Family Policies and Fertility in Sweden[1]

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Abstract

In a continent where most countries exhibit low or "lowest-low" fertility, the experience of Sweden and its Nordic neighbors has become of interest to social scientists and policy makers concerned with the causes and consequences of low fertility. Nordic fertility can be labeled as "highest-low": the fertility of Sweden and its neighbors is below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman but still high as compared to many other developed countries. In the present overview, I provide insights into recent childbearing developments in Sweden and discuss the role of family policies in shaping childbearing behavior. I provide evidence that institutional factors appear to be far more decisive than cultural ones in influencing childbearing behavior, and demonstrate some specific impacts of family policies on childbearing dynamics.

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Introduction

In demographic research, Sweden often stands out as a country of reference. This stems from a combination of facts. First, Sweden has been a fore-runner in the development of important aspects of family-demographic behavior; second, it has some of the best demographic data in the world to detect such developments. It has a long history of meticulously recording the demographic events of its resident population. The experience of Sweden is also of interest because it has been innovative in terms of policy development related to family life. In the 1970s and 1980s, changes in women's position in society motivated the introduction of a wide range of policies with the aim of achieving greater compatibility between women's family and working roles. Subsequently, public policies have continued to aim at promoting gender equality but then focused more explicitly on men and their reconciliation of family with working life.

It is very common to relate the relatively high fertility of Sweden and its Nordic neighbors to the setup of its policies and the characteristics of the Nordic welfare regime. The recuperation of fertility levels that occurred in the Nordic countries during the 1980s is often considered as related to the introduction and extension of various family-related policies. During the beginning of the 1990s, the then remarkably high fertility of Sweden attracted particular attention. The role of increased compatibility between female employment and parenthood in Sweden – and elsewhere in Scandinavia – has been stressed by a large number of authors, as witnessed by a long sequence of related publications during the last previous two decades: see, for example, Moen (1989), Sundström (1991), Haas (1992), Pauti (1992), Sundström and Stafford (1992), Bernhardt (1993), B. Hoem (1993), Ellingsæter and Rønsen (1996), Rindfuss and Brewster (1996), Hoem and Hoem

(1996, 1999), Brewster and Rindfuss (2000), Oláh (2003), Rønsen (2004), Hoem (2005), and Neyer et al. (2006). In the early 1990s, Bernhardt (1991) referred to the Swedish experience as a positive example for other countries in Europe to follow, and according to Pinelli (1995) Sweden exemplified the possibility of encouraging fertility increase in a country. The importance of institutional changes that facilitate women to combine the production and reproduction has also been stressed by Eurostat. In a number of population projections, this institution has made future fertility levels in EU countries depend on the possible implementation of such policies (for an early discussion of this kind, see Joshi 1996).

It is important to note that Swedish family policy never has been directed specifically at encouraging childbearing but instead have been aimed to strengthen women's attachment to the labor market and to promote gender and social equality. The focus has been on enabling individuals to pursue their family and occupational tracks without being too strongly dependent on other individuals or being constrained by various institutional factors. Policies are explicitly directed towards individuals and not towards families as such. In terms of childbearing, the goal is to enable women and men to raise the number of children they want to have. Surveys on young Swedes reveal that, on average, Swedish women and men aspire to have well above two children. In view of these results, Swedish authorities have become particularly concerned about childbearing dynamics in times of period fertility declines to far below the population-replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. This was the case at the end of the 1970s and, again, in the mid- to late 1990s. In both cases, the then low fertility triggered Swedish authorities to start investigations about what could be done to facilitate Swedish people having the number of children they claim they want to have. (For the latter investigation, see Swedish Ministry of Health and Social

Affairs 2001.) On both occasions, the depressed fertility was seen to be a welfare issue, and the purpose of the investigations was to detect the kind of obstacles in society that could possibly hamper individuals from pursuing their desired life goals. Nevertheless, the desirability of higher fertility as such was in Sweden articulated more explicitly during these two periods than during other calendar periods. In both cases, fertility started to increase again shortly after the investigations had been carried out. As an anecdote, we note that the investigations have a historical predecessor in an ambitious investigation of fertility and family policies carried out by Myrdal and Myrdal during the 1930s. They resemble their predecessor in their "fertility-stimulating" effect: fertility started to increase shortly after the Myrdals published their work in 1934.

