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CHAPTER 11

COHABITATION IN THE SOUTHERN CONE: RECENT EVOLUTION, ASSOCIATED FACTORS AND CONVERGENCE

Carla Arévalo and Jorge Paz

ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to document the increase in cohabitation in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) between 2010 and 2021, to analyze the role played in it by certain associated factors such as changes in the educational level of the population, age structure, and income distribution, and to evaluate the importance of people's preferences (in terms of ideas or values) for cohabitation versus marriage. The results suggest that the models of nuptiality identified in previous studies coexist in the region: the traditional and the modern one, while there is a convergence of the prevalence of cohabitation among social groups within countries. Furthermore, although the prevalence of cohabitation as a springboard to marriage cannot be rejected, there are indications that suggest the presence of perceptions and ideas favorable to cohabitation as an alternative form of family organization, closer to the predictions of the theory of the second demographic transition than to the postponement of the age of entry into marriage and the birth of children.

Keywords: Argentina; Chile; cohabitation; family; region; Uruguay

I. INTRODUCTION

This chapter pursues three objectives. First, it aims to document the increase in cohabitation in the Southern Cone during the last decade: 2010–2021. Second, it aims to provide evidence on the role played by objective and subjective factors in this process. The former include the expansion of the educational level of the population, school attendance, and demographic aging, among others. The subjective factors refer to people's attitudes and perceptions about the role of the individual in society and various issues of interest (gender, religion, inequality, and autonomy). Finally, it seeks to identify convergence in the levels of cohabitation between social groups defined both by their objective position in society (income and educational level, etc.) and by common ideas. Cohabitation is understood here as the situation of cohabitation between people without legal marital ties between them.¹

Available data show an ostensible increase in this form of cohabitation, at least in Northern and Western European countries (Kiernan, 2002; Sánchez Gassen & Perelli-Harris, 2015), non-European West (Lesthaeghe, 2020), Asia (Kobayashi & Kampen, 2015; Zhang, 2017), and Latin America (Esteve, Lesthaeghe & López-Gay, 2012). More and more couples in the world opt for cohousing as a cohabitation model that, in addition, has important consequences for the lives of individuals and societies. There is debate in the literature about the transitory or definitive nature of this process. A good part of the authors argue that marriage remains the ultimate goal of young couples who use free unions as a sort of springboard and postpone entry into marriage (Manning, 2020; Manning, Smock & Fetto, 2019a). Another group of authors argue that it is a different way of organizing life as a couple, raising children, and living as a family (Domínguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martín, 2013). The latter conception of the change in the levels of cohabitation and free unions is in line with the predictions of the theory of the second demographic transition (STD) (Van De Kaa, 1987). Other studies, which take a neutral position in the debate, speak of a certain “delay” in the transition to the STD in certain countries (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Liefbroer & Fokkema, 2008), and others doubt that changes in attitudes and values and their relation to demographic phenomena can be considered as a theory (Coleman, 2004).

Seeking answers to these questions in the Southern Cone is challenging. Between Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay (Southern Cone), there is much more than geographic proximity. This region has common cultural, socio-demographic, and economic characteristics. The fertility decline recorded in Argentina and Uruguay is very similar and places these countries on the European path of the first demographic transition (Pantelides, 2006). In this aspect, Chile differs somewhat from both, since fertility in that country began to decline only in the mid-1960s, following a pattern more similar to that of the rest of Latin America. Despite these differences, it can be affirmed that the three countries are in the final phase of this process (Chackiel, 2004; Zavala de Cosio, 1992) and probably the increase in cohabitation is an indication of the beginning of the STD.

The Southern Cone shares with the larger region of Latin America and the Caribbean, and the prevalence of free unions with very strong historical roots is highly relevant. This led to raise the possibility of the coexistence of two models of nuptiality in the region: traditional cohabitation and modern cohabitation

(Arriagada, 2001; Pérez Amador & Esteve, 2012; Quilodrán, 2008; Rodríguez Vignoli, 2005). The latter would explain the cohabitation boom in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1960 and 2000 (Esteve, Lesthaeghe & López-Gay, 2012).

Taking into account the above, the contribution of this chapter to the literature on cohabitation can be evaluated both from a purely empirical perspective and from a more theoretical one that is related to the debate on the STD march. From the first perspective and to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that have addressed the issue of cohabitation in the Southern Cone during the decade analyzed here. The last recorded research is that of Binstock, Cabella, Salinas and López-Colás (2016) where the trend up to 2010 is analyzed. Questions such as what happened to cohabitation thereafter are still unanswered. From a theoretical perspective, the results of this study allow us to take a position on phenomena such as convergence between social groups and the presence of ideas about the ways of organizing family life.

The chapter is organized in seven sections, including this introduction. The following section presents the conceptual framework used for the interpretation of the empirical results obtained and the hypotheses that serve as a guide for the interpretation of the available information. The results come from processing and analyzing the information from the data sources described in Section III. Section IV details the empirical strategy used to test the working hypotheses mentioned in Section II. The results are presented in Section V and discussed in Section VI. Finally, the chapter concludes with a list of the main messages of the chapter and some questions that are intended to be answered in subsequent studies (Section VII).

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The conceptual framework and guiding hypotheses of this chapter are aimed at understanding the change in cohabitation levels in the Southern Cone. It is therefore excluded from accounting for the historically high level of the phenomenon, which has already been dealt with in other works (Arriagada, 2001, 2004; Quilodrán, 2001, 2008, for example). Regardless of their objectives, previous contributions show that cohabitation is inversely related to age, education, and social class (Binstock et al., 2016; Esteve et al., 2012; Rodríguez Vignoli, 2005). It is striking, then, that the increase in cohabitation is occurring in a context of aging, educational expansion, and deterioration of income distribution. This raises the possibility that other phenomena are operating in a society that are beyond what could be called “structural” or objective factors. It has thus been suggested that the increase in cohabitation has to do with demographic issues related to nuptiality and fertility patterns. The hypothesis in this case is that couples would be delaying the age of entry into marriage and, given that fertility continues to be marital fertility, also the birth of children. Cohabitation thus appears as a stage in the life cycle that couples go through, the objective of which is still marriage. This phenomenon could be called cohabitation as a springboard or as a means, the end of which is ultimately marriage.

The profiles of free unions by age are consistent with this argument: cohabitation in its current form starts out high at young ages and declines as people get

older. Within this conceptual scheme, faster entry into marriage generates profiles with steeper slopes. Despite the simplicity and obviousness of this reasoning, the argument itself is powerful. If people in free unions decide to remain in that state throughout their lives, the slope of distribution would be zero. This would be a rectangular distribution. It is clear then that the slope is determined by exits from the “cohabitation” state, exits which can be to singlehood or marriage. The springboard hypothesis holds that marriage is the majority destination state of those who leave cohabitation. The argument can be generalized as follows: flatter slopes of the age profile of free unions imply greater permanence in the state (free union); or: lower transits to (primarily) marriage.

