

# Unmarried Cohabitation in Czechoslovakia

IVO MOŽNÝ\*

LADISLAV RABUŠIC\*

Department of Sociology and Social Work Masaryk University, Brno

**Abstract:** Our paper tries to answer the question of whether there is or is not the phenomenon of unmarried cohabitation in Czechoslovakia. Despite the character of relevant demographic data (i.e. the relatively low mean age at first marriage, low proportion of children born out of wedlock and high nuptiality rate) we argue that in terms of their trends they provide us with indication that there are more and more women and men for whom the traditional pattern of family formation does not hold any longer, and that living together unmarried as an early form of family life-course or as an alternative to previous experience with marriage is something that can be found in Czechoslovakia. To support our hypothesis we conducted two surveys among partners applying for marriage licenses in 1985 and 1990. Results showed that 31 % and 37 % of couples contracting their first marriage lived together in 1985 and 1990, respectively. The proportion of cohabitants among couples contracting a second or third marriage was 73 % and 77 %. Our conclusion is that unmarried cohabitation in Czechoslovakia does exist. It is not of a Scandinavian type, however. We call it "engaged cohabitation", which is oriented toward marriage.

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Nowadays, there are many ways of setting up a household. The usual one, getting married and having children, has become only one among a wide variety of living arrangements and life styles [Macklin 1983] in the developed countries of Europe, North America and Australia. The demographic behavior of the populations of these countries has been undergoing a fundamental change during the last three decades: nuptial and fertility rates have decreased, mean age at first marriage and mean age at the birth of the first child have increased, and the divorce rate has increased as well.

All these facts are well known to demographers and sociologists. Factors considered by the literature as potential causes of the phenomena vary. Generally speaking, they can be clustered into three types: economic factors, advocated by Becker [1981], Easterlin [1980], Ermisch [1981], etc.; contraceptive technology factors, being stressed for instance by Westoff and Ryder [1977]; and last, but not least, value system factors. The focus of interest on value systems, though recent in

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Direct correspondence to the authors: Department of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy, Masaryk University, Arne Nováka 1, 660 88 Brno. E-mail rabu@lvt.phil.muni.cs.

demographic analysis, has produced several important insights: (see e.g. [Preston 1986; Lesthaeghe 1983; Hoffmann-Nowotny 1987; van de Kaa 1987]). The value change conceptualized for instance by Inglehart [1977; 1990] as a "silent revolution" or more broadly as a "culture shift", is thought to be connected with the new functioning of individuals in post-industrial societies. This change in values generally means a shift from traditional value patterns which stress material well-being and physical security (i.e. "materialist values") toward "post-materialist values", i.e. greater emphasis on the quality of life, on needs of belonging, self-esteem and self-realization.

The autonomous progression of an individualist-oriented Western value system [Lesthaeghe 1983] coincides with population changes in the Western world: as van de Kaa [1987] put it, we are witnessing shifts from marriage towards the cohabitation of unmarried persons, from children to the adult couple as the focus of the family, from contraception as a means of preventing unwanted pregnancies to deliberate self-fulfilling choices whether and when to conceive a child (with voluntarily childlessness as a frequent outcome), and from uniform to widely diversified families, households and life-styles.

Such ordering has its inner logic. When we look at it from the point of view of individuals' life courses, the shifts can be seen as a sequence that begins with unmarried cohabitation. In the late 1960s, young men and women, healthy and biologically mature, living in a world of unprecedented prosperity, with open access to high schools and universities, gradually came to the conclusion that marriage (and the family) was not a necessary condition for their happiness. They postponed it but, at the same time, they were not willing to postpone their sexual life. Since social norms concerning pre-marital sexual behavior had been already loosened (see e.g. [Schmidt, Sigush 1972; Yankelovich 1981; Scanzoni, Scanzoni 1988]), the separation of sex from marriage became widely accepted. The contraceptive technology of the 1960s (and the liberal abortion laws of the 1970s) also made it possible to separate sex safely from procreation, thus setting favorable conditions for the emergence of alternative life-styles and the creation of diversified forms of households.