Recent fertility developments in Sweden

The general situation of fairly high Swedish fertility has been obscured by the fact that childbearing in Sweden has fluctuated that much in recent decades. A presentation of aggregate trends in childbearing in the four main Nordic countries as they show up in period Total Fertility Rates (TFR) reveals that Swedish fertility has exhibited a roller-coaster pattern (Hoem and Hoem 1996) with undulations around the average of the other Nordic countries (see Figure 1). The general picture of Nordic fertility is that of an increase during the 1980s followed by a convergence between countries towards the present Nordic average of a TFR at around 1.8 children or more per woman. In an international comparison, such a fertility level can be labeled as "highest-low": it is below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman but still high as compared to many other developed countries.

Recent fluctuations in Swedish period total fertility show an upward trend from 1983 to 1990, a sharp drop from 1992 to 1997, and a recovery from 1999 to the present day: monthly statistics from Statistics Sweden reveal that by the beginning of 2008 Swedish fertility was still increasing. As fertility measure, however, the TFR is a very crude indicator. It is better suited to describe the completed childbearing of cohorts of women and men than the fertility developments during a period. In various publications, I have instead presented period trends in childbearing at different birth orders of women in Sweden (see Andersson 1999 with an update in Andersson 2004a) and other Scandinavian countries (Andersson 2002, 2004b) by applying more advanced statistical methods to longitudinal population-register data. Following an approach first suggested and described by Jan Hoem (1991, 1993a), this amounts to a modern version of indirect standardization, which allows for (i) the disaggregated description of demographic change, displaying trends in childbearing for important subgroups of women, (ii) the efficient use of available data, controlling for compositional changes over the demographic categories at hand, and (iii) the use of a metric that is appropriate for a period-based analysis, giving information about changes over time in the propensity of the various groups of women to give birth.

Figures 2 and 3 provide the description of Swedish childbearing dynamics by means of a set of standardized annual birth rates of childless women and mothers, respectively. Figure 2 shows how first-birth fertility of women at ages below 30 decreased up to the mid-1980s. This decline was followed by a marked increase in the first-birth fertility of older women, together reflecting general postponement of entry into motherhood. During the Swedish baby boom of the 1980s, birth propensities also increased strongly for mothers at different parities (Figure 3) – as well as for the younger childless women. By contrast, the 1990s displayed strong declines in birth

risks. As in the 1980s, these trends were followed by practically all demographic subgroups of women. In relative terms, the drops were strongest in first-birth rates of younger women and in third- and fourth-birth rates. Another clear trend reversal in birth propensities occurred after 1997. It is interesting to note that the increase in childbearing propensities in 1998 and 1999 is not evident in aggregated TFR data. The TFR of Sweden was recorded at 1.50 in these two years, the lowest level ever registered. With our presentation, we can get at the underlying dynamics of different subgroups of women, revealing with better precision when important changes in childbearing behavior have occurred.

A comparison of childbearing dynamics in Sweden as expressed in Figures 2 and 3 with those of other Nordic countries reveals many similarities in patterns and trends and, again, that Swedish fertility has fluctuated more strongly than the corresponding birth rates of its neighbors (Andersson 2002, 2004b, Neyer at al. 2006). The recent stability and similarity in the fertility of the other Nordic countries suggests that their fertility levels can be seen to a certain extent as a reflection of an underlying Nordic fertility regime at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Finally, the image of very volatile Swedish fertility withers if we instead look at the completed childbearing of Swedish cohorts of women (Figure 4). Statistics of that kind show that each female cohort born in Sweden in 1935 and later has achieved a final number of children within a narrow range of around 1.9-2.1 children per woman. (For information on patterns in cohort fertility in the Nordic countries, see Andersson et al. 2008; see also Frejka and Calot 2001 and Björklund 2006.) Despite period fluctuations in fertility, the final outcome in terms of the average number of children born to cohorts of Swedish women has not been affected. The combined information of different fertility statistics rather indicate a long-term relative stability of Swedish

fertility, with short-term period fluctuations occurring both around its own long-term cohort fertility level and around a recent average of Nordic period fertility. When comparing cohort fertility measures of the Nordic countries, Sweden instead appears as the country with the most stable level of ultimate number of children born (Figure 4).

