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**The meaning of marriage vis-à-vis childbearing in the United States and Europe**

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**Abstract**

Across the United States and Europe, increasing shares of births occur outside of marriage. Consequently, some have suggested that marriage is decoupling from the childbearing process and may be becoming an outmoded institution. However, it is likely that the presence of children is still linked to marriage. Moreover, across Europe and the United States, even when children are born to unmarried parents, a large proportion will experience marriage of their parents (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). This paper extends Holland's (2013) marriage typology, linking the timing of marriage, childbearing, and cohabitation. The meaning of marriage is organized around six ideal types: *Direct Family Forming*, *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming*, *Conception-Related Legitimizing*, *Birth-Related Legitimizing*, *Reinforcing* and *Capstone* marriage. Using data from the Harmonized Histories, covering 12 European countries and the United States, I demonstrate both continuity and change in the context of marriage in cross-national perspective.

Across the United States and Europe, births outside of marriage account for a growing share of total births, between 20-percent (e.g., Italy and Spain) to more than 50-percent of all births (e.g., Estonia, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the former GDR (East Germany)) (Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). As a consequence, some have suggested that marriage is decoupling from the childbearing process and may, in some contexts, be becoming an outmoded institution (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Kiernan 2001). However, it is likely that the presence of children is still linked to marriage. For instance, Holland (2013) demonstrated a close relationship between transitions to marriage and parenthood in Sweden, a country often identified as a context where cohabitation is indistinguishable from marriage (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004). More broadly, across Europe and the United States, even when children are born to unmarried parents, a large proportion will experience marriage of their parents (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012).

Holland (2013) argued that the temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage is informative as to the meaning of marriage and built a typology of first marriage structured around the relative timing of these two family-life transitions. Marriages occurring prior to a first conception were identified as *Family Forming* marriages. For those couple marrying prior to beginning their childbearing or in the absence of childbearing, marriage may be an expression of “permanency and... long-term commitment,” conferring both symbolic and legal status to the couple prior to (or in the absence of) childbearing (Holland 2013, p. 279). Marriages following a conception or within the 12 months after a birth were termed *Legitimizing* marriage. While marriage is not a prerequisite for a first conception or birth, it is still closely linked to the first birth, and may be motivated by the desire to transfer filial rights to both parents.

Marriages after a first-born child is one year old, but prior to subsequent births were termed *Reinforcing* marriage. While “the transition to parenthood may be an explicit expression

of seriousness and commitment” for a couple and “marriage is not necessary for childbearing, ... the introduction of a child into the union changes the couples’ circumstances in such a way that marriage becomes desirable” (Holland 2013, p. 281). Finally, marriages after the completion of childbearing were identified as *Capstone* marriages. The concept of a Capstone marriage was introduced by Cherlin (2004, p. 855), who argued that marriage’s place in the life course once came before other individual- and couple-level investments, such as coresidence, stable employment, and the building of savings, but now it often comes after these investments have been made. With respect to childbearing, Capstone marriage may be associated with achieving a desired family size: “now that the family is complete, the couple will marry” (Holland 2013, p. 281). Measuring childbearing (or family size) intentions retrospectively is challenging and the data are not typically available in standard survey or administrative data. Therefore, Holland proposed identifying Capstone marriages as those that occur after a second or higher-order birth, or once an “only child” is 5 years old, a duration established by preferences for birth spacing and subsequent childbearing risks in the Nordic countries (Andersson 2004).

When comparing women born between 1950 and 1977 in Sweden, Holland documented lower rates of marriage among younger cohorts, suggesting that marriage is increasingly delayed and even foregone. There was a marked decline in *Legitimizing* marriage as an important union type, and the rise of *Capstone* marriage across birth cohorts. Still, despite increasing diversity in the context of marriage across cohorts, marriages occurring prior to a first conception (*Family Forming* marriage) constituted the largest share of all marriages.

Holland’s first marriage typology offers a useful starting point for cross-national comparative studies of the meaning of marriage vis-à-vis childbearing. Building upon Holland (2013) and drawing upon the related findings of Perelli-Harris et al (2012), who demonstrated the increasing importance of cohabitation as a context for bearing and raising children across country

contexts, I broaden Holland's original four-part marriage typology to capture patterns of marriage behavior. While cohabitation is an almost universal prerequisite for marriage in Sweden (Andersson and Philipov 2002), this is not the case in other country contexts (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004) where marriage retains distinct legal and symbolic advantages over cohabitation, particularly with respect to the rights and responsibilities afforded to parents (Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). Moreover, distinguishing direct marriage from marriage occurring after a period of coresidence may help us to understand the changing nature of marriage within and across societies. As such, in this extended typology I distinguish *Direct Family Forming* marriage, whereby a couple does not co-reside prior to marriage, and *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming* marriage, where marriage is preceded by a period of cohabitation.

