

Parenthood and Gender Attitudes: How do Women and Men Cope with the New Role?

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The increase in women's labour force participation in the past few decades has been witnessed in many developed countries. Most of the increase comes from the increased numbers of working mothers. Researchers, aiming to advance the understanding of those changes in behaviours, are interested in studying changes in people's attitudes and values towards mothering and gender division of labour (Kaufman 2000), sometimes referred to as gender-role attitudes, gender ideology, or simply gender attitudes. Most studies examined long-term trends of changes in gender attitudes across cohorts. These studies revealed a move towards gender equality in more recent cohorts (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Surprisingly, only a few studies pay attention to how attitudes change within individuals over the life course despite the existence of many critical life-changing events over one's life (Baxter et al. 2015; Kim and Cheung 2015).

Gender attitudes are closely related to family processes and outcomes, including family formation and dissolution, childbearing and parenting, the division of housework labour, and the performance in the labour market. Many life events, such as the transition from school to work, getting married, and becoming a parent, may change how people define themselves, and with whom they interact, thereby influencing their attitudes. There is little to assume that one's gender attitudes would remain static over life.

There are only limited numbers of papers investigating how change in critical life events is associated with changes in people's attitudes toward gender and family. Using panel data, a few recent studies have found a slow egalitarian trend in men's and women's gender attitudes (Vespa 2009). Others focusing on life events noted that

the birth of child would turn both women and men into more gender traditional attitudes (Baxter et al. 2015). Despite pointing out the correlation between age or other key life events and the change in gender attitudes, existing literatures remain ambiguous to explain how those transitions in life shape/reshape people's gender attitudes. In particular, the gender differences and the couple interactions in those family formation processes are largely ignored, especially when transition to parenthood is of interest. The transition into parenthood would have quite different meanings to women and men. Becoming a parent coincides with an increase in women's time on housework and a reduction in women's time in paid labour. On the contrary, parenthood is correlated with increases in men's paid work time and earnings. In addition, many studies only focus on specific transitions such as the birth of a child in the life course without considering the slow and gradual process of gender attitude formation and adjustment. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the consequences brought by parenthood to women and men separately and to evaluate different factors mediating those changes in gender attitudes in the family formation and development process.

Theories and Hypothesis

Theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that people adjust their views to align with behaviours and arrangements (Festinger 1962; Schwarz 2007). Therefore, if women are the primer carer of the children after birth, they may adjust their attitudes and views according to the current arrangement and support women's role as mothers and carers for the family. Similarly, men may also adjust their beliefs accordingly and follow the same direction of becoming more supportive to traditional gender roles.

Hypothesis 1. Both women and men become more supportive to traditional gender roles after the birth of the first child.

Given that it is usually the case for mothers to withdraw from the labour market following the birth of a child and to spend more time on housework and childcare than fathers do, the gender-specialization feature of this post-birth family arrangement may be reflected as different sources of the psychological dissonance for the women and the men. Women are more likely to be under the context of spending more time

on housework and having a certain economic inactive period. For men, they are less likely to heavily alter their labour market performance, while they are linked to their economically inactive partners. The dissonance theory asserts that attitudes are context specific, and therefore the change in attitudes for women and men due to new birth should be mediated in different ways.

Hypothesis 2. Change in women's attitudes following the birth of the first child should be mediated by change in women's labour market participation and women's time spent on housework. However, change in men's attitudes due to the first birth should be mostly mediated by change in their partners' labour market participation.

The birth of the first child is only a transient process compared to the long-term care and educate of the children after births. Children's development has several stages. The children's growing independence as they age makes it reasonable to believe that family arrangements at the time of or shortly after the birth of the children would not remain unchanged for years. As the mothers gain more experience in balancing work and family, and as their children grow older and more independent, those women may choose to regain their earning power in the labour market (Kahn, García-Manglano and Bianchi 2014). Research has shown that the negative effect of women's labour force participation due to children would decline or even eliminated by the time when those mothers are at their 40s and 50s (Kahn, García-Manglano and Bianchi 2014). Those changes in labour market performance for mothers would again create the possibility for those women to move into more gender equal attitudes supporting women's role in the labour market. Their husbands, accepting the decline in the demand of the children, may again make relative view adjustment. However, those attitude changes would be much less prominent and may only occur at a very slow pace.

Hypothesis 3. As the growing up of the children, the parents would move towards more gender liberal attitudes gradually.

Data, Methods, Results and Discussion

This paper uses the long-term 18 waves of the British Household Panel Survey

lasting from 1991 to 2009 (to be further linked to the later Understanding Society Survey until 2014). Gender attitudes are measured using four items asking specific questions in every other wave. The mean score of the sum of the five items are used as the dependent variable.

Fixed-effects panel regression models are used to account for individual-specific unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity. In summary, numbers of children presented in the household are strongly correlated with one's gender attitudes. By comparing women's and men's gender attitudes before and after the birth of the first child, the current evidence shows that both women and men are becoming more conservative in terms of the support of mothers staying home to take care of the children and the family. However, changes in attitudes for first-time mothers can be partly mediated by changes in hours spent on housework, while for men changes in hours on housework have no effect on attitude change. Interestingly, almost all the changes in being more conservative for men are mediated by change in the employment status of their partners. In addition, when we focus on those women and men who have already been parents, results demonstrate that both women and men would turn to be more gender liberal as their children age.

All the findings strongly support the cognitive dissonance theory and reflect an active response of the parents' subjective views to changes in family arrangements due to the arrival of a new child and the growing-up of their children. Those results provide insights into the context-specific gender differences in the effect of first birth on men's and women's gender attitude and fill in the gap of studying the change in gender attitudes in a long term with the development of a family as the children are becoming more independent. This study extends our understanding about how parenthood and the dynamics of a family's development process would shape women's and men's subjective perceptions over life.