

Ambivalence about Children in the Transition to Parenthood in Sweden

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Abstract Sweden provides perhaps the greatest support for childbearing and parenthood in the world, including generously subsidized medical, maternal, and child care, paid parental leave, and child allowances. In this context, attitudes towards parenthood are likely to have a particularly strong impact on the decision about whether and when to have a child. We examine the effects on first births of holding attitudes about children, not just of positive and negative attitudes, but also of ambivalence, for those who both value children but also value the things that compete with parenthood for young adults' time and other resources. Our analysis shows, measuring attitudes before the transition to parenthood, that ambivalence about children delays the transition to parenthood, but not nearly as much as holding purely negative attitudes. The results are much stronger for women; for men, only holding negative attitudes delays the transition to parenthood. The effects of ambivalence are particularly marked among younger persons and those with a high school education or less.

Introduction

Research on the effects of attitudes towards children and subsequent childbearing has focused on single dimensions and relatively simple measures (Fawcett 1988), normally distinguishing those with positive and negative attitudes on one dimension or another (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006). But the social world is rich in ambivalence (Merton 1976), and as in studies of intergenerational ambivalence (e.g., Connidis 2002; Lüscher 1998), it is likely that ambivalence characterizes the attitudes of many young adults when they consider becoming parents. Many may have both strong positive feelings, such as that children give life meaning, confirm adult status, and serve as important objects to love and be loved by, and strong negative feelings, given the great costs of children, both in time and money, that compete with young adults' ability to pursue other interests important for many in this stage of young adulthood, such as travel (Crimmins, 1991, Fawcett 1988).

In Sweden, the greatest cost of children is time, because the state provides important subsidies towards the financial costs of children, including generously subsidized medical, maternal, and child care, paid parental leave, and child allowances. Nevertheless, Sweden has shared with much of the industrialized world in the growth of norms of intensive parenting (Bianchi, Robinson & Milkie 2007), requiring parents to be attentive to the child's needs, to support the child's schooling and everyday activities, to protect against risks of different kinds, and to encourage children's self-confidence (Alwin 1996; Björnberg & Kollind 2005), greatly increasing the time costs of children.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects on the transition to parenthood of ambivalent, as well as positive and negative, attitudes towards children, using recent longitudinal data on young adults in Sweden that provide measures of attitudes towards children obtained prior to the transition to parenthood. We will examine effects of these attitudes on the timing of the transition to parenthood, and will also consider differences in effects between men and women (given women's greater time investments in children, even in Sweden), among those of different ages (as older individuals may have already experienced travel and other opportunities cherished by young adults), and between the more educated (who are likely to have had high consumption aspirations) and the less educated.

Background

The transition to parenthood normally takes place relatively late in the transition to adulthood, the final step, as it were. Adulthood was once considered to begin with the end of education, at least in the mid-twentieth century, by which time, with the advent of the necessity for post-high school education, levels had begun to encroach on adult ages and the end of education was followed rapidly by employment (for men), marriage and parenthood (Modell, Hirschberg, and Furstenberg 1976). In the past several decades, however, difficulties young people increasingly face in the labor market, and the complex of behaviors that have led to the deferral of the committed relationships with partners and children, together with the continued upward pressure on educational attainment, have led to the creation of this new life course stage of “emerging adulthood.”

This is a new life course stage between adolescence and full adulthood that bridges the ages between 18 and 30, when individuals are no longer children but not yet adults (Arnett 2007; Furstenberg 2012). During these ages, many are still pursuing education and/or have not established stable work and family trajectories. Increasingly, young adults see these ages as a time to travel, experiment, and explore, requiring freedoms not normally found in conjunction with the restrictions of parenthood.

Most young adults, of course, continue to want to become parents, not just as a signal of (finally) achieving adulthood, but also as a sign that the period of free exploration is over, and that stability can be achieved. During the early years of emerging adulthood, however, children represent a decidedly mixed blessing. How soon is too soon to be tied down? How late can they/should they wait? Further, another characteristic of emerging adulthood is increasing heterogeneity (Furstenburg 2012), so that many may value the freedoms children preclude, while others reach quickly for the comfort and security of a more stable life style. And of course, it is likely that many will feel both, and be ambivalent about parenthood (and others may have little interest either in freedom or family stability).

