



# DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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*Research Article*

**Attitudes toward work and parenthood  
following family-building transitions in Sweden:  
Identifying differences by gender and education**

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## **Attitudes toward work and parenthood following family-building transitions in Sweden: Identifying differences by gender and education**

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### **Abstract**

#### **OBJECTIVES**

This paper examines how family-building transitions (union formation and first birth) affect the attitudes of Swedes toward work and parenthood. The literature finds that these life course transitions have a traditionalizing effect on gender roles. Is this also the case in Sweden, one of the most gender-equal countries in the world?

#### **METHODS**

Our study uses the longitudinal Young Adult Panel Study database. We run first-difference OLS regressions on the relationship between family-building transitions and work and parenthood attitudes, distinguishing men from women, and those with more education from those with less.

#### **RESULTS**

We find that family transitions do slightly traditionalize attitudes toward work and parenthood, but differences by gender and education are very small.

#### **DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION**

The overall pattern is one of striking similarity between men and women, suggesting that the gender revolution is well advanced in Sweden; traditional gender differences remain primarily among those with less education.

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## **1. Introduction**

The separate-spheres construction of men's and women's adult roles in industrialized countries has long defined men as providers (in the public sphere) and women as homemakers (in the private sphere). Recently, however, the separation appears to be breaking down; men are increasingly expecting to be involved fathers, and women are increasingly expecting to provide for their families and themselves (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegard 2015). However, this process, sometimes called the gender revolution, is far from complete (Hochschild and Machung 1989) and appears to have stalled (England 2010) or to be only partial, progressing primarily among the more educated portions of the population (Cherlin 2016).

At the individual level, decisions about couples' division of tasks in the public and private spheres are likely to depend on their attitudes. How committed are men to their career progress – their good provider roles? And how committed are women to being mothers – a key element of their domestic roles? Women have certainly increased their investment in their own careers in the past half century (e.g., Goldin 2006), and more recently men have increased their engagement in fatherhood (Hofferth et al. 2013; Evertsson and Boye 2018). These changes in men's and women's attitudes toward work and parenthood are contributing to the breaking down of the separate spheres.

Nevertheless, in most countries, two pressures encourage couples to transition to or intensify attitudes supporting a traditional division of labor. One is the pressure that arises from the family-building transitions of union formation and parenthood (Dribe and Stanfors 2009). These transitions normally lead women to relinquish some of their work commitments as they spend more time with their children and on domestic chores, while men's work commitment grows as they respond to the increased pressure to provide. The second pressure on the progress of the gender revolution appears to be the level of economic inequality, given that those with low levels of education are normally more supportive of a traditional division of labor (Cherlin 2014).

We examine a recent cohort of young men and women in Sweden, a country with a high level of gender as well as socioeconomic equality, to discern the impact of family-building transitions on attitudes toward work and parenthood and how any impact is shaped by gender and education. Our study uses the longitudinal Young Adult Panel Study (YAPS) database, a three-wave survey of Swedish young adults. Running first-difference OLS regressions on the effects of family-building transitions on work and parenthood attitudes separately for men and women, as well as for those with more than a secondary education compared to those with a secondary education or less, reveals that even in Sweden, family transitions influence attitudes toward both parenthood and work and that these effects do indeed differ by gender and socioeconomic status. However,

gender matters only among the less educated, and overall, the education and gender differences are very small compared to those that appear in less egalitarian societies.

## 2. Background

The separate-spheres construct of men's and women's work and family roles appears to be breaking down (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015). At the macro level, for 100 years or more, the construct of the separate spheres seemed deeply entrenched. Men were providers in the public sphere, and women were homemakers in the private sphere. This role structure was the ideal in much of the developed world from approximately the mid-19th century, when the Industrial Revolution was well underway, causing men's massive departure from agricultural occupations. The ideal began to erode in the mid-20th century, when many forces began to undermine the need for married women to be in the home full-time (Goldscheider and Sassler 2018; Stanfors and Goldscheider 2017). Other changes provided women with paid opportunities to better care for their families (Oppenheimer 1970). Thereafter, the growth in female labor force participation (Goldin 2006; Björklund 1992) and men's increasing involvement in their homes, most particularly with their children (Coltrane 1996; Hwang and Lamb 1997; Kaufman 2013), have been challenging the separate-spheres construct, initiating a major gender revolution.

It has been argued that the gender revolution is thoroughly structural (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015). According to rational choice theories, people maximize their well-being, given structural constraints and opportunities, and people's attitudes generally reflect these opportunities and constraints and tend to change as conditions change. The movement of women into the labor force has been reinforcing egalitarian *gender roles* in both the public and the private spheres, as well as egalitarian *gender attitudes*. However, to understand the breakdown of the separate-spheres construct, it seems necessary to analyze men's and women's attitudes toward work and parenthood separately instead of examining a combined construct such as gender role attitudes. In this paper we analyze attitudes as a kind of proxy for how couples decide about the division of tasks in the private and public spheres.