This process has taken different forms in different countries. Whatever their form, however, the new approaches to partnership that have been recorded in so many countries until now are obviously important indicators of a general value change in Western society.<sup>1</sup>

The literature on cohabitation is quite extensive (see e.g. [Gwartney-Gibbs 1986; Macklin 1978, 1983; Scanzoni, Scanzoni 1988; Siew-Ean 1987; Thornton 1988; Trost 1979, 1988; Wiersma 1983; Teachman, Polonko 1990; Spanier 1983; Bejin 1985, White 1987], etc.). All the authors agree that cohabitation is a

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<sup>1</sup>) One would find, I believe, a strong association between the existence of unmarried cohabitation and, for instance, the rate of post-materialism. According to Inglehart's [1990] analyses, the most post-materialistic countries are the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. These are also where we also find high unmarried cohabitation rates.

consequence of socio-cultural changes, and that its development has been quite rapid. It is characterized as a partnership which is individualized, oriented towards self-fulfillment, which enables the feeling of independence, but gives at the same time a sense of personal identity and intimacy. In many countries the perception of cohabitation by the general public has changed: the formerly "deviant" behavior has become a tolerated (or at least not opposed) social institution. Experts on cohabitation also generally agree that it is difficult to measure or evaluate the phenomenon since it is missing as a demographic classification in the vital statistics of many countries.

Nevertheless, demographers and sociologists have so far been able to collect some data concerning the rate of cohabitation in the West. We know that cohabitation is quite common in Nordic countries, but also in the Netherlands, the FRG, France and Great Britain. Though cohabiting dyads do not form a large group within the adult population at any particular point in time, the proportion of age-specific cohabitation (among young adults) is relatively high. There are also growing numbers of young people who have cohabited for a certain period of time and also growing numbers of people living together as unmarried couples after a previous divorce.

In the former "socialist" countries cohabitation has been recorded only in Hungary [Carlson, Klinger 1987] and East Germany, where it used to be relatively high. Does it also exist in Czechoslovakia?

The answer is not easy to determine. As is well known, Czechoslovakia shares some demographic similarities with the West, but also possesses some unique characteristics. As in the West, the fertility rate has been low (TFR was 1.95, the net reproduction rate 0.92 in 1989) and the divorce rate has been high (33.7 per 100 marriages in 1989). On the other hand, nuptiality has also been high (the marriage rate was 7.5 per 1000 population in 1989) and the mean age at first marriage has been relatively low (it was 21.8 for females and 24.4 for males in 1988) as has been the mean age at the birth of the first child (21.8 in 1970, 22.5 in 1989).

Nevertheless, we were able to observe certain trends in the last decade indicating the evolution of new, culturally legitimate patterns of family formation. The mean age at first marriage has been slowly rising (it was lowest in the 1960s: 21.06 for females in 1966 and 23.75 for males in 1969; the corresponding figures for 1988 are 21.8 and 24.4), the continuous decrease of the never married has stopped (in the 1960s 6 % of men and 3 % of women had never married at the age of 50; in 1988 the corresponding proportions were 12 % and 6 %), the proportion of children born out of wedlock has been on the increase (7.6 % of all children born in 1989), and the share of children conceived by unmarried women has been increasing as well (these were 44.4 % of the first children born within 8 months after wedding in 1970, 49.5 % in 1980, and 56.6 % in 1989).

We believe that all these trends are mutually dependent and it seems that there are more and more women and men for whom the traditional pattern of family formation:

falling in love	going steady	getting married	living together with regular sex	children
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does not hold any longer. Getting married is not a precondition for having sex or conceiving a child. Marriage often becomes only a consequence of a regular sexual life: young couples often get married when they realize that they are expecting a baby; the widowed and the divorced do not enter new marriages and live together instead. Thus, despite the rigid and oppressive Communist ideology penetrating all spheres of Czechoslovak society, the general social climate concerning sexual and marriage behavior has been more or less permissive.<sup>2</sup>

As sociologists, we are convinced that unmarried living together as an early form of family life-course or as an alternative to previous experience with marriage is something that does exist in Czechoslovakia.

Demographers generally agree that one of the indirect indicators of changes in family formation and reproductive behavior is an increase in the proportion of children born out of wedlock. For 110 years, it has been gradually decreasing in Czechoslovakia: from 15 % in 1860 to 6 % in 1950; the absolute minimum (4.4 %) was reached in the Slovak republic (SR) in 1969, in the Czech Republic (CR) in 1974 (4.4 %). Since then, the rate has gradually increased to 7.9 % in the CR and 7.2 % in the SR in 1989. This parallels the situation in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1980 [Bartoňová 1991]. When we take into consideration that the nuptiality of the unmarried decreased during the 1980s (6.30 in 1980 and 6.07 in 1989 per 1000 population), the mean age at first marriage increased, and the fertility rate of unmarried women - despite a general fertility decrease - increased as well, we can venture the hypothesis that there is a growing group of young people (especially those aged 20-24) who live more or less in marriage-like unions, who postpone their marriages until they expect a child; then they usually get married.<sup>3</sup> If a woman does not get married at that stage, she often bears her child out of wedlock.

