Childbearing and Marriage: Investigating the Importance of Context for Meaning-Making of First-Time Marriage

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ABSTRACT

Previous research reveals that the temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage can have an impact on the meaning of first-time marriage. This article aims to obtain a deeper understanding of meaning-making of first-time marriage in relation to childbearing. Narrative interviews with 16 brides and grooms in 8 couples in Sweden were conducted. The material was analyzed in relation to the temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage. The study reveals that the construction of meaning of marriage does not only relate to the temporal context. Social factors such as social class or family formation might also be relevant for how meaning is constructed. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of meaning-making as a relational process constructed within particular contexts.

Introduction

Until the end of the last century, there was a strong norm in Sweden, as in many other countries that children should be borne within the institution of marriage. Today, most couples cohabit, have children and then marry. Some researchers claim that marriage is becoming an outmoded institution, decoupled from the childbearing process and indistinguishable from cohabitation (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001; Kiernan & Smith, 2003). Others argue that there is a continued link between childbearing and marriage. Perhaps the normative pressure to follow the standard sequence of marriage followed by childbearing is weakening, leading to a greater variety of sequences, even when marriage and childbearing are jointly planned (Billari, 2001; Wu & Musick, 2008). Previous research has shown that young Swedish adults express enthusiastic support for childbearing and rearing within cohabitation, although most of these young adults want to get married anyway (Bernhardt, 2004; Jarnkvist, 2008). The demographer Holland (2013) suggests that the meaning of first-time marriage might differ depending on

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the context in which it occurs. The temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage can have an impact on the meaning of marriage. Holland has developed a typology of marriage, structured around four possible meanings, i.e., as a family forming, legitimizing, reinforcing, and capstone institution. Holland's typology, as well as most other theories and models on marriage formation, is based on quantitative demographic data. Several researchers point to the fact that qualitative research must be conducted in the field to clarify details and highlight the complexities in the relationship between cohabitation, children, and marriage (Holland, 2013; Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012).

This article aims to obtain a deeper understanding of meaning-making of first-time marriage in relation to childbearing. The material is analyzed in relation to the temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage. I use the typology of marriage developed by Holland (2013) as the starting point in my analyses of qualitative interviews with 16 heterosexual men and women in 8 heterosexual couples in Sweden. The participants were just about to be married for the first time when the interviews were performed. Holland's typology not only allowed me to deepen the understanding of the importance of context in the formation of meaning in my analyses; it also provided an opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of generalized typologies such as Holland's. This typology is worked out from an analysis of administrative register data in Sweden. Therefore, it was important to analyze wedding stories from people getting married in Sweden. Compared to other countries, Sweden has a large diversity in terms of family life course and a continued salience of marriage despite widespread acceptance of other family forms (Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011; Holland, 2013). This makes the Swedish context a useful starting point for broader comparative studies of the institution of marriage. This paper is constructed as follows: first, I review previous studies and present the theoretical framework that is used in the paper. After describing the method applied, I present the results of the study, which is followed by a discussion.

Relation between children and marriage

The transition from cohabitation to marriage has been the focus of several demographic studies in Sweden (Bernhardt, 2004; Duvander, 1999) ever since cohabitation came to be more common in Sweden at the end of 20th century. The literature reveals three factors that determine if and when a cohabiting couple gets married: the individual's life stage, opportunity for economic benefit, and personal background (Bernhardt, 2004; Duvander, 1999). A comparative study between several European countries revealed that patterns of union formation and childbearing develop along different trajectories across countries. Nonetheless, marriage remains the predominant institution

for raising children (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). As child rearing has become more common in cohabiting relationships, many studies during the last years have investigated the relationship between cohabitation, children, and marriage (Holland, 2013; Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011; Perelli-Harris et al., 2012). Children in general and pregnancy in particular stimulate thoughts of marriage (Baizán, Aassve, & Billari, 2004; Fagerberg, 2000; Jarnkvist, 2008; Lappegård & Noack, 2015; Le Goff & Ryser, 2010; Moors & Bernhardt, 2008; Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011). Currently, most couples who marry in Sweden have been living together for several years before the wedding (Holland, 2013) and have children (Karlsson, 2010).[1] The trend is similar in other European countries (Perelli-Harris, Bernardi, 2015). Perelli-Harris et al., 2012) as well as in Latin America, at least among well-educated people (Laplante, Castro-Martín, Cortina, & Martín-Garcia, 2015). Jarnkvist (2008) suggests that cohabiting couples who are serious in their relationship and want to get married do so when they are having children. Where marriage follows childbearing, it may also symbolize the final stage in the family-building process (Cherlin, 2004).