Given this understanding of the gender revolution, when it is "completed," one would expect no, or very minor, gender differences vis-à-vis attitudes toward work and parenthood. Although progress varies, the gender revolution is by no means complete (Esping-Andersen 2009). It is often characterized as stalled (England 2010) or as proceeding unevenly (Sullivan, Gershuny, and Robinson 2018) – progressing only among the more educated portions of the population (Cherlin 2016; Gähler and Oláh 2020). More educated men tend to have more egalitarian gender role attitudes (Pampel 2011a)

and are more involved with their children (Evertsson and Boye 2018; Hofferth et al. 2013).

### **3. Attitude research: Gender, work, and family**

There is extensive research on attitudes toward work and family (e.g., Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Kalleberg and Mastekaasa 2001). Work attitudes have frequently been analyzed using the concept of work commitment (Crompton and Harris 1998; Evertsson 2013). Family attitudes cover a wide spectrum, such as attitudes toward marriage and divorce, the importance of motherhood and fatherhood, and the costs and benefits of becoming a parent. Of particular relevance for the current paper is research on attitudes toward the importance of children (Nauck 2007; McQuillan et al. 2008).

There is also research linking attitudes about work and family together, particularly in a gender context, including studies of attitudes about the consequences of maternal employment for families and children (Bianchi 2000; Scott 1999) and even about paternal employment (Kaufman and Blair 2020). Considerable research has focused on attitudes regarding the appropriate roles, rights, and responsibilities of women and men, using the concept of gender ideology (e.g., Davis and Greenstein 2009). Both women and men can occupy roles such as partner, parent, and worker, but the relative importance (or value) attached to these respective roles may differ, depending on age, gender, education, and societal context.

A central question in attitude research is whether attitudes are formed in childhood and adolescence through the socialization process and then generally remain stable, shaping subsequent behavior, or whether adult life situations and transitions can also influence attitudes. This is usually conceptualized as the question of selection versus adaptation. If adaptation is important, it seems reasonable to assume that important life course transitions may result in resocialization of work and family attitudes (Moors 2002, 2003). Holland and Keizer (2015), using YAPS data, found that individuals holding positive views with regard to survey items such as “children give life meaning” and “having children is important in life” were the most likely to transition to parenthood in the ten years following the initial survey. Thus there was clear evidence of a selection effect. Whether there were gender differences in this regard was not tested. There was also some indication that being strongly committed to work had a negative effect on the transition to parenthood. Again, gender differences in this regard were not tested.

To study adaptation – i.e., to analyze change over time – it is necessary to have access to longitudinal data on attitudes, which are relatively rare. Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn (1983) analyzed a panel study of women and their children in the United States and thus were able to study sex role attitude change between 1960 and 1980, very early

in the gender revolution. Female labor force participation was found to both influence and be influenced by attitudes toward the appropriate roles of men and women. That is, it had both a selection effect and an adaptation effect for women's career orientation. On the other hand, there was a selection effect but no adaptation effect in the relationship between parenthood and family attitudes.

Two studies of the effects of life course transitions on changing gender role attitudes (more recent than Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn [1983]), are Corrigan and Konrad (2007) and Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde (2010), both with data from the United States. Each study includes both women and men, and while Corrigan and Konrad examined the impact of marriage and children, Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde (2010) focused specifically on the birth of first and second children. The former study concluded that individuals act on their preferences but also accommodate themselves to situational constraints. That is, there is evidence of adaptation. Both studies found gender differences in the adaptation process: Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde found that while parents generally became more traditional in their gender role attitudes following the birth of a child, women changed more than men. Corrigan and Konrad, on the other hand, found that having children had a stronger negative effect on gender egalitarianism for men than for women. Hence life course position, gender, and parenthood have effects on attitudes toward the gender roles of men and women. The stability of gender attitudes related to the timing of family formation has been studied by Florian (2022), who found that respondents who reported frequent changes in attitudes entered marriage later than other respondents.

As mentioned above, a central aspect of attitude research is whether childhood socialization is more important than current life situations or life course transitions in shaping adult attitudes toward work and family roles (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004; Lesthaeghe and Moors 2002; Schwarz and Bohner 2001). Existing research seems to suggest that this is an empirical question, and the limited research on this issue has yielded different results, reinforcing the finding that the relationships might depend on context and type of attitude (Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn 1983). For example, using YAPS data, Evertsson (2013) found that Swedish women's work commitment decreased following the transition to motherhood, but this effect seemed to be transitory. Kaufman, Bernhardt, and Goldscheider (2016) found mostly enduring attitudes toward gender equality despite life course transitions among young adults in Sweden. Andersson's study of Swedish attitudes toward divorce (2015) suggested a relatively small influence of family life course events.

### **3.1 The challenge of gender and socioeconomic differences**

The effects of individual life events and transitions often differ by gender. Therefore it is plausible to hypothesize that, to the extent that changes in attitudes are observed, the patterns may differ between men and women. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study of life transitions and changing attitudes toward work, as well as toward parenthood, has involved both men and women. In addition to gender differences, macro studies suggest that there are also likely to be socioeconomic differences in the effects of family-building transitions on work and parental attitudes. At one extreme are the results of studies of family patterns in the United States, which led McLanahan (2004) to describe the “diverging destinies” of children depending on their socioeconomic background. Cherlin (2014, 2018) also emphasizes the dramatic differences by education on patterns of marriage, cohabitation, and union dissolution, as well as on bearing and raising children out of wedlock. Sweden, in contrast to the United States, has not exhibited large status differences in recent years (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015), which is consistent with findings by Pampel (2011a, b). He has demonstrated, both for European countries and the United States, that the growth in egalitarian gender role attitudes begins among the more educated, leading to a strong socioeconomic divide, but over time those with less education join this growth, reducing differences by socioeconomic status.

