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**Actualising the ‘democratic family’? Swedish policy rhetoric versus family practices**

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**Abstract**

In this paper we examine empirically a key element of individualisation theory – the democratic family. We do so using the ‘acid test’ of family policy, and family practice, in Sweden. First we review the progress of family policy in Sweden since the 1960s, which has expressly promoted an agenda of gender equality and democracy in families, with individual autonomy for both adults and children as one key element. We then turn to family practice, looking particularly at negotiation and adult equality, lifelong parenting after separation, and children’s autonomy. While Swedish policy makers and shapers seem to have developed the idea of the democratic family long before the sociologist Anthony Giddens, the results in practice have been more ambivalent. While there has been change, there is more adaptation to pre-existing gender and generational norms.

**Key words**

Individualisation, family policy, family practice, family democracy, Sweden

### **Introduction: individualisation, family democracy and the case of Sweden**

The theory of individualisation, as expressed by Ulrich Beck (1992, 1994) and Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992, 1998), has become particularly influential in many social sciences: the traditional social structures of class, gender, religion and family are supposedly withering away, so that people no longer have pre-given life worlds and trajectories. Instead individuals are 'condemned to choose' their own biographies. The 'project of self', with an emphasis on individual self-fulfilment and personal development, comes to replace collective, social aims. Families are crucial in this vision, where modern societies have dissolved 'the social foundations of the nuclear family' (Beck 1992: 153). So while we still search for intimacy, this search leads to 'families of choice'. In this new type of family, all issues are subject to negotiation and decision-making (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

One result is that the gender divided, and generation divided, family is replaced by the 'negotiated family' in which given roles have vanished. There are now no fixed norms as to who should do what, when and how, whatever gender or generation they belong to. Giddens (1991, 1992) develops an ideal-typical concept of 'the pure relationship' to express this idea. This is 'pure' because it is entered into for its own sake and for the satisfaction it provides to the individuals involved. The pure relationship must therefore be characterised by openness, involvement, reciprocity and closeness, and it presupposes emotional and sexual democracy and equality. Giddens' optimistic forecast, expressed particularly clearly in the polemical *The Third Way* (1998), is that more and more people will enter into equal loving relationships of this kind and, consequently, that the only possible development is the one of family 'democratisation'.

Giddens focuses on the relationship between adult men and women, but he also places emphasis on the relationship between parents and children. Consequently, he argues, the care and protection of children become a key guiding principle for family policy. In this negotiated

family without given gender roles, the importance of fathers' relationships to their children is central. The democratic family is then characterised by shared and negotiated authority over and with children, parental responsibility, and lifelong parental contracts (both parents have the same rights and responsibilities irrespective of their current marital or partnering status). Relationships in this 'democratic family' are based on mutual respect, which naturally also means that they have to be free from violence (ibid, 95).

This idea that modernisation leads to increased democracy in families is not new, and indeed was a central concern of sociologists of the middle of the last century (Roman 2004)<sup>1</sup>. The idea that social modernisation means a more democratic family was displaced by critical feminist accounts, developing from the 1970s onwards, of a highly gendered and hence undemocratic family (ibid)<sup>2</sup>. Paradoxically (and perhaps because of this), families left the centre stage of sociology. It was not until the publication of Giddens' and Beck's analyses of the transformation of the private sphere during 'late modernity' that family relationships once again became the subject of theoretical attention in mainstream sociology.

In this paper we examine empirically this key element of individualisation theory, using the case of family policy, and family practice, in Sweden. This is a useful, 'acid test' case study for such an assessment as Sweden is the type case of the 'social democratic welfare state' and also of a 'women friendly' and 'weak breadwinner' gendered welfare regime (Hernes 1987, Lewis, 1992, Sainsbury 1994; see Duncan 1995 for review). It will be in countries such as Sweden that we would expect the processes of social modernisation which lead to individualisation, and their consequences for dissolving gender inequality and promoting democracy in families, to have gone furthest. Certainly Sweden ranks one of the highest countries on indices such as divorce rates, female labour participation, women's incomes

relative to men's, unmarried cohabitation, and births outside marriage. It is also a country where, since the 1960s, legislation has expressly promoted an agenda of gender equality and democracy in families, with individual autonomy as one key element.

