

**REPARTNERING AMONG SWEDISH MEN AND WOMEN:
A case study of emerging patterns in the second demographic transition**

Eva M Bernhardt
Associate Professor of Demography
Stockholm University

eva.bernhardt@suda.su.se

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Abstract:

Growing “partnership mobility” is characteristic of countries undergoing the “second demographic transition”; yet studies of repartnering are relatively rare. This paper demonstrates that in a relatively gender equal society like Sweden, the repartnering behaviour of women and men is remarkably similar. Coresidential children lower repartnering propensities for both men and women (but are of course a much more rare experience in the life of unpartnered men), as does increasing age, while having been previously married or long duration of previous union makes people more likely to repartner. There is no discernible trend over time in repartnering propensities.

1. Introduction

Partnership breakup and repartnering are important aspects of modern demographic behaviour. Both have increased in prevalence over the last couple of decades, in conjunction with informal cohabitation instead of, or as a prelude to, formal marriage. This latter phenomenon started growing in Sweden in the late 1960s and is more widespread here than in any other country (Prinz 1995). Such relationships have higher dissolution rates than other types of unions (Hoem and Hoem 1992, Duvander 1996), and their increased importance has therefore contributed to the growing “partnership mobility”, which characterises contemporary Western societies in general, and perhaps Sweden in particular. The increasing vulnerability of coresidential unions, whether marital or non-marital, has been singled out as one of the crucial components in the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 1995), a fundamental and maybe irreversible change in family patterns in developed countries. The second demographic transition is supposed to result from the increasing importance that people attach to individual autonomy and self-fulfilment, which leads to less committed relationships between partners.

Today at least 40 percent of all newly formed partnerships¹ involve at least one partner who has been married or cohabiting before (Statistics Sweden 1994). The process of repartnering (or at least the observable part of it) starts at the time of the breakup from the previous partnership, when the ex-spouse or ex-cohabitor enters what in most cases will be an “interim stage” between two partnerships (sometimes this interim stage will be zero or close to zero). What factors influence the propensity to form a new partnership and the speed with which it occurs? As union dissolution becomes an increasingly common experience in the lives of children and adults, this question becomes increasingly important to answer. Sweden, with its high levels of cohabitation and non-marital

childbearing, is often regarded as a forerunner in the development of modern family dynamics, and would therefore seem like a particularly interesting place to study this phenomenon. Since an overwhelming majority of newly formed unions in Sweden start out as cohabiting relationships, in this paper we will make no distinction between the formation of marital and non-marital unions. The transformation of second and third cohabiting unions into marriages will be analysed in a later extension of this paper².

2. The data

To study the repartnering process it is necessary to have life-history information on dates (year and month) for the start and the (possible) end of all partnerships that the respondent has experienced up to the time of the interview, that is *complete cohabitational histories*. Such information is available in the 1992 Swedish Family Survey, conducted by Statistics Sweden. It is based on a sample of 6,498 persons, using the National Population Register as the sampling frame. Of the original targeted sampling frame, 4,983, or slightly more than three-quarters, were successfully interviewed (77.4% of the women and 75.2% of the men). Rather than obtaining a sample of all adults, however, the strategy was to target certain cohorts (five for women, those age 23, 28, 33, 38, and 43 at the time of the interview, and three for men, those age 28, 33, and 43).

¹ I use the word "partnership" to denote a heterosexual coresidential couple, regardless of whether they are married or not.

² Duvander (1998), analysing the transition from cohabitation to marriage in Sweden in the early 1990s, using educational level and present economic activity to indicate a couple's available resources, consistently found that individuals with higher educational levels were more likely to marry or plan a marriage than individuals with lower educational levels.

