



European Research Council  
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# Cohabitation trends, policies and practices:

## Situating the United Kingdom in an international perspective

#cohabUK

[www.nonmarital.org](http://www.nonmarital.org)

<http://www.cpc.ac.uk/>

February 6, 2015



# European Research Council Starting Grant CHILDCOHAB – Understanding Childbearing in Cohabitation



## 1. Trends

Harmonized Histories:  
British Household Panel  
Survey  
Generation and Gender  
Surveys  
US National Survey of  
Family Growth

Official statistics for maps

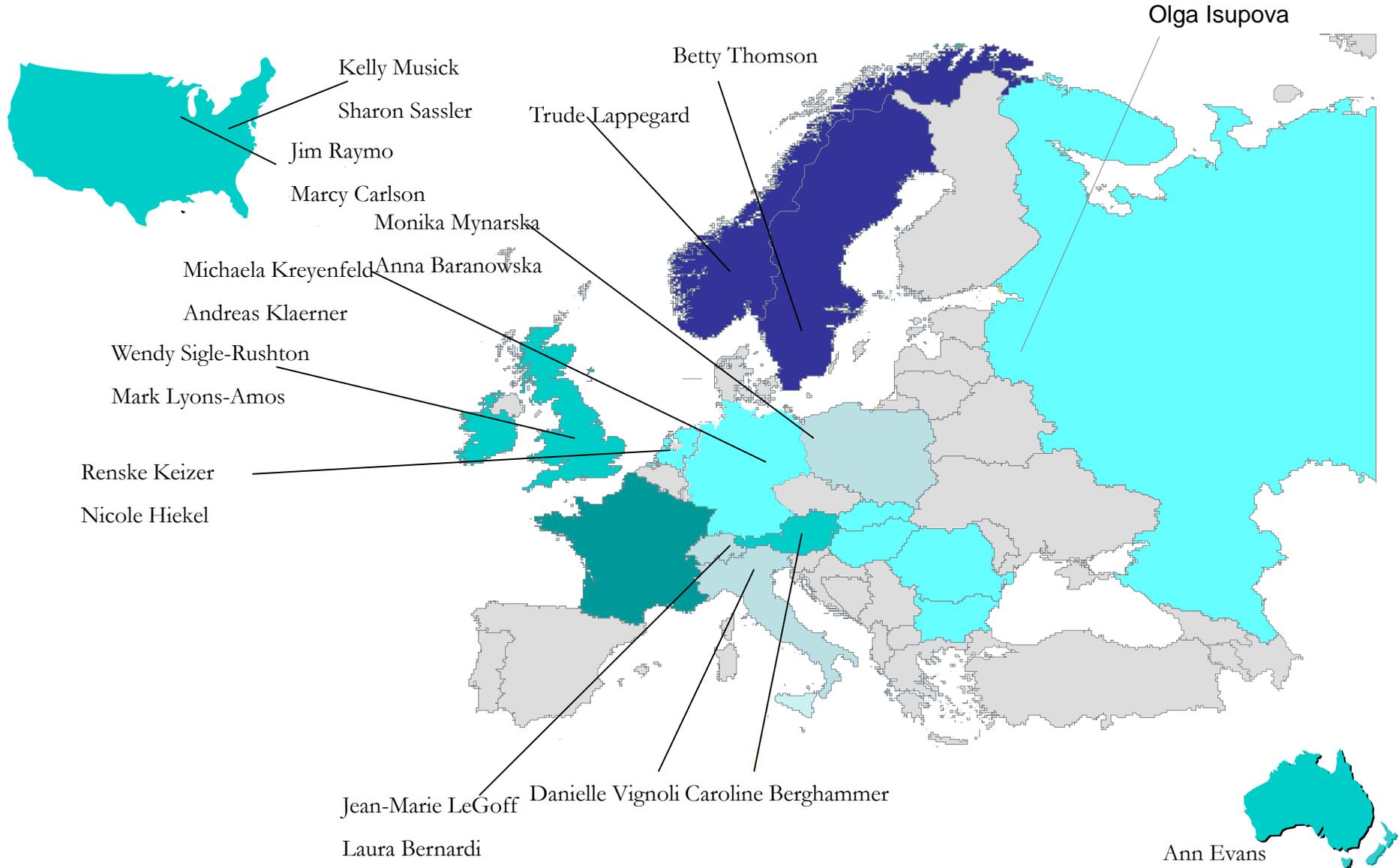
## 2. Explanations

Focus groups  
Legal policies on  
cohabitation and  
marriage

## 3. Consequences

Longitudinal surveys  
BCS 1970  
US NLSY  
Australia HILDA,  
Norway GGS  
Sweden LNU

