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Understanding the Marriage Effect: Changes in Criminal Offending Around the Time of Marriage

Torkild Hovde Lyngstad & Torbjørn Skarðhamar

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Social bonding theories argue that marriage has a re-training effect on criminal offending. Given what is known about marriage and union formation in contemporary Western societies, it is realistic to assume that the social and emotional bonding between married partners predates the actual date of marriage. In consequence, if these processes influence criminal behavior, we should expect significant reductions in offending several years prior to marriage. Independently of the social bonding theory, it is possible to treat marriage as an outcome of rather than a causal agent in the process of criminal desistance. (...)

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Torkild Hovde Lyngstad & Torbjørn Skarðhamar

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The text

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Abstract

Social bonding theories argue that marriage has a restraining effect on criminal offending. Given what is known about marriage and union formation in contemporary Western societies, it is realistic to assume that the social and emotional bonding between married partners predates the actual date of marriage. In consequence, if these processes influence criminal behavior, we should expect significant reductions in offending several years prior to marriage. Independently of the social bonding theory, it is possible to treat marriage as an outcome of rather than a causal agent in the process of criminal desistance. An individual who has “cleaned up his act” may be more attractive in the market; marriages may be unlikely to occur at elevated points of the criminal trajectory for this reason. These issues have received limited attention in prior research. In this study we examine criminal offending trajectories using a within-individual design and population-wide register data on Norwegian men who entered marital unions in the years 1995-2001 (N=120,821). Our results show a gradual and substantial decrease in offending levels during the five years prior to marriage, followed by a small but a non-trivial increase after the formalization of the relationship. Overall, the decade around the marital event is characterized by major strides towards criminal desistance. However, the effect of marital event is negligible relative to the amount of desistance that takes place prior to marriage. Earlier research may have overstated the importance of marriage as a discrete life course event as a causal factor in criminal desistance.

Keywords

marriage, desistance from crime, social bonds, investments in relationships, register data

Comprendre l'effet du mariage : Changements dans les attitudes criminelles au moment du mariage

Résumé

Les théories du lien social soutiennent que le mariage a un effet réducteur sur la criminalité. Etant donné ce que l'on sait du mariage et de la formation du couple dans les sociétés occidentales contemporaines, il est réaliste de supposer que le lien social et émotionnel entre les mariés précède en temps la date effective du mariage. Par conséquent, si ces processus influencent le comportement criminel, on devrait attendre des réductions significatives de la criminalité plusieurs années avant le mariage. Indépendamment de la théorie du lien social, il est possible de traiter le mariage comme un résultat plutôt que comme un facteur causal dans le processus de renonciation au crime. Un individu qui s'est “rangé” serait plus attirant sur le marché; les mariages auraient peu de chances d'avoir lieu à des niveaux élevés de trajectoire criminelle pour cette raison. Ces questions ont fait l'objet de peu d'attention dans les travaux de recherche jusqu'ici. Dans cette étude, nous examinons les trajectoires de la criminalité en utilisant une conception intra-individu et un registre de données concernant une population d'hommes norvégiens qui sont entrés en union maritale dans les années 1995-2001 (N=120,821). Nos résultats montrent une baisse progressive et significative des niveaux de criminalité au cours des cinq années précédant le mariage, suivie d'une légère mais non négligeable augmentation après la formalisation de la relation. Surtout, la décennie autour de l'événement marital se caractérise par une très importante avancée en matière de renonciation au crime. Cependant, l'effet de l'événement marital est négligeable comparé au niveau de renonciation atteint avant le mariage. Les études antérieures ont peut-être exagéré l'importance du mariage en tant qu'étape de la vie à l'origine de la renonciation au crime.

Mots-clefs

mariage, renonciation au crime, liens sociaux, engagement dans les relations, données de registres

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A large number of studies have argued that marriage is an important causal factor that leads to desistance from crime. Examples include the studies by Laub, Sampson and colleagues, based on their theory of age-graded social control (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). A key argument of this theory is that the effect of getting married does not stem from the formal transition to marriage, but from the quality of the marital bond (Laub et al. 1998: 233). The process of desistance is typically gradual, and may start out with growing commitment to a romantic partner. Importantly, it seems reasonable to assume that commitment to a relationship and a romantic partner increases also well ahead of marriage, and also that it may affect the likelihood of eventually getting married (Wiik et al 2009). Tellingly, two of the men in the Glueck-sample are quoted saying that their turning point was when they *met* their wives (Sampson and Laub 2003: 134, our emphasis). This suggests that any decline in crime around the time of marriage should start around the time of meeting a partner and decline further throughout the dating and courtship period. Few contributions on the marriage-crime relationship have actually studied how criminal activity develops in the period leading up to marriage.

The men interviewed in the studies cited above were born in the 1930s and most of these men thus married in the 1950s or early 1960s, a period where normative systems around the family dictated early, universal marriage and by family scholars denoted “the golden age of marriage” (Coontz 2005). Since then, major changes have taken place in the family systems of industrialized countries (van de Kaa 1987; Kiernan 2004), challenging the role of marriage as a defining moment in individual’s lives. The changes may have implications for the marriage-crime relationship as it include i.e. postponed first marriage, increasing cohabitation rates, increasing duration of non-marital relationships, and a weakened link between first marriage and childbearing (Kravdal 1997; Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Stevenson and Wolfers 2007). One implication is that there probably is a stronger selection into marriage now than a few decades ago.