The fact that about half of all children were either conceived or conceived and born out of wedlock in 1988 can be interpreted in two ways: 1) those children were conceived by chance or as a matter of bad luck; they were an outcome of unplanned and uncontrolled behavior. We do not regard such an "explanation" plausible. On the contrary, our hypothesis is that: 2) the growing proportion of children conceived and/or born outside marriage is an indicator of a growing

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2) When the latter of the authors of this paper introduced the concept of "unmarried cohabitation" into demography in Czechoslovakia (see [Rabušic 1986]), the board of editors felt it necessary to append their comment at the end of the paper, saying that "only a marriage as the legal arrangement of the relationship of a man and a woman creates the conditions for a responsible relationship of parents to their children. (...) Therefore our society does not support the formation of unmarried cohabitation in any area" (p. 138).

3) About 93 % of all children are born to married couples.

proportion of non-maritally cohabiting dyads who stay and live together, have a regular sexual life, common economy and common plans for their future.

We believe that our hypothesis is also supported by the fact that the parents of the 57 % of children born within eight months after the wedding cannot simply start their reproductive periods "by mistake". Our empirical experience suggests that unmarried cohabitation consists very likely of three types:

1. cohabitation considered as "de-facto marriages" by Czechoslovak demographers. As Bartoňová [1984] maintains, this type of cohabitation is practiced mainly by people of middle and older age, mostly divorced or widowed. The dyads are registered as common-law marriages. According to the 1980 Census (the latest data from the 1991 Census are not yet available from the Federal Statistical Bureau), the median age of de-facto marriages was about 42 and their proportion was low: 3.3 per 100 marriages. Their characteristic feature is that they do not bear children nor do they entertain the possibility of getting married.
2. cohabitation which we can call "engaged cohabitation". The analysis of demographic indications has led us to the conclusion that Czechoslovak women (mostly in urban areas) enter the reproductive process after a shorter or longer period of sexual relations with their prospective partners which includes the sharing of an apartment and a way of life. Here, prevention against conception weakens with the growing mutual trust of the partners. After a period of time, they do get married; the women's pregnancy may speed up the dyad's decision to marry.
3. cohabitation of single persons of the opposite sex who do not intend to marry (i.e. "real" cohabitation of the Scandinavian type). Here, women have "illegitimate" children. From the Czechoslovak 1961, 1970 and 1980 censuses, we know that the proportion of never-married women aged 30-34 having children is growing: the respective figures are 16.6 %, 17.6 % and 22.1 %.

Besides these three forms there is also a dynamic group of "cohabitating divorcees". These cohabitants' partnerships usually develop into one of the three mentioned forms. An important intervening variable determining which form it takes is the age of the partners: the young divorced will very likely legitimate their relationship by marriage after some time (especially when a child is conceived). Older partners may live in de-facto marriages or declare their unions common-law marriages.

To obtain reliable information with regard to unmarried cohabitation, we carried out two consecutive surveys among all partners (no sampling) coming to Brno<sup>4</sup> to apply for marriage licenses in June 1985/May 1986 and in June 1990/May 1991. We realize that by interviewing the population applying for marriage license we cannot record "real" cohabitation. On the other hand, the life-long unmarried population is not numerous yet.

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<sup>4</sup>) Brno is the second largest city in the Czech Republic, with a population of about 400,000. It is the industrial, cultural and scientific center of Moravia (the eastern part of the Czech Republic).

In the survey, the existence of unmarried cohabitation was indicated by the answer: We've stayed and lived together more or less as married for some time before marriage. Those who said they had lived together only during holidays and vacations or only occasionally were classified as non-cohabitants. Our results were quite surprising for a country where unmarried cohabitation was considered to be practically nonexistent (see table 1).

Table 1. Proportion of unmarried cohabitation in Brno 1985/1986 and 1990/91 (in %).

