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# Cohabiting and Married Individuals' Relations with their Partner's Parents

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## **Cohabiting and Married Individuals' Relations with their Partner's Parents**

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### **Abstract**

Using Norwegian survey data on partnered individuals ages 18 to 55 (N=4,061, 31% cohabitators), the current study investigated differences across marital and cohabiting unions regarding the patterns of contact with the parents of the partner. In addition to investigating the frequency of such contact, we assessed the nature of and perceived quality of contacts with the partner's parents. We grouped respondents according to whether they had children with their partner and controlled for a range of selection characteristics. Results confirmed that parents with preschool children met their in-laws more frequently than the childless, irrespective of union type. Married respondents as well as cohabitators with preschool children reported better relations with their partner's parents than childless cohabitators. Taken together, our results imply that having small children was more decisive for the relationship with the parents of the partner than getting married, particularly with regard to contact frequency.

## **Introduction and background**

Despite increasing focus on in-law relations (e.g., Kim, Zarit, Fingerman, & Han, 2015; Lee, Spitze, & Logan, 2003; Shih & Pyke, 2015), few studies have explicitly investigated relations with the parents of the partner across marital and cohabiting unions (Artis & Martinez, 2016; Daatland, 2007; Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009). This research generally confirms that the family ties of cohabitators are weaker than among those married, though findings so far are mixed. With the exception of Hogerbrugge and Dykstra (2009), these extant studies either focused on co-residential unions in mid-to-late life or were conducted in a context where cohabitation was practiced by a selected few.

Using recent Norwegian survey data on partnered individuals ages 18 to 55 ( $N = 4,061$ , 31% cohabitators), the aim of this study is to increase our knowledge about possible differences across marital and cohabiting unions regarding the patterns of contact with the parents of the partner. In Norway, one in four couples are currently cohabiting, more than half of first births are to cohabiting couples (Statistics Norway, 2016a, 2016b), and the living arrangement is essentially equal to marriage in terms of public policy and nearly completely socially acceptable (Noack, 2010). Studying in-law relations across marital and cohabiting unions in a “cohabitation land” (Syltevik, 2010) will give valuable insights into the nature of cohabitation and potential future developments in other countries where the union type is less common.

In addition to investigating the frequency of such contact, we assess the nature of and perceived quality of the contact with the partner’s parents. In particular, we add to the literature by separating between married and cohabiting couples with and without common children and investigate whether having common children is more important for relations with the parents of the partner than being married. As engaged cohabitators (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009) and cohabitators with marriage plans are more like marrieds than other

cohabitators (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996; Poortman & Mills, 2012; Wiik, Bernhardt, & Noack, 2009), we also separate between cohabitators with and without plans to marry their current partner within two years.

*Prior research on family relations in marital and cohabiting unions*

Research on the family ties of married and cohabiting couples has mostly addressed support between parents and adult children. For instance, whereas Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel (1990) found that cohabitators were more likely to depend financially on parents, another U.S. study showed that cohabitators less often than their married counterparts received financial transfers from parents (Hao, 1996). In the U.S. cohabiting young adults were also less likely to exchange non-financial support with their parents (Eggebeen (2005), and support for intergenerational co-residence is weaker among cohabitators than those married (Seltzer, Lau, & Bianchi, 2012). Using comparative European and U.S. data Yahirun and Hamplova (2014) further confirmed that cohabitators had less maternal contact than those married, even when (grand)parenthood was accounted for. To be sure, there are studies from the U.S. (Musick & Bumpass, 2012), the U.K. (Nazio & Saraceno, 2013), and Norway (Daatland, 2007) finding no differences in parental contact across union types.

Only a handful of studies have so far investigated whether relations with the parents of the partner differ across marital and cohabiting unions. Assessing the family ties of cohabiting and married individuals in the Netherlands, Hogerbrugge and Dykstra (2009) showed that cohabitators had significantly less face-to-face contact with their own as well as their partner's parents compared with those married. Next, using U.S. data including a small sample of cohabitators from the late 1980s Artis and Martinez (2016) found that cohabitators less often than married individuals received financial support from their partner's parents. Also, cohabitators with marriage plans were less likely to exchange support with their partner's

parents than those married. There were no differences across union types regarding the quality of the in-law-relationship (Artis & Martinez, 2016). However, this study was conducted during a period in the United States when cohabitation was relatively rare and practiced by a selected few (Smock, 2000), so findings may not apply to the current situation.

