Family Formation in Sweden around the Turn of the New Millennium

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List of empirical studies


Introduction

This thesis contains four empirical studies on patterns in Swedish family formation around the turn of the new millennium. The overarching aim of the thesis is to add to the debate and knowledge about factors related to family formation in Sweden and in other Western societies. The purpose is to provide a better understanding of the meaning of family formation and the role of factors that relate to marriage formation and childbearing.

In the last half a century, there have been vast changes in the patterns of formation and dissolution of families in Western societies (e.g., Lesthaeghe 2010, Oláh 2015). Marriage rates have decreased, in some countries in favor of non-marital cohabitation leading to a larger share of extramarital births. At the same time divorce rates have increased and overall childbearing levels have most often declined. These changes have triggered researchers in demography and other social sciences to search for causes of change, describe the potential consequences, and make predictions for the future. It has also led to discussion about issues such as the role and meaning of families, the role of marriage and childbearing in modern societies and the relationship between these two family-formation processes. Researchers have linked family-demographic change to other parallel societal developments, such as increases in men’s and women’s educational attainment and women’s labor market participation (e.g., Becker 1993). Not the least they have been linked to changes in gender structures (e.g., Goldscheider, Bernhardt & Lappegård 2015, Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015) and to increasingly individualistic values (Lesthaeghe 2010, Surkyn & Lesthaeghe 2004).

Sweden has been at the forefront of these demographic trends as well as emerging trends in gender equality and value development, which makes it a theoretically interesting case to study. Studying recent family formation in Sweden can provide valuable insight into the state of these processes in a context where they have been in play for several decades.

A family could be defined in many different ways (see e.g., Fox & Luxton 2001), but in this thesis the focus is on what in demographic research and related disciplines is commonly termed family formation, namely marrying or having a child. More specifically, the event of first-time marriage formation and having a first child are studied. These life events distinctly mark the formal formation of a family, although in Sweden those who marry or have children have normally previously lived in a more or less

The thesis consists of two main parts where the first two empirical studies focus on first-marriage formation and the last two focus on the transition to parenthood. The studies on marriage formation touch upon issues related to the nature and meaning of marriage in Sweden and Western societies in general. They relate to the debate about the extent to which marriage differs from cohabitation and whether marriage is losing its ground as a family-forming institution. These studies provide some clues to the evaluation of what may be the central driving forces behind changing trends in marriage formation. Such issues are interesting for the general debate about family change in Western countries.

The last two studies examine childbearing differentials across different segments of the labor market, such as occupations and workplaces. In parallel with women’s increased labor-market participation and declining fertility rates observed in Western and many other industrialized countries, there has been a growing interest in the relationship between work and family life. Paid work is often seen as necessary to afford having children but also as an obstacle when it comes to having time to care for children. It is important to know how men’s and women’s work context relate to their childbearing behavior. The type of occupation and workplace are key measures of individuals’ current locations in the labor market and the social context that they are in. For example, the compatibility of work and family life may differ across different occupations and workplaces. These two studies have a clear gender perspective and relate to questions about the gendered nature of the association between work and family-life.

All four empirical studies of this thesis are based on Swedish register data that cover virtually the entire resident population of Sweden. This is a data source of unusually large size and high quality that is only matched in a few other countries, for example the Nordic neighbors. Having access to this data source enabled me to carry out a combination of both broad and unusually detailed investigations of family formation, which is reflected in the empirical studies of this thesis (see the data and methods section). The years covered are 1991-2007 in the two marriage studies and 2002-2006/2007 in the two studies on the transition to parenthood.

This introductory chapter is intended to provide an overview of the contents of the thesis and tie the separate studies together. The next section of the introduction situates modern-day Swedish family formation in the theoretical discussion about family formation as well as in an international context and a wider time frame. Thereafter, the data and methods are briefly discussed, followed by a short summary of each of the four studies and a concluding discussion about the studies and the thesis as a whole.
Situating modern-day Swedish family formation

In order to place this thesis in a broader context, this section is intended to situate Swedish family-formation patterns around the turn of the millennium in relation to a wider time frame and also in comparison to other countries. Not the least, the thesis needs to be situated in the general scientific debate about family formation.

Theoretical perspectives

One of the most prominent theoretical approaches to explain the family-demographic changes that have occurred in the Western world in the last five decades is the theory of the second demographic transition. It is based on the idea that the family-demographic changes largely are a symptom of a broader ideational shift towards more individualistic and secular values and away from authorities and traditions (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe 2004, Lesthaeghe 2010). When large parts of the populations have achieved a certain level of economic standard with living conditions where basic needs are met, individuals can start focusing on higher order needs, in accordance with Maslow’s (1954) formulation of the hierarchy of needs (Lesthaeghe 2010). These higher order needs relate to individualism, self-realization, expressive values, and tolerance towards others. Although not as emphasized, this development is also seen as related to more symmetrical gender roles, and women’s increased economic and reproductive autonomy.

In individual life projects, family life is postponed and no longer seen as equally central. Couple relationships are increasingly seen as a project that should be fulfilling to the individual and if the relationship does not live up to expectations, there is no necessity in staying together (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe 2004, Lesthaeghe 2010, Giddens 1992). Entering marriage as a lifelong contract becomes less attractive; marriage rates have gradually declined at the same time as divorce rates increased. In Sweden this started already in the 1960’s, but in other European countries it started a few years or even decades later (Council of Europe 2006). Marriages were postponed to later ages and in many Western countries, especially the Nordic ones, unmarried cohabitation became not only a prelude to marriage but also an alternative to marriage for many couples (Heuveline & Timberlake 2004, Hiekel, Liefbroer & Poortman 2014). The share of children born to non-married cohabiting parents increased, not the least in the Nordic countries (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012, Heuveline & Timberlake 2004).

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1 Other important works in the social sciences have also discussed the increasing individualization and weakening role of tradition and social institutions (e.g., Inglehart 1997), not the least in relation to couple relationships (e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Bauman 2003).
Nevertheless, most Europeans, including Swedes, marry sometime in their life (Andersson & Philipov 2002) and there are still important institutional incentives to marry in many countries (Perelli-Harris & Sanchez-Gassen 2012) as well as normative ones. In Sweden around the turn of the millennium it seems that love and commitment were the prime reasons for entering marriage (Bernhardt 2001, Strandell 2013).

