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*Jani Turunen*

## Entering a stepfamily: Children's experience of family reconstitution in Sweden 1970-2000

### **Eintritt in die Stieffamilie – Die Erfahrungen von Kindern mit Familienrekonstitution in Schweden zwischen 1970 und 2000**

**Abstract:**

In this article, I use the Swedish Level of Living Survey data to study children's experience of family reconstitution, or the first formation of stepfamily in Sweden 1970 to 2000. I set out to analyze relative risks for acquiring a stepparent for boys and girls of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, here measured as parent's educational attainment. The results show no educational differences in the stepfamily formation process. There are however clear gender differences in the family reconstitution process where the likelihood of gaining a stepparent varies by the child's gender. Other factors that have effect on the child's likelihood of entering the first stepfamily are the time lived with a single parent as well as the child's age in interaction with the child's sex. Although there are no educational differentials in stepfamily formation, one needs to account for the social gradient in the processes leading to children being in the risk pool. Particularly children of higher educated parents have a significantly lower risk of being born out of union or experiencing a parental union dissolution and thus being exposed to the risk of entering a stepfamily.

**Zusammenfassung:**

In diesem Beitrag werden die Daten des schwedischen Level of Living Survey verwendet, um die Erfahrungen von Kindern mit der Familienrekonstitution, genauer: mit der ersten Formierung einer Stieffamilie in Schweden zwischen den Jahren 1970 und 2000 zu untersuchen. Zu Beginn wird das Risiko analysiert, einen Stiefelternteil zu bekommen und zwar für Jungen und Mädchen unterschiedlichen Alters und sozioökonomischen Hintergrunds, wobei letzterer anhand des Bildungsniveaus der Eltern gemessen wird. Die Ergebnisse zeigen hinsichtlich des Bildungsniveaus keine Unterschiede im Prozess der Gründung von Stieffamilien auf. Es bestehen jedoch eindeutige Unterschiede zwischen den Geschlechtern, da die Neigung, einen Stiefelternteil zu bekommen, je nach Geschlecht des Kindes variiert. Andere Faktoren, die ebenfalls Einfluss auf die Eintrittsrate in eine Stieffamilie haben, sind: die Zeitdauer, die ein Kind mit einem alleinerziehenden Elternteil gelebt hat als auch das Alter des Kindes in Wechselwirkung mit dessen Geschlecht. Obwohl die Bildung keinen Einfluss auf die Rate des Eintritts in eine Stieffamilie hat, muss man beachten, dass es ein soziales Gefälle bei den Prozessen gibt, die dazu führen, dass Kinder sich im Risikopool derjenigen befinden, die überhaupt in eine Stieffamilie eintreten können. Insbesondere Kinder höher gebildeter Eltern haben ein signifikant geringeres Risiko außerhalb einer Partnerschaft geboren zu werden oder die Trennung oder Scheidung der Eltern zu erleben und sind somit seltener im Risikopool der-

jenigen zu finden, die in eine Stieffamilie eintreten können.

**Key words:** stepfamily, stepparent, stepfamily formation, family reconstitution, re-marriage, Swedish Level of Living Survey.

**Schlagwörter:** Stieffamilie, Stiefelternteil, Bildung einer Stieffamilie, Familienrekonstitution, Wiederverheiratung, schwedischer Level of Living Survey

## 1. Introduction

Complex family forms like stepfamilies are not a new phenomenon but something that has changed form during the past few decades. Whereas the commonality of stepfamilies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were mainly due to high death rates, the reason for the re-emergence of family form complexity in the Western industrialized world since the 1960's is a change in family behavior. The constellation of changes, often called the Second Demographic Transition, includes increasing non-marital childbearing as well as separation and divorce, all of which produce a larger pool of children who may live part of their childhood in a stepfamily setting.

McLanahan (2004) claims that the Second Demographic Transition has led to growing socioeconomic differentials for children's experience of family life. American children experience two different trajectories. Children of highly educated parents gain by having older, more educated parents with higher incomes and more time for them as well as more stable unions. Children from lower socio-economic groups, on the other hand, are more likely to be born out of union, experience divorce as well as have younger parents with lower incomes and less time for their children. McLanahan shows further that educational differences in mothers' age, employment, single motherhood as well as fathers' time spent with children have increased over time in the U.S.

Although family patterns in the U.S. tend to be extreme in comparison to those in other affluent countries (McLanahan 2004; Andersson 2002), McLanahan provides some indication that socio-economic differences in children's family lives are also found outside the United States, including Sweden. Differences tend to be smaller, perhaps reflecting lower levels of social and economic inequality (Gottschalk/Smeeding 1999; Brandolini/Smeeding 2006). And it is not clear whether the differences that are found in other countries represent 'diverging destinies,' i.e., whether socio-economic differences were larger in the 1990s than during earlier periods. Because income inequality has increased to some degree in all affluent countries (Gottschalk/Smeeding 1999; Brandolini/Smeeding 2006), McLanahan's thesis may be applicable to other national contexts.

