

The Rise and Fall of Illegitimacy in a Rural Society

The Case of Rendalen, Norway 1750-1900

Introduction

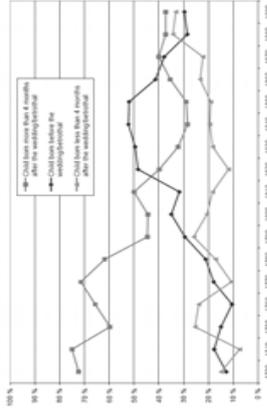
In the second half of the 18th century there was a rise in the number of illegitimate births in Europe. The number fell a century later. While the question of increased levels of illegitimacy has received a great deal of attention connected to a possible romantic revolution, there has been little study of why these levels again fell.

Previous findings and further questions

Premarital sexuality was not an uncommon feature in Rendalen in the 18th century, and many brides were pregnant or had their first child before marriage. Still, around 1790 there was a great surge in premarital sexual activity, involving girls from both the landowning and the (semi-) landless group. This surge had two faces. One was the fact that a premarital pregnancy and especially a premarital birth became the normal way to start a marriage. The other is that simultaneously there was a surge in looser premarital sexual relations.

The article which constitute the basis for this poster addresses two questions concerning this. When the normal way to start a marriage was to have a sexual relationship that ended in a pregnancy, it is also obvious that not all relationships based on mutual attraction would culminate in marriage. Was it a situation whereby the young men and women of Rendalen began to pursue a vision of romantic love in a society already in possession of a relaxed view on premarital sexuality? Or is it more a result of a process of proletarianisation where parents had little to offer a large flock of siblings, who then of necessity had to provide and find a partner for themselves?

Figure: Proportion of pregnant brides or having the first child before marriage among all married mothers. Decades. Marriage in Rendalen 1734-1900.



Note: A bride is considered pregnant when the child is born within four months after the wedding. Betrothal is used as date of marriage before 1799. Data only for first marriages for men and women.

Reference

Hans Henrik Bull (2006). 'The Rise and Fall of Illegitimacy in a Rural Society. The Case of Rendalen, Norway 1750-1900', article no 3. *Marriage decisions in a peasant society* [..]. Doctoral thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo.

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A farmer's family in Rendalen, c. 1870; four of the five daughters married sons of farmers. Nordstadelismuseum, Tynset.

Method

A logistic regression of remaining a farmer as an adult for sons and daughters of farmers.

The regression shows the effect of marriages initiated by an extramarital pregnancy on social mobility - controlled for social origin of the spouses and their age of marriage.

Data

The basis for the analysis is the Rendalen database. The foundation of the database is parish registers from 1734-1900 that are linked together by a family reconstitution procedure. In addition there are linkages to several other sources such as censuses, probate registers and court journals.

Table: Mean age of men and women from Rendalen at the birth of a child conceived out of wedlock according to the parents' social class. Number of cases in brackets.

Time period	Men		Women	
	Farmers	Farm workers	Farmers	Farmworkers
1750-1775	28.9 (60)	28.2 (24)	26.7 (53)	25.6 (16)
1775-1800	30.4 (96)	30.5 (86)	26.9 (82)	28.4 (70)
1800-1825	28.7 (119)	28.8 (98)	26.3 (110)	27.8 (82)
1825-1850	29.4 (152)	29.6 (198)	26.0 (134)	27.4 (188)
1850-1875	29.2 (157)	28.4 (288)	26.2 (141)	25.8 (238)
1875-1900	27.3 (150)	27.1 (326)	25.4 (132)	24.5 (282)

Source: Rendalen database

Note: Extramarital pregnancy is defined as pregnancy wherein the child is born before or less than four months after the wedding (or official betrothal).

Regression I - main findings

During the whole period it was only the farmer who had the clear ability to affect the outcome of whether an extramarital pregnancy would result in marriage for their children. In the early period (1750-1800), it may be seen that the farmer's wife had a positive effect on securing a marriage for her daughter, irrespective of the social status of the girl's suitor.

Regression II

Table: Logistic regression coefficients of becoming a farmer after marriage. First marriages for sons and daughters of farmers from Rendalen 1750-1900. Only couples registered as having a child.

Characteristic	1750-1800		1800-1850		1850-1900	
	mean	odds ratio	mean	odds ratio	mean	odds ratio
Birth of first child (ref. More than 4 months after the betrothal/wedding)	0.57	1.00	0.40	1.00	0.41	1.00
Before the wedding	(0.20)	0.25***	(0.41)	0.49**	(0.38)	0.36***
Within four months after the wedding	(0.23)	0.38**	(0.19)	0.88	(0.21)	0.44*
-2logL	949.8		972.2		737.2	
-2(Residual deviance-Null deviance)	0.189		0.109		0.138	
Events	105		111		123	
Exact	180		177		159	
*p<0.10 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01						
Source: Rendalen Database						

Results and Conclusion

During the whole period under study, having a child before the wedding or betrothal had a clearly negative impact on the propensity of becoming a farmer. Experiencing an extramarital pregnancy can be seen as a result of a mating process where parents had limited control. Opposite, when economically strategic considerations were included in the mating process, there was seldom any early pregnancy. Therefore, the result from the above table shows that couples established more on the basis of a sexual or romantic attraction was less likely to succeed economically.

The differences over time offer some additional information to the decision making in the courting process over time. Despite that premarital pregnancy was a common feature in the 18th century it is a very clear tendency that these marriages were not part of economic strategic considerations. It seems that men and women from the group of farmers that had few options of acquiring a farm were given the possibility of finding a partner of their own.

For those men and women marrying in Rendalen in the second half of the 19th century, the chance of remaining a farmer had increased. This was mainly due to the fact that there was a surge in the number of farms combined with many moving out from the parish. Despite this large access to becoming a farmer, there was a continuation of the negative effect of initiating the marriage with a premarital pregnancy. This indicates that parental control was still at play in the courtship procedure and the choice of marriage partner. The social differences between the landowning and the labour class had become more pronounced in the second half of the 19th century, and thereby the farmers had more to defend both economically and socially.