In Norway, Daatland (2007) found no differences between cohabiting and married individuals aged 40 and over with respect to contact frequency and joint celebration of family events with their partners' parents. Additionally, two studies on caregiving to elderly parents-in-law included union type mainly as a control variable. In the UK, Henz (2009) found that married couples were more likely to provide informal care for elderly parents-in-law than unmarried couples. Chesley and Poppie (2009), on the other hand, showed that U.S. cohabitators more often than those married were in a position to assist their partner's parents. There were, however, no differences across union types in the amount of time spent providing this help. As these extant studies focused on co-residential relationships in mid-to-late life, results are not necessarily applicable to younger age groups.

### *Investing in family relations*

By forming intimate relationships individuals get access to intra- and intergenerational social networks through the partner (Astone, Nathanson, Schoen, & Kim, 1999), which may be used in order to get access to other resources, like help and support as well as financial resources. The possession of social capital implies that individuals are embedded in a system of normative obligations created by social consensus (Coleman, 1988). Individuals can draw on this type of system for help and support, but they are also obligated to respond to others. Family relations, both related to "blood" and legal ties, can be seen as a type of social capital (Furstenberg, 2005). In general, capital is acquired through investments, with investments in social capital being made through varying levels of contact (Coleman, 1988). Considerations

of uncertainty regarding possible future costs and benefits shape the investments in family relationships: The greater the uncertainty, the fewer are the investments made (Portes, 1998).

This uncertainty regarding the benefits of family relationships may vary according to union type. In several countries cohabitation may still be labelled an “incomplete institution”, though marriage as well may have undergone a process of deinstitutionalization, at least in the U.S. (Cherlin, 2004). A common understanding is that cohabitation is partly a result of long-term cultural trends during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including an emphasis on emotional satisfaction, and romantic love in partnerships (Cherlin, 2004). Reflecting these cultural trends, it is often argued that cohabitation is selective of more individualistic and nontraditional individuals (Smock, 2000), and cohabitation may be a temporary phase and a flexible union type (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014; Syltevik, 2010). Also, there are fewer formalities when entering and dissolving cohabitating unions, and according to Mills (2000) cohabitation exemplifies the decline and transformation of ritualized life course events which characterizes modernity.

Also, cohabitation is less legally binding, though the union type is more institutionalized in Scandinavia than in most other comparable regions. In Norway cohabiting couples with common children, as well as those who have been cohabiting for two years or more, have mostly the same rights and responsibilities as married parents in public law areas like social security, pensions and taxes (Perelli-Harris & Sanchez-Gassen, 2012). There are, however, remaining legal differences, particularly in the area of private law where it is still up to cohabitators’ themselves to make private agreements on for instance inheritance. And, whereas married couples who want a divorce normally have to go through a separation period of one year, there is no compulsory separation period for cohabiting couples (Noack, 2010).

If cohabitation is more informal than marriage and the choice to cohabit reflects an ideology rejecting tradition, stressing self-fulfillment, it could be a barrier for making joint

investments (Brines & Joyner, 1998). Correspondingly, cohabitation is a less stable union type than marriage, also in Norway (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006). Further, cohabitators are overall less satisfied with their union than those married (Hansen, Moum, & Shapiro, 2007; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). To be sure, cohabitators constitute a highly heterogeneous group and in many cases cohabitation is a prelude to marriage (Hiekel, Liefbroer & Poortman, 2014; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990). In Scandinavia, Wiik and colleagues (2009) found that cohabitators without marriage plans were less committed to and satisfied with their unions than those married. On the other hand, cohabitators planning to marry their current partner were more similar to those already married than to cohabitators without marriage plans.

Although cohabitation is widespread and accepted even among Norwegians in their mid-to-late adulthood, there still are generational differences in the acceptance of cohabitation, and older Norwegians generally hold less positive attitudes than their younger counterparts (Noack, 2010). One reason could be the lower level of commitment and heightened risk of dissolving cohabiting relative to marital unions. The temporary character of many cohabiting unions might imply that the parents of the partner as well as individuals themselves invest less in the relationship than those married. Also, as cohabitation is less institutionalized than marriage, there might be fewer obligations to exchange help with the partner's parents if one is cohabiting rather than married. In line with this assumption, married individuals in the United States more often than the never married expressed obligations to help close relatives, like grandchildren, parents-in-law, and children-in-law (Nock, Kingston, & Holian, 2008).

Given that there is greater uncertainty in cohabiting than marital unions, cohabitators could be less responsive than those married to normative expectations regarding family obligations and contact with the partner's family. Marriage, on the other hand, could provide additional

“glue” for the couple’s larger kinship network. Taken together, we therefore expect to find that cohabitators, on average, have less contact and poorer relations with the parents of their partner than their married counterparts.