Currently, the majority of children in Sweden are born into stable relationships but outside of marriage (Statistics Sweden, 2010). The previous research has shown that children conceived and/or born during cohabitation may have a positive effect on the stability of their parents' relationship in countries like Sweden, where cohabitation is an important part of family formation. Children born into cohabiting unions represent union-specific capital and promote stability in their parents' union. Empirical evidence from Canada lends support for this argument (Wu, 1995). In countries where cohabitation is not that common, the relationship between childbearing and stability for cohabiting couples is more unclear. A study of the situation in the United States shows that children conceived during cohabitation are associated with greater stability in their parents' relationship, whereas children conceived and born during cohabitation are not (Manning, 2004). A comparative study of changes in union status during the transition to parenthood in 11 European countries during the 1970s to the early 2000s indicates that there are different ways for family formation across countries and that setting-specific factors produce changes in behavior at different stages. In all countries, however, it appears that marriage remains the predominant institution for raising children. The authors conclude that further research is needed to investigate why marriage is more likely to occur at these stages (Perelli-Harris et al., 2012), and this article is an example of such research.

Context and meaning

I use a constructivist approach in my understanding of the interviewees' narratives of meaning in relation to marriage. Social constructivists believe

that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society invent the properties of the world together (Kukla, 2000). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with one another and with the environment they live in. The constructivist perspective is directed toward understanding how meaning is defined, interpreted, and handled in different contexts. Previous demographic research about the meaning of marriage has construed meaning as a static concept for a long time. Under this view, if people change their way of living, marriage becomes meaningless (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001, 2004). However, under a constructivist approach, the meaning of marriage has changed throughout history and can also differ between couples, partly depending on when they choose to marry. The focus of this article is the relation between marriage and children.

Swedish as well as international research often highlights the symbolic meaning of marriage. Since marriage is no longer required as a public display of commitment, weddings have become more important as symbolic events (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015; Jarnkvist, 2011; Le Goff & Ryser, 2010; Townsend, 2002). With the increase in cohabitation and destandardization of the life course, the role of marriage has become less salient in peoples' lives early in relationship formation, although it still may be important as the relationship progresses (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015). Recent research from Norway indicates that the meaning of partnership has shifted from being defined around marriage to being defined around having a child (Lappegård & Noack, 2015). For most people, however, marriage remains an ideal if not a priority, given other life events (Berrington, Perelli-Harris, & Trevena, 2015). The focus on family is also visible in legal texts. In the 20th century, the protection of the family has increasingly been emphasized in legal texts, the place where the special status of marriage was usually focused (Andersson, 2011).

Previous studies further reveal that social structures such as gender and social class may be important for shaping attitudes and norms about marriage and childbearing. Images of "real" weddings and "real" brides are shaping the construction of femininity (Adeniji, 2008; Jarnkvist, 2011), marriage might be a part of constructing fatherhood (Le Goff & Ryser, 2010), and social class is important for what kind of wedding people choose to have (Jarnkvist, 2011). Individuals in professional occupations are more likely to prefer the traditional order of marriage before childbearing (Duncan & Phillips, 2008; Duncan & Smith, 2006), and the highly educated are more likely to have a birth within marriage than those who are less educated (Berrington, 2001, 2003; Kiernan & Smith, 2003; Perelli-Harris et al., 2010).

The demographer Jennifer A. Holland has developed a typology of first-time marriage structured around four possible meanings of marriage. These meanings are related to the context in which it occurs. The model

was developed on the basis of an analysis of administrative register data covering all Swedish women born between 1950 and 1977 who have lived continuously in Sweden and were never married and were childless at age 18. Holland tabulated the incidence and type of all first marriages by age and educational attainment. According to this typology, marriage can be understood as a family forming, legitimizing, reinforcing, or capstone institution. When marriage occurs before the couple has any children, it is *family forming*. The *legitimizing* marriage closely follows a first conception or birth. In this case, marriage is not normatively necessary for conception and birth but is nonetheless closely linked to the birth of the couple's first child. When a couple marries a year or more after a first birth but before subsequent births, it may be taken as an indication of *reinforcement*. Holland argues that the transition to parenthood in this case may be an explicit expression of seriousness and commitment. The legal aspects of marriage may provide an added sense of security, stability, or permanency for the couple. The *Capstone* marriage is also a demonstration of commitment as well as broader family and economic stability. This marriage occurs when the couple has achieved a desired family size (after a second or higher order birth or after a lone child reaches 5 years of age). In this case, childbearing is a demonstration of the long-term commitment of the union, which is considered strong. The *Capstone* marriage is a symbol of success (Holland, 2013). I use the typology developed by Holland as a starting point in my analyses of interviewees' wedding stories.