In section 2, we review the progress of family policy in Sweden. Just how far, does this show an official journey towards Giddens' 'democratic family.' In section 3 we turn to family practice, based on an extensive literature review of recent family research. It is one thing to legislate for family democracy, but how far is this translated into personal behaviour, particularly in an area where policy is often indicative or exemplary rather than binding. Has family practice in Sweden also become 'democratic'? We look particularly at negotiation and gender equality, lifelong parenting, and children's autonomy. In the conclusion, we return to individualisation theory in the light of this 'acid test' case study.

## **2. Creating 'the democratic family' in Swedish policy**

Before the 1960s Sweden had developed a markedly organised and state supported version of the housewife – male breadwinner family contract (Hirdman 1990). While Swedish policy had placed some emphasis on individual rights, autonomy and gender equality before this, (Okin 1989, Carlsson Wetterberg and Melby forthcoming), policies remained ambivalent. For example, while on the one hand women's 'dual roles' were problematised in the 1940s and 1950s, on the other hand it was asserted that mothers were irreplaceable for small children. Hence, the normative dominance of the male breadwinner family was not seriously questioned (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997, Lundqvist 2007).

A radical shift to this settlement took place in the late 1960's, when the desirability of 'equality of opportunity' ('jämställdhet') between men and women became a normative

discourse (Dahlström and Liljeström 1967, Roman forthcoming) This particular naming was in itself a breakthrough, as this new term distinguished the issue of gender inequality from the previously completely dominant political discourse, in Sweden, around class inequality (Acker et al 1992, Hirdman 1998). This shift is variously explained by changing economic circumstances and labour demands, the influence of second wave feminism, and the particular organisational expression of all this in Swedish politics – especially in the governing Social Democratic party and their political partners in the labour movement (Hirdman 1990). A whole series of government inquiries into the problem of the family and equality of opportunity, on which female sociologists, economists and psychologists were well represented, began with the 1965 Family Policy Committee (*Familjepolitiska Kommitten*) and the 1969 Family Expert Commission (*Familjesakkunniga*). There were no less than 74 ‘family and gender’ commissions in the 1970s, and this official interest has continued to date. The purpose of these inquiries was to recommend legislation and their goal is well expressed by the Family Experts Commission’s major 1972 Report on Family and Marriage; the need was to create ‘a society in which every adult individual can take responsibility for themselves without being dependent on relatives, and in which equality between men and women is a reality’ (SOU 1972:41, 58). Gender equality, then, would also mean individual autonomy.

The Family Commission early on identified marriage and family law care as a crucial dimension for reform. It was becoming obvious, at least to the Commission’s experts, that the legal system developed for an earlier housewife-breadwinner contract was quite out of synch with their desired goals, and with the social changes already occurring. For women were already ‘voting with their feet’ as they took on paid work in increasing numbers, many more marriages were terminated in divorce, and couples were living together without marrying. While the principle of gender equality was taken as a guiding principle, the Commission gave

special emphasis to autonomy and financial independence, as well as to the mutual responsibilities of spouses; legislation should be designed so that ‘spouses can keep a large degree of independence during the marriage’ (SOU 1972:41, 58). Separate taxation assessments were introduced in 1971 and a 1974 law reform not only made divorce easier, but also removed the question of guilt. Abortion on demand was also introduced in 1975. More generally, the Commission concluded, partnership should be seen as a form of voluntary coexistence between independent individuals. Hence it recommended that all new legislation should be neutral in relation to the form of this coexistence (ibid); unmarried heterosexual cohabitation was subsequently legally recognized as equivalent to marriage in 1976, allowing shared care of children to unmarried parents – although this was not fully extended to same sex partnerships until 1995<sup>3</sup>. The Family Expert Commission carried on its work for ten years, with the result that marriage, in legal terms, was transformed to the voluntary union of two independent individuals (Romanus, 1992). Autonomy with mutual responsibility became established as the normative basis for family life.