Additionally, to capture different types of *Legitimizing* marriages, I distinguish *Conception-Related* marriage (sometimes termed "shotgun marriage"), where marriage occurs after first conception but before a first birth, and *Birth-Related Legitimizing* marriage, where marriage occurs after a first birth but before that child's first birthday. Distinguishing these two types of Legitimizing marriage was less relevant in the Swedish context because filial rights are transmitted to parents regardless of their marital status (Bøe 2010; Perelli-Harris and Gassen 2012). However, this is not the case in all countries and by distinguishing these two types of *Legitimizing* unions, we are able to more finely distinguish the changing nature of marriages taking place very close to a first birth, within contexts where norms regarding childbearing within marriage may be changing.

### ***Data and Method***

Data for these analyses come from the Harmonized Histories, harmonized marriage, birth and cohabitation histories for 12 European countries and the United States, developed by Perelli-

Harris and colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (Perelli-Harris, Kreyenfeld and Kubisch 2010). The primary sources of data for the Harmonized Histories are the Generations and Gender Surveys of Belgium (2008-10), Estonia (2004-055), France (2005), Georgia (2006), Germany (2005), Hungary (2004-05), Lithuania (2006), Norway (2007-08), and Romania (2005). These data are supplemented with data from: the Dutch Fertility and Family Survey (2003); the British Household Panel Survey (2005-06); the Spanish Survey of Fertility and Values (2006); and the United States 1995 and 2007 National Survey of Family Growth. Data for several other countries were available but were excluded because the surveys only covered younger cohorts (Austria, Poland), lacked key information about respondents' age (Italy) or lacked sampling weights (Bulgaria, Russia).

[Table 1 about here]

I limit the analysis to women born between 1950 and 1977, who were never married and childless at age 18 ( $n = 52,294$ ). Approximately 1% of respondents did not report the date of their marriage or first birth; these individuals were excluded from the analysis. In order to categorize marriages relative to the timing of childbearing, I combined union and birth histories to assign births to the respondent's union(s) or periods of living alone. Children born between the start and end of a union were assigned to that union. Children born within 9 months of a union's end were assigned to that union. Children not assigned to a prior union, but born within 12 months of the start of a new union were assigned to that new union, becoming that couple's first shared birth. Non-union births were defined as those occurring more than 9 months after a union and more than 12 months prior to a subsequent union.

I identified all first marriages from age 18 until the survey date. In order to identify the categories of marriage discussed above, I utilized information about co-residence with their

partner prior to the marriage, parity, and age of the woman's firstborn child (Figure 1). First marriages occurring when the woman had no children and had not yet conceived a child (at least 8 months prior to a birth) were identified as *Family Forming* marriages. I further distinguished (a) *Direct Family Forming* marriages as those where the marriage start date and co-residential union start date were the same or where the marriage start date was earlier than the co-residential union start date. If the co-residential union start date predated the marriage start date, those marriages were classified as (b) *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming*. Marriages occurring after a conception (7 or fewer months prior to a birth) but prior to a birth were classified as (c) *Conception-Driven Legitimizing* marriage. Marriages occurring when a woman's first child was 12 months old or younger were classified as (d) *Birth-Driven Legitimizing* marriage. Marriages occurring to women with one child aged 13 to 60 months were classified as (e) *Reinforcing* marriages. Finally, marriages occurring to women with one child over the age of 60 months (an "only child") or with two or more children were classified as (f) *Capstone* marriages.

[Figure 1 about here]

Following Holland (2013), I also distinguished marriages occurring after a first childbearing partnership had dissolved or after a non-union birth (as defined above) in a separate *Step* marriage category. Because the typology relies on parity progression, marriages occurring after a multiple (twin, triplet, etc.) first birth are also separately categorized. These two types of marriage are pooled as "other" marriages in all tables.

I tabulated the incidence and type of first marriage (regardless of whether the marriage was still intact) at each age for all women from age 18 until the survey date. In order to make comparisons across cohorts and countries (given that the surveys took place in different years), I

compare women's experiences of first marriage at age 20, 30, and 40. I have full information on the experience of first marriage from age 18 to 40 for women of the 1950 to 1957 cohorts, from age 18 to age 30 for women of the 1958 to 1967 cohorts, and from age 18 to 20 for women of the 1968 to 1977 birth cohorts.

Because the sampling frame of the United States National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) covered women aged 18 to 44, the analysis of these data was somewhat different than the other country cases. The oldest cohort of women in the United States was drawn from the NSFG 1995, and had to be restricted to those born between 1950 and 1954 in order to compare the same women at age 20 and 30 to women aged 40. For the middle cohorts, born 1958 to 1967, data from the NSFG 1995 and 2007 were pooled. For the youngest cohorts, born 1968 to 1977, data were drawn from the NSFG 2007 only. As a consequence, the United States country sample is not as balanced across cohorts as in the other countries (Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

In the first set of tabulation (Table 3) I present the proportion of women ever having entered a first marriage at age 20, 30 and 40, by cohort and country. These tabulations will reveal changes in the propensity to marry and the timing of marriage, within and across countries. I then tabulate the type of first marriage, based on the typology presented above, at age 20, 30 and 40, by cohort and country for those ever experiencing a first marriage (Table 4). I note that this is a change in the denominator from all women (Table 3) to all first marriages (Table 4). All tabulations are weighted using probability sampling weights.