Method

To obtain a deeper understanding of the importance of context for meaning-making in marriage, qualitative method was used, through which the nuances and depth in the studied phenomenon can be observed. I conducted interviews with 16 women and men in 8 heterosexual couples, all born in Sweden. When the couples booked the wedding ceremony, employees at the municipality or the church organization making the booking also informed the couples about my research project. I contacted those who were interested taking part of the project. The criterion for being interviewed was that at least one person in the couple should be marrying for the first time.[2] This method of getting in contact with interview persons could be questioned if there had been a close relation between for example the priest or the church and the interview persons. However, none of the interview persons had any closer connection to either the priest or the church as an organization. Most Swedes belong to the church of Sweden without taking active part in ceremonies or other activities. Being a member of the church of Sweden is by many members considered to be a part of their cultural identity (Jarnkvist, 2011). This was also the case among those I interviewed.

The interviews took place in 2007/2008, when the interviewees were aged 24–40 years. Every couple, except one, had young children together. The childless couple was undertaking "*In vitro* fertilization (IVF)" treatment with the aim of having children. The interviewees lived in a medium-sized town and a small town in northern Sweden. In this area, most of the church weddings are quite large, while the civil weddings are small, intimate, and often held in secret. The wedding size for those couples interviewed here followed the same pattern. I have followed the four generic main requirements of research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, which include information, consent, confidentiality, and utilization.

I performed semistructured interviews based on themes with open as well as more specific questions. We spoke about the wedding process, from the decision to marry to the time immediately following the wedding. The timing and motives for marrying was one of the themes of the interview and is a focus in this article. I asked the interviewees to tell me about their relationships with their partners and their lives together, from the start of the relationship until the time of the interview; how come and when they had begun to talk about getting married; and how they were planning the marriage. I also asked personal questions about marriage and cohabitation, such as the interviewees' own understanding of marriage and whether he/she had always wanted to get married.

Holland's (2013) typology of marriage was used as a lens through which I sorted out the interview material. In this way, the story of each person was situated in a certain period of time and related to the typology. The analysis of the interview material was inductive. I used a form of narrative method described by Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, and Zilber (1998). My starting point is that a person's story (its content as well as its form) says something about both the person and the subject matter that the person talks about. Each story is also marked by the context in which it is told. The purpose of the story, the relationship between narrator and listener, and the narrator's emotional atmosphere are some of the aspects that affect the story (Johansson, 2005; Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998). The story says something not only about the individual and his/her meaning system but also about the narrator's culture and social world.

I used a narrative thematic analysis, the focus of which was how the interviewees create meaning in their choices to marry. The analysis was undertaken in several stages. First, I sorted the narratives in groups of four, depending on the age of the child (if they had any) at the time of the marriage. The groups were constructed according to Holland's (2013) typology of marriage. Out of eight interviewed couples, one was married without having any children, two couples married within the first year of birth, four couples married after the first year and one couple married after the completion of child bearing. Subsequently, I performed a vertical analysis that cuts straight

through each interview in each group. I searched for leading themes in the narratives and analyzed each theme in relation to the narrative as a whole (Johansson, 2005). I focused on the content of the narrative in particular, what the interviewees said about what happened, the characters in the story, the story line, and story setting. In each group of interviews, I also performed a horizontal analysis across all the interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of—and to be able to make comparisons between—the themes in different narratives. Throughout this article, interviewees' real names were not used. Where it says "Karin" it is my voice.

Child bearing and marriage

The results are presented in line with the sorting of the material. The interviewees express different understandings of marriage partly depending on when they married. Marriage before childbearing can be understood as family forming. The couple expresses traditional norms and marriage values; they talk about the lifelong relationship and that a responsible parent should be married. Couples marrying within the first year of the birth of the child express two different ways of understanding the meaning of their weddings—as a means to create a "real" family as well as to consolidate the family. Both of these understandings have to do with legitimizing the relationship. When a couple marries a year or more after the birth of the first child but before subsequent births, it may be taken as an indication of reinforcement. The marriage is talked about as a way to reinforce the seriousness of the relationship for oneself, relatives, and others as well as the partner. Children are an important part of this commitment. Finally, marriage after the completion of childbearing can be understood as an expression of commitment. The couple shows family and economic stability. In this study, the interviewees talk about marriage not only as commitment but also as legal security. Besides the different meanings relating to time periods, the analysis of the material reveals meaning-making as an ongoing, relational process. The differences in understanding are not only related to when in time the couple marries but also to the history of the individual as well as the relation itself, for example, social class can be important for how a person construct meaning of marriage. The results are presented and further described below.

Marriage before childbearing family forming

Holland (2013) describes marriage before childbearing as family forming. It is the old, traditional way of marrying. One of the couples I interviewed, Leif and Lisa, did not have children at the time of their marriage, but they are currently undergoing IVF treatment, hoping to become pregnant. The couple talks about the meanings of marriage as: 1) having a lifelong relationship, and 2) being a

responsible parent. The two meanings are traditional in the way that they relate to old norms of relationships and parenthood. Being married under this understanding means to be together for the rest of one's life and parents should be married when having children. Marrying is family forming.

