Domestic gender equality and childbearing: first, second and third births in Sweden

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Eva Bernhardt* and Frances Goldscheider**

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, high labor force participation among mothers, and high break-up rates, all of which are usually considered to have a negative effect on birth rates, with a relatively high level of childbearing. Sweden also has a high level of shared responsibility for home and children. Is there a fertility response to gender equality in the home?

We examine the effects on first, second, and third births of holding more egalitarian gender role attitudes, which stress the importance of men sharing equally in the care of home and of men's actually sharing in domestic tasks. Our analysis shows that, measuring attitudes before the transition to parenthood and actual practice after the arrival of the first child, it is *inconsistency* between gender role attitudes and the actual division of housework that significantly reduces the likelihood of second and third births; less impact of gender equality appears for first births.

* Stockholm University ** University of Maryland

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, however, have suggested that an important factor encouraging higher fertility lies in the home, that gender equality at the family level—specifically fathers' engagement in domestic tasks—is associated with increased childbearing even in countries with little state support for families, such as the United States (Kaufman, 2000; Torr & Short, 2004).

In this paper we investigate how gender role attitudes and equal sharing of home tasks affect the transition to first, second, and third births in Sweden, using longitudinal information on young adults. The panel database YAPS (Young Adult Panel Study) follows them as they form attitudes and make decisions during the early family-building years. This helps us address the central research question of 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 the domestic sphere contribute to increased fertility or the opposite? Is there a fertility response to gender equality?

verview of the research area

Understanding the multiple links between individual attitudes, families' decisions with regard to the allocation of work/care roles, 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 links between gender role attitudes and behaviour and subsequent family outcomes. Sharing caring responsibilities is likely to affect family behaviors in the longer run. Do such families have

fewer children, as men encounter many of the same 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 and perhaps because men's greater family engagement increases their orientation towards home and children (Björnberg 1998)?

Sub-replacement fertility (less than about two children per woman) characterizes nearly all 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) although recent studies have shown that the pattern has reversed at the country level (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000). Over the past decade, however, 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, Duvander and Andersson 2006, Kaufman 2000, Oláh 2003, Torr and Short 2004).

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 between sharing household tasks and fertility, with the least and the most egalitarian couples more likely to make the transition to a second child than those in the middle, while individuals' 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 agrees with the findings of Oláh (2003) and Duvander and Andersson (2006) with regard to second births in 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 a father's use of parental leave and the likelihood of having a second child could be influenced by his '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, even if they do not participate in housework. Hence, a clearer test for Sweden should focus on sharing housework, not on how family leave is shared.

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 but fewer do so afterwards, there is a strong economic incentive to have the second and later children each within 2½ years.

However, it is less clear how sharing housework affects first births, as, to the best of our knowledge, there are almost no 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. This analysis, however, also included several other measures of attitudes towards the costs and benefits of children; when these measures were omitted, there was no significant effect. Further, both those with egalitarian attitudes and those with nonegalitarian attitudes are responding primarily to their expectations about

parenthood prior to a first birth. We expect a stronger effect of gender role issues on later births, since those contimplating such births have the additional information they have gained from actual parenthood, and of how well they have functioned with their partners in the daily tasks parenthood imposes and the joys it provides.

In this paper, we will model the transition to first birth using the same model as for second and 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.

Data and methods

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 register and survey data, with the Survey Unit of Statistics Sweden in charge of the fieldwork. Designed from the beginning to be longitudinal, the first two waves of data collection were carried out in 1999 and 2003; the third wave was completed in 2009 but was not available for this analysis. 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.

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 first, second, and/or third child consists of 1 595 respondents who fulfilled the following criteria at the time of the second survey in 2003:

- For the cohorts of 1968, 1972, and 1976, we included those who participated in both 1999 and 2003, were cohabiting or married in 2003, and had not had a third birth (1 319 were included based on this criterion).
- For the youngest (1980) cohort, first interviewed in 2003, we included the 276 cases who were in a residential partnered relationship (married or cohabiting), did not have three children nor pregnant with the third.

Register information on births in the period 2003-2006 has been linked to the survey data, which include complete fertility information from 1999 and 2003. Thus, the transition to a first, second, and third child can be analysed using Cox regression. The observation period in most cases starts at the time of the 2003. For second and third births, where the previous child is born less than 9 months prior to the 2003 survey, start date is 9 months after the birth of the previous child.

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 "nonegalitarian" 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, we examined the answers to a simple question regarding how the respondents perceived that they shared housework with their partner. . We also examined the effects of a parallel question on sharing childcare, but the results were inconsistent. Another recent study with these data (Goldscheider, Goldscheider, and Bernhardt 2008) also found that these attitudes were far more predictive of sharing housework than of sharing child care. It would seem that many more men share childcare than housework, but we will need to wait until the 2009 data, which include responses from

both members of a couple, to see whether women agree that men share childcare as much as they say.

There were only three response alternatives to the question on sharing housework: 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, 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 (somewhat more, 63 percent, reported 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 four years later.