## **Results**

### *Ever Marrying, by Age, Cohort and Country*

Table 3 provides results about the experience of a first marriage for women born between 1950 and 1977. First I consider the first marriage experiences of women of the earliest birth cohorts (1950 to 1957). By age 20, 12% (Spain) to 34.1% (Hungary) of all women had ever experienced a first marriage. There are no clear regional patterns of variation in the share of women experiencing a first marriage in these birth cohorts. In Western Europe, proportions ever experiencing first marriage range from 15.6% in the Netherlands to 20.5% in Germany. In Southern Europe, 12% of women in Spain had ever married by age 20. In Central Europe, 34.1% of Hungarian women had ever married. Shares of women ever marrying in Eastern Europe are not much different than in other regions of Europe, ranging from 15.1% in Lithuania to 26.3% in Romania. Finally, about 1-in-4 women in the two Anglo-Saxon countries had ever married by age 20, a slightly larger share in the United States than in the United Kingdom.

By age 30, the vast majority of women in the 1950 to 1957 birth cohorts across all countries had experienced a first marriage. The smallest shares, approximately 3-in-4 women, were observed in France, Germany, Norway, Georgia and Lithuania. The largest shares, approximately 9-in-10 women, were observed in Hungary and Romania. By age 40, the shares of women ever experiencing a first marriage rise further to more-than-8- to 9-in-10 women in all countries. Although not shown, tabulations of the share of women born 1950 to 57 ever-married by age 45 in the countries for which data were available revealed that few first marriages occur after the age of 40, suggesting that estimates of ever-married women at age 40 give a reasonable approximation of total lifetime ever-married shares for women of these birth cohorts.

Regional variation in marriage patterns become evident when examining the shares of women ever-married at age 20 among women of the 1958 to 1967 birth cohorts. There is

evidence of differentiation between women living in Western Europe, the Anglo-Saxon countries and Spain, where we see the smallest shares of women ever experiencing a first marriage by age 20, ranging from 6.8% in the Netherlands to 15.4% in the United States. Excepting Lithuania, where shares of women experiencing a first marriage by age 20 were not dramatically different from that observed in the United States (16.5%), larger shares of women had experienced a first marriage in Central and Eastern Europe, ranging from 22.8% in Estonia to 31.5% in Hungary. This regional differentiation is also evident when considering cohort change in the share of women experiencing a first marriage by age 20. There was a uniform decline in marriage in Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries when comparing shares among the earliest (1950 to 1957) and middle (1958 to 1967) birth cohorts: the share of women ever-married by age 20 in these countries declined by nearly half in all countries. While it is not possible to differentiate tempo and quantum shifts in marriage based on these cohort comparisons alone, delayed family formation is likely a major contributor to the decline in the share ever-married at age 20 in these countries. Shares of ever-married women declined only slightly in Hungary, while they remained stable across cohorts in Spain. In Eastern Europe, however, there is evidence of increasing shares of ever-married women, suggesting that the pattern of “early marriage” became more pronounced across birth cohorts.

At age 30, the lowest shares of women born between 1957 and 1968 experiencing a first marriage were observed in Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries: approximately 2 in 3 women in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United States have experienced a first marriage by age 30; shares were slightly higher in the UK (71.3%) and Belgium (74.8%). In Georgia and Spain, shares of women ever marrying were in the middle of the range (approximately 76%). About 80% or more of women in the other Eastern European countries and Central European Hungary had ever been married by age 30. Turning to cross-cohort

change, the early marriage pattern observed in Eastern Europe did not result in larger shares of marriage at age 30. Here, as in all other regions, women of the middle cohort were less likely to have entered a first marriage as compared to women born between 1950 and 1957, except in Lithuania, where there was a slight increase in marriage, and in Georgia, where the decline in the share of ever-married women was only marginal. The largest declines in the share ever-married were observed in the United States and the Netherlands (approximately a 20-percentage-point decline), but substantial double-digit declines were also observed in France, Norway and the UK. Of course, it is not possible to know if these declining shares of ever-married women indicated marriage delayed or marriage foregone without following these women further into their family forming years.

Because of the different survey dates across countries, we can only produce comparable cross-country estimates of ever-married status for women born between 1968 and 1977 at their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. Similar to the findings for women of the middle birth cohorts, the smallest shares of women experiencing a first marriage by age 20 were observed in Western Europe, the United Kingdom and Spain. In these countries, for these birth cohorts, early marriage was a marginal behavior. In the United States, about 12% of women born between 1968 and 1977 were had been married by age 20. In Hungary and Estonia, the share of ever-married women reached 17%. Finally, we observed the highest shares of ever-married women (over 20%) in Georgia, Lithuania and Romania.

When considering trends in first marriage across cohorts, we see a continuation of the decline in the shares of ever-married women at age 20 in Western Europe and the Anglo Saxon countries. With data on the most recent birth cohorts, this trend was also evident in Spain, Hungary, Estonia and Romania, although the magnitude of the decline was smaller in the Eastern

European countries. There was evidence of stability in the proportion of women ever entering a first marriage by age 20 in Georgia, while we observe a slight increase in the share in Lithuania.

