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**Working Paper**

## Relationship quality in Europe

Discussion Papers, No. 633

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Research Department, Statistics Norway, Oslo

*Suggested Citation:* Wiik, Kenneth Aarskaug; Lappegård, Trude; Keizer, Renske (2010) : Relationship quality in Europe, Discussion Papers, No. 633, Statistics Norway, Research Department, Oslo

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/192615>

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**Discussion Papers No. 633, October 2010  
Statistics Norway, Research Department**

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## **Relationship quality in Europe**

**Abstract:**

In this study, we utilize data from the first wave of the Generations and Gender Surveys to investigate relationship quality among currently married and cohabiting individuals aged 18 to 55 (N = 41, 666) in eight European countries (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Romania, Russia, and the Netherlands). Controlling for a range of characteristics of respondents and their partners, the analyses show that cohabitators in general more often have breakup plans and are less satisfied than those married. We expected to find fewer differences between cohabitation and marriage in countries where cohabitation is widespread. Correspondingly, we find that the difference between marriage and cohabitation is largest in Russia, Romania, Germany and Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Cohabitation, Relationship Quality, Europe

**JEL classification:** Z10, Z13, Z19

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**Discussion Papers**

comprise research papers intended for international journals or books. A preprint of a Discussion Paper may be longer and more elaborate than a standard journal article, as it may include intermediate calculations and background material etc.

## 1. Introduction

Most studies find that cohabitators are less committed to and satisfied with their partnerships than those married (Brown, 2003; Hansen, Moum, & Shapiro, 2007; Nock, 1995; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009). There are, however, reasons to assume that there are regional variations in the degree to which relationship assessments differ across union types, mainly due to country differences in institutionalization and prevalence of unmarried cohabitation. Although cohabitation has become an increasingly popular living arrangement and the majority of young adults now cohabit prior to marriage in most European countries (e.g., Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008), there are differences in how the union type is practised and viewed in different national contexts. The Scandinavian countries are, for instance, often cited as examples of countries where cohabitation is largely indistinguishable from marriage. In South-eastern Europe, on the other hand, this living arrangement is far less common. Correspondingly, Heuveline and Timberlake (2004) classified 17 Western countries and showed that the demographic behavior of cohabitators is almost indistinguishable from those married in Sweden. In the other end of the spectrum we find Italy, Spain, and Poland where cohabitation is a highly marginal phenomenon (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004).

Utilizing recent comparable data from the Gender and Generations Surveys (GGS) including eight European countries (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Romania, Russia, and the Netherlands), we investigate two dimensions of relationship quality (i.e., relationship satisfaction and breakup plans) in marital and cohabiting unions. As there seems to be no or only small differences between cohabitators with plans to marry their partners and those who are already married (Brown & Booth, 1996; Wiik et al., 2009) we are not only focusing on union type but also on marriage intentions. That is, whether or not cohabitators intending to marry their partner are more marriage like than other cohabitators.

In particular, we assess in which countries the differences between cohabitation and marriage in relationship quality are most pronounced and in which countries the two union types are essentially identical. Our general hypothesis is that differences between cohabitators and those married in relationship satisfaction and breakup plans are more pronounced in countries where cohabitation is less widespread and less institutionalized. For instance, as this union type is less prevalent and institutionalized in South-eastern Europe, the differences between marriage and cohabitation in union quality may be more pronounced there. In Northern Europe, where most people cohabit prior to an

eventual marriage and cohabitation is more institutionalized, one would expect smaller differences between the union types.

Similar comparative studies have been carried out earlier, but they have mainly focused on the actual demographic behaviour of cohabitators and those married (e.g., Kiernan, 2004; Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Prinz, 1995; Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). A recent exception is the study of Soons and Kalmijn (2009) who investigated the “cohabitation gap” in general well-being in 30 European countries. Using multilevel models, they found that cohabitators generally reported lower levels of well-being compared with those married and that this gap was smaller in countries where cohabitation was common and institutionalized than in countries where cohabitation was a marginal phenomenon.

To fully understand the relation between union type and relationship quality, comparisons should be made across countries. However, to our knowledge, there are no comparative studies on relationship quality in marriage and cohabitation. And, most of the existing research on relationship assessments across union type is based on U.S. samples. The current study thus extends prior research on the association between union type and relationship quality by comparing married and cohabiting relationships across eight European countries, and it should give valuable insights into our understanding of unmarried cohabitation in different contexts.

## **2. Background and previous research**

### **2.1. Relationship Assessments in Cohabitation versus Marriage**

Existing studies commonly conclude that married individuals are more committed to and satisfied with their relationships than those living in cohabiting relationships (e.g., Brown, 2003, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Correspondingly, comparing those who cohabited with their current spouse prior to marriage with those who married directly and those who were currently cohabiting in the U.S., Nock (1995) found that cohabitators were less happy with their relationships than both groups of married individuals. Studying co-residential relationships’ in midlife in Norway, Hansen et al. (2007) found that never-married cohabitators reported lower levels of relationship happiness compared with married individuals, but the differences were small. They argue therefore that among older adults having an intimate relationship appears to be more important than formalizing the union through marriage, in a society where there is no longer any stigma attached to cohabitation.

