Are the Roles of Men and Women Being Redefined?

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I don’t think Davis and van den Oever were right in forecasting - in the beginning of the 1980s- that “marriage is falling out of fashion” (Davis and van den Oever, 1982). Quite contrary, marriage is fashion. Weddings are fashionable, expensive – and eligible. One might ask if wedding now counteract marriage, and marriage counteract children.

I want to discuss this in relation to the roles of men and women. I will discuss the different functions marriage has in relation to parenthood in the Northern and Southern Europe: the first case where marriage and parenthood is increasingly separated and fertility is relatively high, the second case where marriage and parenthood is united and fertility is low. This is my argument:

The shift in the value of children to parents, from economic to emotional, is a major drive behind new marriage patterns and fertility decline. Men and women react differently to having children for emotional reasons. I shall argue that women want children more and that fertility is higher where women can have and provide for children without being married. In countries where this is not possible, men are the main obstacle for having children.

The rush to marry

It is a long tradition in countries in Northern Europe, that brides were pregnant upon marriage. Unmarried pregnancy and illegitimacy was common in England since 1750 and it is suggested that historically it is the “rush to marry” – peaking in 1950 – that is unusual (McRae, 1997). In Scandinavia this “rush to marry” has a long history. For the pregnant married women only one solution could solve the emerging problem - wedding and marriage.
If we focus on pregnancies before marriage, the figure reveals a surprising stability. About every second child is conceived before marriage. Historical studies confirm that this is an old pattern. Demographic historian Sølvi Søgner, as an example, says: “all studies from Norwegian local societies of old ages show surprisingly high figures for pregnant brides. The figures vary from 1/4th to every second or closer to 2/3rd” (1990: 45). Historical studies from Sweden and Denmark reveal similar features (Milhøj 1961; Prinz 1991; Mathiessen, 1979; Trost, 1978). Pregnant brides are the traditional pattern, unmarried mothers are the modern pattern. We know that the father is still there, but now in a consensual union rather than a marriage. What we now see is a sharp decline in the legal confirmation of fatherhood.

It was the children born in the 1950s’ – in the golden era of the Parsonian nuclear family, who changed the behaviour, but time was ripe. The economic value of children to parents had declined over a century, young women were educated and no longer accepted the rule of the patriarch. As they approached the age of childbearing around 1970, wide-ranging protests against Vietnam war, the 1968-riots and the “flower-power” movement signalled a new phase. After 1970 children were increasing not only conceived before marriage – they were also born outside. The change started, as we know, quite timidly among “innovators” (the “west”) from 1970s to take a much faster pace among imitators (the “rest”) from the 1980s (Chesnais, 2000: 129). The housewife era came to an end, but so did the breadwinning father.

Young women were given the possibility to control childbearing, and the immediate result was a strong increase in extra-marital births! Control was the crucial factor. Women were older when becoming pregnant, in most cases the baby was planned – or at least not unwanted by the woman (but as we shall see, not necessarily by the couple) – a father was – also in most cases – present. There was time and energy to make “a walk on the wild side”, outside marriage. The pioneers were the 68-generation. They were the children of the “housewife era”. What did these young women learn from their mothers? One event can illustrate the situation from my country. In 1969 the Government proposed to change the way in which child allowances should be paid. Instead of sending a check in the name of the mother, the Government proposed to give the amount as a deduction of the tax for the father. The strength of the protest revealed that for many women the child allowance was the only kind of cash

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1 With Per Borten as Prime Minister (Center-party).
money they felt was their own and the proposal was withdrawn (Stang Dahl, 1976). These were the mothers of the 68-generation. The daughters learned from their mothers to avoid the trap of marriage.

Prominent feminists of the time focused on marriage as “a slavery contract” (Stang Dahl, op.cit). Marriage was the symbol of oppression and since the 1970’s consensual unions have obtained increased cultural support. In Norway we can be glad for this development. Actually, this is the reason, I would say, why we have a relative high fertility in Norway.

*Figure 2: Number of children born in Norway, 1801 - 1999*

This figure shows two aspects: first we see that children are increasingly born outside marriage. Second we see that a rise in the number of children take place at the same time. One may wonder what fertility would look like if extramarital births were not at this point accepted. Of course, we may also ask whether this is a likely scenario for countries in Southern Europe if extra-martial births were accepted also in these countries? For Norway, it seems, the “extra” children of the late 1980s are a bonus of the loosened control of marriage over childbearing. Could such a pattern also be found in other countries?