> Karin: Marriage. You said that marriage makes you feel as if you are a couple for real.
>
> Leif: Yes, it is in any case a tie that is bound a bit tighter. Yes, you see it all the way until you are sitting in an elderly home together and remembering everything. That is what you see with marriage. And then children of course, if there are children. Everything is much more right then, I think. Yes, mom and dad are married. I think that is an important part of children's upbringing.

As discussed above, there are two parts of the quotation, expressing different meanings of marriage: 1) the life long relationship and 2) being a responsible parent. At the beginning of the quotation, Leif talks about marriage as a lifelong union, seeing himself sitting with his wife in a home for elderly people, remembering their life together. To use the expression of Holland (2013), Leif understands marriage as family forming and it "represents an expression of permanency and a long-term commitment" (2013, p. 279). However, there is more to say about the quotation. During the interview, he describes how he has lived an irresponsible life as a single man for a long time. He wants to change this now. Leif also mentioned that his parents separated when he was young. He describes years of insecurity and a deficient relationship with his mother. He says that he wants to "do it better". My interpretation is that, marriage for Leif is an attempt to create a secure environment for the children he hopes to have. It is important for him to have a "normal family". To marry prior to childbearing is in line with socio-historical family formation norms in the Western world and for Leif it is important to follow these norms. This is embodied in his words: "everything is much more right then, I think". To use (Townsend, 2002) words, marriage can be interpreted as an element of the "package deal," with the foundation of a home, the formation of the family, and the work. According to Leif's partner, Lisa, the timing of the marriage was completely Leif's wish. He told her that he wanted to get married within a year from the time of their engagement and before they had kids. "For once, I want to do it right", he told her. The narrative reflects a pattern of a social order that has to be followed: a person engages him or herself, gets married, and has a child. This idea is also revealed in previous research on men getting married before having children (Le Goff & Ryser, 2010). Lisa says that she could have waited with the marriage to save money, so that they could have had the big wedding she had always longed for. That did not happen; they married in secret with only a few witnesses present. To marry before they had any kids was not important to her, she says.

However, now she is happy about it and says that "it feels like we did it in the right order." When we come to talk about the meaning of marriage, Lisa says:

> Actually, it is not such a big difference, except that it is written on a paper, and I will have one more name. We had planned to be together anyway for the rest of our lives. But, in a way, it feels more serious with us being married. To show the world around us that 'here we are, the two of us!' (Lisa)

To Lisa, neither the time of the marriage or the marriage itself seems to have been as important as it was to Leif. However, now that they have decided to marry, she is happy about it. For Lisa, it is not necessary to marry to have a lifelong relationship, but by marrying Leif, she confirms the relationship in front of others. In any event, by marrying before having children, Lisa and Leif will conform to sociohistorical family formation norms in the Western world (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). To gain respect from society, the couple had to marry before having kids. Currently, however, society accepts births before couples marry and thus, according to some, it is said to have lost its meaning (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Kiernan, 2001, 2004). The narratives of Leif and Lisa show that the meaning of marriage might not be lost but might have changed. In the case of Leif, it seems as though marrying before having children is a way to gain respect from himself as well as from society. Marriage is a symbolic step, rather than a legal one. The narratives show that marrying before having children might not only be an expression of seriousness within the relationship. Children that are wished for might also be an important part of the meaning of marriage. The analysis further highlights the complexity of meaning-making. The meaning of marriage might differ within a couple and also for a person over time. It is strongly connected to the temporal as well as relational context. Meaning-making is an ongoing relational process.

Marriage within the first year of the child—legitimizing

According to Holland's model, marriages within the first year of the birth of the first child can be interpreted as legitimizing. This meaning is not necessary normative but is closely related to the birth of the child. This meaning is deepened in the interviews. The narratives of the couples that marry just before or within a year after childbearing mention two moments that set in motion plans for marriage: when they are about to decide the child's surname[3] and in the context of signing a paternity certificate.[4] These moments are closely connected to the birth of the child, which indicate that children are important in couples' decisions to get married. The interviewees also describe different ways of understanding the meaning of their weddings: 1) to create a "real" family and 2) to consolidate the family. Both of these understandings have to do with legitimizing the relationship.