If it is accepted that cohabitation is an alternative state to marriage and not a means to that end, then people who choose that state may differ in some respects from those who choose marriage. Here appears the idea put forward by the STD theory that, for some reason related to perceptions and values, people today opt for lifestyles different from those chosen in the past. Within these different lifestyles can be included a variety of behaviors, the most interesting here being the ways of relating to people, of seeking and forming couples and households, and of having children. In this context, cohabitation would be part of these new lifestyles. If this is so, cohabiting couples would have the same number of children as married couples, a phenomenon that has already been documented in some studies (Solís, 2013). This alternative state is what could be called the traditional-local model as opposed to the traditional-European (Catholic) model, which would have been predominant in the less economically advantaged sectors of society. The interpretation of the transition of nuptiality would be that couples from more advantaged social sectors would be adopting this form or lifestyle and that this change (from a traditional Catholic model to another traditional-local model) comes from a generational change and a different way of perceiving how society works.

Two possible hypotheses, which are not necessarily contradictory, can explain the increase in cohabitation:

H1. Men and women changed their way of forming a couple, having children, and living as a family.

H2. Couples delay the age of entry into marriage and the birth of their children.

STD theory offers a theoretical interpretation of *H1* that, although formulated to understand cohabitation and marriage patterns in the US and other developed nations (Kuo & Raley, 2016; Raley, 2001), could be used for the geographic context analyzed here: the Southern Cone. One could then posit that the rise in cohabitation and decline in marriage, along with declining fertility and relatively high levels of out-of-wedlock fertility, would be driven by changes in the ideational climate (e.g., attitudes and norms), as well as broad structural changes, such as transformations in the employment structure and economic bases of families. These changes in ideas support family forms other than marriage. Therefore, analyses based on norms and values (ideational climate) could provide an important vantage point from which to measure the cultural position toward marriage, beyond behavioral indicators. In sum, SDT theory predicts a shift toward very

low fertility and a diversity of union and family types. The main driver of these changes is a powerful, inevitable, and irreversible shift in attitudes and norms in the direction of greater individual freedom and self-realization (Zaidi & Morgan, 2017), a transition toward post-materialism (Inglehart, 1977).

Manning, Joyner, Hemez and Cupka (2019b) empirically support the second hypothesis and argue that STD is stagnant. Young people, they argue, are not rejecting marriage. On the contrary, they are waiting to marry. Using evidence from the US reported in other studies they show that in 2010, more than two-thirds (69%) of unmarried people aged 18–29 expect to marry and that 80% of young people believe it is important to marry someday. This is mainly true, according to these authors, for low-income women. The reason why this is so seems to have to do with evidence that cohabitation is often not considered as “good” as marriage, mainly in terms of rights, not only of the partners, but also of their children. Manning, Smock and Fetto (2019a) robustly support these findings. Also, qualitative studies suggest that young adults often “slip” into cohabitation without deliberate plans to cohabit (Manning & Smock, 2005) and do so relatively quickly; one-quarter of cohabiting women moved out some time after first having sex (Sassler, Michelmore & Qian, 2018).

In mixed regimes, it may happen that couples assimilable to the *H1* approach coexist with others closer to the *H2* argument. Moreover, if it is accepted that the STD is precisely that: a *transition*, it is to be expected that old patterns of behavior will overlap with new patterns. This is precisely what is put forward as the third hypothesis.

H3. Some couples delay the age of entry into marriage and the birth of their children, while others remain in that state.

This hypothesis would be compatible with shifts in the cohabitation distributions together with a change in the slope within the same distribution. These shifts could be supported by the overlapping of generations and that imprints on the cohabitation profiles characteristics that are attributed to the age of the individuals rather than to the generation of birth from which they come. The following will provide evidence in this sense.

III. DATA SOURCE AND CHARACTERISTICS

The information comes from different sources. From the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC) of Argentina, we used the Permanent Household Survey, urban total (EPH-TU) for the years 2010 and 2021; from the Ministry of Social Development and Family of Chile (MIDEPLAN), the National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey (CASEN) for the years 2009 and 2020; and from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) of Uruguay, the Continuous Household Survey (ECH) for the years 2010 and 2021. All three surveys contain questions related to the marital status of the population. Those of Argentina and Chile are similar, but both forms differ from those of Uruguay. Both the EPH-TU (INDEC) and the CASEN (MIDEPLAN) contemplate the categories: unmarried, married, separated, widowed, and single. Uruguay's ECH (INE) uses two questions: one referring to the type of union and the other to current marital status. The first one is directed to those people with a partner, which follows from

the answer about marital status, and the type of union to which it refers is very detailed. In this research, it was necessary to sacrifice the wealth of information from Uruguay in order to homogenize and make the ECH data compatible with those of the EPH-TU and the CASEN.

Information was also taken from the *World Values Survey* (WVS), the global research project that provides data on opinions and values on many dimensions of economic and social life from nearly 90 countries around the world. Questions on gender roles, the importance of religion, the importance of autonomy for children's education, and opinions about economic inequality were used for this study. Marginally, data were added from *The World Marriage Data* (WMD), the program of the United Nations Population Division, which provides a comparable set of indicators on the marital status of the population by age and sex for 232 countries and areas of the world.

IV. METHOD

The descriptive analysis was based on the calculation of two types of cohabitation prevalence rates: (a) as a proportion (or percentage) of persons in union over the total number of persons with a partner; and (b) as a proportion (or percentage) of persons in union over the total number of adults. All the sources mentioned in the previous section made it possible to obtain these rates.

For the multivariate analysis, work was carried out with models that meet the following specification:

$$CH_i = X \Theta + u_i$$

where CH_i represents the selected cohabitation indicator explained in (a) and (b) of the first paragraph of this section) corresponding to the person i . X is a matrix that, in addition to a column of ones, contains the variables considered relevant to understand the cohabitation phenomenon. On the other hand, Θ is a vector with the parameters to be estimated, and u_i , the error term.

To identify the effects of each variable on cohabitation, the sign and significance of the parameters included in the vector Θ will be analyzed. A significant parameter implies the impossibility of rejecting the absence of a relationship between the variable in question and the probability of cohabitation, *ceteris paribus*. Probit regressions are estimated for, in general, adults between 15 and 59 years old. In this context, it is assumed that:

$$E(CH_i | X_i) = E(CH_i = 1 | X_i) = CH_i = \Phi(X_i \Theta) = \int_{-\infty}^{X_i \Theta} \phi(s) ds .$$

where $\phi(s) = \frac{1}{(2\pi)^{1/2}} e^{-s^2/2}$ is the density function of the standard normal distribution with zero mean and variance 1. The integration variable s is dichotomous.