Cohabitation	1985/1986	1990/1991
We've lived together more or less as married for some time	45.5	47.8
We've lived together but only during holidays or vacations	17.8	22.1
We've lived together only occasionally	29.6	20.2
No, we haven't lived together, we were just going steady	7.2	9.8
	N = 1562	N = 1384

Currently, the proportion of people in Czechoslovakia who have some experience with cohabitation is high, close to 50 %. However, our hypothesis expected to find at least two types of cohabitation: the "engaged cohabitation" of singles, and the cohabitation of those who have already had some experience with marriage. Our surveys show that the proportion of cohabitation depended on whether it was the first or a repeated marriage (see table 2).

Table 2. Proportion of unmarried cohabitation by first (1st.m.) or repeated marriages (r.m.) in Brno 1985/86 and 1990/91 (in %).

Cohabitation	1985/1986		1990/1991	
	1st.m.	r*.m.	1st.m.	r*.m.
We've lived together more or less as married for some time	30.9	72.8	37.4	76.3
We've lived together but only during holidays or vacations	23.8	6.7	26.7	9.0
We've lived together only occasionally	35.8	16.7	23.9	10.4
No, we haven't lived together, we were just going steady	9.6	3.8	11.9	4.4

N = 1066 N = 536 N = 999 N = 367

\* if either the bride or the bridegroom or both established a repeat marriage

### First Marriages

The observed length of unmarried cohabitation prior to marriage confirms that the term "engaged cohabitation" is appropriate. Its average duration was 12.3 months in 1985/86 and 12.0 months in 1990/91. About 47 % of the cohabitations did not last more than 6 months in both surveys. The relatively longest cohabitation was in the 25-29 age group of both brides and grooms (15 months). We did not find support for the hypothesis that unmarried cohabitants will establish marriages more often than noncohabitants because of the pregnancy of a bride. The proportion of pregnant brides was lower in cohabiting dyads than in non-cohabiting ones (32 % : 42 % in 1985/86, and 30 % : 38 % in 1990/91). Thus, unmarried cohabitation does not increase the probability of pregnancy.

We also did not find support for the generally held idea that cohabitation is more widespread among people of higher educational attainment. The opposite is true in Czechoslovakia. Our data reveal an indirect association: the lower the educational attainment of both the mother and father of a bride,<sup>5</sup> the higher the proportion of cohabitation. The same was true when we considered the socio-occupational status of brides and grooms (see table 3).

Table 3. Unmarried cohabitation by socio-occupational status and by sex in Brno in 1985/86 and 1990/91, first marriages (in %)

Status	1985/86		1990/91	
	bride	groom	bride	groom
unskilled worker	64.5	62.8	61.8	64.7
apprentice	.	19.6	.	42.1
skilled worker	31.1	28.5	39.2	41.3
student of secondary school	25.0	24.0	.	29.6
employee with secondary education	26.0	27.8	37.8	33.6
student of higher education	25.0	17.2	34.1	27.3
employee with higher education	25.5	30.9	31.9	37.3

Similar results are reported from Hungary (see [Carlson, Klinger 1987]).

### Repeated Marriages

If marriage is repeated for at least one of the partners getting married, cohabitation prior to marriage is quite typical behavior: in 1985/86, 73 % of such partners were cohabiting, in 1990/91, 76 %. The average length of cohabitation was almost twice as long as those in "engaged cohabitation": 21.2 months and 22.3 months in the respective years. 57 % were cohabiting for at least a year.

The length of cohabitation was strongly associated with the age of brides and grooms. In both years the younger dyads (i.e. brides not older than 24, grooms not older than 29), having a mean duration of cohabitation of about 14 months, remind

<sup>5</sup>) We analyze brides' characteristics more often since parents are, for obvious reasons, less permissive with their daughters than their sons in Czechoslovakia.

one of "engaged cohabitants". The older cohorts cohabited on average between 24 and 30 months. Our hypothesis about the mixed types of cohabitation of the divorced or widowed is thus supported. Among the young never-married, cohabitation is regarded as a "test marriage". Among the older ones, it is regarded as a regular union leading to marriage only after a longer time of living together; their propensity to marry is not strong and in many cases they do not establish a new marriage at all (statistics reveal that about one half of divorced women will not remarry). Those people, however, could not be reached by our survey. Their existence is, nevertheless, indicated by the fact that about 40% of children born out of wedlock are born after divorce.

### Discussion

Our survey indicated two things. First, it brought support for our idea that a significant proportion of the population starts their family life by means of a shorter or longer period of unmarried cohabitation. Second, unmarried cohabitation in Czechoslovakia is not of the Scandinavian type; it is not a new social institution substituting for marriage among the young. It is instead "engaged cohabitation", oriented (so far) toward marriage. It has been an alternative path towards marriage, not an alternative to marriage itself. The question is whether it can become the alternative to marriage in the near future in Czechoslovakia.