Table 1. Incidence rates (per 1000). Second and third partnerships in Sweden

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
Second	17.3	18.6
Third	23.8	14.6

The event that is analysed in this paper is the start of a *new coresidential union* among those who have experienced a breakup from their first or second partnership. To get an idea of the relative propensities of forming second and third unions, respectively, we calculated incidence rates, as shown in table 1. We find that when it comes to repartnering for the first time, women have slightly higher rates than men do, but this is sharply reversed when it comes to the formation of third unions. This most likely reflects the fact that many of the first unions are childless cohabiting unions, where the ex-cohabitators have high repartnering propensities. In fact, childless women (neither coresidential nor non-coresidential children) have slightly higher repartnering rates than do childless men (23.0 per 1000 versus 18.7). Kiernan (1999) showed that an exceptionally high percentage of first births to Swedish mothers were born after the end of the first union (that is most likely in their second relationship, since relatively few births occur outside unions altogether). Due to the negative impact of coresidential children on repartnering, which disfavours women more than men, men are more likely to form a new union after second partnership breakup, while many women then remain solo mothers.

The percentage distributions of the various categories of the independent variables are found in table 2. The fixed covariates can be grouped into two categories: *childhood* and *cohabitational history* variables. The childhood variables describe various aspects

of the respondent's situation while growing up. We include measures of family background (parental family size and structure, i.e. whether respondent grew up with both biological parents or not, and parental religious values) and community background (community size and non-Swedish origin). The cohabitational history variables, on the other hand, describe various characteristics of the previous union, for example whether the respondent showed a desire for a long-term relationship by getting married, either directly or by transforming a cohabiting union into a marriage³. The variable "period of previous partnership breakup" is divided into four categories: 1) the breakup occurred prior to 1974, 2) during the period 1974-79, 3) 1980-85, or 4) 1986 or later (up to 1992, when the survey was undertaken). "Length of previous union", on the other hand, distinguishes between very short unions (less than a year) and successively longer ones, the last category being 10 years or more. Finally, we have a set of timevarying covariates, which measure *life course work and family progress*: level of education, current activity, number of coresidential and non-coresidential children, and current age.

The transition into a second or a third union, the repartnering process, is modelled by means of Cox regression, with time since breakup from previous partnership as the duration variable, and the independent variables as mentioned above. Cox regression is a form of event history analysis, where the influence of the covariates (the independent variables) on the transition is assumed to be proportional. The dependent, or outcome, variable is whether or not a new coresidential union is entered after breakup from the previous partnership. If the respondents have not repartnered, they are censored at the time of the interview. The results are presented as relative risks, that is the relative likelihood that someone with the specified characteristics will enter a second or a third

³ In Bernhardt (1999) a distinction was made between "direct marriage" and "marriage later". However, there was no difference in repartnering behaviour between those two categories. This distinction was therefore dropped in the current analysis.

union, compared to the transition rate of individuals in the baseline, or omitted category (which has the relative risk of 1.0).

3. Results

Tables 3A and 3B show the results of the regression analysis for women and men, respectively. Model 1 includes only the *childhood* variables. Non-intact childhood family structure and parents' religiosity had no impact for either women or men, and was therefore dropped from the subsequent models. It has been found that experiencing parental divorce as a child, increases the risk of partnership dissolution as an adult (for recent examples see Kiernan and Cherlin 1999 and Oláh forthcoming). Apparently, such childhood experiences do not affect repartnering propensities. Parents' (and own) religiosity have been shown to influence the choice between a marital or a non-marital union in Sweden (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 1998), but does not seem to have any effect on repartnering generally.

