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Diffusion of cohabitation in Poland

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Abstract

This paper attempts to establish the stage Poland has reached in the process of cohabitation diffusion, referring to the theoretical model of the process developed in demographic literature. Official statistics suggest that Poland is still in the first stage of cohabitation diffusion; however, our in-depth study of the process of first union formation challenges this view. We investigated cohabitation from a life-course perspective and analysed the meanings which are attached to this form of living arrangement. The results clearly indicate that Poland has already entered the second stage of cohabitation diffusion. We reached this conclusion on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data. This mixed-method approach allowed us to obtain empirical evidence from different sources and hence to formulate our conclusions with higher certainty (methodological triangulation).

Keywords: cohabitation, cohabitation diffusion, first union formation, methodological triangulation

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1. Introduction

The increasing popularity of non-marital cohabitation is one of the most marked trends in family-related demographic patterns in contemporary Europe. Before the 1970s, consensual unions were limited to marginal sections of society — mostly the underprivileged (Trost 1978, Villeneuve-Gokalp 1991). Cohabitation was chosen by those who could not get married for legal or financial reasons (Haskey 2002, Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). Only in few countries (e.g. Sweden) did non-married cohabitants belong to avant-garde groups formed in opposition to church and social norms (Lesthaeghe 1995, Trost 1978).

After the 1970s, the situation changed profoundly. In the Nordic countries and France, already in cohorts born in the 1950s, over 80% of women chose cohabitation as their first union (Anderson and Philipov 2002). Women in the Netherlands, Austria and the UK soon followed this pattern (Fokkema et al. 2008, Prskawetz et al. 2008, Sigle-Rushton 2008), while in the 1990s an upsurge in cohabitation incidence was observed in many post-socialist countries such as Bulgaria, Russia, Hungary (Hoem et al. 2009) and the Czech Republic (Sobotka et al. 2008). The spread of cohabitation has not occurred at the same pace across the whole continent, however (Carmichael 1995, Kiernan 2000, 2002, Nazio and Blossfeld 2003). It has been much slower, for instance, in southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain), where at the turn of the 1990s only 10-20% of women chose cohabitation as their first union (Anderson and Philipov 2002). Poland is another country where marriage appears to be strong and has not yet lost ground to informal unions. In our paper, we take a closer look at the spread of cohabitation in Poland, attempting to answer the question of how far the country has advanced in the process of cohabitation diffusion.

We follow the theoretical model of cohabitation diffusion proposed by Kathleen Kiernan (2002), who, drawing on the work of Prinz (1995), distinguished four stages in the process:

- (1) Non-marital cohabitation is rare and limited to marginal groups of society. It is treated as a deviant or avant-garde behaviour.
- (2) The number of cohabiting couples increases. Cohabitation starts appearing among other social groups. At this stage, consensual unions are perceived as a testing period preceding marriage.
- (3) Couples remain in non-marital unions for increasing periods of time. Cohabitation becomes an acceptable alternative to marriage.

(4) Cohabitation and marriage become equivalent.

Notably, the theoretical model presented above defines the subsequent stages using quantitative as well as qualitative indicators. In quantitative terms, cohabitation becomes increasingly common from one stage to the other, spreads gradually across various social groups, and its duration increases. In qualitative terms, also the meaning of consensual unions changes. First it is seen as a deviant or avant-garde behaviour, then as a trial period before marriage, as an alternative to marriage in the next stage, and finally the two forms of union become indistinguishable. Therefore, to accurately determine Poland's progress in terms of the above model, our study combines quantitative and qualitative methods. We apply event-history analysis to assess the incidence and duration of consensual unions in certain social groups, as well as across time. This method is complemented by an in-depth qualitative study that seeks to discover what meaning of cohabitation diffuses in Poland. Our focus is on first unions only.

In the following section, we briefly summarise the body of knowledge about cohabitation in Poland prior to our study. Next we outline our research methods for both the quantitative and the qualitative parts of our study and present their respective results. In the discussion, we attempt to give a precise, definite answer to the question: which stage of cohabitation diffusion has Poland actually reached?

2. Cohabitation in Poland

Only few studies have been carried out on non-marital cohabitation in Poland. The scarcity of research on this topic is not surprising given the low number of cohabitants reported by the National Population Censuses and survey data. Consensual unions accounted for a mere 1.3% of all unions in 1988, 1.7% in 1995 and 2.2% in 2002 (Slany 2002, Fihel 2005). Survey results give similar estimates: 1.4% according to the Population Policy Acceptance Study of 2001 (Kotowska et al. 2003) and 4.5% according to the European Social Survey (2006).

