

Influences on Gender-Role Attitudes during the Transition to Adulthood

Pi-Ling Fan

American Institutes for Research

and

Margaret Mooney Marini

University of Minnesota

We use longitudinal data for a nationally representative sample of U.S. youth to study intergenerational and intragenerational influences on the gender-role attitudes of young women and men. We find that during the period between 1979 and 1987 young women had more egalitarian attitudes than young men but that the gender-role attitudes of both sexes were similarly influenced by family background. Although there was considerable stability in gender-role attitudes during the transition to adulthood, both sexes experienced change in an egalitarian direction with age. Young men experienced more change than young women, making their attitudes more similar to those of young women over time. Gender-role attitudes were also influenced by particular experiences and role changes during the transition to adulthood, including the continuation of education, movement into and out of the labor force, entry into marriage, and becoming a parent. © 2000 Academic Press

Gender-role attitude change in the United States is well documented. Early evidence indicated some change in gender-role attitudes during the late 1940s and 1950s with respect to views on equality of opportunity in the labor market. In 1938, only 40% of women and 27% of men indicated a willingness to vote for a woman for President, but these percentages increased to about 60% by 1959, decreasing only slightly during the 1960s (Spitze and Huber, 1980). Change in gender-role attitudes continued during the 1960s, with sizable shifts in attitudes

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Address reprint requests to Pi-Ling Fan, American Institutes for Research, John C. Flanagan Research Center, 1791 Arastradero Road, Palo Alto, CA 94304-1337.

occurring prior to the public resurgence of the Women's Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mason, Czajka, and Arber, 1976). After the resurgence of the Women's Movement, gender-role attitudes continued to change, shifting in an egalitarian direction through at least the mid-1980s, when the last survey evidence reported was collected (Thornton and Freedman, 1979; Cherlin and Walters, 1981; Herzog and Bachman, 1982; Thornton, Alwin, and Camburn, 1983; Mason and Lu, 1988; Thornton, 1989).

As change in gender-role attitudes occurred, the principle of equality of opportunity in the workplace was accepted more readily than change in the responsibilities and activities of women and men in the home (Mason and Bumpass, 1975; Mason et al., 1976; Thornton and Freedman, 1979). Data collected from women in 1970 and earlier indicated the existence of two distinct attitude dimensions: one pertaining to equality of rights in the labor market and the other pertaining to the division of work within the home. Prior to 1970, there was evidence of more change in attitudes about equality in the labor market than in attitudes about the division of work within the home. After 1970, change in attitudes about gender roles in the home began to catch up with change in attitudes about equality in the labor market. By the late 1970s, the two distinct attitude dimensions had become one, with attitudes about gender roles in the home strongly tied to attitudes about gender equality in the labor market (Mason et al., 1976; Thornton et al., 1983).

Evidence indicates that the shift in gender-role attitudes since the 1970s has been pervasive throughout the U.S. population. Although it occurred sooner and to a greater degree among some subgroups than others, it has clearly not been simply a reflection of differing personal circumstances and experiences (Mason and Bumpass, 1975; Mason et al., 1976; Spitze and Huber, 1980; Thornton and Freedman, 1979). The process of change in gender-role attitudes has involved both change within birth cohorts and change between birth cohorts. Change within birth cohorts appears to have been more important in the overall process of change than change between birth cohorts, a finding which reflects the strong influence of historical events, or "period effects" (Thornton and Freedman, 1979; Thornton et al., 1983; Mason and Lu, 1988).

Changes over the life course of an individual or a group of individuals reflect the confounding of aging, or life-stage, influences and historical influences. There is also an interaction between these two types of influences, since historical influences tend to have a greater effect on individuals during the "impressionable" years of adolescence and early adulthood (Glenn, 1980; Sears, 1981, 1983; Schuman and Scott, 1989; Alwin, 1994). Research on gender-role attitudes indicates that those in younger birth cohorts experienced greater change over the life course as a result of historical influences than those in older birth cohorts (Thornton and Freedman, 1979; Miller and Glass, 1989). Those in younger birth cohorts also have more egalitarian attitudes than those in older birth cohorts when cohorts are compared at the same age (Thornton et al., 1983; Mason and Lu, 1988).

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