

Domestic gender equality and childbearing: First and second births in Sweden

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Abstract

Sweden, one of the most gender-equal societies in the world, has managed to combine ‘modern’ family patterns such as unmarried cohabitation, postponement of the transition to parenthood, and high break-up rates, which are usually considered to have a negative effect on birth rates, with a relatively high level of childbearing. What is the role of gender equality in this? Does shared responsibility for home and children contribute to increased fertility or the opposite? Is there a fertility response to gender equality?

We have examined the effects on *first births* of holding more egalitarian gender role attitudes, which stress the importance of men sharing equally in the care of home and children, and found that egalitarian attitudes among men seem to be delaying the transition to parenthood, and perhaps reducing the likelihood of ever becoming a parent.

Further, our analysis of the effects of domestic gender equality on *second births* in Sweden shows that, measuring attitudes/expectations before the transition to parenthood and actual practice after the arrival of the first child, it is *inconsistency* between ‘ideals’ and ‘reality’ that significantly reduces the likelihood of a second birth.

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Introduction

Sweden, followed by the rest of Scandinavia, has been in the forefront of the gender role revolution, with high proportions of fathers sharing the caring role with mothers (Hook 2006) and even higher proportions of mothers sharing the providing role with fathers (Sainsbury 1999, Haas et al 2006). Sweden is also a leader in maintaining near replacement fertility in Europe (Frejka et al. 2008). Most research linking these trends has focused on the role of the state in reducing the conflict between women's employment and family responsibilities, suggesting that this relatively high fertility is the result of state policies that provide women with job security, quality childcare and paid family leave (e.g., McDonald, 2000). A few studies have reinforced this finding, by showing that gender equality at the family level—fathers' engagements in childrearing and mothers' engagement in bread-winning—is associated with increased childbearing.

In this paper we investigate how gender role attitudes and equal sharing of home tasks affect the transition to first and second birth in Sweden. This requires longitudinal information on young adults that follows them as they form attitudes and make decisions during the early family-building years. We are able to take advantage of longitudinal data in the panel database YAPS (Young Adult Panel Study). This helps us address the central research question how Sweden, one of the most gender-equal societies in the world, has managed to combine 'modern' family patterns such as unmarried cohabitation, postponement of the transition to parenthood, and high break-up rates, which are usually considered to have a negative effect on birth rates, with a relatively high level of childbearing. What is the role of gender equality in this? Does shared responsibility for home and children contribute to increased fertility or the opposite? Is there a fertility response to gender equality?

Overview of the research area

Understanding the multiple links between individual attitudes, families' decisions with regard to the allocation of work/care roles and parental leave, and couples' willingness to have (additional) children requires understanding the context within which families must decide. In addition to public policies and institutional and other structural conditions, this includes understanding the sources of gender role attitudes in young adulthood, factors affecting attitude stability in the early family- and career-building ages, and the links between gender role attitudes and behaviour and subsequent family outcomes, particularly fertility and union

dissolution. Sharing family leave and caring responsibilities—engaged fatherhood, in fact—is likely to affect these two key aspects of families in the longer run. Do such families have fewer children, as men encounter the difficulties of combining home and work as women have (Hochschild 1989), or do they have more children, perhaps because the gain in women’s willingness to have more children more than offsets the effects of the added pressures on men or because (and perhaps men’s greater family engagement increases their orientation towards home and children - see Björnberg 1998)?

Sub-replacement fertility (less than about two children per woman) characterizes contemporary European societies, as well as most of those with European-origin populations (Billari 2004). Although Sweden is not among the countries with very low fertility (Kohler et al 2002), completed fertility for the cohorts born in the 1960s is not likely to exceed 1.8 children per woman. The ‘modern’ fertility decline (with increasing levels of childlessness and a sharp decrease in the likelihood of third and higher order births), together with the increasing postponement of the transition to parenthood, are central components of what demographers call the ‘second demographic transition’ (Lesthaeghe 1995). These trends have often been attributed to women’s increasing participation in paid work outside the home (Bernhardt 1993, Brewster and Rindfuss 2000), but over the past decade or so focus has increasingly been directed to the issue of unpaid rather than paid work, or more specifically to the impact of the gender division of housework and childcare on fertility. Is there a fertility response to the division of home tasks? The answer to this question is far from settled, although there seems to be increasing evidence with regard to continued childbearing that a more gender equal home is “pro-family.” Several studies of fertility, in Sweden as well as in other places, show that more egalitarian men transition more rapidly to a second (or even a third) birth (Berinde 1999, Kaufman 2000, Oláh 2003, Torr and Short 2004, Duvander and Andersson 2006).