McLanahan's focus is mainly on educational differentials in children's access to a biological two-parent family and the resources in parental engagement and money that it brings. Other family dynamics that affect children's access to resources may, however, be affected by growing inequality. The dynamics of stepfamilies and parental repartnering is one potential factor that may ameliorate the effects of a loss of resources and offer a way out of single parenthood. Having another adult in the household increases household income and reduces the workload for the parent, freeing up time. It can also increase the child's access to, and support of, another adult even when the stepparent doesn't assume a

formal parenting role. One could also argue that a stepparent may take time from the parent that would otherwise have been spent with the child (Thomson et al. 2001), while at the same time not providing any additional time from the stepparent whose primary interest is the new partner and not the children.

In this paper I will investigate whether Swedish children from different socio-economic backgrounds experience different chances of entering a stepfamily, or in other words, acquiring a stepparent. Stepfamily formation is an aspect of Swedish family dynamics where very little attention has been given to socio-economic differences with only a few previous parent-level studies. A possible 'diverging destinies' scenario with a growing gap between groups of children losing or gaining from the development of the last few decades motivates a closer examination of the stepfamily formation process from a child perspective.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Based on previous work by Becker (1991), Goldscheider and Waite (1986) and Oppenheimer (1988), de Graaf and Kalmijn (2003) present a general theory of repartnering based on need, attractiveness and opportunity.

First, people form unions because they have a need for something that the union can bring. It can be emotional, social, sexual or economic. It can also be a need to have children. A new partner can bring support, companionship, intimacy and financial security as well as a chance to form a family. All though the need to have children is likely to be smaller when repartnering and forming a stepfamily than in first union formation because at least one of the partners already has children. The greater the need for these is, the more likely one is to form a union.

Need may differ for men and women. Women have lower labor force participation, have on average lower incomes and work more part-time than men (Blossfeld/Hakim 1997). Part-time work is especially common for women with children (Sundström 1997). They should therefore have greater financial need for repartnering than do men. Women more often have custody of children after a divorce or separation, increasing not only financial need but also need for another adult in the household to help with household tasks and childrearing.

Second, the likelihood of repartnering depends on how attractive a person is. Attractiveness can of course be physical but also social and economic. A person with a stable and well-paying job may be more attractive than an unemployed person and a highly educated person more attractive than someone with only basic education. Having children may also affect a person's attractiveness. Children from previous relationships may make a person less attractive on the repartnering market because a potential partner can expect the child to be a financial burden and a competitor for attention and affection from the parent-partner. The child may also bring other complications like increased contact with the previous partner who is the child's parent, or diffuse roles within the new stepfamily (see Cherlin 1978). Therefore, the number of children should have a negative relationship with the likelihood of repartnering. Especially co-residence could be argued to make a parent less attractive than if the children mainly reside with the other parent. Young chil-

dren may be more attractive for a prospective stepparent who might expect less conflict with a young child than an adolescent. It may also be easier to form a more parent-like relationship to a stepchild if the stepfamily is formed during the young childhood.

There are also gender differences in the effect of children on parents' attractiveness on the partnership market. Women may be viewed as less able to 'mother' a stepchild than men could 'father' a stepchild, because being a mother implies a deeper and more active role with stronger ties to the child than being a father, a role that could more easily be handled by an 'outsider' (for discussion of mother and stepmother role expectations see Weaver/Coleman 2005; Hays 1996). Related to this is that children more often reside with the mother after a separation or divorce. So men who like children might be more interested in partnering with a woman who has children than it would be the case when the woman considers a male partner. On the other hand, women with children might prefer men who are fathers because it reflects the man's experience with, and interest in, children. Having children might also make a man more attractive in cases where the prospective female partner is older and childless but still would like to have a family. The sex of the child may also affect the attractiveness of the parent on the repartnering market. Dahl and Moretti (2008) have shown that parents in the U.S. have a preference for sons and Andersson and colleagues (2006) have shown that Swedish, Danish and Norwegian parents have a preference for girls whereas Finnish parents prefer boys. Both these studies deal with biological children and the demand for stepchildren may be different but suggest that the gender of the child might be a factor worth also being taken into account when analyzing the attractiveness of a parent on the repartnering market.

