The Changing Meaning of Cohabitation: an Analysis of Selected European Countries

In most of the northern and western European countries cohabitation started after the early (1970s and 1980s). Unlike those countries, the southern European ones were not touched by a massive diffusion of cohabitation. Most of the central and eastern European countries experienced the steeped increase of the proportion of cohabiting couples in Europe after the fall of the wall.

Objectives of the study: we are especially interested in analyzing the emergence of events that links the status of a union, the birth of a child or the separation among these events. We can make visible what is the stage of the diffusion of cohabitation reached in western and, most interestingly, in eastern European countries. From the other side we can question the applicability to broader contexts of the scheme proposed by Price (1985) described in Scheme 1.

A comparison of methods: a descriptive schema vs. a sequence analysis approach

We compare the results between different generations and summarize the sequence of events obtained with two different methods: a) descriptive schema vs. sequence analysis.

### SCHEMA 1 – STAGES OF THE DIFFUSION OF COHABITATION

1. No diffusion: cohabitation is chosen by people who have no chance to marry
2. Start of diffusion: the new behavior starts to spread between the "trend setters", it is still viewed as a deviant behavior
3. Marriage and cohabitation have the same meaning: fertility is not different between the two unions

### Differences between methods:

- **The purely descriptive approach forces the data in guidelines that are strongly influenced by the researcher.** On the other side, the interpretation of the results and of the meaning of the groups is straightforward. The sequence analysis, originally proposed by Abbott (1995) allows us to define group of people according to the duration of the time that separate two or more events, and to the order with which the events are experienced. It consists of the sequence observed in the data and compute a measure of dissimilarity based on the number of basic operations (creation, deletion or substitution of an event) that are necessary to transform one sequence of states in the other (optimal matching).

Future stage: is still not clear if the cohabitation starts soon after the end of the formal civil status or from the beginning of the relationship. It is necessary step we plan to include in the analysis the characteristics of the respondents (education level, option about cohabitation, family background) that are likely to influence the belonging to a particular group. The introduction of these features in the choice of the optimal matching algorithms, the computation of the matching costs and the final groups will allow to advance in this direction.

### References


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