In this research, we study the timing of change in men’s offending relative to the year of their first

marriage. Our contribution is three-fold: First, we provide a critical review of the theoretical arguments and empirical literature on the marriage-crime relationship. We conclude that although marriage is strongly associated with desistance, a *causal* effect has not empirically established. Neither is it clear whether marriage or desistance comes first. Second, we provide an empirical analysis of desistance and marriage in a way that explicitly focus on the timing of change among those who actually marry. The sample is the total population of all men who married in Norway between 1995 and 2001 (N=120,821 persons). Using a within-individual design, we compare men’s behavior year-by-year over a decade-long period around the time of their marriage. This allows us to study both the period preceding and well as following the marriage, and at the same time by design avoiding any bias due to selectivity into marriage. Third, we use data from Norway, a country where the previously mentioned family changes have been among the more profound, widespread, and normative than in the world (Noack 2001; Kiernan 2004). Given that most countries seem to be moving towards widespread cohabitation (see for example Bumpass and Lu 2010; Castiglioni and Dalla-Zuanna 2009), Norway is an ideal test case for reexamining the marriage effect on desistance from crime.

Marriage and crime: theory and evidence

Whether or not marriage leads to desistance from crime is a long-standing question in sociology and criminology (Sampson and Laub 1993, Shover 1983). The process leading up to marriage might also involve a desistance process, and potentially a reciprocal relationship between desistance and the likelihood of marriage (Thornberry 1987). Theoretically oriented contributions to the literature usually discuss both of these periods of time and the concurrent development in criminality, while most empirical studies of the marriage-crime relationship focus on the *consequences* of getting married on crime. For both conceptual and empirical purposes it is useful to distinguish between the process leading up to marriage and the consequences (or effects) of marriage.

The process leading up to marriage

In an influential study, Laub et al (1998) argue explicitly for desistance as a gradual process

where increasing interactions with the partner and investments in the relationship strengthens the bond between the man and his partner and others connected through the relationship. These stronger bonds will in turn promote desistance. The process leading up to marriage thus starts with the man initiating a romantic relationship to a partner, and during this period of courtship the man might desist from crime to varying degrees (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998: 233).

The effect of a partner relationship, such as a marriage, on an individual's propensity to commit crimes is usually thought to work through at least four specific mechanisms: a) increased *direct social control* by the new spouse, b) increased *social support* available to the man through his spouse, her social network and in-laws (Laub and Sampson 2003), c) changes in *daily routine activities* such as how leisure time is spent (Warr 1998), and d) changes in one's perception of oneself (Laub and Sampson 2003: 46; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). All four of these mechanisms are plausible causal micro-narratives of lower rates of offending after a man initiates a romantic relationship to another person. They are certainly relevant to the process leading up to the formalization of a relationship, but also after this event.

In the process of increasing relationship investments there is likely a continuous selection process of which relationships go on to further investments and which relationships do not. One example is that if the partner is unhappy with the relationship, perhaps because of the man's continuing involvement in criminal activity, she may terminate the relationship. The men in those relationships that survive over time are thus likely to be more "desistance-friendly" than others. Giordano et al. (2011) argue that change is contingent upon a "readiness for change" so that one is less likely to grasp actual opportunities unless one is initially motivated to do so. Thus, offenders are likely to desist from crime when marrying because they are already motivated for making a change in their lives. Moreover, we would expect that those who are motivated for such a change will already before marriage display signs of changed behavior, such as reduction in offending. We would then expect the desistance process to start well before marriage and that this process partly produces systematic selection into marriage. For men who do eventually marry, we would expect that their level of criminality show a steady decline in

the period before the actual marriage. This logic is not necessarily limited to formal marriage, but holds also for other milestones in the development of a romantic relationship, such as moving in together as cohabitants. One interesting study from Finland found that marriage was not associated with reduction in crime, but cohabitation was (Savolainen, 2009). One reason for this is likely to be that in Finland, marriage is usually preceded by cohabitation, so that any effect of the relationship would take effect before marriage. Savolainen's findings are in line with the argument that it is the union formation, and not marriage per se that is of importance.

The consequences of formal marriage for desistance

We now turn to the consequences of marriage itself, or, the effect of getting married on desistance. The process of investments in the relationship is likely to continue after formal marriage. After the marriage is contracted, there might be effects beyond those listed by a) through d) above. For example, a marital union differ from a non-marital union in e) its legal ramifications, and f) the symbolic aspects of both a wedding ceremony and society's response to married individuals relative to that of cohabiting individuals.