In most Western countries, starting from the 1970’s childbearing was postponed to higher ages (Council of Europe 2006), to stages after finishing education, finding a job and realizing other individual goals. In some countries this started in the 1970’s. Parenthood may be seen in conflict with self-realization in other life areas (e.g., Lesthaeghe 2010), because of the time restrictions, economic costs, and increased need for selflessness that may come along with having children. In many countries, although not as evident in the Nordic and a few other countries, childbearing is not only postponed, but also the average number of children that a woman has during her fertile years has decreased (Frejka & Sobotka 2008, Lesthaeghe 2010, Oláh 2015). In many countries, the childbearing levels are well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman that is a prerequisite for replacing each parental generation with an equally large generation of children.

The second demographic transition perspective has received some critique and questioning, especially for making too far-reaching assumptions about a broad range of family behaviors across Western and other industrialized countries. For example, it can be argued that it primarily is a Western phenomenon (for discussion see e.g., Ochiai 2014, Lesthaeghe 2010). The description of how new family behaviors, such as childbearing within unmarried cohabitation, diffuse over different strata in society has also been challenged (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). A main critique is that the theory underestimates important labor-market or economic factors for change in family behaviors (ibid., Ochiai 2014). Some scholars have questioned if the second demographic transition is in fact only a continuation of, or a secondary feature of, the first demographic transition (Cliquet 1992, Coleman 2004). In the period between the two world wars, in the midst of a period of strong fertility decline, the debate was very similar to the one later suggested by the second demographic transition proponents (see van Bavel 2010). In many Western countries, including Sweden, the 1950’s and 1960’s mainly constituted a temporary break from this decline with early marriage formation and childbearing (for discussion see van Bavel 2010, Lesthaeghe 2010), leading to higher aggregate levels of marriage and fertility.

There are many structural changes that scholars have connected to the family-demographic changes. Somewhere around or after the mid 1900’s, women in many industrialized countries started entering the labor market to a large extent, thus making the same kind of movement into the public sphere that men did already during the early phases of industrialization.
(Löfström 2004). There have also been large flows of both men and women entering into higher education (OECD 2012).

Many scholars have connected women’s increased labor-market participation to the postponement and decrease of both childbearing and marriage formation. From the second demographic transition perspective, education and paid work can be seen as arenas for self-expression and self-realization that compete with family life (Lesthaeghe 2010). Becker (1993) has proposed that in earlier times there were gains from marriage because of labor specialization within couples. A man could have a wife to take care of the household and children and a woman could get the economic security and support that a husband’s earnings provided. When women started working in the labor market, there was less specialization and less need for marriage and family formation. Furthermore, there was no longer a necessity for women to marry or to stay married as they could support themselves and were much less economically dependent on any partner. Paid work could also be seen as competing with women’s roles as caregivers.

Others argue that the incompatibility between work and family life and the changing roles in the family may be underlying the demographic developments in the initial stages of change, but is probably not an appropriate explanation for changes observed in more recent years (e.g., Goldscheider et al. 2015, Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015). Much research from more recent decades contest that women’s paid work is related to lower levels of family formation in many contexts (see Oppenheimer 1997 for discussion), including Sweden (Bracher and Santow 1998, Andersson 2000). There are signs that in recent years the association between female labor-force participation and childbearing has turned into a positive one at the aggregate, cross-country, level (Ahn & Mira 2002, Billari & Kohler 2004). The role of policies that enable the combination of work and family life for this turnaround is widely acknowledged (Neyer & Andersson 2008, Gornick & Meyers 2008, Ferrarini & Duvander 2010, Hoem 2005). In countries with such policies, there is no need to choose between being active on the labor market and having children. On the contrary, for both men and women, paid work is often seen as a prerequisite for supporting a family economically.

Increasing gender symmetry, as well as women’s increased economic authority, are seen as parts of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2010), although gender itself is not central in this discussion. Others emphasize the role of gender equality and changes in gender structures as crucial for understanding the family-demographic change that has occurred and foreseeing developments for the future (e.g., Goldscheider 2000, McDonald 2000, Bernhardt 2004, Sobotka 2008a, b). This is especially the case in two recent publications (Goldscheider et al. 2015, Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015). They propose that women’s mass-entry into the labor market and higher education may have decreased family-formation incentives and destabilized families through increased uncertainty of what to
expect from a potential partner and what role gender may play for work and family life. This may have lead to less willingness to commit to a partner, for example through marriage or childbearing (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

When women increasingly entered the labor-market and the public sphere they still had the major responsibility for the private sphere, such as housework and childcare, leading to a double burden for them (Gerson 2010). Some see this burden as a reason for why women may want to postpone marriage and motherhood and in some cases also reduce the number of children they have or even forego family formation altogether (McDonald 2000, Goldscheider 2000, Goldscheider et al. 2015).

Both Goldscheider and colleagues (2015) and Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) argue that this unbalanced situation can be solved by a move towards increasing gender equality. The flow of women entering the labor market and the public sphere marks the first phase of what can be seen as ‘the gender revolution’. In the second part men also take on a larger share of the responsibility for the private sphere (Goldscheider et al. 2015). The end state of the revolution, if it is ever reached, is that men and women share both paid work and housework and care for their children equally. A development in that direction is expected to lead to more balance and willingness for commitment among partners and more stable relationships (Goldscheider 2000, Bernhardt 2004, Goldscheider et al. 2015). Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) instead use the term ‘female revolution’ for the changes in women’s roles and postulate that there can be a return to ‘more family’ as gender egalitarianism becomes more normative. Many scholars argue that the shift into more gender egalitarian societies is still an ongoing and slow or even stalled process (e.g., Esping-Andersen 2009, Gerson 2010, England 2010), and is contingent on contextual factors (e.g., Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015).

