


Article

Using Intersectional Perspectives in the Studies of Non-Religion Ritualization

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Abstract: In the 21st century, the Church of Sweden has lost its dominant position regarding the ritualization of births, marriages, and deaths in Sweden. Above all, name giving ceremonies, civil weddings, and civil funerals have become more common. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how intersectional perspectives can improve the understanding of the construction of non-religion in life-cycle ritualization, such as name giving ceremonies and civil funerals, performed beyond religious or non-religious organizations. This article presents the intersectional analyses of two non-religion ritual narratives as examples of how intersectional analyses could be conducted. The analysis clarifies the impact of power in non-religion ritualization, and how non-religion is constructed in relation to other discursive categories, in this case gender, sexuality, social class and nationality. The conclusion is that the use of intersectional perspectives is relevant for gaining a complex understanding of the construction of non-religion as well as knowledge of ritualization beyond religious or non-religious organizations nowadays.

Keywords: non-religion; civil ceremonies; ritual; intersectionality; funeral; name giving ceremony; narrative



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1. Introduction

This article explores how intersectional perspectives can improve studies of the construction of non-religion in civil ceremonies, such as name giving ceremonies and civil funerals, performed outside religious or non-religious organizations. These forms of life-cycle rituals have increased dramatically in Sweden during the last decades.¹ However, with a few exceptions (cf. Høeg 2009; Jarnkvist 2011, 2019, 2020), there has been little interest in qualitatively studying civil ceremonies in Nordic countries. Such studies are needed to gain a deeper understanding of what ritualization of significant life events means for people in Sweden today (Jarnkvist 2019) as well as how non-religion is constructed beyond organized atheist and other non-religious cultures (Lee 2015a, 2015b).

Research on life-cycle rituals have revealed that social categories such as class, gender and nationality are made through, and effect, ritualization (Adeniji 2008; Jarnkvist 2011; Le Goff and Ryser 2010; Gustafsson 2003; Høeg 2009). However, social stratifications are often studied as single categories and intersectional approaches are rare. Intersectionality clarifies how social categories interact in individual lives, social practices, and institutional arrangements, and what the interactions lead to in terms of power (Davis 2008). This article aims to provide a complex understanding of the construction of non-religion in life-cycle ritualization through an intersectional perspective.

In line with Lee (2015b), I argue that existential issues continue to be relevant and are still ritualized outside religious settings, which is also presented in previous research

¹ By example, civil funerals have increased from about four percent in 2000, to about twelve percent in 2019 (Sveriges Begravningsbyråers Förbund 2020). Only one third of all couples in Sweden, who got married in 2019, chose a wedding within the Church of Sweden who, before the separation from the state in year 2000, were the leading organizer of life-cycle rituals in Sweden (The Church of Sweden 2020).

(e.g., [Jarnkvist 2019](#)). Civil ceremonies can relate to, as well as make distance from, religious organizations and religion, in different ways. In this article, I present an intersectional analysis of two narratives with ritual actors, who say that they have chosen a civil ceremony because they want to keep a distance from organized religion in the ritualization. Drawing from the narrative methodology ([Johansson 2005](#)) and ritual practice theory ([Bell 1997](#); [Humphrey and Laidlaw 2006](#)), I focus on the narrators' ritual life-script and how narrators talk about ritual as a practice. The intersectional perspective contributes to a complex knowledge of how non-religion is constructed in relation to different social categories in civil ceremonies. The article is structured as follows. I first present a brief overview of the previous research and theoretical framework used in the paper. After describing the method applied in the study, I present my findings and analysis. Finally, I discuss the results.

2. Non-Religion in Life-Cycle Rituals

Most research on non-religion examines organized atheism or humanism (e.g., [Cragun et al. 2017](#); [Smith 2011](#)). However, as [Lee \(2015a\)](#) concludes, there is a need for further research on non-religion beyond these organizations. Many people seem to identify themselves as “not religious,” “non-religious” or “secularist,” rather than “atheists” or “humanists.” Lee has found that “atheist” and “humanist” often associate to certain convictions, while concepts such as “secularist” or “non-religious” are more open for ambivalence.

What, then, is non-religion? Non-religion and secularism are terms often used as synonyms. In this study, I use the term non-religion. Many researchers define non-religion as the rejection of religion or “irreligion” (e.g., [Smith 2011](#)). However, during the last century, several researchers have problematized the categorizing of people as either religious or not religious (e.g., [Af Burén 2015](#); [Rosen 2009](#); [Willander 2014](#)). They have made methodological reflections in terms of studying religion in modern society ([Willander 2014](#)), criticized the one-dimensional perspective of religion ([Rosen 2009](#)), and asked for an understanding of “religiosity” and “secularity” (non-religion) that consider expressions of complexity, contradiction and (in)congruity ([Af Burén 2015](#); [Lee 2015b](#); [Smith 2011](#)).