According to McDonald (2000), what he calls ‘gender equity’ at home is particularly likely to influence fertility in contexts of high gender equity in what he calls ‘individual-oriented institutions,’ i.e., higher education and careers. Sweden is thus a likely place to look for an effect of domestic gender equality on childbearing. In their analysis of second births to dual-income working couples in the United States, Torr and Short (2004) found a curvilinear relationship, with the least and the most egalitarian couples more likely to make the transition to a second child, while gender ideology had no significant effect. They conclude that ‘equity

in practice rather than ideology is the more important predictor of subsequent fertility for couples who already have one child' (op.cit.p. 124). This concurs with the findings of Oláh (2003) and Duvander and Andersson (2006) with regard to Sweden, although they used father's uptake of parental leave as a measure of domestic gender equality instead of men's involvement in housework. However, as pointed out by Duvander and Andersson, both father's use of parental leave and the likelihood of having a second child could be influenced by the father's 'child orientation'. Strongly child-oriented men would presumably be more interested in taking long parental leaves as well as being very positive to the idea of a second child.

It is less clear how egalitarianism affects first births, as, to the best of our knowledge, there are very few studies of this relationship. However, in a study using data from the YAPS database, Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) examined the effects on first births of holding more egalitarian gender role attitudes, which stress the importance of men sharing equally in the care of home and children, and found that egalitarian attitudes among men seem to be delaying the transition to parenthood, and perhaps reducing the likelihood of ever making the transition to fatherhood. We will present those findings in more detail in the next section. We will also extend the analysis of the relationship between domestic gender equality and childbearing to consider factors affecting second and in future work, third births, and take into account explicitly how the division of actual housework and childcare, as well as egalitarian attitudes, affect continued childbearing, measuring attitudes before the transition to parenthood and actual practice after the arrival of the first (or second) child. We know of no other study with this design.

First births

The analysis of the transition to parenthood in Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) used data from the longitudinal YAPS database, more specifically from the first survey in 1999, together with information on whether or not respondents, who were childless at the time of the 1999 survey, had a first birth in the four-year period between the first two surveys. The Young Adult Panel Survey (YAPS) – formerly referred to as 'Family and Working Life in the 21st century' - has been designed to enable studies of the complex interrelationships between attitudes and demographic behaviour (see www.suda.su.se/yaps for more information). The database is a unique combination of survey and register data. Two waves of data collection have so far been carried out (1999 and 2003), and a third wave will take place in 2009.

The first part of Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) looked at factors affecting attitudes towards the cost and benefits of children, with egalitarian gender attitudes as the main explanatory variable. Our results show that while both men and women perceive more benefits to parenthood than costs, men are more likely than women to perceive both negative and positive consequences of parenthood. Further, gender role attitudes shape parental attitudes differentially for men and women. More egalitarian men perceive fewer costs and more egalitarian women perceive fewer benefits than those with more traditional gender role attitudes.

Our analysis of the transition to parenthood indicated, somewhat surprisingly, that, when controlling for assessments of the costs and benefits of children, men with more traditional attitudes were more likely to become fathers at an early age, while gender role attitudes had no effect on women's transition to parenthood. In contrast, there were no gender differentials in the effects of costs and benefits, each of which strongly affected the transition to parenthood, but, of course, in opposite directions.

The positive effect on the transition to parenthood for men with traditional gender attitudes was not found to be an effect of early partnering, as one might have suspected. We speculated that the earlier transition to fatherhood among men with traditional gender attitudes might reflect their tendency to partner with traditional women who are enthusiastic about becoming mothers early, and vice versa. Lacking partner data on attitudes, however, we were unable to test the hypothesis.