Although the different explanations for recent family-demographic developments are not mutually exclusive, they may carry somewhat different predictions for the future. Based on the second demographic transition arguments, a reasonable prediction for the future is a continuously weakening role of the family and continuance of the demographic change seen in the last decades, or at least not a reversal in such development without a reversal in the ideational sphere. The more gender-based perspectives, on the contrary, predict lower and later family formation at first but then a strengthening of the family when or if norms and behavior become more gender egalitarian.

Sweden’s reputation as being one of the main forerunners in the second demographic transition is not only granted by its family-demographic developments but also by its value context. For example Sobotka (2008a,b), measuring ideational context by a composite index of second demographic transition values, places Sweden at the top among more than 20 European countries. Based on World Values Survey data (World Values Survey 2015),
the “Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map” has been created with two axes measuring ideational factors where values at the high end of the scales are closely related to the second demographic transition values. One axis measures the degree of traditional values versus more secular and rational values and the other axis captures survival values at one end and self-expressive ones at the other end. Sweden has in repeated surveys been ranked the highest in both secular-rational values and self-expression values (among 40-60 countries all over the world), also slightly higher than the other Nordic countries. Between 1981 and 2014 those values have gradually increased in Sweden (ibid.).

Sweden is often seen as one of the countries that have come furthest in the gender equality developments (e.g. Goldscheider et al. 2015, Bernhardt et al. 2008). This is especially the case when it comes to norms and values. For example, it is a general belief that both men and women should be engaged in paid work as well as in taking care of their children (Evertsson 2014, Fahlen 2013). At the same time, it can be argued that there has been little change in factual gender equality in Sweden in the last decades and that men still have much more power than women in several areas, for example when it comes to decisions about the division of paid and unpaid labor (Bekkenengen 2002). Men’s increased engagement in their children can be interpreted as a growing prevalence of child-orientation among fathers and not driven by a strive for gender equality, although a more balanced division of labor can be an outcome (ibid.).

In short, Sweden is a theoretically interesting context to study because it is on the forefront of the developments both in family-demographic change and in ideational and gender role change. The family-demographic developments certainly differ across historical, cultural, and political contexts (Reher 1998, Lesthaeghe 2010, Sobotka & Toulemon 2008, McDonald 2006). Still, the current state of Swedish family formation may inform about the broader state of affairs of these developments. The theoretical perspectives mentioned in this section are not discussed in all of the empirical studies of this thesis, but become more important when tying the separate studies together and situating the thesis as a whole in the scientific literature and debate.

Swedish family-formation trends
The trends in marriage formation and childbearing in Sweden during the last half-century are described in more detail below. The connection between these two family-formation processes is also discussed as well as how family formation is defined and measured in the empirical studies of the thesis.
Marriage formation in Sweden
The Swedish marriage trends are described through the Total First Marriage Rate for women during 1960-2012 (Figure 1). This is a measure based on the number of marriages in a year as well as the age structure and size of the population. It gives the probability of a woman to ever get married if the age-specific first-marriage rates in that specific year would remain at current level throughout her marriageable years (in this case up to age 49). This measure is often used to depict marriage trends across years and countries. The box with the dashed lines in Figure 1 depicts the time period covered in the two empirical studies on first-marriage formation in this thesis.

Figure 1. Total First Marriage Rate (TFMR) for women below age 50, Sweden 1960-2012.

Sweden was the first country, closely followed by the other Nordic countries, to experience a vast decline in marriage formation rates, starting in the late 1960’s. In parallel with the marriage decline there was an increasing trend in the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation in Sweden (Trost 1979), to a larger extent than in most other Western countries outside the Nordic region. As can be seen from Figure 1, the trend in first-marriage formation was mostly declining from the late 1960’s until 1998, apart from peaks in the mid 1970’s and 1989, which have been ascribed to policy changes. The peak in the mid 1970’s was likely due to changes in the divorce legislation in
1974 that facilitated divorce and created a large influx of divorcees into the marriage market. The possibility of a smoother dissolution of marriage and the public discussion about it might also have made marriage seem as a more modern and less strict form of union (Agell 1985). The peak in 1989 was due to changes in the widow’s pension act that created economic incentives, primarily for middle-aged or older women, to marry their cohabiting partners before the end of that specific year (Hoem 1991).

The general declining marriage trend, and especially the early and swift onset, in parallel with the large prevalence of unmarried cohabitation created the image of Sweden (and its Nordic neighbors) as the leader in the fall of marriage (Popenoe 1988).

From 1998, however, there was an increasing trend in marriage formation. This is a trend that has received surprisingly little attention in the scientific literature, considering previous theoretical discussion and that this was such a clear break from general and earlier trends. This development became the inspiration for the first empirical study in this thesis. After 2008, the trend has been rather stable but somewhat fluctuating. There is also an evident peak in the year 2000, without any apparent explanation other than the fact that this year was the turn of the millennium. This was part of the inspiration for the second empirical study, which examines digit preferences in marriage formation.

Another interesting development is that the increasing divorce rate has turned into a slightly declining one in Sweden after the turn of the millennium (Andersson & Kolk 2011). This is the case for the Nordic region in general, while divorce rates are still generally increasing in other European regions (Oláh 2015). There may also be a reversal in marriage formation in the other Nordic countries, judging from their Total First Marriage Rates (Council of Europe 2006, Eurostat 2012, Oláh 2015).

It could be mentioned that trends in same-sex marriages have no direct effect on the described Swedish marriage trends. Marriage between same-sex partners became a legal option in 2009, but these marriages are so few compared to opposite-sex marriages that they do not affect overall patterns visibly. Furthermore, registered partnerships, which have been an option for same-sex couples since 1995, are not included in the marriage statistics that I rely on. The introduction of registered partnership and marriage for same-sex couples can be regarded as signs of a general development towards less traditional views of couple relationships and marriage. The meaning of marriage has most likely changed over the last half-century.

Part of the decline in marriage rates in Sweden, as in other countries, has been driven by a general postponement of marriage to later ages (e.g., Winkler-Dworak & Engelhardt 2004). The mean age at first marriage is high in Sweden compared to many other European countries (Sobotka & Toulemon 2008, Council of Europe 2006, Oláh 2015). It has increased quite
continuously from the historical low at ages 25.9 for men and 23.3 for women in 1966 to ages 35.9 for men and 33.4 for women in 2012 (Figure 3).