# Nonmarital Childbearing Network



- CPC - Southampton
- Ann Berrington
- Nora Sanchez Gassen
- Marta Styrac
- Paulina Galezewska
- Jennifer Holland

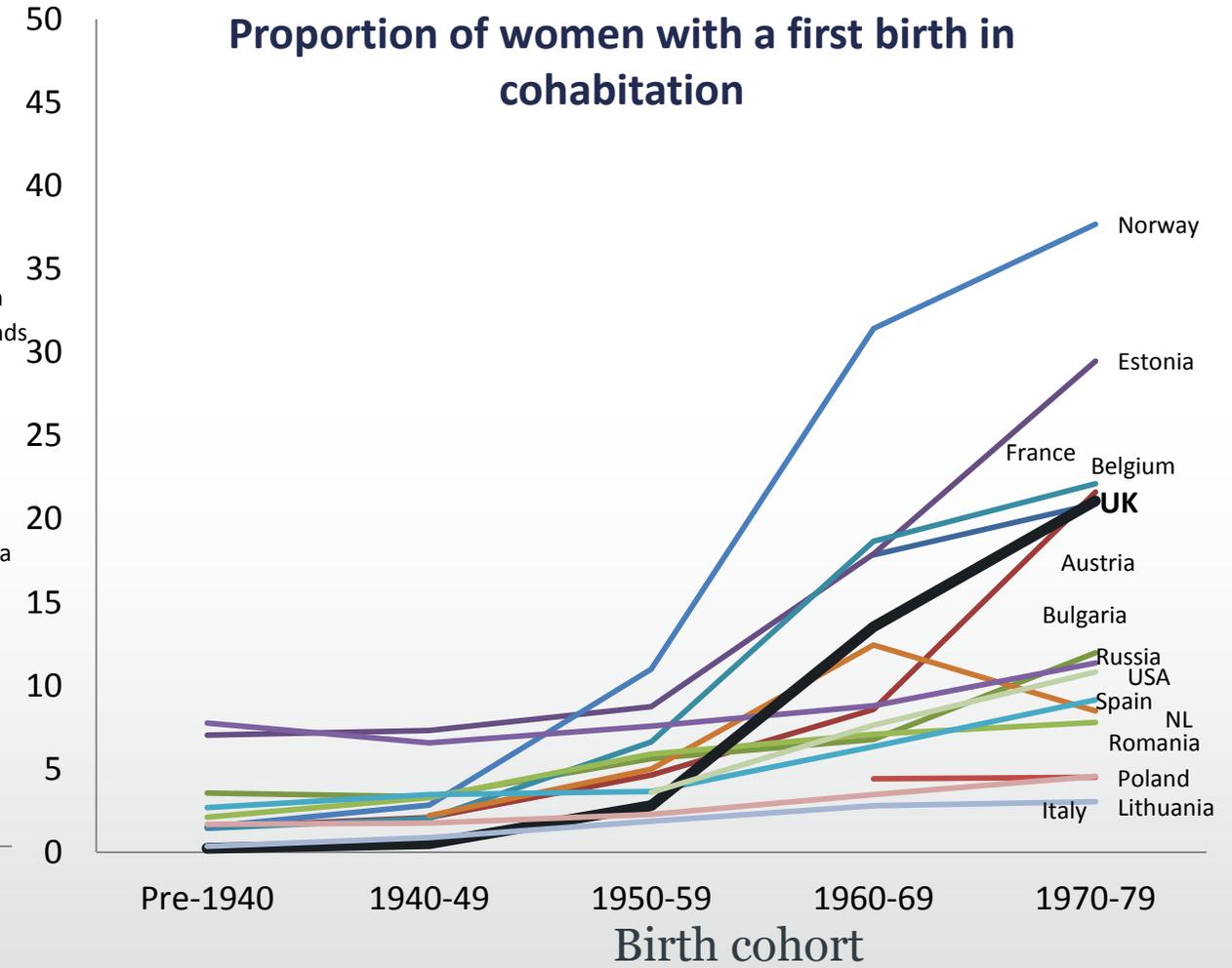
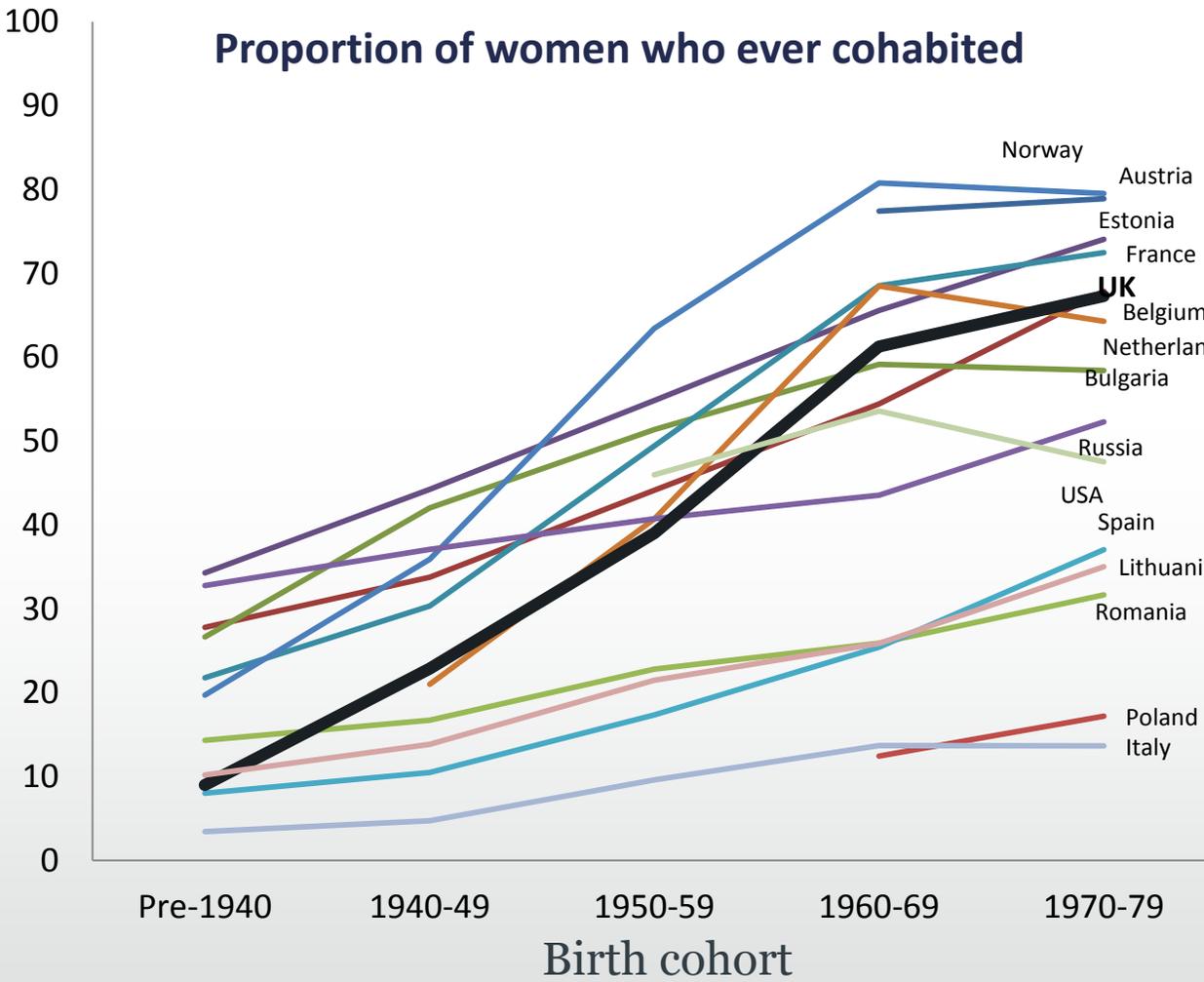