For women, being of non-Nordic origin significantly lowers repartnering propensities, as does the circumstance of having grown up in a rural or a metropolitan area (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, the three biggest cities in Sweden), relative to the omitted category (non-rural, non-metropolitan). The lower repartnering propensities of women with a non-Nordic origin may be an example of an "independence effect": assuming that it is a bigger step for those women to get divorced and leave an unsatisfactory relationship, they are less inclined to give up their newly won independence by repartnering. The effect of having grown up in a metropolitan area can be interpreted as an indicator of tastes/preferences, where "post-materialistic" attitudes are more prominent. With a post-materialistic orientation, individual autonomy and self-fulfilment are

important goals in life, which may result both in a higher propensity to leave an unsatisfactory relationship, and a lower propensity to repartner. The number of siblings has an unexpected effect: lone children, that is those who have grown up without siblings, have significantly higher repartnering propensities than those who belong to the omitted category, namely those in the “mainstream” category of 1-3 siblings do. Likewise, those with many siblings, meaning four or more, are more inclined to form a new union after the previous one has failed. The latter effect is less surprising, as having many siblings may indicate having been exposed to a more “family-friendly” environment. It is not clear to me, why persons *without* siblings should be more inclined to re-enter a partnership, and I am not aware of any studies, which have found this effect. One may speculate, however, that having a partner becomes more important if one has no brothers or sisters, in order to strengthen the “same-generation family network”.

Adding *cohabitational history* variables, we find that, surprising enough, having been married in the previous union seems to have no impact on the repartnering behaviour for women. The period variables indicates a decline in repartnering propensities over time, while women with very long previous unions, 10 years or more, actually are less likely to repartner than those with shorter unions behind them. These effects are most likely due to the fact that we have not controlled for the effect of coresidential children in this model. If we proceed to model 3, which includes all the timevarying covariates, the effects of the childhood variables remain more or less unchanged, while the marriage variable now demonstrates the expected positive effect of having experienced a more committed relationship. The period effect disappears, or at least is no longer significant, while increasing length of previous union has a significantly positive effect on repartnering propensities. There is no effect of education, as that is probably picked up by the current activity variable: women working full-time (versus part-time) and those

involved in home tasks are significantly more likely to repartner. It seems that working full-time makes women more attractive on the marriage market, maybe in combination with giving them more opportunities to meet new potential partners?

Education can be seen as a proxy for resources and earning capabilities, but also as an indicator of tastes/preferences. Oppenheimer (1998) argues that the “independence effect” that results in part from women reaching higher levels of education, implies delayed marriage rather than non-marriage, since women’s higher education and better earning capabilities make them more attractive on the marriage market. It can be argued that women’s reduced dependence on men’s earning capabilities not only gives them the option to abstain from or delay union formation (perhaps marriage in particular), but also widens their possibilities to leave an unsatisfactory relationship. Oláh (forthcoming) found, however, in her analysis of dissolution of first parental unions in Sweden that higher than compulsory education *decreases* dissolution risks for both men and women. On the other hand, women working full-time had the highest dissolution risks (except for students), while for men unemployment and less than full-time work (that is inability to live up to the “provider role”) lead to greater risks for union dissolution. In my analysis there was also an interaction effect between education and current activity, showing that highly educated women (post-gymnasium level) who worked full-time had particularly high rates of repartnering (not shown). This would seem to confirm Oppenheimer’s thesis that highly educated women are particularly attractive on the marriage market, even when they have been partnered before. Bracher and Santow (1998) analysed first union formation in Sweden and concluded that “far from being less likely than other women to cohabit or marry, women with a greater degree of economic self-sufficiency are more likely to do so”. They had not only education but also income and a whole battery of measures reflecting attachment to the labour market (past, current

and potential). Although my analysis had a less elaborate set of variables measuring economic self-sufficiency, it does seem to indicate that this conclusion also holds for the formation of second and third unions.

Living with coresidential children has a sharply negative effect on repartnering, and the impact is greater the more children there are in the household. Having non-coresidential children (a relatively rare circumstance for women) has no impact, while repartnering propensities decline sharply with increasing age. The negative effect of parenthood for women's chances, or wishes, to repartner, corresponds to the findings in earlier studies that having children strongly reduces women's remarriage possibilities (see for example Koo et al 1984 and Lampard and Peggs 1999). The effect of children on *men's* chances to remarry has rarely been the object of study, presumably because children in most societies (in Sweden as well) usually stay with their mother after the parents move apart⁴. The analysis presented in this paper makes it possible to demonstrate, maybe for the first time, what is the impact of coresidential as well as non-coresidential children on men's repartnering propensities.