### *Context of Marriage by Age, Cohort, and Country*

Table 4 presents the results for tabulations of the context of first marriage, as characterized by women's premarital cohabitation, parity, and age of the first-born child. Here percentages correspond to the proportion of all marriages, rather than all women (as in Table 3); the total share of women ever married at each age is included for reference. Results are presented separately by age, cohort, and country context, however, for ease of interpretation, my discussion of the results will be organized around four major trends in the changing context of marriage across cohorts and countries.

#### *1. Shifting nature of Family Forming marriage*

In all countries there was evidence of an expansion of *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming* marriage and a decline in *Direct Family Forming* marriage when comparing the oldest and middle cohorts at age 30. This finding is consistent with studies documenting the widespread emergence of cohabitation as a part of the family formation process across diverse country contexts (Hiekel, Liefbroer and Poortman 2012; Lesthaeghe 2010). The magnitude of the shift toward marriage prior to a first conception, but following a period of coresidence, varied across countries: in Western Europe, this shift is most dramatic; in Central and Eastern Europe, the shift is less pronounced.

Evidence for this trend was mixed at age 20, when comparing all three birth cohorts. In Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, the Anglo-Saxon countries, and in France, there was evidence of a unilateral decline in *Direct Family Forming* marriage and an increase in *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming* across all three cohorts. However, in Belgium, Germany, the

Netherlands and Norway, there was evidence of growth in *Direct Family Forming* marriage in the last cohorts (born between 1968 and 1977). This trend, paired with very small shares of women entering a first marriage by age 20 for this cohort, may indicate increasing selectivity into early marriage in these country contexts.

## 2. Growth in Conception-Related Legitimizing Marriage

In Central and Eastern Europe, there was evidence of the increasing importance of *Conception-Related Legitimizing* marriage, those occurring in the 7 months prior to a first birth. In Hungary, Estonia, Georgia, Lithuania and Romania, there was growth in this type of marriage, but no appreciable growth in marriage types occurring after a first or higher-order birth (*Birth-Related Legitimizing, Reinforcing* or *Capstone* marriage). In these countries, where marriage is increasingly tied to the moment of conception, the transfer of filial rights may be an increasingly important reason to formalize a union through marriage. This trend in these five countries stood in opposition to the trend in Western and Southern Europe, where *Conception-Related Legitimizing* marriage became a less important type of marriage when comparing cohorts at age 20 and 30.

## 3. Two Types of First Marriage? Family Forming & Post-First-Birth

In France, Germany, Norway and Spain, while there were notable cross-cohort differences in the shares of (combined *Direct* and *Post-Cohabitation*) *Family Forming* marriage at age 20, at age 30 there was almost no cross-cohort change in the shares of those entering *Family Forming* marriage vs. all other marriages. In both the earliest and middle cohorts, about 75% of first marriages were *Family Forming* in France and Spain, 70% in Germany, just under 60% in Norway. In all of these countries, there was a marked decline in *Conception-Related Legitimizing* marriage, while shares of post-birth marriages (*Birth-Related Legitimizing, Reinforcing* and *Capstone*) increased. Taken together, these two trends suggest that increasingly there may be two dominant

motivations for marriage in these countries: for some, marriage may represent the first symbolic or legal step in forming a family (*Family Forming* marriage), while for others, marriage is motivated the presence (not just the conception) of one or more shared children.

#### *4. The Declining Importance of Family Forming Marriage*

A notable trend evident in the two Anglo-Saxon countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, was the declining share of *Family Forming* marriages across cohorts at age 20 and 30. In these two countries, the shift away from *Direct-* to *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming* marriage is indeed evident, but the combined share of these two marriage types declined by 14.1% and 12.7% percentage points at age 20 across three cohorts, and by 6.4% and 8.3% at age 30 across two cohorts in the UK and the US, respectively. This trend in *Family Forming* marriage was paired with growth in all post-conception and post-birth marriage types. Taken together, this suggests that marriage in the United States and United Kingdom may be increasingly tied to the conception or birth of a child, rather than the first step in the family forming process.

## **Discussion**

This paper investigated the incidence, timing and context of marriage for women born between 1950 and 1977 across 12 European countries and the United States using retrospective marriage, union and childbearing histories from the Harmonized Histories. The analyses revealed changes in marriage behavior across cohorts, across the life course, and distinct variation across countries, suggesting that marriage is not a uniform family institution and its meaning may be changing in Europe and the United States.

The analyses revealed two distinct patterns of the incidence of marriage in early life. In Western and Southern Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon countries, ever marrying by age 20 has

declined steadily across cohorts. On the other hand, in Central and Eastern Europe, there has been stability or even growth in the share of women ever-married by age 20, suggesting an “early marriage” pattern (Hajnal 1982) has remained important for (some) women in these societies. Despite this, when comparing the earliest and the middle birth cohorts at age 30, there is evidence of a uniform pattern of lower entry into first marriage across all countries, excepting Georgia and Lithuania. The largest reductions in the share of women ever-married are observed in Western and Southern Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the contexts where the decline in entry into marriage was already most pronounced at age 20. Of course without being able to follow women in the middle and latest cohorts into later life it is impossible to determine whether marriage is delayed or foregone.