Third, regardless of one's need for a partner and one's attractiveness on the repartnering market, it is necessary to actually have the opportunity to find a person to form a union with. Meeting, dating and getting to know someone well enough to form a union with him or her requires time. The more opportunities to meet new partners one has, the higher the likelihood of forming a new union. Childrearing requires time and limits one's possibilities to take part in typical activities where one might meet potential partners. The opportunity argument probably plays a larger role in repartnering than in first union formation, especially when having children from previous unions. People forming stepfamilies are generally older and less active in typical partnering market activities and institutions like schools. The repartnering market is also likely to be less effective because there are fewer single people at higher ages. Besides the age of the parent, the age of the children may also relate to the parent's opportunity to find a partner. Younger children require more time and attention from the parent thus reducing opportunities to find a new partner but, on the other hand, increasing the need to have another adult in the household to share responsibilities. Other factors affecting one's opportunities to meet a new partner include family size and market work. Working increases one's social network and daily contact with other adults, so the opportunity to find a partner should arguably be greater for someone who works than for a homemaker or an unemployed person. Working of course reduces one's financial need, so paid work is likely to affect repartnering likelihood in both directions. Because women, on average, participate less in paid work and work more part time than men (Blossfeld/Hakim 1997) their work-related mating opportunities should be smaller. Family size should have a negative relationship with repartnering opportunity for the simple reason that more children require more time.

Need, attractiveness and opportunity to re-partner should also vary between countries with different welfare state settings and social policies. Social policies and financial transfers, directed towards single parents in particular but also towards parents in general, primarily help to reduce the financial need of single parents. Laws regulating post-divorce alimony are another cross-country difference that reduce the financial need but may also discourage people to re-partner or at least re-marry since the right to alimony is usually conditional on one's post-divorce marital status. Laws regulating child support and its enforcement also affect the need to repartner. A major factor, which reduces financial need, differing between countries, is female labor force participation.

Even though social policies mainly affect the need for a partner by providing single parents with resources, the same policies should also affect the attractiveness of single parents on the repartnering market. A single parent is more attractive to a prospective partner in a society where a stepparent is not expected to take as much financial responsibility for the children from the partner's previous unions than for one's biological children.

The opportunity to partner is likely to be least affected by the welfare state setting which will be discussed in the following.

## 2.1 The Swedish case

Sweden is famous for having a generous welfare state with high levels of economic equality (see for example Gottschalk/Smeeding 1997) as well as a high level of gender equality and female labor force participation (Sundström 1997). During the research period covered by this paper, the female labor force participation has risen from around 60% in 1970 to just about 80% in 1993 whereas the male labor force participation has fallen from almost 90% to about 80%. Part-time work is, however, common for women in Sweden with 41% of women working part-time in 1993 as compared to only 9% of men. Part-time work is especially common among women in childbearing ages (Sundström 1997).

In the Swedish case where female labor force participation is high, the financial need for Swedish women is likely to be lower than for women in countries where most women exit the labor market when having children. Andress and colleagues (2006) have shown that Sweden has high gender equality with respect to post-separation incomes and in their study the economic consequences of a separation were small and there were no significant gender differences. Labor force participation also works in the other direction by increasing women's social network and providing more opportunities to meet a new partner.

Sweden has for a long time had family policies designed to minimize the economic differentials in family life. The extensive social policies directed towards parents and children include long paid parental leave with job protection for working parents (80 percent pay up to a cap for 13 months); monthly child allowance; means-tested housing allowance; free education (including tertiary); subsidized, high quality and widely available child care and after-school activities for primary school children, among other things. All these benefits are independent of the parent's union status and in most cases general and not means-tested, with the exception of the housing allowance (Andress et al. 2006; Oláh/Bernhardt 2008; Sundström 1991). The economic consequences of a separation are

therefore less severe in Sweden where these family policies reduce the cost of ending a dysfunctional union and at the same time reduce single parent's economic need of re-partnering. It can also be argued that Swedish policies should, in general, create less difference in the family behaviour of different social groups than in countries with less extensive family policies.

Shared custody of children after separation, both in legal and physical terms, is also increasingly common in Sweden (Schiratzki, 1999; Lundström, 2009). Joint physical custody frees up time and increases the opportunity to re-partner during the days when the child is staying with the other parent. A majority of children do, however, reside most of the time with their mothers (Lundström, 2009), giving the fathers more opportunity for repartnering than mothers. The commonality of shared physical custody and father involvement in post-separation childrearing may also affect the attractiveness of Swedish men. As stated above, a person bringing a child to a new relationship – with all the complications that might entail – is likely to be less attractive on the repartnering market than a childless person. A man with shared custody of a child should therefore be less attractive than a father who is completely non co-resident. A person who shares the custody of the child with the former partner might however be more attractive than someone who has full custody and whose child co-resides with him. Given the commonality of shared physical custody of children after a separation in Sweden, the gender difference in post-separation attractiveness should be smaller in Sweden than in countries where shared post-separation custody is rare.

### 3. Stepfamilies in Sweden

In his international comparison Andersson (2002) shows that between 78 and 38 percent of the children will have lived in a stepfamily setting 10 years after a parental union disruption, with the US having the highest proportion and Poland the lowest. 62 percent of Swedish children who have experienced a union dissolution will have lived with a stepparent by age 15. For children born to single mothers, 52% will have had experience of stepfamily formation by age 9 in Sweden and 65% in the United States. A large share of these family formations do, however, take place during the first year of the child's life and can be assumed to be formed by the biological parents rather than a mother and a stepfather (Andersson 2002).

