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Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

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The dissolution of first-birth unions in Sweden[1]

Die Auflösung von Ehen/Partnerschaften mit Kindern

Exploring policy impacts and differences by marital status

Einflüsse familienpolitischer Maßnahmen und Familienstandsunterschiede

Zusammenfassung

Im vorliegenden Artikel wird der Versuch unternommen mehr Licht auf die Zusammenhänge zwischen den familienpolitischen Veränderungen im Bereich Scheidung/Trennung und der zunehmenden Familieninstabilität, die in Schweden von Mitte der sechziger bis zu den frühen neunziger Jahren zu registrieren war. Zu diesem Zweck wurden die Daten des schwedischen Familiensurveys von 1992/93 regressionsanalytisch ausgewertet. Die Ergebnisse belegen sowohl direkte wie auch indirekte Einflüsse familienpolitischer Maßnahmen. Direkte Einflüsse manifestieren sich zum Beispiel im Hinblick auf die gemeinsame elterliche Sorge und die Inanspruchnahme des Erziehungsurlaubs von Vätern. Langzeiteinflüsse von Veränderungen des Scheidungsgesetzes (z.B. Wegfall des Schuld-Paragrafen) scheinen sich dagegen nur sehr begrenzt auf die Familienstabilität auszuwirken. Indirekte familienpolitische Einflüsse lassen sich belegen anhand der Tatsache, dass sich Ausbildungsniveau und beruflicher Status auf die Scheidungs-/Trennungsquoten auswirken. Interessanterweise scheint auch der Familienstand eine Variable zu sein, die sich auf die Stabilität der Partnerbeziehung auswirkt.

Schlagworte: Schweden, Familienpolitik, Familienauflösung (Trennung oder Scheidung), Scheidungsgesetz, elterliche Sorge.

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to shed more light on the relationship between changes in policies around family dissolution and increasing family instability among parents in Sweden from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s. Data extracted from the Swedish Family Survey of 1992/93 are analysed using the method of intensity (hazard) regression. The results suggest both direct and indirect policy effects. Such direct impacts are indicated for joint custody for children and for father's use of parental leave, while the long-term influence of no-fault divorce law

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seems to be very limited on family stability. Indirect policy impacts are seen for the effects of different educational levels and employment statuses on partnership dissolution. Also by marital status interesting differences were found regarding the determinants of parents' relationship stability in Sweden.

Keywords: Sweden, family policy, family dissolution (i.e. divorce or separation), divorce law, custody for children.

1. Background

In the second half of the 20th century, there have been substantial changes in demographic trends in Europe. Sweden has been among the fore-runners in changes in traditional family patterns, as well as changes in traditional gender relations. The latter entails several issues. First of all, it is seen in the high level of female labour-force participation and the proportions of women in higher education. The introduction of individual taxation in 1971 was a strong incentive for married women's gainful employment (Gustafsson, 1992), and a wide range of social services has facilitated the combination of employment and parenthood for both women and men. The public childcare system dates back to the 1960s but has expanded rapidly since the mid-1970s (Gustafsson & Stafford, 1994). In 1974, the parental leave program was introduced, by which fathers can take leave for the care for their children on equal grounds with mothers (Sundström, 1991). In 1980, fathers became entitled to ten days special leave (so-called „daddy days") after the birth of their child. Since the mid-1990s, one month of the 12-month parental leave with 80% income replacement has been reserved for fathers. Also, the policy discourse around gender equality has promoted a more equal participation both in paid work and in family work for women and men (Sainsbury, 1996; Oláh, 1998; Hobson & Bergman, forthcoming).

