

Gender Role Attitudes and Late Transition to Parenthood in Sweden

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In most countries of Europe undergoing the Second Demographic Transition, unprecedented low fertility levels have been accompanied by a dramatic increase of the mean age at first birth for both women and men in the 1990s and early 2000s. Except for the post-socialist countries, the transition to motherhood has been delayed to ages of the late twenties in Europe and may easily become a new standard of life-course patterns (Gustafsson 2001). The same trend applies to men as they start family formation at even higher ages than women, and are more likely to remain childless than women are. In the developed world, our biological predispositions for parenthood have been counterbalanced by a less child-centered context where competing demands of e.g. education and paid work, as well as new, appealing opportunities render parenthood increasingly to be a choice among many other choices individuals make in their lives (Morgan and Berkowitz King 2001). At the same time, normative pressures for parenthood have weakened or disappeared resulting in increasing tolerance of childlessness. Thus, the impact of changing gender-role attitudes on the transition to parenthood is an issue of considerable interest.

Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) studied the impact of parenthood attitudes (cost-benefit considerations as well as gender-role attitudes regarding the division of domestic responsibilities) on the early transition to parenthood among young adults in Sweden based on data from a new Swedish panel survey called *Family and Working Life in the 21st Century*. Respondents (with both parents born in Sweden), who were childless at age 22, 26 and 30 in 1999 (i.e. the first wave of the survey) were selected and followed until 2003 (the 2nd wave), thus age 26, 30 and 34. The authors found that men with more traditional attitudes regarding family-level gender relations were more likely to become fathers at a relatively early age, whereas gender-role attitudes had no effect on women's early transition to motherhood.

The impact of less traditional gender-role attitudes among Swedish parents on the propensity to have another child was also studied based on other data sources. Using FFS-data, Olah (2003) found that, in the 1970s and 1980s, one-child parents were more likely to have a second child if the father took parental leave with the first child. This finding was confirmed by Duvander and Andersson (2006) who showed beneficial effects for the second and third births for couples with less traditional gender-role attitudes, analyzing the length of father's parental-leave uptake, based on register data from the 1990s.

These results indicate that a less traditional division of family responsibilities promotes further childbearing among Swedish parents. We are, however, somewhat uncertain about the role of gender role attitudes in the transition to parenthood itself as the Bernhardt-Goldscheider (2006) study focused at relatively young ages only. Also, they found no effect for women, unlike for men, probably due to their focus at young ages. Given the trend of increasing mean age at first birth, I seek to shed more light on the late transition to parenthood in this paper by addressing further aspects of gender relations. As Sweden is a forerunner of both the Second Demographic Transition and of more egalitarian gender relations, I will focus on Sweden in this paper.

Although I will use the same data source as in the Bernhardt-Goldscheider (2006) study that addressed the early transition to parenthood, my analysis will differ by several aspects from their study. *First* of all, I will study late parenthood only. Taking advantage of register information on births and marriages up to (and including) the year of 2006 which have recently been added to the database of *Family and Working Life in the 21st Century*, I will focus on respondents aged 26 or older and being childless at the time of the 2003 wave of the survey and follow them until the first birth or the end of 2006. Thus the working sample will consist of respondents aged 26, 30 and 34 years in 2003. The new cohort of 22 year-old added to the survey in 2003 will not be included in my analysis. In order to deal with the problem of selectivity, I will also conduct an analysis of selection into my sample. Also, respondents were asked in 2003 about the reason for not yet being a parent and one of the alternatives for response refers to problems to get pregnant. Based on this information, I will also control for subfecundity in the analysis. *Second*, unlike the Bernhardt-Goldscheider (2006) study, I will include both ethnic Swedes and respondents with at least one foreign-born parent as also a sample of ‘second generation immigrants’ of Polish and of Turkish origin were interviewed. *Third*, I will study attitudes regarding public-sphere gender relations instead of those on the (preferred) division of domestic tasks. The information I plan to use is agreement/disagreement on the following statements: ‘A society where women and men are equal is a good society’ and ‘It is just as important for a woman as for a man to be able to support herself through own earnings’. Based on these items, I will create an index on egalitarian versus traditional public-sphere gender-role attitudes and study its impact of the late transition to parenthood, while controlling for a number of important factors (such as individual background characteristics, partnership behavior and labor-market attachment).

References

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