### *Consanguineal versus affinal ties*

The fertility behavior of cohabiting couples is a key factor in the status of cohabitation as institution. It is often argued that the more cohabitation enters “the arena for reproduction” the more it is likely to be a substitute for marriage (Smock, 2000). Correspondingly, most studies usually find that married as well as cohabiting couples with common children are less likely to dissolve their unions than their childless counterparts (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Steele, Kallis, Goldstein, & Joshi, 2005). Also, though children may put stress on relationships and parental couples on average are less satisfied with their unions (Wiik, Keizer, & Lappegård, 2012), they seem to be more committed to their unions than childless couples (Wiik et al., 2009). Still, however, cohabiting parental couples are more divorce prone than married parents across Europe (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006) as well as in the United States (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004).

According to Stanley and Markman (1992), children create “internal constraint commitment,” defined as actual or perceived costs of exiting a union, and they argued that the greatest increase in constraint commitment comes when couples have children. Other costs of breaking up could be loss of joint property, common friends or social prestige (Stanley et al., 2004). There is probably less social pressure on the couple to stay together if they are in a cohabiting, rather than a marital, relationship, especially if they are childless. Similarly, children may be understood as a form of “union specific capital” (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977) or “joint production” (Brines & Joyner, 1999) that increases partners’



commitment to the union, and perhaps also to the partner's family, especially his or her immediate kin.

Although there is some evidence that mother-in-law relations worsen when children arrive (Marx, Miller, & Huffmon, 2011), ties between each partner's respective families are generally cemented when couples get children (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Most importantly, as the relationship between grandparents and grandchild is consanguineal, and parents and grandparents all have a reproductive interest in children (Danielsbacka, Tanskanen, & Rotkirch, 2015), the affinal tie (i.e., marriage) may be an unnecessary addition to strengthen the relationship to the partner's parents. Correspondingly, findings from Norway confirm that cohabiting as well as married parents aged 40 years and above saw the parents of their partner more often than the childless (Daatland, 2007). Whether this finding also applies to younger parents with small children, however, remains unknown.

In sum, we expect to find that parents have more and better contact with the parents of their partner than the childless, and that differences between married and cohabiting parents are nonexistent or at least smaller than among their counterparts without common children. To be sure, the positive association between having common children and relations to the parents of the partner might vary according to the youngest child's age. As most parents are in need of support and extra childcare when children are young, we expect to find that differences between married and cohabiting couples with common children in preschool ages (below six years) will be particularly small.

## **Method**

### *Data and sample*

We used data from the Life course, generations and gender study (LOGG), a nationally representative survey carried out in 2007/2008. The data were obtained through telephone

interviews and a postal questionnaire. In addition, the survey data were supplemented with longitudinal information on education, children, and place of residence from administrative registers. The gross sample for the telephone interview was 24,830, whereas 14,892 respondents fulfilled the interview, giving a response rate of 60%. All respondents interviewed over telephone were sent a postal questionnaire. 10,794 (72%) returned the postal questionnaire. The final data set is nationally representative of the non-immigrant population in the selected age groups. In the descriptive analyses a weight was used, to reduce potential non-response bias related to sex, age, region, and education (Lappegård & Veenstra, 2010).

For the current analyses, we restricted the sample to non-immigrant respondents aged 18 to 55 who completed the postal questionnaire ( $N = 6,614$ ). We further excluded respondents who were not living in a co-residential union at the interview ( $n = 2,016$ , 30.5% of the full sample), as well as those whose partners' parents were both deceased ( $n = 514$ , 7.8%) and those living in a same-sex union ( $n = 23$ , 0.3%). Our final sample thus comprised 4,061 partnered individuals, of whom 2,789 (69%) were married and 1,272 (31%) were cohabiting.

### *Dependent variables and statistical approach*

Respondents who were living in a co-residential relationship were given several questions on the frequency, type and perceived quality of the contact with different family members, including the parents of their partner. Regrettably, using these data it was not possible to distinguish between the partner's mother and father. First, respondents were asked how often they met their partner's parents. This variable had the following original values: 1: Don't have or are not alive, 2: Daily, 3: Weekly, but not daily, 4: Monthly, but not weekly, 5: A few times a year, 6: Less often, and 7: Never. We recoded this variable with values ranging from 0 (never) to 365 (daily). This variable was then log-transformed and ordinary least squares

regression was applied to assess differences across union types. In supplementary analyses we used the original variable, with similar results (results not shown).

Second, in order to capture the perceived quality of the respondent's relationship to his or her partner's parents, we utilized three questions asking respondents whether or not they felt that their partner's parents appreciated her/him as a person (1=*yes*, 0=*no*), if they could speak confidentially with them (1=*yes*, 0=*no*), and if they believed the parents of their partner would help them in a critical situation (1=*yes*, 0=*no*). These three items were then summarized, with scores ranging from 0 to 3. Chronbach's alpha was .70 for the summated items. Ordinal logistic regression was used to analyze this outcome.