In line with Lee, I argue that non-religion should be viewed as “any form of difference, not merely rejection, and as distance from any aspect of religion, not just theism” ([Lee 2015a](#)). When doing so, the interest is drawn to processes and representations “moving closer to non-religious godlessness or non-religious cultures and experiences that may be positive and concrete” ([Lee 2015a](#)). Life-cycle rituals are example of moments for such experiences, when existential issues can be elaborated with, non-religious experiences (such as experiences of love, life, and death) and existential cultures (such as atheism, agnosticism, and ambivalence) can be expressed and formed.

I have chosen to analyze narratives of people who say that they want to distance themselves from religion and religious organizations in their ceremonies. From that aspect, I categorize them as rejecters and non-religious. However, the focus in this article is not on what the interviewees might believe or not believe in. Nor do I try to sort them in boxes of “atheists,” “humanists,” “agnostics” or any other categories. Instead, I focus on how the narrators talk about the ritualization and what kind of meaning ritual practices might have for them. Doing so, I can spot the construction of non-religion in ritualization. In the article, I present my analysis of two ritual narratives. The analysis of Fanny's narrative of a name giving ceremony sheds light on how non-religion is constructed in relation to other discursive categories, in this case gender, sexuality, social class and nationality. The analysis of Astrid's narrative about a funeral reveals knowledge of the impact of power in non-religion ritualization and how non-religion is constructed in relation to social class and nationality.

3. Theoretical Starting Point

In this section, I outline the perspective used on rites and ritualization, then I discuss the relation between ritualization and different discursive categories. Drawing from ritual practice theory (Bell 1997), my starting point is that ritualization is conducted in relation to the social context to which the individuals belong. There is no specific meaning imbedded in the ritual itself; instead, the ritual actor constructs the meaning. Sometimes the action is meaningless (Humphrey and Laidlaw 2006, p. 274). Bell (1997) describes rites as part of a historical process in which old cultural patterns are reproduced, but emphasizes that ritual actors can reinterpret and change these patterns. The rite is tied to and integrated with the community's worldview (1997, pp. 81–83). Thus, rites are not only traditional acts, but also imbibe changes in society and culture.

Ritual practice theory is partly inspired by Durkheim's ([1915] 1965) classical theory of ritual as social practice, intended to bring order to society and separate the sacred from the profane. However, Bell problematize the understanding of ritual as a basic and universal phenomenon with a clear and structural mode of action (Bell 2006). Instead, ritual practice theory emphasizes the complexities and contradictions there are in ritualisation, and underline the importance of studying ritualisation in relation to the social context in which it occurs. By combining the practice theoretical perspective on ritualization with intersectional theory, which emphasis social structures' impact on individuals, institutions, and society (Christensen and Jensen 2012), the understanding of civil ceremonies' meaning and function is deepened. Former research on life-cycle rituals has primarily studied the construction of gender, class, and cultural identity in medial (Winch and Webster 2012; Heise 2012) and personal (Bromberg 2005; Broekhuizen and Evans 2016; Le Goff and Ryser 2010) narratives. Studies on wedding rituals in religious and civil contexts reveal that individuals construct femininity (Adeniji 2008), motherhood (Jarnkvist 2011) as well as fatherhood (Le Goff and Ryser 2010) and social class (Jarnkvist 2011, 2019) in the ritualization. Baptism (Reimers 1995; Høeg 2009), weddings (Jarnkvist 2011) and funerals (Bäckström et al. 2004; Wiig-Sandberg 2006) held in the Nordic folk churches can be a way of showing loyalty to the country and its culture. Studies from the first years of 2000 show that the heteronormativity is strong in ritual culture in Sweden (Adeniji 2008; Svensson 2007) and that life-cycle rituals performed within the Church of Sweden are normative for other civil ceremonies (Jarnkvist 2011, 2019, 2020).

Even though previous research on life-cycle rituals sheds light on the impact and construction of different discursive categories in ritualization, intersectional perspectives are rare. Davis (2008, p. 68) defines intersectionality as "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power." Intersectionality has its roots in black feminism from the middle of the 19th century, and its critic of white middle class feminism not recognizing different power relations (such as race and class) in women's lives (Brah and Phoenix 2004). The analysis of the impact on the intersection of different power relations, in peoples' lives as well as on different levels in society, has become recognized in feminist research since then. According to intersectional perspectives, social stratifications affect people's living conditions and are also remade by human actions. One stratification, such as gender, cannot be separated from other stratifications but is made in relation to them and effected by them (Brah and Phoenix 2004). Intersectional perspectives can uncover positions of privilege that are often ignored or taken for granted and reveal how power structures and positions are challenged and renegotiated (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014). Therefore, intersectional analyses are appropriate to use when studying the complexity in a social phenomenon such as the construction of non-religion in life-cycle rituals in contemporary Sweden.

