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Descriptive Finding

The timing of marriage vis-à-vis coresidence and childbearing in Europe and the United States

Jennifer A. Holland

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The timing of marriage vis-à-vis coresidence and childbearing in Europe and the United States

Jennifer A. Holland¹

Abstract

OBJECTIVE

These descriptive findings extend Holland's (2013) marriage typology by linking the timing of marriage, childbearing, and cohabitation, and apply it to a range of European countries and the United States. 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.

METHODS

I present descriptive tabulations of data from the Harmonized Histories, covering 17 European countries and the United States, to highlight continuity and change in the context of marriage across the life course, cohorts, and countries.

RESULTS

Although smaller shares of women entered marriage at each age across cohorts, there is increasing diversity in the timing and context of marriage. Family-Forming marriage continues to be the majority marriage experience, but Direct Family-Forming marriage has declined and Post-Cohabitation Family-Forming marriage has increased in many contexts. Conception-Related Legitimizing marriages became more important in Central and Eastern Europe but less common in Western, Northern, and Anglo-Saxon countries. Limited evidence of growth in post-first-birth marriages suggests that childbearing intentions or a first conception continue to be important triggers for marriage, although this may be changing in Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, and some Western European countries.

CONCLUSIONS

While most people who marry do so prior to or in the absence of a first conception, increasingly marriage is not the first step in the family-building process. Still, for many women in diverse country contexts, marriage continues to be very closely linked to initiating childbearing.

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1. Background

Increases in non-marital childbearing have led some to suggest that marriage and childbearing are decoupling (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Kiernan 2001). However, Holland (2013) demonstrated a continued link between transitions to marriage and parenthood in Sweden, where long-term cohabitation is nearly indistinguishable from marriage and most children born to unmarried parents experience the marriage of their parents (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012).

The temporal ordering of marriage and childbearing may be indicative of the meaning of marriage. Building upon Holland's (2013) marriage typology, I investigate the context of marriage in 17 European countries and the United States. Marriages occurring prior to a first conception are identified as 'Family-Forming.' For these couples, marriage may be an expression of "permanency and... long-term commitment," conferring legal and symbolic status on the couple (Holland 2013: 279). While cohabitation is an almost universal prerequisite for marriage in Sweden (Andersson and Philipov 2002) and cohabiting couples have access to some legal protections where 'cohabitation contracts' or registered partnerships are available, in most countries marriage remains distinct from cohabitation (Holland and de Valk 2015; Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012). As such, in this extended typology I distinguish 'Direct Family-Forming' marriage, whereby a couple does not coreside prior to marriage, from 'Post-Cohabitation Family-Forming' marriage.

Marriages just preceding or following a birth are termed 'Legitimizing' marriages. While marriage is not a prerequisite for a first conception or birth, it is closely linked to that birth. Distinguishing pre- and post-birth Legitimizing marriages was less relevant for Sweden, where filial rights are transmitted to parents regardless of marital status (Bøe 2010; Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012). Because rights, responsibilities, and norms pertaining to non-marital childbearing vary across countries, I distinguish 'Conception-Related Legitimizing' marriage (sometimes termed 'shotgun marriage' or 'bridal pregnancies'), where marriage occurs following a first conception but before a first birth, and 'Birth-Related Legitimizing' marriage, where marriage occurs within 12 months of a first birth.

'Reinforcing' marriages occur after a first-born child is one year old but prior to subsequent births. While "the transition to parenthood [demonstrates] seriousness and commitment" 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: 281). 'Capstone' marriages occur after the completion of childbearing. In the mid-20th century Golden Age of marriage, union formalization occurred early in adulthood. Today, marriage may increasingly be the

‘crowning achievement’ of the transition to adulthood, occurring only after achieving residential, employment, and family-life stability (Cherlin 2004). With respect to childbearing, Capstone marriage is associated with achieving a desired family size. In the absence of data on childbearing or family size intentions, Holland (2013) proposed identifying Capstone marriages as those occurring after a second or higher-order birth, or once an only child is 5 years old, a duration established by birth-spacing preferences and subsequent childbearing risks (Andersson 2004; Billingsley and Ferrarini 2014).