However, let's first take a look at the effect of childhood and cohabitational history variables for **men**. Here we find both similarities and noticeable differences. As regards the *childhood* variables, being of other than Swedish origin has no significant effect on men, while the impact of the number of siblings is quite similar. Noticeable is the absence of a "big city" effect on men; contrary to women, having grown up in a metropolitan area does not appear to influence the repartnering behaviour of men. The effect

⁴ After divorce or separation parents retain joint custody for their children, according to the rules introduced in 1983, unless one of them files for the annulment of joint custody. Joint (legal) custody assumes that the parents cooperate in important questions regarding their children, but does not require (equal) sharing of physical custody. Oláh (forthcoming) found that dissolution risks increased in Sweden after these rules were introduced.

of a rural background is similar, however, although not significant for men (it should be remembered that the male sample is only about half the size of the female sample).

Moving on to the *cohabitational history* variables, having been married in the previous union has an even bigger positive effect on men than on women, while there is no sign of declining repartnering rates over time, not even before we control for the timevarying covariates. In model 3, there is, however, an indication that very long unions (10 years or more) increases repartnering propensities for men, while having some vocational education, which increases the possibilities of getting a more qualified (and well-paid) job, increases the likelihood of repartnering for men, compared to those men who only have the lowest compulsory level of education. Having higher levels of education, however, has no significant impact on repartnering behaviour. The current activity variable is constructed in a different way for men than for women. Here the omitted category is the normative category of full-time work, while part-time work (a rare experience for men) is included in the category of “other”. For men, not having work has, as expected, a sharply negative impact on repartnering propensities.

Interestingly enough, living with coresidential children (a much less common situation for men than for women) has (almost) the same negative effect as it has for women. This has to my knowledge never been shown before. Having non-coresidential children does not impede men from repartnering (but neither did it for women). Finally, the effect of getting older on repartnering behaviour is remarkably similar for men and women.

4. Discussion

Remarriage or repartnering is a relatively underdeveloped area of demographic research. Moreover, the emphasis has been more on stepparenting and the effects of children from a previous union on the stability of the newly formed unions (see Ihinger-Tallman and Paisley 1987) than on what makes newly divorced or separated individuals form a new union (but see Wilson and Clarke 1992, and Lampard and Peggs 1999).

In a previous version of this analysis (Bernhardt 1999), my conclusion was that one could observe noticeable gender differences in repartnering behaviour in Sweden. That analysis did not include the timevarying covariates that control for life course work and family progress. Clearly, taking account of how life progresses in terms of economic activity and the presence or absence of children in the household gives a somewhat different picture. In fact, I would say that the main impression of the results presented in this paper is that of noticeable gender similarities. The one exception is “current activity” where women working full-time rather than part-time repartner more frequently, while for men it is unemployment (failure to live up to the “provider role”) that lowers repartnering propensities. Apart from the gender-specific effect of work-life experience, women’s and men’s lives seem to evolve differently after partnership breakup mostly when children have been born in the previous union. This is not because the impact of coresidential children differs for women and men when it comes to their repartnering behaviour, but because of the remarkable differences in who actually takes care of the children after partnership breakup. Men with coresidential children repartner less often than those unburdened by such responsibilities; however, living with children after partnership breakup is a much more rare experience for men than for women. This is reflected in the fact that men repartner *more often* after breakup from a second union

than from the first, while the situation is the reverse for women. This divergence in repartnering rates probably reflects “continued gender inequalities in opportunities to start new relationships rather than women’s loss of commitment to marriage-like partnerships” (Jamieson 1998).

