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# Structural stability, quantitative change: A latent class analysis approach towards gender role attitudes in Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, social science surveys have aimed to assess respondents' attitudes towards gender roles. In this paper, a model-based clustering approach towards gender role attitudes is proposed in contrast to commonly used dimensional methods. Working from a role theory perspective, we expect different profiles in the population when it comes to role expectations. Using data from the German General Social Survey in 1991 and 2012, we identify attitude patterns via multi-group latent class analysis, taking differences between Eastern and Western Germany into account. Five latent classes representing different combinations of role expectations towards couples and parents and varying levels of intensity are distinguished. Attitude change is assessed by comparing latent class prevalence over time, while statistically testing for measurement equivalence. The analysis reveals a regionally variable decrease in traditional role models: Eastern Germany exhibits a faster pace of 'de-traditionalization' and less potential for role conflicts regarding working mothers.

## 1. Introduction

Change and persistence in gender roles – beliefs, norms, and expectations of 'appropriate' behavior based on sex – have been widely discussed topics in the social sciences over the last decades (e.g., [Cotter et al., 2011](#); [Lindsey, 2015](#); [Mason et al., 1976](#)). In many social science surveys, e.g., the U.S. General Social Survey, the British Understanding Society Panel, the International Social Survey Programme or the German General Social Survey, respondents' attitudes towards gender roles are assessed via several items that mainly involve attitudes towards the division of labor in the family and the consequences of women working. Analyses of gender role attitudes usually assume a dimensional structure, whereas clustering approaches are relatively rare. In particular, the construct has often been operationalized as one-dimensional, ranging from a traditional, male breadwinner model to an egalitarian point of view (e.g., [Cotter et al., 2011](#); [Knudsen and Wærness, 2001](#)). Other researchers assume two dimensions, arguing that support for single-earner households does not necessarily imply opposition towards dual-earner arrangements ([Blasius and Thiessen, 2006](#)). In doing so they distinguish between items which concern women's nurturant and instrumental roles ([Scott, 2008](#)) or differentiate between the perceived consequences of women participating in paid labor for families, and general gender norms ([Blohm and Walter, 2016](#); [Sjöberg, 2004](#)). Irrespective of the number and designation of dimensions, the approaches share the general assumption of a dimensional structure of gender role attitudes that holds true for the whole population.

In the dimensional conceptualization, attitude change is assessed as a shift on a latent continuum. Though seldom stated explicitly, researchers generally suppose that the scale of this continuum is time-invariant. It is (implicitly) assumed that changes in response distributions can unanimously be attributed to attitude changes, i.e. that the results are not compromised by time-related

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non-substantive variation. Operating under these conditions, a large body of research affirms that, over the last decades of the 20th century, there is – albeit at different paces and without a strictly linear course – a global trend towards egalitarian attitudes (Braun and Scott, 2009; Dorius and Alwin, 2012; Scott, 2008). However, the question as to whether the assumption of the construct's invariance holds true – that is, whether measurement equivalence is given – is rarely assessed.

In this paper we propose a model-based clustering approach towards gender roles as an alternative to this widespread dimensional analysis strategy. Instead of extracting dimensions from a set of items, we apply latent class analysis (LCA), identifying groups (latent classes) with different 'attitude profiles'. Theoretically, the clustering approach draws on classic sociological conceptualizations of the term 'role' (Dahrendorf, 1964; Linton, 1936; Merton, 1957; Parsons, 1951). In this perspective, gender role attitudes involve role expectations pertaining to distinct statuses, such as mother, employee, or wife. This complex of – potentially conflicting – expectations regarding the behavior of men and women in diverse familial and organizational roles suggests that there are different latent classes that comprise distinct combinations of gender role expectations (Grunow et al., 2018; Knight and Brinton, 2017).

In a latent class framework, attitude change is assessed by comparing the number, composition, and size of classes at different time points. In this context, we explicitly take the possibility of time-related structural changes and non-substantive variation into account. Therefore, it is considered a necessary precondition to test for measurement equivalence before drawing any substantive conclusions about attitude change, i.e., an equal number of classes and equivalence of class-specific response probabilities in the case of LCA. While dimensional methods also allow researchers to test for measurement equivalence, this has hardly been realized in the context of gender role attitudes (Blasius and Thiessen, 2006; Constantin and Voicu, 2015). We exemplify our approach by using data on gender role attitudes from the German General Social Survey (GGSS) of 1991 and 2012.

The article is structured as follows: We start with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological conditions of the clustering approach, followed by some information on gender relations in Germany. Then, we apply LCA to six categorical gender role items from the GGSS. We interpret the resulting classes and conduct tests for measurement equivalence. Subsequently, attitude change is assessed by comparing class prevalence over time. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and the methodological implications of our approach.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Gender roles as social roles

The methodological decision in favor of a clustering approach can be illustrated by situating gender roles within the sociological paradigm of social roles (Lindsey, 2015). Linton (1936) describes social roles as the behavior of occupants of a certain social status that is oriented towards the patterned expectations of others. In modern societies, individuals occupy multiple statuses at the same time, such as mother, employee, and wife. In turn, each status is characterized by an array of roles related to the social circle of the status occupant. Such a 'role set' (Merton, 1957) may, for example, incorporate a mother's interaction with her children, but also with the children's teachers or their father. Inter-role conflicts occur when a person's status-set includes roles which are mutually incompatible (Dahrendorf, 1964). For example, a father is expected to spend time with his children, an activity that may collide with his perceived duty to work in order to support the family.

These considerations imply that the *structure* and *combination* of role expectations can be expected to differ between individuals. For example, some people's expectations of a mother's behavior towards her children may have implications for their perception of all women in paid labor, while for others these subjects are entirely unconnected. In this perspective, a clustering model investigating segments of the population with different combinations of role expectations is more in line with role-theoretical implications than the postulation of a dimensional structure that is expected to hold for all individuals. A clustering approach that is directly based on single items facilitates a differentiated analysis of heterogeneity in answer patterns. At the same time, it preserves as much information as possible on role expectations towards different statuses and reflects the interplay of various role expectations in distinct groups.

Role expectations are learned and internalized via socialization processes in social institutions such as the family and the education system (Dahrendorf, 1964; Parsons, 1951) and are characterized by values and norms which evolved in a specific social context (Parsons, 1951). Social roles can thus be understood as a linkage between the individual, its social circle, and society at large. In the context of gender, these roles are currently undergoing major changes in contemporary societies (McHugh and Frieze, 1997). Lopata (2006) argues that social differentiation in advanced industrial societies leads to more complex role sets, as well as to an increased likelihood of role conflicts. Role expectations are not static, but can be expected to differentiate across time, for example when the 'role-set' (Merton, 1957) of a wife is gradually perceived as more independent from the one of a mother. These changes cannot be conceptualized bipolarly on a continuum from traditionality to modernity (cp. Gusfield, 1967), or, as in the context of gender roles, egalitarianism (Knight and Brinton, 2017). In addition, social roles change in different ways: for instance, the role definitions of wives and mothers have been undergoing more substantial changes in the last decades than those of husbands and fathers. Lopata (2006) also points out that family roles change to varying degrees depending on aspects such as ethnicity, religion, and social class and their interweaving. Accordingly, we assume that gender role expectations will not only have different structures in different segments of the population, these structures may also be subject to differential changes over time. These considerations imply that testing for measurement invariance is necessary.

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