In a cross-sectional study Jonsson (2001) shows that 6 percent of Swedish children live in a stepfamily setting with a mother and stepfather and 1 percent with a father and a stepmother. These data exclude children who lived in a stepfamily at some earlier point but not at the time of the survey and thus underestimate children's experience of stepfamily life.

Neither the study by Andersson (2002) nor the one by Jonsson (2001) take socio-economic factors such as educational attainment into account. Neither do Bumpass and colleagues (1995) who have shown racial differences in American children's likelihood of ever being in a stepfamily where non-Hispanic whites have a markedly lower likelihood than do African Americans, not controlling for other class characteristics.

There are some previous studies examining stepfamily formation in Sweden. In a cross-sectional analysis of Swedish and US data Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2001) show that there is a positive relationship between earned income and the likelihood of men being stepfathers in the United States and to an even greater extent in Sweden. The effect of earnings is stronger on marriage and biological fatherhood, suggesting that stepfatherhood is less financially selected and less of a commitment for the man. This finding could also be interpreted as the mother having lower demands or less bargaining power when finding a stepfather as compared to when looking for someone to form a biological family with. The fact that earnings have a stronger effect on family formation in Sweden also implies that Swedish men allocate more of their earnings to families than do Americans, even though government support for families with children are higher. An alternative interpretation is that mothers in Sweden expect a prospective partner and stepfather to have a higher income. There is, however, also evidence from longitudinal analysis of stepfamily formation for income being unrelated with becoming a stepfather in the United States. Instead the study shows that education has a negative relationship with American men's likelihood of becoming a stepparent (Goldscheider/Sassler, 2006).

Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2001) also show a negative relationship between educational attainment and being a stepfather as well as a biological father in Sweden and the US, with highly educated men being more likely to remain single as compared to forming a family than are men with low education. The effect is, however, weaker than the effect of earnings and in Sweden only significant for men in cohabiting stepfamilies. This suggests that, although fatherhood pushes men to earn more, men with high education avoid family roles, especially when the latter are confronted with a stepfamily setting (see also Oláh et al. 2002). The educational differentials in men's likelihood of becoming stepparents are much larger in the United States than in Sweden, meaning that highly educated American men avoid stepparenthood to a much larger extent than Swedes do (Bernhardt/Goldscheider, 2001; Oláh et al. 2002). A negative effect of education on stepparenthood is absent for American women, meaning that highly educated American women do not avoid stepparenthood like men do (Goldscheider/Sassler, 2006). Lampard and Peggs (1999) have shown that in Britain higher socio-economic status, measured as occupational class, increases the likelihood of becoming a stepparent.

There is evidence for clear gender differences in the stepfamily formation process. Women are far more likely to have co-resident children after a separation than men and less likely to form a stepfamily. In their longitudinal study of stepfamily formation in Sweden, Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2002) show that women with co-resident children are less likely to enter a union than are those who don't live with children. They are, however, more likely to form a stepfamily together with a man who also has co-resident children than to remain single. Single men are less likely to have co-residential children than women, but the men who are single dads have a higher likelihood of forming a stepfamily than to remain single. Unlike for single mothers, there is no difference in the likelihood of a father entering a union with a woman who has or does not have children of her own (Bernhardt/ Goldscheider, 2002). This means that children are an impediment for women on the repartnering market but not for men.



## 4. Data

For this study I have used data from the Swedish Level of Living Study (the Swedish abbreviation is LNU). The LNU was first conducted in 1968 and replicated in 1974, 1981, 1991 and 2000. It is a nationally representative survey with a 1/1000 sample of the Swedish population in ages 15-75 (18-75 since 1991) and contains a longitudinal component while adding random samples of new respondents in the age range to create a new cross-section of the population at each time. In the 1991 and 2000 surveys, union and childbearing histories of the respondents were added enabling analysis of family change over time. For this reason, data from these last two waves have been used in this study.

I have used the child as the unit of analysis and restricted the analysis to children born to Swedish-born parents between 1970 and 2000 who are observed after a non-union birth or after parental separation at less than 16 years of age. Immigrants have been excluded because their full union histories cannot be observed in the data and because immigrant's family patterns are quite different with respect to cohabitation and separation and there are not enough cases in the data to test interactions with immigrant status. This leaves a sample of 1277 children in 780 family clusters. Half of the children are girls and half boys. The respondents are 785 Swedish born-parents of whom 435 are women and 350 men. The sample includes both children co-residing with the responding parent as well as those living partly or entirely with the other parent.