Some studies indicate that the relationships of cohabitators who report that they intend to marry their current partners differ less from those of married individuals than cohabitators without marriage plans. For instance, Brown and Booth (1996) stress that for many couples cohabitation serves as a preface to marriage, and it is therefore crucial to take into account their marriage intentions, which could be indicative of cohabitators' relationship quality. Their results show that the relationships of cohabitators with marriage plans were not qualitatively different from those of marrieds. Analyses showing poorer relationship quality among cohabitators than marrieds could therefore reflect the lack of a control for marriage intentions among the cohabitators (Brown & Booth, 1996). Similarly, Brown (2004) reported no differences in relationship quality between cohabitators who plan to marry their partners and cohabitators who actually marry. In Sweden and Norway, the analyses of Wiik et al. (2009) revealed that cohabitators in their mid twenties to mid thirties overall were less serious and less satisfied with their relationships than those married. They were also more likely to have considered ending their current relationships than were married respondents. On the other hand, the views of cohabitators who reported that they intend to marry their current partners within two years differed much less from those of married respondents than cohabitators without marriage plans.

Cohabitators' lower union quality could, obviously, be due to the fact that cohabitation and marriage are qualitatively different union forms. First, married individuals may have normative and legal benefits that cohabitators lack. Correspondingly, Nock (1995) argues that marriage and cohabitation must be seen as qualitatively different forms of relationships in the U.S. because of differential institutionalization. Whereas cohabitation is characterized by being novel and extralegal living arrangement, marriage is normatively approved and legal (Nock, 1995). Cohabitation may, in other words, still be an "incomplete institution," though marriage as well may have undergone a process of deinstitutionalization (Cherlin, 2004).

Also, differences in relationship quality by union type could be a consequence of the marriage itself and the norms and values associated with the institution of marriage. Not only the wedding ceremony itself, but several rituals and practices remain reserved for entering marriage. Perhaps more importantly, individuals that do marry exhibit socially accepted behavior and they may receive social approval from society, family and the social surroundings in general (Kalmijn, 2004). This could be of particular importance in countries in which cohabitation is less accepted.

Cohabitation is, however, widespread and increasingly accepted and institutionalized in several countries. For instance, in the Nordic countries cohabitation is more institutionalized than elsewhere

and cohabiting couples with common children have mostly the same rights and responsibilities as married parents. One example is Norway where about three-quarter of all existing cohabitating couples have lived together for a minimum of two years or have children together (Noack, 2010). Although such marriage-like unions have most of the same rights and obligations as married couples, there are continuing differences in the area of private law, which to a large degree is left to the cohabitators themselves to regulate by private agreement. There are still relatively few cohabitators who make such agreements (Noack, 2010).

On the other hand, selection, not the experience of cohabitation itself could explain marrieds' superior relationship quality. That is, cohabitation and marriage could attract different types of individuals initially, and cohabitators may be selective of those who are "poor marriage material" (Nock, 1995). For instance, cohabitators are more likely to have characteristics that are associated with union dissolution, like lower socioeconomic status (Kravdal, 1999; Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007; Wiik, 2009). Additionally, cohabitators could have attitudes and values that "predispose" them to be less committed and satisfied. In the U.S., at least, there are some evidence that cohabitation is selective of more individualistic and nontraditional individuals (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Smock, 2000).

## **2.2. The Role of Children and Other Demographic Variables**

In addition to these differences in relationship assessments by union type, the association between union form and relationship quality may be influenced by a range of other factors. First, it seems plausible that couples with common children are more committed to the union than couples without children. For instance, children can act as "glue" and several studies have shown that union dissolution risks are significantly lower when couples have joint children. Some of this may be due to selectivity of the happiest couples into childbearing, but studies from the U.S. and U.K. indicate that there is also a causal component in this relationship (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Steele, Kallis, Goldstein, & Joshi, 2005). Stanley and Markman (1992) argue that children create "internal constraint commitment," defined as actual or perceived costs of exiting a union, and they argue that the greatest increase in constraint commitment may come when couples have children. Most studies of union quality as well as studies of dissolution risks therefore take into account the presence of children.

Children may also put stress on relationships, and some recent studies confirm that the presence of children is associated with lower levels of relationship quality (Brown, 2003, 2004; Wiik et al., 2009). Nock's (1995) results showed that having children in preschool age decrease relationship happiness among men and women alike. Further, the findings of Moors and Bernhardt (2009) indicate that

Swedish cohabiting couples planning to have children are more likely to marry and less likely to break up. In Norway, Wiik et al. (2009) found that birth plans was positively associated with relationship satisfaction and seriousness and negatively related to breakup plans. On the other hand, step children in the household seems to be associated with a lower union quality (Brown, 2004), as well as a higher dissolution risk (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006) in the U.S.

Relationship duration could be another factor influencing breakup plans and satisfaction with the union. The probability of being satisfied could be at its highest in the earliest phase of a partnership, which may be evidence of a “honeymoon period” effect. The assumption that relationship duration is inversely related to satisfaction has been confirmed in earlier research (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Wiik et al., 2009). Further, some studies report that prior cohabitation experience is significantly associated with lower levels of relationship quality (Brown, 2003, 2004).

Regarding gender differences, Brown and Booth (1996) reported no significant differences between women and men in relationship happiness, although they did find that women were less inclined to report relationship disagreement and fairness. In Sweden and Norway, on the other hand, women are significantly more serious about their relationships than men (Wiik, et al., 2009). Finally, age has a negative effect on relationship quality (Brown & Booth, 1996; Wiik, et al., 2009).

### **2.3. Socioeconomic Variables and Relationship Assessments**

The level of union quality is associated with socioeconomic variables as well. First, having a partner whose education and/or income is high could be positively related to being satisfied with the union. Such a partner is more likely to contribute to the household economy, and could bring social status and prestige to the couple. Previous studies find, however, that married and cohabiting couples that are heterogamous with respect to traits such as age, education, and income have an elevated risk of splitting up compared with homogamous couples (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Goldstein & Harknett, 2006). Moreover, heterogamy with respect to education (Tynes, 1990) and age (Wiik et al., 2009) reduces relationship satisfaction. Also, couples’ status inconsistency in occupation and earnings is associated with low relationship quality, particularly if women have higher status than men (Brennan, Barnett, & Gareis, 2001; Rogers & DeBoer, 2001). One reason why homogamous couples should be more satisfied with and committed to their current unions and less likely to split up than heterogamous couples could be that they fit together better and share “a common universe of discourse” (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985: 1234).