### *Independent variables*

Combining information on union type and the number of common children as well as the youngest child's age, our first explanatory variable has the following six categories: (a) married, no common child, (b) married, youngest child below six years, (c) married, youngest child six years or older, (d) cohabiting, without common child, (e) cohabiting, youngest child below six years, and (f) cohabiting, youngest child six years or older. Second, in an additional set of analyses, we used a question asking cohabitators whether they intended to marry their current partners within the next two years. Thus, we separated between (a) married respondents, (b) cohabitators with intent to marry, and (c) cohabitators without such intentions.

We further controlled for a range of variables known to be correlated with cohabitation as well as relations with parents-in-law (e.g., Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009; Kim et al., 2015; Wiik et al., 2012). First, respondents' age was grouped into three categories: (a) 18-34 years, (b) 35-44 years, and (c) 45-55 years. Another variable measured respondent's gender (0 = men, 1 = women). Relationship satisfaction was measured by asking respondents how satisfied they were with their current unions. Originally a variable with values ranging from 0

= *very dissatisfied* to 10 = *very satisfied*, this variable was regrouped as a dummy indicating whether (1) or not (0) respondents were very (values 9 and 10) satisfied with their union. We chose this method because only 33% scored 8 or lower.

The duration of the co-residential relationship was measured in years, and in multivariate models a quadratic term was included to control for nonlinearity. The few missing cases ( $n = 23$ , 0.6%) were assigned mean values for marital and cohabiting unions, respectively. Also, a dummy indicating whether (1) or not (0) respondents had experienced parental union dissolution before they turned 18 years was incorporated. Educational attainment was grouped into three categories: (a) primary (up to 9 years), (b) secondary (up to 12 years), and (c) tertiary (13+ years). Also, a dummy indicating whether (1) or not (0) respondents had experienced prior marital or non-marital union(s) was incorporated. Further, we made a dummy measuring whether (1) or not (0) the respondent's current partner had any children from a prior union. Last, we separated between those residing in urban (1) and rural areas (0).

## **Results**

### *Descriptive results*

Descriptive statistics by union types are presented in Table 1. From this table we first note that cohabitators on average reported more face-to-face contact with the parents of their partner compared with those married, though differences were small. When asked about the characteristics and quality of the relation to the parents of the partner, on the other hand, higher shares of those married were most satisfied. Again differences between married and cohabiting respondents were small, and taken together, as much as 40% (cohabitators) and 45% (marrieds) scored values 2 and higher on this item. A substantially higher share of cohabitators was childless (49.6%) compared with their married counterparts (12%). Also, 18.5% of cohabitators intended to marry their current partners within the next two years.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics by union type. Married and cohabiting individuals aged 18 to 55 ( $N = 4,061$ )

Variables	Union type		
	Married % / M (sd)	Cohabiting % /M (sd)	All % /M (sd)
Dependent variables			
Contact frequency	2.24 (1.28)	2.32 (1.20)	2.26 (1.26)
Relationship quality			
0	37.3	39.4	38.0
1	17.4	20.2	18.3
2	31.0	29.0	30.4
3	14.3	11.4	13.3
Independent variables			
Common children			
Yes, youngest child $\leq 5$ years	30.6	32.5	31.3
Yes, youngest child $\geq 6$ years	57.4	17.9	44.3
No common child	12.0	49.6	24.4
Marriage plans		18.5	
Woman	46.3	51.3	48.0
R's age			
18–34	19.1	53.2	30.5
35–44	41.7	31.8	38.4
45+	39.2	14.9	31.1
R's education level			
Primary	20.4	22.7	21.2
Secondary	44.4	43.6	44.1
Tertiary	35.2	33.8	34.7
Satisfied with relationship to partner	67.2	66.5	66.9
Parental divorce	8.3	15.5	10.7
Partner has prior child(ren)	4.5	8.5	5.8
Union duration	17.0 (8.1)	7.2 (6.2)	13.7 (9.04)
Prior co-residential union(s)	23.0	42.6	29.5
Urban residence	65.9	64.0	65.3
$N$ (%)	2,789 (69%)	1,272 (31%)	4,061