It is well established that there is a strong association between marriage and desistance from crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; King, Massoglia, and Macmillan 2007; Blokland and Nieuwebeerta 2005; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006; Theobald and Farrington 2009). There are reasons to question the assumption that this association is causal, i.e. that marriage affects lower crime rates. Selection into marriage is a major problem in comparisons of offending levels in married vs. non-married individuals, even if utilizing sophisticated longitudinal methods¹: Those who eventually choose (or are chosen) to marry might differ from those who do not choose (or are not chosen) to marry on observed as well as unobserved characteristics. These differences are, of course, to some extent the product of varying degrees of prior investments in the relationship as described above. For example, motivation, or "readiness", to marry is likely to in part be determined by the state of the relationship, and strongly

1. For discussion on the limitations of matching techniques on observational data, see (Morgan and Winship 2007: 88; Angrist and Pischke, 2009:69; Freedman and Berk 2010).

correlated with one's willingness to desist from crime. Such differences will severely bias estimates of the difference in crime between married and non-married individuals.

In sum, previous studies have shown a strong association between marriage and desistance from crime, and some studies also suggest that such an association also holds for cohabitation (which possibly leading up to marriage). This association is consistent across almost all across settings and time periods. This association is often interpreted as marriage leads to desistance, but what comes first has not been given much attention in previous studies.

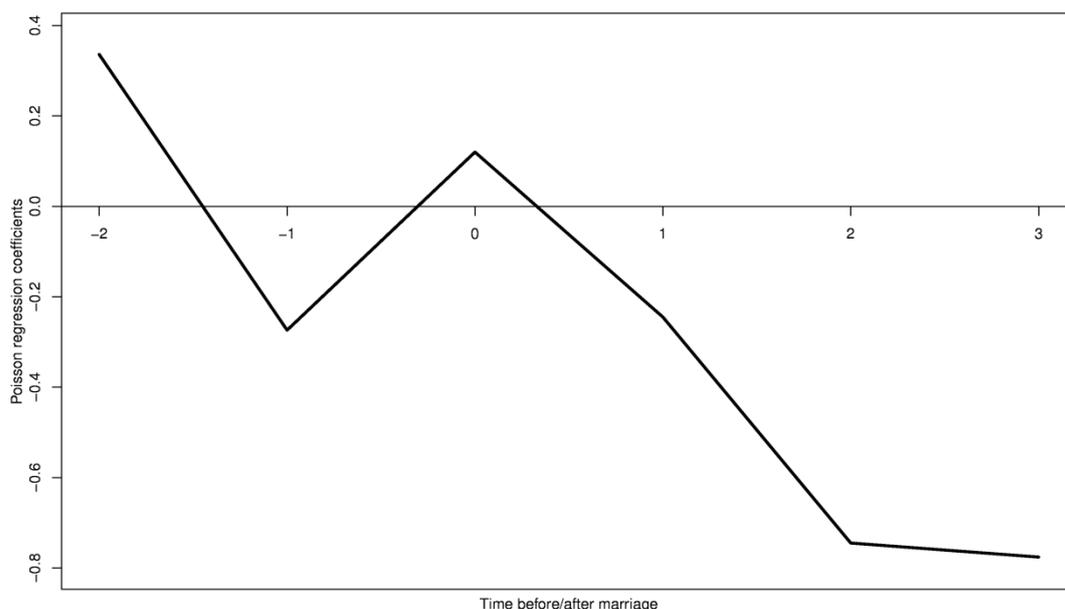
Issues with models and measurement

Previous studies have for the most part compared average offending rates in two states, the married and non-married states. However, studies using regression techniques typically estimate the "effect" of being in the married state versus not being in that state using a time-varying dummy variable for marital status (see e.g. Sampson and Laub, 1993; Horney et al 1995; Blokland et al 2005; Bersani et al 2009). Similarly, studies using matching estimators have also treated the effect of marriage as a "treatment" that takes effect from the date of the wedding and stays the same thereafter (King, Massoglia, and Macmillan 2007;

Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006; Theobald and Farrington 2009). This is not a problem if one only is truly interested in the causal effects of "tying the knot" (i.e. the result of mechanisms 5) and 6) above), but comparing the average levels before and after marriage are likely to conceal changes such as a downward slope in offending before marriage and a possible return to higher crime rates after marriage.

To our knowledge, the study by Laub et al (1998) is the only prior contribution that allows for more flexible patterns of changes in offending around the time of marriage. They used panel data on a sample of delinquent boys from age 7 to 32 with information on convictions for each year and marital status as a time-varying covariate, in a model of the individual's entire conviction trajectory with marital status as a time-varying variable, while at the same time controlling for a host of observable characteristics. Marital status is measured using six dummy variables capturing the annual relative offending rates over the period from two years before marriage to three years after marriage. These estimates (recalculated from the reported estimates for "good marriages" and "not good" marriages) are shown in Figure 1, depicting an average trend with decrease in crime prior to marriage, a temporary increase the year of marriage, and then a continued decrease in crime. However, there is no (statistically significant) change prior to marriage followed by a decrease

Figure 1 : Poisson Regression Parameters for "Marriage Period"
Taken from Laub et al (1998: 234)



after marriage. This supports the idea of growing commitment with time *after* marriage and is consistent with the hypothesized causal effect of marriage on crime. The six-year period they study is, however, rather short, and include only three post-marriage observation years.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has followed the lead from Laub et al (1998) to study the time trend in crime *prior* to as well as *after* marriage. In related literatures we find two recent contributions where fairly similar designs are used: Recently, Kreager et al (2010) examined changes in criminal activity after the transition to motherhood. In contrast to the study by Laub et al., they used a within-individual design on a dataset consisting of *only those who actually experienced the transition*. Duncan et al's (2006) study of changes in binge drinking and illicit substance use around the time of marriage centered a series of annual observations of an individual at the year of entry into first cohabitation or first marriage, and examined how drug use and drinking developed in the years before and after the transition.