This article clarifies how different structures of power intersect in the construction of non-religion in civil ceremonies. I focus on the power relations that are of specific interest in relation to non-religion life-cycle rituals in this material: gender, social class, sexuality, and nationality. I suggest that intersectionality can be used to make critical and constructive

insights in studies on non-religion and ritualization. Intersectionality provides a critique of existing power relations and institutional practices relevant for non-religion ritualization and, thus, improves the framing and understanding of the construction of non-religion in life-cycle rituals.

4. Materials and Methods

This article presents an analysis of two ritual narratives from a study on civil ceremonies, approved by The Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala (Reg. No. 2016/488). Interviewees included parents of children who were the subject of name-giving ceremonies, couples who had civil weddings, and relatives of people given a civil funeral. Celebrants and personal contacts helped me identify the people to interview. In selecting interviewees, I wanted to represent the different types of civil ceremonies, and conducted nine interviews with twelve people during the spring of 2017. The interviewees ranged in age from 28 to 68 years and lived in different parts of Sweden. Eight were born in Sweden, while four had immigrated as adults. All were well educated: two were university students while the rest had university degrees. Each interview focused on a certain ceremony that took place in 2013–2017. Interviews were conducted (mostly) at the interviewees' homes. Each interview session was 70–150 min long, with an average of 90 min. The narrators talked about the background of the rites, practices, and material used in the ritual, and how they experienced and interpreted the practices and artifacts. Each interview was subsequently transcribed and anonymized.

The analysis uses a narrative approach due to its ability to make human experiences meaningful and to turn actions, feelings, and thoughts into a form of organized puzzle. In the narrative method, the person's story is central, as it says something about the individual as well as the subject discussed (Johansson 2005). Each story is also marked by the context in which it is told. As such, life story narratives contain important actual information, but can also be analyzed as representations. Narratives describe how people draw on different social categories in constructing their life story (Prins 2006, p. 281). In the analysis, I strove both to take the actual information about ritual creation seriously, and analyze how, for example, non-religion was constructed discursively in relation to other social categories. The use of intersectional perspective in the narrative analysis makes visible the different ways of positioning and how non-religion in ritualization is partly related to the individual's access to power in society. Narratives are also adjusted for varying audiences. These different positions relate to processes of, for example, ethnic, gendered, and classed identification. Following this argumentation, intersectionality can be explored by examining how people stress their different affiliations in their life-stories (Christensen and Jensen 2012). Drawing from Christensen and Jensen (2012), I use empirical material of ritual stories as a way to approach constructions of non-religion in ritualization as well as the role that social categories play in people's lives.

In the analysis, I read all the anonymized transcripts to get an overview of the material. The following questions have been central for the analysis: How does the narrator position herself in relation to religion and religious/non-religious organizations? How is the positioning acted out in the ritualization? Which social categories, if any, are represented in the empirical material? Are any norms for behavior discernible in the material? How are these norms reproduced, reinforced, or challenged? How do different categories intersect with each other in the narrative? How are different forms of power expressed and experienced?

I selected the narratives of two people—Fanny and Astrid—to present in this article. These narratives have clear story lines and describe the ritual in detail. In this material the narratives also represent two common ways of relating to religion and religious organizations in the ritual. While Fanny emphasizes the importance of neutrality in relation to religion, Astrid takes a clear stand against religion, especially Christianity. The different ways of positioning result in differences in the ritualization. The chosen narratives also represent two different ceremonies; Fanny talks about a name giving ceremony, and Astrid

about a funeral. These rituals are very different from each other in many ways. However, they are both events when existential questions are actualized, as they focus on the beginning and end of life respectively, which makes them especially interesting in this study (cf. Lee 2015b). I present my analysis of the two narratives below as examples of how intersectional perspectives can contribute to the understanding of non-religion life-cycle rituals. The chosen narratives illustrate how non-religion is constructed in relation to femininity/motherhood, sexuality, nationality, and social class, as well as the impact of different forms of power in ritualization. The mentioned social categories were found to be relevant in the narratives of Fanny and Astrid.