Childbearing behavior in the Swedish context

Both the relatively high fertility of Sweden and its recent fluctuations need to be seen in the light of the specific setup of the Swedish welfare state. Its general orientation is directed towards the compatibility of family activities and the labor-force participation of women and men, the very existence being evident not only in the fairly high fertility but also in the strong labor-market attachment of Swedish women and men. The reconciliation of the family and working life of women is facilitated by (i) an individual taxation and individual-based social-security systems, which makes it less attractive for couples to pursue gendered segregation of work and care, (ii) an income-replacement based parental-leave system, which gives women incentives to establish themselves in the labor market before considering childbirth, and (iii) subsidized child-care, which allows them to return to work after a period of parental leave. A strong policy focus on gender equality aims not only at enhancing women's position in the labor market but also at encouraging men to be more active as to childrearing tasks within the family sphere.

Figure 5 provides some evidence of the equalizing effects of the Swedish policy setup as reflected in the childbearing dynamics past age 30 of Swedish women at different educational levels. The figure reveals that the average number of children born to women at age 30 is much lower for those with a post-secondary education

than among those with shorter educations. This is not surprising as the highly educated have had less time to establish themselves at the labor market and are likely to commence childbearing later than women with only primary or secondary education. What is more interesting is that the highly educated manage to recuperate their fertility at subsequent ages so that educational differences in ultimate childlessness (Andersson et al. 2008) and ultimate fertility (Figure 5) have vanished when women reach the end of their reproductive years.

In general, it is difficult to determine exactly to what extent family policies truly affect childbearing behavior in a country. In empirical research, such policies would be treated as a macro-level factor, and it is often impossible to isolate the effect of one such factor on individual-level behavior from the possibly competing impact of other macro-level factors. A careful cross-country comparison of gendered patterns in labor-market activity and of family dynamics within the different welfare-state regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990) of Europe nevertheless lends strong support to the role of political and institutional factors in explaining childbearing behavior (for empirical examples, see various contributions in Andersson and Neyer 2004). We find further support for the importance of such factors by a detailed examination of patterns in the childbearing of women in Sweden. Andersson (2000) and Hoem (2000) demonstrated, for example, that women well established in the labor market and with a decent level of earnings have much higher propensities to become a mother than childless women with a weaker attachment to the labor market. This pattern underlines that parenthood and labor-market activity by no means are considered by Swedish women as competing activities. The pattern is likely to be strengthened by the design of the Swedish parental-leave system, with its distinct income-replacement character, i.e., a leave allowance that constitutes 80% of a person’s own earnings prior

to childbirth. This system is likely to be conducive to higher fertility levels, in that it increases the compatibility of childbearing and employment. A decent level of income for a woman in Sweden is nowadays seen as a prerequisite for her childbearing and certainly not a hindrance to it. Evidently, this system is also sensitive to economic trends; Andersson (2000) and Hoem (2000) demonstrated that recent variations in the business cycle have fuelled the roller-coaster movements of Swedish fertility. In particular, the economic down-turn in Sweden in the early 1990s triggered the subsequent fertility decline during that decade.

Studies of childbearing patterns by the labor-market attachment of Swedish parents by Andersson, Duvander, and Hank (2005) and Andersson and Scott (2007) reveal further that the impacts of female and male earnings on a couple's childbearing behavior turn out to be fairly similar. This suggests that there is at least some degree of gender equality in the way Swedish couples deal with their family building.

The importance of institutional factors in shaping childbearing behavior is further underlined by a detailed study of the childbearing dynamics of foreign-born women in Sweden. If cultural factors instead were most important in shaping childbearing behavior, then one would expect very different dynamics of women and men stemming from widely different countries of origin. However, the opposite holds. Swedish- and foreign-born women exhibit a remarkable similarity in both the way they respond to recent period effects in Swedish fertility (Andersson 2004c) and how their labor-market attachment interacts with their childbearing behavior (Andersson and Scott 2005). We take this as very clear indications that institutional factors seem far more decisive than cultural ones in shaping childbearing dynamics.

Consequences of family policies: facts or artefacts?

When studying the possible impact of family policies on childbirth one ideally considers the whole package of policies in their particular context. A specific policy cannot be seen in isolation, and its effect in another context might turn out to be completely different from that where it was first introduced. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile examining the extent to which specific policies can truly be shown to affect individual childbearing behavior in a certain context. This can be achieved if a policy is depicted in such a way that there is some variation between individuals in how it actually is materialized. In this manner, I have studied how different aspects of the Swedish parental-leave and child-care systems have been related to the childbearing dynamics of Swedes.