To summarize, there are several major limitations in the empirical literature on marriage and crime. First, theoretical contributions view desistance and romantic relationships as mutually reinforcing processes leading to gradual desistance, while only one of the available studies to date take up this idea in an empirical analysis. Laub, Nagin, and Sampson (1998) describes changes in crime around the time of marriage, but only model the differences between married and non-married as a time-varying dummy variable and do not effectively deal with selection into marriage. The other studies compare average criminality between individuals in the married state with individuals in the unmarried state, but without making much or anything out of the likely reciprocal causality of desistance and investments in romantic relationships (and eventually marriage). What regards any causal effect of marriage on crime, a strong claim that marriage leads to lower offending rates require evidence drawn from a nearly perfect quasi-experimental situation where marriage is "randomly assigned" to individuals. Using sophisticated methods on rich data sets, researchers have attempted to mimic experimental situations but it is unlikely that for example matching estimators will yield unbiased results, as no data set contain all potentially relevant confounders. Finally, no study has so far examined

the longer-term changes in offending both prior to and after men's marriage.

Research questions

We set out to fill some of these gaps in the literature, by answering three research questions. Our first research question is whether there is any change in individual's offending *before* the time of marriage. This question corresponds to a test of the idea proposed by Laub et al (1998) and others that romantic relationships are investment processes that lead to gradual desistance from crime.

The second research question deals with the development of the crime rate of those men who actually get married, after the time of their marriage. Here, there are several competing ideas of what to expect from the data: There is the conventional idea that marriage leads to a reduction in crime, over and beyond the desistance that result from the process leading to marriage (i.e. that there is an effect of getting married on crime). In Norway, there might be weaker reasons to believe that such an independent marriage effect should obtain, as cohabitation and childbearing often precedes marriage and are fully accepted by society. In the case "getting serious" in Norway, there should be no further decline in criminality after marriage for those who get married. Finally, there is also the possibility of an *increase in crime after marriage* due to what is the special situation around the time of the wedding. It is possible that men who live rather non-orderly lives tend to get married in a period of their lives characterized by stability, and are probably at an unusually low level of criminality at this time (due to the continuous selection process of gradual desistance). As time progresses after marriage, some of them may suffer blows to their stable life that in turn might lead to increased offending.

Our third and final research questions is an *overall* assessment of how the offending rate develops for men who choose (or are chosen) to marry over *a whole decade* around the time of their wedding. If, for example, there is a gradual process of desistance leading to marriage, but an increase in offending after marriage, the overall long-term picture is unclear.

Data and methods

Our data were extracted from Norwegian administrative registers. The basis for the Norwegian registers is that every resident in Norway has a

personal ID number, and this ID is used routinely by a range of governmental agencies. For example, charged persons are recorded by the police using this ID, and the registrar office records all changes for each person's marital status and child births. The ID makes it possible to link an individual's data from different registers. The data are sent to Statistics Norway for statistical purposes as well as research, with all use strictly regulated by the Norwegian Statistical Act. The register system contain a wide range of measurements organized as either time series or event histories (depending on the type of variable) at the individual level for each resident. Therefore, many of the limitations associated with survey data, such as the data being limited to a geographical area or having a small number of observations, do not plague our study. Furthermore, the only attrition from the data is natural—that is, due to death and emigration. Individual level data from the crime statistics are linked with demographic register system. Both data sources are individual-level, population-wide and longitudinal. For a more thorough discussion of these data, see Røed and Raam (2003) and Lyngstad and Skardhamar (2011).

The information from the police's registers includes all solved cases where the perpetrator is found from 1992 to the end of 2009. These persons have got some kind of legal decision against them, usually a conviction, but can also be conditional waiver of prosecution or the case was transferred to mediation, or the person was not criminally responsible (e.g., low age or not accountable because of mental health issues). For this reason, the data on crimes committed is slightly broader defined than just convictions. An advantage of these data is that in a fair number of cases there is no conviction even though the perpetrator is found and the case is solved. More importantly, the data include each single offence and the date it was *committed* (in contrast to the date of conviction, which may be years later). Although our data on solved cases goes through 2009, we only include offences committed in the period 1992 to 2004 in our analysis. This is to allow for a time lag between when the offence was committed and the case being solved. The crime data are divided into different types of criminal activity; one main distinction is between *serious crimes*, which are considered more serious offenses than *misdemeanors*. The difference is defined in the Norwegian penal code, where misdemeanors are

largely composed of shoplifting, traffic offenses and environmental offenses.

Research design

To answer our research questions, we study the rate of offending year by year before and after the year of marriage, for those men who actually get married. This let us avoid the problem of selection into marriage in the sense that all the men we study got married. On the other hand, it implies that we do not have a control group with whom to compare the married men. For our analysis, we select *all* men resident in Norway who married for the first time between 1995 and 2001, and being between 20 and 50 years old at the year of marriage (N = 120,821 persons).