Sweden also has a long history of liberal divorce legislation and rather high dissolution rates even among families with children (Goode, 1993). The Swedish divorce legislation acknowledged some no-fault grounds as early as 1915, and the remaining fault grounds were eliminated in the divorce law that came into effect in 1974. The reform shortened and simplified the divorce procedure. A waiting period of six months is required only for couples with minor children, or if one of the spouses disagreed on divorce. As the law is based on a „clean break" theory, the parties of the couple are responsible for their own economic support after the family break-up. Thus, spousal alimony is almost non-existent, but property is divided evenly between the former spouses independently of its source (Glendon, 1989). In case of separation from non-marital cohabiting relationships, the property that is divided evenly between the partners is restricted to the family home[2] (and only if it was acquired for the couple's joint living) and to the household goods, while a car,

2 From 1974 onwards, the most needy partner's right to the occupation of the family home at separation from consensual relationships has been acknowledged in the law (Agell, 1989).

financial assets, a summer house, property related to leisure activities, etc. belong to their original owner alone, even if they were used by both partners during the relationship (Agell, 1989)[3]. If a couple has minor children, a non-resident parent is obliged to pay child support. This rule applies to both marriages and cohabiting relationships. In case of non-payment, the state provides the maintenance allowance and tries to recover it from the parent later on (Fine & Fine, 1994).

The rule of joint custody is a question that has been widely debated in Sweden lately, in connection with legal reforms around family dissolution. When a child is born in a marriage, the parents automatically have joint custody. Also, unmarried parents who marry later have joint custody for their children from the date of the marriage. Parents who live in consensual union (i.e. non-marital cohabiting relationship) can have joint custody if they request it in a joint application to the court (since 1977), or to the local tax authority if both parents and the child are Swedish citizens (since 1983), otherwise the mother has sole custody. After divorce or separation, parents retain joint custody for their children according to a rule introduced in mid-1983, unless one of them files for the annulment of joint (legal) custody. Since October 1998[4], the court can decide about continued joint custody according to the child's best interest, even if one of the parents objects[5]. Furthermore, the court can decide with whom the child should live if the parents disagree on this matter, even when the parents have joint custody. As parents usually live in separate households after the family break-up, joint custody means that they have to cooperate[6] in important questions regarding their children, i.e. to agree on their residence, education, sports and other activities, etc. If they prefer, they can also share the physical custody of the children by letting them live with both of the parents for equal periods (SOU, 1995). Although the overwhelming majority of children reside with their mother, the joint custody rule has led to increased involvement in the children by both parents, even after family break-up (Bernhardt, 1996).

Given these important changes in the Swedish legislation on family dissolution and the parallel increase in partnership break-up in recent decades, the question arises whether the changes to no-fault divorce and to continued joint custody influence individuals' union disruption behaviour[7]. As for the former, there is some evidence in the literature for a short-term effect as seen in a temporary surge in the number of divorces following the introduction of the no-fault divorce law (see e.g. Haskey, 1986 for the UK; Nakonezny et al., 1995; Rodgers et al., 1997 for the US; Hoem, 1997 for Sweden), but evidence for long-term effects is less conclusive (for an exception see Poppel & Beer, 1993, who show the lack of such effects for the

3 Another difference as compared to married couples is that a cohabiting partner does not inherit automatically when his/her partner dies, but a will is required (Agell, 1989).

4 Our data however, only cover the period up to 1993.

5 Sole custody is the rule in cases of abuse (including child abuse and abuse of the other parent) and when the parents have extreme difficulties to cooperate.

6 Municipalities offer parents who disagree so-called co-operation talks (i.e. structured discussions on how to resolve issues surrounding custody and access) within the framework of their social services (Saldeen, 1997).

7 Of course, union disruption is a couple issue, that comprises individuals.

Netherlands). As for the latter, custody arrangements were studied for their influence on child well-being (for an overview see e.g. Seltzer, 1991), but we know very little on their effect on disruption behaviour per se. Furthermore, in the Swedish context we should also take into account policies about gender-equal parenting, as the division of childrearing responsibilities within the family is likely to be important for union stability. The purpose of this paper is to shed more light on these issues. I examine the impact of public policies on union disruption among parents in Sweden from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s. I focus on the first-birth union, that is the union in which the first child was born to a couple.

2. Data, method, variables

The empirical analysis in this study is based on data extracted from the Swedish Family and Working Life Survey of 1992/93, conducted by Statistics Sweden. The survey is part of the European Family and Fertility Surveys project, concerted by the Population Activities Unit of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The Swedish survey contains data on 4984 respondents, selected by simple random sampling from each of five cohorts of women born in 1949, 1954, 1959, 1964 and 1969, and three cohorts of men born in 1949, 1959 and 1964. The data provide us with full retrospective histories of partnership formation and dissolution, childbearing, educational and occupational activities, as well as information on childhood family characteristics of the respondents (Granström, 1997).

