

## **Ambivalence about Children in the Family Building Process in Sweden**

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Research on the effects of attitudes towards children and subsequent childbearing has focused on single dimensions and relatively simple measures (Fawcett 1988), but as in studies of intergenerational ambivalence (e.g., Connidis 2002, Lüscher 1998), it is likely that ambivalence characterizes the attitudes of young adults when they consider becoming parents or increasing their family size. Many may have both strong positive feelings, such as about children giving life meaning, confirming adult status, and serving 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 important interests (Crimmins, 1991, Fawcett 1988).

In Sweden, the primary cost of children is in terms of time, because the state provides important subsidies towards the financial costs of children, including generous paid parental leave, subsidized child care, 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 fertility of ambivalent attitudes towards children. We will distinguish effects on the timing of the transition to

parenthood, as well as on the transition to second and subsequent births. We will build on two completed papers, one on the determinants of holding ambivalent attitudes (as well as positive, negative, and neutral attitudes), which is available on request, and one on the factors affecting these fertility transitions (also available).

We are eager to begin exploring how attitudes shape the childbearing of young Swedes over the life course state of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2007). Swedes are unusual in the European context in attaining near replacement fertility, and while much of this unusually high fertility is likely to result from the ways the Swedish state provides resources to reduce the costs of childrearing, attitudes are also likely to shape fertility variation. We will examine how the effects of attitudes towards children change over the early adult life course (with ambivalence perhaps becoming less salient as young people approach age 30, and have had the opportunity to travel and experience different activities and relationships) and will examine as well whether such attitudes have more impact on the more educated (who might value leisure activities such as travel more highly than the less education). We have access to an outstanding dataset, a repeated survey of young adults that follows them over 10 years, with repeated measures of attitudes and excellent histories of family building.

#### Data and Methods

The Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) was designed to enable studies of the complex interrelationships between attitudes and demographic behavior (see [www.suda.su.se/yaps](http://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, there have been three waves of survey data collection, which

were carried out in 1999, 2003, and 2009, respectively, thus spanning a ten-year period. The main topics covered in the YAPS questionnaires are 1) plans, expectations and attitudes regarding family and working life, 2) histories of family formation, building, and dissolution, and 3) factual information about the respondents' current situation and background characteristics. The survey data have been combined with several kinds of register data from the mid-80s onwards, including for our purposes births up to 2008.

The original sample in 1999 consisted of 4,360 persons born in Sweden in 1968, 1972 and 1976. With an overall response rate of 65 percent, there were a total of 2,820 respondents, whose identities have been kept by Statistics Sweden through 2009. A second round of the survey was conducted in 2003, when a new group of 1,194 22-year olds was added, increasing the number of birth cohorts to four (1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980), with an overall response rate of 70 percent. Thus, the total number of respondents in 2003 was 2,816 who began being interviewed in 1999 or 2003.

Using register information on births in the period 2003-2008, the transition to a next child between 2003 and 2008 is analysed using Cox regression. The observation period in most cases starts at the time of the 2003 survey round. For second and third births, where the previous child is born less than 9 months prior to the 2003 survey, the start date is 9 months after the birth of the previous child.

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 – that is, 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.

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