Create a "real" family

Olle and Carolina married less than 1 year after childbearing. When I asked Olle what the marriage means to him, he replied:

> There are legal advantages if you put it that way. However, it is not for that reason. It is more than that. Maybe tradition, a bit … that it is nice in a family for the parents to be married, I think. (Olle)

Olle clearly relates marriage to being a parent. The nuclear family with married parents is an ideal to Olle. It is also the way he has been brought up himself. As Holland describes in her typology of first marriages, the meaning of the marriage that occurs just before or less than a year after childbearing is closely linked to the birth of the couple's first child. In the words of Holland, it is a legitimizing marriage.

Olle also mentions the importance of tradition, a concept that is frequently used in narratives of couples marrying in church and which is also related to social class. Narrators with strong cultural capital talk about marriage as tradition. In Olle's family, it is common for couples to marry and in other parts of the interview he says that it has always been clear to him that he should marry.

Consolidate the family

While Olle talks about marriage as the parents' responsibility to the children, his future wife, Carolina, focuses on the notion of consolidating the family. A stronger bond is formed between all the members of the family and they all stand together as a unit.

> Karin: Is marriage strongly connected to the child? Do I understand you correctly, then?

> Carolina: Of course we choose to get married primarily because we … have each other. Because we love each other as a couple. However, I still think that I see it as a little connected to … family in some way. Not, like, children, but that we are a family and so it feels as if it a little bit symbolizes or shows like what we think is important. In some way then. So, it's not necessarily as if we wouldn't be able to get married without having children, but it feels like an obvious choice now in some way.

Carolina first mentions love as a reason for marrying. Quite soon, however, she grabs hold of the term "family." It is clear that she wants to emphasize the sense of creating a distinct family through marriage. In Carolina's definition of family, children do not appear to be a necessity. Being a couple suffices to qualify as a family. My understanding of her is that the distinctive characteristic of a family is that it is a coherent unit. Such a unit is formed through marriage. As Carolina and Olle have a child together, it is sufficient for Carolina to solidify this unit through marriage.

Marriage a year after a first birth - reinforcement

When a couple marries a year or more after a first birth but before subsequent births, it may be taken as an indication of reinforcement. Holland argues that the transition to parenthood in this case may be an explicit expression of seriousness and commitment. The legal aspects of marriage may provide an added sense of security, stability, or permanency for the couple. Four of the eight couples I have interviewed marry during this period of time and they all express seriousness and commitment in their narratives. The marriage is a way to reinforce the seriousness of the relationship for 1) oneself, 2) relatives and others as well as 3) the partner. The child is an important part of this commitment.

Reinforcement for oneself

Maria and Mark's daughter, Alma, was born 18 months before they got married. For Maria, it was the child that enabled her to be daring enough to get married.

> I have always seen all that with marriage, as if it is then that it ends. There are so many people who break up after getting married, so for me it has never been important, but now it has become important … somehow. However, it probably has a lot to do with when you have children together and, yes, it feels as if you stand firmly together. You believe in it. That it will last a lifetime. (Maria)

Maria has had a negative view of marriage for a long time, but having her daughter Alma instilled other ideas in her. With the birth of their child, the relationship between Maria and Mark changed, and suddenly, marriage felt like a natural step for Maria to take. How can this be? According to previous research, marriage is the normative union in Sweden, although cohabiting is very common (Adeniji, 2008; Bernhardt, 2004). By getting married Maria and Mark are following accepted family norms in the Swedish society.

However, what is it about the child that makes Maria believe in a lifelong relationship to her partner? Ulrich Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that contemporary life has drawn the family into a process of individualization, which means that relationships are becoming more brittle, debilitating the family as an institution. Adults are well aware that there are no guarantees that a relationship will last forever. This leads them to focus increasingly on their relationship to the child. The child becomes a fixed point in their existence, the person that the parents will always be bound to, no matter what happens between the parents (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The child symbolizes a hope that the parent's relationship will last. Recent research from Norway indicates that the meaning of partnership has shifted from being defined around marriage to being defined around having a child (Lappegård & Noack, 2015). According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory, Maria's experience of change in her relationship to Mark after the birth of their child

can be interpreted as an example of the experience of childrearing as a link to meaning-making in marriage. At a time when every second marriage breaks up, the most established relationships can feel fluid in the way that Maria describes it. The child becomes the stable foundation that is lacking in society in general. Her daughter Alma gives Maria's own life and her relationship to Mark (new) meaning and thus Maria feels daring enough to commit to marriage.

