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# Women have a stronger say in couples' decisions to have a child

## Abstract

Sweden stands out as a forerunner in the development of gender equality and family dynamics. To deepen the knowledge on power distribution and gender dynamics of couple relations, we investigate how women and men's childbearing intentions influence actual childbearing behavior. The Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) has information on both partners' childbearing intentions in 2009, which we follow for five years with register data on childbearing. The results indicate that women's childbearing intentions are more important than men's intentions in determining actual childbirths.

*Keywords:* childbearing intentions, gender equality, couple decisionmaking

SWEDEN IS IN the forefront of the social and demographic development regarding families. Fertility declined early in Sweden but is now among the countries with relatively high fertility in Europe. Other relevant developments are for instance that the importance of marriage and marriage stability have decreased and marriage is less closely related to childbearing, women are economically independent, and men increasingly take part in traditionally female areas such as childcare. This development is sometimes referred to as the gender revolution (Goldscheider et al. 2015) and the generations born in the late 1960s to early 1980s are the first to grow up under these circumstances. These women and men seem to follow similar patterns of childbearing as their parental generations when it comes to the number of children they have on average but when in life to have children has changed over time. Even though we know much about how family dynamics develop, we know less about couple-level decisions and negotiations behind the demographic behavior of these generations. In order to address this rather neglected dimension, this study focuses on how couples' childbearing intentions are related to realized childbearing in the near future. This question originates in a strand of research on the relationship between intentions and behavior (Ajzen and Klobas 2013), and numerous studies of the relationship between childbearing intentions and realized childbearing (see for example Thomson & Hoem 1998; Stein et al. 2014). Early studies on couples' childbearing intentions indicate mixed results as to whether the woman or

the man has a stronger say, while somewhat more recent studies sometimes indicate a veto decision (Thomson & Hoem 1998). It thus seems as if both partners have to agree for more children to be born. We are interested in whether this is true also in Sweden today.

We want to relate this question of decision making within couples to the development of gender equality in the last decades and therefore ask *whose intentions are decisive for childbearing*, to give insights into the dynamics of power relations and gender for couples in this new context. As our core interest is the gendered dynamics of such decisions, we focus on heterosexual relations, although obviously all individuals who reflect on whether to have children are not living in couples and all couples do not consist of a woman and a man. The unveiling of how decisions are made in heterosexual couples will likely be of importance also for other constellations and for decision making regarding childbearing in general. But needless to say, same-sex couples and single individuals face in large part different conditions for childbearing.

## Data and method

We use the Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) which measures the childbearing intentions of both partners in couples in 2009. Thereafter we follow the same couples using register data until 2014, to investigate whether their intentions were realized. YAPS includes a nationally representative sample of women and men born 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980, where also coresidential partners were asked to fill out a questionnaire (see [www.suda.su.se/YAPS](http://www.suda.su.se/YAPS)). Our working sample contains 865 opposite-sex couples; 23.8 percent with no children, 28.3 percent with one child, and 47.9 percent with two children at the time of the survey.<sup>1</sup> Logistic regression is applied, and we conduct a pooled analysis, containing all couples, as well as additional separate analyses for childless couples, one-child couples and two-child couples.

Childbearing intentions are based on the question *Do you think you will have (more) children in the future?* Responses *yes* and *probably yes* are regarded as *wanting a(nother) child*, while the responses *no* and *probably no* are regarded as *not wanting a(nother) child*. Non-responses and don't know-answers are also coded as *not wanting a(nother) child*. The answers of the woman and the man are combined into four categories indicating intention agreement or disagreement.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the couples, approximately 110 couples were expecting a child when the interview took place and those were coded as belonging to the parity they were soon to belong to. The rationale for this is that the question on childbearing intentions refers to first or additional children, apart from previous children or the expected child (if pregnant). A note of caution is that our data only includes information about the respondents' births and within the five years following the interview, some couples may have split up and the birth may actually be by a new partner. We therefore performed additional analyses where we only included births during 2010–2012. The results are not sensitive to a shorter follow up period and we therefore decided to use data from the whole five year period.