### **3.2 The Swedish context of our study**

The specific context of our current study is Sweden early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gender role-related behavior is certainly affected by country-level (or even global-level) factors that shape opportunities to choose work and family behaviors. Sweden, like only a few other countries, provides parents with inexpensive, high-quality child care and well-paid, job-protected parental leave, allowing parents to maintain their careers while engaging closely with their children.

Thus Sweden is a country in which combining employment and child raising is a social norm for both men and women, both expected and facilitated by state policies (Olàh and Bernhardt 2008). The explicit aim of these policies is to make it possible for both mothers and fathers to combine work and family. In addition, there has been an extensive expansion of the preschool system, guaranteeing a place to all children above the age of 1 year, at a highly subsidized cost. Hence, in this paper, we consider two particular types of attitudes, namely those relating to (1) work and (2) parenthood, and we examine whether and how they change across the life course in response to family transitions in a country with such a strong egalitarian context. Our study benefits from

the existence of a longitudinal database (YAPS), the central aim of which is to enable studies of the mutual relationship between attitudes and demographic behavior in the early adult life phases in Sweden.

Based on the research reviewed above, we formulate the following five hypotheses:

- 1) Life course transitions such as union formation and childbearing influence individuals' attitudes regarding work and parenthood, with a negative effect for work commitment and a positive effect for parenthood attitudes.
- 2) There are gender differences in the effect of life course transitions on attitudes toward work, with women experiencing stronger negative effects than men, but the differences will be small in an egalitarian country such as Sweden.
- 3) There are gender differences in the effect of life course transitions on attitudes toward parenthood, with women experiencing stronger positive effects than men, but the differences will be small in an egalitarian country such as Sweden.
- 4) There are educational differences in how life course transitions influence work attitudes, with the more educated experiencing stronger negative effects than those with less education, but the differences will be small in a relatively redistributive society such as Sweden.
- 5) There are educational differences in how life-course transitions influence parenthood attitudes, with the more educated experiencing stronger positive effects than those with less education, but the differences will be small in a relatively redistributive society such as Sweden.

## **4. Data, measures, and methods**

### **4.1 Data**

The main source of data for this analysis is the YAPS, a longitudinal survey that follows three cohorts of Swedish young adults (born in 1968, 1972, and 1976) over two successive periods, with a first interview in 1999 and follow-up interviews in 2003 and 2009. The YAPS was conducted as a nationally representative postal survey, obtaining a response rate of 65%. This response rate is in line with response rates attained for contemporaneous Swedish surveys (de Heer 1999) and is comparable with rates observed in other longitudinal surveys carried out in developed countries, such as the United States (Abraham, Maitland, and Bianchi 2006).

Nevertheless, YAPS, like other longitudinal surveys, shares the problem of bias due to non-response or attrition. Out of the 2,820 individuals first interviewed in 1999, 1,575 were successfully reinterviewed in 2009, with an attrition rate of 44%, raising concern

about attrition bias. Wanders (2012) conducted a study of attrition in the YAPS and concluded that the highest risk of dropping out was found for men and those with low education. Switek (2016), using YAPS data, conducted an extensive analysis of attrition and the sociodemographic characteristics of those lost to attrition and concluded that the possible attrition bias in the survey would not have a strong effect on the main results of her study.

We found the same results. Following the method described by Wooldridge (2010), we tested for selective attrition associated with our two main dependent variables. This test consists of adding a lead attrition indicator (which turns to 1 in the period before attrition) in a regression of the dependent variables on the explanatory variables. According to Wooldridge, if the attrition indicator turns out to be not significant, attrition does not present a source of bias. We use data on changes in attitudes toward parenthood and work in the period 1999–2003 to construct the model, with a lead attrition indicator as an explanatory variable (see the Appendix). The attrition indicator was not significant in either case. In addition to the problem of attrition bias, unfortunately there is also the risk of reverse causality due to the relatively long periods between the three surveys (four and six years, respectively), which we discuss in the methods section, below.

As we are interested in changing attitudes over time, we restrict our analysis to respondents who are included in all three waves of the survey. This leaves us with 1,385 respondents, of whom 802 (approximately 58%) are women and 583 are men. To complement information obtained from the respondents, Statistics Sweden linked the YAPS data with Swedish Register records, providing access to additional sociodemographic information (such as the highest attained education level). The final dataset includes a comprehensive set of variables related to a person's family life, attitudes, and various demographic characteristics.

## **4.2 Measures**

The outcome variables are two attitude measures. One, attitudes toward parenthood, was constructed by combining two questions from the YAPS that capture respondents' attitudes toward parenthood as expressed at each interview. Our measure of respondents' attitudes toward the importance of work is based on a single item. The parenthood index is constructed as the sum of (1) the extent to which a person believes that children give life meaning, and (2) the importance to a person of having children, both indicators of the importance of parenthood. These two components correlate very closely, with a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.827, suggesting that the second component contributes considerable stability. The exact wording of the question on attitudes toward

work is “How important is work in your life?” Responses range from 1 (one of the least important things) to 5 (one of the most important things).