Reinforcement for others

As mentioned earlier, new parents can feel that their relationship has become stronger with the birth of their child. For them, getting married is not just a sign that they are a family, but also that their relationship as parents is serious. My interviews with couples getting married make clear that the relationship between man and woman is stable. The couple has lived together for several years and have children or are trying to have children together. The conception of children seems to have been a deliberate choice, and through the child's birth, the ties between the adults have become stronger. The couples co-own their housing and other possessions. The man and woman have also built up a life together in which both are crucial parts. Marriage is a symbolic action that confirms the serious nature of the partnership. Cecilia expresses it in this manner:

> Karin: This thing with marriage, then. You say that you wanted to get married and that this came to the fore with the child, but what are your thoughts about marriage? You have named life-long fidelity.
>
> Cecilia: Yes, I think so. If you love someone so, it is a promise in some way. You make a promise not just in church. Others see it too, that you like each other. It is, well, like a little proof, I think, when you get married in church and promise each other eternal fidelity. It is like a bit of paper. It is not for that bit either, rather it is, well, in front of, yes, mom and dad and siblings.

When Cecilia talks about fidelity, my interpretation is that she means fidelity in terms of "staying together" as well as sexual fidelity. She says that she and Magnus are so secure in their relationship that they could have given each other such promises with or without marriage. Marriage is a confirmation for the people around them that the couple's relationship is serious. She attributes the public confirmation particular significance, especially for the surrounding family. This way of thinking confirms indications from earlier research that the birth of a child is a trigger for those couples who are serious in their relationships (Jarnkvist, 2008). Cecilia does not talk about tradition but it is evident that it is a tradition in her family to marry, and to do it in church is for her the "right way" to marry.

Reinforcement for the partner

For Lotta, marriage is a reinforcement of her love to Andreas, before herself, him and those around them.

> Karin: The reason for getting married was primarily legal, if I understand you correctly?
>
> Lotta: Yes, that was probably what finally made me feel that I could take the step. Or I felt that it was almost necessary in some way. And the reason that I have hesitated about getting married at all is because I just think that it is so special and that it is so big and that it is so ceremonious. And that you stand there and promise things for the rest of your life and … can I really stand by it? This is why it has seemed too big … that I have felt that I haven't really been able to manage it. Yes, because marriage feels really holy for me.

Lotta hesitated for a long time to get married. Since she has children from a previous relationship and now also has a child with Andreas, the legal motives became so strong that she decided on marriage. As Holland argues, there are legal advantages that come with being married that provide security for the couple. However, the road to marriage was long for Lotta. She has several relationships behind her in which marriage was never considered. She also describes how she comes from an environment in which getting married is uncommon. It is possible that this is another reason why the step has been difficult to take. Lotta describes marriage as holy, and it is clear that she has thought a lot about whether she dares to enter into it. The seriousness of marriage also becomes obvious in another part of the interview, when Lotta says that it is "quite easy anyway" to have children together as an unmarried couple. She describes the decision to get married as much more difficult. Certain hesitancy toward the promises can still be heard when she says that "you have decided in some way that it is this person that I want to live with … as long as it works". Maybe Lotta's earlier experiences make it difficult for her to talk about a lifelong promise. Instead, she chooses the phrase "as long as it works." The risk awareness that, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, characterizes contemporary relationships comes to the surface in Lotta's narrative. A fear of making promises follows this awareness. The legal advantage of being married "forced" Lotta to marry, and by doing so, she signaled to herself, her partner and others that she wants to have a lifelong relation to him.

Marriage after the completion of childbearing—commitment and legal security

According to Holland, marriage after the completion of childbearing is a sign of commitment. The couple exhibits family stability and economic stability. Two of the interviewed couples married during this time period. The analysis

of the four interviews not only confirms this understanding but also highlights formal or legal motives for marrying. Marriage is talked about as 1) commitment but also as 2) legal security.

Commitment

Joseph and Sofia have two children together and say that they have seen themselves as a family even though they have not been married. Through marriage something further happens. The family is bound together into a unit:

> Karin: So the children were important for your decision to marry? Joseph: Yes. Well, they are. It becomes like one family. One big family.

Joseph emphasizes the word "one" when talking about how the family is affected by the marriage. My interpretation is that the child has become the meaning-carrying link that makes the family a unit (compare e.g., Lappegård & Noack, 2015). Marriage strengthens this unit, among other things, through the fact that many choose a common surname. The entry into a marriage marks a commitment to stay together as a unit forever. This understanding of marriage is also normative. Joseph performs a master narrative of what a "real" family should be like. The ritual means that the family is united, integrated, and becomes uniform, in other words, stable (Bourdieu, 1994/1999).

Legal security; according to Swedish law, marriage carries certain financial advantages that are not available to cohabiting partners. This applies in particular if one of the partners dies.[5]

Richard talks about the legal security that comes with marriage. His partner, Sandra, has a child from a previous relationship. He talks about the economic consequences that would follow if Sandra or Richard should die while they were not married.