Given this heterogeneity, how do attitudes towards the costs and benefits of children affect the timing of the transition to parenthood? It is easy to predict that those with the strongest concerns about children limiting freedom will delay the longest, while

those who value the stability that children tend to bring to daily life will become parents early; much research has shown this (e.g., Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006), but what of the ambivalent? Will they delay as well? Our first hypothesis is that they will be intermediate in their timing of parenthood between those with positive and negative attitudes.

Testing this hypothesis in Sweden adds particular salience, as Sweden is considered to be a country with relatively low levels of familism. Swedes are considered to have relatively weak intergenerational ties (Newman 2012; Reher 2005) and to be far along on the Second Demographic Transition and hence high on the need for self-actualization (Lesthaeghe 2010). Despite a strong two-child norm (see fig. 1), it seems likely that many young Swedes will allow their ambivalence to cause them to delay for too long.

Fig. 1 about here

It is also a highly egalitarian society in terms of socioeconomic status. This suggests that unlike in the US, where class heterogeneity is linked with extreme heterogeneity in the timing of parenthood (Martin 2004), even relatively less educated Swedes should resemble more educated Swedes in the effects of positive, negative, and ambivalent attitudes towards parenthood. Hence, we hypothesize that class will not distinguish the effects of attitudes on the timing of parenthood.

Gender, in contrast, is likely to make a strong difference, even if gender differences are more muted in Sweden (Liefbroer and Goldscheider 2007). On the one hand, children limit women's freedoms more than men's, but on the other, women tend to invest more in the parental role than men, taking the majority of parental leave (Duvander and Andersson 2006; Oláh and Bernhardt 2008) and being much more likely to work part time when children are young (Sundström 1991). Hence, we expect that for most couples, it will be the female partners whose attitudes dominate, which means that attitudes towards children will have more impact on women's family building than on men's.

Age, in contrast, might make a considerable difference in the effects of ambivalent feelings about children on the transition to parenthood. By the late 20s, most young Swedes are likely to have had the opportunity to travel, and to experiment with different experiences and relationships. This suggests a final hypothesis, that the effect of ambivalent attitudes might attenuate with age.

Findings from an earlier analysis of the YAPS dataset (Bergnéhr and Bernhardt forthcoming) showed that the majority of those still childless had positive expectations of parenthood entailing a more meaningful life, but also that many anticipate that becoming a parent will mean less personal freedom. About 25 percent of the respondents expressed ‘ambivalence,’ in the sense that they expected both less personal freedom and a more meaningful life. As a child is highly likely to restrict parents in a society where independence is a highly valued characteristic of life (Bauman 2003, Lee 2005), the authors argue that to expect less personal freedom in most cases carries a negative connotation, while it is hard to dispute that a more meaningful life is considered as something positive.

A four-category variable was constructed for that analysis, combining the two items (a more meaningful life, and less personal freedom) into their four possible combinations: ambivalent, positively inclined, negatively inclined, and ‘neutral.’ In a joint model, including both men and women, findings showed that males were significantly more likely to be characterized as ambivalent than females, while post-secondary education increased the likelihood that the respondent had ambivalent feelings about parenthood. Living with a partner seemed crucial to reducing ambivalent feelings among men, while there was no gender difference in the effect of higher education.

This variable was also used to predict birth plans among the childless. Interestingly enough, those expressing ambivalent views about having children were only slightly less likely to expect a child within the next five years, compared to those ‘positively inclined.’ In the current paper, we test this result in order to see whether ambivalence has a stronger effect on the actual transition to parenthood than it did on Swedish young adults’ expectations.

In this paper, we model the transition to first births using comparable models, including measures of attitudes towards parenthood. Taking advantage of longitudinal data from the Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) database, we measure attitudes about to parenthood (while the respondents were childless) followed by the transition to first parity over the ensuing six years. Later on we will analyze how parenthood attitudes reported after the transition to parenthood i.e. actually experienced positive and negative consequences of becoming parents, affect continued childbearing.

Data and Methods

Data: The Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) was created to enable studies of the complex interrelationships between attitudes and demographic behavior (see www.suda.su.se/yaps). Designed from the beginning to be longitudinal, there have been three waves of survey data collection, carried out in 1999, 2003, and 2009, thus spanning a ten-year period. The survey data have been combined with register data from the mid-1980s onwards, including births up to 2008.

Sample: The original target sample in 1999 consisted of 4,360 Swedish-born persons in 1968, 1972 and 1976. This resulted in 2,820 respondents (response rate of 65 percent) whose identities have been kept by Statistics Sweden through 2009. For the 2003 round of the survey, a new group of 1,194 22-year olds (1980 cohort) was added, increasing the number of birth cohorts to four, with an overall response rate of 70 percent. The analytic sample used in this paper for the analysis of the transition to parenthood consists of the 1,567 respondents who were childless at the time of the 2003 survey.