The parenthood index results in a total score that ranges from 2 (if the respondent has a weak general attitude toward parenthood on both questions) to 10 (if the respondent has a strong general attitude toward parenthood on both questions). The answers to the work importance measure ranged from 1 to 5.

Given our interest in the effect of life course transitions on attitudes, we also construct two variables that capture the common life course transitions undergone by young adults: union formation and becoming a parent. Union formation and dissolution, which we include as a control, are constructed by following respondents’ changes in relationship status between surveys. Respondents are identified as having undergone union formation if they have become a part of an intimate coresidential relationship since the previous survey.

### **4.3 Methods**

To analyze changes in attitudes toward career and parenthood over different ages, we construct five age groups: ages 22, 26, 30/32, 34/36, and 40, respectively, at the time of a given interview. The 22-year-old age group includes respondents born in 1976 (interviewed in 1999); the 26-year-old age group includes respondents born in 1976 and 1972 (interviewed in 2003 and 1999, respectively); the 30/32-year-old age group includes respondents born in 1976, 1972, and 1968 (interviewed in 2009, 2003, and 1999, respectively); the 34/36-year-old age group includes respondents born in 1972 and 1968 (interviewed in 2009 and 2003, respectively); and the 40-year-old age group includes respondents born in 1968 (interviewed in 2009). Each respondent therefore contributes two observations (1999–2003 and 2003–2009), so there are twice as many observations as there are respondents. We then analyze changes in attitudes toward work and parenthood between these ages (22 to 26, 26 to 30/32, 30/32 to 34/36, and 34/36 to 40).

We exploit the panel structure of our data by using first-difference OLS regressions to estimate the partial effect of a life transition on changes in attitudes toward career and parenthood. The use of a first-difference model allows us to control for all observable and unobservable individual- and cohort-level fixed effects that may affect a person’s attitude. More explicitly, it allows us to eliminate all time-invariant heterogeneity among the survey respondents, which greatly reduces the risk of an omitted variable bias in our analysis. Our first-difference model is a close relative of the fixed effects model commonly used in literature to control for individual time-invariant characteristics. Unlike the fixed effects model, however, the first-difference model does not assume strict exogeneity, since instead of demeaning the data (subtracting the mean, as in the case of

fixed effects), the first-difference model eliminates time-invariant heterogeneity by means of subtraction. (For a detailed discussion of the exogeneity assumptions in these models, see Leszczynski and Wolbring 2022.)

Formally, we represent a person's attitude toward parenthood or career at age  $a$  as a function of their age, sociodemographic characteristics (such as marital status or whether the person is currently parenting a child), and any fixed effects (or traits, such as personality or characteristics related to the person's birth cohort) that are constant and affect a person's disposition. In terms of equations, we can represent a person's attitude index at age  $a$  as:

$$AttIndex_{i,a} = \alpha_a + \beta * X_{i,a} + \delta_i + \varepsilon_{i,a}, \quad (1)$$

where  $\alpha_a$  is the person's age,  $X_{i,a}$  is a vector of sociodemographic characteristics that are allowed to change over the life course,  $\delta_i$  captures all individual-level fixed effects that are constant and affect a person's attitude, and  $\varepsilon_{i,a}$  is the error term. Since we observe each survey respondent at three points in time, we collect information on their attitudes and other characteristics at ages  $a0$ ,  $a1$ , and  $a2$ . We can therefore calculate two first differences in their attitude indexes as a function of changes in time-variant characteristics, such as a change in partnership (union) or parenting status (i.e., life course transitions):

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta AttIndex_{i,a1-a0} &= (AttIndex_{i,a1} - AttIndex_{i,a0}) = (\alpha_{a1} - \alpha_{a0}) + \mu * (X_{ia1} - X_{ia0}) \\ &+ (\delta_i - \delta_i) + (\varepsilon_{ia1} - \varepsilon_{a0}) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta AttIndex_{i,a2-a1} &= (AttIndex_{i,a2} - AttIndex_{i,a1}) = (\alpha_{a2} - \alpha_{a1}) + \mu * (X_{ia2} - X_{ia1}) \\ &+ (\delta_i - \delta_i) + (\varepsilon_{ia2} - \varepsilon_{a1}) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

In Equation (2),  $\Delta AttIndex_{i,a1-a0}$  is the change (first difference) in a person's attitude between ages  $a0$  and  $a1$ ;  $(\alpha_{a1} - \alpha_{a0})$  is the change in a person's age (in other words, their progress over the life course);  $(X_{ia1} - X_{ia0})$  are the changes in a person's sociodemographic characteristics (including life course transitions) whose effect is captured by  $\mu$ ;  $(\delta_i - \delta_i)$  are time-invariant characteristics that drop out of the model as a result of the first order subtraction; and  $(\varepsilon_{ia1} - \varepsilon_{a0})$  is the new error term. The analogous reasoning can be followed for Equation (3).