Another way of viewing the developments in marriage formation over time is to look at patterns across birth cohorts. If focusing on women born in 1935-1985 (see Figure 2 in Study I for more detail) it is apparent that the percent who has ever married at any given age decreases for every cohort up to those born just before 1970. At age 44\(^2\), only 69 percent of the women born in 1965 had ever been married, while the corresponding figure was 93 percent for women born in 1935. However, women born in the 1970’s reached the levels of those born in the mid 1960’s, before turning age 40. Women born in the 1980’s even surpassed the levels of those born in 1975 when they were in their twenties. This shows that marriage is no longer becoming less popular and it underlines the shift in marriage trends (as described in Study I).

It should be noted that as cohabitation became more prevalent as a union form, the difference in form of rights and regulations between cohabitation and marriage have gradually been minimized in Sweden. Some important changes occurred as late as in the 1990s, such as the introduction of fathers’ equal right to shared custody of children also in the case of dissolution of a cohabitation union as in the case of formal divorce (Schiratzki 2008).

Marriage is not more advantageous than cohabitation in terms of social security, legal rights, or economic benefits in the way that it is in many European countries outside the Nordic region (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen 2012). Nevertheless, a few small differences remain that makes marriage more favorable, such as the inheritance rules for married and cohabiting partners (Agell and Brattström 2008). This may produce an incentive to marry, especially for couples with large assets. In addition, in the event of divorce, assets and property are divided more equally between the two former partners than at dissolution of a cohabiting union (Agell and Brattström 2008). This may be an incentive for the partner with less assets to marry (usually the woman). There may thus be different gains from marriage for different socioeconomic groups (Duvander 1999), even if the differences may be comparatively small in Sweden.

**Childbearing in Sweden**

Figure 2 describes the time trends in fertility in Sweden between 1968 and 2012. The fertility measure is the Total Fertility Rate, which often is used to illustrate trends over time and make comparisons across countries. This measure relates the total number of children born in a year to the age structure and size of the population. It shows the number of children a woman would have over her childbearing years if the age-specific fertility rates of a specific year would remain stable over all her childbearing years

\(^2\) The oldest age available for women born 1965.
(here ages 15-49). The box with dashed lines in the figure highlights the time frame that is covered in the two studies on the transition to parenthood in this thesis.

**Figure 2.** Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for women below age 50, Sweden 1968-2012.

In Sweden, the childbearing trends follow a roller-coaster pattern (first described by Hoem & Hoem 1996) as can be seen from Figure 2. This is partly related to the fact that childbearing trends in Sweden follow the business cycles (Andersson 2000, Hoem 2000). Men and women appear to temporarily adjust the timing of their childbearing to the labor-market situation. There is a close and positive link at the individual level between labor-market attachment and childbearing among Swedish men and women (e.g., Andersson 2000). At the macro level, high labor-force participation is combined with relatively high fertility (e.g., Billari & Kohler 2004). These facts have often been ascribed to labor-market and family policies that encourage and protect parents’ labor-market work, enhance the possibility of combining work and family life, and explicitly aim to promote gender equality (e.g., Neyer & Andersson 2008, Ferrarini & Duvander 2010, Gornick & Meyers 2008, Hoem 2005). In particular, the fact that the level of the parental-leave benefits is based on each individual’s previous work-related earnings is an incentive for both men and women to postpone parenthood until being established on the labor market and having adequate earnings. Study III and IV in this thesis illustrate important variation in
childbearing patterns within the group of employed men and women, across different segments of the labor market.

In a number of other Western countries, there have been more starkly declining or persistently low fertility rates (Council of Europe 2006, Frejka & Sobotka 2008, Oláh 2015). In 2012, Sweden had among the highest fertility rates in the EU (Eurostat 2014b). Nevertheless, as in other Western countries there has been substantial postponement of parenthood also in Sweden. The mean age at becoming a parent has increased from 26.6 for men and 24.0 for women in 1970 to 31.5 for men and 29.0 for women in 2013 (Figure 3), although there was no change over the more recent period 2004-2013. Women become mothers relatively late in Sweden compared to many other European countries (Council of Europe 2006).

Although period measures of fertility have fluctuated substantially and the postponement of parenthood has been quite extensive in Sweden, the cohort patterns in childbearing have remained remarkably stable. Across each cohort born between 1920 and 1965 the average number of children that a woman gives birth to has remained quite steady around 1.9-2.1 (Statistics Sweden 2011; Figure 2.3). It is the timing of childbearing that has changed and not a woman’s average completed fertility.

The share of women who remain childless has not increased substantially. In fact, the share of women who remained childless at age 45 was around 14 percent both for women born in 1930 and those born in 1955-1965. The lowest childlessness is found for women born between 1935 and 1950 where 12-13 percent remained childless at age 45. Among men, there seems to have been a slightly increasing trend and the lowest level of childlessness is found for those born in 1940 where 17.1 percent remained childless at age 55, while the corresponding figure was 20.7 percent for those born in 1955 (Statistics Sweden 2011; Table 3.3.).

Some of the marriage and fertility statistics presented here are based only on women, because that is generally what is produced. Regarding gender differences it is worth mentioning that a slightly larger share of men than women remains either never-married or childless. This is primarily related to the fact that there is a larger share of men than women of marrying and childbearing ages in the population (Statistics Sweden 2011).

The relationship between marriage and childbearing
When tying the two family-formation processes marriage and childbearing together a first observation is that the developments of marriage and fertility rates are quite similar across years (see also Figure 3 in Study I), apart from some deviations such as those produced by the marriage peak in 1989. Nevertheless, the link between marriage and childbearing has become looser over the years in terms of timing. In the early 1970’s, the mean age at first marriage and first childbearing were the same, but over time the mean age at first marriage has increased more than at becoming a parent (Figure 3). Such
a development is seen also in many other European countries (Oláh 2015). This gap has increased gradually and substantially in Sweden and is currently about four years for both men and women (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Mean age at first marriage and mean age at first birth for men and women separately, Sweden 1970-2013.