5. Results

In this section, I present the narratives of Fanny and Astrid. Fanny is one of the Swedish-born narrators who talks about the importance of having a religiously neutral ceremony, not affected by Christianity or the Church of Sweden. The name giving ceremony she has created is a tribute to heterosexual love, core families and motherhood, the way she understands it. Astrid is a Swedish-born, upper middle class, elderly woman. She talks about the funeral of her husband, who was an outspoken atheist, as the moment in memory of the deceased, as well as a time for mourning together with friends and family. Astrid expresses the loss of a ritual manuscript to hold on to and the narrative presents how power is situated in ritualization.

5.1. Constructing Middle Class Motherhood in a Name Giving Ceremony

Fanny, a Swedish born well-educated woman around 35 years of age, has a high position within social health services. She is not baptized and has never been a member of the Church of Sweden. However, she visits churches occasionally because she likes the space, she says. Fanny married in church because her husband-to-be wanted to, but it seems like she would not have chosen to do it otherwise. When the couple had their first child, it became important to Fanny to celebrate the birth of the child. In the interview, she says that she absolutely did not want the child to be baptized, as she did not want to decide about her daughter's membership in a religious organization. Moreover, Fanny says that she feels uncomfortable with the sayings in the Baptism ceremony. "One asks very, very big questions to a child who does not understand, so I have not felt comfortable with baptism," Fanny says. On the other hand, Fanny expresses that she has nothing against Christianity as such. "As I think, she [the daughter] is welcome to get baptized, I would be glad if she wanted to get baptized one day, however it is not something that I will do for her," Fanny says. She emphasizes the importance of not directing her daughter in any religious way, and she does not want anyone else to do it either: "I do not know if she will become a Christian. Maybe she wants to belong to some other religion, and I *do think* that no one is to guide her. Of course, I have many values that I will transfer to her, but I do not have a wish to shape her to become a Christian," Fanny says.

Fanny's narrative reveals an ambivalent relation to religion (cf. Lee 2015a). She makes it clear that she wants to distance herself from religion, at least Christianity, but at the same time, she says that she would be happy if her daughter wanted to be baptized. However, Fanny seems to take it for granted that her daughter should want to be religious in some way. The story gets even more complex as Fanny says that her husband wanted to baptize their child. According to him, that is something one just has to do when a child is born, and he likes the ceremony, Fanny says in the interview. "I understood that he had a very strong feeling for baptism, which is not really tied to any particular faith in God. And then I thought it reasonable that my discomfort before it would win over his desire for just such a ceremony," Fanny says. After a discussion about the morally propriety of having a religious rite if one is not a believer oneself, the husband changed his mind and agreed on not letting their child be baptized. However, then he at first was not interested in having any ceremony at all. Nevertheless, when Fanny had explained to him that this was important to her, he agreed on having a name giving ceremony.

Previous research has revealed that there can be some tension surrounding life-cycle rituals. Couples might have different views on the value of tradition, for example, or they might disagree on the type of narrative being told about the meaning and purpose of the ritual (Jarnkvist 2011, p. 180ff; Lee 2015b, p. 181). Both examples seem to reflect Fanny's and her husband's situation. However, the use of an intersectional perspective can help us better understand this tension. Fanny's story clarifies that the norm of baptism is strong not only in her husband's family but also among their common friends. The couple had participated in many Baptism rituals, however, name giving ceremonies were new to them. Deciding to have a name giving ceremony includes breaking strong norms and traditions. This can be difficult for many people (e.g., Jarnkvist 2019). Why so? From an intersectional perspective, it pertains to the impact of different power relations. According to previous research, celebrating life-cycle rituals in the Church of Sweden can be a way to show loyalty with, and in relation to, Sweden as a nation (e.g., Jarnkvist 2011; Reimers 1995; Høeg 2009; Bäckström et al. 2004; Wiig-Sandberg 2006). It is a way to construct Swedishness. Name giving ceremonies do not (yet) have these connotations. Moreover, inviting friends and family to life cycle rituals seems to be an important part of constructing the middle class in Sweden (Jarnkvist 2011, 2019). If the couple had chosen not to have a ceremony they would have broken with this norm. However, Fanny treated the situation in the same way as several other Swedish born narrators. She transferred ritual practices from the baptism into the civil ceremony. Fanny hired a celebrant, and instead of water on the child's head, as in Christian baptism, Fanny's child got a crown of flowers. "This was when it happened," Fanny said in the interview, emphasizing the importance of a transition act in the ritual. The ritual of the Church of Sweden was used as a normative foundation out of which the civil ceremony was designed (cf. Jarnkvist 2019). The similarity made the name giving ceremony a "real rite," according to Fanny. The importance of traditionalization and the similarity between the rites is made visible. In addition, Bell (1997, p. 145) describes the element of traditionalization as very important in ritualization. The fact that civil ceremonies often inspires with the rites performed in churches has been recognized in previous research (Høeg 2009; Jarnkvist 2011, 2019; MacMurray and Fazzino 2017). My interpretation indicates that, by transforming practices from the religious ritual into a non-religious context, Fanny constructs non-religion in intersection with middle class Swedishness. The civil ceremony's similarity to the religious hegemonic ritual gives the name giving ceremony credit, in the eyes of friends and family as well as Fanny's husband, and Fanny's (as well as her husband's) social status is guaranteed (cf. Jarnkvist 2019).