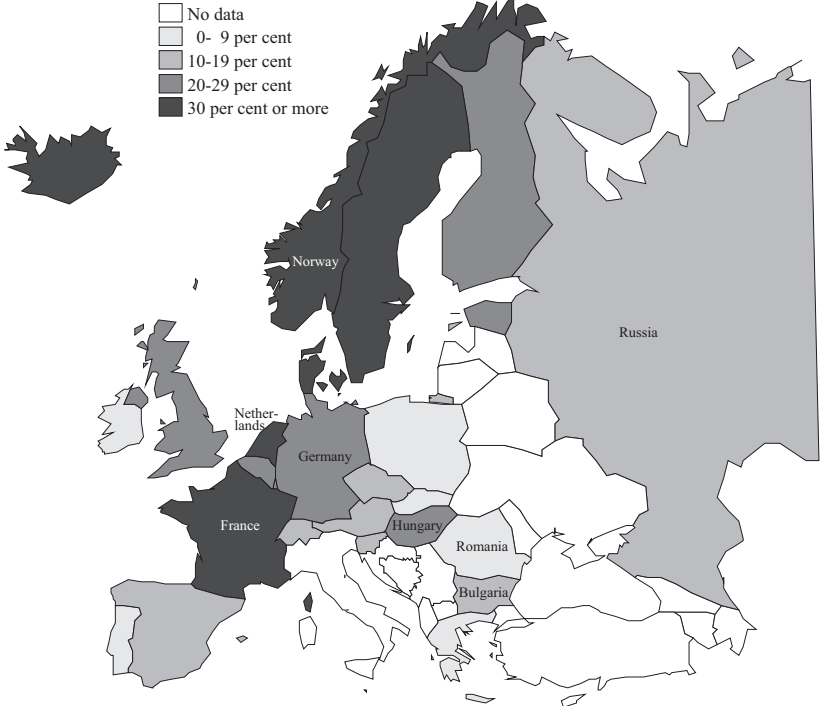


Not only the socioeconomic composition of the couple, but also individuals' own level of education and income, seems to be associated with relationship assessments. Although some studies report no association between education (Brown, 2003, 2004; Nock, 1995; Wiik et al., 2009) and earnings (Nock, 1995) and union quality, Brown and Booth (1996) found a positive relation between education and union quality in the U.S. Also, education decreases perceived dissolution risk among married couples (Thomson & Colella, 1992).

### 3. Cohabitation in Europe

There is considerable variation in the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation within Europe. Figure 1 shows the share of cohabitators among men and women aged 26 to 35 in most European countries, including the ones studied in the current paper. Generally, cohabitation is most common in Scandinavia and Western Europe and rarer in the Central- Eastern- and Southern-European countries. Among the countries included in the present study, cohabitation is most widespread in Norway where 47% of men and women aged 26 to 35 were living as cohabitators. This is compared to 37% in the Netherlands and France and 25% in Germany and Hungary. In Russia and Bulgaria 19% and 18% of men and women in the same age group were cohabiting. Romania is characterized by a low level of cohabitation: 8% of persons aged 26 to 35 were cohabiting there. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1. Share of cohabitators in Europe. Men and women aged 26 to 35. Per cent.**



Sources: ESS 2004 from Kasearu (2007). Data on the countries analysed in the current paper are from the GGS.

In many European countries cohabitation has nearly completely replaced marriage as the choice of first union. For instance, in Sweden, France, and Norway roughly 90% of first unions are now cohabitations (Duvander, 1999; Toulemon, Pailhé, & Rossier, 2008; Wiik, 2009). Further, in the Netherlands, about 70% of those born in the 1960s started to live with a first partner in an unmarried union (Fokkema, De Valk, De Beer, & Van Duin, 2008). In Russia, the rise of cohabitation as first union has been sharp among the cohorts born after 1960 (about 40%), whereas in Hungary around 70% of first unions are today cohabitations (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008).

Cohabitation has also become the relationship context for a substantial proportion of births, and we generally find the same pattern as described above: High numbers in North and West and lower in East and South. For instance, in Norway, 55% of first births are in cohabitation, compared with 44% in France and 30% in the Netherlands. In Central and Eastern European countries fewer first births take place within cohabitation (e.g., around 20% in Hungary and 15% in Romania and Russia) (Perelli-Harris et al., 2009). Although it is more common for cohabiting couples to have children in the former East Germany, Germany is characterized by a close link between marriage and having children (Dorbritz, 2008).

There are also country differences in the level of acceptance of cohabitation. Liefbroer and Fokkema (2008) examined to what degree respondents in 29 European countries agreed with the statement that it is ok for couples to live together without planning to marry. Although the majority in all countries found nonmarital cohabitation acceptable, only 10% or less disagreed in countries like Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the former East Germany. The comparable figure in Bulgaria and Russia was 30% (Liefbroer & Fokkema, 2008).

## **4. Data and method**

### **4.1. Sample**

We use data from the first wave of the national Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) in Bulgaria ( $N = 12,858$ ), France ( $N = 10,079$ ), Germany ( $N = 10,017$ ), Hungary ( $N = 13,540$ ), Norway ( $N = 14,882$ ), Romania ( $N = 11,986$ ) and Russia ( $N = 11,261$ ) carried out in the period 2003-2007. The GGS is a set of comparative surveys which interviewed nationally representative samples of the 18-79 year-old resident population in each country. Among many other appealing features, these data allow us to study women's and men's breakup plans and relationship satisfaction within marriage and

cohabitation. For the Netherlands we use data from the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study. This survey, which is now officially the Dutch part of the GGS, was conducted in 2002-2003 and includes a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 79 ( $N = 8,150$ ).