An additional notable finding with regard to the trends in women’s entry into first marriage, while some diversity in the share of women ever-married is evident in all cohorts, among women of the earliest cohorts (born between 1950 and 1957) we see the greatest cross-country uniformity in the share ever-married at each age. In later cohorts, cross-country variation becomes more pronounced. This finding suggests that, at least among women born in the middle of the last century, there may have been a more universal understanding of marriage’s place in the family life course. Changes in the timing of marriage for women of later cohorts are increasingly uneven across societies. Such differential diffusion is consistent with other processes of family change, such as with regard to fertility and cohabitation (e.g. Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Van Bavel 2004; Vitali, Aassve and Lappegård 2013).

Still, even in the earliest cohorts, there is clear evidence of cross-national diversity in the *context* of marriage. In order to explore this, I extended the typology of marriage first proposed by Holland (2013), linking the timing of marriage, the experience of premarital cohabitation, and the timing of childbearing. Tabulating the shares of marriages corresponding to the six marriage

types (*Direct Family Forming*, *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming*, *Conception-Related Legitimizing*, *Birth-Related Legitimizing*, *Reinforcing* and *Capstone* marriage) by age, cohort and country revealed four major trends in marriage behavior among women born between 1950 and 1977. First, when comparing the earliest and the middle birth cohorts at age 30, *Direct Family Forming* marriage declined in importance, while *Post-Cohabitation Family Forming* marriage increased. While there is clear diversity in the meaning of cohabitation (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Hiekel, Liefbroer and Poortman 2012; Kiernan 2001; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990), the increasing importance of cohabitation as part of the family formation process in Europe and the United States is irrefutable. It is clear from these estimates that cohabitation is an important stage in the marriage process for many women across country contexts. At the same time, *Direct Family Forming* marriage, marriage in the absence of premarital cohabitation, continues to constitute a non-trivial share of marriages in most countries, and is a particularly important form of marriage in contexts where early marriage is a marginal behavior (e.g. in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway at age 20).

A second key finding, in Central and Eastern Europe, *Conception-Related Legitimizing* marriage is an increasingly important marriage type. This result stood in contrast to patterns of decline in *Conception-Related Legitimizing* marriage in Western and Southern Europe. An intensification of the salience of conception for marriage suggests that the impetus for marriage may be increasingly tied to the transfer of filial rights to both parents in these contexts. A further investigation of the rights and responsibilities afforded married and unmarried parents in these countries might reveal distinctly different legal incentives for marriage in Eastern and Central Europe versus Western and Southern Europe (Perelli- Harris and Gassen 2012). It may also be that the symbolic value of marriage or strong norms against non-marital childbearing within these contexts makes marriage more desirable once a couple has conceived a their first child.



In Western and Southern Europe, stable shares of *Family Forming* marriage (albeit with shifts away from *Direct* toward *Post-Cohabitation*) paralleled with shifts away from *Conception-Related Legitimizing* marriage toward post-birth (*Birth-Related Legitimizing, Reinforcing, and Capstone*) marriage, suggest two distinct motivations for marriage may exist in these countries. For the majority, marriage continues to be the first step in the family formation process and a prerequisite for a first conception. However, for a growing share of women, marriage is tied the birth of a first or higher order child. Finally, a distinct Anglo-Saxon pattern of declining shares of *Family Forming* marriage was evident. Like in other country contexts, the shift from *Direct* to *Post-Cohabitation Family Formation* marriage was also evident in the United States and the United Kingdom; however, here the combined share of *Family Forming* marriages declined across cohorts at both age 20 and 30. In these two countries it seems that marriage is increasingly linked to a conception or birth, rather than the first stage in the family forming process, suggesting a reordering of life course events for some women. Taken together, these last three trends suggest that, although marriage may not always be the first step in the family building process, for many women in quite diverse country contexts, it continues to be very closely linked to the childbearing process.

The analyses presented here are descriptive, rather than explanatory. The cross-cohort changes in the incidence and context of marriage likely reflect social changes in the meaning of marriage, but also compositional population change, particularly with respect to educational attainment (Holland 2013; Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2012; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). For instance, Holland (2013) demonstrated an educational gradient in both the propensity to enter first marriage as well as in the context of first marriage in Sweden. The most highly educated were more likely to marry and those marriages were more likely to precede a conception (*Family Forming*). While they were less likely to marry, among the least educated greater diversity in