The development of pervasive, high quality and affordable public childcare in Sweden, starting in the 1960s, is well documented (eg Björnberg 2002). One motivation was just to allow gender equality in practice, by allowing women both to have children and to stay in employment and develop careers. Three particular landmarks are the 1976 law requiring municipalities to draw up 10 year childcare expansion plans, the 1985 law giving all children aged 18 months to 7 years, with working or studying parents, or with special needs, a place in public childcare by 1991, and the 1995 law making it obligatory for municipalities to provide childcare on demand. The Family Policy Committee’s 1972 Report also recommended buttressing the gender equity effects of the public childcare system by transforming maternity leave into a much longer and gender-neutral parental leave, subsequently introduced in 1974.

Since 2002 this has allowed 13 month's leave at 80% of income up to a maximum cap, with an additional 90 days on a lower flat rate. An additional 60 days 'temporary' parental leave is available if the child – or the childminder – is sick. At the same time labour regulations were introduced giving the right to return to the same job after the leave. This was extended by 1979 legislation giving parents of small children (up to eight years) the right to a six-hour working day. This thoroughgoing childcare and parental leave system has been a central institutional prerequisite to the policy aim of achieving gender equality.

These reforms also pointed to the position of fathers, where another 1972 report from the Family Policy Committee had already declared that children need their fathers' active involvement (SOU 1972:34). In that the parental leave schemes are gender neutral, and thus transferable between either parent, it was hoped that fathers would also participate. In a similar vein non-transferable paternity leave after birth was equalised with maternity leave, for both time off work and for benefits received. It became apparent through the 1980s, however, that fathers were not taking up parental leave and that the goal of transforming fathers into active carers would need more active intervention. According to the 1993 government Working Group on Fathers, Children and Working Life, set up to investigate this problem, fathers wanted to be more active, but recalcitrant employers, who both responded to and used gendered norms about parenting, were preventing this. They also faced hidden discrimination from mothers, who derided their competence as carers. But this created a 'Catch 22' situation, in that fathers needed a period of close contact to allow bonding with children (Bergman and Hobson 2002). These conclusions were controversial, especially as they were written by an all male panel of 'non-experts' such as journalists, authors, and business executives (Klinth 2002). Nonetheless, in response to these conclusions the non-transferable 'daddy-month' (i.e. parental leave which had to be taken by the father, or lost)

was introduced in 1995, further extended into two months in 2002. Fatherhood, then, would no longer be seen and experienced as just providing cash through labour market work, but would also mean also direct childcare through household work. This shift in family policy to include fathers, as well as mothers, became seen as a 'double emancipation' – women could be workers as well as carers, but men could be carers as well as workers (ibid.).

If fathers were going to become active carers, then what would happen after separation or divorce? A number of government inquiries pursued this issue. Importantly, their reference point has been 'the child's best interests', and they expressly distanced themselves from the idea that custody was simply a gender equality issue. This was interpreted as joint custody in the basic 1979 report (SOU 1979: 57), a position later strengthened by reforms in 1998 giving a right of access to both parents, to ensure that the child meets and spends time with the parent with whom it does not live, and allowing courts to award joint custody against the express wishes of one of the parents. In effect, this has made fatherhood compulsory for divorced and otherwise absent biological fathers (Bergman and Hobson, 2002).

This whole reform movement is reflected retrospectively in the 2002 government 'action plan' for gender equality (Regeringens skrivelse 2002/03: 140). With an overarching goal that 'women and men should have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all vital areas of life', concrete goals are to achieve (i) an even distribution of power and influence, (ii) the same opportunities for financial independence, (iii) equal conditions and prerequisites for enterprise, work, conditions of work and career development (iv) shared responsibility for home and children, and (v) freedom from sexually related violence.

The last of these aims – freedom from sexually related violence- was for a long time neglected in Swedish equal opportunities and family policy, which was instead strongly

dominated by issues around paid work, childcare and finance (although Sweden was one of the first countries to recognise rape within marriage in 1965). A 1976 Commission even recommended reducing rape to a minor crime (presumably in the spirit of sexual liberation), although public outrage prevented this. Paradoxically, the strong institutional and political position of Swedish feminism may have perhaps skewed reform towards less challenging and more traditional policy areas (eg Eduards, 1997). However during the 1980s a women's shelter movement helped bring this issue to the political agenda, and men's use of violence in intimate relationships increasingly came to be regarded as a central political problem (Hagemann-White 2000, Wendt Höjer 2002). By 1982 legislation was changed so that the domestic violence became a matter for criminal law, and in 1993 the Commission on Violence against Women was set up. Declaring that a 'basic prerequisite for the emergence of men's violence against women is the structure of society based on men's superordination and women's subordination' (SOU 1995: 60, 401), the 1993 Commission's work resulted in a wider criminal law, enacted in 1998, outlawing 'gross violence of a women's integrity', and in extra funding to the police and health services to implement this.

