

Cohabitation – the Alternative Life of Dyad

Andrzej Ładyżyński / e-mail: aladyzynski@gmail.com
Institute of Pedagogy, University of Wrocław, Poland

Ładyżyński, A. (2016). Cohabitation – the Alternative Life of Dyad. Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal 8/2, 124–133.

The article presents cohabitation as a substantial form of social life. It is characterized by the common life of two people without formalization of their relationship. It constitutes the phase preceding the marriage, it may occur between the marriages or replace them directly. Cohabitation becomes more and more popular due to its formula of lack of commitment. Despite of the various opinions on thus cohabitation, it constitutes a social phenomenon being more widely spread in a society encompassing with its span people of different age and status.

Key words: *cohabitation; alternative forms of family life; marriage*

Introduction

There is no doubt that cohabitation is an extremely important form of social life – ‘the parallel life’. It constitutes a phase that precedes the marriage, it is the stage that occurs between the marriages or it replaces them directly. In the view of the abovementioned arguments, I would like to take into consideration of this analysis the heterosexual relationships only. My attempt is to analyze this unusual phenomenon of social life, which bonds people together making them want to be together, even only for some time. Cohabitation can be perceived and analyzed differently, nevertheless the fact that it is an actual and significant phenomenon cannot be ignored. It cannot be disregarded, because of its contemporary social popularity as well as its span embraces the few preceding generations. Without any doubt, this dyad has to be noticed and reflected upon since it constitutes a model of building a communities within the modern social groups.

There is also an educational point of view to consider. Cohabitation educates in the narrow sense – a couple of people in an informal relationship learns how to coexist as well as in a broad sense – cohabitation is a culturally popularized, or even a promoted phenomenon. Media coverage that approve of such forms of social life can also be regarded as programs promoting educational content.

What the cohabitation really is?

Krystyna Slany lays an inquiry about its quintessence and she responds to it in a synoptic way: *Putting it the easiest way, cohabitation relates to a common, but informal life.*¹ Cohabitation constitutes an alternative form of the family contributing to the extension of this concept in a commonly understood and perceived way.² Pondering upon the universality of the notion of the family, one can extend its definition from its classic understanding as a relationship between the man, woman and a child, which is created when the more or less formal bond appears between the partners.³ The term *cohabitare*, which means a life together denotes *a legally unsanctioned relationship of a heterosexual couple.*⁴ It is also defined as *a state in which a sexually active, unmarried couple run a household together.*⁵ The term cohabitation is replaced by such terms as: informal, unsanctioned relationship.⁶ The informal phrases describing this phenomenon are the following: “to shack up” or “live in sin” etc.

Concubinage is a parallel term to cohabitation used in similar contexts. *It relates to a permanent, informal relationship between a man and woman, who are not married, but they maintain the mental, physical and economic relations. It constitutes a factual relation as opposed to a legal relation.*⁷

Forms and shapes of cohabitation

There are many forms of cohabitation. The two major categories this phenomenon falls into are: premarital and extramarital. K. Slany

1 Slany, K. (2008). *Alternatywne formy życia małżeńsko-rodzinnego w ponowoczesnym świecie*, Kraków: Nomos, p. 135.

2 Kwak, A. (2005). *Rodzina w dobie przemian. Matżeństwo i kohabitacja*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak”, p. 88.

3 Marody, M. – Giza-Poleszczuk, A. (2004). *Przemiany więzi społecznych*, Warszawa: „Scholar”, p. 186.

4 Janicka, I. (2008). Dynamika związku a wzajemna zależność kohabituujących partnerów, In M. Bogdanowicz, M. Lipowska (ed) *Rodzinne, edukacyjne i psychologiczne wyznaczniki rozwoju*, Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”, p. 71.

5 Kwak, A. (2001). Kierunki przemian kohabitacyjnych. In T. Rostowska (ed), *Psychologia rodziny. Matżeństwo i rodzina wobec współczesnych wyzwań*, Warszawa: Difin, p. 47.

6 Ibidem, p. 48.

7 Piechnik-Borusowska, J. (2001). Czy wolne związki będą alternatywą dla życia małżeńskiego i rodzinnego w Polsce? „*Edukacja Dorosłych*”, Issue 2, p. 61.

distinguishes a short and long-lived cohabitation.⁸ Taking into consideration its disparate functions Anna Kwak recognizes the following types of cohabitation.⁹

- *It precedes the marriage and constitutes a period of the prolonged dating,*
- *It precedes the marriage and constitutes a preparation time for getting married, testing each other, strengthening the mutual relations without the responsibility for the spouse and children,*
- *Is an alternative for marriage, especially for the couples which do not intend to get married,*
- *Is an alternative form of unmarried life stemming from the ideology of independence.*

Jolanta Piechnik-Borusowska distinguishes two groups:¹⁰

- free relationships, which have no history,
- free relationships (of previously married partners).