The working sample for the present study comprises women who have reported one or more marital or non-marital unions and have borne at least one child in a union. As cultural differences are likely to affect family dissolution risks, I have excluded individuals of non-Nordic origin. In order to examine the impact of public policies on first-birth union disruption, I have tried to make the sample as homogenous as possible. Therefore I have also excluded those who have an adopted child in their first-birth union or whose partner had a child from a previous relationship[8], as well as those whose union ended in the same month in which they had their first child, or whose first child died. Thus, my working sample includes 1869 women, of whom 20.5% experienced the disruption of their union before the 16th birthday of their first child.

I use the method of intensity regression to estimate the impact of various factors on the risk of dissolution of first-birth union. In the analysis, I link the number of disruptions of first-birth unions for respondents with certain features and in certain activity statuses to the corresponding number of person-months of exposure[9]. This

8 The Swedish FFS provides us with information on partner's children living in the respondent's (and her/his partner's) household. The partner's other children who have never lived with the respondent are not recorded.

9 The computations are based on exposures in half-month units. We pretend that the interview and all recorded demographic and other events happened at the middle of a calen-

informs us about whether individuals with particular characteristics are more or less likely than other (comparable) women to dissolve their first-birth union. We start the observation at the birth of the first child of our respondents. For unions that are not disrupted by separation (i.e. the event we study here), we cease the observation at 16 years after first birth, at the end of the union caused by the death of the respondent's partner, or at interview, whichever event comes first. The analysis is based on a piecewise-constant proportional-hazards model. We behave as if the disruption intensity is constant over each of the following time intervals in the first child's life[10], but let it vary between intervals: Infancy (up to age 1), toddler years (up to age 3), pre-school years (up to age 6), early and middle school-age years[11] (up to age 12), and teenage years (up to age 16). The Windows-based software „RocaNova", developed at Statistics Sweden, is used for the model fitting. The results, produced as maximum-likelihood estimates of the effect parameters of the model, are presented in the form of relative risks[12].

The main variables of interest are two measures of policy impacts, one at the societal level (*policy period)* and the other at the family level (whether the *father took parental leave* with the first child). The former represents a partitioning of calendar time, while the latter is based on information provided in the data. For the policy period factor I distinguish between three periods denoted by major changes in the legislation around family dissolution: (i) 1964-1973, when divorce was possible both on fault grounds and no-fault grounds; (ii) 1974-mid-1983, when all fault grounds were eliminated and divorce procedure was shortened and simplified; and (iii) mid-1983-1993, when as a general rule parents retained joint custody for children after the union ended.

Further, as we wish to examine the impacts of public policies on union stability, we should control for other factors that have been found to greatly affect family disruption in previous studies. Therefore, I also include the following variables in the analysis: (i) individual characteristics, such as religiosity[13] and the composition

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dar month, while changes in the policy period variable occur at the beginning of a calendar month.

10 Age of the first child is our time variable.

11 In a preliminary analysis I distinguished also between age of school start (up to age 8) and mid-school age years (up to age 12), but they are combined here given their very similar disruption intensities.

12 For each variable we choose a reference category for which the relative risk of union disruption equals 1. The results show whether individuals in the other categories have higher (values above 1.0) or lower (values below 1.0) disruption risk than those in the reference category. For example, a relative risk of 0.7 means that the risk of union break-up for individuals in that category is 30% lower than that of individuals in the reference category.

13 This variable shows the respondent's religious activity level at the time of the interview, which might be a little problematic. Given the age-range of our respondents (i.e. 23-43 years of age at interview) however, there can hardly have been any great changes in their religious activity level during their recorded family career. Respondents who attend church or other religious meetings at least once a month are defined as religiously active.

of the respondent's family in childhood; (ii) maturity at family formation of the respondent as an individual (measured by age at first birth according to educational level at first birth) and as a party in a couple (measured by the interval between the start of the union and the first birth); (iii) union-specific characteristics, such as first-birth-union order[14], marital status, and age of the youngest child; and (iv) human-capital variables which reflect the respondent's labour-market attachment, such as educational attainment and employment status. I use only categorical variables in the analysis[15].

