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## Advances in Life Course Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr)

## Gender role ideology and life course transitions of baby-boom women

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 28 October 2011

Received in revised form 24 February 2012

Accepted 15 April 2012

## Keywords:

Gender role ideology

Life course transitions

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the interrelationship between attitudes toward gender role egalitarianism and family and human capital decisions among a group of baby-boom women from 1971 to 2005. Using latent growth curve and latent difference modeling of 294 women, we found that early egalitarian values decreased the risk of becoming a mother and marrying and increased the risk of graduating college and working in the labor force. A sharp increase in egalitarianism was found between 1971 and 1985 that was more characteristic of women who graduated college and worked in the labor force. The stall of the post-1985 period was predicted (inversely) by earlier attitudes toward egalitarianism, but not by life decisions. Results suggest that early values were consequential for life pathways taken by these women and that more advantaged women were at the vanguard of the surge in egalitarian gender values during the 1970s and 1980s that subsequently moderated from the mid-1980s onward. There appears to be a convergence among women in their attitudes over time, characteristic of an institutionalization of gender role equality that blends liberal and traditional orientations. This study offers a long-historical view into how women's gender role attitudes change over historical time and the role that family and human capital factors play in that change.

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Gender role attitudes have changed remarkably over the last four decades, with endorsement of equality between men and women rising precipitously in the 1970s and into the 1990s (Brewster & Padovic, 2000; Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004), followed from the mid-1990s onward by a stall or stagnation in attitudes, sometimes referred to as a backlash toward a more traditional demarcation of gender role divisions (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011). Gender role attitudes have ostensibly shaped and reshaped the life course of baby-boom women in particular, the generation best positioned to take advantage of greater opportunities and freedoms brought by the feminist movement.

However, it is not fully known the extent to which gender role attitudes—whether subscribing to an egalitarian or traditional gender role ideology—directly influenced women's family and socioeconomic decisions, and how

these decisions have formed life course pathways leading to subsequent change in gender role attitudes. In this paper we investigate the interrelationship between gender role attitudes and family and human capital investments over more than three-decades in the lives of the younger cohort of baby-boom women, using data from a long-term longitudinal study in southern California. Specifically, we examined how women's gender role ideology expressed in late adolescence and early adulthood influenced parental, marital, educational, and employment outcomes following the transition to full adulthood, and whether these family and socioeconomic outcomes produced future changes in gender role ideology both during the period of liberalization and the period of retrenchment in feminist sympathies.

### 1. Gender role ideology over the life course

Gender role ideology refers to attitudes about the distinctiveness of women's and men's roles within core social institutions such as the family and the workplace

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(Morgan & Waite, 1987). The baby boom cohort—that born between 1946 and 1964—came of age during a time of great change in women’s roles and an expansion of opportunities for them. This cohort was the leading edge of an unprecedented liberalization of attitudes throughout the 1960s and into the 1980s, which began to plateau during the 1990s (Brewster & Padovic, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Gender role attitudes shape individual behaviors by virtue of preference in decision making about family and career, but also through egalitarian workplace policies, equal rights legislation, and a social climate that provides opportunities for and relaxes constraints on women in their family and work pursuits.

How attitudes change or remain stable over the life course has been the subject of much study. One rendering of this dynamic is that youth absorb the ideology of the period when they come of age, then remain relatively stable over their life-spans, a phenomenon known as the “impressionable youth” hypothesis (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Alwin & Krosnick, 1991). Cohort-based approaches have largely focused on differing values of successive birth cohorts, attributing much of the initial liberalization in gender role attitudes to increased employment of women in contemporary cohorts that necessitated changes in traditional roles within the home and family (Brewster & Padovic, 2000). As Mason and Lu (1988) suggest, attitudes followed structural changes in the economy that widened women’s participation in the labor force.

The subsequent stall in gender egalitarianism, on the other hand, tends to be attributed to cultural factors. For instance, Brewster and Padovic (2000) suggest that social and political shifts in the 1990s (such as media reporting of negative consequences for children of working mothers) have moderated the increase in more liberal attitudes in the past decade. Others have pointed to an emergent neo-feminism—a form of cognitive dissonance that blends an ideology of intensive motherhood with that of gender-neutral values (Charles & Grusky, 2004; Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011; Hays, 1996). From this perspective, motherhood will not necessarily weaken gender role egalitarianism, nor will it strengthen it.

## 2. Family and career decisions and gender role ideology

Liao and Cai (1995) posit that gender role attitudes are malleable and fluctuate depending on one’s exposure to particular life situations. Important life events that relate to feminist or gender role ideals, such as marriage, parenthood, and labor force participation, may prompt changes in gender role attitudes. From this perspective, turning points in life are important for how gender role attitudes are acquired and altered (Cunningham, Beutel, Barber, & Thornton, 2005; Tallichet & Wilits, 1986), opening the possibility that family and labor force decisions are not only influenced by earlier held gender beliefs, but also may change those attitudes through the life course (Barber & Axinn, 1998; Bram, 1984). Morgan and Waite (1987, p. 545) summarize this dialectic with the

statement that “value orientations are both rationale for plans of action and a justification for past behavior.”

Egalitarian gender role attitudes have had an impact on family formation decisions of women, with education and career advancement delaying both marriage and child-bearing (Barber & Axinn, 1998; Cunningham et al., 2005; Koropecjy-Cox & Call, 2007; Rowland, 2007). Even before the birth of their first child, women who became mothers were more traditional than those who remained childless (Baber & Dreyer, 1986; Bram, 1984), suggesting that gender attitudes may be exogenous to fertility behavior. However, evidence also shows that becoming a mother results in a shift to more traditional views on gender (Morgan & Waite, 1987), as does having more children and larger kin networks (Liao & Cai, 1995).

Human capital factors such as education, income, and employment history also enhance gender egalitarianism (Cunningham, 2008; Cunningham et al., 2005; Tallichet & Wilits, 1986). Tallichet and Wilits (1986), in a panel study, also found that adolescent girls with more egalitarian gender views subsequently achieved greater levels of education than their counterparts, but were no less likely to marry and have children. These few short-term longitudinal studies suggest that gender role attitudes influence major life decisions that bear on family formation and career trajectories.

Of course, family and career decisions of women rest on the same underlying foundation; valuing higher education, establishing a stable career, either delaying marriage or never marrying, and having fewer children or remaining childless are interdependent and have a common source in liberal attitudes about women’s role in society (Bram, 1984; Keizer, Dykstra, & Jansen, 2007). However, the question of whether gender role attitudes motivate family and career decisions, or reflect them, has not been resolved. Research on the reciprocal relationship between gender ideology and life pathways of women has been mixed, but show support for both perspectives.

## 3. Hypothesized model

The purpose of our investigation is to examine how life decisions and gender role attitudes are mutually interdependent over the life course of baby boom women as they age from young adulthood to midlife. The three goals are to (1) document whether gender role ideology expressed in late adolescence and early adulthood has consequences for family and human capital decisions of women following the transition to adulthood, (2) describe long-term patterns of change in women’s gender role ideology over 34 years, and (3) examine the contribution of earlier family and human capital decisions to the long-term change in gender role ideology in both “liberalization” and “stagnation” periods.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Sample

This study used eight waves of data (1971–2005) from the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG). The LSOG

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