



# The transformation of US gender role attitudes: cohort replacement, social-structural change, and ideological learning

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## Abstract

Growing support for gender equality and a shift toward less restrictive views of gender roles suggest a significant transformation of US public opinion during the second half of the twentieth century. Following the initial discovery of these trends in the 1970s, attitudes toward gender roles received less scholarly attention in the 1980s, due in large part to questions about the relevance of this type of opinion change for understanding patterns of stability and change in behaviors and institutions related to gender. Since the early 1990s, a new generation of research has reported evidence linking changing gender role attitudes to subsequent change in the behavior of individuals and also to the level of gender inequality within specific institutions. While gender role attitudes appear to have significant effects within the context of family institutions, questions about the precise causal *origins* of these changing attitudes have received insufficient attention in the recent literature. This paper contributes to the sociological reconsideration of this opinion trend by evaluating competing explanations of changing gender role attitudes. We find evidence of substantial cohort replacement effects. Further analyses suggest that processes of ideological learning may mediate a large portion of the cohort replacement effect, also explaining much of the contribution of adult attitude change to opinion trends. We discuss implications of these findings for advancing the literature on gender role attitudes, and also for fruitfully revisiting questions about the role of ideology in US public opinion.

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## 1. Introduction

Changes in US attitudes toward gender roles during the past three decades have been large and generally monotonic. Highly restrictive attitudes, characterized by negative beliefs about women in non-domestic roles, an unwillingness to support women's rights across a wide range of institutions, and a tendency to endorse gender-based differences in power or responsibility have evolved into seemingly more liberal attitudes (Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Cherlin and Walters, 1981; Ferree, 1974; Mason and Lu, 1988; Thornton and Freedman, 1979). Opinion trends of this magnitude and apparent degree of coherence are relatively rare (Page and Shapiro, 1992, Chapter 3), and the consistently liberal direction of these trends can be observed in changing responses displayed in Fig. 1 to eight gender role attitude items from the General Social Surveys (Davis et al., 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Although the existence of liberal trends in gender role attitudes is relatively well-known among opinion researchers, a fuller understanding of their causal origins and significance for other fields within contemporary sociology is under-developed. The explanation for this state of affairs may stem from the relatively specialized nature of opinion research and also from a more general skepticism among a number of social scientists regarding the significance of these opinion trends for understanding historical patterns of stability and change in gender inequalities and behaviors. To better understand the rationale behind our investigation of causal sources of changing gender role attitudes, it is thus useful to briefly consider the evolution of this research literature.

In the 1970s, a first generation of researchers documented the existence of liberal trends in gender role attitudes, identifying several plausible (and divergent) explanations for these trends (Ferree, 1974; Mason et al., 1976; Thornton and Freedman, 1979). Limited by the short time frame covered by surveys, these studies did not attempt to fully adjudicate competing hypotheses, and this research literature slowed during the 1980s in the face of growing skepticism regarding the sociological significance of these opinion trends. This skepticism was fueled in part by the growing influence of sociological theories that criticized "sex role" approaches for ignoring macro-level dimensions of gender, and for explaining gender inequalities solely as a function of the acquisition of gender identities in childhood (Berk, 1985; Hess and Ferree, 1987; Lopata and Thorne, 1978). Taken together, this work called into question the capacity of changing gender role attitudes to exert pressure for significant change in behavior or institutions, suggesting that unresolved debates concerning their causal origins might be of limited intellectual importance.

Over the course of the past decade, however, a new generation of research has suggested evidence for the causal influence of gender role attitudes on several behaviors and relations within family and political institutions, suggesting in turn the sociological significance of *trends* in these attitudes. For instance, a number of researchers have

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<sup>1</sup> The magnitude of these trends can be appreciated when viewed from the longer historical perspective provided by an early Gallup Poll (fielded in the General Social Surveys using the same question wording and response format): in 1936, only 18% of Americans approved of a married woman "earning money in business or industry," but in 1972 over 60% of respondents supported married women's labor force participation, and this figure has held steady at approximately 80% since the 1980s.

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