3. Characteristics of first-birth unions by union type

Before we turn to the results of the analysis, I briefly describe some basic characteristics of the three types of first-birth unions in Sweden. Non-marital cohabitation has been very common in Sweden from the 1960s onwards. It first functioned largely as a short prelude to marriage, but since the mid-1970s consensual unions have lasted longer and births have increasingly occurred in such relationships (Hoem & Rennermalm, 1985). In fact, since the mid-1980s the majority of Swedish couples have had their first child while living in consensual union (Hoem, 1996). Most of such couples get married while their children are still young (SCB, 2000). As the prevalence of non-marital cohabitation increased, marriage rates declined in Sweden. The propensity to marry decreased very strongly during the 1970s, and somewhat less sharply during the 1980s[16] and early 1990s. The decline was less pronounced among women with children than among childless women (Andersson, 1998).

In spite of the general shifts in family-formation patterns in Sweden, certain subgroups of the population have been less receptive than others (Hoem, 1995). This is seen even in our simple descriptive statistics (Table 1: Appendix) that reveals great variations in the distribution of respondents with particular characteristics among the three types of first-birth unions. I distinguish between non-marital cohabiting relationships („consensual union"), partnerships which started as cohabiting unions but the couple got married later („marriage preceded by cohabita-

14 The first two groups of factors, first-birth union order and whether the father took parental leave with the first child, have fixed values, while the rest of the variables in the analysis, including current policy period, are time-varying covariates (i.e. their values may change over time and are updated month by month).

15 Thus we use the natural nominal or ordinal grouping of the variables (e.g. religiously active versus not active; primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, higher education for current educational attainment), and grouped versions of continuous variables (e.g. first-birth interval: below 3 years, 3-4 years, 5 or more years).

16 The year of 1989 was, however, an exception to the decreasing propensity to marry. The number of weddings almost trebled in that year alone in response to changes of rules for widow's pension from the following year (for details see Hoem, 1991).

tion“ [17]), and unions where the couple started their co-residential relationship with marriage („direct marriage“).

Table 1. Distribution of Swedish mothers (percentages) in different types of first-birth unions.

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage	all first-birth unions
cohort:				
1949	9.9***	28.2***	54.7***	24.8
1954	20.7**	27.6*	22.3	25.2
1959	27.8	25.3	12.2***	25.1
1964	24.6***	15.4*	7.9***	17.5
1969	17.0***	3.5***	2.9*	7.4
religious activity level:				
active	4.6***	8.1	38.1***	9.3
not active	95.4	91.9	61.9***	90.7
childhood family:				
intact family	76.2	81.8	87.1	80.6
parents divorced	16.1**	11.7	5.0**	12.5
parent died	2.9	3.0	5.0	3.1
other non-intact family	4.8	3.5	2.9	3.8
first-birth union order:				
first union	77.7	85.8	89.9	83.7
second or higher order union	22.3***	14.2*	10.1*	16.3
educational attainment:				
primary	28.9	25.8	25.9	26.7
lower secondary	44.9*	38.8	31.7	40.1
upper secondary	10.1	11.3	12.9	11.1
higher	16.1***	24.1	29.5*	22.1
first-birth interval:				
< 8 months	12.8**	7.5**	15.8***	9.6
8 - 17 months	20.1	17.6	30.9***	19.4
18 - 35 months	31.5	28.2	28.8	29.2
36 - 59 months	17.8**	24.2*	15.1*	21.7
60 + months	17.8	22.5*	9.4***	20.1
age at first birth (conditional on education at first birth):				
very early	16.1	15.8	25.9***	16.6
early	25.8	25.8	23.0	25.6
medium	20.9	23.2	23.0	22.5
late	15.2	17.6	13.7	16.6
very late	22.0*	17.6	14.4	18.7
father took parental leave:				
yes	58.6	55.0	41.0**	55.0
no	37.5	39.9	49.6*	39.9
not eligible	3.9	5.2	9.4**	5.1
N	**546**	**1184**	**139**	**1869**

*** significant at the 1%-level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

17 Some of these marriages were formed before or immediately after the birth of the couple's first child, others were formed later. Since there is no distinction according to the law or the societal moral between children born to married couples and children of unmarried mothers in Sweden, marriages preceded by cohabitation with the same partner are treated in the analysis as a single union type after marriage formation independently of when the marriage occurred (i.e. before or after the first birth).