Method: The transition to a first child is analysed with Cox regression, using register information on births between 2003-2008. The observation period starts at the time of the 2003 survey round.

Among the many attitudinal questions included in the survey questionnaire, one set was intended to measure parenthood attitudes. Childless respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 5, whether they expected less personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends, a better partner relationship, and/or a more meaningful life as a result of becoming a parent. Earlier analysis of the parenthood attitudes among childless young adults in Sweden (Bernhardt 2004) has shown that among the three items indicating (likely) negative consequences of parenthood (less personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends) it is the first item that is of the most concern to the respondents; i.e., it is the statement which the respondents are most likely to agree with, while 'a more meaningful life' seems to carry more weight than the expectation of a better partner relationship. We will therefore focus on those two in our analysis of the effect of prior parenthood attitudes on the transition to a first birth among childless young adults in Sweden. We will use information for a sample of 1,567 childless respondents (801 women and 767 men).

So do young men and women in Sweden expect the transition to parenthood to result in less personal freedom and/or a more meaningful life? Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the percentage distributions of the responses of men and women, respectively. The scale went from 1=disagree completely to 5=agree completely, and about 40 percent of the women and 50 percent of the men indicated a value of 4 or 5 to the question about restricted personal freedom, while a little over half of both men and women gave the same response (4 or 5) to the question about parenthood resulting in a more meaningful life. Thus it is clear that the majority have positive expectations of parenthood entailing a more meaningful life, but also that many anticipate that this will mean less personal freedom.

Fig. 2. Less personal freedom

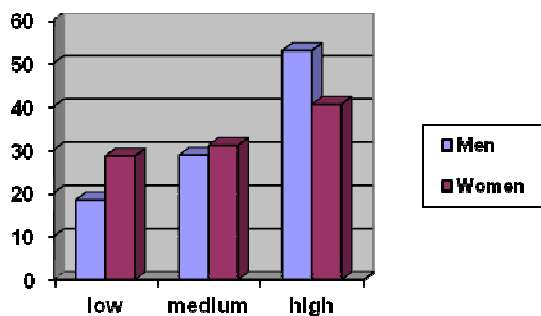
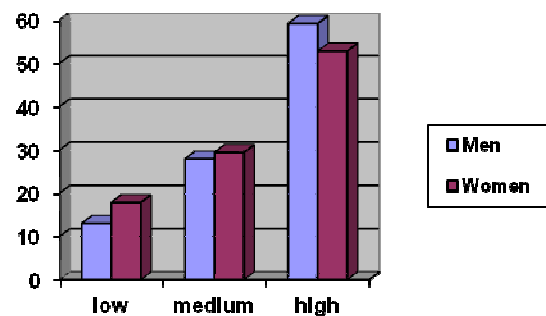


Fig.3. Life becomes more meaningful



Thus, although expecting both less personal freedom and a more meaningful life is not necessarily contradictory, it can be assumed that holding both these views is likely to create some ambivalence about making the transition to parenthood. We have therefore constructed a four-category variable in the following way:

1. **Ambivalent** Have indicated 4 or 5 on the scale (1-5) regarding both 'personal freedom' and 'meaningfulness'
2. **Positively inclined** Have a high value on 'meaningfulness' and a low (1-3) on 'personal freedom'
3. **Negatively inclined** The reverse
4. **Indifferent** Have values less than 4 on both 'personal freedom' and 'meaningfulness'

The percentage distributions of the parenthood attitude variable for men and women, as well as their distributions on the other measures we include in this analysis, are shown in Table 1. Roughly 30 percent of both men and women are defined as ‘positively inclined’, and about 20 percent as ‘negatively inclined’ (with men slightly less positive and slightly more negative than women). The major difference between men and women is that men are much more likely to be ‘ambivalent’ while more women fall in the ‘neutral’ category (neither expecting less personal freedom nor a more meaningful life).

Table 1 about here

In addition to our main explanatory variable (parenthood attitudes), we also include controls for age of the respondent (22, 26, 30 and 34), education (primary/secondary versus post-secondary), partner status (unpartnered, living with a partner) and a career ambition index (low, medium, high). All these variables are measured at the time of the 2003 survey.

