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Shared practices

Social networks and fertility decline during the Swedish
demographic transition, 1850-1950

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Abstract

This thesis studies how social interactions influenced the fertility decline during the Swedish demographic transition between 1850 and 1950. This, to gain insights into how and why norms and values affected married couples' birth control practices, and how this shaped the fertility decline. Social interaction effects are studied in two different networks, voluntary associations and spatial communities using regression-based methods, in four research papers. The relationship between social interactions and fertility, in turn, is studied at different levels of society, on a macro-, meso- and micro-level. The results show that married couples reproductive practices were affected by social interactions during the whole study period. Members of unions, free churches and temperance associations had, in general, lower fertility than others. Additionally, couples living near a union or a free-church was also more inclined to limit their fertility. Finally, the results show significant spatial autocorrelations in fertility of neighbours and couples in adjacent neighbourhoods. These results suggest that increased use of birth control was diffused within social networks through social interaction mechanisms and collective action. However, the most substantial effects are seen during the fertility transition. This was a time of large-scale societal changes, which made the perceived net benefits of childbearing more uncertain. The results of this thesis indicate that couples drew upon the experiences of others to make more informed decisions. Over time, these new shared practices were formed into social norms, connecting ideas of respectability with family limitation, diffused within social networks.

Keywords

historical demography, fertility transition, social interaction, social network, voluntary associations

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