To capture the intuitiveness of the parameters included in Θ , partial derivatives were calculated for each of the variables included in the model:

$$\frac{\partial CH_i}{\partial X_{ji}} = \frac{\partial \Phi(X_i \Theta)}{\partial X_{ji}} = \phi(X_i \Theta) \Theta_j$$

The magnitude of the changes in the probability thus depends on the level at which the averages of the variables correlated with that probability are reported. For this reason, the average is also reported in each regression. The probit model will be estimated by the maximum likelihood method, as is the usual practice in these cases.

These include, among others, sex, age, education, and family income. Education and income can be associated with social belonging. Given that the rate of school attendance is increasing, a co-variate representing current attendance at any level of formal education was included. When data were available, labor status and the presence of children in the household were considered as a proxy for fertility. This subset of variables could be called control variables, since they do not directly address the hypotheses that are at the heart of this chapter.

To identify perceptions and values, variables were constructed to represent generations of births, a criterion that considers the interaction between the life cycle and formative experiences, mainly due to technological, economic, and social changes that occurred in the medium term. To do this, the *Pew Research Center* was followed (Dimock, 2018), with which the Silent Generation (born before 1945), Baby Boomers (1945–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2012) could be differentiated.

The WVS made it possible to add to the generations, other more direct variables of perceptions and values (or ideational climate). For gender roles, an index was constructed using the following items: (a) when a mother has a paid job, the children suffer, (b) in general, men are better political leaders than women; (c) a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl; (d) in general, men are better business executives than women; (e) being a housewife is almost as rewarding as having a paid job. The person to whom these questions are applied must answer whether he/she completely agrees or completely disagrees, on a gradient ranging from four to zero.

Attachment to religion was captured through the question about the manifest importance that religion has for the interviewees. A question was used that differentiates gradients, from very important to not at all important, passing through intermediate levels such as “quite important” and “not so important.” Finally, the autonomy index was used, which is obtained from four questions that seek to capture what adults consider to be important qualities for a child. The questions refer to: (a) religious faith; (b) obedience; (c) independence; and (d) determination and perseverance. The index takes four possible values: -2 , -1 , 0 , 1 and 2 , -2 being the number that represents the greatest obedience and 2 the greatest autonomy. With this index, three binary variables representing the value “autonomy” were constructed, with the understanding that those people who consider autonomy more important will be more likely to cohabit than those who are more obedient,

assuming of course that “obedience” responds to the most traditional and deeply rooted norms in society.

V. RESULTS

Cohabitation in the Southern Cone, and in each of its member countries (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay), increased during the 2010s. This suggests that this is not an unexpected and sudden event, but rather that the phenomenon consolidates a trend that began to manifest itself intensely in the late 1980s and mid-1990s (Chart 11.1).

Chile has the lowest prevalence, which is to be expected because the first demographic transition began relatively later (Chackiel, 2004; Zavala de Cosio, 1992). The increase slows down in Argentina and Chile during the last part of the period. In Argentina, this occurs in the 2000s, while in Chile it does not occur until the following decade. In Chile, the age at first marriage increased from 24.6 years in 1992 to 28.4 years in 2011, an increase that clearly places it above Argentina and Uruguay. The 1992 level had not changed since the first available data for 1970. It should be noted that the expansion of cohabitation is verified in all age groups, although with varying intensity (Chart 11.2).

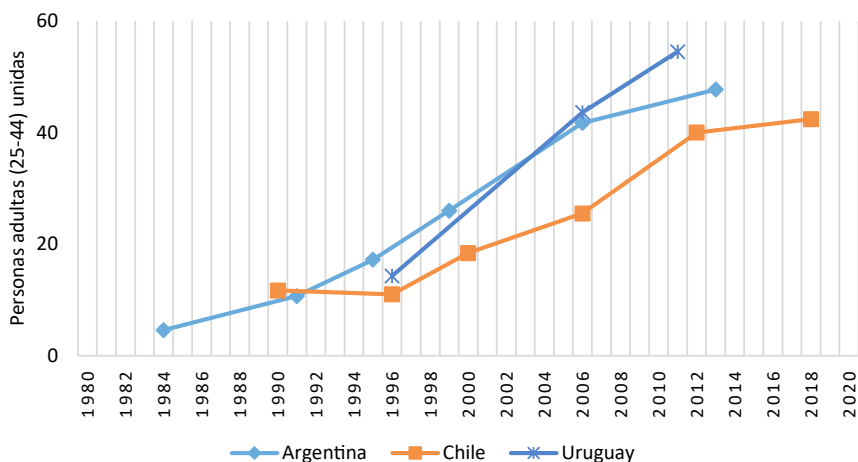


Chart 11.1. Evolution of Cohabitation in the Southern Cone, 1980–2020.

Source: Own elaboration with data from World Values Survey:

All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

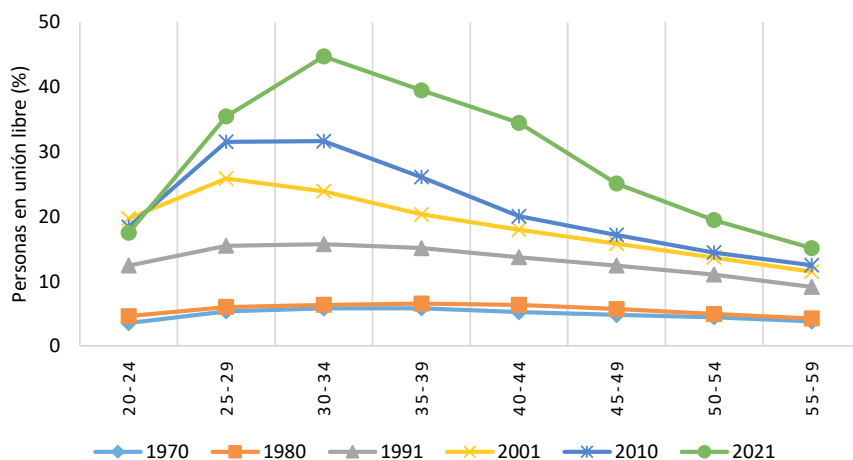


Chart 11.2. Prevalence of Cohabitation in the Southern Cone by Age Group, 1970–2021. Source: Own elaboration with data from United Nations (WMD, 2019) for the period 1970–2001, and from country household surveys for the period 2010–2021.

To reveal differences between groups, Table 11.1 shows the percentage of cohabiting men and women out of the total number of men and women living with a partner. The groups considered are those that can be identified from the household surveys of the countries in question.

It can be seen that cohabitation increased by about 10 points during the 2010s, and it occurred at different rates: it was more intense in Uruguay than in Argentina and Chile, despite the fact that in 2010 Uruguay had a higher rate than the other two countries. The gaps between groups also narrowed for each year, both within the region and within individual countries. The speed of change between the different groups is very similar between countries, with only Uruguay showing greater homogeneity of behavior. Cohabitation increased faster in the middle ages (30–39), in the most educated group, in the extreme income brackets (poorest 20% and richest 20%), among those who have children and among those who do not attend educational institutions.