As mentioned above, since  $\delta_i$  disappears from the first-difference equation, this model does not require an exogeneity assumption about the relationship of time-invariant heterogeneity and the error term. However, our model does rely on two important assumptions: (1) absence of time-varying heterogeneity and (2) absence of reverse causality. With respect to the first, we argue that, given the relatively short time between

our surveys and that major personality changes are unlikely to occur unexpectedly, our focus on a relatively short period of a person's lifetime should mitigate any bias from this assumption (should any such bias exist).

The second assumption, of absence of reverse causality, merits more serious consideration. Absence of reverse causality requires that a change in a person's attitude toward work or parenthood does not result in this person forming a union or becoming a parent. Because long-lasting behavioral changes in attitude toward important life conditions such as work or parenthood are unlikely to occur spontaneously, and because decisions about life-changing events such as forming a long-term union or having a child are unlikely to be affected by transitory changes in attitudes, we consider it more likely that in the context of our question, causality runs from the life course transition to change in attitude rather than the other way around.

Despite the above reasoning, we must acknowledge the possibility that an external cause that is not controlled for in our study might result in a long-lasting change in attitude that leads to a life course transition, resulting in reverse causality and bias in our analysis. Nevertheless, given our context and data limitations, we consider the first-difference model to be the best specification for our analysis.

Keeping in mind its limitations, the precise specification used in our econometric analyses is:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta AttIndex = & \alpha_1 * age_{22\_26} + \alpha_2 * age_{26\_32} + \alpha_3 * age_{32\_36} + \alpha_4 * age_{36\_40} \\ & + \beta_1 * uform + \beta_2 * educ\_trans + \beta_3 * parent\_young \\ & + \beta_4 * parent\_old + \beta_5 * udiss + \beta_6 * notrans \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

By controlling for the age period during which a person undergoes a transition, this specification has the benefit of not confounding the effect of the transition with the pure effect of aging. Given the inclusion of *notrans* (a binary variable that captures the change in attitude that takes place irrespective of any of the transitions), the econometric model is run without an intercept. This is methodologically equivalent to an OLS first-difference regression that includes an intercept but omits *notrans* (or one of the other transition variables) from the regression. The specification with no intercept is preferred because it avoids the use of a reference group in measuring the effects of each transition on personal attitudes and instead captures the “pure” partial effect of the transition.

Model (4) is used to run separate regressions where the dependent variable  $AttIndex_i$  represents either the work and career or the parenthood indices, respectively. The models are estimated separately by (a) gender, (b) education, and (c) gender and education.

## 5. Results

Women hold somewhat more positive attitudes toward parenthood than do men at all ages, as the separate-spheres construct predicts, suggesting that parenthood in Sweden is still more central to women's identity than it is to men's. However, the differences are not great (half a point at most ages), and their patterns are otherwise very similar (Table 1, Columns 1 and 2). Rather than showing diverging trends, as would be expected if women embraced their domestic roles while men ceded some parental involvement to women in order to invest in their good provider responsibilities, both men and women attach *greater* importance to parenthood as they age from the early 20s to the late 30s, with increases in the index of close to a point and even some convergence between men and women.

**Table 1: Parenthood index (scale 2–10) and importance of work (scale 1–5), by age and gender**

Age	Parenthood index		Importance of work	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
22	7.83	7.52	3.99	3.82
26	8.14	7.58	3.82	3.83
30–32	8.39	8.06	3.73	3.76
34–36	8.58	8.17	3.77	3.78
40	8.53	8.30	3.83	3.89

Men and women are even more similar when it comes to attitudes toward work importance, with almost identical levels at most ages (Table 1, Columns 3 and 4). For both sexes and over age, Swedes are generally more positive toward parenthood than toward work, although differences in enthusiasm are small at the youngest ages but increase with age, leading to substantial divergence. What is very clear, however, is that gender similarity dominates patterns for both scales.

Our paper aims to explain to what extent these trends are related to family-building transitions (union formation and parenthood) over these ages and whether there are differences by gender and/or education in these relationships, or whether they are simply a result of the aging process. Tables 2–5 present the results of regression analyses of changing attitudes related to family-building transitions, focusing on differences by gender and education.

Table 2 compares individuals by gender, while Table 3 compares individuals by education. Finally, Tables 4 and 5 compare individuals with the same education levels but different genders.

**Parenthood attitudes.** Attitudes toward parenthood are positively and significantly related to family-building transitions: union formation and parenthood (Table 2, Columns 1 and 2). The relationship is most marked for those who have recently become parents, with an increase in the parental orientation scale by about a point (1.05 for women, 0.92 for men); the relationship is somewhat weaker for parents for whom two or more years have passed since the birth of the child (0.67 for men, 0.61 for women). The positive relationship with union formation is weaker than the effect of parenthood (less than a half point increase) but is also significant for both genders. Once they have entered a coresidential relationship, men and women seem to think parenthood more important than they had before, indicating that most individuals see childbearing as an integral part of a partnership.