The scale of this phenomenon is actually barely measurable. Without any doubt, such relationships are common, however they cannot be exactly determined statistically.¹¹ This aspect is pointed out by Krystyna Slany.¹² There can be observed a significant change consisting in the popularization of the cohabitated relationships. Census from 1988 indicated that the families created from the informal relationships constituted only 1.2 % of all the families. In the end of the 1990s, such relationships' span amounted to about 300 thousands and in about 10% of which children were born.¹³ Despite such a span, in 2001 Krystyna Kluzowa stated that *the extent of the cohabitation are scarce in Poland in contrast to the scale it has reached in the other west European countries.*¹⁴ Cohabitation however, is not easily statistically classifiable.

⁸ Slany, K. (2008). *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁹ Kwak, A. (2001). Kierunki przemian rodziny – alternatywy dla małżeństwa, „*Roczniki Socjologii Rodziny*”. Issue XIII, p. 23.

¹⁰ Piechnik-Borusowska, J. (2001). *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹¹ Janicka, I. (2003). Małżeństwo czy związek niezalegalizowany?, In I. Janicka – T. Rostowska, *Psychologia w służbie rodziny*, Łódź: Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, p. 68.

¹² Slany, K. (2008). *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹³ Piechnik-Borusowska, J. (2001). *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

¹⁴ Kluzowa, K. (2001). Sytuacja demograficzna rodziny polskiej lat dziewięćdziesiątych i jej konsekwencje społeczne. In M. Ziemska (ed), *Rodzina współczesna*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, p. 17.

There are no statistically clear-cut social frames of this phenomenon as relationships of this kind are characterized as disparate, informal, non-standard and they are spread through the long period of time. Similarly to the state of engagement, which has a nearly legalized status, but is not fully institutionalized, statistically unregistered. The second phenomenon described is actually linked by a formal private act – proposal, engagement and the final decision of a couple to get married. The most precise data would probably be drawn from the jewelers selling engagement rings. In other cases, the family, friends and facebook share the knowledge. Information about cohabitating couples is much scarcer.

The reasons for choosing cohabitation as a form of relationship

The few examples of opinions indicating reasons for choosing this kind of informal relationship are presented below. Iwona Janicka includes the following patterns of perceiving cohabitation:¹⁵

- the time for institutionalization of our relationship has not come yet,
- the unwillingness to formalize the relationship,
- testing the relationship.

In Iwona Janicka's understanding, the most common reasons for living in cohabitation are the following:¹⁶

- decision that this is not the right time to move the relationship to the next level, determination of the external factors,
- unwillingness to formalize the relationship via marriage, which is compensated by the cohabitation constituting an alternative, which is stipulated by the emotional factors and expectations,
- putting the relationship to test, which is based on the emotional-logical analysis. The partners wish to live together, but first they have to verify whether they will be fine together.

J. Piechnik-Borusowska indicates that the motives for which, people remain in the free relationships depend on its type. The following incentives for choosing the free relationships are accentuated in the group of people, who have never been in the relationship before:

- one's own immaturity to start a permanent relationship,
- the wish to be independent,

¹⁵ Janicka, I. (2009). *Perspektywy związków..*, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 48.

- the economic necessity (living together is easier and more economic),
- the willingness to get to know each other better,
- the lesser responsibility,
- the necessity forced by the living conditions (e.g., getting a job nearby),
- one's own negative experiences from the childhood.

On the other hand, in the relationships between people, who had been married before the following reasons for choosing cohabitation are highlighted:

- the impossibility to get married (one of the partners is divorced),
- disillusion connected with the previous relationships and reluctance to repeat those patterns,
- the value of independence (including financial one),
- fewer stressful situations in case of parting.¹⁷

Marriage and cohabitation

The opinions on marriages and cohabited relationships are divergent. There are more and more views advocating cohabitated relationships as the only true and authentic relationships of the future, at the same time marriage is perceived as an archaic form, which does not live up to the contemporary conditions and expectations. On the other hand, there is an opinion that marriage constitutes the only valid and irreplaceable form of people's coexistence.¹⁸

The attempt to compare the experiences of cohabitating and married couples can provide an intriguing insight into those phenomena. A collation of the aspects of those two types of relationships is presented beneath.