In all three countries, cohabitation is more frequent among younger people and the prevalence decreases monotonically with age. The highest proportion of cohabitation is found among people whose income is between quintiles I and II (poorest 40% of the population). In the other groups, these gaps are less clear, perhaps influenced by the correlation of some of the variables included and the age of the individuals. Such is the case of education, children, and participation in the labor market. Thus, for example, school attendance is more frequent among the youngest who, at the same time, are the most likely to be unmarried rather than married. In sum, Table 11.1 provides a first view of the convergence

Table 11.1. People who cohabit with those who have a partner. Southern Cone Countries, 2010–2021.

Variable/ Categories	Southern Cone		Argentina		Chile		Uruguay	
	2010	2021	2010	2021	2010	2021	2010	2021
Total	27.4	37.6	28.1	38.4	25.1	34.0	30.6	44.0
Age								
20–29	69.9	83.2	72.3	83.0	62.7	82.5	72.7	88.0
30–34	46.3	70.9	48.9	73.8	37.3	62.5	49.2	73.9
35–39	32.0	53.9	34.1	55.6	26.0	46.8	35.5	61.6
40–49	22.3	39.3	23.0	40.9	19.8	32.0	26.8	47.5
50–59	16.0	22.3	15.9	22.5	16.0	20.9	17.6	28.5
Sex								
Men	29.3	40.0	31.0	42.0	25.1	34.1	30.6	44.1
Women	25.8	35.5	25.7	35.4	25.0	34.0	30.6	44.0
Education								
0–6	24.4	26.3	26.2	28.7	20.0	21.1	29.1	30.7
7–11	29.3	34.2	29.3	34.5	28.3	28.5	36.2	47.7
12+	26.6	41.1	27.4	41.8	23.3	38.4	25.5	46.6
Income								
I	40.3	52.6	43.5	55.4	30.0	42.9	49.0	62.3
II	34.4	43.9	36.6	45.7	28.0	37.4	36.3	51.3
III	27.2	36.7	27.3	38.6	26.6	30.9	28.5	40.4
IV	23.8	30.8	23.2	30.6	25.4	30.4	24.2	36.6
V	21.1	32.1	21.3	32.1	20.7	32.0	21.0	33.9
Girls & boys								
Don't have	18.5	25.4	18.1	24.8	18.7	18.8	22.9	31.9
Have	33.7	43.8	35.6	49.2	28.6	34.1	36.8	55.5
Attendance								
No	26.8	36.2	27.4	37.0	24.6	33.3	29.8	69.9
Yes	53.3	52.9	53.3	70.8	52.9	53.5	55.2	42.7

Source: Own elaboration with data from household surveys in the countries.

process not only at the aggregate level (convergence between countries), but also within each group. The cohabitation rate increased in all groups, but increased more in those that had a lower propensity at the beginning of the period, which resulted in a reduction of the disparity between the categories of each group. A different way of looking at the same phenomenon is as follows: the increase in the groups with the highest prevalence of cohabitation had a smaller increase than that of the mean.

To complement the previous examination, focusing on the “propensity to cohabit,” Table 11.2 shows the structure of the total population and those who are cohabiting, between 2010 and 2021.

Along with aging, educational expansion, and the increase in the labor market participation rate (which occurs among unmarried people), there is a process of impoverishment (increase in the participation of the population in the lowest quintiles of the income distribution), and a considerable increase in the population that attends some formal educational establishment. Neither the proportions by sex (there is no reason for this to have happened) nor the proportion of the

Table 11.2. Structure of the Adult Population. All Persons and United Persons.

Variables/Categories	All Persons		United Persons	
	2010	2021	2010	2021
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age groups				
25–29	57.4	55.6	54.6	44.8
30–34	23.2	26.6	27.1	34.5
35–39	19.4	17.8	18.3	20.7
Sex				
Men	48.5	47.4	48.4	47.1
Women	51.5	52.6	51.6	52.9
Years of education				
0–6	7.9	2.9	10.8	2.5
7–11	46.0	12.3	56.5	17.3
12+	46.1	84.9	32.7	80.2
Quintile of household per capita income				
I	14.5	19.8	17.4	20.6
II	16.1	19.7	19.6	21.5
III	17.3	18.6	18.6	17.1
IV	20.8	18.7	20.8	18.3
V	31.4	23.2	23.6	22.6
Girls & boys				
Don't have	5.3	6.1	5.3	5.9
Have	94.7	93.9	94.7	94.1
Attendance				
No	84.0	71.4	94.4	76.0
Yes	16.0	28.6	5.6	24.0
Economic activity condition				
Not active	27.7	28.8	24.4	19.0
Active	72.3	71.2	75.6	81.0

Source: Own elaboration with data from household surveys in the countries.

labor force for the population as a whole changed. The changes in this structure of those in consensual union are ostensible: the percentage of cohabitants at older ages, at higher educational levels, and at higher levels of education has increased.

Convergence Among Groups

Further analysis of the relationship between the probability of cohabitation and the associated factors requires the use of the data shown in [Table 11.A1](#) (Appendix). The first column shows the marginal effects for the total sample, while the next two columns differentiate the years to which they correspond. The signs and statistical significance of the parameters go in the direction of the relationships found in the descriptive test, although with additional details that weaken or strengthen them. Thus, it can be seen that the increase in cohabitation cannot be rejected (effect of the dichotomous variable “year 2021”), that more educated people tend to cohabit less than less educated people, that cohabitation decreases with age and income (see [Chart 11.2](#)), is lower among those who have

children, higher among those who attend formal education and among those who are active in the labor market. It is also found that Chile's level of cohabitation probability is lower than in Argentina, and that Argentina and Uruguay present similar levels, all other variables considered in the regressions being equal.

Convergence among groups can be examined by comparing the last two columns. This assessment can be made, on the one hand, by the significance of the correlation and, on the other hand, by the difference in the absolute value of the marginal effects in cases where the parameters are significant in both years. It can then be seen that despite the increase of 14.6 percentage points in the probability of cohabitation, the effect of education on this probability was reduced by half. On the other hand, the significance of income, presence of children, and school/university attendance disappeared. Only age, sex, and being in the labor force remained, and in some cases increased the correlation. These results suggest a generalized convergence of cohabitation levels across social groups. In this context, labor market position seems to indicate that some specialization persists between spouses in legal marriages. Age differences may be reflecting other effects that are analyzed in the next section.

Perceptions and Values

The birth cohorts defined as explained in Section IV differ from each other in the way they perceive and value society, its institutions and social relations. This is a simple way to assess social change with available data (in this case the person's year of birth) cross-sectional, as used in this chapter. [Table 11.A2](#) in the Appendix allows us to see the relationship between birth cohort and the probability of cohabitation, all other variables being equal. Otherwise, this table is similar to the previous one, except for two variations in addition to the incorporation of the cohorts: first, in all cases, the pool of observations is being taken, years 2010 and 2021, and, second, adult individuals of all ages are incorporated: 15 and older. For this last reason, the sample sizes differ from the previous cases. This was done simply to include in the sample individuals who represent the generations or cohorts included in the estimates.

