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Love, marriage, then the baby carriage? Marriage timing and childbearing in Sweden

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Abstract

Background: Some scholars claim that marriage is an outmoded institution, decoupled from the childbearing process in Sweden. However, it is likely that the presence of children is still linked to marriage, since most children born to cohabiting couples experience the marriage of their parents. The temporal ordering of childbearing and marriage may be informative as to the meaning of marriage.

Objective: I develop a typology of marriage, structured around four possible meanings of marriage as a Family Forming, Legitimizing, Reinforcing and Capstone institution.

Methods: I analyze administrative register data covering all Swedish women born between 1950 and 1977, who have lived continuously in Sweden and were never married and childless at age 18 (N = 1,396,305). I tabulate the incidence and type of all first marriages by age and educational attainment.

Results: Family Forming marriage (prior to a first conception) is the dominate first marriage type across all cohorts. The share of Legitimizing marriages (post-conception or within 12 months of a first birth) has declined across cohorts. There is an emerging trend toward Capstone marriage (after the birth of two or more children). There is an educational gradient in the experience and type of first marriage. Tertiary-educated women more frequently marry prior to a first birth (Family Forming or Legitimizing marriage). While fewer less-educated women marry, there is greater diversity in the timing of their marriages relative to childbearing.

Conclusions: Results demonstrate a continued link between childbearing and marriage, although the ordering of these events may be changing for some subpopulations.

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