

Becoming a parent in Sweden: Differences between men's and women's attitudes about parenthood and in their relationship to later childbearing

We analyze Swedish survey data on attitudes toward parenthood young adults aged 22-30, some of whom have become parents. Our results show that both men and women regard parenthood as something that makes life more meaningful, but men are more likely than women to perceive/experience negative consequences of parenthood, such as loss of personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends, and more likely than women to expect/experience a positive consequence, namely improvement of their relationship with their. While parenthood is generally positive for both men and women, men seem to take a stronger stand, both for and against the transition to parenthood, while women are more "in the middle" – they are less inclined to worry about negative consequences, but neither do they think of parenthood as something that will improve the relationship to their partner. However, egalitarian men are less likely to perceive/experience loss of personal freedom and time with friends than more traditional men, while this effect is not found among women.

Preliminary bivariate analyses of the effect of parenthood attitudes on the transition to parenthood indicate that men who expect fatherhood to lead to loss of personal freedom are considerably less likely to have a child in the 2½ years following the survey, while this effect is not found for women. For women it seems that it is the relationship to their partner that matters the most: not expecting it to improve lowers the likelihood of a first birth, while positive expectations increase it. This effect is not found for men. For both men and women the expectation that parenthood will make life more meaningful has a significant and substantial positive effect on actual childbearing.

This paper will report on these findings in more detail, and also pursue the question whether the arrival of a (first) child has positive, neutral or negative effect on parenthood attitudes. This analysis has become possible since there is now a second wave of the survey, conducted in the spring of 2003, four years after the first survey. The new wave will also allow us to extend the analysis of the transition to parenthood from 2½ years (based on registry data) to 4 years, increasing the number of births.