Membership in all cohorts (and for all cases analyzed: total sample of the Southern Cone and each country separately) is significantly correlated with the probability of cohabitation and the result is robust (significance and signs are maintained in the set of estimates). The hypothesis that establishes a higher probability of cohabitation for more recent cohorts, all else constant, cannot be discarded [The "all else constant" should be considered with caution given that the "all" in the sentence refers to the rest of the variables included in the regression, not all the factors in a broad sense]. The rest of the variables retain their significance and the signs already commented for [Table 11.A1](#) (Appendix), however, the variables that capture the age-cohort relationship reduce their effect in absolute value, thus showing that when the birth cohorts are not incorporated, they are the ones that capture what could be called the "cohort effect" or "perceptions effect."

The introduction of cohorts into the regressions is supported as long as it is accepted that the members of each cohort think differently from the members

of other cohorts. The cohort ignores on which topics or dimensions these divergences are apparent. An alternative way to capture these dimensions and their relationship to the probability of cohabitation is to incorporate specific indicators of perceptions on certain dimensions. Given that it is not possible to cover all possible sources of divergence, the variables of generations or birth cohorts will be left out, so as not to lose everything that is not incorporated in the dimensions included. Thus, the conception of income distribution and economic inequality, gender roles, religiosity, the importance of autonomy and self-determination are taken into account. It is expected that more recent generations have less traditional values than older generations on these issues and that these conceptions are correlated with couples' decisions to cohabit or marry. The results of this exercise can be seen in [Table 11.A3](#) in the Appendix. The first two columns of this table are useful to differentiate the value of the estimated parameters with (column 1) and without (column 2) variables representative of the values in force in the Southern Cone. The remaining columns show the differences in these parameters between men (column 3) and women (column 4), since there is reason to believe that the variables correlate differently in each of these groups.

What is important in these regressions goes beyond the correlation of each perception variable with the probability of cohabitation. The inclusion of perceptions and values causes changes in the estimated parameters for other variables. It is notable, for example, the reduction in the effect of age on the probability of cohabitation. The differences between genders are also marked. But before presenting these differences, it is interesting to see that the gender variable, as a dichotomous variable included in the regressions that do not differentiate by gender, is not significantly different from zero. Openness by gender causes changes in the estimated parameters. For example, women who express preferences for more competitive and unequal societies are less likely to cohabit. These preferences do not affect men's probability of cohabitation. Variables reflecting preferences for less traditional ways of life are significant only for women, and for some men at rather extreme levels of the gradients. For example, the degree of religiosity becomes significant and positive in the probability of cohabitation for men only in the gradient that shows that it is "not important at all," while in the case of women, all gradients are significantly correlated with the probability of cohabitation. In other words, women's likelihood of cohabitation increases as their degree of attachment to religion decreases.

A remarkable aspect is the reduction in the value of the parameters of birth generations for women compared to men. This result suggests that women's ways of thinking about society and the world are better reflected in the variables representing gender roles, valuation of inequality, degree of autonomy and religiosity. The same is not true for men. Marked differences related to gender were also found. Although no specific contributions related to this topic were located in the literature, there are papers that highlight that in countries with greater gender egalitarianism (such as Argentina and Uruguay in the Southern Cone), women's economic advantages are associated with higher propensities to marry and cohabit, as well as to have children ([Goldscheider & Sassler, 2018](#); [Eliminar Lappegård et al., 2018](#); [Qian & Sayer, 2016](#)). The literature also argues that gender norms clearly

shape the association between women's educational attainment and marriage. In countries where gender relations are more traditional (the Chilean case, for example), more educated women are less likely to be married than less educated women. Conversely, in countries that are more egalitarian from a gender perspective, better educated women are more likely to be married (Kalmijn, 2013).

VI. DISCUSSION

The objectives of this chapter were to document the rise of cohabitation in the Southern Cone between 2010 and 2021, to analyze gaps between social groups and convergence in the levels of cohabitation among these groups defined both by their objective position in the social structure (educational level, income, etc.) and by perceptions. To do the latter, birth generations were identified. Indicators of current beliefs and values were also used.

It was noted that cohabitation increased, consolidating a trend that had already been documented in Binstock, Cabella, Salinas and López-Colás (2016). A reduction in cohabitation gaps between social groups was also observed, suggesting convergence, not only of country averages, but also between social groups within each country. This convergence of levels of free unions is framed within the particularity of the transition of nuptiality in Latin America and the Caribbean (Quilodrán, 2008). There is a pattern of coexistence of at least two models of family formation: a traditional one, generalized in sectors with lower human capital (education) and income, and a less traditional one, located in sectors with greater social and economic disadvantages. It was observed that in both cases the prevalence of cohabitation increased, in line with the findings for Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole (Esteve, Lesthaeghe & López-Gay, 2012). The loss of the degree of correlation and statistical significance between cohabitation and income strata between 2011 and 2021 suggests that the separation is a distinct advance of the “modern model” of cohabitation mentioned by Quilodrán (2008). This is a visible sign of progress toward the STD in the Southern Cone: increased education as a factor that opens the way to new options such as marrying later, getting better jobs and questioning institutions such as the Church and the family. In this last context, marriage loses strength as the privileged structuring axis of social relations within and outside the family.

To follow the course of cohabitation throughout the life cycle of individuals, age profiles were used. The results obtained support the hypothesis of cohabitation as a springboard to marriage, but at the same time, they reveal a generalized increase in prevalence, which was documented for countries very different from those of the Southern Cone within the region (Santos-Mercedes & Aponte-Cueto, 2022). According to the age profiles, prevalence declines with age, which suggests that people marry at some point in their life cycle. The shift of the curve documented in Chart 11.2 shows how the distribution corresponding to more recent periods stochastically dominates that of preceding periods and how the slope declines steeply and monotonically as people's age increases.

This change in the position of the distribution could reflect two facts: (a) a postponement of the time of entry into legal marriage; or (b) the deferential

behavior of cohorts or generations, which include a given set of ages. Charts 11.3a and 11.3b suggest that the hypothesis that best fits the facts is the latter. The age profiles are shown there, and this information is combined with the experience of each cohort in the age groups that could be located in each database: the countries' household surveys (Chart 11.3a) and the World Values Survey (Chart 11.3b). Although the information is the same, the presentation of both graphs is justified to validate the robustness of the results.

This was also evident in the regressions. It could be observed that the marginal effect of the variables representing the age groups was significantly reduced in absolute value when introducing the generations of births among the variables contemplated on the right side of the regression equation. Although between Gen X and Millennials there is a certain decline in the curve (Graphs 3a and 3b), it does not have the slope revealed by the descriptive statistics. It is possible to think that rather than a process of transition to marriage, cohabitation is emerging in the Southern Cone as an alternative way of living as a couple, forming a family and having children. In the generations prior to Gen X, the relationship between age and cohabitation is practically nil, although it is clear that in this case the data limitation plays a role, because only rather advanced age segments can be captured.