As we have seen, family policy in Sweden from the beginning took the view that adults should be autonomous within partnerships, although they had mutual responsibilities for parenting. This principle of individual autonomy has been extended to children. As early as 1972 a commission was convened charged with showing that 'society can no longer accept that physical violence is used against children as a means of education or punishment' (SOU 1978: 10, 13), resulting in 1979 legislation banning corporal punishment in the home, and by 1982 this was made a mandatory criminal offence. The development of shared custody after divorce or separation was also seen as a question of children's rights; any one parent's power over their children would diminish, and the custody laws required consultation with children

and decisions based on children's best interests (SOU: 1987:7). The new law enacted in 1998 even introduced an offence of 'sabotage of child contract', where a parent does not actively support contact with the other partner. This same report started from the premise that 'a child is an independent individual, whose interests must be protected by the legal system in the same way as those of other citizens' (ibid, 13) and subsequent commissions took the stance that a child is an individual citizen with their own rights (eg SOU 1994: 38, 1998:97).

This child centred perspective was also an important motivation in the development of public childcare. As the foundational government reports make plain (SOU: 1972: 26, 27) public childcare was also intended as a means of addressing social inequality between children, and to provide children with a better social and pedagogical environment. In other words, childcare would reduce structural constraints on children's future choices. Later government reports (SOU 1975:30, 1981:25) developed the idea that it was not good for a child to spend too much time with its mother at home, and regarded public childcare as a 'love resource' for children - through the love and care of nursery staff children would not be entirely dependent on parents. In this way a major result – perhaps the major result (Björnberg 2002) - of the public childcare system in Sweden has been to advance children's welfare and individual rights. Public childcare can be seen as not only extending individual autonomy and family democracy for women vis a vis men, but also for children vis a vis parents.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, in 1990 Sweden ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child without reservation; the 1997 Parliamentary Bill implementing this in practice took the premise that the child's perspective must be developed in order that there should be an opportunity to really place the best interests of the child at the centre. In these ways legislation has implemented for a more democratic family where authority over children has

to be negotiated. Or, as the 1978 Commission on banning corporal punishment put it, 'independent decision-making and voluntary responsibility' are crucial requisites for maintaining the 'the democratic social order' (SOU 1978: 10, 23).

As this brief review shows, a powerful state led reform movement in Sweden legislated, and created supporting social institutions, for individual autonomy, gender equality, mutual responsibility for children, active fathering, citizenship for children, freedom from violence, and negotiated authority. The emphasis on the individual is central in this system of rules and resources. In other words, starting as long ago as 1969, intensifying in the 1970s, and consolidating in the 1980s and 90s, Swedish family policy has been busy creating the conditions for Giddens's 'democratic family'. It is one thing to legislate and set up public institutions from the top, but quite another to change social practice in family life. The next section turns to this issue.

### **3. The democratic family in Sweden - rhetoric versus practice?**

Individualisation theorists see the extension and individualisation of the social rights and benefits of the welfare state, as we saw for Sweden in the last section, as a central driving force in the individualisation process (for example Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). But this claim is left as an assertion; theorists neglect the processes through which this force can actually exert itself in practice, how a changed system of formal rules and institutions might actually change behaviour. This is likely to be a particular problem in the sphere of family lives, where research has amply shown that there are deep seated, long-lasting and resilient social norms about what is proper and expected behaviour (see Duncan and Edwards 1999, Pfau-Effinger 1998, 2004, Therborn 2004). We might therefore expect adaptation, through which agents continue to act according to pre-existing norms in their new institutional setting,

if in a superficially different way to before. Behavioural changes might not only be slow, but also be partial and full of unintended consequences.