### 4.1 Modelling and Method

The model is on the child level with the child as the unit of analysis rather than a control variable, which is usually the case when studying repartnering. The method used is discrete-time event history analysis with robust standard errors adjusting for clustered observations (more than one child per respondent). A child is considered to be exposed to risk if it is either born out of a union, has a deceased biological parent or has experienced a parental separation. The term "union" includes both marriage and cohabiting unions. More children in Sweden are born in cohabiting unions than in marriage and very few are born to single mothers (Andersson, 2002; Kennedy/Thomson, 2010).

It is not possible to tell from the data whether a union formed by a single parent is with the child's biological parent or a stepparent. In cases where the child has a non-co-resident parent at birth but experience parent's residential union during the first year of life, the partner is assumed to be the child's biological parent and the child is considered an in-union birth. This means, of course, that some of the children who are assigned in-union status at birth were in fact children of single parents who formed a new union before the child was one year old. The model may therefore underestimate the duration of living with a single parent but the error is not likely to be large. The same method has been used by Kennedy and Thomson (2010), Heuveline and colleagues (2003) and Bumpass and colleagues (1995).

The time during which each child is exposed to risk of entering a stepfamily is measured in months starting at month of birth for children born out of a union and at month of parental separation or parental death for children born in a union. Children who have ex-

perceived parental death are so few that they are analyzed together with those who have experienced a parental separation. Observations are censored when a child reach age 16 or at the month of the interview, whichever occurs first. 633 children were censored. The data has a total of 70872 months of observation. Models are estimated separately for mothers and fathers as well as for both sexes combined. There is no information about the children's post-separation residential histories in the data set but – because most children live with their mothers – estimating models separately by mothers and father give proxy models for residential and non-residential stepfamily formation.

Furthermore, I have used logistic regression in an additional analysis in order to assess the risk of being in the original study population, meaning: being less than 16 years of age, having been born out of a union, having a deceased parent or having experienced parental union dissolution before reaching the age of 16 years. This was done in order to analyze whether selection by educational background happens when the child first comes under risk of stepfamily formation rather than in the family reconstitution process. The results of this analysis are presented in the Appendix.

## 4.2 Measures

The dependent or the event variable is the formation of a stepfamily, here defined as the parent of the child who is the adult respondent in the survey getting married or beginning cohabitation, thus bringing a new adult into the child's life on a more permanent basis than dating. The stepfamily can be formed by either a parent co-residing with the child, in most cases the mother – or an absent parent, in most cases the father. This means that the child in fact is under risk of entering two stepfamilies. The baseline duration parameter is time under risk of stepfamily formation: less than two years, two to four years, five to nine years and ten to fifteen years. Children born out of union are considered under risk at birth, whereas children born to married or cohabiting parents are considered under risk at separation or divorce or at parental death. Education is a time-constant categorical variable: less than secondary school, secondary school (Swedish "gymnasium") and tertiary education. It is measured at the time when the child first came under risk of stepfamily formation. There is also a control variable for the parent's educational status at the time when the child became under risk.

The child's age at exposure to risk is also a four-categorical variable: less than three years, three to four years, five to nine years and ten to fifteen years of age. The age is combined with the sex of the child in an interaction term for sex and age at exposure to risk. There is also a control for number of siblings, half or full, with three categories: no siblings, one sibling and two or more siblings at time of exposure to risk.

The parent's union status at the birth of the child is controlled for with a three category variable with the following categories: born out of union, born in the parent's first or second or higher order co-residential union. Finally, there is a period control for the decade (1970s, 1980s or 1990s/year 2000) in which the child came under risk of stepfamily formation.

*Table 1:* Descriptive statistics: Independent variables

Variable	Percent
<b>Parent's highest finished education</b>	
Less than secondary	36
Secondary	39
Tertiary	17
	8
<b>Parent's union status at birth</b>	
Born in first union	65
Born in second union	19
Born out of union	16
<b>Years lived with single parent</b>	
< 2	31
2-4	32
5-9	25
10-15	12
<b>Number of siblings</b>	
No siblings	30
1 sibling	43
2 or more siblings	27
<b>Decade of exposure to risk</b>	
1970s	16
1980s	33
1990s/2000	51
<b>Child's sex</b>	
Boy	50
Girl	50
<b>Child's age at exposure to risk</b>	
<3	41
3-4	16
5-9	27
10-15	16

Source: LNU, 1991 and 2000 waves, author's calculations.

## 5. Findings

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the full sample of children who were at risk of entering a stepfamily at some point before age 16. Of all the children in the sample, a majority of 57% had entered a stepfamily before age 16 with the percentage of girls higher than for boys. If we instead look at differences in the percentage of children entering a stepfamily by parent's sex we can see that 64% of the children whose fathers were the survey respondents had gained a stepparent, whereas only 52% of the children of female respondents (see Table 1).