*Figure 3: Births outside marriage. Scandinavia*

I have emphasized that 1970 represented a shift. If we look at the Scandinavian countries together, we find remarkable similar patterns. Scandinavia is particular in its high level of childbearing outside marriage. But similar trends are found in other countries.

*Figure 4: Extra-marital births in Europe since 1970.*

Since 1970 we find a general rise in extramarital births. Ireland represents an interesting case. In 1970 less than 5 per cent of the children were born outside marriage, compared to 30 per cent in 1999. The explosion came as late as 1990, with a sharp mountain climbing line. Italy, by contrast, shares the bottom position with Greece, also the two countries with a bottom position of fertility levels. Italy, it is often argued, is a country where the tradition and/or religious has a strong hold on reproductive behaviour, but is also a leading country in terms of legal abortions (Sardon, 2000). These three examples, Ireland, Italy and Greece reveal the variations that are now found between countries where religion, tradition and culture are
supposed to represent a strong check on innovative fertility behaviour. If my argument is true, we should expect a rise in fertility to follow the rise in extramarital births in Ireland. We do not find a rise, but neither do we find a continued sharp decline. Since 1970 fertility in Ireland has declined from 3.97 to 1.88 (equivalent to 53 per cent). Dividing the period into two, before and after 1990, we find that almost this entire decline took place before 1990 when fertility was down to 2.1. Since then the fertility has stabilised around 1.9 (Sardon, 2000).

Hence, if we cannot say that extramarital births in Ireland are leading to an increase in overall fertility, at least we can say that extramarital births was what was needed to stop a further decline! Marital fertility in Ireland might show a constant decline, but Ireland as well may have been “saved” by the extramarital births.

From Pater –Est to paternity testing

Canadian sociologist Mary O’Brien explored marriage as the social institution to overcome the biological uncertainty between men and children (1981). In lack of an indisputable biological linkage to ones own children, men need a social recognition to establish the right to a particular woman’s children. In all western countries this is known as “the Pater-Est” rule, simply saying that the man married to a woman is claimed to be the legal father of this women’s children. With the decline in the legal confirmation of fatherhood, through marriage, a new industry has developed in determining fatherhood biologically. A visit on the Internet using the key word “paternity testing” gives almost 20,000 hits, where DNA testing is offered. Biology, unlike social bonds, rests on confirmation of blood ties. It is the biological, not the social role of fathers that is placed in the centre. As long as children are an important resource in protecting family position, the social role of fathers was prominent.

This pattern is found towards the end of the 19th century. Gradually the family lost its position as a centre of economic resources and prestige, and – as described by Kingsley Davis in 1937 – an increasing mismatch between the reproductive system (family) and social organisation has been evolving over the century. In the course of development property ascribed through the family line is, if not substituted, then at least supplemented, by individual achievement through education. Historically, marriage was the preferred state, the entrance to power and prestige. As described by John Gillis, the old society had no social position for bachelors (1996), it was through the status of being a family man that (well-off) men could enter important positions in society. The Parsonian family with the breadwinning father and housewife mother, had its prime era from 1930s to 1960, in the intermediate period from a society where prestige was ascribed through the family to the society where prestige is
achieved individually. Power, privileges and authority followed gender and age hierarchies. “By contrast, a society based on the labour market”, says Caldwell “does not need an upward flow in either veneration or wealth” (1981: 230). With the democratisation of the family, breadwinner’s privileges were under attack (1981). In the system of the male household head, lasting through the housewife era, both power and consumption were shared unequally (368). With female employment the gender basis of power was disturbed, and with a general democratisation of the family an unequal sharing became hard to defend. As children became a threat to adult privileges both parents would agree to have fewer children: “Real children’s liberation movements have not proved to be possible, although the speed of fertility decline can undoubtedly be explained by ever more successful demands by children for a more equal share in family consumption and pleasure and to do less work in household production” (254). But men had more to loose than women had.]

**Children or Porsche?**

Male privileges are a basis for high fertility, Caldwell argues (1981). With individualism, privileges based on sex and age differentiation erode, and logically, with this also men’s motivation for high fertility.

If men had privileges within marriage, women should be the ones who had gains from leaving marriages as well as for not marrying. Already Durkheim noted that men had more to gain from marriage than women. In *Suicide* he argues: “Conjugal society, so disadvantageous for women, must even in the absence of children, be admitted to be advantageous for men.” (2000[1897]): 193) and continues: “… indeed, marriage may very possibly act in an opposite way on husband and wife. For though they have the same object as parents, as partners their interests are different and often hostile.” As a consequence: “Divorce is usually asked for by the wife from the husband” (269). At this time, in 1897, few women had the option to leave marriage. What happened to men’s motivation for marrying as children were turned into an economic burden? We don’t know much, but find some indications on a decline in the interests of having children.