The Census of 2002 showed that half of those living in informal unions are aged 40 or above, and only 12% are younger than 25. They usually live in cities (75%, Central Statistical Office 2003). For most of them, the current cohabitation is not their first union: only 35% of cohabitations are formed by never-married partners, while in the remaining cases at least one partner is widowed, separated or divorced (ibid). As many as 56% of couples in informal

unions have children. Clearly, cohabitation is not common among the younger generation of Poles. Moreover, it is apparently being chosen by individuals who have a relatively low educational level and come from lower socio-economic strata (Fihel 2005, Slany 2002).

The information presented above on the incidence of cohabitation and the characteristics of Polish cohabitants might suggest that Poland is still in the first stage of cohabitation diffusion, as this form of union is limited only to a marginal group of society, namely the disadvantaged. The statistics on consensual unions in Poland come only from cross-sectional surveys, however. This type of data can underestimate the incidence of consensual unions, particularly in a country where cohabitations are relatively brief, preceding marriage rather than constituting long-term relationships. The underlying reason for this is that cross-sectional data allow us to assess the current levels of cohabitation, but do not provide information on the levels of ever-cohabitation. It is thus possible that Poland has already entered the second stage of cohabitation diffusion, but the indicators available do not capture this phenomenon well enough. In order to judge which stage of the process has been reached, retrospective data that include partnership histories are required. This sort of data allows us to trace cohabitation episodes of any duration and at any stage of an individual's life course.

In addition to an increasing incidence of consensual unions, a country which has entered the second stage of cohabitation diffusion should also experience a spread of this form of living arrangement to other social strata, which were so far less likely to cohabit. Two models of cohabitation diffusion have been observed. In the first one, cohabitation is a fashion that spreads from the top of the social hierarchy to the bottom. This pattern was recorded in the Netherlands (de Feijter 1991 quoted in Sobotka 2008), Italy (Rosina and Fraboni 2004), and Spain (Baizán, Aassve and Billari 2003). In the second model, cohabitation originates among the disadvantaged members of society, as for instance in some Western and Northern European countries and in the United States (Kiernan 2000, 2002). Poland seems to belong to the latter group, along with some other Central and Eastern European countries, such as Hungary, Bulgaria or Romania (Spéder 2005, Koytcheva and Philipov 2008, Hoem et al. 2009). In order to judge whether Poland has already entered the second stage of cohabitation diffusion, we need to examine whether there are any signs indicating that informal unions have started to spread to higher social strata.

Finally, consensual unions are perceived differently at subsequent stages of the

diffusion process. If Poland has entered the second stage, cohabitation will be seen as a testing period preceding marriage. It will have ceased to be thought of as a deviant behaviour, a perception typical of the first stage.

All in all, three questions need to be addressed if we are to assess which stage in the process of cohabitation diffusion Poland has reached. First, has there been any increase in the proportion of young Poles who choose consensual union as their first relationship before they decide to marry? Second, are there any indications that non-marital cohabitation is spreading to higher strata of Polish society? For instance: is it becoming more common among highly educated women? And third, what meanings of cohabitation spread among Poles? In what follows, we address the first two research questions using quantitative methods, while qualitative methodology is employed to answer the third question.

3. Data and method

3.1. Quantitative study

In the quantitative part of our study, we employ data from the Employment, Family and Education Survey (EFES) carried out in the fourth quarter of 2006. This retrospective survey provides monthly data on 3,000 life histories of women born 1966-1981 (aged 25-40 at the time of the interview). It was prepared at the Institute of Statistics and Demography (Warsaw School of Economics) within the project “Cultural and structural conditions of females’ labour force participation in Poland” financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and coordinated by Professor Irena E. Kotowska.

To address our research objectives we proceeded in two steps. First, we estimated a piecewise constant hazard model for the transition to first union, with woman’s age since 15 treated as process time. Decrement type was introduced into this model in addition to the set of control covariates enumerated below, and it was interacted with calendar time. This technique, called joint estimation of competing risks, was described in detail in Hoem and Kostova (2008) and in the Appendix in Hoem et al. (2009). It allows a direct comparison between the time trends in the entry to cohabitation and the entry to direct marriage, which means that we can verify whether cohabitation has become more widespread than direct marriage at any time. Reference is made to the results of the joint model only where we

present temporal developments in union formation (Section 4.1). However, we cannot interpret remaining parameters of the model in terms of relative risks (Hoem et al. 2009). Therefore, in the second step we estimated transition to cohabitation and transition to direct marriage separately, which enabled us to analyse educational differentials in partnership choices of the individuals. It is to be noted that this technique would not allow us for comparisons across union types, which is possible in the joint model.