This interpretation is compatible with a curious stylized fact: there is no ostensible increase, at least during the long period up to the latest available data, in the age of entry into marriage, except in Chile (Chart 11.4).

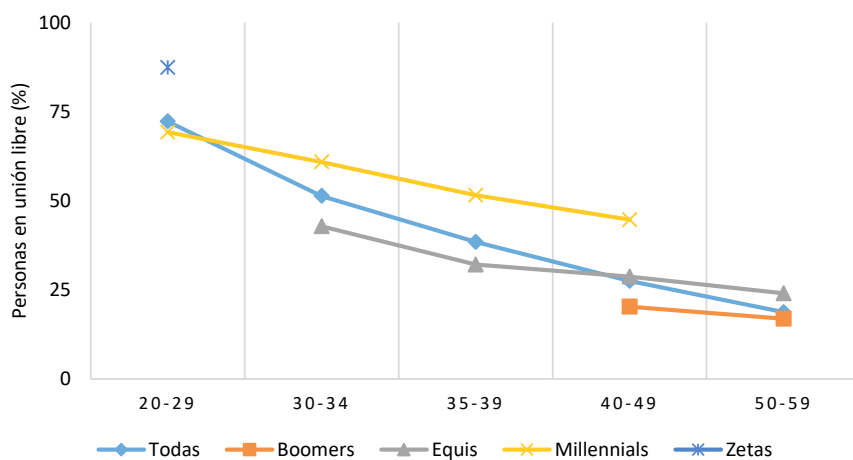


Chart 11.3a. Prevalence by Age Groups and Birth Cohorts. Southern Cone Countries. *Source:* Own elaboration with data from World Values Survey: All Rounds – Country-Pooled Datafile Version: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

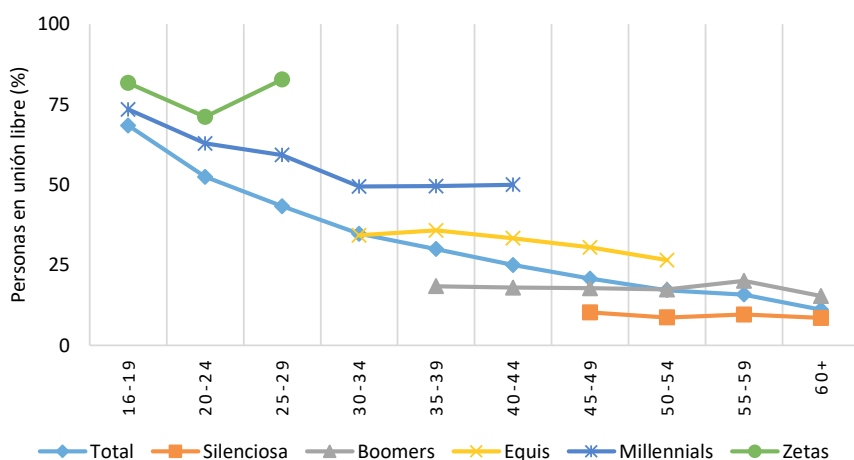


Chart 11.3b. Prevalence by Age Group and Birth Cohort. Southern Cone Countries. *Source:* Own elaboration with WVS data.

It can be argued that this postponement of the age of entry into marriage could explain part of the increase in cohabitation, but not all of it.

Certainly, designs that use survey data as in this chapter have strong limitations to advance the testing of hypotheses. But the inquiry about ideas about free union and marriage can be deepened by appealing to alternative indicators as [Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín \(2008, 2013\)](#) do for Spain and Portugal, for the latter year using data from more specific surveys. Particularly, [Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín \(2013\)](#) introduce the analysis by 10-year cohorts and find significant effects on the probability of cohabitation. The data with which these authors work allow them to identify previous unions of first unions.

This chapter used data from the WVS and found that people's ideas about gender roles, income equality, religion, and autonomy are strongly correlated with the probability of cohabitation. The effect is particularly marked for women, although at extreme values it is also seen for men. These variables are also correlated with generations. For example, the number of people who answered that religion has little or no importance in their lives in the Southern Cone was 20.8% of the members of the Silent Generation, versus 61.8% among members of Gen Z. The increase is gradual between generations: 29.9%, 41.4%, and 54.7% for Boomers, Gen X and Millennials, respectively. The importance of autonomy also follows an analogous behavior: 29% for the Silent Generation, 41% for Gen Z. This does not imply denying all the benefits that marriage still offers compared to free union and that continue to operate in an important group of the population. These benefits are mentioned by certain authors to predict that the transition to

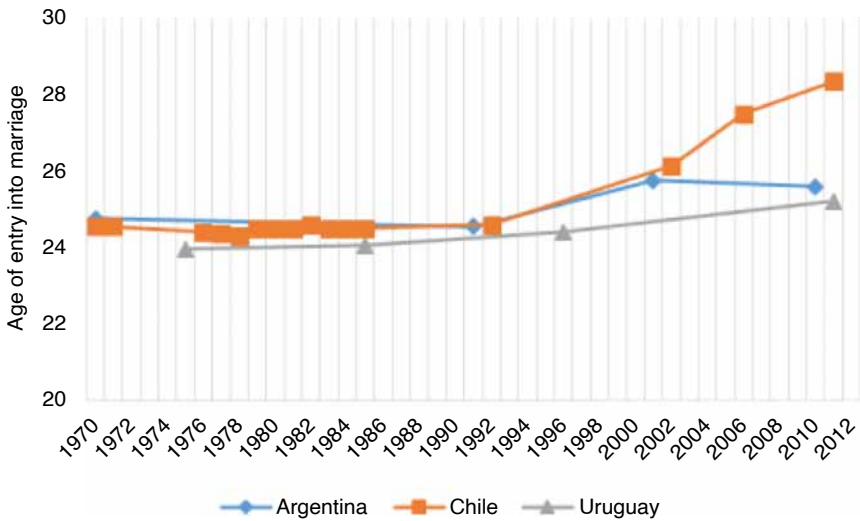


Chart 11.4. Age at Entry into Marriage in Southern Cone Countries. *Source:* Own elaboration with data from United Nations (WMD, 2019).

free union will be slow and with periods of stagnation (Manning, 2020). Many couples in the Southern Cone continue to opt for marriage (hence the slope in the age profiles), but there is a group that seems to prolong without declining with age. This is particularly noticeable among Millennials in the US. Compared to their generational neighbors, with Gen X, Knittel and Murphy (2019) found that Millennials are less likely to marry at age 35.