Hoffmann-Nowotny [1987] rightly maintains that the spreading of unmarried cohabitation can be perceived as an attempt to merge the *Gemeinschaft* features of family structures that hold them together through "mechanic solidarity" with the features of the *Gesellschaft* which are typical for modern societies (having "organic solidarity"). Bejin [1985] showed that contemporary juvenile cohabitation could be understood as an attempt to create a synthesis out of the almost irreconcilable features of love in marriage and love outside marriage [Aries 1985, Flandrin 1985]. Those are significant variables which will have to be taken into consideration when trying to make predictions about unmarried cohabitation in Czechoslovakia. Assuming that individual life-styles are to a certain extent influenced by social change on the macro level, we can hypothesize that unmarried cohabitation will become as normal as anywhere else. Czechoslovak political and social changes will certainly influence Czechs' and Slovaks' paths to marriage.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>) Social policy together with (pronatalist) population policy successfully lured young people into getting married through a system of subsidies, long maternity leaves, advantageous marriage loans (extremely low interest rates and partial loan forgiveness after the birth of the first child), etc. They also pushed them into parenthood by the high taxation of childlessness and, perhaps most effectively, by the practical impossibility of getting an apartment for unmarried and/or childless couples (and single persons as well). There were no alternatives to married life: it was impossible to travel or to start a business, and access to colleges and universities was limited by a strict *numerus clausus*. It was hard to pursue a dynamic career. Political activism (of a civic nature, not the "official" one) was dangerous and having a family was actually the only source of authenticity in a world of public hypocrisy. The last fifty years of political instability and discontinuity have made mutual understanding between generations difficult and driven the young to an early departure from their parents, who were often perceived as morally discredited by self-preserving compromises. At the same time, however,



Political changes have increased life opportunities in Czechoslovakia. Higher numbers of the young will enter colleges and universities, most of the young will take advantage of the possibility of traveling, more and more of them will devote their energies to establishing and maintaining private businesses. Life will become more individualized. Getting married and starting a family will cease to be the only realm of authentic and independent decision-making for young individuals. Their value systems will shift<sup>7</sup> and create the necessary conditions for new life-styles.

One of the obstacles to unmarried cohabitation in Czechoslovakia has been the housing shortage. The housing policy of the "socialist" state in fact discriminated against single persons. Nevertheless, we found in our survey that having an apartment and engaging in cohabitation were associated: the difference between the cohabiting and non-cohabiting dyads who would have a place to live after marriage was almost 20 % (50 % : 32 %) in the group of first marriages and about 30 % (83 % : 52 %) in the repeated ones. Since housing policy is on the agenda of the government now, we can expect radical changes also in this respect. Since "ideational" conditions for unmarried cohabitation already exist, real unmarried cohabitation is an available option in Czechoslovakia today.

IVO MOŽNÝ is a professor of sociology and social philosophy, his main work is in the sociology of the family [books: *Rodina vysokoškolsky vzdělaných partnerů (The Family of University-Educated Couples)*, Brno, UJEP 1983, *Moderní rodina: mýty a skutečnosti (The Modern Family: Myths and Realities)*, Brno, Blok 1991] and in the social consequences of political change [*Proč tak snadno: některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce (Why So Easy: Some Family Reasons for the Velvet Revolution)*, Praha, Slon 1991]. At present he is the head of the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy at Masaryk University in Brno, and Vice-President of the Czech Sociological Association.

LADISLAV RABUŠIC is an assistant Professor of the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy of Masaryk University in Brno. He teaches courses on methods of social surveying and introductory sociology. His fields of research are social demography, the sociology of values, and the social and cultural contexts of social change in Czechoslovakia. He has published a number of articles in Czechoslovak sociological and demographic journals.

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the economy of young families, necessarily based on two incomes, could hardly survive without the lasting support of (and dependence on) their family of origin. Such dependence was not only economic. The young also needed their parents' support in child care and their social (and political) capital, i.e. their connections, social networks and informal influence.

<sup>7</sup>) In another survey of a representative sample of the Brno population we found out there had been a striking difference in the rate of post-materialism among young age cohorts in comparison with older ones. While the rate of postmaterialists to materialists was 1:1 in cohorts born after World War II, it was about 1:3 in the older age groups.

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