A recent study from the Netherlands finds that the investments in children are equivalent to the price tag of a luxury car. It is named “the Porsche option” (Kalle et al. (2000). Who wants a Porsche and who wants a child? The study finds that men prefer the Porsche. Women want a child sooner, men want to postpone. Women want a third child more often; men tend to take “a blocking position”. The conclusion drawn is that “Male power in decision making [therefore] seems to be mostly blocking power (or postponing power) (point 4.4). The
decision for parenthood, therefore, is in the first place a decision for motherhood. In the negotiation process women hesitate to bring in the question of division of labour and tasks at home since they often consider this to have a negative impact on the probability of persuading the man to have a(n)other child. The Netherlands is claimed to have a world “Championship” in postponing births. The report leaves no doubt: men continue to have power in reproductive choices, and their power is used to limit fertility. A conflict is suggested between gender equality and fertility. It seems that men are the main drivers of fertility limitation, but the motive might be found in the new role of women. If men more often want a Porsche while women want a child, births outside marriage can solve the issue!

The conclusions from this study is in accordance with a similar study from Norway (Skjær Ulvik, 1992). Women in couples were interviewed about the negotiations with their partners on having children and the number of children. In most cases both women and men wanted children, but disagreed on timing and number. Women pushed for having a first child earlier and more for a third child. In the negotiation process it was important for women that both partners wanted a child. Getting the man to agree on having a child was less complicated, the women told, than getting him to actively want the child. This was a critical point in the couple relationship, since, in cases where the man had “given in” both man and woman felt that she should take the main responsibility for the child.

Other studies support the idea that consensual unions may give women opportunities to have babies even if the partner is less convinced. From Britain a qualitative study revealed that children born outside marriage – in a consensual union – surprisingly often were not planned between the couple (Smart and Stevens, 2000). Men in this situation explained they felt that they were tricked or pushed into becoming fathers. The women were described by the men, as “really” being in control of the situation - in nature’s reproductive lottery (p. 30). Men did not so much refuse to marry as simply regard it as an irrelevant. Some fathers were unwilling to commit themselves fully to the relationship or, in some cases, to fatherhood. To others the desire to remain uncommitted was expressed as a continual postponement. While the women spoke of the father as refusing to take his responsibilities seriously and settling down, the men spoke of feeling trapped by domesticity. ii

Children are born in fewer numbers, at a higher age of parents and more often outside marriage. But a father is still present at the birth of a child. “It takes two to Tango, Doesn’t it?” an article rightfully asked a few years ago, when stating that most children are born within a stable couple relationship (Corijn et al, 1996). True, but tango, somewhat like
fashion, is a short-lived, passionate gender play. The master of the tango is not necessarily the master of the napkin change.

**The equalisation trap?**

Are consensual unions an escape from a marriage trap to women? Are consensual unions an escape from a fatherhood trap to men? I propose that these are questions that need to be explored. But, its linkages to gender equality are crooked at best.

Europe experiences widespread decline in marital births. In some countries children are born outside marriage, in other countries they are born in fewer numbers. The two directions have one feature in common: an increased gap between men and children. Two factors are often mentioned as responsible for the development: Gender and welfare. We think that demographic changes are related to new gender roles, and, perhaps in combination with the welfare system of a society. We are less sure about the mechanisms at work. Several options are available. The gender-family-fertility nexus could work through:

- Women giving priority to education and work rather than having family and children.
- Women downsizing family and fertility priorities due to lacking domestic assistance from men.
- Men exercising a blocking power towards having children.

In other words, is it women, is it men, or is it the relationship between them that has a final say in family and fertility matters? If male power over reproduction is stronger in marriage than in consensual unions, we could argue that the results of their blocking power is traced primarily in countries where marriage is a persistent strong institution for reproduction.

While gender equality is a political goal, children are increasingly more of a female responsibility. Invariable, a family dissolution implies a separation between fathers and children.

