

Should Mothers of Preschoolers Work for Pay?

Changing Attitudes in Seven Countries, 1988-2002

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Public opinion regarding the desirability of married women working reflects cultural beliefs about appropriate gender roles, as well as practical assessments of family economic need, the financial returns to female labor force participation, and the difficulty women have balancing work and family. As documented across countries, gender role attitudes have become less traditional and more egalitarian (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Crompton, Brockmann, and Lyonette 2005; Scott, Alwin, and Braun 1996; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Although maternal employment was long seen as detrimental to children, this concern has abated in recent decades. According to a study of seven Western countries, there was a general decline over time in respondents who agreed that “(a) pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works” (Braun and Scott 2009). Although the rise in married women’s labor force participation is a global phenomenon, there are country-to-country differences in normative beliefs about whether mothers of young children should work for pay and, if so, how much (Treas and Widmer 2000). These differences invite cross-national analyses of changing attitudes toward maternal employment, particularly for women.

If attitudes have grown more favorable toward employment of mothers with preschool children, the mechanisms behind these changes remain a matter of speculation. On the one hand, in advanced industrial countries, demographic shifts in the composition of populations have been largely favorable toward liberal views (Charles and Cech 2010; Knudsen and Waerness 2001). Although the population has tilted a bit toward more conservative older cohorts over time, women have become better educated, less likely to be married or religiously affiliated, more likely to work for pay, and more likely to have been raised by a working mother. Even without the influence of compositional shifts, it is possible that respondent characteristics have become more (or less) salient for attitudes.

Of particular interest, for example, is the possible influence of childhood socialization, as indicated by whether or not a respondent had a mother who worked for pay. As married women’s labor force participation has risen, more women report having had a mother who worked when they were children. Because the grown children of working mothers are known to be more accepting of maternal employment (Charles and Cech 2010; Ex and Janssens 1998; Knudsen and Waerness 2001), this implies a compositional boost in attitudes approving mothers who work for pay. Of course, when most mothers work for pay, their influence may be less consequential—both because working mothers will be less highly selected for non-traditional gender views and because tolerance of maternal employment may permeate the society. In one U.S. panel study, mothers’ employment history proved more important for gender attitudes of daughters’ born in earlier, rather than later, cohorts—suggesting that family socialization is more consequential when maternal labor force participation is less common and cultural views less supportive (Moen, Erickson, and Dempster-McClain 1997).

Drawing on 1988-2002 survey data for seven countries, this paper ascertains whether women in all countries examined reported comparable increased in support for paid work by mothers of

preschoolers. Next, in identifying the respondent characteristics which predict attitudes, the paper asks whether compositional changes in the population can account for attitude changes and whether the relationship of attitudes and respondent characteristics changed over time.

Data, Measures, and Methods

This paper relies on the data from the 1988 and 2002 waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) Family and Changing Gender Roles modules. Seven countries—Austria, Germany (West), Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the US—offer comparable variables in both waves. Analysis focuses on 4608 women, aged 18 or older, in 1988 and 3594 in 2002. Country-specific samples range from 306 for West Germany in 1988 to 1033 for (West) Germany in 2002.

The dependent measure for attitudes toward working mothers are based on an item asking whether women should work full-time, part-time or not at all when there is a child under school age. To facilitate decomposition analyses, responses are recoded to work (=1, including work full-time and part-time) and stay at home (=0). Independent variables include respondent's age, partnership status, educational attainment, work status, maternal employment, and religious affiliation, as well as country dummy variables and survey year. Age in years is a continuous variable. Partnership distinguishes married or living as married (=1; else=0). Educational attainment for the countries is harmonized into two groups: above the secondary educational level (=1) and secondary or lower (=0). Work status is divided into three categories: full-time, part-time or less than part-time, and not working. Categorical or numeric data on family income for the countries are harmonized into six categories. Whether mother worked before the respondent was 14 years old (yes=1, no=0) measures early gender role socialization. The respondent's religious affiliation is classified into four types: Roman Catholic, Protestant, other religion, and no religious affiliation.

The analysis builds on logistic regression models for whether mothers of preschoolers should stay at home or work for pay. Beginning with main effects, we add interactions between key independent variables, country, and survey year to ascertain whether the salience of respondent characteristics for attitudes changed and whether all countries display the same net trend over time. Lastly, Fairlie decomposition is used to gauge the extent to which compositional changes in population account for the growing approval of maternal employment.

Findings

How did attitudes toward employment of preschoolers' mothers change over time? Between 1988 and 2002, women's support for paid employment for mothers of preschoolers increased significantly in all countries, except for Hungary where attitudes were essentially unchanged. On average, the women favoring employment went from 42% to 59%. The increases in approval of working mothers were relatively modest for the liberal welfare states, U.S. and Great Britain, and more substantial for the conservative ones, Austria and (West) Germany, where enthusiasm for maternal employment was generally lower.

How did other characteristics of the population change over the period? Women were more highly educated and less likely to be married. Higher percentages in 2002 worked at least part-time, lacked any religious affiliation, and had childhood experience with a working mother. Thus, these variables shifted toward segments of the population known to be more supportive of maternal employment. On the other hand, the 2002 respondents were, on average, two years older. On whole, these compositional changes could be expected to foster more supportive

attitudes toward maternal employment (as indicated by the results of logistic analyses predicting attitudes favoring working or staying home).

Did shifts in population composition account for the increased support for working mothers?

Fairlie decomposition methods show that changes in demographic composition of the population only account for 13% of the 17 percentage point gap between 1988 and 2002 $((.023/.178)*100=13.14\%)$. Taking education as an example, the contribution of the rise in educational attainment to the total difference in support for maternal employment is 6.12% $((.011/.178)*100=6.12\%)$. The limited contribution of demographic change leaves us to speculate that attitude changes arose either from changes in the salience of respondent characteristics for attitudes or, alternately, from changes in the underlying beliefs.

Does the impact of these predictive respondent characteristics change from 1988-2002? To answer this question, we look to logistic models with interaction effects for survey year and key explanatory variables, namely, the respondent's characteristics and country dummies. All things considered, we find a significant interaction with time (survey year) for only one individual-level variable. The association of respondent's mother's employment and support for working mothers declines between 1988 and 2002. Childhood socialization counts less for attitudes over time.

Time by country interactions are in line with an earlier finding: Compared to the liberal US, the magnitude of the 1988-2002 increase in support is greater for West Germany, Austria, Ireland, and the Netherlands. Further analyses reveal that the increase in support for working mothers is mostly larger for part-time employment versus staying at home in these countries compared to the US. Main effects are generally not very different with interaction terms included. However, respondents either married or living as married become significantly less likely to support working mothers with preschoolers when interactions are introduced in the models.

Conclusion

Women's increased support for mothers working instead of staying home with their preschoolers is not just a function of the greater salience of respondents' demographic characteristics for attitudes over time. If the experience of having had a working mother is any indicator, respondent characteristics came to matter less. Furthermore, demographic shifts in population composition can account for only a small part of the overall increase in support. Changing attitudes, therefore, reflect a general ratcheting up of tolerance for employment for mothers with young children.

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