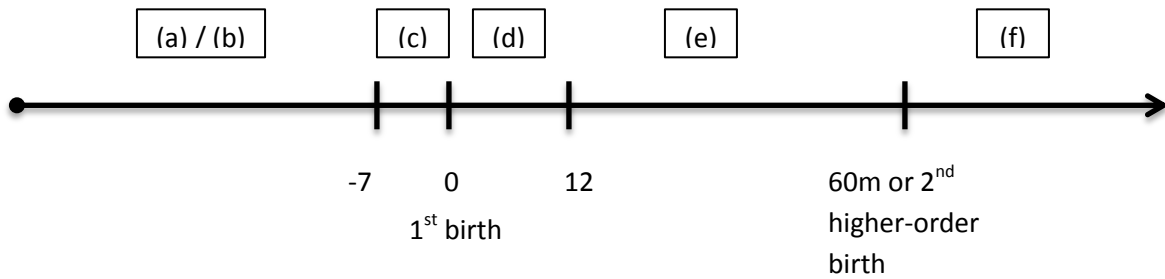
marital context was evident. It is likely that the experience, the timing, and the context of marriage may vary by other individual covariates, such as socioeconomic status, religiosity and values, immigrant background status, and family background, such as parental education and marital status. So too may different country-level characteristics, such as macroeconomic circumstances (e.g. the unemployment rate), gender egalitarianism, and (regional) diffusion of new family forms, may play a role in shaping individuals family life choices. Investigating how marital behavior maps on to individual-, regional- and country-level characteristics will further our understanding of the modern-day meaning of marriage and provide greater insight into the meaning of the trends highlighted here.

Still, the typology of marriage proposed by Holland (2013) and extended here offers a valuable starting place for cross-cohort and cross-national comparisons of marriage behavior. The results presented here provide insight into the changing nature of the institution of marriage across space and time. While these analyses demonstrate the usefulness of such a typology, they cannot vet the underlying meanings of marriage proposed in Holland (2013). While it is reasonable to postulate possible meanings of marriage based on the relative timing of two key family formation events (marriage and childbearing), the truth of these hypothesized meanings cannot be substantiated with life history information alone. Investigating whether the meanings proposed by Holland are indeed salient for couples is an important next step. Assessing the validity of the hypothesized meanings of marriage demands, at a minimum, longitudinal data on intentions. Better still would be detailed qualitative interviews with dating, cohabiting and recently married couples, to gain insight into how these couples perceive marriage's place in the family life course. These data could, for instance, help uncover the schemas people use to understand and make meaning with regard to marriage, as well as to shed light on intentionality and the decision-making processes that lead people to determine the timing and context of their

marriages (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011). Only by combining deeper qualitative investigations of meaning-making with population-level estimates of marriage behavior can we truly understand what couples are trying to achieve through marriage and how modern-day marriage may or may not be adapting to the changing family life course.

**Figure**

Figure 1. Stylized model of marriage types (Holland 2013)



**Tables**

Table 1. Harmonized Histories

Country	Data Source	Year of Survey
Western Europe		
Belgium	Gender and Generations Survey	2008-10
France	Gender and Generations Survey	2005
Germany	Gender and Generations Survey	2005
Netherlands	Fertility and Family Survey	2003
Norway	Gender and Generations Survey	2007-08
Southern Europe		
Spain	Survey of Fertility and Values	2006
Central Europe		
Hungary	Gender and Generations Survey	2004-05
Eastern Europe		
Estonia	Gender and Generations Survey	2004-05
Georgia	Gender and Generations Survey	2006
Lithuania	Gender and Generations Survey	2006
Romania	Gender and Generations Survey	2005
Anglo-Saxon		
United Kingdom	British Household Panel Survey	2005-06
United States	National Survey of Family Growth	1995, 2007

Source: Harmonized Histories, author's calculations.

Table 2. Birth cohorts, by Country (weighted %)

Country	Birth Cohort			N (unweighted)
	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	
Western Europe				
Belgium	26.3	40.7	33.0	1,924
France	27.9	37.0	35.1	2,464
Germany	26.7	41.6	31.6	2,612
Netherlands	27.2	38.5	34.3	2,252
Norway	26.7	36.1	37.2	2,808
Southern Europe				
Spain	21.4	38.0	40.7	2,682
Central Europe				
Hungary	31.9	30.1	38.0	2,833
Eastern Europe				
Estonia	30.5	35.7	33.9	3,441
Georgia	25.2	39.5	35.3	2,837
Lithuania	23.6	35.6	40.8	3,198
Romania	26.0	27.8	46.2	4,000
Anglo-Saxon				
United Kingdom	24.0	41.2	34.8	3,348
USA	14.3	53.0	32.7	7,122

Source: Harmonized Histories, author's calculations.

Notes: Percentages weighted; N unweighted. For the USA: information for the 1950-54 birth cohorts come from the NSFG 1995; information for 1958-67 birth cohorts come from the combined NSFG 1995 and 2007 data; and information for the 1968-77 birth cohorts come from the NSFG 2007.

<sup>a</sup>For the United States, the oldest cohort consists of those born 1950-54, due to age sampling restrictions of the NSFG (18-44).