So we concluded that the greater egalitarianism of Swedish men might be reducing Swedish fertility, or at least contributing to the postponement of childbearing. One should keep in mind, however, that the respondents in our sample were still quite young (the oldest ones were age 30 at the time of the 1999 survey), and had considerably more time to make the transition to parenthood. This is particularly true of the male respondents, as the median age at first birth for Swedish men is almost 3 years higher than that for women (29 for women, and close to 32 for men; see Oláh and Bernhardt, 2008). To the extent that our results are due to differences in timing (traditional men becoming fathers early, and egalitarian men later in life), the gap between them will be closing over time. This can be ascertained, when, with the third wave of the survey, the young adults can be observed up to higher ages (the oldest cohort, born in 1968, will be 40 years old in 2009). Further, prior to a first, both those with traditional and with egalitarian attitudes are making decisions primarily based on their

expectations about parenthood; those contemplating a second birth have the additional information they have gained from actual parenthood, such as how well they have functioned with their partners in the daily tasks parenthood imposes and the joys it provides. A stronger test of the impact of egalitarian gender roles on fertility, then, is the progression to a second birth, the sine qua non of replacement fertility. In this paper, we examine this issue.

Data and methods

The main topics covered in the YAPS questionnaires are plans, expectations and attitudes regarding family and working life, histories of family formation, building, and dissolution, plus factual information about the respondents' current situation and background characteristics. Designed from the beginning to be longitudinal, the first round of the survey was carried out in April-May 1999, with the Survey Unit of Statistics Sweden in charge of the fieldwork. The sample consisted of 4 360 persons born in Sweden in 1968, 1972 and 1976. With an overall response rate of 65%, there were a total of 2820 original respondents, whose identities have been kept by Statistics Sweden through 2009. A second round of the survey was conducted in 2003. This time, a new group of 1194 22-year olds was added, increasing the number of birth cohorts to four (1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980). The overall response rate was 70 percent. Thus, the total number of respondents in 2003 was 2 816. After the first two surveys, the YAPS database contains a total of 3 547 individuals who were interviewed in 1999 and/or 2003.

The analytic sample used in this paper for the analysis of the transition to a second child consists of 308 respondents who fulfilled the following criteria at the time of the second survey in 2003:

- They had a co-residential partner (cohabiting or married)
- They were one-child parents (or the female partner was pregnant with their first child)

Register information on births in the period 2003-2006 has been linked to the survey data. Thus the transition to a second child in the four-year period following the second survey can be analysed, using Cox regression. The observation period starts at the time of the 2003 survey, or 8 months after the birth of the first child, if the first child was born after the survey, or less than 8 months prior to the survey.

Gender role attitudes in 1999 were measured by using the answers to the question: “What do you think would be the best arrangement for a family with pre-school children?” with the following response alternatives:

- *Only the man works and the woman takes the main responsibility for home and children*
- *Both work, but the woman works part-time and takes the main responsibility for home and children*
- *Both parents work roughly the same hours and share the responsibility for home and children equally*

We label the third alternative “egalitarian”, and combine the first two, indicating a “traditional” gender role attitude towards the balance of work and family. Among the respondents in our analytic sample, 77 percent had egalitarian attitudes before becoming parents (somewhat more women than men expected to share the responsibility for home and children equally with their partner).

To capture actual performance in 2003, after they had become parents, we used the answers to two simple questions regarding how the respondents perceived that they shared housework and childcare with their partner. There were only three response alternatives: a) *I do the most*, b) *We share equally*, and c) *My partner does the most*. If the male partner was reported to do the larger part of housework or childcare, the respondents were regarded as holding views that run contrary to traditional views of proper gender roles, so we grouped these couples together with those who reported that they shared the chores equally between them. In our analytic sample, 56 percent reported that they shared housework and 63 percent that they shared childcare. Our study of determinants of the sharing of home tasks in Sweden (Goldscheider, Goldscheider and Bernhardt 2008) confirms that there is a strong relationship between prior attitudes and later behaviour; traditional gender role attitudes in 1999 significantly decreases the sharing of housework as well as childcare four years later.