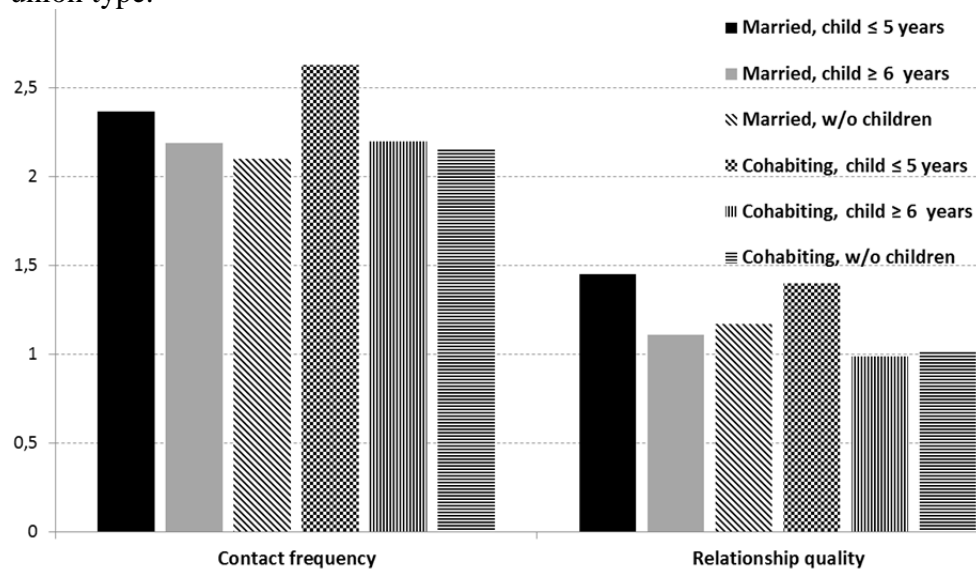
Note: Weighted percentages/ means

Regarding the control variables, married respondents were older than cohabitators. Further, women were more often cohabiting than men, reflecting the fact that the female sub sample was younger. From Table 1 we also note that there were no major educational differences across union types. And, although respondents overall were quite satisfied with their unions,

those married were more satisfied than cohabitators. Cohabitators lived in unions of shorter duration and more often had experienced parental divorce than their married counterparts. Further, 9% of cohabitators had step children and 43% had lived in one or more prior co-residential union(s), compared with 5% and 23% of those married. Lastly, Table 1 confirms that the majority of cohabiting as well as married respondents resided in urban areas.

The mean values on the two outcomes by union types are presented in Figure 1. From this figure it is evident that respondents with common children below six years on average reported significantly more face-to-face meetings with the parents of their partner compared with the childless and those with older children. In fact, cohabitators whose youngest child was five years or younger met their partner’s parents significantly more often than their married counterparts ( $p<.05$ ). We find the lowest contact frequency among married and cohabiting respondents without common children. Regarding the quality of the relation with the parents of the partner, those married with preschool children scored significantly higher compared with cohabitators as well as married respondents with older children ( $p<.05$ ).

**Figure 1.** Frequency of contact and quality of the relation to the parents of the partner. By union type.



Note: Mean values, weighted. Differences between married individuals with children 5 years or younger and all other union types statistically significant,  $p<.05$  (t-tests, two-tailed).

### *Multivariate results*

Turning to the multivariate results, the results presented in Table 2 confirm that cohabiting as well as married respondents with children below six years met their partner's parents more often than childless cohabitators. More precisely, married respondents whose youngest common child was five years or younger scored 0.19 higher on this scale compared with childless cohabitators, controlling for gender, age, education, relationship satisfaction, parental divorce, step children, union duration, prior co-residential union(s) and place of residence. Cohabitators with small children, on the other hand, scored 0.40 higher on the contact frequency scale compared with their childless counterparts, given the other variables included are held constant. Treating those married with preschool children as the omitted category in an alternative model confirmed that cohabitators with small children saw the parents of their partner significantly more often than their married counterparts (results not shown). The results presented in Table 2 further show that no statistically significant differences emerged between respondents with older children and cohabitators without common children. The same was true for those married without common children, who saw their in-laws as frequently as did childless cohabitators.

From the full model in Table 2 we further note that there were no gender differences in the contact frequency with the partner's parents, contrary to the assumption that women bear the main responsibility for maintaining kinship ties (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). This finding probably reflects the gender equal nature of Norwegian society (Goldsheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). Next, those aged 35 and older reported significantly less contact than younger respondents, consistent with the negative age gradient found in prior studies (e.g., Chesley & Poppie, 2009; Daatland, 2007). Regarding education, the tertiary educated met their in-laws less frequently than the primary educated. In line with extant studies showing that adult children who are satisfied with their marriage exchange more support with their parents-in-

law (Kim et al., 2015), respondents who were very satisfied with their union met their in-laws significantly more often than those who were moderately to less satisfied. Also, the frequency of contact with the parents of the partner first increased but then decreased with union duration. Last, respondents with experience from prior co-residential union(s) as well as those living in urban areas met their partner's parents less often than respondents without prior union experience and those living in rural areas.