The share of children born to non-married parents increased substantially from the 1970’s onwards, almost exclusively due to a growing share of births within cohabitation, but the trend flattened out around the turn of the millennium (Thomson & Eriksson 2013). By the early 1990’s half of all children were born outside of marriage, and since then the percentage has fluctuated between 54 and 56 percent (ibid., Statistics Sweden 2010, Table 2.2.13). Holland (2013) confirms that the timing of first marriage in relation to childbearing has become less strict over time. Nevertheless, she shows that among women in Sweden who do get married sometime before age 40, the majority does so before having children or within a year after the child is born, although the latter has become less prevalent over time. She argues that “marriage is still a salient institution in Swedish family formation” (ibid.; p. 297). Marriage is still closely related to childbearing plans (Moors & Bernhardt 2009, Hiekel & Castro-Martín 2014) and the majority of unmarried cohabiting couples with children eventually marry sometime (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004), also in Sweden.
Altogether, the relationship between the two family-forming processes has changed. Earlier the norm was to get married before having children, but the ordering of events has increasingly become the other way around and sometimes marriage is skipped altogether. A larger share of Swedes remain never-married than who remain childless, as seen from the discussion above. The norm is still to have children, but marriage is seen as more optional, as also confirmed by a Norwegian focus group study (Lappegård & Noack 2015). Sometimes even partnership is seen as optional, as in the case of ‘choice mothers’ who have children without a partner, although that is still rare.

It has also been suggested that marriage formation may carry different meanings depending on the timing in relation to childbearing (Holland 2013, Lappegård & Noack 2015). Marriage formation that occurs before or soon after the first birth is more conventional regarding timing compared to marriages occurring a few years after starting childbearing. Marriage may in the former case sometimes be seen as a prerequisite for, or legitimizing of, childbearing (Holland 2013).

The types of commitments that marriage and childbearing represent may have changed over time. Marriage does not bring the same permanent commitment as before but is generally still seen as a more committed form of relationship than unmarried cohabitation, even in modern-day Sweden (Wiik et al. 2009, Bernhardt 2001). Having a child is a stronger commitment than getting married, because a marriage can be dissolved while parenthood is for life (Lappegård & Noack 2015). Having children is not only a commitment to the child but also creates a permanent link to the other parent. This link may not necessarily imply a lifelong commitment to the other parent, because of the increased acceptance for and prevalence of parental separation (Kravdal 1997, Thomson & Eriksson 2013). Having a child may thus increasingly be seen as a commitment to the child rather than to the other parent. The strong tie between children and parents can be illustrated by the fact that joint custody of children is the legal default after separation or divorce in Sweden (Schiratzki 2008). Furthermore, an increasingly large share of children reside part time with both of their separated parents (Statistics Sweden 2014c).

The marriage and childbearing patterns in the empirical studies of this thesis may reflect somewhat different types of outcomes. Low marriage rates may to a large extent reflect the tendency of never getting married. For childbearing, the rates are to a larger extent about the timing of first childbearing. For example, individuals might change their occupation or workplace to better fit with their childbearing plans. Low childbearing in a certain type of occupation or workplace may actually mean that individuals leave that environment for another more suitable context when planning to have children. Nevertheless, it seems as if some of the differences observed
across occupations in childbearing risks translate as well into differences in completed childbearing and childlessness (see discussion in Study III).

**Family formation in focus**

It should be noted that certain types of family formation are addressed in this thesis, while others are not. Forming a marriage or having a child are the two processes included in the thesis and they represent two different types of family commitment that an individual or a couple can make. More specifically, only first-time marriage formation and having a first child are studied. These are two life events that clearly mark the formation of a family, although marriage and childbearing is almost always preceded by cohabitation (Andersson & Philipov 2002, Thomson & Eriksson 2013).

Entering into cohabitation can also be a family-forming process, but is not studied here. During the time period covered in this thesis, cohabitation can only be detected in Swedish register data if the partners can be linked through them having children together (see discussion in the section on data and methods). It could be argued that moving in together might be a seen as bigger step in the life course than getting married for some individuals. Nevertheless, the meaning of cohabitation and the degree of commitment in these unions tend to differ substantively for couples, both within and between countries in Europe (Hiekel et al. 2014, Perelli-Harris et al. 2014, Hiekel and Castro-Martín 2014) including Sweden (Wiik et al. 2009). Marriage is a definite event, while cohabitation might be a more gradual process of commitment, where the initial stage of cohabiting may be connected to a comparatively low level of commitment (Perelli-Harris et al. 2014). In contrast, marriage formation and childbearing mark very clear and more distinct family commitments.

Re-marriages are not studied. They may be affected by different factors than first marriages. Childbearing after the first child is not studied either, partly because the empirical coverage would be too extensive. Becoming a parent is probably the most life-altering transition and reflects actual family formation, while higher birth orders can be seen as continued family building.

Furthermore, only standard types of marriages and becoming a parent are studied in this thesis. When it comes to marriage, opposite-sex marriages, but not same-sex marriages or registered partnerships are covered. This is to have a uniform study population and homogeneous family-forming process, but also because this definition of marriage best relates to the type of union that is covered in the scientific discussion about the meaning of marriage in general and change in marriage trends over time. The studies of becoming a parent are limited to having biological children, because adoption may be a process with other timelines and considerations than that of biological childbearing. Furthermore, those who become parents through adoption constitute a small minority.
Data and methods

Swedish population register data

All four empirical studies in this thesis are based on Swedish population data derived from administrative registers maintained by Statistics Sweden. For the specific studies, the data are drawn from a collection of registers called Sweden in Time: Activities and Relations (STAR) organized at Stockholm University. The data are at the individual level, de-identified, and cover the entire resident Swedish population over several decades. All vital events occurring in Sweden, such as marriage formation and childbirth, are recorded in the registers at the precision of year and month. There is also a large amount of socio-economic data, such as on education, earnings, and occupation, as well as links to, for example, workplaces. Such data are available at an annual basis. The four empirical studies do not cover the exact same time periods, because data availability differs for the key variables used in the different studies. Each study covers as many calendar years as possible.