For the analysis of second births we constructed a domestic gender equality variable by combining attitudes in 1999 and actual behaviour with regard to housework and childcare in 2003. These three variables were dichotomous, egalitarian vs non-egalitarian (or traditional) and were combined in the following way: the couples were classified as **consistently egalitarian** if the respondent had an egalitarian attitude in 1999 and reported sharing housework and/or childcare in 2003. If the respondent had a traditional attitude in 1999 and reported that the woman did most of the housework and the childcare in 2003, the couple was classified as **consistently traditional**. Finally, the cases in between, with egalitarian attitudes

Table 1. Description of the sample for analysing the transition to a second child among Swedish one-child parents (N=308)		
<i>Respondent's gender</i>	N	%
Men	133	43.2
Women	175	56.8
<i>Respondent's age in 2003</i>		
26	105	34.1
30	130	42.2
34	73	23.7
<i>Educational level in 2003</i>		
Nine-year school	72	23.4
Upper secondary	97	31.5
Lower post-secondary	46	14.9
Upper post-secondary	93	30.2
<i>Marital status</i>		
Cohabiting	192	62.3
Married	116	37.7
<i>Current residence</i>		
Metropolitan area	128	41.6
Non-metropolitan area	180	58.4
<i>Ethnic background</i>		
Swedish	260	84.4
Polish	31	10.1
Turkish	17	5.5
<i>Age of first child in 2003</i>		
Pregnancy	70	22.7
1-12 months	99	32.1

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Table 1. Continued		
<i>Age of first child in 2003</i>		
13-24 months	74	24.0
25-36 months	39	12.7
37-48 months	26	8.4
<i>Attitude-behaviour variable</i>		
Consistently egalitarian	171	55.5
Egalitarian-ambivalent	68	22.1
Traditional-ambivalent	28	9.1
Consistently traditional	41	13.3

in 1999 but no shared housework or childcare in 2003, or those cases where the respondent had a traditional attitude in 1999 but reported sharing both housework and childcare in 2003, were regarded as **ambivalent**. We distinguished between **egalitarian-ambivalent** and **traditional-ambivalent**, as it seems reasonable that expecting to share housework and childcare with one's partner, but not achieving this goal, creates quite a different situation than if one expects traditional gender roles in the family, but reports sharing both housework and childcare. As can be seen from Table 1, a little more than half of the couples can be described as 'consistently egalitarian', while about 13 percent were 'consistently traditional'. More couples were classified as 'egalitarian-ambivalent' than 'traditional-ambivalent' (22 and 9 percent, respectively).

In addition to our main explanatory variable (the combined attitude-behaviour variable), we also included a number of control variables in the analysis, namely respondent's *gender* and *age*, *educational level*, *marital status*, *current residence* (the metropolitan area comprises the three biggest cities in Sweden, namely Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö), *ethnic background* (YAPS includes a main sample of respondents born in Sweden, with two Swedish-born parents, as well as a smaller so-called second-generation sample, consisting of Swedish-born respondents, with one or both parents born in Poland or Turkey), and *age of first child in 2003*.

Second births

Unlike some countries in Central and Southern Europe, there is still no marked trend in Sweden towards one-child families, and only a slow increase over the cohorts in final childlessness (Oláh and Bernhardt 2008). The parity progression ratio for Swedish one-child mothers born in 1960, i.e. the proportion of one-parity women who went on and had a second child, was about 84 percent. The two-child norm appears to remain strong in Sweden. And since the late 1970s “the tendency to have a second child once you have the first one has become even stronger” Hoem (2004:26). Calculations based on YAPS data indicate that about two-thirds of one-child parents have a second child within four years. This tendency towards relatively short birth intervals is no doubt related to the so-called ‘speed premium’, introduced in 1980, which stipulates that parents can retain the level of their parental leave benefits paid after the birth of one child also after the birth of the next one, provided that this child arrives within thirty months. As most women work full-time before the birth of the first child, there is a strong economic incentive to have the second child within 2½ years.

Our analysis of the transition to the second birth is based on an analytic sample of 308 men and women, born in 1968, 1972, and 1976, who were living with a cohabiting or married partner at the time of the 2003 survey. They had one child (but not more), born in the interval between the first and the second survey, that is between 1999 and 2003. In addition, the sample includes those couples where the female partner was pregnant at the time of the 2003 survey, i.e. their first child was born within 8 months after the survey.