More detailed studies seem to confirm these findings and extend them to phenomena linked to cohabitation and marriage. Following a period of change from a long history of patriarchal families and arranged marriages to an environment in which people are relatively free to choose their intimate partners, Blair, Madigan and Fang (2022) show how recent changes in divorce, cohabitation, and marital sex have altered young people's perceptions of marriage. The nuptiality transition is probably reflecting behavioral patterns at work in other, more complex social processes. It seems likely that the process leading toward greater importance of individual over collective decisions, a transition from pre, to post-materialism, is reflected in the coexistence of traditional with more modern forms of nuptiality. In Blair and Madigan (2019) and Blair et al. (2022), it is noted that while parental mate selection for their children has been superseded, mate selection choices are not entirely made by the individuals themselves. There would be a stage in which materialistic values prior to the STD process continue to operate and prevail, although they tend to fade over time.

The results are compatible with the modification of the normative sequence of "marriage, then sexuality, then offspring" (Quilodrán, 2008). In this sequence, marriage used to play a leading role. The data show that couples are waiting longer than before to get married and that fewer and fewer are making

the transition to marriage. This change could be one of the consequences of the transformation of relationships within the family, which are becoming less hierarchical (changes in ideas and in the norms regarding premarital sexuality, which are more flexible, and regarding reproduction outside marriage). In this sense, it could be seen that of those socio-demographic and economic factors that favor cohabitation over marriage, the results of the analysis conducted here suggest that education and income play an important differentiating role, but this is diminishing and disappearing in some cases. The diminishing effect of education can be interpreted as an indicator of the diffusion of cohabitation in all social strata, although the statistical significance shows that it is still selective among people with certain characteristics: employed and with profiles that could be called "progressive."

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cohabitation increased considerably in the Southern Cone, an expansion that, starting from a historically high level like the rest of Latin America, began in the late 1980s and mid-1990s and consolidated during the second decade of this century. There is no reason to think that this evolutionary pattern will stop immediately afterwards. It can also be affirmed that there was the convergence of cohabitation levels, and that this occurred not only between countries, but also between social groups within countries. In this case, the observed trend is more than disturbing: this convergence was slow, not because cohabitation increased slowly in the economically and socially more advantaged sectors of society (the group furthest behind in the transition of nuptiality), but because in the less advantaged sectors it also increased very rapidly.

Is this new impetus toward greater cohabitation a conjunctural one, dependent on the economic cycle and the well-known macroeconomic instability of countries, or is it rather a manifestation of a new way of thinking and conceiving society? It becomes important then to refer to the discussion that places cohabitation as a transitory state with a view to traditional marriage, or is it feasible to consider marriage as a new way of forming couples, living as a family and raising children. Of course, marriage still presents many advantages to couples from a legal perspective, but despite this, why does cohabitation increase?

First, the monotonicity of change over time makes it possible to rule out any correlation with the economic cycle. Furthermore, although economic crises tend to be synchronous in the region, the amplitude of the cycles differs considerably between countries, so that, if they had any impact on the patterns of marriage and cohabitation, they could have manifested themselves with some particularity in each of them, which is not what happened: the characteristics of the change were very similar between them. This important aspect could also be further investigated, because in this work we only offer speculations from the observation of the data without it having been the most interesting topic.

In favor of the idea of cohabitation as a springboard to marriage are the cohabitation profiles by age, which are clearly decreasing, with the modal age

shifting progressively to the right (older ages). In this chapter, we went further and introduced the analysis of the birth generations, first, and variables representative of different ways of seeing and thinking about the world. Consideration of these variables makes the age profiles more relative and much less pronounced than what is seen by omitting them. This is a sign, a clue, that allows us to doubt the springboard hypothesis and leads us to think of cohabitation as a form that is relentlessly imposed. Traditional values are still strong and deeply rooted and this makes institutions such as marriage remain predominant in the region. But this chapter showed that these values and beliefs are becoming less entrenched, and new values are pro-cohabitation. In this case, cross-sectional data are only imperfect surrogates for panel data. Panel data would be needed to test hypotheses related to delayed age of entry into marriage and birth of the first child in order to advance this hypothesis.

A generalized convergence of cohabitation levels between social groups was observed, although the gaps have not been closed, and significant differences between groups persist. In this context, the evidence suggests that some specialization persists between spouses in legal marriages. Using data on people's perceptions of various aspects, it was concluded that there is some kind of relationship between these perceptions and the decisions people make about how to live together. It was also observed that these perceptions reveal themselves in important dimensions of life, such as the position individuals take on economic inequality, the importance of religion, gender roles, and the degree of autonomy of decisions. But perhaps the most important element of these values and perceptions is their effect on the other variables that are correlated with cohabitation, such as age, education, and income. Given that there seems to be a certain convergence of ideas and perceptions, these could be leading to changes in the relationship that the more structural variables have on cohabitation.

The results presented and discussed in this chapter can be interpreted as an answer to the question that [Quilodrán \(2008\)](#) asked more than a decade ago. She said that too little time had elapsed since increases in cohabitation began to spread to know whether longer bachelorhood would result in less intense nuptiality, or whether the traditional free union would be replaced by a modern one whose fundamental difference lies in the characteristics of its members: more educated spouses and more empowered women. Everything found here seems to be in line with the latter statement, although the precarious conditions of the population in economic terms mean that the prevalence of traditional cohabitation is still very high.

The main limitations of this chapter stem from data availability and data adequacy, as it is often the case in this type of study. The information available on a large scale comes from household surveys, the purpose of which is not to collect data on marital union patterns. These patterns emerge from one or two questions in the questionnaires. In this sense, and given the importance of the topic for the life of societies, it would be very important to have at least a battery of questions in household surveys that would allow for more detailed information on phenomena related to nuptiality.

NOTE

1. Cohabitation is also known as free union, informal union, among others.

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APPENDIX

Table 11.A1. Factors Related to the Probability of Cohabitation, Southern Cone (Marginal Effects).

Variable/Categories	All the Sample	Year 2010	Year 2021
Year 2021	0.187*** (0.007)		
Education	-0.012*** (0.001)	-0.015*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.002)
Age groups			
30–34	-0.126*** (0.011)	-0.146*** (0.008)	-0.090*** (0.023)
35–39	-0.254*** (0.009)	-0.237*** (0.006)	-0.259*** (0.020)
40–49	-0.381*** (0.008)	-0.347*** (0.006)	-0.400*** (0.016)
50–59	-0.473*** (0.006)	-0.396*** (0.005)	-0.533*** (0.012)
Men	0.065*** (0.008)	0.050*** (0.007)	0.080*** (0.014)
Income quintile			
I	-0.033*** (0.012)	-0.041*** (0.009)	-0.027 (0.021)
III	-0.030** (0.012)	-0.065*** (0.009)	0.007 (0.021)
IV	-0.074*** (0.012)	-0.082*** (0.009)	-0.065*** (0.021)
V	-0.052*** (0.013)	-0.077*** (0.010)	-0.029 (0.022)
Children (Yes)	-0.037*** (0.010)	-0.057*** (0.008)	-0.010 (0.018)
Attend education	0.019** (0.010)	0.020** (0.008)	0.016 (0.017)
PEA	0.073*** (0.015)	0.077*** (0.018)	0.080*** (0.028)
Country			
Chile	-0.050*** (0.006)	-0.051*** (0.005)	-0.057*** (0.012)
Uruguay	0.003 (0.009)	0.000 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.028)
Pseudo- R^2	0.152	0.134	0.148
Average	0.404	0.329	0.475
Cases	237,876	161,842	76,034

Source: Own elaboration with data from the HEEH of the three countries.