Our approach is to study the men who get married, and use their criminal histories year by year *before and after* the event as the outcome variable. Thus, we compare the men with themselves before and after the year of marriage. This “within-individual” comparison does not allow for assessing causal effects of relationships or marriage in comparison with a control group, but rather describes the rate of change in offending around the year marriage. In other words, we observe the result of all causal mechanisms that affect desistance and the quality of any relationship the man is in as well as all selection processes in and out of those relationships.

Following Duncan et al (2006), we study the likelihood of committing crimes both in the period leading up to marriage and in the immediately subsequent period. Thus, we examine any changes in the likelihood to commit crime only among those who marry. The parameters of interest are eleven dummy-variables for number of years before and after marriage, capturing the *trends in offending* relative to the year of marriage. Thus, we do not only avoid the problem of spurious relationships that arise when one compares married individuals to unmarried individuals, but also allow for any pattern of the change in offending, both before and after marriage.

Our data on committed offences cover the period 1992 through 2004. The width of the observation window before and after an event depends on which year they married. By selecting all men who married in 1995 through 2001 we make sure that each individual is followed for at least three years and for a maximum of five years *both before*

and after the year of marriage. This implies all men contribute with between seven and eleven observations (person-years) to the analysis. The data set consist of 120,821 persons and a total of 1,087,315 person-years. We have no reason to believe that the fact that some men contribute fewer person-years should bias our results in any way as all contribute at least three years both before and after marriage.

Our outcome variable was defined as a binary indicator of having committed at least one offence in a given year. This outcome variable includes

misdemeanors such as drunk driving and shop lifting. To check whether the results hold also for the more serious crimes, we repeat the analysis excluding all misdemeanors.² The variable of interest is a variable indicating how many years before or after the year of marriage this particular person-year represents. It is categorical variable, where each category indicates how many years the person-year observation is before or after the year of marriage. We denoted this variable *time*, and it

2. The differences between serious crimes vs. misdemeanors are defined in the Norwegian Penal Code.

Table 1. Distributions of Offences Before and After Marriage

Variable	Persons in the sample	All offences Before marriage	After marriage	All serious crimes Before marriage	After marriage
N	120821	13012	9949	4021	3453
Age					
20	281	71	88	41	50
21	635	157	131	64	63
22	1282	279	233	124	94
23	2044	412	301	161	134
24	3098	550	369	185	145
25	4685	685	484	208	173
26	6561	824	633	248	234
27	8477	993	673	312	247
28	9783	1046	764	321	243
29	10548	1129	804	326	253
30	10637	1019	759	266	248
31-34	33407	3154	2541	914	830
35-39	19644	1865	1504	571	508
40-44	7191	620	517	211	185
45-49	2548	208	148	69	46
Time of marriage					
1995	15432	1112	1290	294	483
1996	16015	1543	1399	435	461
1997	17321	2060	1469	592	503
1998	18056	2162	1642	691	621
1999	17253	1927	1479	600	540
2000	17530	2048	1390	678	455
2001	19214	2160	1280	731	390

ranges from -5 to 5 , where $time = 0$ is the year of marriage. The parameters are interpreted as the yearly likelihood (in log odds) of committing at least one offense up to five years prior to and after the year of marriage. The extensive use of dummy variables allows a flexible shape of the offending rates over time before and after marriage.

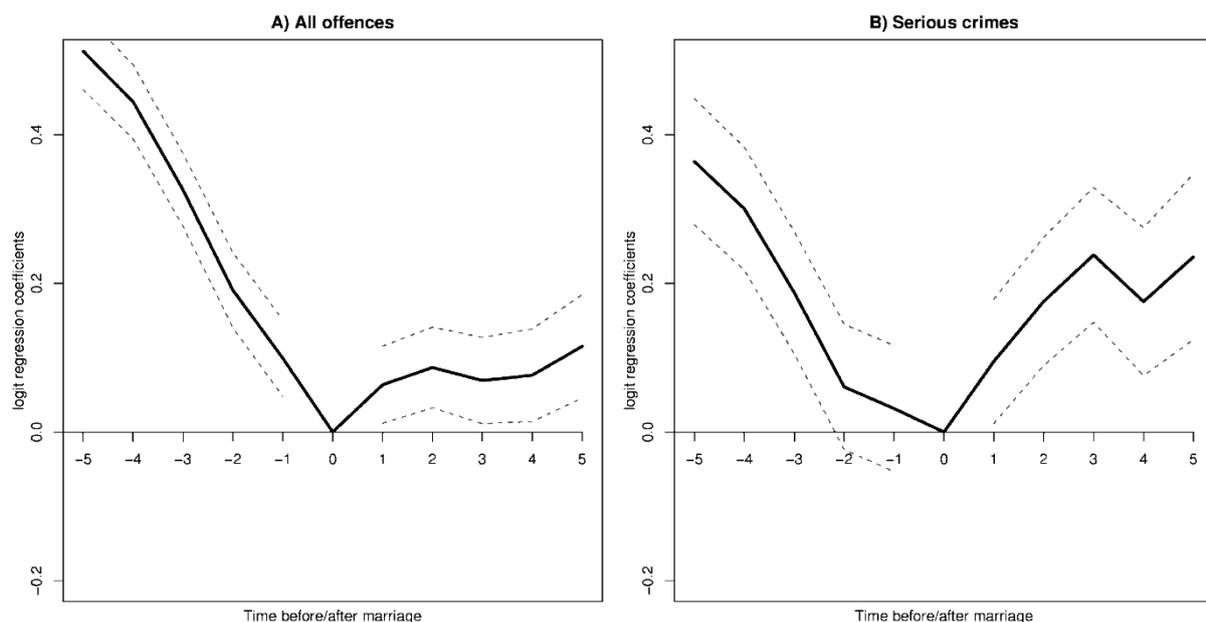
We are not primarily interested in the magnitude or significance of each and every one of these coefficients, but rather the pattern in offending over time they display when considered together. To simplify the presentation, regression parameters are plotted as a function of *time before/after marriage* in Figure 2. In these the plots, dotted lines represent the limits of 95 percent confidence intervals around the point estimates for each year. The baseline category is the year of marriage ($time = 0$), so if the interval between the dotted lines includes the horizontal axis, then the parameter estimate for that time point is not significantly different from the year of marriage.