Certainly this is the substance of one major critique of Sweden's gender equality policy. True enough, Sweden is relatively 'women-friendly' compared to many other countries - women can be mothers and workers at the same time, they have become more economically independent of men, and have a greater capacity to form and maintain autonomous households (Björnberg 2002, Nyberg 2002). Women are no longer regarded as appendages to male headed families, but as individuals with their own relationship to the state. But his very success, critics argue, may even have cemented – rather than eroded - gender inequality. For while women's lives may have become easier in many ways, in effect this has proceeded by forcing women to adapt to male norms, without demanding much change in men's family lives (Hirdman 1988, Holter, 1992). The individualisation of family law, and the principle of gender neutrality in legislation and institutional rules, may have exacerbated this. Swedish women have even lost gender specific rights they once held by virtue of their domestic position, such as divorce maintenance and widow's pensions. Equal rights do not mean equal work or equal access when pre-existing gendered divisions are marked (Eduards, 1986, Widerberg 1986, Ohlander 1994). The continuing high levels of gender segregation in employment, and the predominance of women taking parental leave, are two examples (Mosesdottir 2001, Björnberg 2002). The 'democratic family', as set up by reforming Swedish family policy, may be open to similar criticisms. We will pursue this theme for three central elements of the democratic family: negotiation, shared parenting, and the position of children.

*Negotiation, equality and autonomy*

Negotiation plays a central role in both Giddens' and Beck's theories of the transformation of family life. Partnerships, including marriage, are increasingly constructed by those who enter into the relationship. In other words, both the form and the content of a Giddens' 'democratic family' or Beck's 'negotiated family' become the subject of continual discussion and decision-making. This also requires equality and autonomy. The concept of negotiation and the 'negotiated family' has also played an important role in Swedish family sociology, where researchers have theorised that the room for manoeuvre on the part of individuals has increased concurrently with a reduction in the compulsive power of norms. Empirically the focus has been on studying how heterosexual couples organise their work and finances. While this research, as reviewed below, rarely focuses directly on family democracy as such, it nevertheless allows an empirical evaluation of its extent in contemporary Sweden.

Rather than free negotiation with open communication and active choices, this research shows that norms and understandings about gender still strongly shape negotiations between spouses and partners, and their results in the division of labour and financial organisation. While there may be everyday negotiation, this results in arrangements which are compatible with people's notions of 'proper' female and male. Much 'negotiation' in fact proceeds without open discussion, for example using gestures and tone of voice. This type of negotiation is even more likely to result in a pre-given, gender based, allocation system, without any real discussion ever having taken place. In those cases where open conflict exists, studies show that the parties' respective access to financial and normative power resources – usually greater for men - influences the outcome (Ahrne and Roman 1997, Roman 1999, Björnberg and Kollind 2005). At the same time, however, these studies show that there has been a shift in normative attitudes. The gendered homemaker-breadwinner model no longer finds much support, and the great majority of both men and women agree that housework and childcare should be shared equally between the sexes. In this way the gender equality discourse has had

an impact on people's notions of what heterosexual couple relationships should look like. Most embrace at least some of the goals of gender equality policy

This 'democratic' discourse is only partially translated into practice, however. Certainly the breadwinner/homemaker division of labour has virtually disappeared – the number of women without paid employment, but working unpaid in the home, was just 2% by 2003 (SCB, 2004), and women's proportion of men's income, on average, increased from scarcely half to more than two thirds from 1970 to 1990 (Bygren et al 2004, Nyberg 2002). In addition, the estimated time women partners spend on housework (excluding childcare) has on average decreased from 32 hours in the mid 1970s to just 18 hours at the end of the 1990s. But the decrease in women's housework is not compensated for by a corresponding increase by men, although a measly two hours per week in the mid 1970s had risen to seven hours by 2000 (SCB 2003, Evertson and Neramo, 2004). If the time devoted to care of children is included, the gap widens further (Gähler and Rudolphi, 2004). For families with small children the difference is maximised, as new fathers increase their paid work, while new mothers take greater responsibility for child and home. Even if an increasing number of men take some formal parental leave, mothers still take the bulk, accounting for 83% of leave days in 2003 (Duvander and Bygren 2004). There are also great differences in paid work. For men full-time work is still the standard – and the expected norm. Women, on the other hand, are in paid work for less time, not just because they are more likely to work part-time, but also because they take so much parental leave. And at the same time as new fathers take on more paid work, mothers are particularly likely to work part-time for several years after their parental leave (Bekkengen, 2002, Flood and Gråsjö 1997, Hörnqvist, 1997, Gähler and Rudolphi, 2004).