Table 3. Experience of a first marriage by age, cohort and country (weighted)

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977
Western Europe									
Belgium	19.7	13.7	4.6	82.5	74.8		88.2		
France	16.9	10.5	2.5	76.5	62.6		83.9		
Germany	20.5	12.6	7.4	75.2	69.2		83.6		
Netherlands	15.6	6.8	2.8	83.3	65.3		89.7		
Norway	17.9	8.9	1.8	75.9	63.3		85.1		
Southern Europe									
Spain	12.0	12.4	5.8	84.1	76.2		88.9		
Central Europe									
Hungary	34.1	31.5	17.6	89.8	86.4		92.4		
Eastern Europe									
Estonia	17.7	22.8	17.1	85.9	79.5		90.7		
Georgia	20.9	23.3	23.5	76.4	75.7		84.8		
Lithuania	15.1	16.5	19.6	76.1	80.8		83.8		
Romania	26.3	28.6	24.3	89.6	87.4		93.4		
Anglo-Saxon									
United Kingdom	22.5	12.1	4.4	84.4	71.3		91.2		
USA	27.7	15.4	12.0	80.9	61.3		89.4		

Source: Harmonized Histories, author's calculations.

Notes: Percentages weighted; N unweighted.

<sup>a</sup>For the United States, the oldest cohort consists of those born 1950-54, due to age sampling restrictions of the NSFG (18-44).

Table 4. Context of first marriage among those experiencing a first marriage by age, cohort and country (weighted)

	20			30			40		
	Born	Born	Born	Born	Born	Born	Born	Born	Born
	1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	1958 - 1967	1968 - 1977	1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	1958 - 1967	1968 - 1977	1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	1958 - 1967	1968 - 1977
<b>Western Europe</b>									
<b>Belgium</b>									
Direct Family Forming	45.1	29.1	37.7	45.7	35.0		43.8		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	30.2	61.7	46.6	39.1	53.4		39.5		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	22.8	9.2	15.7	12.0	8.5		11.5		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	0.9	0.0	0.0	1.0	1.0		1.2		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.5		1.2		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.5		0.7		
Other	0.9	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.9		2.1		
% ever entered first marriage	19.7	13.7	4.6	82.5	74.8		88.2		
N (unweighted)	479	773	673	479	773		479		
<b>France</b>									
Direct Family Forming	53.8	49.6	45.0	48.4	29.9		45.9		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	12.6	24.4	41.6	26.9	46.1		28.5		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	31.3	22.5	3.5	17.5	13.4		16.4		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	2.3	1.9	9.9	2.0	2.8		2.3		
Reinforcing	0.0	1.6	0.0	2.6	3.4		3.0		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	2.3		2.1		
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	2.1		1.8		
% ever entered first marriage	16.9	10.5	2.5	76.5	62.6		83.9		
N (unweighted)	785	1045	1006	785	1045		785		

Table 4. *Continued*

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 – 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 – 1967	Born 1968 – 1977	Born 1950 – 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 – 1967	Born 1968 – 1977	Born 1950 – 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 – 1967	Born 1968 – 1977
<b>Germany</b>									
Direct Family Forming	34.7	31.7	37.3	32.7	23.6		30.3		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	28.5	28.3	29.9	37.8	46.4		37.4		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	29.1	34.8	26.0	19.0	18.1		18.3		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	7.3	5.2	6.7	5.6	5.3		6.0		
Reinforcing	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.4	3.4		0.7		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	1.4		2.1		
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	1.7		5.3		
% ever entered first marriage	20.5	12.6	7.4	75.2	69.2		83.6		
N (unweighted)	725	1236	871	725	1236		725		
<b>Netherlands</b>									
Direct Family Forming	73.2	66.9	82.4	71.1	45.4		67.6		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	5.0	14.7	6.5	19.1	43.1		20.4		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	20.4	18.4	6.3	8.5	8.0		8.8		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.3		0.8		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.6		0.5		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6		0.6		
Other	0.8	0.0	4.8	0.4	0.9		1.3		
% ever entered first marriage	15.6	6.8	2.8	83.3	65.3		89.7		
N (unweighted)	816	1090	903	816	1090		816		



Table 4. *Continued*

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977
Norway									
Direct Family Forming	24.3	30.2	56.0	27.8	18.9		26.4		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	18.6	27.5	25.5	29.5	40.6		30.2		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	47.8	30.5	12.5	30.2	16.9		27.7		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	6.9	11.8	6.0	5.6	9.4		5.6		
Reinforcing	1.7	0.0	0.0	3.1	6.9		3.4		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	5.2		1.9		
Other	0.6	0.0	0.0	2.8	2.1		4.8		
% ever entered first marriage	17.9	8.9	1.8	75.9	63.3		85.1		
N (unweighted)	1040	1449	1508	1040	1449		1040		