In the current paper, we exclude respondents not living in a co-residential relationship as well as those older than 55 ( $n = 51,107$ ). This gives a sample of 41,666 currently married or cohabiting individuals in the age group 18 to 55. This age span was chosen in order to maintain an acceptable number of cohabitators (particularly low in Romania and Bulgaria) and to be able to separate between those with and without marriage plans. For instance, restricting our sample to those aged 40 or less, the number of Romanian cohabitators without marriage plans fell from 83 to 31. The sample sizes per country are: Norway ( $n = 6,721$ ); Bulgaria ( $n = 6,252$ ); Hungary ( $n = 6,049$ ); Romania ( $n = 5,605$ ); Russia ( $n = 5,028$ ); Germany ( $n = 4,181$ ); France ( $n = 4,006$ ); the Netherlands ( $n = 3,824$ ).

## 4.2. Dependent Variables and Procedure

In order to assess the degree of relationship quality among married and cohabiting respondents, we utilize two outcome variables. The first of these, *relationship satisfaction*, was measured by asking respondents how satisfied they were with their current unions. This variable has values ranging from 0 = *very dissatisfied* to 10 = *very satisfied*. We use ordinary least squares regression to test the effect of union type on relationship satisfaction. Note that the number of missing observations on this variable is considerable in the French sub sample ( $n = 1,182$ , 29.5%), although there are no major difference in non-response by union type (29.2% of marrieds compared with 30.2% of cohabitators).

The second dependent variable was made by utilizing a question asking respondents whether they themselves had *considered breaking up the union* in the year preceding the survey. When respondents had considered splitting up during the last year they were coded 1. Negative answers were coded 0. Note that this question was not included in the Dutch survey. Binomial logistic regression analysis was used to model the odds of having breakup plans.

In the results section we present two sets of regression models: One for relationship satisfaction with and without controls and one for breakup plans with and without controls (Table 3). To test whether there are differences in the effect of union type and relationship assessments across country, significant interactions in the effects of country on our outcomes by union type are presented in Table 4. Separate models for each country are shown in the appendices.

### 4.3. Independent Variables

Our main explanatory variable is type of union. In addition to information on cohabitation and marriage, we use a question about marriage intentions among cohabiting respondents, i.e., whether they are intending to marry their current partners within the next three years. The response categories were: “Definitely not,” “probably not,” “probably yes,” or “definitely yes.” Cohabitators who were probably or definitely intending to marry within the next three years were defined as having marriage intentions. In the Dutch and Norwegian surveys the response categories were simply “yes” or “no.” Thus, we made a three category variable separating between married respondents (1), cohabitators with intent to marry within the next three years (2), and cohabitators without such intentions (3). A set of dummy variables were also included to capture any effect of country, with Norwegian respondents serving as the reference group.

We include a range of covariates in the equations to control for possible confounding sources of variation in comparing the union types, as prior research show that they are correlated to cohabitation and our two outcomes. First, we control for the presence of common children of the couple in the household. This variable was coded 1 if one or more child(ren) of the couple resided in the household. Couples with no common children were coded 0. Also, we include an indicator for presence of step children in the household, coded 1 if the respondent or his or her partner had prior children who were living in the household and 0 otherwise. Lastly, respondents were asked if they plan to have (more) children. Those with preferences for (more) children were coded 1, whereas those without were coded 0.

Further, respondents’ age was measured in years. In additional analyses age squared was also included to control for nonlinearity. As the association between age and our outcomes were linear this variable was not included in our final models. Moreover, we made an indicator to control for age homogamy in the couple. When the age difference between the respondent and his or her partner was less than six years, they were coded as age homogamous (1). Age heterogamous couples were coded 0. Another variable measures any effect of the respondent’s gender with values 0 for men and 1 for women. A further variable captures the duration of the co-residential relationship in years. We also include a quadratic term to control for nonlinearity in the effect of union duration. Also, a dummy indicating whether (1) or not (0) respondents have experienced prior marital or nonmarital union(s) was incorporated.

Educational attainment was grouped into three categories depending on whether respondents had completed any education at the primary, secondary or tertiary level. Lastly, the educational composition of the couple was captured by a variable measuring whether they had completed the same level of education (primary, secondary, tertiary) (1), or whether the respondents' partner had a higher (2), or lower (3) education than him-or herself.

## 5. Results

Descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses are presented in Table 1 and show that cohabitators without plans to marry their current partner report significantly lower levels of relationship satisfaction than those married ( $p < .05$ ). Cohabitators intending to marry their partner within the next three years are, on the other hand, significantly more satisfied compared with their married counterparts. Both groups of cohabitators more often have had breakup plans relative to those married.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics on Variables Used by Union Type. Mean (SD) or % (N =41,666)**

Variables	Married	Cohabiting, without marriage intentions	Cohabiting, with marriage intentions
Dependent variables			
Satisfied (0 – 10)	8.7 (1.6)	8.2 (1.9) *	8.9 (1.4) *
Breakup plans (% yes) <sup>a</sup>	6.2	17.0 *	9.5 *
Independent variables			
Common children (% yes)	77.9	47.2 *	36.5 *
Step children (% yes)	5.0	17.2 *	15.5 *
Birth plans (% yes)	12.9	21.1 *	45.4 *
Union duration in years	17.4 (9.2)	8.1 (6.9) *	5.2 (5.1) *
Previous union(s) (% yes)	12.0	42.4 *	33.7 *
Education level R			
Primary	17.9	23.0 *	21.2 *
Secondary	53.6	45.8 *	47.7 *
University	28.5	31.2 *	31.1 *
Couple's education			
Homogamous	65.1	60.3 *	64.6
R > partner	17.6	19.7 *	18.7
R < partner	17.3	20.0 *	16.8
Age	40.9 (8.6)	36.0 (9.4) *	31.3 (8.2) *
Age homogamous (% yes)	78.9	70.1 *	70.5 *
Female (% yes)	56.4	57.1	53.0 *
<i>n</i>	33,827 (81.2%)	4,695 (11.3%)	3,144 (7.5%)

<sup>a</sup> Data on breakup plans not available for the Netherlands.