2. Data and method

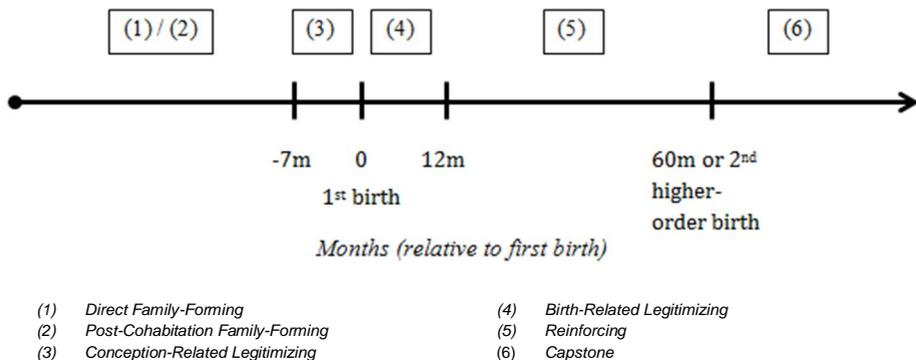
Data is drawn from the Harmonized Histories, marriage, birth, and cohabitation histories for 19 European countries and the United States (Perelli-Harris, Kreyenfeld, and Kubisch 2010). The data was constructed using wave one of the Generations and Gender Surveys of Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Sweden, and the Dutch Fertility and Family Survey (2003), the British Household Panel Survey (2005–2006), the Spanish Survey of Fertility and Values (2006), and the United States 1995 and 2007 National Survey of Family Growth. Data for Austria, which covered only younger cohorts, and Italy, which lacked key information about respondents’ age, was excluded from these analyses. The sample was limited to women never married and childless at age 18, born between 1950 and 1977 ($n = 58,360$). I excluded respondents missing dates of first marriage or births ($<1\%$ of the full Harmonized Histories sample).

Unlike the Swedish administrative data used by Holland (2013), the Harmonized Histories do not include father identifiers for the children born to women in the sample. Children were assigned to a union if they were born between the start and end dates of that union. Eleven percent of first births ($n = 5,443$) and 6% of second births ($n = 2,005$) occurred to women not in coresidential unions. It should not be automatically assumed that these were non-union births, since in many cases the birth may trigger coresidence or marriage. To assign these children to unions or to periods of living alone, I followed a set of rules developed within the stepfamily fertility literature (see e.g., Holland and Thomson 2011). Children born within 9 months of a union’s end were assigned to that union. This rule assumes that while the child was born after a union’s end, the child was conceived in that union. Using this 9-month rule, 1,491 first births (3%) and 364 second births (1%) were assigned to a union. All unions formed after this dissolved childbearing union would be considered step-unions. Children not assigned to a prior union but born in the 12 months prior to the start of a new union were assigned to that union, becoming that couple’s first shared birth. Here I assume that a non-

coresidential partnership existed, produced a child, and the transition to coresidence or marriage (closely) followed the birth of that child. Following this 12-month rule, a further 991 first births (2%) and 555 second births (1.6%) were assigned to a union. Where this partnership transition is to non-marital coresidence, couples that experienced a first birth would be ‘at risk’ for a Post-Birth Legitimizing, Reinforcing, or Capstone marriage, and couples that experienced a second birth would be ‘at risk’ for a Capstone marriage. Where the partnership transition is directly to marriage, those following a first birth would be classified as Post-Birth Legitimizing marriages and those following a second birth would be classified as Capstone marriages. Births occurring more than 9 months after a union and more than 12 months prior to a subsequent union are classified as non-union births: 2,961 first births (6%) and 1,086 second births (3%) were identified as non-union births. Any unions formed after these births would be considered step-unions.

I identify the six types of marriage discussed above using information about coresidence prior to the marriage, parity, and age of the firstborn child (Figure 1). Because the typology relies on single parity progressions, marriages occurring after a multiple first birth (e.g., twin, triplet, etc.), where a woman transitions directly from parity 0 to parity 2 or higher, are categorized separately. First marriages that occur after a first childbearing union dissolves (i.e., step-marriages) are categorized separately, since the association between marriage and childbearing in this new stepfamily may be more complex (see Holland and Thomson 2011). For the purposes of this descriptive finding, first marriages after a multiple first birth and step-marriages are pooled and classified as ‘Other’ marriages.