¹⁷ Piechnik-Borusowska, J. (2001). *op. cit.*, p. 63–64.

¹⁸ Janicka, I. (2003). *Matżeństwo czy związek ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

Comparison of the chosen aspects of cohabitation and marriage

L.p.		Marriage	Cohabitation
1.	Status	Permanent relationship	Temporary/permanent relationship
2.	Commitments	Permanent	Short-lived or none
3.	Dependence	Demarcated by the financial community, predictable and real	Lack of financial community, Emotional community
4.	Reliance and trust	Long-lived	Spontaneous
5.	Sociability	More common friends, no distance	Lesser number of common friends, exposed to distance
6.	Goals	Common and individual	Individual needs and development

Janicka, I. (2008). Dynamika związku a wzajemna zależność kohabitujących partnerów, In M. Bogdanowicz, M. Lipowska (ed). *Rodzinne, edukacyjne i psychologiczne wyznaczniki rozwoju*, Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls", pp. 71–82.

Marriage except of the emotional sphere, common responsibilities and rules – financial community. Cohabitation is based on the emotional sphere, which is in this case elevated to the priority. Married couples constantly provide support to each other and in cohabitation it may happen casually. The reason for such state stems from the lesser reliance and stability of their mutual responsibilities. The cohabitating couples have less mutual friends and they are much more likely to be exposed to the distance from their families and friends. Social support is more readily translatable to the marriage as opposed to free relationships.

It is related to the fact that cohabitating couples are more focused on realization their individual than common goals. As a consequence, such relationships are more prone to failure and change of partners.¹⁹ The concept of marriage is not rejected by the cohabitating couples as it strictly interweaving with it. Cohabitation constitutes a prologue to it, it occurs after its resolution or between another marriages. Thus, cohabitation can be perceived as a two-way solution.²⁰

The other significant differences between these two concepts pertains to the age of the partners. People entering into marriage are often prevaillingly young and the middle-aged partners constitute a minority in this case. Cohabitating couples are more diverse group as far as the age is concerned. While married couples are concerned about the interdependent relations, couples in the free relationships care about

¹⁹ Janicka, I. (2008). *Dynamika związku...*, op. cit., pp. 71–74.

²⁰ Kwak, A. (2001). *Kierunki przemian*, op. cit., pp. 23–26.

their own independence. Representatives of the formal relationships take up commitments with their families in an unequivocal and clear way, while the cohabitating couples undertake the common tasks more inconsistently.²¹

Iwona Janicka, who investigates the phenomenon of cohabitation suggests that the lower quality of the informal relationships in comparison to the marriages is observable, especially when it does not precede it, but constitutes an alternative for it. The quality of married relationships turns out to be poorer between those partners, who have cohabitated beforehand. By contrast, the time of the cohabitation is a variable in the view of the so called "the cohabitation effect", which in case of the prolongation of the cohabitation may threaten that such a couple may never enter into the marriage.²²

Lack of formal structure is the aspect that is indicated by the cohabiting partners as a positive side. They emphasize the importance of building the individual and personal side of life. Certainly, there is the other side of the coin. Jean Guitton relates to the parents of young couples entering into marriage as *those who must accept the birth of the couple constituting a new structure, not the parallel collation of two individuals*. The researcher associates the marriage with the metaphor: *"the closed and sealed garden"*. Guitton indicates that the relations between parents and children, who have their own families differ substantially from relations they had before marriage.²³

Meanwhile, the informal relationship does not have such clear-cut boundaries separating the couple from the families they come from. In fact, the separation does not bear such strong consequences as it is not connected with the change in structure as in the case of marriage. Surely, it does not concern the so called "inveterate cohabitants". Cohabitation results in characteristic suspension of the social roles. The young adults are partners for each other. If the cohabitation constitutes a premarital stage they eventually become engaged, who promise each other that they will formalize their relationship. Otherwise, if they acknowledge the status of their relationship as informal one, they do not fully enter into and fulfill their social roles of parents-law, son-in-law and daughter-in-law. Undoubtedly, this nomenclature can be used by the family members in more free, casual and humorous than serious way.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 24.

²² Janicka, I. (2009). *Perspektywy związków...*, op. cit., pp. 48–49.