Brienna Perelli-Harris  
*University of Southampton*

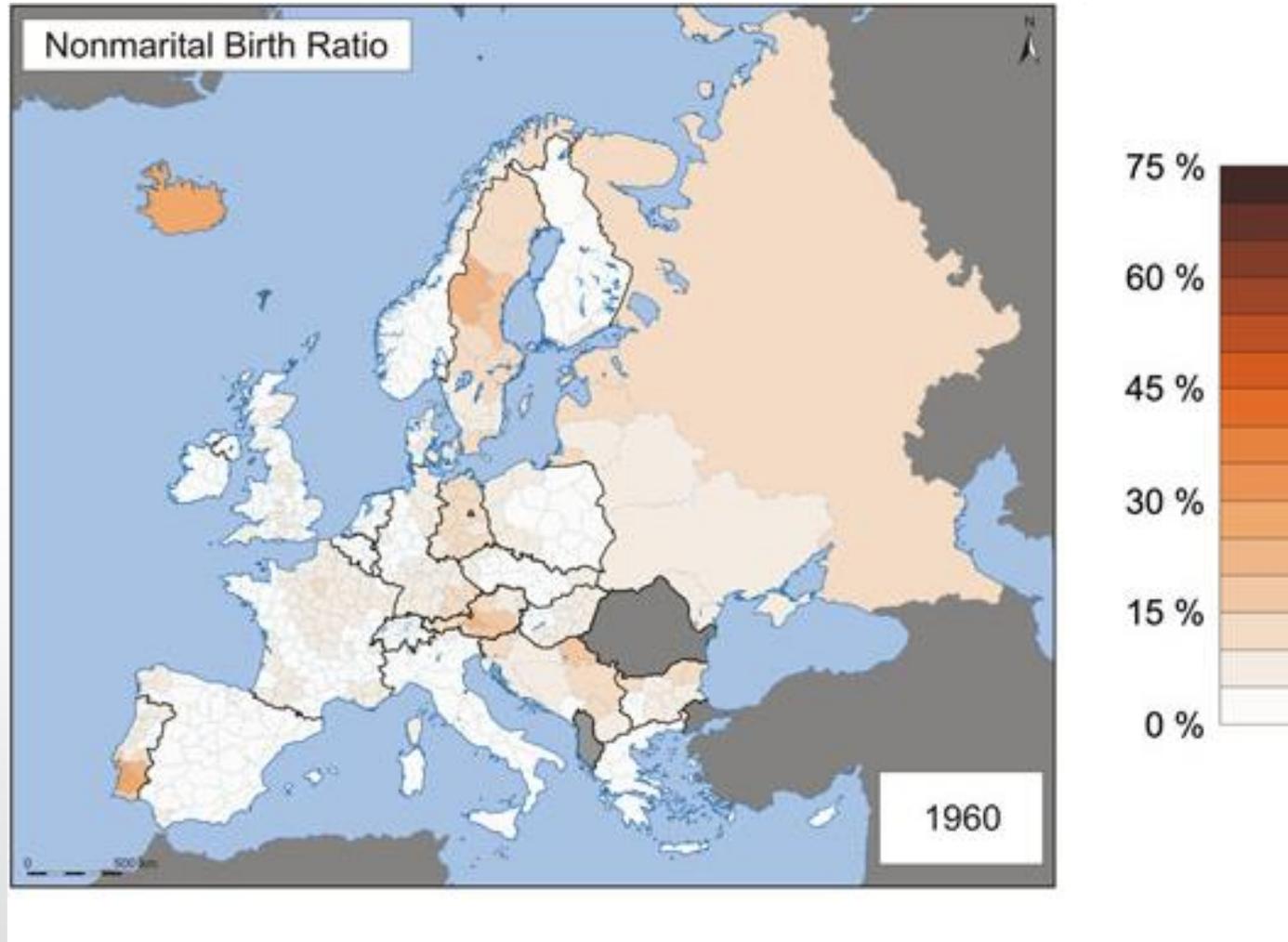
## Cohabitation Trends: An international perspective