## Findings

Most couples, 87 percent, agree in their intentions to have or not to have children. About 41 percent agree that they want a(nother) child and 46 percent agree that they do not. Among childless couples and one-child couples 67 percent and 69 percent, respectively, agree that they want a(nother) child. Among two-child couples 75 percent agree that they do *not* want to have more children, reflecting the strong two-child norm in Sweden. Considering the outcomes of these intentions, among childless couples where both partners wanted children as many as 80 percent had a child within five years. The figure is even higher among couples with one child, almost 85 percent, whereas only 49 percent of couples with two children who stated that they wanted another child realized these intentions within five years. Also within couples where neither partner intended to have children this occasionally happened.

The central question here is what happens when the woman and the man have different intentions. In eight percent of the couples the woman intended to have a child but the man did not, and in five percent of the couples the man intended to have a child and the woman did not. Out of the couples where only the woman wanted a child, 47 percent ended up with a child, to be compared to 30 percent of the couples where only the man wanted a child.

Findings from the logistic regression (Table 1) on the association between a couple's childbearing intention and realized childbirth, where confounding factors are controlled for, indicate the same pattern for childless, one-child couples and two-child couples, even if the small sample restricts statistical significance in the parity-specific models. Couples where the woman but not the man intended to have a(nother) child, were more likely to end up with a child, compared to when only the man intended to have a(nother) child, although this difference is statistically significant only in the pooled model. Not surprisingly, the couples where both wanted a child were most likely to have a(nother) child in the following five years and couples where neither partner wanted a(nother) child were least likely to do so. The findings indicate that although couple agreement to have children seems to be positive for childbearing, women more often have a stronger influence on childbearing decisions.

Table 1: Logistic regression on the likelihood to have a child between 2010 and 2014. Odds ratios and p-values.

Childbearing intentions	All couples		Childless couples		One-child couples		Two-child couples	
	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p
Woman wants/ Man does not	1		1		1		1	
Woman does not/ Man wants	0.26	0.005	0.28	0.118	0.21	0.141	0.31	0.190
Both want (more) children	1.91	0.035	2.01	0.292	2.79	0.111	1.48	0.428
Neither want (more) children	0.19	0.000	0.15	0.013	0.33	0.136	0.16	0.000
Constant	3.18	0.019	2.80	0.266	2.94	0.290	3.08	0.164
Nagelkerke R Square	0.59		0.41		0.603		0.43	
N	865		206		245		414	

Note: The models control for both partners' age, education and employment status, as well as partnership status, number of children and age of the youngest child (for one-child and two-child couples).

## Conclusion

In Sweden, women and men increasingly participate on equal terms in the private and public sphere, have similar roles, and are economically independent. In this setting, gender equality is a strong norm which is likely to influence negotiations also over childbearing in couples. The findings from this study nevertheless indicate that women's childbearing intentions are a stronger predictor of realized childbearing than men's intentions. If only the woman wants a child and not the man, the couple more often ends up with a child than if only the man wants a child.

Women's stronger say in realizing childbearing intentions indicate that the reproductive area still to part is a woman's decision area. It may also indicate that women still carry the largest costs for childbearing, and thus have a larger say in the decision. For example, although Swedish women to a high degree remain on the labor-market after having children they take the major part of the parental leave that is available to all parents (Duvander, Ferrarini, Johansson 2015) and the income development of women and men after childbearing is unequal.

The findings do not necessarily indicate that men have children against their will but possibly that childbearing intentions may change more easily for men than women. Five years is a long follow up and by the time the actual decision is made many men who responded that they were not intending to have a child, may have changed their mind. The findings may be interpreted to mean that a woman is more successful in convincing her partner of having a child, than the other way around. Understanding the reasons behind female dominance in childbearing decisions is an important topic for future studies.

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