*Figure 5: Children living with mother, and children living with mother. Norway 1980-2000*

The risk of a parental break-up is much higher in consensual unions compared to marriage. Parental break-up invariable involves father’s separation from the mother-and-child family, a feature that is elevated through consensual unions. A surprising gender stability in parenthood
persists: children live with fathers when fathers live with mothers. Only few fathers, in the case of Norway, loose contact with their children completely (about 5 per cent). But daily life is substituted by visiting schemes and a large share of the fathers see their children relatively little (Jensen and Clausen, 1997; Moxnes and Winge, 2000).). Parental break-up, largely accelerated by consensual unions, weakens the social fatherhood. At the ideological level gender equality is high. In my country it is reflected in family and welfare politics, and most people, men as well as women will agree that gender equality is an important social goal. Fathers do more at home, in particular together with children (Brandth and Kvande, 1998). Nonetheless, a gradual feminization of childhood is taking place and consensual union is a driving force in this development.

At the symbolic level, in Norway, changes in the naming can serve as another example of a feminization of childhood. Traditionally, upon marriage the wife automatically was given the name of the husband, and children born in the marriage was given the fathers family name. By 1964 through the Law of Personal Naming, women were entitled to retain their family maiden name. In 1979 another change in the law decided that children automatically were given their mother’s family name. The parents can notify the authorities that they want the child to have the father’s name, but if they do not take any action the child is given the mother’s name (Stang Dahl, 1991).

I have emphasised the shift in legal and symbolic bonds between fathers and children and will just briefly mention the economic bonds, which I have also claimed to be declining. As mothers entered the labour force fathers were liberated from the sole breadwinner role. Both parents would contribute to household expenses. Still, the sharing of expenses are gendered and in Norway mothers are now more likely to cover child related expenses than fathers are. A study has confirmed a positive relationship between mother’s earning and her share of child related expenses, and similarly between living in a consensual union and paying a larger share of such expenses (Jensen, 2000). Father’s breadwinner role is now shared with mothers, and mothers are increasingly the main provider for children in legal, social and economic terms.

**Gender equality and fertility**

If there is a conflict between gender equality, on the one hand and fertility on the other, how come that fertility is higher in the more gender equal societies? I think we have to reconsider the meaning of gender equality. Scandinavia, well know to be leading in gender equality, at the same time has the highest level of occupational segregation by sex among OECD
countries (Anker, 1998). In other words, Scandinavian labour market is the least gender equal, and a lack of competitiveness in “female niches” may promote higher fertility. It could be an important issue for future research to explore the linkages between female employment and the structure of the labour market. What is it, if anything, that may constitute a link between welfare, family and fertility? Is it welfare service in cash and kind? Is it a welfare labour market that is sufficiently protected to allow women to combine childbearing responsibilities with employment? If so, where does this lead us in terms of gender equality?

We are left with some paradoxes that I shall lastly mention briefly:

**Paradoxes:**

- Wedding costs appear to be a barrier to marriage, but it is in the most prosperous countries that consensual unions substitute marriage.
- Marriage is seen as the prime reproductive institution, but fertility is higher in countries where births outside marriage are widespread.
- The status of women is seen as a main factor of declining fertility, but men may have the blocking power.

Historically the unity of marriage and parenthood rested upon gender compliance in wanting children and a gender disparity in caring for them. Children are now born in higher numbers where society accept unmarried motherhood, women are economically active, where welfare system supports female employment and where the labour market includes “woman friendly” niches. If men and women now have different motives for having children, an acceptance of unmarried motherhood may enhance the fertility rates. However, the solution to the fertility problem may at the same time be a source of a child welfare problem.

**References:**


Kristiansen, Jan Erik (1986): *Synkende barnetall: Frustrert fertility i et barnefiendtlig samfunn*? [Declining Number of Children: Frustrated fertility in a child hostile society?], Department of sociology, University of Oslo


Once the pattern was established, the social composition of cohabiters over time changed – from higher towards the lower end of the socio-economic scale. But I shall leave this here.

A Norwegian study supports that children born in consensual unions are more often unplanned (Kravdal, 1997).

Lettenstrøm present figures from 1946-50, 1951-55 and 1956-60, while Dyrvik present figures from 1956-60, 1961-65 and 1966-70. Consequently both of the present the figure for 1956-60, but it is not the same (Lettenstrøm has 46,0 while Dyrvik has 51,0). I have chosen Dyrvik’s figure since this is the most recent of the two publications and it is reasonable to assume that it is more correct. Dyrvik does not comment on this himself. In the figure years 1950 means 1946-50 etc.
Figure 2: Number of children born in Norway, 1801 - 1999

Births inside and outside marriage. Norway 1805-1999

Figure 3: Births outside marriage. Scandinavia
Figure 4: Extra-marital births in Europe since 1970.
Figure 5

Children living with mother, and children living with father. All 0-17 years. Norway 1989-2000