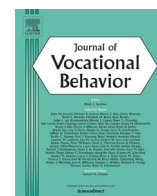




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## Gender-role attitudes and parental work decisions after childbirth: A longitudinal dyadic perspective with dual-earner couples<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

The present research investigates the impact of gender-role attitudes on dual-earner couples' parental work decisions after childbirth. We assumed both parents' length of leave and changes in working hours are associated with individual as well as the partner's attitudes. Dyadic data from two lagged-design studies (Study 1:  $N = 138$  heterosexual couples; Study 2:  $N = 168$  heterosexual couples) were analyzed by using the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) to account for interdependencies between spouses. As expected, in Study 1 fathers' individual attitudes predicted their changes in working hours. Fathers with more egalitarian attitudes decreased their working hours to a larger extent. Most importantly with respect to the interdependence between couples' attitudes and each partner's decisions concerning the work and the family domains, results of both studies showed that fathers' attitudes predicted their wives' work decisions: women with more egalitarian partners took shorter leaves and decreased their working hours less. In contrast, mothers' attitudes did not influence their husbands' behavior. Hence, this research highlights the importance of couple dynamics, that is, men's gender-role attitudes, to explain women's work-involvement decisions after childbirth.

Having a baby is associated with numerous changes and reorganizations in parents' daily life. A particularly important challenge concerns mothers' and fathers' work life, such as (temporary) parental leave,<sup>1</sup> and future work engagement. Young mothers and fathers might wonder which work- and family-related decisions are best for themselves and which ones are best for their partner. During pregnancy and the first months after childbirth, beliefs about the ideal mother role are expected to be especially salient, and might, therefore, be particularly important predictors for work decisions.

An investigation of factors that might influence parents' work decisions is of utmost importance for various reasons. Leaves of absence and (temporary) part-time schedules have been found to have adverse consequences on women's and men's careers, such as lack of promotion and reduced income (Abele & Spurk, 2011; Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Schneer & Reitman, 1997; Spivey, 2005). At the same time, with respect to mothers' work-family-related behavior, previous research has highlighted the impacts of short leaves on mothers' physical and mental health (e.g., Chatterji & Markowitz, 2004; Gjerdingen, Froberg, Chaloner, & McGovern, 1993). Moreover, mothers who work part-time instead of full-time reported better health and fewer work-family conflicts (e.g., Buehler & O'Brien, 2011). Concerning the effects of fathers' work-family-related behavior, positive effects of longer leaves and shorter working hours on their relationships with their children

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term *parental leave* (or *maternity/paternity leave*) refers to any period of time a woman or man takes off from work following childbirth. We do not restrict the term to statutory provisions for leave.

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have been found (e.g., O'Brien, 2009; Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). Furthermore, ongoing debate continues on the relevance of parental leave for children's health (e.g., Berger, Hill, & Waldfogel, 2005; Buehler & O'Brien, 2011; O'Brien, 2009; Tanaka, 2005).

The current study examined the impact of mothers' and fathers' gender-role attitudes on dual-earner couples' parental leave and employment decisions after childbirth, and, most importantly, accounted for interdependencies between couples. Therefore, dyadic data were analyzed using the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), "a model of dyadic relationships that integrates a conceptual view of interdependence with the appropriate statistical techniques for measuring and testing it" (Cook & Kenny, 2005, p. 101). By considering the non-independence between spouses, the APIM was found to be particularly useful in the study of couple data (Cook & Snyder, 2005; Kenny et al., 2006). Moreover, we used longitudinal data from two studies to investigate intra-personal and inter-personal effects of gender-role attitudes on parents' work decision. In sum, our research aims at deeper insight into the interplay between partners' attitudes to better understand each partner's work decisions in an interdependent relationship.