Figure 1: Stylized model of marriage types (derived from Holland 2013)



I tabulated the incidence and type of first marriage (regardless of whether the marriage was still intact) for all women from age 18 until 12 months prior to the survey (in order to uniformly apply the union assignment criteria for children born between unions). To make comparisons across cohorts and countries I compare women's experiences of first marriage by age 20, 30, and 40. I have full information on first marriage experiences of women born prior to 1957, until age 30 for women born between 1958 and 1967, and at age 20 for women born between 1968 and 1977. All tabulations use sampling weights.

The analysis of the United States National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) differed because the survey covered women aged 18 to 44. To compare the same women at ages 20, 30, and 40, the oldest United States cohorts were drawn from the NSFG 1995 and restricted to those born between 1950 and 1954. For the middle cohort, data covering women born between 1958 and 1964 was drawn from the NSFG 1995 and was pooled with data covering women born between 1961 and 1967 from the NSFG 2007. For the youngest cohorts, data was drawn from the NSFG 2007 only.

Table 1: Birth cohorts, by country (weighted percentages)

Country	Birth Cohort			N (unweighted)
	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1968–1977	
Western Europe				
Belgium	26.4	40.6	33.0	1,926
France	27.9	37.1	35.0	2,840
Germany	26.8	41.7	31.6	2,838
Netherlands	27.3	38.5	34.2	2,814
Northern Europe				
Norway	26.6	36.2	37.2	4,001
Sweden	23.6	37.6	38.8	2,398
Southern Europe				
Spain	21.3	38.0	40.7	4,020
Central Europe				
Czech Republic	26.7	32.6	40.7	2,308
Hungary	31.9	30.0	38.1	3,215
Eastern Europe				
Bulgaria	21.0	37.4	41.6	3,467
Estonia	30.4	35.8	33.8	2,469
Georgia	25.3	39.5	35.2	2,627
Lithuania	23.6	35.5	41.0	2,259
Poland	37.7	29.9	32.4	5,355
Romania	26.0	27.8	46.3	2,690
Russia	33.4	39.2	27.4	3,365
Anglo-Saxon				
United Kingdom	23.9	41.2	34.8	2,787
USA	15.8	47.8	36.3	6,981

Source: Hamonized Histories

^a For the United States, the oldest cohort consists of those born 1950-1954, due to age sampling restrictions of the NSFG (ages 18–44).

3. Results

3.1 Ever marrying

While there is cross-national diversity in the share of ever-married women, the greatest uniformity is evident among the earliest cohorts (born 1950 to 1957) (Table 2). In later cohorts, country and regional variation becomes more pronounced. Sweden, where the retreat from marriage was already evident among women of the earliest birth cohorts, is an exception to this general pattern.

Table 2: Experience of a first marriage by age, cohort, and country (weighted percentages)

	Age					
	20		30		40	
	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1968–1977	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1950–1957 ^a
Western Europe						
Belgium	20.8	13.4 ^{***}	4.4 ^{***†††}	83.5	75.3 ^{***}	88.5
France	17.0	10.6 ^{***}	2.5 ^{***†††}	76.7	62.5 ^{***}	83.8
Germany	20.3	12.6 ^{***}	7.5 ^{***†††}	75.0	69.2 ^{***}	83.4
Netherlands	15.9	6.9 ^{***}	2.8 ^{***†††}	83.4	65.3 ^{***}	89.7
Northern Europe						
Norway	18.1	9.0 ^{***}	1.8 ^{***†††}	76.1	63.6 ^{***}	85.2
Sweden	6.2	3.3 ^{**}	2.7 ^{**}	58.7	47.4 ^{**}	76.3
Southern Europe						
Spain	12.1	12.5	5.9 ^{***†††}	84.1	76.2 ^{***}	89.0
Central Europe						
Czech Republic	21.4	23.9	21.8	83.7	83.3	86.7
Hungary	34.5	31.6	17.9 ^{***†††}	89.9	86.5 ^{**}	92.5
Eastern Europe						
Bulgaria	31.4	30.4	25.5 ^{***†††}	83.8	85.0	87.5
Estonia	17.7	23.2 ^{***}	17.2 ^{†††}	85.9	79.6 ^{***}	90.7
Georgia	21.3	23.7	23.7	76.5	75.9	84.8
Lithuania	15.3	16.4	20.0 ^{***†}	76.2	80.8 ^{**}	83.8
Poland	20.1	21.6	18.5 ^{††}	85.8	83.1 ^{**}	89.4
Romania	26.6	28.8	24.7 [†]	89.7	87.4	93.4
Russia	22.8	31.2 ^{***}	30.4 ^{***}	86.1	86.7	90.8