> If anything happened to me, it wouldn't affect Sandra that much. However, if anything should happen to her, because she has children from a previous relationship, it would be much more difficult for me, for example, to remain here. So there are lots of elements like that we have to pay attention to, to obtain security. Both for us and for the children … in the future. (Richard)

Marriage gives security to Richard since it would help him, purely in financial terms, to continue living in the joint dwelling if Sandra should die. In other words, marriage gives legal and economic security to both parents and families with children from previous relationships. Sandra talks about marriage in the same manner.

> We discussed it for over a year. Because we said: "We either get married or get help to write documents, since I have children from a previous relationship and all that". If anything were to happen to me. And so we said: "Yes, well then let's get married! Yes." And then we made the decision. (Sandra)

Sandra describes the decision as very rational. The choice was to marry or write a will. The couple chose to marry. The fact that Sandra has children from a previous relationship was the deciding factor for her. It is for the legal protection that she is getting married.

Discussion

This article aims to obtain a deeper understanding of meaning-making of first-time marriage in relation to childbearing. The material was analyzed in relation to the temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage. The typology of Holland was hugely helpful when structuring the material, as it made the relation between the meaning of marriage and the context visible. However, the qualitative analysis also highlighted the weakness in these kinds of typologies, as they do not make the complexity of meaning visible. The qualitative analysis yields a broader as well as deeper understanding of how meaning of first-time marriage is constructed in relation to context. There are different nuances in the meanings of marriage constructed by the couples.

My analysis shows that the construction of meaning of marriage does not only relate to the temporal context. The understanding of marriage can differ within the couple. The construction of meaning is for example related to family traditions and social class. Those who have a strong relation to marriage in their family of origin talk about marriage as an important tradition which brings meaning to the marriage, while the traditional aspect is not at all mentioned by those who do not have married parents, for example. This understanding is also related to wedding form and social class. Those interviewees who talk about marriage as a tradition all have a church wedding. Marrying in church also brings with it a lot of costs, as church weddings often are expected to be big and beautiful, while civil weddings often are small with only a few witnesses invited (Jarnkvist, 2011). The church wedding couples I have interviewed also all have a stronger economic, social, and cultural capital than couples having civil weddings. My interpretation is that social class might be important for the construction of meaning of first-time marriage.

The analysis further brings forward the idea that the construction of meaning is an ongoing relational process. A person might shift his/her understanding of marriage in relation to how his/her partner talks about marriage. This is another aspect of how the construction of meaning is related to context. Here, the important factor is not only the timing of marriage in relation to the birth of the child or the upbringing of the individual but also the social context of a relation. Below I highlight the main findings in my analysis and discuss them in relation to Holland's typology.

Marrying before having children was talked about in my interviews as family forming, as Holland also suggests. Marriage might not only be an expression

of seriousness within the relationship. Children that are whished for can also be an important part of the meaning of marriage. The analysis highlights the relational aspect of meaning-making, as it is negotiated within the couple. Meaning-making as an ongoing process is seldom discovered in previous research on marriage. According to Holland's model, marriages *within the first year of the first child* can be interpreted as legitimizing. It is not necessarily normative but closely related to the birth of a child. This meaning is deepened in the narratives. Two perspectives of meaning-making can be highlighted: 1) to create a "real" family and 2) to consolidate the family. Both have to do with legitimizing the relationship, but the former meaning is closer related to children than the second. It is also normative. The different understandings are mentioned by Olle and Carolina, who married each other. They are an example of how the meaning of marriage might differ within a couple. According to previous research (Lappegård & Noack, 2015; Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011), pregnancy and birth of children stimulate thoughts of marriage. The understanding of the relation between children and marriage is thus deepened in this analysis. When a couple marries *a year or more after a first birth but before subsequent births* it may, according to Holland, be taken as an indication of reinforcement. The narratives of my interviewees deepen this understanding and make it more complex: marriage is described as a way to reinforce the seriousness of the relationship for 1) oneself, 2) relatives and others, and 3) the partner. Children are an important part of this commitment. As Holland mentions, the legal aspect might also be important. Finally, according to Holland, *marriages after the completion of childbearing* are signs of commitment. The couple exhibits family and economic stability. Two of the interviewed couples married during this time period. The analysis of the four interviews confirms this understanding but also highlights the formal or legal motives for marrying. Marriage is talked about as 1) commitment but also as 2) legal security.

Tradition as a meaning of marriage is mentioned by several interviewees, all marrying in church. It does not seem to be related to the temporary order of the birth of a child. Instead it is connected to upbringing and social class. This result highlights other factors than children to be relevant for how individuals construct meaning of their first-time marriage.