*Table 2:* Descriptive statistics: Dependent variable, Children ever in a stepfamily

<b>Percent of children ever in a stepfamily at age 15 by sex of child.</b>		
<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Both sexes</b>
60%	55%	57%
<b>Percent of children ever in a stepfamily at age 15 by parent's sex.</b>		
<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Both sexes</b>
64%	52%	57%
<b>Percent of children ever in a stepfamily at age 15 by parent's highest education at child's first exposure to risk.</b>		
<b>Less than secondary</b>	40%	
<b>Secondary</b>	56%	
<b>Tertiary</b>	47%	
<b>Education unknown</b>	55%	

Source: LNU, 1991 and 2000 waves, author's calculations.

Table 2 also shows the relationship between the child ever being in a stepfamily by age 15 and the highest completed education of the parent at the time when the child first came under risk of stepfamily entry, i.e. out of-union birth or separation. The percentage of children entering stepfamily varies between 40% and 56%, but without any clear gradient and with the highest proportion among the children of parents with secondary education.

Table 3 shows the results of the event history model for stepfamily entry. The model shows no educational gradient and none of the education variables are nearly statistically significant. The model has also been estimated with an interaction term between educational level and period. A test showed that it only increased the goodness of fit of the model for male respondents. Due to the small sample size the interaction category for children of male respondents with tertiary education, who came under risk of stepfamily formation in the 1980s, became 28 times larger than the comparison category. The results are not presented in this paper. The other socioeconomic variable, parent's employment status at child's first exposure to risk, does not show any significant association with stepfamily formation.

One of the differences that do exist is that the risk of stepfamily entry decreases with time spent with a single parent, with the first two years being the most intensive period. The odds of entry fall by half in the following three-year period and are halved again for the period between five and nine years. After 10 years of living with a single parent, the likelihood of stepfamily formation is very low. One reason for the higher risk in the first years is, of course, that many parental unions break up because one of the parents already has met a new partner with whom s/he is forming a stepfamily.

Table 3: Relative odds of child entering a stepfamily.

Variable	All children		Children of male respondents		Children of female respondents	
	Odds ratio	P-value	Odds ratio	P-value	Odds ratio	P-value
<b>Parent's highest finished education</b>						
Less than secondary	1		1		1	
Secondary	1.03	0.905	0.93	0.877	1.28	0.503
Tertiary	1.03	0.946	1.45	0.507	0.92	0.85
<b>Parent's union status at birth</b>						
First union	1		1		1	
Second union	0.47	0.007	0.37	0.034	0.43	0.016
Born out of union	1.03	0.930	3.82	0.022	0.39	0.026
<b>Parent's employment status</b>						
Unemployed	1		1		1	
Employed	0.79	0.360	1.44	0.517	0.722	0.297
<b>Years lived with single parent</b>						
< 2	1		1		1	
2-4	0.48	0.003	0.39	0.013	0.56	0.084
5-9	0.23	0.000	0.19	0.001	0.30	0.001
10-15	0.02	0.000	0.01	0.000	0.02	0.000
<b>Number of siblings</b>						
No siblings	1		1		1	
1 sibling	1.30	0.292	1.46	0.346	1.56	0.187
2 or more siblings	0.81	0.498	1.89	0.259	0.65	0.283
<b>Decade of exposure to risk</b>						
1970s	1		1		1	
1980s	0.42	0.014	0.24	0.028	0.47	0.060
1990s/2000	0.05	0.000	0.01	0.000	0.07	0.000
<b>Interaction sex-age</b>						
Girl <3	1		1		1	
Girl 3-4	0.58	0.127	0.54	0.237	0.53	0.206
Girl 5-9	0.30	0.002	0.38	0.130	0.23	0.002
Girl 10-15	0.13	0.000	0.08	0.000	0.13	0.001
Boy <3	0.52	0.020	0.35	0.032	0.57	0.121
Boy 3-4	0.49	0.030	0.27	0.011	0.61	0.302
Boy 5-9	0.23	0.000	0.48	0.187	0.12	0.000
Boy 10-15	0.19	0.000	0.28	0.084	0.09	0.001

Source: LNU, 1991 and 2000 waves, author's calculations.

The chances of stepfamily entry also decrease with the age of the child at the time s/he first was exposed to risk. The children who were less than three years of age at the time they first lived with a single parent are those with the highest likelihood of acquiring a stepparent. Children older than 10 years of age at the time of first family dissolution have a much lower likelihood of stepfamily entry than the youngest children do. This might be an effect of stepparents regarding parents of small children as more attractive partners since it is easier to build a strong parent-like relationship to a small child. Small children are also more time-consuming and a single parent might have a higher need of a partner to share daily tasks and provide support when the child is younger. Small children's being

time-consuming does, on the other hand, reduce the opportunity to meet a new partner. The age of the child is also correlated with the age of the parent and young parents are more attractive on the relationship market than are older ones. This is especially true for women whereas it may be easier for middle-aged fathers to form a new family.