**Table 2: OLS regressions: change in attitudes toward parenthood and career explained by life transitions, by gender**

Explanatory variable	Change in attitudes toward parenthood		Change in importance of work	
	Women (All)	Men (All)	Women (All)	Men (All)
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Union formation	0.340 (0.150)	0.479 (0.178)	-0.193 (0.0735)	-0.213 (0.0903)
Recent parents	1.052 (0.185)	0.923 (0.222)	-0.432 (0.0909)	-0.185 (0.115)
Less recent parents	0.606 (0.155)	0.670 (0.192)	-0.111 (0.0795)	-0.145 (0.108)
Union dissolution	-0.117 (0.190)	0.304 (0.275)	-0.117 (0.0937)	-0.207 (0.122)
No transition	0.046 (0.131)	0.259 (0.192)	-0.062 (0.0695)	-0.104 (0.0906)
> secondary education	0.077 (0.093)	0.137 (0.116)	0.035 (0.0497)	0.0292 (0.0570)
Age 22–26	0.053 (0.165)	-0.346 (0.207)	-0.160 (0.0848)	-0.0269 (0.105)
Age 26–30/32	-0.146 (0.155)	-0.115 (0.196)	0.045 (0.0787)	0.0262 (0.0935)
Age 30–32/34–36	-0.024 (0.147)	+ -0.514 (0.213)	0.159 (0.0767)	0.103 (0.100)
Age 34/36–40	-0.260 (0.165)	-0.238 (0.257)	0.217 (0.0958)	0.257 (0.116)
Observations	1,447	1,040	1,471	1,055
Adjusted R-squared	0.063	0.042	0.040	0.013

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Plus sign indicates significant differences between men and women at  $p < 0.1$ .

The parenthood attitudes of men and women seem to relate in very similar ways to these family-building transitions. There are no significant gender differences in the relationship between parenthood attitudes and family-building transitions. Clearly, young Swedish women and men are surprisingly similar in their reactions to family building, at least when it comes to attitudes toward parenthood.

Nevertheless, the simple fact of aging (holding family transitions constant) is related to having less favorable attitudes toward parenthood, particularly among men, with declines between each age group – declines that are significant over the four years between ages 22 and 26 and between ages 30/32 and 34/36 for men. This trend is much less marked among women. Having a post-secondary education was not significantly related to either men's or women's parental attitudes.

**Work attitudes.** Comparing men's and women's changes in attitudes toward the importance of work following family-building transitions (Table 2, Columns 3 and 4) also shows similar patterns for young men and women, but with somewhat less dramatic effects. The work attitudes of both sexes are negatively related to recent parenthood; once they become parents, they view work as less important, although the coefficient is much larger for women and only significant for them ( $-0.432$  versus  $-0.185$  for men). Nevertheless, the relationship seems to be transitory, given that neither men nor women who have only older children have significantly lower levels of work attitudes than they had before they became parents.

Moreover, when it comes to the relationship between union formation and work attitudes, both women and men find work and career significantly less important once they have entered a coresidential relationship, which would seem to testify to how far the gender revolution has advanced in Sweden. Aging contributed to the reduced relationship with work-related attitudes, a process that began earlier for women (between age 22 and 26) than for men (between age 34 and 36/40). Union dissolution had a significant, negative relationship between family building and men's work attitudes, but this was not the case for women. Having attained a post-secondary education had no impact on changes in work attitudes.

**Differences by education.** As we noted earlier, attaining a post-secondary education had no significant additive relationship with attitudes toward either work or parenthood, for men or for women (cf. Table 2). Nevertheless, it is possible that the relationship between family-building transitions and attitudes toward work and parenthood might differ between those with different levels of education, as Cherlin (2014, 2018) found so dramatically for family issues in the United States. We address this question in Table 3, which subdivides the regressions on changes in parenthood and career attitudes by levels of education (but not by sex).

**Table 3: OLS regressions: changes in attitudes toward parenthood and career explained by life transitions, by final educational level (secondary/post-secondary)**

Explanatory variable	Change in attitudes toward parenthood		Change in attitudes toward career	
	Secondary	Post-secondary	Secondary	Post-secondary
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Union formation	0.386 (0.231)	0.415 (0.134)	-0.339 (0.114)	-0.142 (0.0652)
Recent parents	0.974 (0.274)	1.008 (0.170)	-0.295 (0.139)	-0.398 (0.0808)
Less recent parents	0.984 (0.239)	+ 0.411 (0.143)	-0.277 (0.123)	-0.064 (0.0762)
Union dissolution	0.314 (0.289)	-0.091 (0.190)	-0.279 (0.133)	-0.082 (0.0914)
No transition	0.294 (0.240)	0.066 (0.125)	-0.179 (0.110)	-0.051 (0.0646)
Male	-0.043 (0.107)	-0.024 (0.094)	-0.013 (0.0575)	-0.007 (0.0469)
Age 22–26	-0.045 (0.254)	-0.056 (0.134)	0.037 (0.126)	-0.120 (0.0700)
Age 26–30/32	-0.372 (0.246)	+ 0.109 (0.119)	0.101 (0.113)	0.075 (0.0631)
Age 30–32/34–36	-0.350 (0.241)	-0.059 (0.130)	0.281 (0.113)	0.110 (0.0648)
Age 34/36–40	-0.379 (0.269)	-0.060 (0.152)	0.334 (0.130)	0.243 (0.0872)
Observations	1,072	1,415	1,067	1,459
Adjusted R-squared	0.035	0.066	0.027	0.031

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Plus signs indicate significant differences between educational levels at  $p < 0.1$ .