Table 2: (Continued)

	Age					
	20			30		
	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1968– 1977	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1950– 1957 ^a
Anglo-Saxon						
United Kingdom	22.5	12.3 ^{^^}	4.5 ^{^^y+++}	84.4	71.3 ^{^^}	91.2
USA	28.1	16.3 ^{^^}	12.1 ^{^^y+++}	80.9	74.0 ^{^^}	89.4

Source: Harmonized Histories

^a For the United States, the oldest cohort consists of those born 1950–54, due to age sampling restrictions of the NSFG (ages 18–44).

^{^^/^^} Statistically different from cohorts born 1950 - 1957 at the 10%/5%/1% level, adjusted Wald test.

^{+++/+++} Statistically different from cohorts born 1958 - 1967 at the 10%/5%/1% level, adjusted Wald test.

Changes in the timing and incidence of marriage for women of later cohorts occurred unevenly across countries, consistent with the differential diffusion of other processes of family change (e.g., Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Van Bavel 2004; Vitali, Aassve, and Lappegård 2015). In Western and Northern Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries the share ever-married by age 20 declined across cohorts. In Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe there was stability or growth in the share of women ever-married by age 20 among the earliest and middle cohorts, consistent with a sustained ‘early marriage’ pattern (Hajnal 1982). Among the latest cohort, shares of ever-married women at age 20 declined in all countries except the Czech Republic, Georgia, Lithuania, Russia, and Sweden.

In Western, Northern, and Southern Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon countries, proportions ever-married at age 30 declined across cohorts. In Central and Eastern Europe the evidence was mixed: there were modest declines in Hungary and Estonia, shares of the ever-married were stable in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, and Russia, and the share ever-married increased in Lithuania. The Southern, Central, and Eastern European ‘early marriage’ pattern did not result in more women ever-married at age 30 (except in Lithuania), suggesting differing tempo (rather than quantum) trends in marital behavior.

3.2 The context of marriage

Table 3 presents tabulations of the context of first marriage. Percentages correspond to the proportion of all marriages, rather than all women.

Table 3: Context of first marriage among those experiencing a first marriage by age, cohort, and country (weighted percentages)

	Age					
	20		30		40	
	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1968–1977	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1950–1957 ^a
Western Europe						
Belgium						
Direct family-forming	45.3	28.6 ^{**}	36.1	46.5	35.4 ^{***}	44.9
Post-cohabitation family-forming	30.7	62.0 ^{***}	47.6	38.3	53.3 ^{***}	38.8
Conception-related legitimizing	22.3	9.4 ^{**}	16.3	12.1	8.5 [^]	11.6
Birth-related legitimizing	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.9	1.0	1.2
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.4	1.4
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.7	1.0
Other	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.7	1.1
Percentage ever entered first marriage	20.8	13.4	4.4	83.5	75.3	88.5
n (unweighted)	480	772	674	480	772	480
France						
Direct family-forming	53.0	49.6 ^{**}	45.0 ^{***}	47.6	30.0 ^{***}	45.1
Post-cohabitation family-forming	13.5	24.8	41.6 ^{***}	27.3	46.1 ^{***}	29.1
Conception-related legitimizing	31.1	22.1	3.5 ^{***†††}	17.7	13.5 [^]	16.7
Birth-related legitimizing	2.3	1.9	9.9	2.0	2.8	2.3
Reinforcing	0.0	1.6	0.0	2.6	3.2	3.0
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	2.6	2.2
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.8	1.5
Percentage ever entered first marriage	17.0	10.6	2.5	76.7	62.5	83.8
n (unweighted)	785	1,048	1,007	785	1,048	785
Germany						
Direct family-forming	34.2	31.6	37.0	32.5	23.5 ^{***}	30.1
Post-cohabitation family-forming	28.7	28.2	30.5	37.8	46.4 ^{***}	37.3
Conception-related legitimizing	29.3	35.0	25.8	19.0	18.1	18.2
Birth-related legitimizing	7.3	5.2	6.7	5.6	5.5	5.9
Reinforcing	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.4	3.5 ^{***}	0.7
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.4	2.5
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6	1.6 ^{**}	5.2
Percentage ever entered first marriage	20.3	12.6	7.5	75.0	69.2	83.4
n (unweighted)	727	1,239	872	727	1,239	727
Netherlands						
Direct family-forming	71.7	65.2 ^{**}	82.4 [†]	70.6	45.3 ^{***}	67.2
Post-cohabitation family-forming	4.9	16.8	6.5	19.0	43.3 ^{***}	20.3
Conception-related legitimizing	22.0	18.0	11.1	8.8	8.0	9.1
Birth-related legitimizing	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.3	0.8
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.6	1.0
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6 ^{**}	0.8
Other	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.9	0.8
Percentage ever entered first marriage	15.9	6.9	2.8	83.4	65.3	89.7
n (unweighted)	818	1,093	903	818	1,093	818