How is this stark difference between gender inequality in practice, but gender equality in everyday discourse, to be explained? This returns us to the nature of negotiation. Both women and men seem to avoid explanations which may be regarded as an overt sign of gender inequality. Instead they refer to 'financial rationale', 'personal qualities' or 'special circumstances'. To cite 'gender' as an explanation of their choices and actions does not seem legitimate (Holmberg 1985, Magnusson 1998, Björnberg and Kollind 2005). Perhaps the slippage between ideal and reality creates the need to 'justify' what might be regarded as unequal aspects of a relationship? This slippage conceals a gender power system, which, at the same time, is reproduced in the negotiations between men and women – and this is only exacerbated by an official concept of gender equality which underplays inequalities in power between men and women.

The incidence of domestic violence by men tells a similar story. While universally condemned, it also appears common. In representative surveys 10% of women report violence from a current partner or boyfriend, with one third reporting violence from ex-husbands or partners, with many of these reporting repeated and systematic violence (Lundgren et al 2001, Nilsson 2002). Whether violence against women is part of structural male dominance or – following Giddens – more an effect of the increasing threat to this dominance, seems immaterial. For violence represents the exercise of power – in this case gendered power – in its purest form.

What does this mean for the democratic family in Sweden, as advocated and supported by the raft of policy reforms since the 1960s? Gender equality has been seen by reformers and theorists alike as a corollary to family democracy, and indeed women in Sweden have generally become more socially and financially independent from men, and in this way have increased their autonomy. Common discourses about gender roles have also changed, and

men do take a greater share in caring for the children and looking after the home. But these changes are marginal more than fundamental; the gender distribution of both paid and unpaid work, and responsibilities for providing and caring, largely remain. Negotiations in everyday life are both shaped by and recreate this system, and often take the form of pre-given understandings rather than reflexive discussion. All this is in stark contrast to Giddens' theory of autonomous individuals taking decisions based on equal communication. Furthermore, the extent of male violence – which for Giddens is incompatible with democratic relationships – stands in direct contrast to the development of democratic families. We must agree with the Swedish government's own 2003 'action plan' for gender equality which stressed that Sweden is still characterised by a gender system in which women are subordinated to men.

#### *Shared parenting and lifelong parental contracts*

Parenting is also important in Giddens' definition of a democratic family. For in this type of family, women and men should equally share care of their children. This means lifelong parental contracts, for fathers as well as mothers. In other words, shared parenting should continue beyond divorce or separation.

Certainly being a father has become a central part of men's identity in Sweden, men are becoming increasingly family oriented, and as 'everyday dads' are keen to create greater closeness to their children than they had with their fathers (Åström, 1990, Björnberg 1994, 1998, Plantin 1997). Many fathers do involve themselves more in the direct care of their children than was common earlier; by 1993 men with small children devoted an average of 9.3 hours per week to fathering, almost double the figure for a decade earlier (Flood and Gråsjö 1997). This closer involvement alters seems to alter men's gender identity towards a more caring role, and active 'daddy leave' can encourage and cement this (Plantin 2003,

Björnberg 2002). At the same time, however, studies emphasise that men's freedom of choice to shape their parenting was greater than women's. In particular men could 'turn their parenting on or off' according to their interests and needs, partly because what is regarded as a 'good mother' is both more normative, and narrower, than for a 'good father' (Ahrne and Roman, 1997, Klinth 2002, Björnberg and Kollind 2005). For example, mothers are expected to take a responsibility for basic care, while men are expected to live up to the role of a playful father (Bekkengen, 2003). While paid work (at least part-time) is regarded as a duty for women, men's parenting is more optional. This is a major reason for the differential take-up of parental leave by fathers and mothers - the days taken by fathers are biased towards summer holidays and Christmas (Riksförsäkringsverket 2002). In other words parental leave is commonly used by fathers as an extension to holidays with the mother and children. In this way 'shared parenting' look rather different from the ideal – fathers have greater autonomy and choice than mothers.