The results of a cox regression analysis of second births are shown in Table 2. Our main explanatory variable, the attitude-behaviour variable, measuring gender role attitudes prior to the birth of the first child and actual sharing of housework and childcare after they have become parents, shows that ambivalence, that is inconsistency between ‘ideals’ and ‘reality’, has a significant, negative effect on the likelihood of a second child. This negative effect is stronger for those who expect a traditional role division, but, for some reason or another, find themselves in a situation where they have to share both housework and childcare equally with their partner (or at least this is how they perceive it). Couples appear to find it easier to adjust to sharing less than their attitudes have led them to expect, rather than sharing MORE than they had expected, although this might differ by sex. Thus the hazard ratio for ‘egalitarian-ambivalent’, compared to the consistently egalitarian, is 0.684, while for ‘traditional-ambivalent’ the ratio decreases to 0.476. It is also worth noting that there is no significant,

positive effect of expectations for traditional role behaviour when this is confirmed in a family situation where the male partner does not share housework and/or childcare.

Table 2. Factors affecting the transition to a second child among Swedish one-child parents			
Cox regression			
<i>Predictor variables</i>	Hazard ratio	Std.err.	p-value
Women vs. men	1.341	0.196	0.045
Age 30 vs age 26	0.876	0.159	0.467
Age 34 vs age 26	0.568	0.123	0.009
Married vs cohabiting	1.566	0.236	0.003
Upper secondary vs nine-year school	0.799	0.156	0.248
Lower post-secondary vs nine-year school	0.741	0.177	0.210
Upper post-secondary vs nine-year school	1.042	0.204	0.834
Metro residence	1.125	0.171	0.441
Polish vs Swedish background	0.642	0.162	0.079
Turkish vs Swedish background	0.540	0.202	0.099
Age of first child 1-12 months	1.426	0.291	0.082
Age of first child 13-24 months	1.465	0.328	0.088
Age of first child 25-36 months	1.382	0.366	0.221
Age of first child 37-48 months	0.816	0.258	0.519
Egal-ambivalent vs consistently egalitarian	0.684	0.125	0.037
Trad-ambivalent vs consistently egalitarian	0.476	0.126	0.006
Consistently traditional vs consistently egalitarian	1.193	0.244	0.389
N=308			

We find that women and those married are significantly more likely to have a second child. There is also a negative effect of age. The effect of educational level, although not significant, seems to be U-shaped, with those with the lowest and the highest level being more likely to continue childbearing. Unlike our earlier analysis of the transition to parenthood (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006), when we found a negative effect of living in a metropolitan area, there is no effect of current residence. Age of the first child, at the start of the observation period, shows the expected inverted U-shape, although, again, this is not significant.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the effects of domestic gender equality on second births in Sweden shows that, measuring attitudes/expectations before the transition to parenthood and actual practice after the arrival of the first child, it is *inconsistency* between ‘ideals’ and ‘reality’ that significantly reduces the likelihood of a second birth. Sweden, while far along in the gender revolution relative to other countries, still exhibits of the “traditional” division of labor, particularly in the home, suggesting that there is great heterogeneity among couples, that often does not become clear until they have actually experienced parenthood, leading some couples to put on the brakes, as it were. As we cannot (yet) control for the possible effect of this inconsistency on union dissolution, however, it is possible that at least part of this effect is due to the increased likelihood that the discrepancy between ideals and reality has led the couple to split up.

Earlier studies of the effect of gender equality on continued childbearing in Sweden (Oláh 2003, Duvander and Andersson 2006) and in the US (Torr and Short 2004) indicated that it is actual behaviour (fathers’ taking parental leave or the sharing housework or) that matters. Torr and Short included information about gender ideology but its effect was insignificant. However, they measured gender role attitudes at the same time as the sharing of housework. Our research design made it possible to measure attitudes prior to the transition to parenthood, and then actual behaviour once they had become parents. We then find that if the division of home tasks is in accordance with prior expectations, there seems to be no effect on continued childbearing; i.e., couples with high levels of consistency, either for traditional or egalitarian family roles, seem equally keen to have additional children. In contrast, it is the middle group, who are neither fully egalitarian nor fully traditional in their attitudes and practices with

regard to sharing domestic roles (and perhaps have the most conflict), who are the least likely to continue family building.

We would argue that Sweden is a society in transition in terms of men sharing caring roles. Our findings therefore suggest that, while the early stages of the gender revolution in family support and care might have reduced fertility, as women added support roles to their traditional caring roles, as Sweden continues to lead in the gender revolution, increasing proportions of couples will move from ambivalent to consistently egalitarian, reinforcing Sweden's role as a leader in maintaining replacement-level fertility.

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