Table 3: (Continued)

	Age					
	20		30		40	
	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1968– 1977	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1950– 1957 ^a
Northern Europe						
Norway						
Direct family-forming	24.8	30.0	56.0 ^{***††}	27.7	18.8	26.4 ^{^^}
Post-cohabitation family-forming	17.6	28.6 [^]	25.5	29.5	40.7	30.1 ^{^^}
Conception-related legitimizing	47.9	29.6 ^{^^}	12.5 ^{***††}	29.9	16.9	27.5 ^{^^}
Birth-related legitimizing	7.4	11.7	6.0	5.9	9.2	5.9 ^{^^}
Reinforcing	1.7	0.0 [^]	0.0 [^]	2.9	7.0	3.3 ^{^^}
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.7	5.7	3.1 ^{^^}
Other	0.6	0.0	0.0	2.4	1.8	3.6
Percentage ever entered first marriage	18.1	9.0	1.8	76.1	63.6	85.2
n (unweighted)	1,041	1,451	1,509	1,041	1,451	1,041
Sweden						
Direct family-forming	12.8	25.5	15.4	11.3	9.6	9.1
Post-cohabitation family-forming	37.3	41.8	66.5 [^]	40.1	41.3	35.8
Conception-related legitimizing	24.4	8.7 [^]	9.8	15.1	12.8	13.3
Birth-related legitimizing	25.6	18.2	8.3	10.6	14.0	9.7
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.4	7.8	10.1
Capstone	0.0	5.9	0.0	8.1	12.4 [^]	16.3
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.4	2.0	5.8
Percentage ever entered first marriage	6.2	3.3	2.7	58.7	47.4	76.3
n (unweighted)	617	919	862	617	919	617
Southern Europe						
Spain						
Direct Family-Forming	72.6	67.0	51.8 ^{***††}	75.8	70.0	75.1 ^{^^}
Post-cohabitation family-forming	3.4	7.5	14.9 ^{^^}	6.7	11.9	7.5 ^{^^}
Conception-related legitimizing	22.3	23.4	29.3	11.8	13.3	11.7
Birth-related legitimizing	1.6	0.9	3.6	2.5	2.4	2.5
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.8	0.7	0.7
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.1 ^{^^}
Other	0.0	1.2	0.0	2.5	1.1	2.4 [^]
Percentage ever entered first marriage	12.1	12.5	5.9	84.1	76.2	89.0
n (unweighted)	872	1,522	1,626	872	1,522	872
Central Europe						
Czech Republic						
Direct family-forming	45.5	28.5 ^{^^}	31.7 ^{^^}	38.3	31.8	38.0 ^{^^}
Post-cohabitation family-forming	19.3	18.9	20.9	24.8	24.6	24.4
Conception-related legitimizing	31.4	48.1 ^{^^}	41.7 [^]	30.0	34.2	29.3
Birth-related legitimizing	2.3	2.2	5.0	2.6	3.4	2.9
Reinforcing	0.0	0.4	0.0	1.0	1.9	0.9
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.6	0.9
Other	1.5	1.9	0.7	2.9	3.6	3.4
Percentage ever entered first marriage	21.4	23.9	21.8	83.7	83.3	86.7
n (unweighted)	633	754	921	633	754	633

Table 3: (Continued)