\* Difference between cohabitators and married respondents is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

We also note that a significantly higher share of married individuals have common children compared with their non-married counterparts. Cohabitators, on the other hand, more often have step children living in the household and are more often planning to have (more) children. Table 1 also shows that

both groups of cohabitators live in relationships of shorter duration and more frequently report having experienced previous unions than married respondents. A significantly higher share of married individuals is secondary educated, whereas both groups of cohabitators more frequently have completed a primary or tertiary education. Also, compared with those married, cohabitators without marriage intentions are less often homogamous with regard to education. Finally, cohabitators with and without marriage intentions are younger and more often live in age heterogamous relationships (+/-5 years) compared with those married.

**Table 2. Satisfaction with Union and Breakup Plans by Union Type and Country (N =41,666)**

Country ( <i>n</i> )	Union type	%	Satisfaction (0 – 10)	Breakup plans (% yes)
Norway (6,721)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	25.4	8.6 *	15.0 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	5.6	9.3 *	6.1
	Married	69.0	8.8	7.0
France (4,006)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	16.8	8.1 *	18.1 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	10.6	8.8 *	8.5
	Married	72.6	8.5	6.5
Netherlands (3,824)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	11.4	8.4 *	n.a.
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	10.8	9.1 *	
	Married	77.8	8.7	
Hungary (6,049)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	7.3	7.9 *	19.2 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	10.0	9.0 *	8.7 *
	Married	82.7	8.6	6.5
Russia (5,028)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	8.7	7.1 *	34.0 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	8.5	8.4 *	21.9 *
	Married	82.8	8.1	15.9
Germany (4,181)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	10.5	8.5 *	17.0 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	5.6	9.1 *	9.0 *
	Married	83.9	8.9	4.7
Bulgaria (6,252)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	7.8	8.2 *	6.2 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	6.1	8.8	4.5 *
	Married	86.2	8.7	2.7
Romania (5,605)	Cohabiting, w/o intentions	1.5	7.9 *	12.1 *
	Cohabiting, w/ intentions	5.0	8.6 *	5.0 *
	Married	93.5	9.0	2.2

*Note:* Data on breakup plans not available for the Netherlands.

\* Differences between cohabitators and married respondents are statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

The mean score on the variable measuring relationship satisfaction and breakup plans by union type and country are presented in Table 2. In this table the countries are ranged according to the total share of cohabitators in each country. The shares of cohabitators as opposed to married individuals are highest in the Norwegian (31%) and French samples (27%) and lowest in Bulgaria (14%) and Romania (6%). To be sure, restricting our sample to respondents aged 40 or less, the share of cohabitators becomes markedly higher in all countries (e.g., 45% in Norway, 25% in Germany, 22% in Russia, 32% in the Netherlands, and 38% in France). This sample restriction did not, however, alter the association between union type and relationship quality, even in our multivariate models (not shown).

More importantly, we note that in all countries except Hungary and the Netherlands cohabitators without plans to marry their current partner are significantly less satisfied than those married ( $p < .05$ ). Cohabitators with concrete marriage plans are, on the other hand, significantly more satisfied with their union than those married in all countries except Bulgaria and Romania. From table 2 it is also evident that in all countries a significantly higher share of cohabitators has considered splitting up compared with their married counterparts. This finding applies to both groups of cohabitators (i.e., with and without marriage intentions), except for Norway and France where there are no major differences between cohabitators intending to marry their partner and respondents who are already married.

Multivariate models for relationship satisfaction and having considered ending the current union are presented in Table 3. Two sets of regression models are presented for each of our two outcome variables: One with and one without controls. In these models, we have separated between cohabitators with intentions to marry their current partners within three years ( $n = 3,144$ , 40.1%) and cohabitators without such plans ( $n = 4,695$ , 59.9%).

The results from the first ordinary least squares regression model of relationship satisfaction including only union type and country in Table 3 shows, in accordance with our descriptive results, that cohabitators with short-term marriage intentions are more satisfied with their relationship than married individuals. Adding the controls to this model, however, it is evident that cohabitators with and without plans to marry their partner are significantly less satisfied with their relationships compared with married individuals. Controlling for country, the presence of common children and step children in the household, birth plans, union duration, previous union(s), education of the respondent and his/her partner, age, age homogamy and gender, cohabitators without plans to marry their partners score 0.6 lower on the relationship satisfaction scale relative to those married. Net of the other variables included, cohabitators who are planning to marry score 0.1 lower on the satisfaction scale. Also, the

level of relationship satisfaction is significantly lower among respondents from all countries relative to Norwegians, except those from the Netherlands and Germany.