It is of major concern to rule out that the changes in crime rates are not due to ageing or changes in changes in Police priorities or registration routines etc. We therefore use an extensive battery of dummy variables to control for age and period effects. Age at the year of marriage is entered as a dummy for each one-year group in the ages 18 to 30 and additional dummies for 5-year intervals

for the ages 31-50. The use of 5-year intervals does not affect the results. The period effects are captured by one dummy for each period-year at the time of marriage 1994 through 2001. The distributions of these variables are shown in table 1.

Ordinary logistic regression models were estimated on the data set of person-year observations for each transition. When a data set includes repeated observations for each individual, as is the case with panel designs such as this, several methodological issues arise. First, failing to take account of clustering might underestimate standard errors. This applies to some parameters in our models (those for age and timing), but not to the parameters of interest capturing the trends in offending. The reason for this is that there are no repeated observations within the set of individual observations for the time trend parameters *time*. Thus, the standard errors are appropriately estimated. Second, the results might be seriously biased if the population-averaged effect is not the same as the individual-specific effect. This might occur, if X is unevenly distributed in the population and correlated with an unobserved variable, Z , which also determines Y . As our variable of interest is time prior/after the event, no bias will arise for our time trend parameters. Thus the choice of model will in our case affect neither the estimates for neither the parameters of

Figure 2 : Logit Parameter Estimates of Propensity of Offending Leading up to and after Marriage.



interest nor their associated standard errors. Thus, whether to use ordinary logit models or random effects logit models is of no importance in our case. To assure that the results are not affected by our modeling choice, we have nevertheless estimated both models presented in Figure 2 with also a random intercept term at the person level. The differences in results were not important in any substantive way, and we report the ordinary logit coefficients.

Results and discussion

We present the results from our two regression models as figures of relative offending rates around the time of marriage. In addition, the complete results are available in Table 2. Figure 2 shows the results for two models, one with any offence as the outcome and one restricting the outcome variable to only serious crimes. The men marry at year $time = 0$, at the center of the figures.

Table 2. Results from Two Logistic Regression Models of Offending

	All offences		All serious crimes	
Intercept	-3.8233	0.0304	-4.8539	0.0506
<i>Time (ref=0)</i>				
-5	0.5147	0.0261	0.3700	0.0432
-4	0.4459	0.0254	0.3077	0.0421
-3	0.3258	0.0251	0.1929	0.0418
-2	0.1938	0.0257	0.0702	0.0429
-1	0.1011	0.0262	0.0373	0.0432
1	0.0634	0.0265	0.0960	0.0427
2	0.0874	0.0277	0.1768	0.0441
3	0.0685	0.0296	0.2380	0.0462
4	0.0767	0.0318	0.1772	0.0508
5	0.1137	0.0354	0.2325	0.0569
<i>Year of marriage (ref=1998)</i>				
1995	-0.1414	0.0226	-0.2573	0.0370
1996	-0.0906	0.0212	-0.2614	0.0353
1997	-0.0798	0.0199	-0.1699	0.0326
1999	-0.0509	0.0208	-0.0782	0.0337
2000	0.00983	0.0211	0.0208	0.0343
2001	-0.0402	0.0217	-0.0192	0.0354
<i>Age of marriage (ref=30)</i>				
20	1.5495	0.0690	2.0916	0.0906
21	1.2225	0.0539	1.5129	0.0801
22	1.1008	0.0419	1.4116	0.0633
23	0.8900	0.0379	1.0572	0.0607
24	0.6885	0.0349	0.8321	0.0569
25	0.4535	0.0328	0.5365	0.0547
26	0.3141	0.0309	0.3848	0.0519
27	0.1833	0.0298	0.2445	0.0504
28	0.1080	0.0293	0.1329	0.0499
29	0.0963	0.0288	0.1175	0.0492
31	-0.00863	0.0296	0.0116	0.0505
32	0.000907	0.0310	0.0653	0.0523
33	-0.0108	0.0324	0.00709	0.0552
34	0.0224	0.0335	0.0856	0.0563
35	0.0597	0.0348	0.1639	0.0578
36	0.0709	0.0369	0.1185	0.0622
37	-0.00408	0.0412	0.1586	0.0666
38	0.00790	0.0441	0.0115	0.0754
39	-0.00616	0.0473	0.0463	0.0794
40	0.0729	0.0501	0.2067	0.0812
41	-0.0745	0.0550	0.0335	0.0900
42	0.0355	0.0637	0.1517	0.1035
43	-0.2708	0.0773	-0.1713	0.1269
44	-0.0544	0.0795	0.0837	0.1279
45-49	-0.2001	0.0515	-0.2351	0.0896