**Table 2.** Contact frequency with partner's parents (OLS). Married and cohabiting individuals aged 18 to 55 ( $N = 4,061$ )

Variables	Model without controls			Model with controls		
	<i>b</i>	<i>se b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se b</i>	<i>t</i>
Union type (ref.: cohabiting, w/o child(ren))						
Married, w/o children	-0.09	0.09	-1.01	-0.04	0.09	-0.44
Married, child $\leq 5$ years	0.25***	0.07	3.71	0.19*	0.08	2.55
Married, child $\geq 6$ years	0.06	0.06	0.99	0.12	0.09	1.36
Cohabiting, child $\leq 5$ years	0.49***	0.08	6.20	0.40***	0.08	4.98
Cohabiting, child $\geq 6$ years	0.05	0.09	0.49	0.06	0.11	0.55
Controls						
Woman				0.04	0.04	0.96
R's age (ref.: 18–34)						
35–44				-0.14*	0.06	-2.35
45+				-0.34***	0.08	-4.36
R's education (ref.: primary)						
Secondary				0.06	0.06	0.96
Tertiary				-0.13*	0.06	-2.11
Satisfied with union				0.21***	0.04	5.17
Parental divorce				-0.01	0.07	-0.19
Partner has prior child(ren)				0.09	0.09	0.94
Union duration				0.02*	0.01	2.03
Union duration squared				-0.01*	0.01	-2.24
Prior co-residential union(s)				-0.11*	0.05	-2.20
Urban residence				-0.28***	0.04	-7.00
Constant	2.14***	0.05	42.39	2.25***	0.10	22.70

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



**Table 3.** Quality of relationship with partner’s parents (ordered logit). Married and cohabiting individuals aged 18 to 55 ( $N = 4,061$ )

Variables	Model without controls			Model with controls		
	<i>b</i>	<i>se b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se b</i>	<i>OR</i>
Union type (ref.: cohabiting, w/o children)						
Married, w/o children	0.24	0.13	1.28	0.24	0.14	1.27
Married, child $\leq 5$ years	0.74***	0.10	2.10	0.55***	0.11	1.73
Married, child $\geq 6$ years	0.16	0.09	1.18	0.31**	0.13	1.36
Cohabiting, child $\leq 5$ years	0.61***	0.12	1.84	0.52***	0.12	1.69
Cohabiting, child $\geq 6$ years	-0.07	0.14	0.93	0.07	0.16	1.07
Controls						
Woman				-0.12	0.06	0.89
R’s age (ref.: 18–34)						
35–44				-0.29***	0.09	0.75
45+				-0.56***	0.12	0.57
R’s education (ref.: primary)						
Secondary				0.28**	0.09	1.32
Tertiary				0.36***	0.10	1.44
Satisfied with union				0.58***	0.06	1.79
Parental divorce				-0.20*	0.10	0.82
Partner has prior child(ren)				-0.05	0.14	0.95
Union duration				0.05***	0.02	1.06
Union duration squared				-0.01***	0.01	0.99
Prior co-residential union(s)				-0.07	0.07	0.93
Urban residence				0.05	0.06	1.05

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

Turning to the model measuring the nature and quality of the contact with the parents of the partner, the results presented in Table 3 confirm that those married with common children as well as cohabitators with children below 6 years reported a significantly higher level of quality of the relation to their partner’s parents than childless cohabitators. More precisely, the full model of Table 3 shows that married respondents with preschool children were 73% more likely to score higher on this item compared with cohabitators without common children. The comparable increase in the odds ratio among cohabitators with common children below six years was 69%. Those married with older children were 36% more likely to report a higher quality of their relationship to the parents of their partner than childless cohabitators. Last, there were no statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) differences between married childless

respondents and cohabitators with children aged 6 years and older and childless cohabitators.

The results regarding the control variables included in Table 3 confirm that older respondents were less satisfied with the relation to the parents of their partner than younger respondents. Again, there were no statistically significant gender differences, though the  $p$ -value was just above the 5% cutoff point. From the full model of Table 3 we further note that there was a positive and statistically significant association between level of education and the quality of the relation to the parents of their partner, whereas those who experienced a parental divorce before they turned 18 years reported a lower quality of the relation to their partner's parents than those growing up in intact families. Also, there was a positive association between satisfaction with the union and the quality of the in-law-relation. Finally, there was an inverted u-shaped relation between union duration and the quality of the relationship with the parents of the partner.