This unquestionable effect of the presence of children can be interpreted in several ways. Lampard and Peggs (1999) argue that children have a negative effect on repartnering through the demands that they place on their parents or by deterring or objecting to potential partners. Parents may see their parental roles as more important than and a barrier to new relationships. The authors conclude that parenthood should be a key consideration in analyses of repartnering. I fully agree, and would add that it is important to take account of the existence of both coresidential and non-coresidential children in a longitudinal fashion, and to do this for both men and women. Manning and Smock’s (1999) found for the US that non-resident fathers who form new unions do not subsequently see their non-resident children less often than father who do not form new unions, but that new biological children reduce the odds of fathers’ contact with non-resident children. This makes it obvious that we need much more detailed studies of circumstances surrounding partnership breakups and what follows, including the possible repartnering of one or both of the parents. Gender differences in parenting and parental roles probably lie at the heart of the matter here: mothers are expected to be involved parents both before and after a possible divorce or separation, while involved fathers continue to be a more rare phenomenon, even in a relatively gender-equal society like Sweden. Most children continue to co-reside with their mother after the parents move apart, and the existence of joint (legal) custody as a general rule since 1983 (see footnote 4) does not seem to have had any significant impact on repartnering rates (so far).

In addition to the impact of coresidential (and non-coresidential) children being similar for women and for men, ageing lowers repartnering propensities in much the same way for both sexes. Neither for men nor for women can we discern any clear trends over time in repartnering behaviour. The length of the previous union influences repartnering for both women and men, in the sense that having been partnered previously for quite an extended period makes people more likely to repartner. This confirms a previous finding by Chiswick and Lehrer (1990), who regard marriage duration as a measure of “transferable marriage-specific human capital”. It seems that the relative union stability indicated by having experienced a longer first (or second) partnership is a signal of greater commitment not only to that particular partner but to living in a coresidential union generally. The interpretation of the effect of union duration would therefore be similar to that of having married the previous partner, which has a strongly positive effect on repartnering. Having started the previous union as a marital relationship, or having transformed it into a marriage later on in the relationship, seems to manifest a greater commitment generally to “partnered life”. For both men and women, making the commitment to the partner visible by legalising the union really signals a preference for living with someone of the opposite sex, or, conversely, a strong distaste for single life, which shows up in a positive effect on repartnering, should the first (or even second) union fail.

There is of course a direct relationship between partnership breakup and repartnering, in the sense that many breakups follow when one of the partners has found a new partner whom they prefer to the current one. Analysing local marriage markets in the US, South and Lloyd (1995) found divorce risks to be highest where “spousal alternatives” were abundant. In interpreting the results of the regression analysis of the transition from the

unpartnered to the partnered state after a previous partnership breakup, one should also keep in mind the selection processes that have preceded, namely factors influencing the entry into a first union, but more importantly, those that select individuals into the unpartnered state after partnership breakup. It may be argued that these two processes should be analysed jointly, that is that partnership breakup and repartnering should be seen as companion processes, both of which are crucial elements of the new flexibility characterising coresidential couple relationships in modern societies.

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Table 2. Independent variables

		Women	Men
		N	
<u>Childhood family structure</u>			
	Intact	1108	578
	Non-intact	400	174
<u>Origin</u>			
	Swedish	1357	675
	Other Nordic	66	24
	Non-Nordic	85	53
<u>No of siblings</u>			
	No siblings	116	60
	1-3 siblings	1113	562
	4+ siblings	279	130
<u>Size of community growing up</u>			
	Rural	232	134
	Non-rural, non-metropolitan	975	449
	Metropolitan	301	169
<u>Parents religious</u>			
	Yes	191	103
	No	1317	649
<u>Marital status of previous union</u>			
	Cohabiting	1117	591
	Married	391	161
<u>Period of partnership breakup</u>			
	<1974	98	67
	1974-79	278	89
	1980-85	428	204
	1986+	704	392
<u>Length of previous union</u>			
	<12 months	232	120
	12-35 months	473	258
	36-59 months	275	156
	60-119 months	316	133
	120+ months	212	85
<u>Level of education*</u>			
	Low	30.0	34.6
	Low vocational	39.7	35.4
	Gymnasium	12.0	13.0
	Post-gymnasium	18.4	17.0
<u>Current activity*</u>			
	Full-time work	56.5	81.6
	Part-time work	20.2	2.7
	Studies	10.5	6.0
	Unemployment	1.8	2.8
	Home tasks	4.3	na
	Other	6.7	6.9
<u>Number of coresidential children*</u>			
	None	48.9	None
	1	29.1	1+
	2+	22.0	13.6
<u>Number of non-coresidential children*</u>			
	None	92.5	None
	1+	7.5	1
			2+
			12.3
<u>Current age*</u>			
	<25	28.9	20.7
	25-29	28.5	33.0
	30-34	21.1	20.5
	35+	21.5	25.8
Total exposure time in months		56,488	27,898