For our analysis we constructed a domestic gender equality variable by combining attitudes in 1999 and either actual behaviour with regard to sharing housework in 2003 for births after 2003, and expected divisions of housework in 1999 for modeling births between 1999 and 2003. These two variables were dichotomous, egalitarian vs non-egalitarian, 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 or expecting to share housework in 2003. If the respondent had a nonegalitarian attitude in 1999 and reported that the woman did most of the housework and the childcare in 2003 or was expected to, the couple was classified as **consistently nonegalitarian**. For the two inconsistent cases, we created a variable for those with egalitarian attitudes but not egalitarian behavior, and for those with nonegalitarian attitudes but egalitarian behavir. We label them by their attitudes: egalitarian-inconsistent and nonegalitarian-incomsistent. 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 housework, differences that should also distinguish men and women. As can be seen from Table 1, a little more than half of the couples can be described as 'consistently egalitarian', while about 12 percent were 'consistently traditional'. More couples were classified as 'egalitarian-ambivalent' than 'traditional-ambivalent' (28 and 12 percent, respectively).

(Insert Table 1 about here)

In addition to our main explanatory variable (the combined attitude-behaviour variable), we also included a number of control variables in the analysis. Further, since we do not know whether these couples remained together during the 2003-06 period, we included the respondents' responses to a question asked in 2003 about whether they had plans to end the relationship. Unfortunately, we have no information on what the partner's opinions were.

For the couple, we include whether they are married or cohabiting, live in a metropolitan area (i.e., the three biggest cities in Sweden, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö) and the age (if any) of their most recent child. We calculated a 'couple education' measure, indicating the possible combinations of his and hers, approximately dichotomized in each case: both high, his high, hers low, hers high, his low, and both low (the reference category). We also include measures of two characteristics of the female partner most likely to affect childbearing (age and employment status), and indicate whether the respondent was the male or female member. . (Details on these measures can also be found in Table 1.)

Results

The results of our integrated analysis of the transition to first, second, and third births in Sweden, and how our combined attitude-behavior measures affect these transitions, are presented in Table 2, for each transition, and within each transition, for the total and separately for men and women. There is no effect of our attitude-behavior measure on the transition to first births; for second and third births, the dominent effects are for inconsistency, which nearly always slows the transition to the next birth. These effects, however, are considerably stronger for women than for men.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

For second births, we find that those with egalitarian attitudes in 1999 who confronted a non-egalitarian division of housework in 2003 move significantly more slowly to another birth than those with a consistent experrience of egalitarian attitudes and behavior, although this is only significant for the total and for women. The effect for men is weaker but in the same direction (OR=.81) Perhaps when men find they have less work to do than they expected, they are less disappointed than women are when they find they are expected to do more than they had anticipated.

A similar pattern holds for third births, although in more exaggerated form. Women who had expected an egalitarian division of housework but did not attain one were only half as likely

to move on to a third birth as those who did, while in this case, men, if anything, are more likely to make the transition to fathering a third child, although the effect is insignificant. Interestingly, men who had non-egalitarian attitudes but an egalitarian division of labor are much more likely to move on to a third birth than other men with such a d ivision of labor but who began with egalitarian attitudes. Perhaps some men actually 'get into' being active fathers and caring for their homes.

The results for the control variables primarily produce sensible results. Female age has curvilinear effects cleanly across the birth transitions, whether reported by male or female respondents. This reflects the general postponement of children among very young women, and the family completion, or possibly sub-fertility, of the oldest women. The only exception is for the third birth, where the youngest women who had already had a first birth were much more likely to go on to a third. Evidently, those who really got an early start continue in that vein.

Education has no effect on the transition to first birth, but speeds the next two transitions. It seems that mens' education dominates over females' for the second birth, since males with high educational level, whether or not their partner also has a high educational level, move more rapidly to a next birth. In contrast, women's education appears to dominate for third births, since the significant positive effects are for 'both high' and for 'hers high, his low.'

Women with no job before beginning childbearing are less likely to make the transition to the first birth, suggesting that women need to wait until they have a reasonable income to be able to claim a high parental leave income benefit. Given the short period of time we're examining for the later transitions, and the "speed premiun" in the parental leave benefit that allows women to collect benefits based on their income before the previous child if the next one comes within 2 ½ years, it makes sense that women who don't work after a first (or 2nd) child would if anything be more rather than less likely to transition to another birth. Part-time work never differs from full-time work on this issue.

The married start childbearing sooner than those who are cohabiting, but union status has no effects for later parities. This suggests that although childbearing in Sweden is common in cohabiting unions, at least some cohabitors are delaying childbearing until they marry. It is also possible that the married at this young age are selected for early childbearing. No gender differences appear at this additive level; and so far we have found no gender interactions.

Having no plans to end the union increases the likelihood of both a first and second birth, with little effect on the 3rd, particularly for men. For women, the expected effect appears, but is not significant. Metropolitan compared with non-metropolitan residence had no effects. Time since last birth (as indicated by the age of the most recent child in 2003) increases the likelihood of a next birth, relative to not having had that birth for awhile, then decreases it, similar to the effect for female age. For 2nd births, the peak likelihood of another birth is reached when the previous child is aged 24-35 months, but differences by child age up to that point are small. By the time the child is three, however, the likelihood is no greater than if they hadn't had a child by 2003.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the effects of domestic gender equality on first, second, and third 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 or third birth, with no impact on first births. Sweden, while far along in the gender revolution relative to other countries, still has many couples who follow the "traditional" division of labor, particularly in the home. This suggests 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. We cannot (yet) control fully for the possible effect of this inconsistency on union dissolution, however, so 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, although our control for thoughts about union dissolution has the expected negative effect on subsequent fertility.