	Age					
	20		30		40	
	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1968– 1977	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1950– 1957 ^a
Hungary						
Direct family-forming	79.6	67.3 ***	52.6 ****	78.0	65.5 ***	77.1
Post-cohabitation family-forming	2.4	6.4 **	11.7 ****	2.9	9.2 ***	3.6
Conception-related legitimizing	16.5	24.0 **	31.5 ****	15.2	19.3 **	15.0
Birth-related legitimizing	0.9	1.0	3.0 ^	1.1	1.8	1.1
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.8	0.6
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.7	1.1	0.9
Other	0.6	1.3	0.9	1.4	2.3	1.6
Percentage ever entered first marriage	34.5	31.6	17.9	89.9	86.5	92.5
n (unweighted)	1,001	945	1,269	1,001	945	1,001
Eastern Europe						
Bulgaria						
Direct family-forming	35.4	28.7	27.2 ^	37.6	29.4 ***	38.0
Post-cohabitation family-forming	37.1	39.7	37.5	36.2	39.6	35.6
Conception-related legitimizing	21.7	28.3 ^	32.9 ***	20.4	26.1 **	20.3
Birth-related legitimizing	5.1	2.8	2.1 ^	3.2	2.8	3.5
Reinforcing	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.7	0.7	0.9
Capstone	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.3	0.8
Other	0.0	0.3	0.2	1.0	1.2	1.0
Percentage ever entered first marriage	31.4	30.4	25.5	83.8	85.0	87.5
n (unweighted)	526	1,317	1,624	526	1,317	526
Estonia						
Direct family-forming	47.6	39.7	31.4 ***	43.8	33.2 ***	42.3
Post-cohabitation family-forming	17.7	16.1	21.9	16.6	17.7	16.8
Conception-related legitimizing	32.3	38.2	42.7 ^	28.7	33.6 ^	28.2
Birth-related legitimizing	0.8	2.0	2.7	4.4	5.1	4.9
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.1	2.8	1.9
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4	1.2	2.4
Other	1.6	4.0	1.4	3.0	6.4 ***	3.5
Percentage ever entered first marriage	17.7	23.2	17.2	85.9	79.6	90.7
n (unweighted)	736	859	874	736	859	736
Georgia						
Direct family-forming	51.3	49.5	36.3 ****	47.9	48.0	48.0
Post-cohabitation family-forming	20.1	24.8	25.4	20.9	22.2	21.1
Conception-related legitimizing	14.9	18.5	22.0 ^	14.4	18.2 ^	13.9
Birth-related legitimizing	11.7	5.5 **	15.8 †††	11.0	8.3	10.4
Reinforcing	0.7	1.3	0.4	1.8	1.1	2.0
Capstone	0.7	0.0	0.0	2.3	1.2	2.8
Other	0.6	0.5	0.0	1.6	0.8	1.8
Percentage ever entered first marriage	21.3	23.7	23.7	76.5	75.9	84.8
n (unweighted)	728	1,031	868	728	1,031	728

Table 3: (Continued)