Why then, was it more important to Fanny than to her husband, to have a ceremony celebrating the birth of their child? A close reading of Fanny's story about what she found to be especially important in the ritualization might answer that question. When I ask Fanny about it in the interview, she says:

The choice of songs felt very important. Probably more for me than for my husband. So, I thought about them long and long. It was important to me that the songs were non-Christian. That it didn't slip in anything Christian. That it was songs that described the love we felt. The gratitude we felt. For me, it was also a way to lift the songs that I myself, as a very young thought, that these are children's songs. That I finally got to use my youth's thoughts about being a parent.

Fanny clarifies that the choice of songs were important in the planning of the rite and she mentions three things of certain importance; that the songs were "non-Christian," that they described the thankfulness and love that the couple felt towards their baby and, finally, that the songs confirmed the thoughts that Fanny had about parenthood. The place that God and the church have in the Christian baptism have been replaced in the name giving ceremony with the small child as an individual and the family as a collective. By doing so, the rite is an example of the new ritual paradigm that Bell describes as a part of the current individualization (cf. Bell 1997, p. 264). Focusing on the child as an individual might also be interpreted as a way of constructing non-religion by distancing from theism.

The quotation also declares that non-religion is a form of difference, not only rejection of theism (cf. Lee 2015a). After declaring that she distanced herself from Christianity in the ritualization, Fanny moves forward and presents the “secular sacred;” heterosexual love that is fulfilled through the love of the newborn child. The narrative makes visible how non-religion is constructed in intersection with sexuality, femininity, and motherhood. The choice of having a name giving ceremony was a way for Fanny to be released from the religious connotation to the Church of Sweden that baptism has and emphasizes the connection to the child instead.

Fanny says that she has longed to become a mother all her life. Becoming a mother is a strong norm in Sweden and an important aspect for many women in their construction of femininity (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997, p. 51). Fanny constructs a family collective, a heteronormative norm (Butler 2005) with the woman in the center of the family, organizing the family celebrations.

A few years earlier, Fanny fulfilled another of the norms of femininity there is; namely to be a bride in a heterosexual wedding (cf. Adeniji 2008). The wedding dinner was held at the same place as the name giving ceremony and songs of a certain artist were played at both occasions. By doing so, the songs made a link from the wedding to the name giving ceremony, and this was, according to Fanny, important to her. Fanny describes the song that was sang during the name giving ceremony as a “proclamation of love in the next stage.” She says that the song shows that “the love between me and my husband is developed to the next level of love.” The heterosexual core family and biological parenthood is made to norm and visualized in the ritual when Fanny chooses a song that symbolizes that the love that Fanny and her husband have for each other has developed into “the next level of love”: the small child. Quoting Lee’s (2015a) words, non-religious experiences of heterosexual love are expressed in the name giving ceremony. Knott uses the term “the secular sacred” (Knott 2013) when describing occasions (such as name giving ceremony), persons (parents and child), things (a crown of flower), places (a rented restaurant) and principles (love and freedom): those things that secular people value above all others, and that they see as set apart and inviolable (Knott 2013, p. 160). Knott categorizes them as *both* secular *and* sacred. The name giving ceremony of Fanny and her husband’s daughter might be an example of the secular sacred, as Knott describes it.

In short, using an intersectional perspective in the analysis of Fanny’s narrative, I understand the name giving ceremony to be an important link for Fanny in a chain of rituals (wedding and name giving ceremony) which all together construct a heteronormative, middle class life script as a swede. The celebration of the love between the parents on one hand and the child on the other hand can be an indication of individualization (cf. Bell 1997, p. 264). However, this type of individualization, which emphasize authenticity and autonomy in rituals, is a middle-class norm (cf. Jarnkvist 2011, 183ff). Being a middle-class woman and mother, the name giving ceremony is an important event for Fanny in her construction of femininity as a partner to her husband and as mother to their daughter. The name giving ceremony is a celebration of heterosexual love and the core family. Moreover, Fanny distances from the Church of Sweden and constructs non-religion in intersection with femininity, heterosexuality, and middle class Swedishness.