There were no significant differences in the relationships between family-building transitions and work importance between our two educational levels, and just one for attitudes toward parenthood. The only important educational difference in the relationship between parental attitudes and family building involves having older children. Those with older children (none younger than 2 years old) maintained their strengthened positive attitudes toward parenthood if they had not attained any post-secondary education, while those who did have a post-secondary education seem to have lost some (but not all) of their enthusiasm for parenthood by the time their children had left babyhood.

**Differences in parental attitudes by gender and education.** When we reintroduce gender into our analysis of educational differences, we find more interesting differences between men and women (Table 4). Union formation has a far stronger relationship with attitudes toward parenthood for women than for men among those with only a secondary

education (0.707 versus 0.052), while the opposite pattern prevails among those with some post-secondary education (0.211 for women versus 0.722 for men), although only the latter gender difference is significant. Having children older than 2 also shows a significant difference by education in women's attitude toward parenthood (1.02 for those with only a secondary education and 0.45 for those with a post-secondary education). The relationship for women with only a secondary education is significantly stronger; results not presented. There were fewer significant differences in parental attitudes by education for men; the only significant interaction was for union formation. Men with a post-secondary education exhibit a stronger orientation toward parenthood after union formation, which was not the case for men with only a secondary education.

**Table 4: OLS regressions: change in attitudes toward parenthood explained by life transitions, by gender and final educational level (secondary/post-secondary)**

Explanatory variable	Change in attitudes toward parenthood			
	Secondary		Post-secondary	
	Women (1)	Men (2)	Women (3)	Men (4)
Union formation	0.707 (0.289)	0.052 (0.391)	0.211 (0.176)	+ 0.722 (0.204)
Recent parents	0.992 (0.357)	0.870 (0.451)	1.088 (0.217)	0.822 (0.281)
Less recent parents	1.024 (0.285)	0.904 (0.420)	0.454 (0.187)	0.368 (0.224)
Union dissolution	0.271 (0.316)	0.275 (0.549)	-0.254 (0.238)	0.225 (0.314)
No transition	0.303 (0.263)	0.175 (0.451)	-0.014 (0.151)	0.214 (0.220)
Age 22–26	-0.051 (0.302)	0.026 (0.453)	0.140 (0.163)	+ -0.429 (0.209)
Age 26–30/32	-0.608 (0.282)	-0.070 (0.443)	0.108 (0.149)	0.088 (0.180)
Age 30/32–34/36	-0.184 (0.261)	-0.488 (0.450)	0.039 (0.151)	-0.253 (0.221)
Age 34/36–40	-0.567 (0.283)	-0.137 (0.512)	-0.086 (0.178)	-0.076 (0.260)
Observations	556	516	891	524
Adjusted R-squared	0.058	0.027	0.070	0.063

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Plus signs indicate significant differences between educational levels at  $p < 0.1$ .

These results seem to suggest that changes in attitudes toward parenthood with family-building transitions lead to a more traditional orientation among those with lower levels of education in Sweden, with stronger effects on women than on men, as is

commonly found elsewhere. What is dramatic is how much these transitions appear to increase more educated Swedish men's attitudes toward parenthood.

**Differences in work attitudes by gender and education.** Turning to gender and educational differences in the relationships between family-building experiences and work attitudes (Table 5), the patterns are somewhat similar to those for parental attitudes, generally reinforcing the overall picture of less educated young adults holding more gender-traditional attitudes about being good providers. Among those with no more than a secondary education, family building, including union formation, recent parenthood, and less recent parenthood, are related to a lower level of work-importance orientation for women than for men, although only the gender difference for recent parenthood is significant ( $-0.652$  versus  $0.164$ ). There is no evidence of such gender differences in the relationship between family formation and work attitudes among men and women with a post-secondary education; they both experience reduced feelings about the importance of work after family-building transitions.

**Table 5: OLS regressions: change in attitudes toward the importance of work explained by life transitions, by gender and final educational level (secondary/post-secondary)**

Explanatory variable	Change in importance of work			
	Secondary		Post-secondary	
	Women (1)	Men (2)	Women (3)	Men (4)
Union formation	-0.426 (0.147)	-0.182 (0.186)	-0.121 (0.0844)	-0.183 (0.105)
Recent parents	-0.652 (0.185)	+ 0.164 (0.214)	-0.353 (0.103)	-0.475 (0.133)
Less recent parents	-0.349 (0.144)	-0.135 (0.210)	-0.0221 (0.0957)	-0.137 (0.128)
Union dissolution	-0.380 (0.164)	-0.0744 (0.231)	-0.0113 (0.115)	-0.230 (0.144)
No transition	-0.294 (0.136)	0.0298 (0.185)	0.00686 (0.0810)	-0.158 (0.108)
Age 22–26	-0.0160 (0.154)	-0.0255 (0.207)	-0.154 (0.0856)	-0.0752 (0.109)
Age 26–30/32	0.238 (0.134)	+ -0.148 (0.180)	0.0281 (0.0766)	0.145 (0.104)
Age 30/32–34/36	0.469 (0.133)	+ -0.0268 (0.187)	0.0652 (0.0782)	0.183 (0.103)
Age 34/36–40	0.429 (0.163)	0.133 (0.205)	0.201 (0.111)	0.334 (0.127)
Observations	552	515	919	540
Adjusted R-squared	0.064	0.010	0.027	0.026