Turning to the controls, we first note that the presence of common children in the household significantly reduces relationship satisfaction, whereas having birth plans increases the level of satisfaction. This finding is in accordance with previous findings claiming that children may act as relationship stressors (e.g., Nock, 1995; Wiik et al., 2009). Further, the probability of being satisfied is at its highest for respondents living in unions of shorter duration, consistent with the notion of a honeymoon effect. The negative effect of union duration is, however, curve linear. Respondents who have experienced one or more prior relationships are significantly less satisfied than those with no prior relationship experience.

Regarding respondents' education, we see that university educated respondents as well as those with a secondary education are significantly more satisfied with their current unions than their primary educated counterparts. Next, couples who have completed the same level of education as well as respondents whose partners have a higher level of education than themselves are significantly more satisfied than respondents with lower educated partners.

From the model of relationship satisfaction in Table 3 it is also evident that female respondents are significantly less satisfied with their relationships than male respondents. Last, Table 3 shows that older respondents are less satisfied relative to younger respondents.

Turning to our models of breakup plans in Table 3, we see that cohabitators are significantly more likely to have considered ending their current unions than what is the case for married respondents. Although this positive association between cohabitation and breakup plans is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) for both groups of cohabitators, it is particularly strong for cohabitators without plans to marry their partner. Controlling for relevant characteristics, the odds of having had breakup plans in the previous year is 2.6 times as high for this group of cohabitators compared with married respondents. Cohabitators with plans to marry their partners have, on the other hand, 29% higher odds of having considered breaking up relative to their married counterparts. We also note that the odds of having had breakup plans is particularly strong among Russian respondents compared with Norwegians. Bulgarians and Romanians have, on the other hand, nearly 60% lower odds of having considered breaking up relative to Norwegians.



**Table 3. Multivariate Models for a) Relationship Satisfaction (0 – 10, OLS) and b) Breakup Plans (0 – 1, Logistic Regression)**

Independent variables	Relationship satisfaction (0 – 10)				Breakup plans (0 – 1)					
	Model w/o controls		Model with controls		Model w/o controls		Model with controls			
	<i>b (se b)</i>		<i>b (se b)</i>		<i>b (se b)</i>		<i>e<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>b (se b)</i>		<i>e<sup>b</sup></i>
<b>Union type (Married = ref)</b>										
Cohabiting, intent to marry	0.24***	0.03	-0.10**	0.04	0.35***	0.07	1.42	0.25**	0.08	1.29
Cohabiting, no intent to marry	-0.46***	0.03	-0.62***	0.03	1.07***	0.05	2.91	0.96***	0.06	2.60
<b>Country (Norway = ref)</b>										
France	-0.31***	0.04	-0.29***	0.04	0.05	0.07	1.06	0.07	0.07	1.08
Hungary	-0.23***	0.03	-0.24***	0.03	0.05	0.07	1.05	0.10	0.07	1.11
Netherlands	-0.06	0.03	-0.07	0.03	n.a.			n.a.		
Russia	-0.78***	0.03	-0.75***	0.03	1.03***	0.06	2.80	1.02***	0.06	2.79
Germany	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.03	-0.20**	0.08	0.82	-0.17**	0.08	0.85
Bulgaria	-0.15***	0.03	-0.14***	0.03	-0.90***	0.09	0.41	-0.90***	0.09	0.41
Romania	0.06*	0.03	0.06*	0.03	-1.02***	0.10	0.36	-0.90***	0.10	0.41
Common children			-0.16***	0.02				0.01	0.05	1.01
Step children			-0.04	0.03				-0.02	0.07	0.98
Birth plans			0.12**	0.03				-0.09	0.06	0.91
Union duration			-0.03***	0.01				0.03**	0.01	1.03
Union duration squared			0.01***	0.01				-0.01*	0.01	1.00
Previous union(s)			-0.06*	0.03				0.45***	0.06	1.57
<b>Education level (Primary= ref)</b>										
Secondary			0.19***	0.02				-0.01	0.06	0.99
University			0.27***	0.03				0.13*	0.06	1.14
<b>Couple's education (R&gt;partner= ref)</b>										
Homogamous			0.08***	0.02				-0.04	0.05	0.96
R<Partner			0.23***	0.03				-0.02	0.07	0.98
Age			-0.01***	0.01				-0.02***	0.01	0.98
Age homogamous			0.03	0.02				-0.01	0.05	0.99
Female			-0.39***	0.02				0.61***	0.04	1.84
Constant	8.86***		9.68***		-2.70***			-2.58***		

Note:  $e^b$  = exponentiated b. Data on breakup plans not available for the Netherlands.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Further, there is a positive association between union duration and breakup plans. The squared term is negative and statistically significant implying that the likelihood of having considered ending the union increases and then decreases for couples who have lived together for longer periods.

Respondents with prior union experience have 57% higher odds of thinking of breaking up compared with those in their first union. Also, the odds of having had breakup plans is 14% higher among university educated respondents relative to the primary educated. Finally, we note that older respondents are less likely to have considered ending their unions whereas women more often have had breakup plans than men.

From the results presented so far, it is evident that cohabitators, regardless of whether they are planning to marry their partners or not, are significantly less satisfied and have an elevated risk of having considered ending their unions that what is the case for married individuals. Separate models for each country sub sample are presented in Appendices 1 and 2. These models show that there are

considerable country variations in the degree to which cohabitators with marriage intentions differ from those married. First, Norwegian cohabitators intending to marry their partner within the next three years are significantly more satisfied with the union than their married counterparts, whereas Russian and Romanian cohabitators with marriage intentions are more similar to cohabitators without marriage intentions (i.e., less satisfied than those married). And, both groups of cohabitators have higher odds of having considered breaking up the union in Russia and Germany. In the other countries the differences between cohabitators with marriage intentions and marrieds fail to reach statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ).