5.2. Astrid’s Search for a Nonreligious Death Culture

My next example of ritual narrative is a story that sheds light on the problem of death as an area where the nonreligious are disadvantaged by a lack of an institutionalized nonreligious death culture (cf. MacMurray and Fazzino 2017). The use of an intersectional perspective in the analysis of Astrid’s story, may give a more complex understanding of this problem.

I interviewed Astrid, a Swedish born, well-educated woman in her 70s, a few months after the funeral of her husband, Nils, who died after a short period of illness. Astrid describes Nils as a convinced atheist. He was a researcher in natural science, and as one of his colleagues said in a speech at the memorial after the funeral, Nils had his most spiritual

experience looking at an Excel ark. "All the numbers were falling into place and everything was making sense," Astrid cited in the interview.

While Nils grew up in an outspoken atheistic home, Astrid had a more religiously ambivalent upbringing, however, she says that she is a convinced atheist these days, and so are the couple's children. The couple married in secret in a civil ceremony, "the shortest one can get," when they were around their twenties. Astrid says that she wishes they had a bigger ceremony with family and friends invited to celebrate their marriage, however, at the time when they married, they wanted it simple. Some years after the marriage, the couple experienced a bereavement, which makes Astrid sad when she talks about it. One of their children was born dead. Astrid says that no one in the family wanted to go to a funeral of a baby. It was too hard. Astrid and Nils did not want a ceremony either. They chose to bury the child without a ceremony with only Astrid, Nils and the janitor present at the cemetery. However, Astrid regrets that a lot, she says. She describes what happened:

Then we had the urn in a box and then the church janitor in [the cemetery] came on a tractor, in rubber boots, and parked outside the church. Then he went in and turned on the clock so it rang. Then he lowered the urn, and that was it. That was *too* simple, even for my taste.

"It felt unworthy; the way the body was treated by the janitor at the cemetery," Astrid says. With that experience in memory, it was important to Astrid that her husband should have some kind of ceremony and she says that it was self-evident that it should be a civil funeral.

Before I present the funeral of Astrid's husband, I want to take a moment to reflect on Astrid's ritual experiences. According to Lee (2015b) it is common that non-religious people choose not to have ceremonies, as life-cycle rituals often have religious connotations. Astrid does not mention this, but I find that this was quite a big reason for the couple's minimally ritualistic activities. The choice of having a small, civil wedding can also be perceived as a way of following a norm for that time, as big church weddings were seen as a bourgeois habit and therefore many people chose not to marry big, nor in church. Anyhow, nowadays, Astrid regrets both the small wedding and not having a ceremony for the deceased child. Astrid's experiences of previous "non ritualization" is important to understand the struggle she underwent when planning the funeral of Nils.

There were many things for Astrid to solve before the funeral could take place and she expresses a feeling of loneliness in this. "As we do not belong to a congregation or any other community that organizes funerals, everything was up to me," she says. The first thing that Astrid had to decide was who would be the officiant of the funeral, as neither Astrid nor any of her children wanted to take that role. The funeral office did not have anyone to recommend and Astrid did not want to consult the Humanists, as Nils were not very fond of the organization. After a while, a friend of Astrid recommended an officiant. Astrid asked her and she agreed.

Another issue was the venue for the funeral. Everyone who pays tax for funeral activities in Sweden is offered a room for the funeral. Normally, it is an old Christian chapel situated at the cemetery. When civil funerals are held in the chapels, religious symbols are hidden to make the room as neutral as possible, however, Astrid says that she finds the chapels repulsive anyway. She has been to several civil funerals in such chapels and her husband was the officiant for some of them when he was alive. Astrid had problems finding another proper room for the funeral, however, she finally found one, which she was very pleased with.

It was bright, you looked out over town, it was beautiful, the room, and I think it was great. Then there were no crosses and stuff like this, because we did not want that. Even if you use ecclesiastical premises and they are not so very "crossy," somehow there is still some church stamp on it anyway. For I have thought of that on the funerals that Nils has been the officiant for, that it has still been these fonds where you put up the hymn numbers, or the hymnbooks have stood

somewhere. Although it has not been conspicuous, it has been visible all too well. Therefore, in that way, it was nice that it was a completely profane local.

Astrid's resistance against chapels is visible in the quotation. The presence of Christian symbols is too much for her to handle. Astrid's experiences highlight the importance of recognizing materialism in understanding non-religion. As [Engelke \(2015\)](#) contends, secularities cannot be reduced to ideologies; they are embodied, emplaced, and objectified. Rituals hold a lot of symbols and material, and are therefore relevant material for understanding the construction of non-religion. The presence of Christian symbols such as a cross or icons might be very difficult for a non-religious person to encounter, which Astrid's quotation is an example of. By choosing a profane room, clean from religious symbols, Astrid positions herself in relation to religion, taking a clear stand against it, and the choice of room becomes a part of her construction of non-religion. Astrid says that the room where the ceremony was held was light, and had a view of the city. This seems to have been of importance to her.