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Plus signs indicate significant differences between educational levels at  $p < 0.1$

## **6. Summary and discussion**

In this paper we investigate whether family-building transitions influence attitudes toward parenthood and work in Sweden, and if so how. Our study of attitudinal responses to family-building events over the early adult life course demonstrates that attitudes toward work and parenthood change with the experience of family-building transitions (union formation and childbearing), supporting Hypothesis 1. In fact, the influence of family-building transitions on changes in attitudes (positive for attitudes toward parenthood and negative for attitudes toward work) aligns well with the observed overall increase in positive attitudes toward parenthood and the decrease in positive attitudes toward work over the life course. This suggests that family-building transitions could be largely responsible for the attitudinal changes regarding work and parenthood that people experience as they age through their early adult years.

Unlike most other research on this subject, we study attitudes toward parenthood and career separately, for both young men and young women, allowing us to observe more clearly how family building affects each of the separate spheres. Research in countries with less support for families has found strongly traditionalizing impacts of family transitions, far more so than in Sweden, with women becoming more domestic and men reinforcing their good provider roles. In contrast, our analysis of Swedish young adults shows that both sexes now generally follow a “female” pattern: With age and family building, both men and women become more positively inclined toward parenthood and attach less importance to career. Interestingly, while both gender and educational level matter for the effects of family transitions on attitudes toward parenthood and career, the differences are small (supporting Hypotheses 2–5). To reveal gender differences of any magnitude, it was necessary to separate parental attitudes from career attitudes, as a combined gender role measure would likely have missed them. (Kaufman, Bernhardt, and Goldscheider [2016], using the same dataset, found enduring egalitarianism following family-building transitions.) And to reveal differences in socioeconomic status it was necessary to separate men from women, because education makes little difference for men but does make a difference for women. What is quite remarkable is the finding that both men and women with post-secondary education saw work as less important after the family-building transition.

The relationship between family-building transitions and attitudes toward parenthood and work seems to indicate that young Swedes adapt their attitudes to their new circumstances, suggesting that selection is often reshaped by adaptation. Holland and Keizer (2015), using the same dataset, have shown that there are distinct selection effects of family and work attitudes on the transition to parenthood. However, by using a first-difference regression, we analyze change and thus control for the attitude at the beginning of the observation interval. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the existence of

reverse causation due to the relatively long time intervals between observation points. It has been pointed out by Leszczenka and Wolbring (2022) that while the first-difference regression model provides protection from endogeneity arising from unobserved heterogeneity, it can also yield biased estimates in cases of reverse causality. We therefore need to interpret our results with some caution.

The results are of course limited to Sweden and need to be tested more generally, preferably with panel data with shorter time intervals. The relatively weak importance of education for the effect of transitions on attitudes may be specific to the relatively redistributive society of Sweden. The availability of strongly subsidized child care and job protections for those taking family leave make the trade-off between commitments to work versus family much easier to manage than in countries with neither policy in place. More research on countries with less progressive policy regimes could shed further light on these issues. Larger samples would also be useful, given the challenges to significance in this analysis

To summarize, the overall pattern is one of similarity between men and women, seemingly testifying to the fact that the gender revolution is fairly well advanced in Sweden (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015), even if traditional gender structures remain to some extent, particularly when it comes to attitudes toward work and career among those with less education. Evertsson (2013) has already shown that women's predispositions toward work and career are weakened after exposure to the experience of parenthood, although the effect seems to be transitory. This study demonstrates that this is also the case for men, although the effect is less pronounced than for women. Studying gender differences in attitudes toward career and parenthood following family-building transitions appears to be a good way to monitor the progress of the gender revolution in different societies. Our results also reinforce the value of studying attitude differences in the context of the changing social structures that underlie them. Men's and women's changing roles, and the changing structures of inequality within a given society, clearly shape patterns of attitudes by gender and socioeconomic status.

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## Appendix

**Table A-1: Test for attrition bias: OLS regressions of changes in attitudes toward work and parenthood (in 1999–2003 changes) regressed on attrition in 2009 and control variables**

Variables	(1) Parenthood attitude	(2) Parenthood attitude	(3) Work attitude	(4) Work attitude
Attrition indicator	0.071 (0.104)	0.075 (0.086)	-0.0285 (0.0572)	0.0301 (0.0404)
Union formation	0.517 (0.128)		-0.00503 (0.0537)	
Recent parents	0.857 (0.158)		-0.248 (0.0751)	
Less recent parents	0.375 (0.116)		-0.0445 (0.0624)	
Union dissolution	-0.086 (0.150)		-0.0526 (0.0820)	
Age 22–26	0.011 (0.091)		3.733 (0.0423)	
Age 26–30/32	0.065 (0.085)		3.718 (0.0390)	
Age 30/32–36/40	-0.035 (0.080)		3.732 (0.0407)	
Constant		0.232 (0.050)		3.693 (0.0227)
Observations	1,612	1,950	1,684	2,048
Adjusted R-squared	0.053	-0.000	0.951	-0.000

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