To further test whether there are significant country differences in the relation between cohabitation and our two outcomes, results from multivariate models including interaction terms between country and union type (as well as controls for all variables included in Table 3) are presented in Table 4. As we found no significant differences between cohabitators with and without intentions to marry their current partner in our pooled models, and in order to reduce the number of parameters when included in the interaction terms, union type is included as an indicator with the values 0 (marriage) and 1 (cohabitation) in these models.

**Table 4. Multivariate Models for a) Relationship satisfaction (0 – 10, OLS) and b) Breakup Plans (0 – 1, Logistic regression). With Interaction Terms between union Type and Country**

Country*union type	Relationship satisfaction (0 – 10)		Breakup plans (0 – 1)	
	<i>b (se b)</i>		<i>b (se b)</i>	
Norway*married (ref)				
France*cohabitation	-0.14	(0.08)	0.16	(0.14)
Hungary*cohabitation	-0.14	(0.07)	0.07	(0.15)
Netherlands*cohabitation	0.10	(0.08)	n.a.	
Russia*cohabitation	-0.28**	(0.07)	-0.02	(0.13)
Germany*cohabitation	-0.12	(0.08)	0.50**	(0.17)
Bulgaria*cohabitation	-0.18*	(0.07)	0.01	(0.20)
Romania*cohabitation	-0.38***	(0.10)	0.41	(0.25)

*Note:* Controlled for all the other variables included in Table 3.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

From the first model with interactions between union type and country in Table 4 we note that the negative association between cohabitation and relationship satisfaction is stronger in all countries (except the Netherlands) compared with Norway. This interaction effect between union type and country is, however, only statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) for Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The difference in relationship satisfaction between cohabitation and marriage is, in other words, more pronounced in these countries relative to Norway. The country differences in the association between cohabitation and breakup plans are, on the other hand, much smaller: The relation between cohabitation and breakup plans is significantly stronger only in Germany compared with Norway.

## 6. Summary and discussion

Previous studies confirm that cohabitators live in relationships of lower quality compared with married individuals (Brown, 2003; Hansen et al., 2007; Nock, 1995). In line with this research, our study shows that cohabitators overall are less satisfied with their relationships and more often have considered ending their present relationships compared with their married counterparts. Although some European studies exist (e.g., Hansen et al., 2007; Wiik et al., 2009), the vast majority of the research on relationship quality across the two union types is from single countries and mainly from the U.S. We have thus added to this literature by using recent comparable European data from Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Romania, Russia, and the Netherlands. These countries represent much variation in the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation. This union type is most common in Norway (31%) and France (27%). 22% of the Dutch respondents were cohabiting at time of the survey, compared with around 17% in Hungary and Russia and 16% in Germany. Cohabitation is least prevalent in Bulgaria (14%) and Romania (6%).

We set out to assess possible country differences in the cohabitation gap in relationship assessments and we expected there to be less differences between cohabitation and marriage in those countries where cohabitation is widespread. As prior research indicate that there are difference according to whether cohabitators' have marriage plans or not (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996), we also separated between cohabitators with (40.1%) and without (59.9%) intentions to marry their current partners within the next three years. The descriptive analyses showed that in all countries cohabitators in general more often have had breakup plans than those married. French and Norwegian cohabitators with short-term marriage intentions, however, are no more breakup prone than married respondents. And, in all countries married individuals are significantly more satisfied with their current relationships than cohabitators without marriage intentions. Cohabitators with intentions to marry their current partners are, on the other hand, more satisfied than their married counterparts in all countries except Bulgaria and Romania. Controlling for relevant characteristics of respondents and their partners (e.g., common children, union duration, education) in our pooled multivariate models we find, however, that both groups of cohabitators (i.e., with and without marriage intentions) are significantly less satisfied and more often have had breakup plans than their married counterparts.

To be sure, separate multivariate models for each country sub sample show that there are considerable variations in the degree to which cohabitators with marriage intentions differ from those married. Whereas Norwegian cohabitators with intentions to marry their partner are significantly more satisfied with the union than their married counterparts, Russian and Romanian cohabitators with marriage

intentions are more similar to cohabitators without marriage intentions (i.e., less satisfied than those married). And, in Russia and Germany both groups of cohabitators have higher odds of having considered breaking up the union. In the other countries there are no differences between cohabitators with marriage intentions and married respondents.

Moreover, our analyses show that the cohabitation gap in relationship satisfaction is largest in Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria, whereas German cohabitators in general are significantly more likely to have considered ending their relationships than cohabitators elsewhere. As Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and Germany are the countries in our data set where cohabitation is least prevalent, we have confirmed our hypothesis claiming that the cohabitation gap in relationship satisfaction and breakup plans is bigger in countries where cohabitation is less prevalent than in those where the union form is widespread. These findings thereby suggest that when cohabitation becomes more common and institutionalized in a country, and when cohabitation is more of a “stage in the marriage process” rather than an “alternative to marriage” or an “alternative to being single” (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990), couples in the two union types become more similar.

Selection, not the experience of marriage itself could explain the superior relationship quality among those married. It could, in other words, be the most satisfied couples who choose to marry. As our analysis clearly shows that cohabitators with short-term marriage intentions are more satisfied and less often have breakup plans than other cohabitators, it seems probable that there is at least some selection of the happiest couples into marriage.

In order to fully understand the relationship between partner status and relationship satisfaction across Europe, the present study would have benefited from the addition of data from more countries. For instance, with only eight countries we are not able to employ multilevel methodology to better assess country level differences between cohabitation and marriage. However, future research could take into account regional differences within countries in order to examine how different contexts might influence the relationship satisfaction in the two union types.