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perspective**

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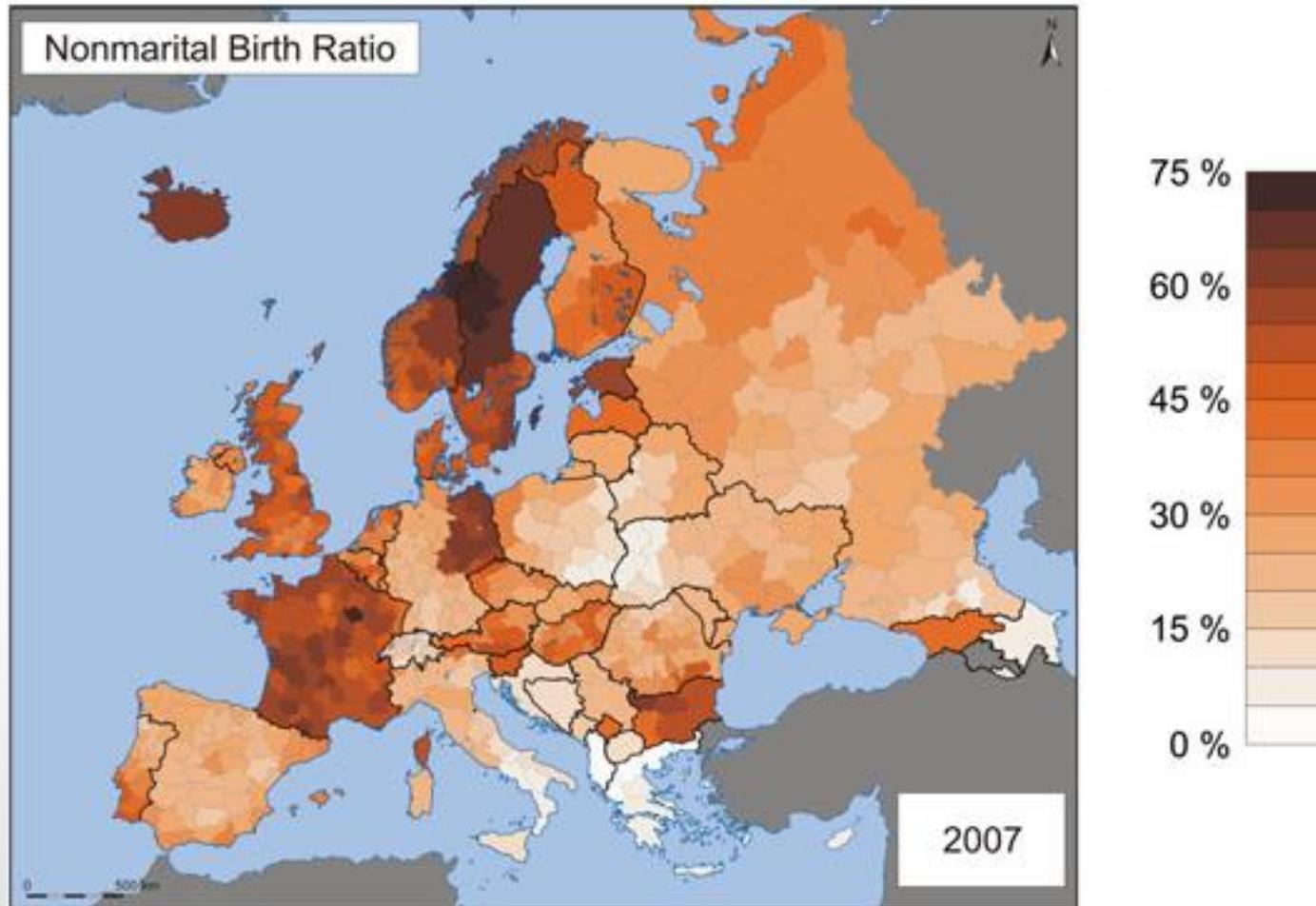


# Nonmarital Fertility in Europe 1960



Kluesener, Sebastian, Brienna Perelli-Harris, and Nora Sánchez Gassen. 2013. "Spatial Aspects of the Rise of Nonmarital Fertility across Europe since 1960: The Role of States and Regions in shaping Patterns of Change." *European Journal of Population*.