The descriptive statistics suggests that the first-birth union is usually a direct marriage for women in the older cohorts, for religiously active mothers and for highly educated women in Sweden. Long-term consensual union is the typical form of first-birth union for mothers in the youngest cohorts, for those who are not religiously active, for women whose parents divorced before their 16th birthday, for mothers with lower secondary education, and for those who have their first child in their second (or later) coresidential relationship. In these two types of unions, the interval between the start of the union and the first birth is relatively short, while women in marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to have long first-birth interval (of 3 years or longer). Women in direct marriages have their first child at early ages relative to other women at the same educational level, while those in long-term consensual unions become mothers at relatively higher ages. We also find that fathers are less likely to take parental leave with the first child in direct marriages than in other unions.

How do policies and various other factors influence the disruption of first-birth unions in Sweden? Are there any differences in their impacts, given the diversity in the composition of women with particular features in the different types of first-birth unions? The next section provides us with some answers.

4. Discussion

The results of the analysis (Table 2) suggest some interesting policy effects on union-disruption behaviour in Sweden, but the individual-related factors also proved to be important.

Table 2. Relative risks of dissolution of first-birth union for Swedish women, 1964-1993. Model with individual characteristics, maturity at family formation, union-specific characteristics, human-capital and policy variables. Also absolute risks (per 1000 person-half-months as a mother) by age of first child.

policy period[1]:		*(p = 0.097)*
January 1964 - December 1973	0.94	
January 1974 - June 1983	1	
July 1983 - June 1993	1.30**	
father took parental leave:		*(p = 0.005)*
yes	0.69***	
no	1	
not eligible	1.08	
educational attainment[1]:		*(p = 0.004)*
primary education	1	
lower secondary education	0.71***	
upper secondary education	0.56***	
higher education	0.64***	

Table 2 continued

employment status[t]:		*(p = 0.000)*
full-time work	1	
long part-time work	0.76*	
short part-time work	0.41***	
on parental leave	0.44***	
own household work	0.60***	
unemployed	0.87	
student	1.53*	
other non-employed	0.48**	
childhood family:		*(p = 0.001)*
intact	1	
parents divorced	1.63***	
parent died	0.92	
other non-intact	1.72***	
marital status[t]:		*(p = 0.000)*
consensual union	1.81***	
marriage preceded by cohabitation	1	
direct marriage	0.58**	
first-birth union order:		*(p = 0.001)*
first union	1	
second or higher order union	1.73***	
first-birth interval:		*(p = 0.004)*
< 3 years	1	
3 - 4 years	0.60***	
5 + years	0.80	
age at first birth (conditional on education at first birth):		*(p = 0.000)*
early	1	
medium	0.79*	
late	0.54***	
age of the youngest child[t]:		*(p = 0.064)*
below 1 year	1	
1 - 2 years	1.60*	
3 - 5 years	1.82**	
6 + years	1.49	
only one child in the household	2.04***	
religious activity level:		*(p = 0.449)*
active	0.85	
not active	1	
age of first child (time variable):		*(p = 0.024)*
below 1 year	1.289	
1 - 2 years	1.384	
3 - 5 years	1.287	
6 - 11 years	0.788*	
12 - 15 years	0.762*	
Log likelihood:	-2870.6	
no. of independent parameters:	34	
Null model log likelihood:	-3016.6	

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

[t] Time-varying covariate

Note: For each variable, risks and their significance are given relative to the reference level, indicated by 1 (no decimals). The p-value of the entire factor is given in the row containing the variable name.