The sex of the child shows a strong preference for girls with boys having much lower odds of stepfamily entry. This is in accordance with earlier findings by Andersson and colleagues (2006) on gender preferences for biological children that show a preference, albeit very small, for girls in Sweden. When we look at the interaction of the child's sex and age we see that the difference in likelihood of stepfamily entry between boys and girls decreases with age. Girls, the ones who are more likely to acquire a stepparent, have the highest risk in the youngest age category. Sons of male respondents have lower likelihood of stepfamily entry than sons of female respondents, especially at higher ages of first exposure. This may be due to fathers being more involved in post-separation child rearing when the child is an older boy (for discussion of gender and father involvement see Pleck/Masciadrelli 2004). When testing for model fit, the interaction term improves the model for male respondents and only at 10% significance-level.

The family size variable is not statistically significant but indicates that having more than one child is neither an impediment nor an incentive for forming new unions in Sweden. When controlling for period, one can see that those who came under risk in the 1970's have the highest likelihood of entering a stepfamily and the ones born in the 1990's or in the year 2000 have the lowest.

When we look at the parent's union status at birth we see that there is no significant difference between children born out of union and children born in the parent's first union. The halved odds for the children born in a second or higher order union compared to children from the parent's first one is, however, significant. The union status variable becomes interesting when we look at it separately for male and female respondents. Children born out of union whose fathers participated in the survey have four times as high the likelihood of acquiring a stepparent compared to the children born in their father's first union, whereas out of union born children of female respondents have less than half of the likelihood of those born in their mother's first union. This gender effect should be interpreted as an effect of the fact that nearly all children born out of a union live with their mothers who, in turn, end up having a lower likelihood of finding a new partner than do the fathers.

## 6. Discussion

The pool of children under risk of stepfamily formation has grown in the past decades due to changed family behaviour. Educational differentials in family dissolution, the main process behind children being under risk of stepfamily formation, have emerged and have become firmly established during the same time (Hoem 1997; Kennedy/Thomson 2010). Previous research has suggested that there are socio-economic and educational differences also in family reconstitution in the United States as well as in Sweden, although of very different magnitude (Bernhardt/Goldscheider, 2001; Bernhardt/Goldscheider, 2002; Goldscheider/Sassler, 2006; Oláh et al., 2002).

In this article, I have looked at differences in stepfamily formation from the child perspective. The results show no parental educational differences in the formation of a child's first stepfamily nor did it show effects of employment status. Educational differentials are, however, present in the processes leading to the child becoming under risk of stepfamily formation. The lack of educational differentials in the family reconstitution process is surprising given the earlier literature showing educational differences in family formation in Sweden. But it also fits the theory on the links between education and family behaviour being most pronounced in societies where parents bear a larger part of the cost of children than a universalistic welfare state of the Swedish kind. It seems that educational differentials play a role in the processes preceding stepfamily formation (see Appendix) but that there are no socio-economic differences in the stepfamily formation process itself.

The main differences in children's chances of stepfamily entry are gender-based, both on the child level as well as at the level of the parent. Boys have much lower odds of entering a stepfamily than girls, even though this is different at different ages with the youngest girls having the highest odds and boys catching up at higher ages. On the parental level we can see that union status at birth of the child go in complete opposite directions for men and women. The fathers of children born out of union have a higher likelihood of partnering, whereas the mothers are less likely to form a union. This difference can be explained by the fact that almost all out-of-union-born children reside with their mothers, whose chance of finding a new partner is reduced by having a child. Fathers with boys are, however, less likely to form new unions than fathers with girls, which might suggest that they take a more active role in rearing male children. The likelihood of forming a stepfamily seems to be unaffected by family size. Welfare provisions like universal child allowance and heavily subsidized high quality child care make childrearing less costly for parents and are likely to explain this.

In conclusion, one can say that there is evidence from previous research, as well as from my model for selection into the risk pool presented in Appendix, for a "diverging destinies" scenario in Sweden, albeit of less magnitude than in the United States (McLanahan 2004; Kennedy and Thomson 2010). But there are no educational differences in children's access to a two-adult household with one biological parent and one stepparent in Sweden.

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## Appendix: Selection into the risk pool

Stepfamily formation occurs in a chain of events where educational differentials may arise. Children must be born out of union, or their parents must separate before they are at risk of entering a stepfamily.

Education increases one's human capital, it provides better job security and on average higher earnings and level of living. Educational differentials in out-of-union births, parental separation and divorce are evident in many Western European countries but the most striking differences are found in the United States (McLanahan 2004). About 20% of all births in the US are to lone mothers, these as well as births during cohabitation are largely concentrated to women without college education (Kennedy/Bumpass 2008). There are also clear and increasing educational differentials in union dissolution with the children of the lowest educated parents being almost twice as likely to ever live with a single parent as are the children of college-educated parents (McLanahan 2004).