Table 4. *Continued*

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977
<b>Southern Europe</b>									
<b>Spain</b>									
Direct Family Forming	73.1	66.8	51.5	75.9	70.0		75.2		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	3.5	7.5	15.3	6.7	11.9		7.5		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	21.8	23.5	29.2	11.7	13.3		11.6		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	1.6	0.9	3.7	2.5	2.4		2.5		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.8	0.8		0.7		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4		0.1		
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.5	1.2		2.4		
% ever entered first marriage	12.0	12.4	5.8	84.1	76.2		88.9		
N (unweighted)	870	1516	1623	870	1516		870		
<b>Central Europe</b>									
<b>Hungary</b>									
Direct Family Forming	80.1	67.4	53.2	78.2	65.6		77.3		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	2.1	6.5	11.2	2.8	9.2		3.5		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	16.3	23.8	31.2	15.2	19.2		14.9		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	0.9	1.0	3.0	1.1	1.8		1.1		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.0		0.6		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.9	0.9		1.0		
Other	0.7	1.4	0.9	1.3	2.3		1.5		
% ever entered first marriage	34.1	31.5	17.6	89.8	86.4		92.4		
N (unweighted)	998	942	1260	998	942		998		

Table 4. *Continued*

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 – 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 – 1967	Born 1968 – 1977	Born 1950 – 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 – 1967	Born 1968 – 1977	Born 1950 – 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 – 1967	Born 1968 – 1977
Eastern Europe									
Estonia									
Direct Family Forming	47.6	40.0	31.6	43.8	33.3		42.3		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	17.7	16.4	21.4	16.5	17.8		16.6		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	32.3	37.9	43.0	28.7	33.5		28.2		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	0.8	2.1	2.7	4.4	5.1		4.9		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	2.6		1.6		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.2		2.2		
Other	1.6	3.6	1.4	3.7	6.5		4.1		
% ever entered first marriage	17.7	22.8	17.1	85.9	79.5		90.7		
N (unweighted)	735	856	871	735	856		735		
Georgia									
Direct Family Forming	50.7	49.2	35.3	47.7	48.0		47.9		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	20.0	24.4	26.3	20.7	22.0		20.9		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	15.3	18.9	21.9	14.7	18.6		14.2		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	12.0	5.6	16.1	11.1	8.4		10.5		
Reinforcing	0.7	1.3	0.4	1.8	1.2		2.0		
Capstone	0.7	0.0	0.0	2.4	1.0		2.8		
Other	0.6	0.5	0.0	1.6	0.8		1.8		
% ever entered first marriage	20.9	23.3	23.5	76.4	75.7		84.8		
N (unweighted)	724	1028	862	724	1028		724		

Table 4. *Continued*

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977
<b>Lithuania</b>									
Direct Family Forming	67.3	54.6	48.0	63.9	59.8		63.5		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	10.0	14.8	14.2	10.8	11.5		11.8		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	21.8	26.0	31.7	18.5	22.5		17.9		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	0.9	4.5	6.0	3.1	3.7		2.8		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	0.6		1.1		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.1		0.9		
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2	1.8		2.0		
% ever entered first marriage	15.1	16.5	19.6	76.1	80.8		83.8		
N (unweighted)	584	893	778	584	893		584		
<b>Romania</b>									
Direct Family Forming	77.8	68.6	69.6	75.5	72.4		74.8		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	8.0	12.3	15.5	9.5	10.3		9.9		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	10.2	13.3	12.2	7.1	10.4		6.9		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	3.9	5.1	2.6	3.8	4.6		3.7		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.8	0.0	1.3	1.3		1.3		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.3		1.5		
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.8		2.0		
% ever entered first marriage	26.3	28.6	24.3	89.6	87.4		93.4		
N (unweighted)	871	844	969	871	844		871		

Table 4. *Continued*

	20			30			40		
	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977	Born 1950 - 1957 <sup>a</sup>	Born 1958 - 1967	Born 1968 - 1977
Anglo-Saxon									
United Kingdom									
Direct Family Forming	74.5	62.7	37.3	74.7	47.2		71.4		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	5.4	11.5	28.5	13.5	34.6		15.7		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	17.1	20.7	19.1	8.9	10.0		9.3		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	3.0	4.9	10.7	0.9	2.8		0.8		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	4.4	0.6	1.9		0.6		
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	1.0		1.1		
Other	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.8	2.4		1.1		
% ever entered first marriage	22.5	12.1	4.4	84.4	71.3		91.2		
N (unweighted)	630	1073	1075	630	1073		630		
USA									
Direct Family Forming	71.4	58.6	51.6	68.1	52.1		65.9		
Post-Cohabitation Family Forming	8.9	14.8	15.9	17.2	24.9		18.8		
Conception-Related Legitimizing	15.5	18.6	18.6	8.2	10.6		7.5		
Birth-Related Legitimizing	3.7	7.0	10.4	2.1	2.8		2.1		
Reinforcing	0.0	0.6	2.9	1.7	2.9		1.7		
Capstone	0.1	0.1	0.0	1.1	3.2		1.7		
Other	0.5	0.4	0.5	1.6	3.4		2.3		
% ever entered first marriage	27.7	15.4	12.0	80.9	61.3		89.4		
N (unweighted)	1,417	4464	2012	1,417	4464		1,417		

Source: Harmonized Histories, author's calculations.

Notes: % weighted; N unweighted. "Other" category includes step marriage and marriage after a multiple first birth.

<sup>a</sup>For the United States, the oldest cohort consists of those born 1950-54, due to age sampling restrictions of the NSFG (18-44).

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