Our key explanatory covariates were calendar period and woman's educational attainment. *Calendar period* was introduced in our models in order to capture temporal changes in the process of interest. The years 1985-2006 were divided into five intervals, the first of which separates the period of state socialism from that of a market economy. Entry risk was assumed to be constant within each interval, but was allowed to vary from one interval to the other. As regards *woman's educational level*, we distinguished four main categories: primary and lower, vocational, secondary, and tertiary. The first category covers women who completed at most eight years of compulsory education. Women with a vocational education continued for a further two years to receive a vocational qualification. The secondary-educated finished at least four years of schooling at the secondary level or even undertook post-secondary but non-tertiary education. Women who hold a bachelor's or master's degree are classified as tertiary-educated. Those who were still studying at the time of the survey were grouped into a separate fifth category, 'in education'.

In addition to calendar period and women's educational attainment, we also controlled for the woman's parity-and-pregnancy status (childless and not pregnant / pregnant with the first child / a mother), the educational level of the woman's mother and father, as well as for the woman's place of residence (urban / rural), which was introduced in our models as a time-varying covariate.

The results of our quantitative analyses are presented in sections 4.1 and 4.2.

3.2. Qualitative study

Our third research question concerns the examination of meanings associated with cohabitation. A suitable approach for such a task is to apply qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Maxwell 1996). A quantitative methodology is explorative, process-oriented and, most importantly from the perspective of our research question, allows us to capture an "insider's perspective" and interpret the world "in terms of the meanings people

bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p. 3).

The data analyzed in our research come from semi-structured interviews, conducted in Warsaw between September 2004 and July 2005. We interviewed 48 individuals (26 women and 22 men) at various, but relatively early, stages of their family careers: couples still dating and couples cohabiting or married; childless (34 respondents) or with one child (14 respondents). In the case of most couples, it was possible to interview both partners, but each of them was interviewed separately. The women’s age ranged from 20 to 30 and the men’s from 20 to 35. Two subgroups were defined as regards educational attainment: up to high school exams (20 respondents) and higher (28 respondents). With the exception of 5 men, all our respondents were born in Warsaw or moved there in their childhood (before the age of 15).

Our sample consisted of individuals who have been living in the city for the major part of their life and are better-educated than the Polish population overall. Respondents with such characteristics are likely to be the “early knowers of innovations” (Rogers 1995): they are most likely to express modern opinions and attitudes. We trust that such a selection of respondents was particularly well-suited for the purposes of our study, as it was not our intention to measure what opinions on cohabitation are prevalent in Polish society. Rather, we sought to discover whether the meaning of cohabitation in question (cohabitation as a pre-marital testing) has already appeared and started to spread. If our respondents did not communicate this meaning, we could be fairly certain that it is absent from Polish society.

The interview guideline covered several topical areas related to the process of family formation. It also included questions on experiences, expectations and opinions concerning partnership, living together with a partner, and marriage.

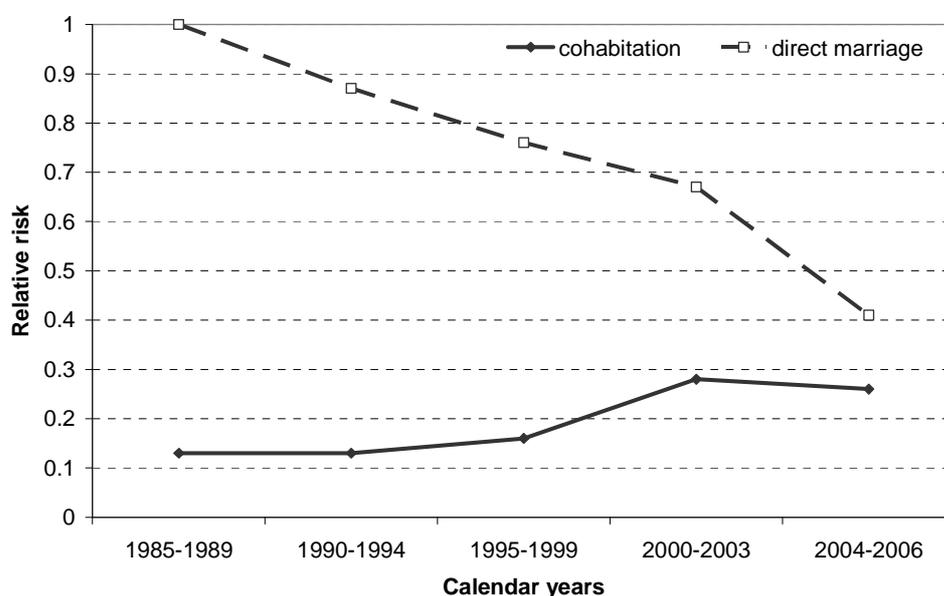
All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using the procedures of the grounded theory approach, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998, cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the first step, all passages related to cohabitation were identified in the interviewees’ narrations. Within this material, we subsequently identified and categorised, through open and axial coding (“bottom-up” coding, Straus and Corbin 1998), the different meanings of this living arrangement expressed by the respondents. The results of these analyses are presented in section 4.3.