Looking at the disruption risks in different *policy periods*, we find that the introduction of one of the world's most liberal divorce laws[18] had relatively little effect on union disruption among families with children, as the risks of family dissolution were very similar in the periods 1964-1973 and 1974-mid-1983. This suggests the lack of long-term effects of the no-fault divorce law on family dissolution behaviour, even though a short-term effect was found also for Sweden in other studies (see Andersson, 1997; Hoem, 1997). However, the introduction of joint custody for children as a main rule after family break-up does seem to influence family disruption. In the period mid-1983-1993, the risk of union dissolution was significantly higher (by 30%) than in the previous decades. Perhaps this is because the new rule gave parents a better chance to remain an active parent, even if the children did not live with them permanently after the family break-up. Parents felt less obligated to stay in a union which they found unsatisfactory. Although the risk of family disruption increased, this is not necessarily negative, as a „good divorce" can be less detrimental for children than living in an intact family with a lot of tensions between the parents (see e.g. Amato et al., 1995; Gähler, 1998; Jekielek, 1998; Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

Furthermore, we see that it is very important for union stability whether the *father took parental leave* after first birth. The risk of union disruption is 30% lower if the father took leave with the first child than otherwise. Although very few fathers share the parental leave equally with their partner, the fact that men use some part of the leave beside the ten „daddy days" may signal that the couple shares other domestic tasks as well,[19] which can strengthen the union. If both parties of a couple have experiences of employment and family work, they can understand each others' problems more easily, no matter whether those are related to paid work or to domestic responsibilities. This in turn will reduce sources of possible conflicts between the partners. Alternatively, fathers' engagement in childrearing might be important for work-oriented mothers as it allows them to return to their job while the children are still too young to be taken care of in public childcare[20].

In addition, we find some indirect policy effects. Let us start with the *educational* level. While in other countries lower-educated mothers usually have lower disruption risk than more highly educated mothers, as was shown for Italy and West Germany (Blossfeld et al., 1995), there are no significant differences in the dissolution risks for mothers with more than primary education in Sweden. In fact, we find here that the disruption risk is significantly lower (by about 30%) for mothers with some education as compared to those with the least education. This can relate to the weaker labour-market position and thus lower earnings of those with primary education, compared to mothers with more schooling. Given the im-

18 Although changes in divorce legislation have no direct implications for the dissolution of consensual unions, we would have expected a bandwagon effect for cohabiting couples in times of radically increasing divorce indices like in the 1970s (see Andersson, 1997).

19 Previous studies have shown that the gap in the gender labour division at home is smaller in Sweden than in other countries (Flood & Klevmarken, 1990; Nermo, 1994).

20 Children of 1.5 years of age and above are eligible for public childcare in Sweden.

portance of having two (at least average) incomes to attain a decent living standard in Sweden, economic problems are probably more frequent in the families of low-educated mothers, which can create tensions and eventually lead to the disruption of the union.

Employment status also points to the importance of policies, particularly that of female employment, for family stability, but from a different perspective. While educational level displays the role of resources on union stability, employment status shows us the impact of time, in terms of how much time and energy women have for their relationships, in certain work categories. As we see, women who study or work full time have the highest risks of union dissolution among mothers in Sweden, followed by mothers in long-part-time work. This can be the result of time pressure these mothers experience. Although women and men share the tasks of the economic provision of the family in Sweden, women are still expected to take the main responsibility for domestic duties and childrearing. This double burden may, however, hamper their abilities to „invest" in the relationship itself which, in turn, increases the risk of union break-up. Short-part-time workers, women on parental leave and other-non-employed mothers have the lowest disruption risks as they can combine different responsibilities more easily than full-time workers or students. Interestingly, the risk of union break-up is higher for housewives than for mothers in the lowest risk categories. This again may refer to the importance of two incomes in families, or to the difficulties of being a housewife in a society that is based on the dual-earner family model.

For the individual-related factors, the results are in line with findings of previous studies. We see that the intergenerational transmission of divorce[21] is also true for Sweden, i.e. children of divorced parents are more likely to dissolve their relationships than those who came from intact families. *Marriage* is another factor of great importance for union stability. Consensual unions are the least stable relationships, direct marriages are the most stable ones, while marriages that occur after cohabitation with the same partner have an intermediary position[22].