*) Timevarying covariate, expressed as percentage of total exposure time

Table 3A. Factors affecting women's repartnering in Sweden (hazard ratios)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Non-intact childhood family structure	0.978		
Origin (Swedish)			
Other Nordic origin	1.001	0.928	0.930
Non-nordic origin	0.713 *	0.714 *	0.762 ^
No of siblings (1-3)			
0	1.256 ^	1.293 *	1.254 ^
4+	1.175 *	1.165 ^	1.171 ^
Size of community growing up (non-rural, non-metropolitan)			
Rural	0.854 ^	0.875 ^^	0.875 ^^
Metropolitan	0.812 *	0.808 *	0.764 **
Parents religious	1.026		
Married in previous union		1.095	1.325 **
Period of partnership breakup (<1974)			
1974-79		0.850	0.929
1980-85		0.831 ^^	0.933
1986+		0.715 **	0.850
Length of previous union (<12 months)			
12-35 months		1.029	1.081
36-59 months		0.882	1.016
60-119 months		0.877	1.217 ^^
120+ months		0.639 **	1.325 ^^
Level of education (low)			
low vocational			0.981
gymnasium			0.974
post-gymnasium			1.012
Current activity (Part-time work)			
Full-time work			1.129 ^^
Studies			0.839
Home tasks			1.425 *
No of coresidential children (none)			
1			0.678 **
2+			0.494 **
No of non-coresidential children (none)			
1+			1.218
Current age (<25)			
25-29			0.875 ^^
30-34			0.676 **
35+			0.414 **

** p<0,01 ^ 0,05<p<0,10
* 0,01<p<0,05 ^^ 0,10<p<0,15

Table 3B. Factors affecting men's repartnering in Sweden (hazard ratios)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Non-intact childhood family structure	1.135		
Origin (Swedish)			
Other Nordic origin	1.365	1.312	1.303
Non-nordic origin	1.039	0.918	0.964
No of siblings (1-3)			
0	1.239	1.224	1.394 ^
4+	1.181	1.218 ^^	1.233 ^
Size of community growing up (non-rural, non-metropolitan)			
Rural	0.841	0.801 ^	0.836
Metropolitan	1.021	1.020	1.051
Parents religious	1.095		
Married in previous union		1.236 ^^	1.446 *
Period of partnership breakup (<1974)			
1974-79		0.833	0.947
1980-85		0.928	0.998
1986+		0.823	0.960
Length of previous union (<12 months)			
12-35 months		1.130	1.171
36-59 months		1.050	1.199
60-119 months		0.798	1.010
120+ months		0.943	1.714 *
Level of education (low)			
low vocational			1.204 ^
gymnasium			0.948
post-gymnasium			0.892
Current activity (full-time work)			
Studies			1.065
Unemployment			0.540 ^
Other			0.947
No of coresidential children (none)			
1+			0.735 ^
No of non-coresidential children (none)			
1			1.142
2+			0.919
Current age (<25)			
25-29			0.927
30-34			0.638 *
35+			0.475 **

** p<0,01 ^ 0,05<p<0,10
* 0,01<p<0,05 ^^ 0,10<p<0,15