Family members can be linked to each other. Children can be linked to their parents and partners can be linked to each other if they are married or have joint children. For non-married partners with a common child it can be assumed that they cohabit if they are registered as living in the same building or complex of buildings. Residence information at the apartment level was not implemented until 2011. Therefore, cohabitation may not be detected for partners who were neither married nor had a child together. This means that information about any potential partner was not available for the empirical studies in this thesis. Such information would have been valuable as nearly all marriage formation and childbearing in Sweden are preceded by cohabitation (Andersson & Philipov 2002, Thomson & Eriksson 2013). Instead, men and women are studied separately with no partner information.

The large size, high quality, and richness of the data were very valuable for the empirical research. For example, in Study I that examined marriage-formation trends over time, the large data size provided a possibility to decompose and standardize marriage trends for many different factors without this leading to unstable patterns. In Study II, the large data size produced stable patterns in marriage formation across ages and calendar years, which enabled the detection of digit-preference patterns (peaks in marriage formation at specific ages and years). Because the data were not relying on self-reported information, which can be biased by digit preferences in respondent reports, the patterns reflect actual behavior. The large size and high degree of detail of the occupational data used in Study III enabled a broad and at the same time unusually detailed overview of associations between occupation and childbearing. It also allowed for the
disentangling of various interrelated occupational characteristics. In Study IV, individuals could be connected to their workplaces and characteristics of the workplace in a longitudinal manner. The role of workplace sex composition for childbearing could be disentangled in an unusually precise manner from other mediating factors, such as earnings, public or private sector employment, occupation, and industry.

Event-history analysis

Event-history analysis was used as a tool in all four empirical studies. This is a standard method in demographic research (Blossfeld, Golsch & Rohwer 2007, Allison 1984, Hoem 1993). The Swedish register data are highly suitable for this method of longitudinal individual-level analysis. The method not only takes into account whether or not individuals experience a certain event, such as family formation or childbearing, but also the time until experiencing the event. The study population comprises individuals who can be defined as “under risk” of experiencing the specific event that is studied. More specifically, only never-married adults are under risk of experiencing first-marriage formation and only childless men and women of childbearing age can be under risk of experiencing first childbearing. In general, individuals are followed from the time of becoming under risk until either experiencing the event or no longer being under risk for other reasons, such as death or emigration. Limitations in data availability often mean that individuals are only followed for a certain part of the time that they are actually under risk (Blossfeld et al. 2007).

Event-history analysis takes into account how factors that are stable or vary across life relate to the risk of experiencing a certain event. Individuals can, for example, change occupation or workplace, get a wage raise, or experience another demographic event than the one that is studied. These changes can be incorporated into the event-history model through time-varying variables. This means that the marriage or childbearing risk in the four studies was modeled as a function of an individual’s characteristics at any given time point. The independent variables were measured in the month or the year before the risk of experiencing the event to ensure accurate chronological ordering of variables and events. The statistical software STATA was used in all analyses (see e.g., Blossfeld et al. 2007). More specific information and discussion about the event-history setup are provided in each separate study.

3 The method was originally designed for cancer research, hence the use of the term ”risk”.
Summary of the empirical studies

Study I – Sweden’s marriage revival: An analysis of the new-millennium switch from long-term decline to increasing popularity

Published in Population Studies

Usually seen as a forerunner in the development of new trends in family-demographic behavior, Sweden has recently experienced a reversal in marriage trends, from a steady decline in marriage rate between the 1960s and 1990s, to a steady increase beginning in 1998. An event-history analysis of women’s first marriages in the period 1991-2007, using register data, shows that compositional changes in labour-market activity and childbearing can only partly explain the reversal, and that apparently no part of it is explained by compositional changes in age, country of birth, educational level, and type of settlement. The evidence suggests that the popularity of marriage in Sweden is increasing, in contrast to what might be expected from the way demographic trends in Sweden and other Western countries are often portrayed in the literature.

This study is a much revised and extended version of my Master’s thesis.

Study II – Digit preferences in marriage formation in Sweden: Millennium marriages and birthday peaks

Published in Demographic Research

Digit preferences are normally seen as potentially harmful biases in respondents’ reports. Possibly such preferences might also be the cause of some patterns found in Swedish marriage formation, thus affecting actual demographic behavior. Digit preferences in marriage formation in Sweden are examined – more specifically, the additional propensity to marry for the first time during the year 2000 or at ages ending with 0 – and their demographic and socioeconomic correlates. Event-history analyses are applied to Swedish register data covering 3.5 million men and women in 1991-2007. First-marriage risks clearly increase for both men and women at exact ages 30, 40, 50, and 60 and in the year 2000. These patterns exist across demographic and socioeconomic groups and are not due to measurement error or random variation. The timing of marriage is not strictly determined by conventional demographic or socioeconomic factors. Whether the findings are idiosyncratic to contexts like the Swedish, where there are small differences between marriage and cohabitation, remains to be answered.
Study III – Type of occupation and the transition to parenthood in Sweden
Available in the series Stockholm Research Reports in Demography

Recent research points to the importance of studying differences in fertility across the labor market. The possibility to combine work and parenthood may, for example, differ across occupations. In the present study, the transition to parenthood is examined for Swedish men and women in 42 different occupational groups covering the entire labor market. Event-history analyses are applied to register data covering 1.3 million individuals in 2002-2007. First.birth risks vary considerably across occupations, also beyond associations related to educational level and earnings. Earnings are positively related to first.birth risks, and seem to be more important for explaining childbearing differences across occupations for men than for women. Factors such as sector, sex composition, and caring and teaching orientation of the occupation are disentangled, which enables an unusually precise depiction of the relationship between work and childbearing. Those in caring or teaching occupations have relatively high first.birth risks, although for men this is only the case when controlling for the relatively low earnings levels in these occupations. Gender differences in fertility are most pronounced in strongly sex-segregated occupations. Differences in possibilities for economic and practical parenting, gendered social interaction, and self-selection are potential explanations for the fertility differentials across occupations.