We included a measure of career ambition, to capture possible delaying effects of wanting to be well established in one’s career/working life before taking on the responsibilities of a child. The index was constructed using the following items in the questionnaire: 1) *How important is work in your life*, 2) *How important is it in your life to be successful at your work*, 3) *A good job offers good opportunities to advance*, and 4) *A good job means that I get a high salary and/or other benefits*. Adding the four items gave a sum from 4 to 20. Cronbach’s alpha for the index was 0.6484, which is reasonable given the limited number of items included. However, as the scale was heavily skewed to the right, indicating that young Swedes report high levels of career orientation, we split the variable into three categories: low = 4-13 , medium = 14-17 , and high = 18-20).

Results

Our major findings are presented in Table 2. The first column (‘All’) shows the results for the total population of unmarried young adults. Those with positive attitudes towards children are the most likely to have made the transition to parenthood over the study period; all the other combinations have significantly lower odds of making this transition (although the result for the ambivalent was only significant at .10). Those with

negative attitudes were barely half as likely to make the transition as those with positive attitudes (.49), while the indifferent made the transition only about 70% as rapidly and the ambivalent were nearly (82%) as likely to make the transition to parenthood as those with positive attitudes.

Insert Table 2 about here

We also assessed these relationships changing the reference category for child attitudes to negative (results not presented). This allowed us to test whether there were differences among the three groups that did not have simple, positive attitudes. This analysis indicated that both the ambivalent and the indifferent were significantly more likely to make the transition to parenthood than those with negative attitudes.

The controls mostly had the expected effects. Women made the transition to parenthood more rapidly than men, and those living with a partner were far more likely to become parents than those who were not in a residential partnership. The age pattern suggests a curvilinear pattern, with those aged 26 (the reference category) and 30 in 2003 being the most likely to become parents, those younger still delaying, and those who had delayed well into their 30s now unlikely to change their ways. Educational level and career ambition had no significant effects.

This table also shows how the results for the total differ between men and women (cols. 2 and 3). The results indicate that indeed, the effects of attitudes are considerably stronger for women than for men. For each contrast, the effect for women appears to have more impact, both in terms of the strength and significance of the relationships, although for each, given the smaller sample, the ambivalent are not significantly different from the positive. In contrast, there are no substantive differences by gender in the effects of the controls (though high career ambition might show a significant interaction, showing the lingering effects of traditional relationships in Sweden).

We examined, as well, differences in the effects of child attitudes by education (post-secondary vs. less than post-secondary) and age. Although we had expected to find little difference by education, in fact there was one: the effect of holding ambivalent attitudes on the transition to parenthood was significant only for those with less education (results not presented). Among those with a post-secondary education, there was no difference between the ambivalent and the positive (odds ratio of .99). In contrast, among

the less educated, the ambivalent were only two-thirds as likely to have made the transition to parenthood as those with positive attitudes. It may be that, with fewer resources, these young adults had not been able to afford the explorations that were possible for those with more resources; it might also be that for those with fewer resources, parenthood is more limiting than it is for those who can afford babysitting for evening activities, travel with children, and other activities popular with young adults.

In our analyses for each of the separate age groups, as we expected, ambivalent feelings had their greatest impact on the youngest respondents, and attenuated with each older age (results not presented). In contrast, those with negative attitudes were less likely to make the transition to parenthood at every age than were those with positive attitudes.

Discussion

In this paper, we analyzed the effects of attitudes towards children on the transition to parenthood in Sweden, a country with near-replacement fertility and strong support for families. Using longitudinal data spanning a period of 10 years, we measured attitudes held prior to the beginning of childbearing. We distinguished holding positive and negative attitudes from ambivalent (and neutral) attitudes. Our results show that young Swedes in the first decade of the 21st century, the majority of whom hold positive attitudes about the value of parenthood in their lives, make the transition to parenthood, and even those with great concerns about the time costs to their freedom of children nevertheless make the transition to parenthood nearly as quickly. The minority who see little value to parenthood, in contrast, are much more likely to delay, especially if they are also concerned about how children restrict their freedom.

These relationships are structured somewhat differently among those of different ages and educational levels, as well as between men and women. These attitudes have more effect on women's transition to parenthood than they do men's, possibly reflecting women's greater engagement in parenting, and their effects attenuate with age as young people have increasingly realized their experiential goals for emerging adulthood. Ambivalence about children delays parenthood more among those with lower educational attainment than those with more, suggesting that young Swedes of all educational levels share aspirations for young adulthood experiences, but that only those with more resources are able to realize them.