When Astrid had booked an officiant and a room for the funeral, she had to decide about the form of the funeral. Astrid says that she took impression of church funerals, which she had been to several times, and especially the funeral of a friend of hers, which took place shortly before the death of her husband.

(. . .) Therefore, I followed such rituals as are in ordinary church funerals. (. . .) I thought it was like a nice ritual, how to do it, to also gather people and create a mood, and so the interaction between what the priest said and what you sang and then how to go out together. (. . .) Then, I thought there was nothing wrong with doing it, just that you could have different words. Therefore, the form of the funeral, I have just taken right after church funerals, but filled it with substantially different content, which felt more right to me.

Like many others, Astrid more or less copied the form of Christian funerals when planning her husband's civil funeral. As mentioned in the analysis of Fanny's narrative, transforming ritual actions from a religious setting to civil ceremonies is common (e.g., [Jarnkvist 2019](#); [Lee 2015b](#)), and may be a way to construct a manuscript for non-religion life course rituals ([MacMurray and Fazzino 2017](#)). In the quotation, Astrid says that she did not find any problems with copying the form of Christian funerals, indicating that she had been thinking of the suitability of doing so in her husband's funeral, who was very clear with not wanting any connection to Christianity in the funeral. The quotation conveys what a balancing act it might be to construct a civil ceremony, which has no manual to follow. This makes it complicated for many relatives, when organizing the funeral.

During the ceremony, the officiant gave a long speech, which she had written after interviewing the family about Nils. The speech focused on memories of Nils and his view of life. Astrid chose songs for the funeral that she knew her husband had liked. One of them was "Jag vill tacka livet," which is a song about the greatness of life. She also rented musicians playing instruments that Nils liked. The unison song, Änglamark, is a well-known song in Sweden and one that Astrid guessed that many of the guests knew from before and could sing. The lyrics are about caring for Swedish nature. The officiant also read a poem that one of Astrid and Nils' daughters had written. It was about the nature surrounding the family's summerhouse. To summarize, the funeral centered on memories of Nils and his love for life, the Swedish nature, and his family. When I ask Astrid what she found to be central in the funeral, she answered:

Coming together. Togetherness. To mourn together, I think it was. I guess that is what we felt. (. . .) Yes, a farewell. In a way that would feel, which had content that would not have annoyed him. He would certainly not have wanted a religious content.

For Astrid, the funeral was about mourning together and to say goodbye to the deceased. She shares this experience with many others, regardless of the form of the funeral (e.g., [Bäckström et al. 2004](#); [Wiig-Sandberg 2006](#)). However, in contrast to religious

ceremonies, there was no talk about what might happen after death. Instead, the focus was on the deceased and his life. [Garces-Foley \(2003\)](#) argue that self-expression has become a central and effective ritual in contemporary funerals as a way to cope with the aftermath of death. However, like many other ceremonies in this study, the funeral had many connections to the Swedish nature, which appeals to something else than the individual. Like others, Astrid also said that she would have liked to have the funeral outside, amidst nature, if the weather would have allowed it. The nature can be understood to be a kind of a non-religious experience ([Lee 2015a](#)), a “secular sacred,” something outside of the human being, which is of great value (cf. [Knott 2013](#)). Nature has been shown to be of great value for many Swedes in general, and to connect to nature can from that perspective be a way to construct Swedishness. In the quotation, Astrid says that she wanted to have the funeral in a way that would not have made Niels upset, as he would not have wanted a religious content. However, as I see it, the funeral is not primarily making resistance towards Christianity, it moves closer to something else, a construction of a positive kind of non-religion (cf. [Lee 2015b](#)). It is a tribute to life and nature. From an intersectional perspective, the focus on nature can be understood to be a way to construct non-religion in intersection with Swedishness.

Astrid’s narrative clearly expresses a lack of “cultural tools” for making non-religious funerals, a phenomenon also highlighted in previous research. Examining death and bereavement among nonreligious Americans, [MacMurray and Fazzino \(2017\)](#) found that nonreligious people often find themselves excluded from normative death culture in America. [Jarnkvist \(2020\)](#) uncovered the same when studying places of rituals in Sweden. In contrast to rituals held in religious settings, civil ceremonies often lack specific places of ritual, so the ritual actors have to find one on their own. This might lead to feelings of rootlessness in relation to place.