In other words 'involved fathers' are not necessarily synonymous with 'fathers on an equal footing with mothers'. This is not just a matter of a father's relationship with his child, but also concerns the man's relationship with his partner. For the research also shows that fathers who are significantly involved in the care of their children often carry out much less housework than their partners. This is particularly important for the concept of the democratic family, where in Giddens' scheme shared parental responsibility is a central aspect, whilst the division of housework is not explicitly discussed (4).

What does women and men's parenting look like after a divorce or separation? In the democratic family separation does not imply that the joint parenting project ceases. Rather life for the adults becomes 'forever' linked through lifelong parenting. And in Sweden, as we

described in section 2, joint custody legislation enforces this for both fathers and mothers. However, there are several problems in how joint custody works in practice.

First, joint custody refers to legal custody – rights of decision making over education, health and so on, rather than physical custody in the sense of day to day care. So while more Swedish children with separated parents than ever before live as much with their fathers as with their mothers (figures have risen from 1 % in 1984-1985 to 20 % in 2003-2004), the most common pattern is still that children live with their mothers most of the time. Similarly, while more children than before visit their fathers at least once a week, and fewer lose contact after a divorce (figures have dropped from 20 % in the 1980s to 13 % in 2003), it is still the case that many only visit their biological father for some weekends and holiday periods. As many as 13 % of the children have no contact with their father at all, and 36 % have little contact - defined as less than once every fortnight (SCB 2005). Lone mothers accounted for 20.3% of Swedish households with children in 2003 (SCB 2004). It is for the fifth of children with separated parents who live with their father as much as their mother, who experience ‘shared residence’ (Gähler, 2001), that lifelong parenting seems more likely.

Secondly, joint custody - like the idea of the democratic family - assumes an amicable and consensual separation. Yet since the 1990s as many as one quarter of divorces were taken to court. There is little place for dealing with differences and disagreements. Thirdly, Swedish custody law re-affirms the primacy of biological fathers, however limited the contact is, while marginalizing social, ‘household’, fathers who may actually carry out daily care. As Helena Bergman and Barbara Hobson put it, a ‘stable administrative family, constructed by the state,

exists in a social context with highly dynamic sets of living arrangements involving single-parent families and reconstituted families from previous marriages' (2002, 103).

The joint custody framework still leaves a majority of separated and divorced fathers less involved, therefore, and they often have a fragile relationship with their children. This is sometimes interpreted, from the viewpoint of masculinity research, as the result of the structural marginalisation of separated fathers (making them invisible in the school and care settings for example) – an image which is then internalised by fathers themselves (Johansson 2003). Alternatively this fragility in fathering is interpreted as a result of men's greater ability to choose whether to be close to their child(ren); fathers can therefore enjoy conditional parenting, whereas mothers generally cannot (Sjöberg-Larsson 2003). Remember also that biological fathers in Sweden have been granted substantial rights of access and joint custody. In addition, pressure on divorced fathers to pay child support to their children is weaker than in many other countries, as the state advances maintenance to lone mothers in lieu. All this has resulted in Sweden being caricatured as 'one of the most men-friendly societies' (Bergman and Hobson 2002, 123). Whatever the interpretation, this situation hardly accords with joint lifelong parenthood and the continuation of the democratic family after separation.

#### *Autonomy for children?*

In Giddens' democratic family children also should have an independent position in family negotiations. Unfortunately, this is a largely un-researched area in Swedish family research, despite the recent development of a 'new sociology of childhood'. Nonetheless, a recent anthology on children's everyday life takes the stance the child should be regarded as a 'co-creator in relationships and its own living conditions' Bäck-Wiklund, 2001,45). Children have agency, and take an active part in constructing their own childhood, and both individualisation and its institutionalisation have increased this – for example children can better develop their

own social networks separate from parents (Näsman 1994). According to a recent survey, the majority (87 %) of children between 10–18 years of age report that they always or often have a say in questions concerning themselves, such as when to come home at night and how they should help out in the household (SCB 2005). Nonetheless, it remains the case that children usually possess restricted power resources, and restricted acting possibilities, that make their active participation in family issues rather limited (Näsman 2005). In this way autonomy for some children has probably increased, while in others it remains strictly limited.