In the figure in the left panel, for which the outcome is defined as any offence being committed in the year of interest, we observe a strong decrease in crime rates toward $time = 0$. After the time of marriage, crime rates level off and finally show a moderate *increase*. Despite the increase in the years after marriage, the offending rate remains at a level below that at the start of the observation window.

The right panel of Figure 2 shows the results from a model identical in all respects apart from the outcome definition, which here is restricted to serious crimes only. Also in this case there is a marked decline in serious offences leading up to $time = 0$, the time of marriage, as well as an increase in the years after marriage. This increase is however stronger than for all offences.

We conclude that with either outcome definition, a reduction in crime is initiated well before marriage. Also, the year of marriage is in both cases the time where offending is the least likely to be committed. For both outcome definitions, we observe an increase in offending subsequent to marriage, but this increase is stronger when we restrict the outcome to serious crimes.

Offending declines before marriage

We have now established that there are marked observable changes in offending for those who get married before marriage. In both cases, we observed a decrease in offending up to five years *before* and continuing up to the time of marriage. Our findings thus extend and improve on the findings from Laub et al (1998), who documented a decreasing (but statistically insignificant) trend in offending two years prior to marriage. Our findings are also consistent with the study of Duncan et al (2006) which is the only other study we are aware of in which a similar trend (in illicit drug use) is modeled over the period before marriage.

We suggest that there might be two main reasons for the decrease in all offences before marriage. First, in most contemporary industrialized societies, it is increasingly common to establish marriage-like cohabitating relationships as a stepping stone towards marriage. This implies that the changes in criminal behavior will take place already at this stage. Second, this period of initial commitment is also a trial-period for many couples. If the relationship does not work out as

well as they hoped, they are less likely to get married at all, or splitting up. If the partner does not approve offending, then men who do not show signs of desisting from crime will be less likely to get married. Thus, marriage may be an *outcome* of one's gradual shift towards more stable, conforming life style. Our study supports the idea that initiation of changes in offending might precede marriage.

Laub, Nagin and Sampson (1998) did not find a statistically significant "courtship effect" before marriage, but this does not necessarily run counter to our findings. It seems reasonable to expect different patterns for those who married in the US in the 1950s and early 1960s compared to those who married in Norway in the late 1990s, where cohabitation and non-marital childbearing is the norm for younger cohorts.

The period following marriage

Our second research question concerned what happens after men marry with respect to their criminal careers. Many previous studies have tried, by way of sophisticated methods, to isolate the causal effect of marriage on crime, and in all cases this causal effect is assumed to be negative, in the sense that it reduces offending rates. If this general idea of a causal effect of marriage is correct, we should observe a further (abrupt or gradual) decline in offending following the time of marriage (even if our research design does not allow a comparison with a control group).

Contrary to the hypothesis of an independent effect of marriage we found that there is an *increase* in offending after marriage, suggesting that any marriage-effect is at least to some extent a "courtship effect" generated by the special relationship conditions around the time of marriage, which seems to wane shortly afterwards. What may these special conditions be? We suggest that men with a tendency to commit crimes will tend to get married in one of the more stable periods of their lives with relatively low crime rates. This argument is based on the idea proposed by Laub et al (1998) that desistance results from a stepwise process of investments in relationships. Given that one is also selected by one's partner in order to marry, and assuming that most female partners prefer non-criminal men, a man is less likely to experience marriage unless he appears to be able to desist at least to some extent. For this reason, the year of marriage could be thought

of as representing a lower bound of their offending. Thus, the increase in offending after marriage can be considered an artifact of the presumably low offending rates at the year of marriage. Regardless of what interpretation is given of the increase in offending, the post-marriage periods certainly not offer a further spell of desistance as has been suggested in the literature.

The post-marriage increase is markedly stronger for serious crimes than all offenses, which indicates that misdemeanors such as traffic offences and simple shoplifting are to a larger degree done away with in the pre-marriage period than crimes such as serious violence and drug offending. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that certain types of offending are more affected by fairly stable, individual-level visceral factors such as proneness to addictions and temperament.

Reanalysis with before-marriage/after-marriage indicator variable

At first sight, our finding of no decline after marriage might appear contradictory to what has been reported from many previous studies. We suggest that this is because in the earlier work, models of offending have been specified so that changes in pre-marriage offending would not be detectable. However, we would have reached a similar conclusion as reached in previous studies if we merely had compared the average level of criminality before and after marriage, and ignored the existence of a downward trend before marriage.