## 1. Gender-role attitudes and parental work decisions: from an individual to a truly dyadic perspective

Mothers' and fathers' work-family interplay can be conceptualized from role-theoretical perspectives. As posited by role-theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), individuals take different social roles depending on their context (e.g., worker, father, spouse). In dual-earner couples, both spouses occupy the worker role. During the transition to parenthood, the mother and father roles are added, respectively. These roles involve specific expectations and require time and effort. Thus, being engaged in different roles and being faced with competing demands can lead to role conflicts (e.g., work-to-family conflicts) in men and women. Most importantly with respect to roles in the work and the family domains, role expectations are clearly gendered and reflected in individual attitudes that might be subsumed under the term gender-role attitudes.

Gender-role attitudes (GRA) are beliefs about ideal behaviors and responsibilities for men and women (Eagly, 1987), ranging from traditional to egalitarian. In accordance with traditional attitudes, the woman's role is being the homemaker, whereas the man's role is being the breadwinner. These beliefs are closely related to ideals about motherhood. Non-traditional attitudes allow for less gender-differentiated roles. Thus, they include the beliefs that women should participate in financially supporting the family and should also be able to have a career, while men should participate in childcare and other aspects of household labor (e.g., Helgeson, 2012).

According to the "doing-gender" approach, gender is considered something people do, contingent on the interactional context in which they are embedded (West & Zimmerman, 1987). By specifying what men and women generally should do and by including expectations about how to be and to behave, GRA may guide men's and women's ideal involvement in work and family domains (e.g., Eagly, 1987). Davis and Greenstein (2009) proposed that GRA act as a lens through which both women and men view their social world and upon which they make decisions. Therefore, individual attitudes have an impact on various family-related behaviors, such as child-rearing on the one hand, and on work-related behaviors on the other (for an overview, see Davis & Greenstein, 2009).

A number of studies have confirmed relationships between *individuals'* GRA and *individuals'* parental leave and adjustment of working hours after childbirth. Women who held traditional GRA were more likely to interrupt labor force participation following childbirth (Glass & Riley, 1998) and to decrease their working hours to a higher extent than their egalitarian counterparts (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Schober & Scott, 2012). With regard to fathers' leaves, GRA were found to be an important determinant with less traditional fathers more often making use of paternity leave (Vogt & Pull, 2010) and taking longer leaves (Duvander, 2014; Hyde, Essex, & Horton, 1993). Furthermore, among men with egalitarian attitudes, fatherhood was associated with a decrease in working hours whereas among men with traditional attitudes, it was associated with an increase (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000). In conclusion, we expect the following intra-personal associations:

**Hypotheses 1 and 2.** Mothers with more egalitarian attitudes take shorter maternity leaves (H1) and decrease their working hours after re-entry less (H2).

**Hypotheses 3 and 4.** Fathers with more egalitarian attitudes take longer paternity leaves (H3) and decrease their working hours after childbirth to a larger extent (H4).

From a systemic perspective (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979), individuals are part of an ecological environment comprising multiple nested systems. Voydanoff (2007) referred to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory to conceptualize the work-family interplay. Microsystems refer to the individual's immediate environments, such as work and family. At the same time, work and family represent an important mesosystem, that is, interrelated microsystems. In addition, exosystems have to be taken into account, that is, mesosystems that include microsystems in which individuals do not participate themselves, such as the partner's workplace. Finally, micro-, meso- and exosystems are assumed to be nested in the macrosystem of the cultural context, which is characterized by specific opportunity structures and constraints, such as legal regulations with respect to parental leaves.

A mesosystemic perspective is also offered by Greenhaus and Powell (2012), who emphasized that family situations are often taken into account when work decisions are made; consequently, they introduced the notion of the "family-relatedness of work decisions." Especially among dual-earner couples whose work and family courses have to be regarded as entwined ("linked lives;" Elder, 1994, p. 9), both partners' individual work decisions are influenced by family considerations. In conclusion, based on system-theoretical assumptions, beside one's own attitudes, meaningful others' attitudes and expectations (here: the partners') influence individual behavior. GRA are likely to appear in parents' everyday interactions, signaling – directly or indirectly – to one partner what the other partner considers desirable or undesirable. As a consequence, one partner's GRA should influence the other partner's work-family-related behavior.

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