4. Results

4.1. Rising incidence of cohabitation as a first union

In response to our first research question, concerning quantitative change in the incidence of informal and marital unions, Figure 1 presents the trends in the risks of entry to cohabitation and direct marriage, derived through the joint analysis of the two competing processes. A change in the first union formation patterns is immediately evident from the clear decline in the entry to direct marriage, which has been taking place since as early as the second half of the 1980s, while a parallel increase in the incidence of cohabitation can be observed since the early 1990s. In the period 1990-1994, entries to cohabitation constituted only 12% of all unions formed. By the years 2004-2006, this percentage had tripled. Although young Poles are still more likely to form their first union through direct marriage rather than by cohabitation, the relative difference in the two intensities, which was close to ten in the late 1980s, decreased to 1.4 in the period 2004-2006.

Figure 1 Trends in (standardised) relative risks of first union formation, by type of union. Poland 1985-2006. Joint competing risk model.



Note: The figure refers to women born 1966-1981. The risks are standardised for current age, woman's educational level, parity-and-pregnancy status, place of residence, mother's and father's educational levels. The computations presented in this figure were prepared in collaboration with Jan M. Hoem.

Using the same data, Matysiak (2009) showed not only that Polish women are becoming more likely to enter cohabitation, but that the consensual unions they form last longer. More specifically, the intensity of ending the consensual union in the years 2000-2006, either through marriage or through disruption, was 30% lower than in the late 1980s. It is also notable that cohabitations in Poland usually end in marriage rather than through disruption. For instance, of consensual unions lasting less than 3 years, 80% were converted into a marriage and only 20% were disrupted.

All in all, our data suggest an increase in the importance of cohabitation for first union formation, occurring in parallel to a decline in the propensity to marry directly. They also indicate cohabitation in Poland to be much more widespread than the official statistics and other cross-sectional data available so far suggest, although undoubtedly consensual unions are still being formed far less often in Poland than in other Northern and Western European countries.

4.2. Diffusion of cohabitation among highly educated Poles

Consistently with the cross-sectional results quoted in section 2 (Central Statistical Office 2003, Fihel 2005, Slany 2002), our results indicate that cohabitation in Poland is more widespread in the lower social strata. Polish cohabitants are more likely to be low-educated, whereas the highly educated tend to marry directly (Table 2).