Symbolic and formal motives

In her typology, Holland mainly suggests symbolic motives for marrying, such as fulfilling current norms for coexisting or to confirm that the relationship is serious. The symbolic motives are also stressed in the narratives of the interviewees. Through this rite, the bridal couple declares that they have a "real" family and a steady relationship. The heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2005) should be understood as an important part of this norm. The bridal couple

gets access to the advantages of the hegemonic form of coexistence. For the individual, this means that he/she strengthens his/her cultural capital through marriage (Bourdieu, 1994/1999). The wedding as rite and marriage as form also carry a history which those who get married become a part of. This is in itself meaning-making. Apart from setting the individual in a historic and contemporary context, the wedding also makes the relationship between two individuals more public. In the wedding, the couple confirms, in front of others, that they are serious about their relationship. The wedding, therefore, answers a need for affirmation of this type of relationship and the birth of a child works as a trigger for this affirmation. Children have a central role to play in parents' decision whether to get married. The narrators talk about marriage as a way to strengthen the family legally, publically, and privately. Marriage is not only (or primarily) a rite for a couple in love; rather, it is a validation of the whole family in which children are included. Where previously finances in particular have functioned as the binding between the adults, my interpretation is that these external criteria have now been replaced by a sense of the child as the connecting factor, as previous research also reveals (Lappegård & Noack, 2015).

Although many couples stress the symbolic motives of marriage, formal or legal motives are also mentioned by many of the interviewees and seem to be the focus for some couples. The analysis makes clear that marriage might be economically important for couples with children from previous relationships in particular because marriage affects their inheritance rights. The legal/financial perspective has also been highlighted in the previous research (Duvander, 1999; Kuo & Raley, 2016; Le Goff & Ryser, 2010) but not from this perspective. The formal motives mentioned here suggest that current laws "steer in" couples in general and those with children from previous relationships in particular, toward marriage. This has also been suggested by earlier sociological research (Andersson, 2011) and can be taken as an example of how the State helps to produce and reproduce the tools for the construction of social reality (Bourdieu, 1994/1999). The laws of coexistence instituted by the State affects the individual's choice to marry. This can be an explanation of why the number of marriages is rising at the same time as the number of divorces is rising, as do the opportunities to build serial families. This factor has not been discussed to any real extent in earlier research. Instead, theories have been posited suggesting that the increase in marriages is the result of marriage being in fashion (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004). The theory is based on an understanding that the legal differences between cohabitation and marriage are so small that they do not, in themselves, have any impact on the decisions of couples to get married. Other factors, such as marriage being in fashion, can be decisive instead. Such an understanding is not possible if the consideration is based on legal differences for serial families. My study requires interpretation to be more complex.

To conclude, meaning-making of marriage is a complex and relational process, strongly connected to the context in which the marriage occurs. Meaning-making is also related to individual factors. My contribution to the research on the meaning of marriage has been to obtain a deeper understanding of meaning-making as a relational process, constructed in a certain context. The social construction of meaning is complex and can be relevant, in a variety of ways, to take into consideration when analyzing why people get married.

This study was conducted in an area in Sweden that includes small- and medium-sized cities. One possible limitation of this study is that the marriage pattern in small communities differs from those in bigger cities. Other limitations might be that the sample of those interviewed is quite small and the interviews were made some years ago. It is important to take into consideration that the results revealed in this study are not possible to generalize. There might be other ways to make meaning of first-time marriage. This study reveals the meaning-making among these persons, by this time of their lives. It is important with further research of how men and women construct meaning of their marriages; research made in different countries, with people with different life circumstances and in different social settings.

When it comes to strengths with the study, I have already mentioned the theoretical implications of it. However, expanding this research beyond the Swedish culture is essential to create a reliable and valid framework. Furthermore, the study is an example of how results from quantitative studies can be used in qualitative research on marriage and family. More research like this is needed to get a deeper understanding of the meaning of marriage. Until now, this subject has been mainly studied with quantitative methods.

As the civil ceremonies are becoming more common for each year, I also see a need of more studies on meaning-making of civil ceremonies as well as research on the construction of meaning-making of marriage in serial families, as this complex family formation is getting more common in western societies.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Amongst those couples that got married in 2009, 55% had at least one child.
2. Two persons in separate couples had been married before.

3. According to Swedish law, children of unmarried parents automatically receive the mother's surname if the parents have not chosen another name within three months of the child's birth (Namnlagen SFS 1982:670, 1§).

4. By law, unmarried parents must certify who the father of the child is. Two witnesses must be present when the document is signed (Föräldrabalken SFS 1949:381, chapter 1, 4§). However, if the mother is married, no certificate is necessary, as it is then assumed that the mother's husband is father to the child (Föräldrabalken SFS 1949:381, chapter 1, 1§).

5. Married couples inherit each other. Co-habiting couples only inherit the jointly owned dwelling and accompanying joint property. If no will has been drafted, the dead person's children inherit all other assets, while the partner inherits none. See further in Äktenskapsbalken (SFS 1987:230) and Sambolagen (SFS 2003:376).

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