	Age					
	20		30		40	
	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1968– 1977	Born 1950– 1957 ^a	Born 1958– 1967	Born 1950– 1957 ^a
Lithuania						
Direct family-forming	66.1	54.1 ^	48.2 ^^	63.4	59.8	62.5
Post-cohabitation family-forming	11.5	15.2	14.1	11.1	11.6	12.7
Conception-related legitimizing	21.6	26.2 ^	31.8 ^	18.7	22.5	18.0
Birth-related legitimizing	0.9	4.5 ^	5.8 ^^	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	1.6	2.0
Percentage ever entered first marriage	15.3	16.4	20.0	76.2	80.8	83.8
n (unweighted)	584	894	781	584	894	584
Poland						
Direct family-forming	53.1	50.0	43.1 ^^^†	56.3	53.1 ^	56.1
Post-cohabitation family-forming	10.4	9.8	10.0	10.4	11.0	10.7
Conception-related legitimizing	32.3	38.2 ^	43.1 ^^	26.2	30.3 ^^	25.3
Birth-related legitimizing	2.7	2.0	2.8	3.2	2.7	3.3
Reinforcing	0.5	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.9	1.4
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	0.7	1.2
Other	1.0	0.0 ^^	0.9 †	1.8	1.4	2.0
Percentage ever entered first marriage	20.1	21.6	18.5	85.8	83.1	89.4
n (unweighted)	2,018	1,603	1,734	2,018	1,603	2,018
Romania						
Direct family-forming	77.2	68.8 ^^	70.1 ^	75.3	72.4	74.6
Post-cohabitation family-forming	8.3	12.2	15.3 ^^	9.6	10.3	10.0
Conception-related legitimizing	10.1	13.2	12.0	7.0	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	1.2
Capstone	0.4	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.5	1.7
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	0.5 ^^	1.9
Percentage ever entered first marriage	26.6	28.8	24.7	89.7	87.4	93.4
n (unweighted)	874	847	969	874	847	874
Russia						
Direct family-forming	69.0	65.4	52.5 ^^^†††	66.3	61.2 ^^	64.9
Post-cohabitation family-forming	8.5	8.0	13.3 ^††	11.8	10.5	11.6
Conception-related legitimizing	17.8	23.3	28.3 ^^	14.6	21.2 ^^	14.4
Birth-related legitimizing	4.3	2.3	5.2 †	3.6	2.9	3.6
Reinforcing	0.3	0.0	0.3	2.3	1.6	2.7
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.9	0.9
Other	0.0	1.1 ^^	0.3	0.7	1.7 ^	1.9
Percentage ever entered first marriage	22.8	31.2	30.4	86.1	86.7	90.8
n (unweighted)	1,091	1,286	988	1,091	1,286	1,091

Table 3: (Continued)

	Age					
	20		30		40	
	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1968–1977	Born 1950–1957 ^a	Born 1958–1967	Born 1950–1957 ^a
Anglo-Saxon						
United Kingdom						
Direct family-forming	74.6	62.1 ^	36.1 ^{***††}	74.7	47.2 ^{***}	71.4
Post-cohabitation family-forming	5.4	12.4	27.5 ^{**}	13.5	34.7 ^{***}	15.7
Conception-Related Legitimizing	17.1	20.5	19.7	8.9	10.0	9.3
Birth-related legitimizing	3.0	4.8	12.5	0.9	2.8 ^	0.8
Reinforcing	0.0	0.0	4.3	0.6	1.9	0.6
Capstone	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	1.2	1.2
Other	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.8	2.2	1.0
Percentage ever entered first marriage	22.5	12.3	4.5	84.4	71.3	91.2
n (unweighted)	632	1,074	1,081	632	1,074	632
USA						
Direct family-forming	71.0	58.6 ^{***}	51.6 ^{***}	68.0	52.5 ^{***}	65.9
Post-cohabitation family-forming	8.8	16.3 ^{***}	16.3 ^{**}	17.2	25.2 ^{***}	18.7
Conception-Related Legitimizing	16.0	18.4	18.6	8.4	10.9 ^	7.7
Birth-related legitimizing	3.6	5.5	10.4	2.1	2.6	2.1
Reinforcing	0.0	0.8 ^{**}	2.9	1.7	2.9 ^{**}	1.7
Capstone	0.1	0.1	0.0	1.2	3.3 ^{***}	2.2
Other	0.5	0.2	0.3	1.3	2.6 ^{**}	1.6
Percentage ever entered first marriage	28.1	16.3	12.1	80.9	74.0	89.4
n (unweighted)	1,427	3,532	2,022	1,427	3,532	1,427

Source: Harmonized Histories

^a For the United States, the oldest cohort consists of those born 1950–54, due to age sampling restrictions of the NSFG (ages 18–44).

^{***} Statistically different from cohorts born 1950 - 1957 at the 10%/5%/1% level, adjusted Wald test.

^{†††} Statistically different from cohorts born 1958 - 1967 at the 10%/5%/1% level, adjusted Wald test.

3.2.1 Continuity and change in the context of marriage

In general, stability or increases in the prevalence of early marriage corresponded with stability in the timing of marriage vis-à-vis cohabitation and childbearing. Where early marriage declined, there were changes in the context of marriage. There were exceptions to this pattern, however. Despite stability or increases in early marriage, the context of marriage shifted in Central Europe, Georgia, Lithuania, and Poland. In Germany there was stability in the context of early marriage despite a considerable decline in incidence. Among women aged 30 there was evidence of cross-cohort changes in the context of marriage in all countries except Lithuania.