Table 2 Relative risks for education in single decrement models

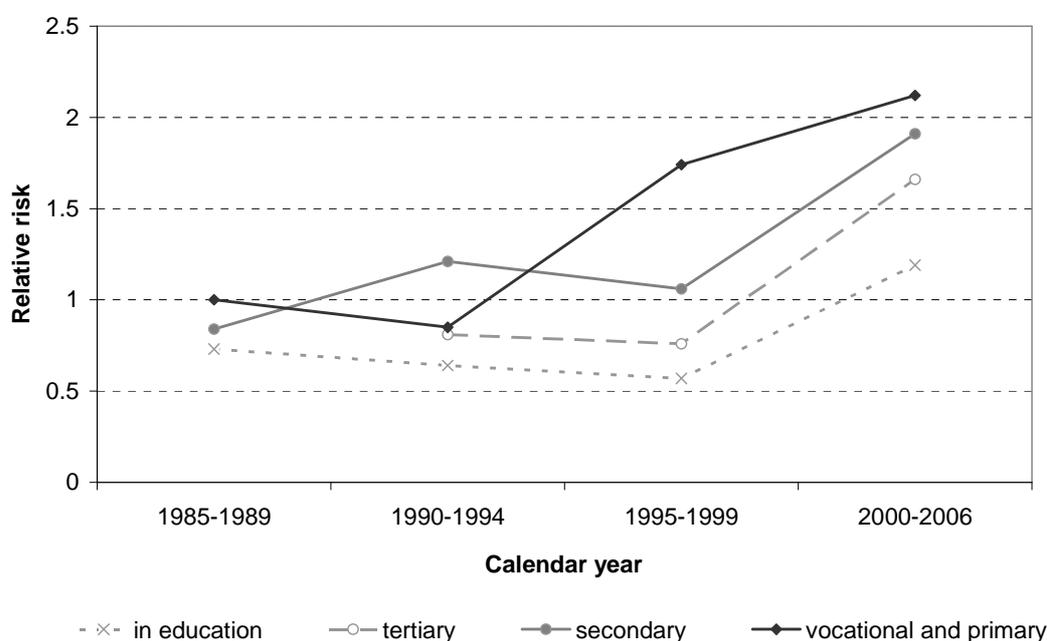
	Mode of union entry ^{a)}	
	cohabitation	direct marriage
Education		
in education	0.73	0.39
tertiary	1	1
secondary	1.21	0.76
vocational	1.4	0.76
primary or lower	1.35	0.55

Notes: ^{a)} - standardized for current age, calendar period, parity-and-pregnancy status, place of residence, mother's and father's educational levels.

Nonetheless, a two-way interaction between educational level and calendar period reveals an important change in the educational gradient in the patterns of first union formation. While in the second half of the 1990s the increase in the risk of entry to a

cohabitation was the most pronounced among the low-educated, in following years it was undeniably the secondary- and tertiary-educated who became more interested in this type of union (Figure 2). A marked rise in the risk of entering an informal union was also recorded among women in education. These findings indicate that Poland has started to experience a diffusion of cohabitation to better-educated social groups, providing a positive answer to our second research question, regarding the spread of cohabitation across social strata.

Figure 2 Trends in (standardised) relative risks of entering cohabitation, by educational level. Poland 1985-2006. Single decrement model.



Note: The figure refers to women born 1966-1981. The risks are standardised for current age, woman's educational level, parity-and-pregnancy status, place of residence, and mother's and father's educational levels

4.3. Meanings of cohabitation

The quantitative analyses presented above suggest that Poland might have entered the second stage in the process of cohabitation diffusion. Consensual unions are gradually becoming more widespread and this trend has recently accelerated among the highly educated, i.e. the social group so far relatively unlikely to cohabit. What remained to be investigated at this stage were the meanings attached to cohabitation. Is cohabitation still

perceived in Poland as a deviant or avant-garde behaviour, which would be typical for the first stage of cohabitation diffusion, or it is treated as a trial period preceding marriage, which is more characteristic for the second stage?

Our interviewees, indeed, consistently perceive cohabitation as a testing period before marriage. Living together provides partners with an opportunity to learn about and test each other, and possibly also to adjust to each other before the decision to marry is taken.

“I think, it wouldn’t necessarily have been a good decision [to marry directly]. Because, yes, of course, there could be a situation in which I don’t live with somebody and afterwards we are a very happy marriage. But in fact, I don’t really know the person until I live with him. I think that only then can you get to know this person truly and in all respects. And only afterwards can you decide to live together for the rest of your life. And marriage is for your whole life.” (Female, 26, cohabiting)

“This [premarital cohabitation] is good for sure. Because people get to know each other and learn about each other’s shortcomings pretty quickly. And then they can either stay together or split. It depends on whether they can reach an agreement, find the solution to their problems.” (Male, 29, married directly)

“Only if you live together can you get to know this person truly and see whether he or she is the right one for the next stage of your life. Or for the rest of your life.” (Female, 28, cohabiting).

Moreover, some respondents perceive cohabitation as the next natural step in relationship development, a natural consequence of their love. In their perception, as a relationship develops, partners want to be closer and closer together. They spend increasingly more time together and finally they start sharing their everyday life.