Notes: *** 1%, ** 5%, *10%. Control groups: (a) Age: 20–29; (b) Sex: women; (c) Income quintile: I; (d) No children; (e) School attendance: No; (f) In the labor market: No; (g) Country: Argentina.

Table 11.A2. Factors Related to the Likelihood of Cohabitation, Southern Cone (Marginal Effects).

Variable/Categories	Southern Cone	Argentina	Chile	Uruguay
Generation				
Boomers	0.176*** (0.016)	0.202*** (0.024)	0.111*** (0.008)	0.138*** (0.012)
Equis	0.387*** (0.017)	0.428*** (0.024)	0.279*** (0.011)	0.360*** (0.014)
Millennials	0.654*** (0.013)	0.679*** (0.018)	0.579*** (0.009)	0.624*** (0.010)
Zetas	0.706*** (0.006)	0.709*** (0.008)	0.710*** (0.004)	0.662*** (0.005)
Education	-0.009*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.001)
Age groups				
30-34	0.062*** (0.012)	0.075*** (0.016)	0.022** (0.010)	0.085*** (0.013)
35-39	-0.065*** (0.011)	-0.054*** (0.016)	-0.091*** (0.007)	-0.051*** (0.012)
40-49	-0.030*** (0.009)	-0.027** (0.013)	-0.045*** (0.007)	0.012 (0.010)
50-59	-0.050*** (0.009)	-0.053*** (0.013)	-0.045*** (0.006)	-0.043*** (0.010)
Men	0.054*** (0.007)	0.074*** (0.009)	0.002 (0.005)	0.027*** (0.006)
Income quintile				
II	-0.039*** (0.010)	-0.041*** (0.014)	-0.029*** (0.007)	-0.064*** (0.010)
III	-0.048*** (0.010)	-0.046*** (0.014)	-0.041*** (0.006)	-0.114*** (0.010)
IV	-0.076*** (0.009)	-0.086*** (0.014)	-0.040*** (0.006)	-0.135*** (0.010)
V	-0.057*** (0.010)	-0.050*** (0.015)	-0.065*** (0.006)	-0.137*** (0.011)
Children	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.007 (0.011)	-0.015** (0.007)	-0.051*** (0.008)
Attend education	0.046*** (0.008)	0.027** (0.011)	0.086*** (0.005)	0.092*** (0.008)
PEA	0.059*** (0.013)	0.081*** (0.024)	0.042*** (0.013)	0.001 (0.016)
Year 2021	-0.012* (0.006)	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.004)	0.015 (0.015)
Country				
Chile	-0.020*** (0.005)			
Uruguay	0.012 (0.008)			
Pseudo-R ²	0.197	0.211	0.160	0.206
Average	0.326	0.332	0.296	0.379
Cases	329,624	88,197	172,802	68,625

Source: Own elaboration with data from the HEEH of the three countries.

Notes: *** 1%, ** 5%, *10%. Control groups: (a) Age: 20-29; (b) Sex: women; (c) Income quintile: I; (d) No children; (e) School attendance: No; (f) In the labor market: No; (g) Country: Argentina; (h) Generation: Silent.

Table 11.A3. Factors Related to the Probability of Cohabitation, Southern Cone (Marginal Effects).

Variable/Categories	Complete Model	Partial Model	Men	Women
Men	0.004 (0.011)	0.015 (0.010)		
Inequality	-0.002 (0.002)		0.003 (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.002)
Gender Roles	0.004* (0.002)		0.008** (0.003)	-0.000 (0.003)
Autonomy degree				
Low	0.040* (0.021)		0.021 (0.032)	0.050* (0.029)
Medium	0.035* (0.020)		0.021 (0.031)	0.046* (0.027)
High	0.042* (0.022)		0.014 (0.032)	0.066** (0.030)
Very high	0.078*** (0.028)		0.076* (0.041)	0.074* (0.038)
Religion				
Important	-0.005 (0.012)		0.000 (0.019)	-0.010 (0.016)
Not much	0.036** (0.014)		0.022 (0.021)	0.047** (0.020)
Not important	0.093*** (0.020)		0.087*** (0.027)	0.099*** (0.030)
Generation				
Boomers	0.090*** (0.020)		0.100*** (0.027)	0.081*** (0.030)
Gen X	0.235*** (0.031)		0.267*** (0.045)	0.203*** (0.042)
Millennials	0.537*** (0.043)		0.585*** (0.061)	0.495*** (0.061)
Years de educación	-0.011*** (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.012*** (0.002)
Age groups				
30-39	-0.007 (0.015)	-0.091*** (0.011)	-0.000 (0.023)	-0.022 (0.020)
40-49	-0.037** (0.017)	-0.150*** (0.010)	-0.018 (0.028)	-0.055** (0.022)
50+	-0.063*** (0.022)	-0.260*** (0.011)	-0.031 (0.034)	-0.093*** (0.028)
Income quintile				
II	0.014 (0.013)	0.021 (0.013)	0.040** (0.021)	-0.006 (0.018)
III	-0.037*** (0.012)	-0.018 (0.013)	-0.040** (0.018)	-0.030* (0.017)
IV	-0.057*** (0.014)	-0.053*** (0.014)	-0.043** (0.020)	-0.066*** (0.018)
V	-0.096*** (0.016)	-0.122*** (0.013)	-0.094*** (0.023)	-0.096*** (0.022)

Table 11.A3. (Continued)

Variable/Categories	Complete Model	Partial Model	Men	Women
Children	-0.011*** (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.027*** (0.006)	0.005 (0.005)
Job	0.023** (0.011)	0.011 (0.011)	0.006 (0.017)	0.039*** (0.015)
Country				
Chile	-0.066*** (0.011)	-0.068*** (0.011)	-0.067*** (0.016)	-0.064*** (0.015)
Uruguay	-0.018 (0.013)	0.017 (0.013)	-0.016 (0.018)	-0.022 (0.017)
Average value	0.199	0.199	0.196	0.202
Pseudo_R ²	0.161	0.119	0.176	0.162
Cases	6,474	6,474	3,067	3,407

Source: Own elaboration with data from the *World Survey Values*.

Notes: *** 1%, ** 5%, *10%. Control groups: (a) Age: 20–29; (b) Sex: women; (c) Income quintile: I; (d) No children; (e) School attendance: No; (f) In the labor market: No; (g) Generation: Silent; (h) Country: Argentina; (i) Autonomy degree: total obedience; (j) Religion: Very important.