# Nonmarital Fertility in Europe 2007



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## Why is cohabitation increasing?

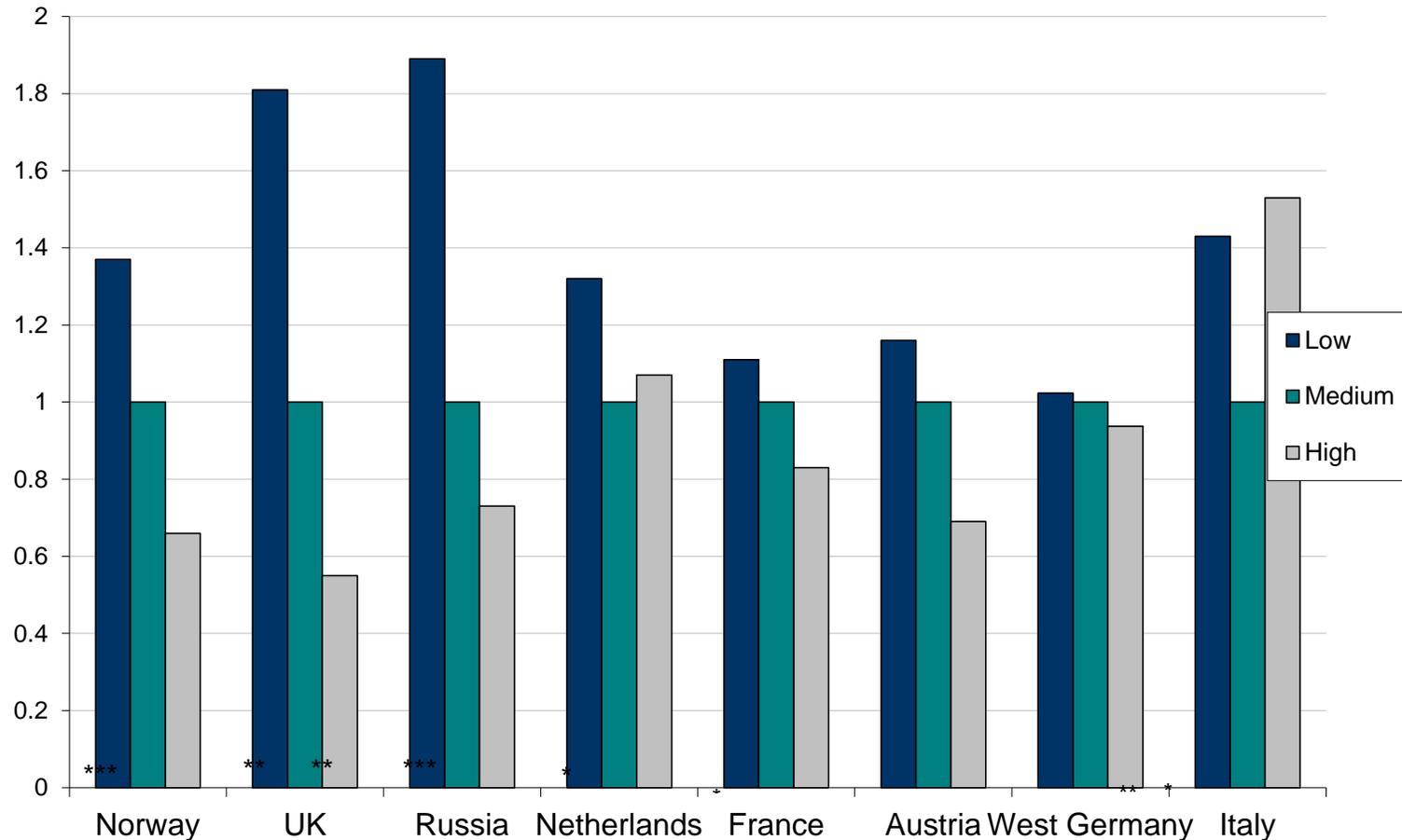
- Second Demographic Transition (*Lesthaeghe et al*)
  - Changes in ideas and values: increase in individualization, independence, self-actualization, and freedom.
  - Rejection of patriarchy/authority/marriage
  - Speculation that new behaviors occur first among the most highly educated (little evidence)
  - Assumes a progression of stages and convergence towards new behavior
  - Marriage disappears?