3.2.2 The continued importance and changing nature of Family-Forming marriage

In all countries, for all cohorts and ages, Family-Forming marriage was the modal or (more typically) the majority pathway into marriage. There was cross-cohort stability in shares of Family-Forming marriage in Western (excluding Belgium), Northern, Southern, and Eastern Europe (excluding Bulgaria, Estonia, and Russia) at age 30. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, Central Europe, and in Bulgaria, Estonia, and Russia, shares of Family-Forming marriage at age 30 declined across cohorts. In these contexts, marriage may increasingly be tied to the conception or birth of a child, rather than the first step in the family-forming process. In Belgium there was a slight increase in the share of Family-Forming marriages across cohorts.

Despite continuing prevalence, the nature of Family-Forming marriages changed in most countries. At age 30, shares of Post-Cohabitation Family-Forming marriage increased and Direct Family-Forming marriage declined in all regions except Sweden and Eastern Europe, consistent with cross-national and temporal patterns of the emergence of pre-marital cohabitation (Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014; Lesthaeghe 2010; Perelli-Harris et al. forthcoming).

Evidence for the shift away from Direct Family-Forming marriage toward Post-Cohabitation Family-Forming marriage was mixed for early marriage. In Southern, Central and Eastern Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon countries there was a shift away from Direct Family-Forming marriage across cohorts. In Spain, Hungary, Romania, Russia, and the Anglo-Saxon countries this was mirrored with a shift toward Post-Cohabitation Family-Forming marriage. In Western Europe, however, the shift from Direct to Post-Cohabitation Family-Forming marriage was not unilateral, and in the Netherlands and Norway there was even evidence of growth in Direct Family-Forming marriage, consistent with increased selectivity into early marriage.

3.2.3 Divergent trends in Conception-Related Legitimizing marriage

In Central and Eastern Europe and the United States, Conception-Related Legitimizing marriage increased in importance. Where marriage is tied to conception, the transfer of filial rights may be an important reason to formalize a union through marriage. In Western Europe (except Germany and the Netherlands) and Norway, Conception-Related Legitimizing marriage became less prevalent, perhaps reflecting changing norms.

3.2.4 Limited growth in post-first-birth marriages

While rare in most countries at age 20 (when childbearing may not yet have begun), marriages occurring after a first birth (i.e., Post-Birth Legitimizing, Reinforcing and Capstone) constitute a non-negligible share of first marriages at ages 30 and 40, particularly in Northern Europe, France, Germany, Georgia, and Estonia. Evidence of significant cross-cohort growth in post-first-birth marriages was limited, except in Northern Europe, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Anglo-Saxon countries. As later birth cohorts transition to parenthood in greater numbers and are exposed to the risk of post-first-birth marriages, further growth may emerge.

4. Discussion

These descriptive findings document declining shares of women entering marriage at each age and increasing diversity in the context of marriage for women born between 1950 and 1977, across 17 European countries and the United States. While these analyses are not explanatory, changes in the incidence, timing, and context of marriage are likely the result of changes in the meaning of marriage and in population composition, as well as individual, background, and macro-level factors (Holland 2013; Ní Bhrolcháin and Beaujouan 2012; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). For instance, if couples perceive the need to establish themselves in the labor market prior to marrying, individual economic circumstances and the broader macroeconomic climate may prompt couples to delay marriage (Oppenheimer 2003). Couples might delay marriage, even after a first or subsequent birth, if there is an expectation of certain marital rituals, such as a large ceremony or honeymoon, which require extensive planning and financial investment, or may be less feasible when children are young (Kalmijn 2004). The availability and affordability of housing may shape couples' marriage and childbearing decisions (Mulder 2006; Holland 2012). The diffusion of new family behaviors and norms, such as the acceptability of non-marital childbearing or the perception of marriage as an outmoded institution, might produce cross-cohort and cross-country variation. Investigating how individual-, regional- and country-level factors shape marital behavior will further our understanding of the modern-day meaning of marriage.

The typology of marriage proposed by Holland (2013) and extended here offers a valuable starting point for comparisons of marriage behavior. Taken together, these trends suggest that most women who marry do so prior to (or in the absence of) a first conception, but for a sizable and growing minority a conception or birth is the first step in the family building process.

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