Women having been in other unions before their first child was born increases the risk of family disruption, while having the first child after three or four years in a coresidential relationship reduces the risk of family break-up. Those who become mothers at early ages relative to other women at the same educational level have an excess risk of family dissolution[23]. Having more than one child greatly reduces the risk of union disruption, but only while the youngest child is below 3 years of age. That religiosity has very little impact on the disruption of first-birth unions is a surprising finding. It suggests that the Swedish society is probably more secularised than other industrialized countries.

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21 See McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Amato, 1996 for the USA; Kiernan & Cherlin, 1999 for the UK; Diefenbach, 1997 for Germany.

22 See also Thomson & Colella, 1992; Lillard et al., 1995 for the USA; Berrington & Diamond, 1999 for the UK; Bennett et al., 1988 for Sweden; Finnäs, 1996 for Finland.

23 See also Morgan & Rindfuss, 1985; Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989 for the USA; Berrington & Diamond, 1999 for the UK; Hoem & Hoem, 1992 for Sweden; Finnäs, 1996 for Finland.

Since marital status (i.e. living in either type of marriages or consensual unions) has such an important impact on dissolution risk, I ran separate analyses for the three types of unions with the same factors as in the previous model, but now looking at interaction effects between marriage versus consensual union and the other factors[24]. In order to reveal the differences across union types I selected a reference category for which the relative risk equals 1 for all three forms of unions, and looked at the patterns of dissolution risks relative to that category for each union type (see Tables 3-11).

Table 3. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and policy period, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
Jan. 1964 - Dec. 1973	0.81	1.23	0.89
Jan. 1974 - June 1983	1	1	1
July 1983 - June 1993	1.39**	1.15	1.59

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

Table 4. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and whether the father took parental leave, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
father took leave	1	1	1
father did not take leave¤	1.43**	1.44**	2.08

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

¤ Not being eligible for parental leave is also included in this category.

Table 5. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and educational attainment, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
primary education	1	1	1
lower secondary education	0.74*	0.68**	0.38
upper secondary education	0.55**	0.55**	0.80
higher education	0.60**	0.57***	1.87

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

24 Thus I combined marital status and the other factors (one at a time) into a composite factor, and refitted the model with the interactions.

Table 6. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and current employment status, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
full-time work	1	1	1
long part-time work	0.90	0.68*	0.57
short part-time work	0.39***	0.45***	0.16**
on parental leave	0.65*	0.26***	0.23
own household work	0.94	0.38***	0.35
student	1.94**	1.22	1.02
other non-employed#	0.76	0.49*	0.00

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

Unemployed is included in the other non-employed category.

Table 7. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and childhood family, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
intact family	1	1	1
parents divorced	1.29	2.28***	0.87
parent died	0.82	0.85	2.45
other non-intact family	1.43	2.21**	0.00

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

Table 8. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and first-birth union order, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
first union	1	1	1
second or higher order union	1.63***	1.84***	2.47

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

Table 9. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and first-birth interval, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
< 3 years	1	1	1
3 - 4 years	0.56***	0.65**	0.36
5 + years	0.66	0.91	1.53

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

Table 10. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and age at first birth, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
early age at first birth	1	1	1
medium age at first birth	0.75	0.79	1.62
late age at first birth	0.49***	0.62**	0.56

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

Table 11. Relative risk of dissolution of first-birth union, by marital status and age of the youngest child, for Swedish women, 1964-1993

	consensual union	marriage preceded by cohabitation	direct marriage
below 1 year	0.57*	0.48**	0.00**
1 - 2 years	0.79	0.83	0.44
3 - 5 years	0.74	1.04	0.23*
6 + years	0.63	0.76	0.68
only one child	1	1	1

*** significant at the 1% -level, ** at 5%, * at 10%

The detailed analysis provides us with further insights on family disruption. While the introduction of no-fault divorce had no significant impact on the break-up of either type of union, the joint-custody rule is found to be important mainly for consensual unions. The disruption risk did not increase significantly in either type of marriage, but it increased in non-marital cohabiting relationships in the third period. Perhaps the uncertainty around the possibility of remaining part of the child's life was larger for non-resident parents after a separation from consensual relationships than from marriages before the joint-custody rule was introduced. This may have caused unmarried parents to remain in their consensual relationships even when they found them unsatisfactory, because of the fear of losing contact with their children.