Astrid gives an expression of missing a non-religious ritual form to hold on to, a place where the funeral should be held, and an officiant. Everything is up to the relatives of the deceased to decide. For people in bereavement this might be a very difficult task to accomplish. Moreover, it may also be a question of money, as renting a place to be in, an officiant and musicians, may cost a lot of money. Most of these things are free for those who are members of the Church of Sweden and have a church funeral. Astrid had use of her strong cultural and social capital, taking impression of funerals she had been to before and getting help from people in her network of contacts when constructing the funeral. Inspired by funerals held in the Church of Sweden, Astrid held on to a form which was common to herself as well as others taking part in the funeral. It was probably understood to be “the Swedish way” of conducting funerals. Having had a well-paid job during her working life, she probably also had enough money to pay for the costs that were connected to the funeral. Analyzing the funeral from an intersectional perspective, Astrid constructs non-religion in intersection with middle class Swedishness. Moreover, the intersectional perspective sheds light on Astrid’s experience of being in a dominant position (being a white, middle class atheist) and suffer from exclusion at the same time (feeling a loss of cultural tools). Drawing from [Lee \(2015a\)](#), I argue that Astrid’s atheist position simultaneously empowers and disempowers her.

6. Conclusions

This study explores how the use of intersectional perspectives in the analysis of ritual narratives can improve the understanding of ritualization of civil ceremonies such as name giving ceremonies, civil weddings, and civil funerals in today’s Sweden. The analysis of the narratives of two people were presented as examples of how intersectional perspectives can be used in studies of ritual narratives.

The intersectional analysis of Fanny’s narrative reveals how different social categories (social class, gender, nationality, and sexuality) intersect with non-religion in ritualization. Fanny constructed non-religion in relation to middle-class femininity, Swedishness and heterosexuality. [Lee \(2015b\)](#) describes civil ceremonies as expressions of “existential cultures,”

a phenomenon where, “incarnate ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death” (Lee 2015b, pp. 159–60). Because existential cultures handle matters of the life course, one of their key expressions is in life-cycle rituals (180), such as name giving ceremonies and civil funerals. Fanny’s name giving ceremony included many expressions of existential cultures. It was an expression of values such as heterosexual love, resulting in a new life with the baby. Core families and middle-class parenthood are highly valued, and can be perceived as examples of “secular sacred” (cf. Knott 2013). There are no statistics available on name giving ceremonies, however, I find it likely that primary rather wealthy and well-educated people create these kinds of ceremonies. Inventing the ceremony as Fanny did, with a rented officiant, food, musicians, and a place to be in, costs a lot of money. Moreover, having big ceremonies, with many invited guests, seems to be part of a middle-class habit (Jarnkvist 2011).

The intersectional analysis of Astrid’s narrative clarifies different aspects of power in ritualization. Astrid expresses a kind of ritualized loneliness and rootlessness, as civil funerals do not have the cultural tools that religious rituals have, such as a place to be in, an officiant, a ritual to follow, and so on. In addition, MacMurray and Fazzino (2017) shed light on the problem that social norms at the end of life contain aspects of religious symbolism and cultural meaning, which are of no help for nonreligious people. Following Young (1990), the authors use the term “Cultural imperialism,” to provide a framework within which Christian-centric hegemony and anti-atheist discrimination are situated. Even though the authors studied the religious landscape in America, which is very different from the one in Sweden, I find the term relevant for understanding the feeling of rootlessness that Astrid expresses, as it explains the hegemony that the Church of Sweden held for a long time over life rituals. People who want to have a ritual for welcoming a newborn, celebrating love, or saying goodbye to a relative, have nothing to hold on to if they do not want a religious ritual. In addition, when it comes to funerals, the chapels that are offered for civil funerals are often impregnated with religious symbols.

The intersectional perspective clarifies how non-religion, in Astrid’s case, is constructed in relation to middle-class Swedishness. She needed a strong cultural, social, and economic capital to be able to design the funeral. In Sweden, an increasing number of deceased are buried without a funeral (Sveriges Begravningsbyråers Förbund 2020). I find it likely that a part of the explanation to this is that many of those who are not members of the Church of Sweden, or for any reason do not want a religious funeral for their relatives, do not have the tools, money, or efforts to create a civil funeral. Instead of making a religious funeral, they choose to have no funeral at all. With this, the intimate moments to mourn together, associated with funerals, slips away.

In this study, I used the narrative methodology and I studied each ritual as a part of a ritual life script, in which other rituals also belong. I argue that the construction and interpretation of rituals should be understood in relation to previous experiences of ritualization as well as in relation to the social and cultural context in which the narrator lives and the ritualization is performed. As narratives are constructed in relation to a person’s social and cultural context, the narrative method is appropriate to use in studies with an intersectional perspective. To come closer to a more complex understanding of non-religion, more research on ritual narratives, using an intersectional perspective, is required.

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