Out-of-union childbearing is uncommon in Sweden. Andersson (2002) estimated that 5% of all births around 1990 were to lone mothers. Kennedy and Thomson (2010) with a slightly different model definition, including male respondents and considering children whose mother form a union during the first year of the child's life to be in-union births, estimate that 3 percent of the births in Sweden during the 1970s to 2000 are outside of a marriage or cohabiting union. There is no evidence for an increase in out-of-union births during the period since 1970 and it seems to be equally rare among parents with different educational backgrounds (Kennedy/Thomson 2010).

Andersson (2002) shows that in 16 countries in Western and Central Europe as well as the USA, the proportion of children having experienced a parental separation – the other main process behind children being in the risk pool for stepfamily formation by age 15 – range between 50 percent in the US and 9 percent in Italy. Sweden lies in between with 34 percent of all children having experienced a separation. There are also large differences between Sweden and the US in children's experience of family dissolution by parental union status. Of the Swedish children born to married parents, 24% experience a divorce by age 15 whereas 38% of the ones born in cohabiting unions experience a parental union separation. The difference is much larger in the US where 35% of the children born in marriage experience divorce, compared to 78% of the children born in cohabiting unions (Andersson 2002). Thus, the children of cohabiting couples in Sweden have about the same likelihood of experiencing family dissolution than have the children of married American couples.

Negative educational differentials in family disruption emerged in Sweden in the 1980s and increased in the 1990s (Hoem 1997; Kennedy/Thomson 2010). This development was a reversal from earlier patterns where highly educated women were more likely to divorce or separate and due to changes in women's educational attainment and changing – less traditional – family systems (Blossfeld et al. 1995). Kennedy and Thomson (2010) show that, although there is a negative educational gradient in the risk of experiencing parental union disruption, the differences are largely due to differences among cohabiting families, with little differences among children born to married parents. They show that children born to a cohabiting parent with only primary education have a 40 percent chance of experiencing parental union disruption, whereas the chance is only 25 per-

cent for the children with married parents of the same educational level. The chance for a child with cohabiting parents with a tertiary education is 24 percent, whereas it is 21 percent for a child with married parents.

Even though Sweden has seen an emergence of educational differences in the likelihood of parental union disruption, one need to keep in mind that the magnitude of these differences is only half of that in the United States. The children of the least educated Swedish parents are only slightly less likely to experience parental union disruption than are those of the highest educated American parents (McLanahan 2004).

Sweden seems to have a less select population of single parents but one could expect that, given the theoretical argument about need, attractiveness and opportunity, there might be socioeconomic differences in the family reconstitution process. Although social policies directed towards people with children reduce the economic need to re-partner, the attractiveness and opportunity are likely to be affected to a lesser degree by this kind of policies.

## **Model and results**

To analyze whether selection by educational attainment happens at an earlier stage than in the family reconstitution process, a logistic regression model on the likelihood of being in the risk group of stepfamily entry – i.e., the probability that the child's parents were not living together at birth or separated at some point before age 16 – was estimated. The independent variable was parent's highest education and controls were added for the child's birth order, the age at first birth for the parent who was the survey-respondent as well as period. The model was also estimated with an interaction term with education and period but this did not increase the goodness of fit of the model. The sample had a total of 5877 children.

Table 4 identifies differentials in the likelihood of children not living with both biological parents. Children of higher educated parents – especially fathers – are less likely to enter the risk pool. In addition, we can see that the probability of being in the risk pool of stepfamily formation falls with the parent's age at first birth. We can also see that children born in the 1980s have an approximately 40% higher likelihood of living with a single parent. The decrease in risk for children born in the 1990s is due to the fact that they are only observed during younger ages and they still have time to 'catch up' or surpass the rates for the older cohorts.

*Table 4:* Relative odds of child not living with both biological parents.

Variable	All children		Children of male respondents		Children of female respondents	
	Odds ratio	P-value	Odds ratio	P-value	Odds ratio	P-value
<b>Child's birth order</b>						
First child	1		1		1	
Second child	0.70	0.000	0.70	0.000	0.70	0.000
Third or higher order child	0.60	0.000	0.63	0.006	0.59	0.001
<b>Child's birth decade</b>						
1970s	1		1		1	
1980s	1.4	0.000	1.71	0.000	1.22	0.109
1990s/2000	0.86	0.161	1.07	0.678	0.71	0.022
<b>Parent's age at first birth</b>						
< 20	1		1		1	
20-24	0.65	0.009	0.39	0.016	0.74	0.109
25-29	0.40	0.000	0.24	0.000	0.45	0.000
30-34	0.41	0.000	0.22	0.000	0.56	0.027
> 34	0.38	0.000	0.22	0.001	0.49	0.039
<b>Parent's highest finished education</b>						
Less than secondary	1		1		1	
Secondary	0.82	0.083	0.74	0.095	0.88	0.401
Tertiary	0.72	0.037	0.62	0.028	0.84	0.431

Source: LNU, 1991 and 2000 waves, author's calculations.