

**Education and union formation:
Gender perspectives on attitudes and behaviour
among young adults in Sweden**

Eva Bernhardt and Elizabeth Thomson

Extended abstract for paper submitted to the session on Family formation
(310, Organizer: Francesco Billari). IUSSP Conference in Tours, France, July 2005

Education has long been viewed as a key determinant of union formation. On the one hand, education provides resources -- employment, income, social networks and problem-solving skills -- that can support the search for a partner and the maintenance of partner relationships. On the other, education offers social and economic opportunities that reduce the “gains to trade” of intimate partnerships. The competition between intimate partnerships and alternative uses of time and energy is usually greater for women than for men because women do a greater share of household work and relationship maintenance than do men.

Where the public and private sectors develop policies and practices that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life and ideological shifts draw men into family and emotional work, resources can be expected to play a larger role than opportunity costs in union formation. In addition, the impact of education should be more similar for women and men than in the past. In this paper, we investigate effects of education on union formation in a context where gender equality is relatively advanced, i.e., Sweden at the turn of the 21st century. We identify the ideological and structural basis of educational effects on union formation and test differences in the processes for young men and young women.

The analysis will be based on data from a panel study of Family and Working Life in the 21st century (FWL), undertaken by Eva Bernhardt. The field work was carried out by Statistics Sweden, and a random sample of 2800 persons born in 1968, 1972 and 1976 completed mail questionnaires in 1999 with a follow-up in 2003 (the 2003 survey also comprised a sample of individuals born in 1980). Survey data have been matched with register information on educational level and line of study at the time of the two surveys. The

survey data include information on cohabitation, attitudes and values with respect to family building and family stability and on the childhood family experiences of respondents (e.g. parental education and the quality and stability of their union). We observe single respondents' attitudes and values at ages 23, 27 and 31, and the formation of unions during the next four years.

Logistic and ordinary-least-squares regression models will be used to estimate effects of childhood family experience and educational choices on attitudes towards and plans for family building, measured at the first round of the survey in 1999. In particular, we will analyse gender differentials in educational effects on perceived advantages and disadvantages with partnered versus single life. Family-building attitudes and plans as well as educational level and line of study will be used as fixed covariates in an analysis of union formation in between the two surveys in 1999 and 2003. In this way, we hope to shed some light on the intricate relationship between education and union formation among young men and women in a country, which is regarded as one of the forerunners in the so-called Second Demographic Transition.