The parental-leave and child-care systems of Sweden are certainly key elements of its family policy. The parental-leave system offers slightly more than one year of paid leave from work after the birth of a child, which can be shared between parents and used in a very flexible way. The allowance paid during leave is based on earnings attained prior to childbirth in the same manner as income replacement is offered to individuals on sick leave or unemployed. At present, the income is replaced with 80% of earnings up to an annual ceiling of around 32,000 Euro (counted as earnings before tax but after social-security contributions). In addition, the scheme offers generous opportunity to stay at home to take care of sick children after the parental-leave period is finished.

The parental-leave system of Sweden was established in the 1970s and extended in the 1980s, with the other Nordic countries following the same development but at a somewhat slower speed. A specific component of the present Swedish system, the so called “speed premium”, was also introduced in the 1980s and

contributed to the fertility increase during that decade. It creates incentives to women to have their children at relatively short birth intervals (Hoem 1990, 1993b, Andersson 1999, Andersson, Hoem, and Duvander 2006). A cross-country comparison of the period effects in childbearing of mothers in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway by the time since the last childbirth (Andersson 2002, 2004b) offers the rare case where a clear causal effect (cf Ní Bhrolcháin and Dyson 2007) can be demonstrated of a policy intervention on the childbearing dynamics in a developed country.

Much of the present debate on the parental-leave system in Sweden focuses on the relatively low uptake of the leave of fathers (Haas and Hwang 1999, Sundström and Duvander 2002, Bygren and Duvander 2006). Swedish fathers do take close to 20 percent of all parental leave, which is considerably higher than in any other country except Iceland (see Gíslason 2007), but Swedish authorities still see the slow progress towards a further increase in paternal involvement in the parental-leave scheme as being an obstacle to gender equality. It is also common to expect that increased paternal involvement in childrearing is related to higher fertility. A study by Duvander and Andersson (2006) suggests that there is indeed a positive but not a straightforward relationship between father's uptake of parental leave and a Swedish couple's propensity to have another child.

In Sweden, public day care for children is regarded as an essential component of the overall welfare system and its direction towards a dual-breadwinner model, gender equality, and the promotion of same opportunities for children of all social backgrounds (Bergqvist and Nyberg 2002). The provision of public child care improved substantially during the 1970s to 1990s, when the expansion of such services became a generally accepted policy objective. At present, practically all

children in Sweden have access to subsidized childcare of high quality. A study by Andersson, Duvander, and Hank (2004) examines if the local variation in child-care characteristics can be related to the childbearing dynamics of parents in different Swedish municipalities. They find no such indication and interpret the absence of effects as a reflection of the generally very appropriate level of child care in Sweden. They conclude that "despite some regional variation in the quantity, quality, and price of day care, the overall coverage with affordable, high-quality child-care opportunities is apparently on a sufficiently high level as to allow parents to make their fertility decisions relatively independent of the specific characteristics of their local area". For a related study on Norway that indeed finds positive effects of child-care availability on fertility, see Rindfuss et al. (2007).

Family policies and fertility: an assessment of different policy options

In this review, I have demonstrated how childbearing patterns in Sweden are related to the setup of the Swedish welfare state. Policies aimed at strengthening women's labor-market attachment and at promoting gender equality have made it easier for women to combine work and family life. In such a setting, fertility has remained relatively high.

The policies that have been most important in creating such a setting are the specific combination of individual taxation, an income-replacement based parental-leave scheme, and a system of high-quality full-time day care. Together they support the existence of the present dual bread-winner model of Sweden. I have not paid attention to the existing scheme of child allowances since the levels of such allowances do not largely deviate from the levels in other developed countries. While being helpful in alleviating some of the direct costs of having children, they are less

likely to promote childbirth as such. It is doubtful that it is possible to simply pay people to have children by offering various allowances or tax deductions. In the Swedish context, childbirth is supported by providing an infrastructure that allows women and men to pursue their individual life goals in terms of family and professional life. In economic terms, Swedish families base their welfare on own earnings rather than on allowances.