“We didn’t treat it like this, that it’s some kind of trial. We simply wanted to [live together], well, it was difficult for us to part. (...) When we weren’t living together, I would come to her place after work or she would come or I was already there waiting for her (...) And one day we decided that this is too hard for both of us and so we started living here.” (Male, 30, married after cohabitation)

“I rather see it [cohabitation] as a natural consequence of two people being together. I mean that we live together, that we're at certain level of knowing each other.”
(Female, 28, single)

Both meanings of cohabitation illustrated above indicate that this form of living arrangement is perceived by our respondents as a natural step that can, or at times even should, precede marriage. It is, however, clear from the interviewees' narrations that it is a transitory phase which should be followed by the decision to separate or to marry. A consensual union is seen as an intermediate stage, a transitional period in relationship development. Presenting all the reasons for which cohabitation is perceived as a lower stage of a relationship compared to marriage is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that this union type is associated with a lower commitment level of the partners, has no social recognition as a family arrangement and garners disapproval from the Catholic Church. These reasons have been described in detail elsewhere (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007). Meanwhile, it is apparent that our interviewees value marriage much higher than cohabitation. This approach is conveyed in the following passages from the interviews:

“I know a couple that lived together for 6 years without marriage, they still don't have it. He simply doesn't respect a woman when he doesn't commit – so to speak – to her. Because that's the only thing a man can do, he can get married. (...) from a man's side it's still marriage that is the only sign of true and sincere love, of respect for this woman.” (Woman, 22, married after cohabitation)

“If we were not married, of course, I would also consider us to be a loving family. But something would be missing.” (Male, 29, married after cohabitation)

Notably, almost all respondents who were not married at the time of the interview wish to marry eventually. Even if at times they express opinions that marriage, “this piece of paper”, will not change anything in their relationship, they want to take this step.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The aim of our study was to evaluate how far advanced Poland is in the process of cohabitation diffusion. We drew on theoretical considerations of Kathleen Kiernan (2002), who outlined four stages in this process, marked by different levels of cohabitation incidence in general and across social groups, but also by different meanings attached to the living arrangement. Official Polish statistics suggest that Poland is still in the first stage of cohabitation diffusion. However, our in-depth study of the process of first union formation, carried out from a life-course perspective, and our analysis of meanings attached to cohabitation indicate that the country has already entered the second stage. This conclusion was reached on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data. This mixed-method approach allowed us to obtain empirical evidence from different sources and hence, to formulate our conclusions with higher certainty (methodological triangulation).

Our quantitative analyses confirmed that the general level of pre-marital cohabitation is still very low in Poland. Nevertheless, they also showed that young Poles have been entering consensual living-together prior to getting married with a frequency that has been increasing already since the beginning of 1990s. Next, we found that even though low-educated women show the highest propensity to form a cohabitation, educational differences in the intensity of entering this type of union have declined in the first half of the 2000s. Clearly, cohabitation has started to seem an attractive living arrangement also to the better-educated. Furthermore, our qualitative findings revealed that consensual unions have begun to be perceived in Poland as a trial period preceding marriage, rather than as an avant-garde or deviant behaviour. Taken together, these findings provide evidence that Poland has already reached the second stage in the process of cohabitation diffusion.

Our investigations concentrated exclusively on the differences between the first and second stages in the process of cohabitation diffusion. Is it possible, however, that Poland has already reached the third stage? We are convinced that the answer to this question is negative. First, the general proportion of people in consensual unions remains very low as compared to many other European countries or the USA. Second, although cohabitation is becoming increasingly common among young people, it is not yet an acceptable alternative to marriage, a development which is an important marker of the third stage of the diffusion process. Our qualitative results indicate that this type of union is still treated as a temporary arrangement

even by young, highly educated individuals from Warsaw. Moreover, other studies have already demonstrated that in contrast to marriage, cohabitation does not provide acceptable conditions for childbearing. Using the same retrospective dataset as was employed in this paper, Matysiak (2009) showed that pregnancy substantially increased propensity to enter marriage among cohabiting women, with no temporal change since the mid-1980s. She concluded that there were no reasons to claim that having children in cohabitation is becoming more acceptable in Poland. Similar conclusions were reached on the basis of qualitative data by Mynarska and Bernardi (2007) who found numerous reasons for why childbearing in consensual unions is not an option for young Poles. First, such a choice encounters social disapproval and objections from the Catholic Church. Second, cohabitation is perceived by interviewees as too insecure and unstable to provide proper conditions for parenthood. All in all, the results cited from both quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that non-marital living-together does not function as a family arrangement in Poland and that parenthood is still strongly tied with marriage. Therefore, we firmly conclude that Poland has not entered the third stage of cohabitation diffusion yet.

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