Study IV - Workplace sex composition and becoming a parent – men and women in Sweden
Available in the series Stockholm Research Reports in Demography

The aim of this study is to examine how the sex composition of the work environment is related to the transition to parenthood for men and women. The existence of such an association has been suggested by previous research, but rarely studied directly. The sex composition of the work environment is expected to shape conditions that influence employees’ childbearing. This study focuses on the workplace because that is where daily social interaction occurs and where work culture, norms, and working conditions are shaped. Multilevel event-history analyses are applied to register data covering nearly all employed and childless men and women of childbearing ages in Sweden in 2002-2006. The main analyses cover workplaces with 5-150 employees because social interaction within larger workplaces is expected to occur in smaller subunits. First.birth risks increase with the share of employees of the individual’s own sex, net of factors such as own earnings, public or private sector employment, occupation, and
industry. The role of working in a family-friendly environment is a probable explanation for the finding for women. The possibilities to engage in gender-role socialization or to find a partner at work are also discussed as potential mechanisms for both men and women.

Concluding discussion

This thesis examines two types of family-formation processes, namely first-marriage formation and first childbearing. The setting is Sweden around the turn of the new millennium. This is a country far along in demographic and ideational developments (Lesthaeghe 2010, Sobotka 2008b) as well as in gender equality development (Goldscheider et al. 2015, Bernhardt et al. 2008). The thesis demonstrates how socio-economic and demographic factors interplay with how families are constructed and shape processes of marriage formation and childbearing. It also reveals crucial gendered patterns as well as gender similarities. The thesis may yield some new answers to old questions but also poses new questions about the meaning of marriage and the driving forces behind changes in marriage trends as well and the nature of the relationship between work, family life, and gender. The empirical studies can provide insight into the state of affairs after many decades of family-demographic, ideational, and gender-role change, where Sweden often has been seen as a forerunner.

The first empirical paper shows that marriage-formation trends turned from declining to increasing rates around the turn of the millennium and that this reflects a true behavioral change. Although marriage trends have not been increasing, but rather fluctuated after 2008, it is still interesting that there was such a clear break from the previously declining trend. The image of Sweden as a leader of the marriage decline apparently needs to be updated.

The digit preference patterns in the second marriage paper show that the choice to marry is easily affected. This could be interpreted as a sign that marriage choices are taken quite lightly in modern-day Sweden, especially in some groups. A speculation that arises from that study is that the wedding ceremony and reception may be important reasons for marrying. This is corroborated by a recent focus-group study among young men and women in the Norwegian capital (Lappegård & Noack 2015). A general opinion among the participants was that having a wedding to celebrate the relationship is a central reason for getting married. Many even argued that there is no point in getting married if you cannot afford a (costly) wedding reception (ibid.).

The effect of digit preferences on marriage formation was clearest among those of typical marrying age or slightly above as well as among those who had children, especially if they had two or more (Study II). This may indicate that couples that are in the most committed relationships more easily take the step into marriage than other couples do. For them, the difference
between continuing to cohabit or to transform their relationship into formal marriage is probably smaller than for other couples. This goes in line with the fact that marriage is still generally seen as a more committed form of union than cohabitation also in Sweden (Bernhardt 2001, Strandell 2013). The findings are also in line with research illustrating that the meaning of cohabitation and degree of commitment varies across cohabiting couples (Hiekel et al. 2014, Perelli-Harris et al. 2014, Hiekel and Castro-Martín 2014, Wiik et al. 2009) and that marriage formation may take on different meanings depending on the stage of the family-forming process (Holland 2013).

What do the findings indicate about the future of marriage in Sweden and other Western countries? The answer depends on what may explain the findings. A few things could be highlighted. The theory of the second demographic transition explains the marriage decline in the Western world largely by ideational change towards individualization and self-realization and the weakening role of traditions. Therefore it is not apparent how that theory can relate to the observed marriage upsurge in Sweden that is not seemingly driven by a return to old values. There seems to be no reversal of value change in Sweden, but rather a continuation in the same direction (World Values Survey 2015). This was a main conclusion from Study I and was also elaborated on in this introductory chapter.

Nevertheless, the second demographic transition perspective may not necessarily be in conflict with a marriage turnaround such as the one observed in Sweden. It was speculated in Study I that “marriage is no longer the conventional form of union formation that it was when the transition in values and behaviour started” (p. 194). A recent focus group study among young adults in modern-day Sweden supports this notion (Strandell 2013), and concludes that Swedish marriage is in fact not in contrast with individualized values. More specifically, that study shows that the discourse around this type of union is highly individualistic and marriage formation is explicitly seen as completely different from that in the parental generation, and also from marriage in other more ‘traditional’ countries. This is in line with Giddens’ (1992) theory about ‘pure relationships’ stating that relationships are formed through a reflexive process and not merely in line with tradition. Marriage is seen as entirely disconnected from religion, patriarchy, and traditional ethics and values (Strandell 2013).

Furthermore, Strandell (2013) shows that although marriage is seen as cementing the relationship (as previously found by e.g., Bernhardt 2001), marriage has primarily formal or symbolic value (similar to Lappegård & Noack 2015). Getting married is not seen as changing the individuals in the couple or their expectations on each other, for example regarding gender roles, apart from the expectation of increased commitment. It does not per se constrain individual autonomy or self-actualization. It is an individualized project within the couple, where both partners need to work on their
relationship and there should be room for individual goals and self-realization (Strandell 2013). Consequently, marriage becomes an individualized project instead of a traditional form of union. Such reasoning opens up for the possibility that marriage trends may stop declining and even turn to increasing levels if countries experience such changes in the meaning of marriage.

The break in the marriage decline is also logical when seen from the arguments that changing gender relations are a major driving force behind recent family-demographic developments (e.g., Goldscheider et al. 2015, Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015). It can be argued that as Sweden has gradually become a more gender equal society, marriage does no longer mean a (permanent) contract where partners sign up for traditional gender roles. This speaks for the possibility for marriage to become more attractive and for an increase in marriage rates in Sweden and similarly gender equal societies also in the future. The same would hold for other countries with low marriage rates if they would develop in a more gender egalitarian direction.