From the results presented so far, it is evident that parents with small children, regardless of their marital status, met their partners' parents significantly more often than the childless and those with children aged 6 years or more. Marital status seems to be more decisive for the quality of the contact with the in-laws, though cohabitators with children below six years were more satisfied than their childless counterparts. To further test the assumption that cohabitators have poorer family relations than those married, in additional analyses we controlled for the quality of the relationship to respondents' own parents. As expected, those who felt that their parents appreciated them as a person, who could speak confidentially with, and who believed their parents would help them in a critical situation, reported a better in-law-relation and met their partner's parents more frequently ( $p < .05$ ) than those who had poorer parental relations. Nonetheless, differences across union types remained unchanged by including this variable (results not shown). In yet another set of supplementary analyses we tested whether there

were any gender differences in the relation between our main independent variable and the two outcomes by including interaction terms between union type and gender. None of the interaction terms reached statistical significance at the 5%-level (results not shown).

In addition to separating between married and cohabiting childless and parental respondents, we also set out to investigate whether cohabitators with plans to marry their current partner within two years were more marriage like than cohabitators without such plans. As shown in the model predicting the quality of the in-law-relationship in Table 4, cohabitators without marriage plans were significantly less satisfied with the relation to their partner's parents compared with those married, net of the other variables included. There were no statistically significant differences between cohabitators with marriage plans and those who were already married. Cohabitators with plans to marry their current partner, however, met their partner's parents significantly more often than their married counterparts. The difference between cohabitators without marriage plans and those married, on the other hand, failed to reach statistical significance at the chosen level ( $p < .05$ ) in the model predicting contact frequency.

**Table 4.** Multivariate models of quality of relationship with partner's parents (ordered logit) and contact frequency with partner's parents (OLS). Married ( $n = 2,789$ ) and cohabiting individuals with ( $n = 231$ ) and without ( $n = 1,041$ ) marriage plans

Variables	Relationship quality (ordered logit)			Contact frequency (OLS)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>se b</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>se b</i>	<i>t</i>
Union type (ref.: married)						
Cohabiting, w/ marriage plans	-0.01	0.16	0.99	0.21*	0.09	2.28
Cohabiting, w/o marriage plans	-0.25**	0.08	0.78	0.01	0.05	0.01

Note: Models controlled for: Gender, R's age, R's education level, common child(ren), step child(ren), relationship satisfaction, parental divorce, prior co-residential union(s), union duration, union duration squared, urban residence.

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

## **Summary and discussion**

Most research on cohabitation has focused on the characteristics of the partners or the relationship itself. Fewer studies have examined whether the family ties of married and cohabiting couples differ (Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009). Further, in the literature on intergenerational relations, ties with in-laws and step-ties have been less investigated than biological family ties (Seltzer & Bianchi, 2013) and this research has in general not considered increasing family complexity (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Additionally, research on relations to the partner's parents across the two union types has so far mostly used data on middle-aged or older married and cohabiting adults and tended to focus on their provision of help and support to ageing parents-in-law (Chesley & Poppie, 2012; Henz, 2009; Daatland, 2007). Using recent Norwegian survey data on partnered individuals aged 18 to 55 with at least one living parent-in-law, the current study set out to inform these branches of family research by investigating potential differences between married and cohabiting individuals regarding the patterns of contact with the parents of their partner. In addition to investigating the frequency of such contact, we assessed the perceived quality of contacts with the partner's parents, a topic that with one exception (Artis & Martinez, 2016) has so far received limited attention in this line of research.

Building on social capital theory and empirical research showing that there are continuing differences in the level of institutionalization and commitment across the two union types in Western industrialized societies, we expected to find that cohabitators, on average, have less contact and poorer relations with the parents of their partner than their married counterparts. Overall, the descriptive results from our study confirmed that cohabitators reported poorer relations to their partners' parents than married individuals, though differences were rather small. Considering the mean frequency of contact with the partner's parents, however, there

were no major differences between cohabitators and those married, congruent with prior Norwegian research on middle-aged and older adults (Daatland, 2009).

These findings are thus only partly in line with the few prior European studies showing that married individuals have more face-to-face contact with (Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009) and more often help (Henz, 2009) the parents of their partner than cohabitators. One reason could be that cohabitation is more widespread and institutionalized in Norway than in most other countries. Norway has also been at the vanguard of changes in family structures, and cohabitation has been an established phenomenon for several decades. Though differences between married and cohabiting individuals exist, they are smaller than in many other European countries (Liefbroer & Dourleijn, 2006; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Wiik et al., 2012).

At the same time, cohabitators constitute a highly heterogeneous group, even in Scandinavia (e.g., Hiekel et al., 2014; Wiik et al., 2009). We therefore extended the literature on differences across union types regarding the patterns of contact with the parents of the partner by first grouping respondents according to whether they had children with their partner. We expected to find that parents had more and better contact with their partner's parents than the childless, and that differences between married and cohabiting parents were nonexistent or at least smaller than among those without common children. As most parents are in need of support and extra childcare when children are young, we expected to find few differences between married and cohabiting parents with children in preschool ages (below six years). In line with these assumptions, our multivariate results confirmed that parents with preschool children met their in-laws more frequently than the childless, irrespective of union type and net of a range of selection characteristics. Also, cohabitators with preschool children as well as married parents reported better relations with their partner's parents than childless cohabitators.