²³ Guitton, J. (1994). *Kobieta, Miłość, Rodzina*. Warszawa: PAX, p. 153.

Does the cohabitation constitute an alternative for marriage? To some extent yes. It appears to raise as a new form of family life. Anna Kwak conceptualizes it rather as a process not as an event. However, the same thing can be applied to a contemporary marriage. It undergoes a process of change as well. It is subject to alternation from the institution to the relationship fulfilling the personal needs of the partners. It starts from the particle of community to the emotional relationship. This aspect links marriage and cohabitation bringing their common features.

Aldona Żurek poses a serious question. Can cohabitation be linked as a phenomenon, which causes that people withdraw from the family oriented models of living?²⁴ It cannot be answered unanimously. Cohabitation constitutes an open book of contemporary living, which consist in liberalization of the norms and customs. It is approved of by representatives of few generations, but at the same time it excites many controversies. Cohabiting couples take up their decisions on their own and often are under pressure of their families. Such situations happen in case of young people, who are capable of entering into marriage, but their decisions are impeded by their parents, who think the right moment has not appeared yet. There has a new social phenomenon arisen, namely the cohabiting seniors, who are not only not encouraged, but even deterring from the decision to formalize their relationship in the fear of losing the right to succession.

There remains a question unanswered: how the informal relationship influences marriage. Cohabitation is for sure a family-based relationship characterized by the individual approach connecting the partners together, which focuses on fulfilling their needs and temporary goals. It can be perceives both as a prelude to marriage and as its alternative – a substitute of marriage.

A. Kwak answers the question whether cohabitation can be treated as marriage's "rival" in the following way: both relationships have the same aim to attain – fulfilling the needs of the individual person in the relationship. They both change their character. Cohabiting couples, especially young people are planning their marriage.²⁵

²⁴ Żurek, A. (2001). Orientacja na mikrostrukturę a rodzina. In *Rodzina współczesna*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, p. 17.

²⁵ Kwak, A. (2005). *Rodzina w dobie.., op. cit.*, p. 295.

Few words about the dilemmas connected with the informal relationships

Cohabitation – the aspect of which is rarely mentioned – is related to the ethical dilemmas whether one can live with the man/woman, who are not espoused. Such reflections pertain especially to religious people.

Partners involved in informal relationship can be encumbered with the apprehensions connected with their common future. The close bond that appears between them lasts around few months, or even years. This state of affairs may spark the natural hopes for the stabilization. Sometimes, cohabitation does not end in marriage, which may bring about apprehension and irritation. Separations, on the other hand, after long years spent together do not in fact differ from divorce at all. Taking into consideration, the formal simplicity of separation, they cause such traumas as divorces.

There is also a phenomenon of the too much carelessness of entering into new relationships as well as ending the other ones. Such cohabitants may have troubles in attaining stabilization and balance understood in the context of one's stable existence with one partner.

There are many didactic spheres that need to be reflected upon within the researched phenomenon. They relate to questions concerning the idea of living together before the wedding and its impact on the quality and continuity of the subsequent marriage, the tendencies to a relationship breakdown by the cohabitating couple. From the pedagogical point of view, there is an important aspect of the formation of egocentric attitudes and actions based on individualistic tendencies, greater acceptance of divorce and lesser attachment to the institution of marriage. As a consequence women and men living in the free relationships may experience difficulties in developing the altruistic qualities, openness to sacrificial service, formation of the community spirit, including unconditional love, which is a crucial element of building the relationship. One may consider and reflect upon the fact to what extent people entering the cohabitating relationship are less prepared to enter the marriage. The significant issue is the level of safety reached in the cohabitating relationship. It especially relates to women who care about the stabilization in life. In the light of these multiple, but surely not sufficient range of questions and doubts, there emerges another essential matter that can be formulated in a following shape: Is it worth to decide oneself to cohabitation as a form of common life, which burdens young people with the various kinds of risk? To what extent can one experiment on oneself and other person's life being aware of the lesser or greater

consequences of the cohabitation as a relationship put to a test?²⁶ It seems that it is impossible to provide fully-fledged answers to these questions. Nonetheless, it is worth asking them to the young generations being about to choose their ways in life and encouraging them to consider these matters intellectually.

²⁶ J. Wojtczak, *Kohabitacja*, Centralna Diakonia Życia, www.oaza.pl/cdz/index.php/pl/spotkanie/2473-kohabitacja [15. 12. 2016.].