## Why is cohabitation increasing?

- Pattern of Disadvantage (*Perelli-Harris et al 2010*)/ Diverging Destinies (*McLanahan 2004*)
  - Social movements and feminism of 1960s/70s changed attitudes
  - Globalization and new employment conditions of 1980s/90s led to increasing uncertainty
  - Divergence between
    - highly educated, who have the skills to cope with the new labor market,
    - least educated, whose labor market conditions are precarious
  - Cohabitation at the start of a relationship is increasing for all,
    - but highly educated are more likely to have the resources to marry before a birth,
    - and least educated are more likely to have uncertain relationships and births within cohabitation

# Negative educational gradient of childbearing in cohabitation

Relative risks of first birth 1970-2004: cohabiting vs. married



Perelli-Harris et al. 2010. "The educational gradient of nonmarital childbearing in Europe."  
*Population and Development Review.*

## Cohabitation and marriage are (usually) not the same

- Cohabiting relationships are less stable (Galezewska et al 2014)
- U.S. research has shown cohabitators are less satisfied with their situation and more prone to abuse (Brown 2003, Kenney and McLanahan 2006)
- In most countries of Europe, cohabitators have lower levels of subjective well-being (Soons and Kalmijn 2009)
- Second birth rates in cohabitation are lower than in marriage in 14 countries in Europe and the United States (Perelli-Harris 2012)

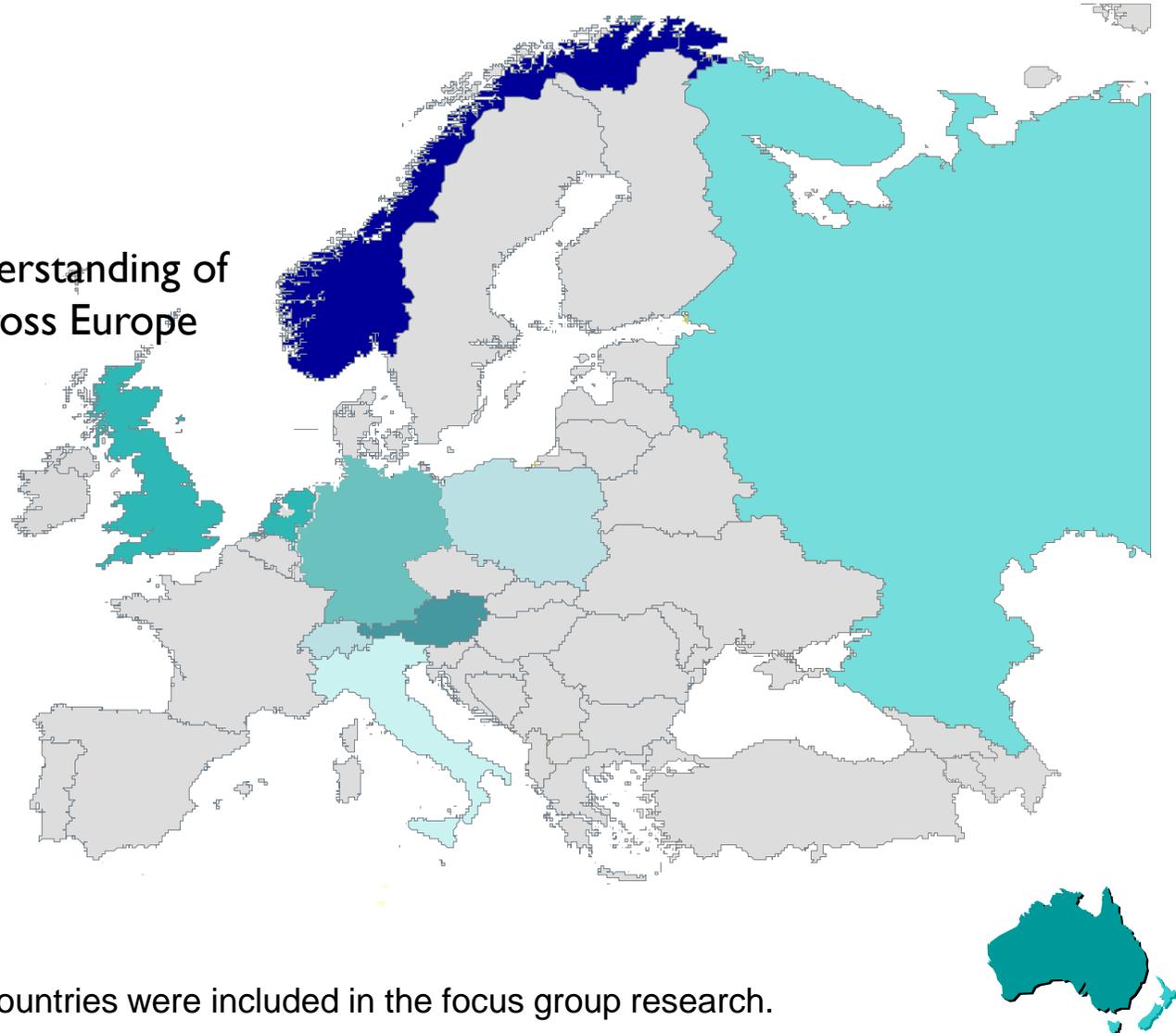
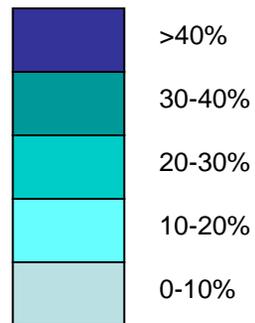
## Nonetheless...

- There are many reasons for cohabiting
- Cohabitors often have certain characteristics, and are a select group
- Cohabitors often marry or have plans to marry and if they do, they:
  - Have second birth rates that are similar to those of people married at the time of first birth (Europe and US: Perelli-Harris 2014)
  - Have similar relationship quality and levels of commitment as married people (Norway: Wiik, Bernhardt, and Noack 2009)
  - Have similar divorce rates to those who directly married (Australia: Hewitt and De Vaus, 2009, U.S. Reinhold 2010)
- Recent U.S. studies show that marriage is not always more advantageous than cohabitation (e.g. for happiness and self-esteem) (Musick and Bumpass 2012).

# Focus group research on Cohabitation and Marriage

Perelli-Harris, Brienna, et al. "Towards a deeper understanding of cohabitation: insights from focus group research across Europe and Australia." *Demographic Research* 31.34 (2014)

Percent of all births in cohabitation



Note: Only colored countries were included in the focus group research.

## Views on cohabitation from Focus Group research

- **Poland and Italy:** easy to separate, able to leave at any time
- **Netherlands:** test relationship, fewer financial risks, freedom, response to divorce
- **Austria:** life-course perspective; cohabitation is for younger ages, while marriage is a more responsible, mature relationship
- **United Kingdom:** personal decision whether to marry, but highly educated want to marry before kids, while cohabitation is the norm for lower educated
- **Norway:** not many differences between cohabitation and marriage, but marriage is often about “romance”
- **Eastern Germany:** Low desire for marriage

## Common themes from Focus Group research

- Marriage still valued (except in Eastern Germany)
- Marriage reflects a higher level of commitment than cohabitation
  - However, children and housing can be a larger commitment
- Cohabitation is usually a testing ground to avoid divorce
- Cohabitation also represents freedom, but is not always devoid of commitment
- Cohabitation is heterogeneous, ranging from the newly dating to the long-term, ideological cohabitators, who reject marriage.
- Do people have different needs to demonstrate public commitment?

## Does the increase in cohabitation matter?

- Previous research in US and UK shows that marriage leads to better outcomes (child development, well-being)
- However, sometimes results are due to selection effects, sometimes effects of marriage (US research)
- Already reversal in effect of premarital cohabitation on divorce in US and Australia
- New research is needed to see whether there are differences in long-term cohabiting relationships and long-term marriages

## Does the increase in cohabitation matter?

- Not everyone is going to get married
- The costs and expectations for the wedding have increased, making it harder to marry, or less of a priority for those who have less money
- Hence people in committed cohabiting relationship may be postponing marriage – just not getting around to it
- Acknowledging the diversity of cohabitation, allows policies to target the couples that are in need.