An important aspect of Swedish policies is that they are directed towards individuals and not families as such. They have no intention of supporting certain family forms, such as marriage, over others. An analysis of crude birth rates and various other crude indicators of the family dynamics of European countries suggests that this might be a wise strategy if one is interested in higher fertility. There is a very clear pattern of countries with more traditional family behavior, such as a high propensity for marriage, low divorce rates, and low levels of out-of-wedlock childbearing, having the lowest fertility while countries with greater diversity in their family dynamics have the highest fertility (Billari and Kohler 2004). Evidently, in a context that confines childbearing to a restricted set of conservative family forms, there always will be a fraction of the population that tries to avoid getting trapped in such a life situation. A persistent focus on gender equality in public as well as in private life (MacDonald 2000a,b) seems to offer a better strategy for policy makers in creating an environment where childbearing is not seen by women as a step towards reduced personal freedom.

A final suggestion based on our study is that the fertility levels of the Nordic countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century are useful as a benchmark when making forecasts about the fertility that is likely to appear when a society orients itself

towards the reconciliation of the active labor-force participation of women and men to the activities and responsibilities of childrearing.

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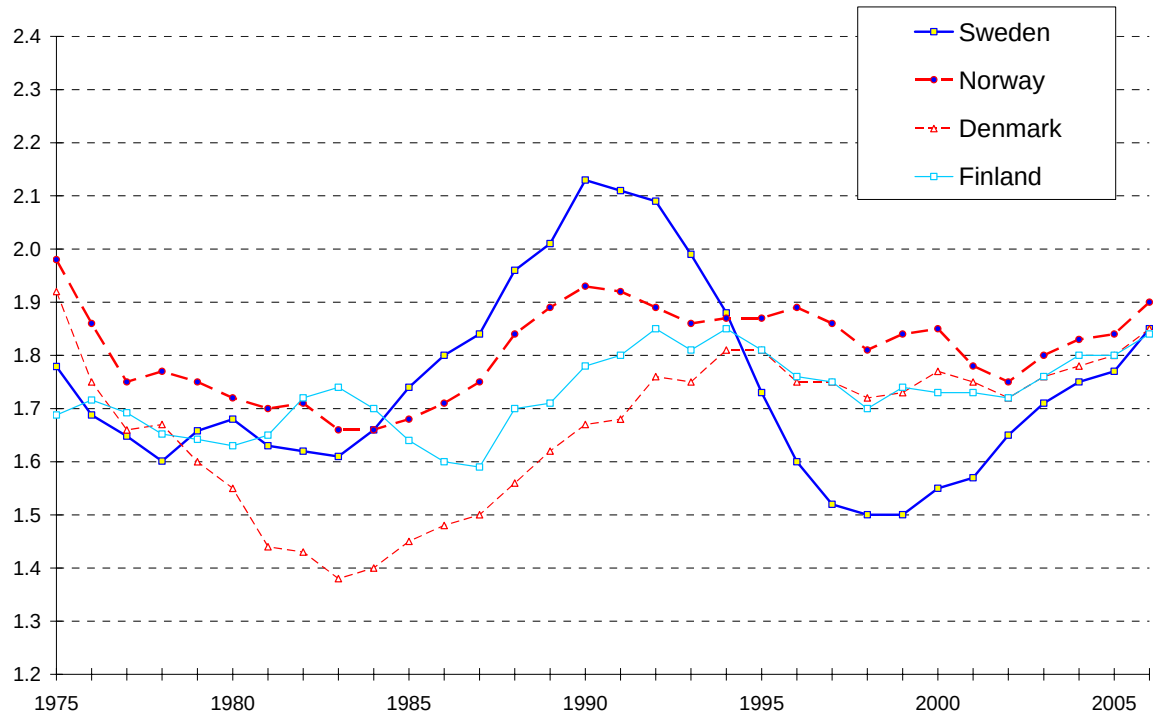
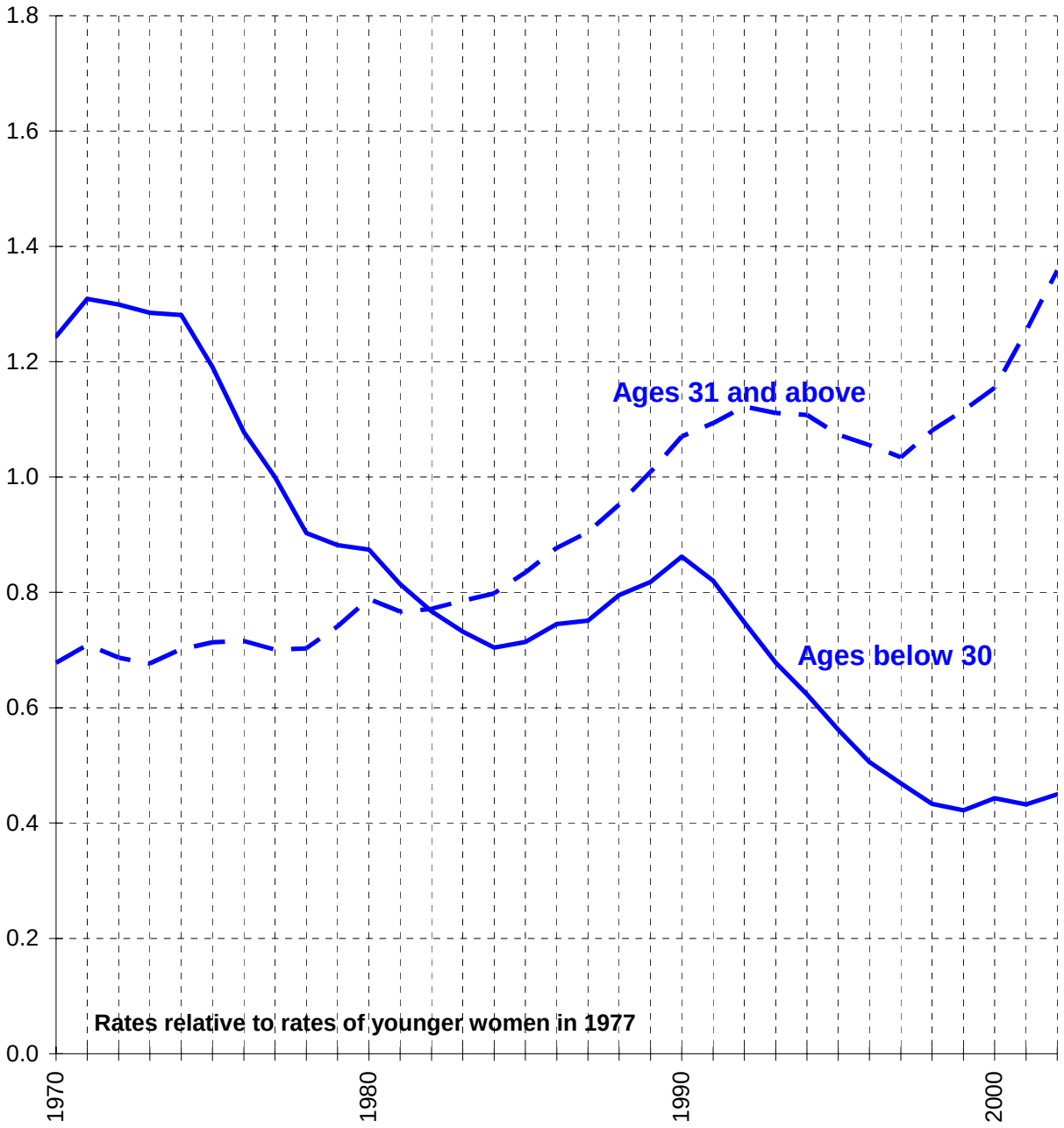
Figure 1: *Period Total Fertility Rate of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 1975-2006*