Regrettably, the Dutch data have no information on breakup plans, so future research should address the issue of breakup plans across the two union types there. A further limitation of the current study is our rather crude measure of positive (i.e., union satisfaction) and negative (i.e., breakup plans) relationship quality. Also, comparing relationship satisfaction across different context, it is important to note that relationship satisfaction to a certain degree could be correlated with the level of general

well being in a country. Research confirms that there is a close link between relationship quality and subjective well-being (e.g., Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). On the other hand, as our main focus here has been on the differences between the two union types and not on country differences in relationship satisfaction *per se*, this should be of minor importance to our results. Additionally, this study relies on one partner's report of relationship satisfaction and breakup plans, and we do not know whether the partner is as satisfied as the respondent and whether she or he also has breakup plans. Couple-level data are required to investigate possible discrepancies between partners' relationship assessments.

Cohabitation is a complex phenomenon and cohabitators constitute a heterogeneous group. For instance, cohabitation could have very different meanings at different stages in the life course and according to whether or not couples have children and prior union experience. We restricted our analyses to cohabitators below the age of 55. However, cohabitation may be a different kind of union for those entering it later in life. For instance, recent research from the U.S. suggests that among older adults, cohabitators and marrieds are more similar with respect to relationship quality (Brown & Kawamura, 2010). This heterogeneity is particularly important to bear in mind when comparing cohabitation across different contexts. As we have used comparable data and separated between cohabitators with and without intentions to marry their partner, in addition to control for a range of other variables known to be correlated with relationship quality as well as cohabitation, at least some of this heterogeneity has been taken into account.

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## Appendix 1. Relationship Satisfaction (0 – 10, OLS Regression). By Country

	Norway <i>b</i>	France <i>b</i>	Nether- lands <i>b</i>	Hungary <i>b</i>	Russia <i>b</i>	Germany <i>b</i>	Bulgaria <i>b</i>	Roma- nia <i>b</i>
Union type (Married = ref)								
Cohabiting, intent to marry	0.18*	-0.05	-0.10	-0.15	-0.26*	-0.01	-0.10	-
Cohabiting, no intent to marry	-0.43***	-0.70***	-0.46***	-0.87***	-1.21***	-0.50***	-0.50***	0.37***
Common chil- dren	-0.16**	-0.23**	-0.37***	-0.01	-0.12	-0.22***	-0.14*	-0.08
Step children	0.01	0.11	0.26	0.04	0.21	-0.44***	-0.16	0.05
Birth plans	0.18**	-0.14	0.26**	0.17**	0.18	0.04	0.01	0.10
Union duration	-0.04***	-0.03	-0.02	-0.04***	-0.06***	-0.02*	-0.03**	-0.02**
Union duration squared	0.01***	0.01	0.01	0.01**	0.01***	0.01**	0.01***	0.01**
Previous un- ion(s)	-0.08	-0.12	-0.20*	-0.04	-0.03	0.13	-0.18	-0.16*
Education level (Primary= ref)								
Secondary	-0.02	-0.09	-0.14	0.42***	-0.01	0.20**	0.41***	0.46***
University	-0.21***	-0.01	0.03	0.65***	0.31***	0.35***	0.50***	0.74***
Couple's educa- tion (R>P= ref)								
Homogamous	0.01	0.07	0.17*	0.17*	0.12	0.07	0.20**	0.20***
R<Partner	-0.02	0.15	0.37***	0.39***	0.17	0.21*	0.36***	0.52***
Age	-0.01*	-0.02**	-0.02**	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01**	-0.02**	-0.01*
Age homoga- mous	0.01	0.18**	0.05	-0.01	0.05	0.05	-0.04	0.01
Female	-0.12**	-0.34***	-0.27***	-0.40***	-0.91***	-0.24***	-0.39***	-
Constant	9.73***	9.74***	9.84***	8.98***	9.34***	9.50***	9.40***	9.10***
<i>n</i>	6,614	2,821	3,482	5,199	4,800	4,002	6,089	5,605

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Appendix 2. Breakup Plans (0 – 1). Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression. By Country

	Norway $e^b$	France $e^b$	Hungary $e^b$	Russia $e^b$	Germany $e^b$	Bulgaria $e^b$	Romania $e^b$
Union type (Married=ref)							
Cohabiting, intent to marry	0.81	1.07	1.35	1.50**	1.89*	1.75	1.10
Cohabiting, no intent to marry	2.17***	2.78***	3.45***	2.84***	3.30***	2.38***	2.10
Common children	0.89	0.92	0.84	1.13	1.44*	1.03	1.01
Step children	1.08	0.88	1.16	0.89	0.95	1.06	1.10
Birth plans	0.75*	1.26	0.90	1.01	0.79	1.12	0.82
Union duration	1.03	1.02	1.07*	1.03	1.03	1.05	0.96
Union duration squared	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Previous union(s)	1.50***	1.80***	1.09	1.49**	2.53***	1.73	1.97*
Education level (Primary=ref)							
Secondary	0.82	1.27	0.82	1.24*	0.81	1.06	0.36***
University	0.86	1.65*	0.81	1.29*	0.89	1.69*	0.37**
Couple's education (R>P= ref)							
Homogamous	1.08	0.97	0.70*	1.02	0.88	0.76	0.41***
R<Partner	0.97	1.10	0.74	1.09	0.76	0.63	0.19***
Age	0.98**	0.99	0.97*	0.97***	0.98	1.00	1.02
Age homogamous	0.95	1.05	0.93	1.01	1.12	0.91	1.08
Female	1.48***	2.31***	1.79***	2.01***	1.51**	1.67**	3.48***
<i>n</i>	6,626	4,000	5,240	4,996	4,013	6,210	5,605

Note:  $e^b$  = exponentiated b. Data on breakup plans not available for the Netherlands.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .