 26 - Article 2

» [The changing determinants of UK young adults' living arrangements](#)

Volume 25 - Article 20

» [Things change: Women's and men's marital disruption dynamics in Italy during a time of social transformations, 1970-2003](#)

Volume 24 - Article 5

» [Cohort fertility patterns in the Nordic countries](#)

Volume 20 - Article 14

» [Rising marital disruption in Italy and its correlates](#)

Volume 20 - Article 4

» [Ukraine: On the border between old and new in uncertain times](#)

Volume 19 - Article 29

» [Meanings and attitudes attached to cohabitation in Poland: Qualitative analyses of the slow diffusion of cohabitation among the young generation](#)

Volume 16 - Article 17

» [Fertility change in Egypt: From second to third birth](#)

Volume 15 - Article 18

» [New fertility trends in Norway](#)

Volume 2 - Article 3

Most recent similar articles in Demographic Research

» [Changes in partnership patterns across the life course: An examination of 14 countries in Europe and the United States](#)

Volume 33 - Article 6 | Keywords: [cohabitation](#), [Europe](#), [marriage](#), [partnership](#), [unions](#)

» [Cross-national differences in women's repartnering behaviour in Europe: The role of individual demographic characteristics](#)

Volume 37 - Article 8 | Keywords: [cohabitation](#), [Europe](#), [marriage](#)

» [Cohabitation among secular Jews in Israel: How ethnicity, education, and employment characteristics are related to young adults' living arrangements](#)

Volume 35 - Article 32 | Keywords: [cohabitation](#), [family](#), [marriage](#)

» [Introduction to research on immigrant and ethnic minority families in Europe](#)

Volume 35 - Article 2 | Keywords: [cohabitation](#), [Europe](#), [marriage](#)

» [Do coresidence and intentions make a difference? Relationship satisfaction in married, cohabiting, and living apart together couples in four countries](#)

Volume 31 - Article 3 | Keywords: [cohabitation](#), [marriage](#), [unions](#)

Articles

» [Current Volume](#)

» [Older Volumes](#)

[»Volume 31](#)

[»Editor's Choice](#)

[»Replicable Articles](#)

[»by Author](#)

[»by Subject](#)

[»Search](#)

Citations

Download to Citation Manager

[»RIS format](#)

[»BibTeX format](#)

Similar Articles

PubMed

[»Articles by Brienna Perelli-Harris](#)

[»Articles by Monika Mynarska](#)

[»Articles by Ann Berrington](#)

[»Articles by Caroline Berghammer](#)

[»Articles by Ann Evans](#)

[»Articles by Olga Isupova](#)

[»Articles by Renske Keizer](#)

[»Articles by Andreas Klärner](#)

[»Articles by Trude Lappegård](#)

[»Articles by Daniele Vignoli](#)

Google Scholar

[»Articles by Brienna Perelli-Harris](#)

[»Articles by Monika Mynarska](#)

[»Articles by Ann Berrington](#)

[»Articles by Caroline Berghammer](#)

[»Articles by Ann Evans](#)

[»Articles by Olga Isupova](#)

[»Articles by Renske Keizer](#)

[»Articles by Andreas Klärner](#)

[»Articles by Trude Lappegård](#)

[»Articles by Daniele Vignoli](#)

Jump to Article

Volume

Page

Volume

Article ID

© 1999–2018 [Max Planck Society](#)

- [Articles](#)
- [Current Volume](#)
- [Older Volumes](#)
- [Editor's Choice](#)
- [Replicable Articles](#)
- [by Author](#)
- [by Subject](#)
- [Search](#)

- [Special Collections](#)
- [About Special Collections](#)
- [All Special Collections](#)

- [for Authors](#)
- [General Information](#)
- [Submission Guidelines](#)
- [Peer Review and Publication](#)
- [Copyright Information](#)
- [Review Process](#)
- [Submit a Paper](#)
- [Submit a Letter](#)
- [My Author Account](#)

- [for Readers](#)

- [Get Email Alerts](#)
- [How to cite DR](#)

- [About the Journal](#)
- [Purpose](#)
- [From the Publisher and Editor](#)
- [Who's Who](#)
- [Our Reviewers](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Copyright & Legal](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)