We repeated our analyses reported in Table 2 (and Figure 2) using the exact same data set. The model specification was also identical, but for one exception: We did not include the set of dummy variables for each year before and after marriage, denoted *time*. Instead we included a single dummy variable that is set to 1 in person-year observations during the married state and 0 in person-year observations during the non-married state. The difference in offending (measured on the log-odds scale) between married individuals and non-married individuals is captured by the regression coefficient of the dummy variable.

For all types of offences, this “effect of marriage” is now consistent with previous studies as the regression coefficient is estimated at $\beta = -0.244$ and is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Thus, the average odds of offending is lower when married compared to not-married. We also repeat the

analysis including only serious crimes giving a less strong result: the estimated regression coefficient $\beta = -0.05$ and statistically significant ($p = 0.0103$). The full results of these regression models are available upon request from the authors. Evidently, one may with this model specification get the impression that there is indeed a reduction in offending when getting married and that the level of offending stays constant thereafter. Crucially, with our data these patterns only appear if we ignore any changes *before* marriage.

A decade of desistance?

In our third research question, we asked how the pattern of offending of men getting married looked when considered as a whole. In other words, what picture emerges when we consider the men and their offending rates over the complete decade around the time of their first marriage? Clearly, this total picture is one of desistance from crime. For both outcomes definitions, the general pattern is that offending rates are lower five years after marriage than five years before marriage. However, this desistance is not clearly linked to the time of marriage in itself, but rather to the process leading up to marriage and whatever made these men marry in the first place.

Our results have important implications for criminological research on family formation and crime. It is time to stop viewing marriage as a particularly important turning point in the process of desistance when considering contexts from contemporary industrialized societies, as the reduction in crime begins well *before* marriage. Following the ideas suggested by Laub et al (1998), more time and effort should be devoted to studying the intricate, reciprocal relationship between having a partner and a relationship and choosing to desist from crime, and the development of this relationship over time. This means that researchers should collect longitudinal data on romantic relationships of all types and at all developmental stages, alongside collecting data on offending.

Limitations of the study

There are some important limitations to this study. First, one may argue that since e.g. cohabitation and childbearing within cohabiting unions are much more common in Norway than in a number of other industrialized countries, this context may represent a special case with little relevance

outside Scandinavia. However, it is no doubt that similar demographic changes have occurred to a large extent also elsewhere, and it has been argued by others that rather than being an “outlier”, the Scandinavian countries have been seen as “front-runners” in the past decade’s demographic changing family patterns, and other Western countries seem to be becoming more similar with time (Sobotka 2008). There is nevertheless a need to assess the impact of demographic events on criminal activity across societies, as the most cited studies so far have been from the US and UK (Farrington and West 1995; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; King, Massoglia, and Macmillan 2007; but see Bersani, Laub, and Nieuwebeerta 2009). It is important to note, however, that if we ignore the possible trends before and after marriage and instead compare average rates in offending before and after marriage, our findings are similar to those reported in previous studies.

Second, it follows from our arguments above that studying the initiation of a romantic relationship and the transition to cohabitation should be given a higher priority by researchers working with desistance from crime. The Norwegian administrative demographic data do not include direct information about cohabitation (unless in particular circumstances involving common children). However, efforts are underway in Scandinavian countries to remedy this problem, and future studies should take advantage of data on cohabitation (see Savolainen 2009). Third, administrative data do not, of course, include information on the qualitative aspects of romantic partnerships, as surveys might (see e.g. Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). We do not have any information on relationship commitment, marital quality or similar indicators. Fourth, it is possible that some persons in the sample spent some time in prison during the observation period. Imprisonments should be dealt with as interval censoring, but we did not have access to information on imprisonments, a limitation our study shares with most other previous studies. One consequence of this limitation might be that the estimated probability of offending is biased downwards. However, lest men tend to get married while imprisoned (which we find rather unlikely), we cannot see how this could explain our main results.

A final caveat is that we have only estimated the *average* change in offending trajectories. This

implies of course that certain groups, say, high-rate offenders, might display a different pattern. Our approach addresses the average effect of marriage, of which desistance from an active criminal career is a special case. It is not quite clear from theory, however, that there would be any differences in marriage effects for different sub-groups. Heterogeneity in the response to marriage would be an interesting topic for future research.

Conclusion

We have described the annual changes in offending before and after marriage for all Norwegian men married between 1995 and 2001. An important lesson for criminological research from our study is that there are good reasons to doubt whether marriage can be seen as a turning point in the desistance process. We suggest that more attention should be paid to the *process leading up to marriage and the concurrent rate of change* in criminal behavior rather than treating a life course transition such as marriage as an experimental “treatment” that induces permanent changes in men’s behavior. Our results generally support Sampson and Laub’s idea that the key to desistance is the social bonds between the man, his partner, and others. The marriage, in itself, does not lead to lasting change in a man’s criminal behavior, and there are good reasons to doubt whether there are any additional causal effects of marriage when compared to other types of committed relationships. Marriage might not any more be the stage of the family formation process that is most important for desistance. Instead, it should be considered as a part of a more complex chain of events that includes the courtship process the initiation of a co-residential relationship, and the transition to parenthood.

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