Taking into account the fact that marriage decisions seem to be taken so lightly in Sweden, especially in some groups, and that there is no strong marriage norm, another prediction for the future could be continued fluctuations and trends going up or down depending on external factors. For example, the economic climate is likely to shape marriage trends (see Study I for more discussion). Other factors could be policy changes, fashion, popular culture, or such arbitrary factors such as digit preferences. This could also be a possible development in other countries if they would develop as far as Sweden in minimizing the differences (in terms of policy and values) between marriage and cohabitation. In any case, Sweden’s marriage turnaround indicates that marriage does not seem to be disappearing in favor of cohabitation.

When turning to the two empirical studies on the transition to parenthood it should be noted that they do not focus on developments over time. They rather provide a snapshot of a few years in the first decade of the new millennium and the specific societal context discussed in this introductory chapter.

These studies add to the literature by showing that a man’s or a woman’s location in the labor-market, here captured by the type of occupation and the sex composition of the workplace, is related to childbearing. They demonstrate that aspects at both the occupational and workplace level are related to childbearing decisions and at the same time as there are many similarities across sex, gender is a key factor for understanding these associations. Differences in childbearing among the employed seem to be due to differences in possibilities to provide economically for a family, possibilities for providing care for one’s children, the extent of engaging in gender-stereotypical behavior, and potentially also possibilities of finding a
partner. A particular personal interest for social relationships and children may also be underlying higher first-birth risks among those in caring or teaching oriented occupations, especially among those who work with children.

Education and employment have also become important arenas for self-realization according to, for example, the proponents of the second demographic transition (e.g., Lesthaeghe 2010). Occupational choices may therefore be increasingly important for understanding broader lifestyle choices and expressions of identity. Occupations may thus become central for differences in childbearing behavior.

The differences found both within and across gender in childbearing behavior across different segments of the labor-market do not necessarily contradict the image of Sweden as a leader in gender equality and in providing possibilities to combine work and family life. In Sweden, where policies explicitly aim to promote beneficial and equal opportunities to combine work and family-life, it is reasonable to expect relatively small differences in childbearing across different segments of the labor market. At the same time, it could be argued that because individuals, and especially women, do not need to choose between work and childcare in the same way as in many other countries, there might actually still be differences in behavior across the labor market in Sweden. In more dissimilar contexts, the difference mainly lies between those on the labor market and those who drop out. To some degree and at some stages in the life course, men and women likely self-select into environments in the labor market that fit well with having children, especially when they plan to start childbearing.

Although Sweden is a relatively gender egalitarian society (Evertsson 2014, Fahlén 2013, Goldscheider et al. 2015, Bernhardt et al. 2008), there is no illusion that the country is close to reaching all the way to true gender equality. Although the general association of employment or earnings and fertility is very similar for men and women (e.g., Duvander & Olsson 2001, Andersson & Scott 2007), this thesis shows that there are crucial gender differences in associations when studying patterns across different segments of the labor market.

Family-friendly working conditions seem to matter more for women’s than men’s transition to parenthood (Study III and IV). This is in line with the fact that mothers still have the main care-giving responsibilities for their children (Bekkengen 2002), as reflected for example in their larger share of parental leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2012) and part time work when children are young (Statistics Sweden 2015). Men’s time for childcare and housework is in general also seen as more variable and negotiable than women’s (Bekkengen 2002).

Another aspect of how gender matters is that not only are the gender-stereotyping of certain occupations and the gendered composition of the workplace key factors for differences in childbearing behavior, but this also
interacts with one’s own gender. More specifically, being in a workplace with many coworkers of one’s own sex or having a gender-typical occupation is related to elevated first-birth risks. The opposite is true for being of the minority gender in a workplace or an occupation. These patterns may reflect that there are still large differences in what is perceived as masculine or feminine behavior or what constitutes an ideal mother or father.

Such remaining gender differences apparently still shape the relationship between work and childbearing differently for men and women in Sweden in the new millennium. If there would be a higher degree of gender equality in these areas, then the type of work and type of workplace would be linked to childbearing in the same way for men and women.

Including both men and women in studies of family formation contributes substantially to the theoretical discussion. This is not the least evident in the two empirical studies on labor-market position and the transition to parenthood. First, gender differences and similarities in the findings inform about the gendered nature of the association between work and family life. They reveal important differences in conditions and roles for men and women in these two life spheres. Second, including both men and women enables better evaluation of theoretical explanations for how work and family life are related. For example, the higher birth-rates found for those working in gender-typical occupations (Study III) would not have appeared as clearly if including only men or only women in the study.

Only women were included in Study I on Sweden’s marriage turnaround. Additional analyses performed after the publication of that study have been carried out for men as well. They show that for men, in the same way as for women, the reversal seems to be only partly explained by compositional changes across labor-market status and parity, but not by other factors (findings not displayed). Compositional changes in educational attainment might explain a minor part of the increase in marriage formation for men, although this cannot be completely ascertained because of changes in the registration of educational level between 1999 and 2000 (as discussed in Study I). Overall, that analysis shows that various individual-level characteristics are associated with first-marriage risks for men in a similar way as for women, although the role of earnings seems to be even more positive for men than for women.

It is apparent from the two childbearing studies in this thesis that the association between work and childbearing is gendered, but in the marriage studies, gender does not seem to have a strong impact on the associations that were studied. This could be because the two studies on childbearing not only focus on differences vertically along factors such as income and educational level, but also examine differences horizontally, such as across occupations and workplaces. The analyses thus allow finding more variation, as well as gender differences, in the outcome examined in the studies on childbearing than in those on marriage formation.
Nevertheless, marital status has no significant impact on everyday life in the Swedish case, while childbearing has, especially when it comes to work life. Childrearing may be conflicting with paid work, while the same cannot be said about marriage. This time conflict apparently creates gendered patterns in the division of paid and unpaid work. It is plausible that because childbearing has more impact on everyday life than marriage formation has, the timing of childbearing is more strictly determined by structural factors than marriage formation is. It is not possible to draw such a clear conclusion from the studies in this thesis, however, because the two family-formation processes are studied differently. Although the choice to marry may be taken lightly (if taken at all) and the timing of marriage formation in relation to childbearing has become loser over time, both marriage formation and childbearing still constitute key parts of family formation in Sweden around the turn of the new millennium.
References