Source: Nordic Statistical Central Bureaus

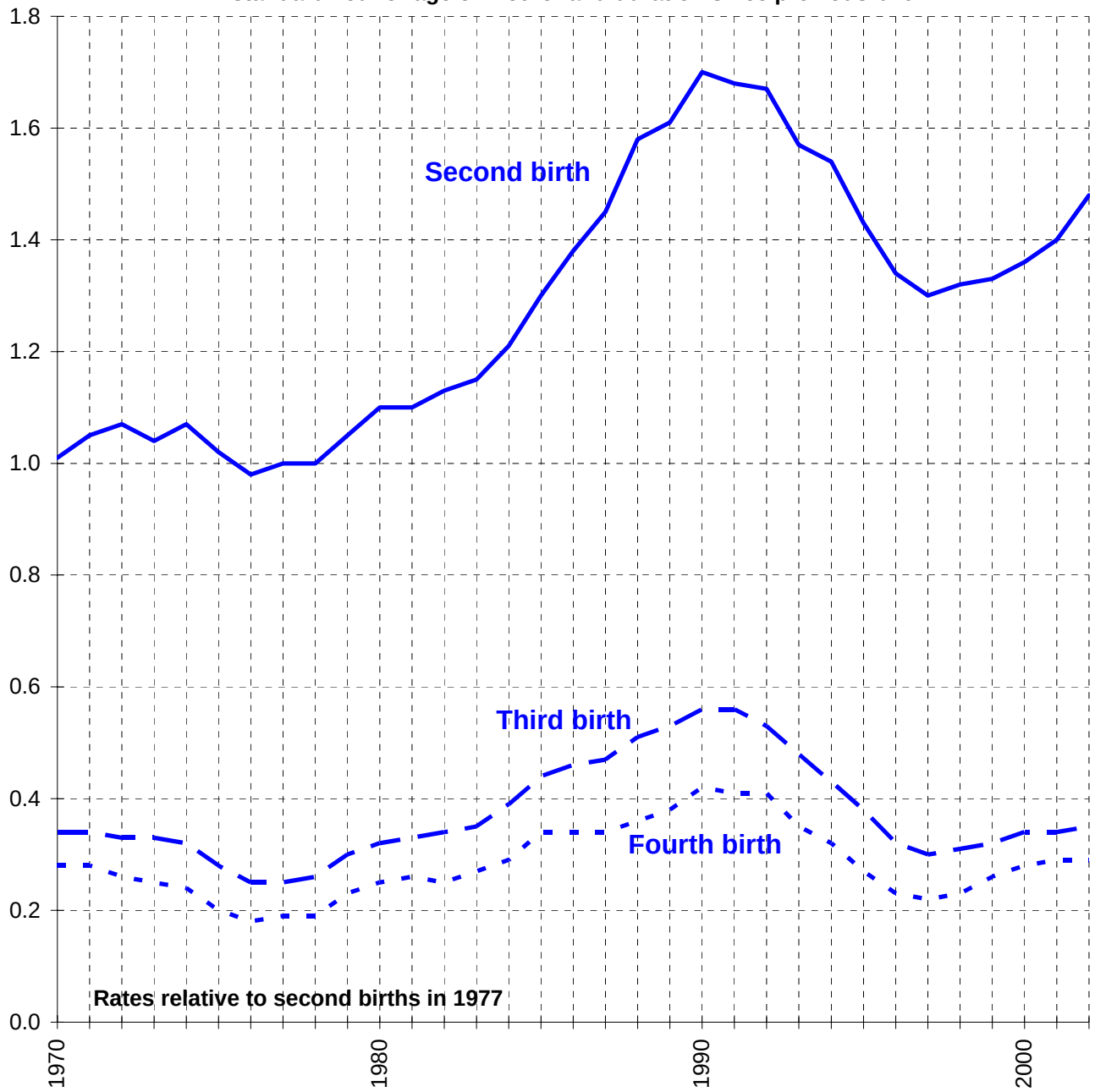
Figure 2: Standardized annual first-birth rates.
Swedish childless women, 1970-2002, by group of ages,
standardized for age in single years.



Source: Andersson (2004a)