Fathers' active participation in parenting, in terms of taking parental leave, seems to be important for union stability in marriages preceded by cohabitation and in consensual unions, but not in direct marriages. This suggests a selection effect. Women in direct marriages are probably more family oriented and more conservative than other women, thus they are more likely to accept the traditional gender distribution of family responsibilities where childrearing and domestic duties are women's domain.

Economic resources, as seen in educational attainment, seem to matter very little for the stability of direct marriages, while we find significantly lower disruption risks for those with more than primary education for the other union types. The amount of time mothers can invest in family life in terms of taking care of their partners and children is, however, very important for all three forms of first-birth unions. Short-part-time employed have much lower risk of union dissolution than full-time working mothers.

The individual-related factors which were shown to be important for the stability of first-birth unions had little impact on disruption risks in direct marriages. For this union type, only the age of the youngest child has proved to be important.

The differences in the range of determinants of union stability across union types suggest that those who marry directly are an increasingly selective group in Swedish society. They are more likely to follow traditional norms and to have more traditional values than the rest of the society, and they may thus be more reluctant to dissolve their partnership, even if it does not meet their expectations. Individuals in marriages preceded by cohabitation are a much more heterogeneous group. Many of them are likely to have a higher propensity to disrupt their first-birth unions than those in direct marriages, as they have less traditional values. This can explain why we find a higher dissolution risk in this group, taken as a whole. Consensual unions that have not been converted into marriages are the least stable relationships, and seem to include individuals who are less committed to the institution of the family, or to their partners, but they are nevertheless committed to their children.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have examined the relationship between increasing union instability among families with children and changes in policies around family dissolution in Sweden, controlling for a number of other factors. In the context of high female-employment rates and no spousal alimony after union break-up, I have found very little impact of changes to no-fault divorce on parents' family dissolution behaviour. This also indicates that a more restrictive divorce legislation, which is frequently suggested in public discourse, would have only a temporary effect, if any, on family stability. On the other hand, child custody rules seem to be important for parents' union dissolution behaviour, especially in consensual unions. When unions broke up before the joint-custody rule, non-custodial parents were probably more likely to lose contact with their children than were parents who left a marriage.

The finding that the father's use of parental leave reduces the risk of union disruption suggests that the emphasis on gender equality in contemporary Swedish policy making can strengthen the family in the long run. As the „dual-earner" family model has become more and more dominant in Sweden, the importance of the division of domestic responsibilities between the partners has increased. Parents who share the tasks of economic provision, childrearing, and household work more equally have more stable unions than others as the sources of potential conflicts are also reduced in such unions.

Furthermore, the low dissolution risks for mothers with more than a primary education, who thus have a better earning capacity than low-educated women, suggest that women's role as economic providers is widely accepted in the Swedish society. In this respect, Swedish policies have been successful. Gender equality

is, however, not yet achieved, given the high dissolution risk for mothers who study or work full time. Women are still expected to take the lion's share in child-drearing and household tasks, and those who have less time for family work because of other responsibilities have to face more conflicts in their relationship, which can lead to family disruption.

Although policies influence family stability in several respects, individual-related factors remain very important. To apply a somewhat complex research design (taking into account individual and institutional factors as well as policy context) might thus be a useful research strategy for studies on the dynamics of family behaviour in modern societies.

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Appendix

Table A: Age at first birth, conditional on educational level at first birth. Swedish women.

Age			age-groups	accor-ding to	education	at first birth		
	compulsory educa-tion		low vocational school		gymnasium		post-gymnasium	
	ages in years	per cent	ages in years	per cent	ages in years	per cent	ages in years	per cent
very early	15 - 18	19.0	17 - 20	14.9	18 - 21	12.0	21 - 24	19.3
early	19 - 20	23.8	21 - 22	28.4	22 - 23	26.1	25 - 26	22.5
medium	21 - 22	23.8	23 - 24	21.6	24 - 26	26.6	27 - 28	20.6
late	23 - 24	15.5	25 - 26	17.4	27 - 28	15.0	29 - 30	17.4
very late	25 +	17.9	27 +	17.7	29 +	20.3	31 +	20.2
Total	499		749		207		414	
per cent of total N (1869)		26.7		40.1		11.1		22.1