It is rather with children whose parents have separated that the notion of children's autonomy seems most appropriate, for not only are the parents then forced to overtly negotiate between themselves concerning arrangements for the child(ren), but the child(ren) also usually become active participants in the discussions. Children, as well as parents, then need to develop good communication skills (Hyden and Hyden 2002). 'Link children', that is children who had their family affiliation in two households after their parents' divorce, seem to have particular opportunities for autonomy (Sjöberg-Larsson 2003). Not only did they manage much of the communication between the two households, but they also had substantial opportunities of creating 'a life of their own' in moving between them. In this way they built up their own family. Interestingly, gender differences were already marked in these children; girls were more involved in the 'family project' than boys who, while still solicitous of their families, seemed to place their own lives first (ibid). Another interpretation might be that these children lose autonomy by taking on adult responsibility. It may be that it is a structural shift of this kind that is required for actively allowing children's autonomy, rather than democracy from above via parents or the state.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper we took Sweden as ‘acid test’ for the transition to the ‘democratic family’. Certainly the aims and implementation of Swedish family policy, over the last 40 years, show much correspondence with Giddens’ view of the democratic transformation of the private sphere. The policy emphasis on the independence and autonomy of individual family members, on gender equality, the strengthening of the position of children, transforming men into active, lifelong parents, the moves against domestic violence; all this fits well with Giddens’ ideal-typical description of ‘the democratic family’. It is almost as if the true founders of this concept were the Family Expert Commission and the Family Policy Committee in Sweden in the 1970s, rather than Giddens in the 1990s.

As we have also seen, these policy aims have only been partially realised in family practice. On one hand the discourse about gender equality within families has become dominant, women – including mothers - have achieved greater financial and household autonomy through paid work and state support, and fathers have become more involved with their children and in housework. On the other hand the realisation of a democratic family is muted; family negotiation remains asymmetrical and mediated through pre-given gendered understandings, there is still marked gender inequality in divisions of labour and family responsibilities, while men and fathers retain superior ability to choose the shape and content of their family lives. There are trends towards joint lifelong parenting and children’s autonomy, but asymmetrical parenting remains more common. Under everything lies the spectre of male violence. There has been change, but much of this change has been more in the nature of adaptation and the reproduction of pre-existing family norms to new circumstances.

This conclusion has implications both for individualisation theory and for sociological research on families. Even for the case of Sweden, an especially modernising - and indeed individualising - social democratic and women friendly state, the social structures of gender and generation are not withering away. This supports the conclusions of other empirical evaluations of individualisation theory and family life (eg Jamieson 1998, Williams 2004). It also shows that the response of individualisation theorists – that the empirical effects of these structures are simply lag effects, that they are simply ‘zombie categories’ where the real motors of change lie with reflexive individualisation - is also dubious. For it seems pre-existing social norms and structures can be readily adapted to new circumstances. There may be de-traditionalisation (for example more people may cohabit outside marriage, more children live in extended families) but this does not necessarily mean that individualisation follows (cf. Duncan and Smith 2006). In this way we agree with Brannen and Nilsen (2005) when they conclude that sociologists have inaccurately conflated choice with agency, and underestimated structural conditions and their effects on actions.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See for example Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship*, (1945), Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (1955); William Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (1963).

These more theoretical and universalising works were followed by detailed empirical research

in both Sweden and Britain, for example Dahlström et al., (1962), Karlsson and Trost (1965), Fletcher (1962), Young and Willmott (1973).

<sup>2</sup> Ann Oakley's, *The Sociology of Housework* (1974) is one early marker.

3. Although in 1988 the "sambolag" law introduced a limited legal framework for the separation of cohabiting same-sex couples. Whether same sex couples should be able to adopt children is still highly contested

<sup>4</sup> Giddens does mention 'reciprocal duties' as characteristic of a democratic type of family.

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