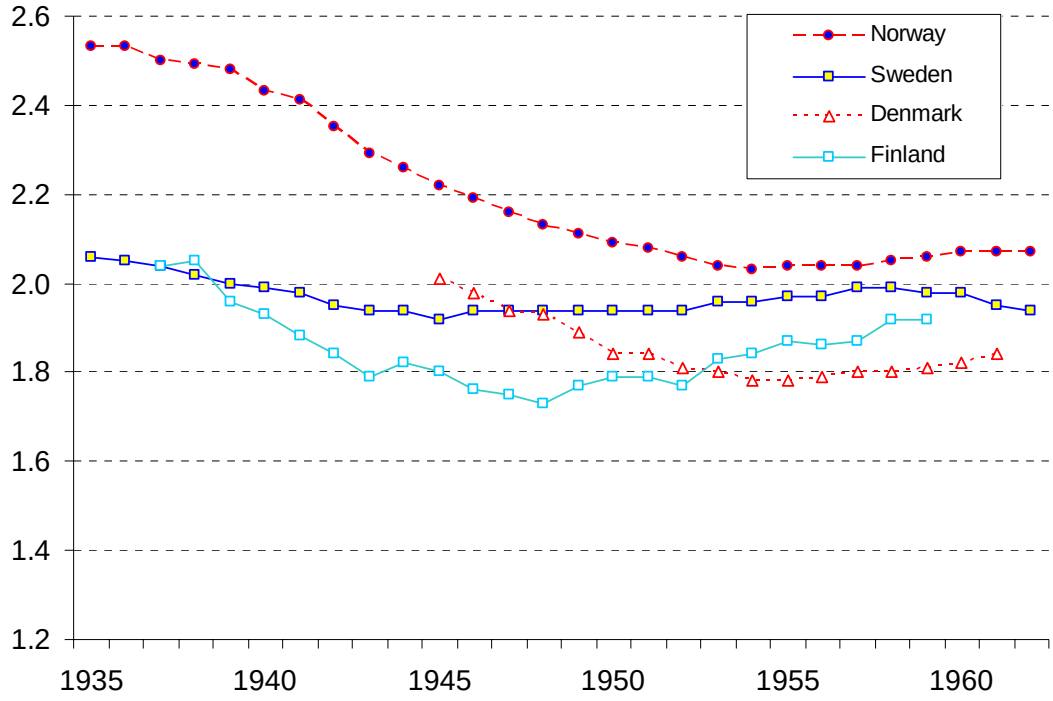
Figure 3: Standardized annual second-, third-, and fourth-birth rates. Swedish mothers, 1970-2002, by birth order,

standardized for age of mother and duration since previous birth.



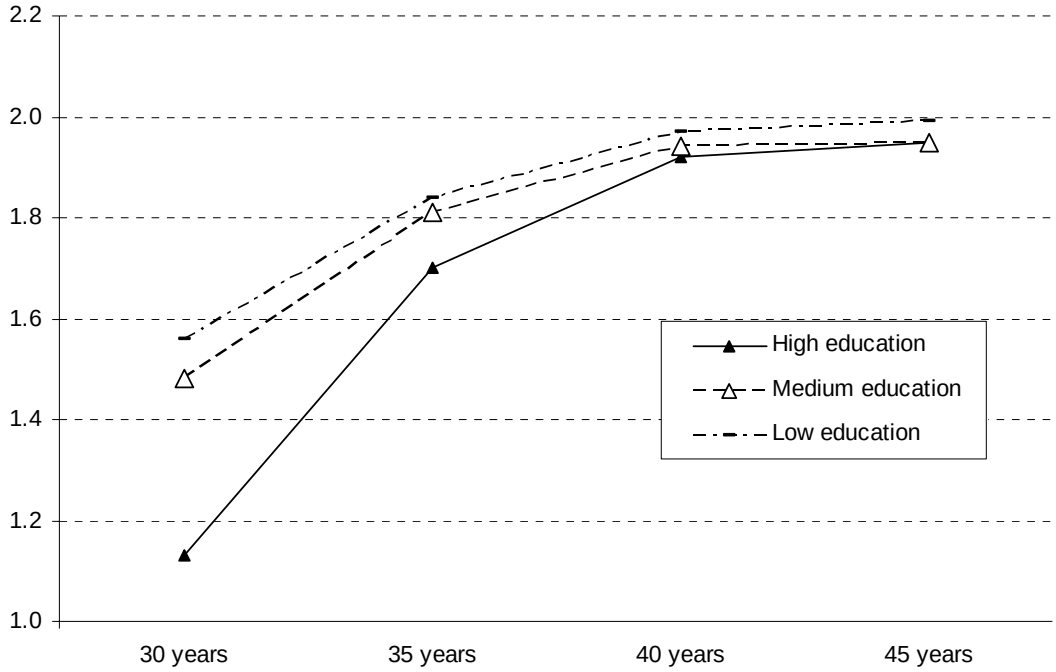
Source: Andersson (2004a)

Figure 4: *Cohort Total Fertility at age 40, female single-year cohorts born in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, 1935-1962*



Source: Andersson et al. 2008

Figure 5: *Cohort total fertility at age 30 and above, by educational level at age 30, women born in Sweden in 1950-54*



Source: Andersson et al. 2008