Taken together, our results confirmed that grandchildren trump marriage, as having (small) children was more decisive for the relationship with the parents of the partner than

getting married, particularly with regard to contact frequency. One explanation could be that grandparents are an important source of informal child care (Hank & Buber, 2009). Even in Norway, where subsidized public childcare is widely available and parents are entitled to generous parental leave schemes, grandparents serve as back-up help (Hagestad, 2006). Also, in a human evolutionary perspective, parents and grandparents all have a reproductive interest in children (Danielsbacka et al., 2015), implying that ties between the partners' respective families are cemented when they have children, regardless of union type. As there was less contact with the in-laws when children were in school ages than in preschool ages our results imply that importance of (grand)children might dissipate as they grow older. To be sure, we used data from a national context where cohabitation is widespread and highly acceptable, and grandchildren may not necessarily trump marriage in its effect on in-law relationships in countries where marriage is still the preferred relationship status, such as the US (Cherlin, 2009).

Regrettably, the data used here contained no information on geographical distance between respondents and their partners' parents. Prior studies on parent-child (Nazio & Saraceno, 2013) and in-law relations (Artis & Martinez, 2016; Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009) confirmed that there is a positive association between proximity and support exchange and contact frequency. Also, longitudinal data are needed to assess whether and how in-law relations evolve over time and if any changes across the life course vary with union types. Further, using these data we were unable to distinguish between relations to the partner's mother and father. As shown in earlier research, relations between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law worsen when women become mothers, whereas ties with biological mothers are strengthened (Marx et al., 2011). Future research on in-law relations should investigate whether the importance of children depends on gender as well as union type.

Further, as cohabitators with marriage plans are more like marrieds than other cohabitators

(Brown & Booth, 1996; Poortman & Mills, 2012; Wiik et al., 2009), we also separated between cohabitators with and without plans to marry their current partner within two years. To our knowledge, only one prior study on relations with the partner's parents has so far assessed whether there is heterogeneity among cohabitators in this respect. Contrary to Artis and Martinez (2016), who showed that cohabitators with marriage plans less often than those married exchanged support with their partner's parents, our results confirmed that cohabitators with short-term marriage intentions saw their in-laws-to-be significantly more frequently than their married counterparts. There were, however, no differences between cohabitators without marriage intentions and those married. Clearly, cohabitators with marriage plans are most often highly satisfied with and committed to their unions (Wiik et al., 2009), and may thus be more involved in their partner's family. As we controlled for union satisfaction, the presence of children and other potential confounders, however, this finding might also reflect that many couples receive practical and financial help from their respective parents to arrange a wedding. Also, Kalmijn (2004) found that there was a positive association between the socioeconomic status of the parents and the probability of a church wedding in the Netherlands. The data used here contained no information on the economic status of the parents of the partner. Whether there indeed is an interaction between the socioeconomic resources of the partner's parents and marriage intentions on contact with the in-laws is a matter for further research.

Regarding the quality of the in-law relationship, our results again confirmed the assumption that lower levels of commitment was related to weaker ties with parents-in-law. That is, cohabitators without marriage intentions reported poorer relations with their partners' parents than those married. Cohabitators with marriage intentions, on the other hand, were just as satisfied with their relation to their partner's parents as married respondents. Artis and Martinez (2016), on the other hand, found no differences between cohabitators with and

without marriage plans and those married. One probable explanation for this discrepancy could be that Artis and Martinez (2016) used U.S. data including a small sample of cohabitators from the late 1980s, when cohabitation was relatively rare.

The poorer relations to the partner's parents among cohabitators without marriage intentions could, obviously, be due to the fact that cohabitation and marriage are qualitatively different union forms. Even in Norway, where cohabitation is widespread and institutionalized, there are still differences in private law (Noack, 2010). The higher quality of the in-law relationship among cohabitators planning to marry and those already married could also be a consequence of the norms and values associated with the institution of marriage, a union type that could provide additional "glue" for the couple's kinship network. The temporary character of many cohabiting unions might, for instance, imply that cohabitators as well as their parents invest less in the in-law-relationship than those married. Also, there might be fewer obligations to exchange help with the partner's parents if one is cohabiting rather than married, or planning to marry. Nonetheless, selection on unobserved characteristics might account for some of our findings. As cohabitators with marriage intentions saw their partner's parents more often and reported a better relation to their future in-laws than other cohabitators, the results from the current study confirmed that there is some selection of more family-oriented individuals into marriage.



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