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, when 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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Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents and Couples in the Analysis of First, Second, and Third Births

	First birth	Second births	Third births	Total (person obs.)	Total respon-dents
	n=744	n=663	n=726	n=2133	n=1574
Attitude/behavior					
Consistently egalitarian	59.95	48.27	40.36	49.65	48.60
Egalitarian inconsistent	22.18	30.62	31.54	27.99	28.02
Consistently nonegalitarian	7.53	9.95	15.43	10.97	11.75
Nonegalitarian inconsistent	10.35	11.16	12.67	11.39	11.63
Mean age					
<24	32.12	14.33	4.82	17.30	18.49
24-27	37.37	33.63	21.21	30.71	28.02
28-31	22.04	33.48	36.64	30.57	28.65
32-35	6.45	15.08	32.64	18.05	20.90
36+	2.02	3.47	4.68	3.38	3.94
Education of R					
Both high	15.99	16.89	15.98	16.27	14.74
His high, hers low	9.81	8.45	7.44	8.58	8.39
Hers high, his low	16.80	16.44	12.26	15.14	14.04
Both low	57.39	58.22	64.33	60.01	62.83
Employment of female partner					
Part-time	6.72	10.11	11.43	9.38	9.53
No work	31.59	31.37	39.94	34.36	36.15
Married	10.62	27.30	46.83	28.13	28.91
Female	57.26	58.37	62.95	59.54	59.66
No break up plans	73.79	79.34	84.30	79.09	78.08
Metro residence	44.49	41.48	35.67	40.55	39.64
Childstatus 2003					
No first/second birth		50.08	46.97	66.43	54.51
Child's age 0-11 months		16.44	11.98	9.19	12.45
Child's age 12-23 months		13.88	9.09	7.41	10.04
Child's age 24-35 months		7.24	6.61	4.50	6.10
Child's age 36+ months		12.37	25.34	12.47	16.90

Table 2. Effects of Gender Role Attitudes and Behavior on First, Second, and Third Births

Predictors	First birth (n = 744)						Second birth (n = 663)						Third birth (n = 726)					
	All		Men		Women		All		Men		Women		All		Men		Women	
	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.
Attitude/behavior																		
consistently egalitarian	1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00	
egalitarian inconsistent	1,21		1,26		1,17		0,73	*	0,81		0,67	*	0,66		1,69		0,49	^
consistently nonegalitarian	0,92		0,80		1,03		1,06		1,32		0,83		1,43		3,09		1,31	
nonegalitarian inconsistent	1,03		1,30		0,79		0,76		1,01		0,59	*	1,89	^	3,69	*	1,31	
Female age																		
<24	0,44	**	0,43	**	0,44	**	0,62	*	0,64		0,58	^	5,52	**	7,73	*	5,29	**
24-27	0,77	*	0,79		0,75		0,93		1,08		0,77		1,41		1,55		1,33	
28-31	1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00	
32-35	0,58	*	0,88		0,28	**	0,50	**	0,62	^	0,41	**	0,41	**	0,75		0,31	**
36+	0,57		0,57				0,30	**	0,28	**			0,23	^	0,23	^		
Education of R																		
both high	1,06		1,07		1,00		1,43	*	1,74	*	1,29		4,36	**	3,15	^	5,42	**
his high, hers low	0,97		1,30		0,83		1,44	^	1,37		1,51	^	1,00		0,00		1,23	
hers high, his low	1,21		1,29		1,15		0,99		0,96		1,09		2,89	**	4,17	**	2,11	
both low	1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00	
Employment of female partner																		
part-time	0,87		0,66		1,08		0,98		1,07		1,00		0,77		0,44		1,03	
no work	0,43	**	0,40	**	0,44	**	0,96		1,06		0,93		0,92		0,55		1,02	
Married	1,78	**	2,05	**	1,62	**	1,09		1,08		1,12		1,00		1,16		1,07	
Female	0,90						1,13						0,73					
No break up plans	1,33	*	1,44	^	1,28		1,59	**	2,00	**	1,42	^	1,25		0,97		1,65	
Metro residence	0,93		0,86		0,93		1,05		1,28		0,91		1,21		1,30		1,20	
Childstatus 2003																		
No first/second birth							1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00		1,00	
Child's age 0-11 months							1,75	**	1,05		2,41	**	1,52		2,20		1,34	
Child's age 12-23 months							2,35	**	1,69	^	3,08	**	3,06	**	4,26	*	2,61	^
Child's age 24-35 months							2,68	**	1,64		3,66	**	2,11		0,64		2,90	^
Child's age 36+ months							1,05		0,88		1,19		1,90		2,17		1,45	

** = p < .01

* = .05 > p > .01