These results make an important contribution to studies of the effects of attitudes on fertility. They make clear that at least under some conditions, it is not enough simply to distinguish those with more positive from those with more negative attitudes towards children; it is also important to consider that ambivalent attitudes towards children have some impact on the transition to parenthood. Nevertheless, overall, it seems that the dominant attitude shaping the timing of the transition to parenthood is holding positive views of children.

Other strengths of this analysis include 1) the systematic use of longitudinal data, so that information on parental attitudes, collected prospectively, can be examined in terms of fertility measured afterwards; 2) the careful distinguishing of positive, negative, and ambivalent attitudes, and 3) distinguishing the transition to parenthood (i.e., first births), from later family building. Even the use of Sweden is a strength, because although the state offsets much of the financial costs of children, the time costs are substantial, as in most other developed countries.

In addition to its focus on a single country, the analysis has several weaknesses. Many of these young adults still have additional childbearing years to continue their family building, and those who begin quite late might differ substantially from those studied here. The sample is small. Moreover, there is no information on the actual attitudes of the partner. The ideal model would include the attitudes of both partners, measured before children are born, to best understand their joint transition to parenthood. We expect, in later work on this subject, to examine the effects of attitudes on later family building, i.e., on the attainment of two children or replacement fertility.

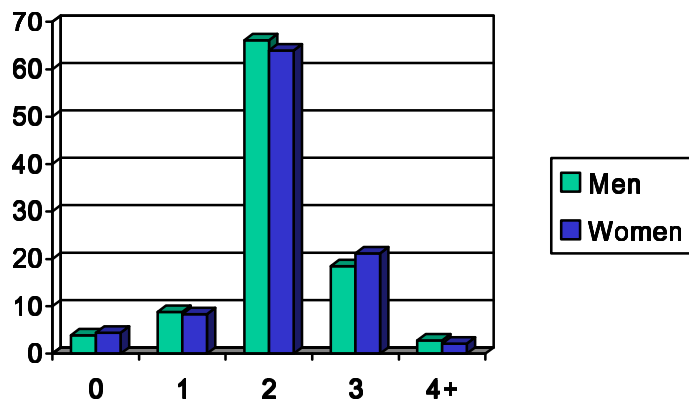
Clearly, this analysis needs replicating in different contexts. It may be that attitudes have their greatest impact in the *absence* of the other supports, as in Italy or the United States, so that Sweden's extensive state policies that allow workers to care for families (Myrdal, 1968, Oláh & Bernhardt 2008) might reduce variation in the family building process, making attitudes less relevant. Our paper is an important first step in attempting to clearly elucidate the ways in which attitudes towards the new demands of parenthood are affecting the timing of beginning childbearing, in Sweden, and perhaps elsewhere, as well.

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Fig. 1. Desired number of children among childless young adults in Sweden (YAPS data)



		Men	Women	All
Parenthood attitudes				
	Positively inclined	30,0	32,1	31,1
	Ambivalent	29,9	20,9	25,3
	Indifferent	17,3	27,5	22,5
	Negatively inclined	22,8	19,6	21,2
Age				
	22	36,9	44,9	41,0
	26	28,2	30,2	29,2
	30	20,1	17,1	18,6
	34	14,5	7,7	11,2
Education				
	Primary/secondary	58,2	47,7	52,8
	Post-secondary	41,8	52,3	47,2
Partner status				
	Unpartnered	55,3	50,7	52,9
	Living with a partner	44,7	49,3	47,1
Career ambition index				
	Low	22,7	19,9	21,8
	Medium	58,3	60,4	59,4
	High	18,0	19,7	18,9
	N	766	801	1567

Table 2. Effects of Child attitudes on first births among childless respondents in 2003, all, men and women (hazard ratios).

	All	Men	Women
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Variables			
Child attitude (ref. = positive)			
Ambivalent	0.82(*)	0.91	0.79
Indifferent	0.69**	0.79	0.63**
Negative	0.49***	0.68*	0.37***
Female	1.27**		
22	0.46***	0.49***	0.45***
30	1.16	1.38*	1.04
34	0.46***	0.43***	0.53*
Post-secondary education	1.05	0.97	1.14
Low career ambition	0.90	1.00	0.82
High career ambition	0.96	1.25	0.80
With partner	3.45***	3.86***	3.21***
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N	1567	766	801
Log likelihood	-3128.33	-1326.02	-1674.87
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(*) 0.10 * 0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001