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Reflexion

Reconciling studies of men's gender attitudes and fertility: Response to Westoff and Higgins

Frances Goldscheider

Livia Sz. Oláh

Allan Puur

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Reconciling studies of men's gender attitudes and fertility: Response to Westoff and Higgins

Frances Goldscheider¹

Livia Sz. Oláh²

Allan Puur³

Note: This reflexion was written in reaction to the paper by Westoff and Higgins entitled "Relationship between men's gender attitudes and fertility: Response to Puur et al.'s "Men's childbearing desires and the views of the male role in Europe at the dawn of the 21st century", *Demographic Research* 19: 1883-1912", which appeared in *Demographic Research* 21: 65-74.

Abstract

A reflexion by Westoff and Higgins (2009) in response to a study by Puur, Oláh, Tazi-Preve and Dorbritz (2008) has recently been published in this journal. Both articles address the relationship between men's gender attitudes and fertility across European countries, using different datasets and quite different measures of gender attitudes, and producing opposing results. Based on that, Westoff and Higgins suggest caution regarding accepting the conclusion of the Puur et al. analysis that increased equality might increase fertility. We respond to their arguments here by elaborating on the theoretical underpinnings of the claim presented in the original article and thus the importance of the differences of the measures of gender attitudes applied in the two studies (gender roles in the public vs. private spheres). With this contribution, we stress the need for further research and theorizing on the links between men's gender attitudes and fertility.

¹ Dept. of Family Science, Univ. of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA.

E-mail: Frances_Goldscheider@brown.edu.

² Dept. of Sociology, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden. E-mail: livia.olah@sociology.su.se.

³ Estonian Interuniversity Population Research Centre, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia.
E-Mail: allan@ekdk.estnet.ee.

Reconciling studies of men's gender attitudes and fertility

Sometimes what appear to be contradictory conclusions can both be “right.” That seems to be the case in the analyses of the relationships between men's gender attitudes and fertility in 8 European countries of Puur, Oláh, Tazi-Preve, and Dorbritz (2008), hereafter Puur et al., and those performed by Westoff and Higgins (2009), hereafter W&H, on the same countries and several other developed societies. In Puur et al., men's egalitarian attitudes are associated with higher fertility; in W&H, in contrast, men's egalitarian attitudes are linked with lower fertility. When these contradictions are both based on solid empirical analyses, as in this case, it is incumbent on the field to find ways to reconcile them. This usually means developing theories and explanations that can embrace them both.

Puur et al. imply a theory of gender role change referring to “the incomplete gender revolution” as do several of the “exceptions” cited by W&H. And there is a strong theoretical argument in the literature that the gender revolution really has two quite separate parts (e.g., Goldscheider 2000; Goldscheider and Waite 1991). First comes the increase in gender equality in the public sphere (primarily in employment), when women's labor force participation increases in response to greater education, lower fertility, and higher life expectancy. This is followed, sometimes more slowly—in the United States, it has taken more than a hundred years (Goldscheider 2002)—and sometimes more rapidly, as appears to be happening in Eastern Europe (Gal and Kligman 2000), by increases in gender equality in the private sphere of the home, family, and dependent care.

According to this view, in the first stage of the gender revolution, families are under pressure, as women increasingly share men's providing tasks in the public sphere while men share women's caregiving and domestic tasks in the private sphere much less, putting great pressure on families to limit fertility. In the second stage, families are strengthened, as men begin to contribute directly to the unpaid caring work of the family, bringing fertility closer to the replacement level. This implies that until we reach the second stage of the gender revolution, studies examining the effect on fertility of egalitarian gender role attitudes re public sphere activities *will probably* find a negative relationship, while those measuring private sphere attitudes, especially *men's* private sphere attitudes, might well find a positive relationship.

A corollary of this approach suggests that moving into the second stage of the gender revolution would not only increase fertility, but also reduce union instability, resulting in this two-stage conceptualization gaining more and more traction. The primary focus of the theorizing and evidence to date, however, has been on fertility. As argued by McDonald (2000), current low fertility rates in the developed world are the consequence of the low level of gender equality in family responsibilities despite high

gender equality in economic provision. Thus, greater male involvement in domestic tasks and childrearing will not only increase domestic gender equality, but most probably fertility as well (see also Neyer and Andersson 2008). Similarly, Feyrer et al. (2008) emphasize the importance of greater male involvement in childrearing for increasing women's willingness to have more children, as a response to women's increasing labor-market status and household bargaining power.

Supporting this theoretical reasoning, studies in Sweden show that when fathers take more parental leave for their previous child(ren), the couple is more likely to have a second and third birth (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2008; Oláh 2003). Similar results using different models, data, measures of father involvement, and methods of analysis, have been found in Norway (Duvander et al. 2008), Denmark (Brodmann et al. 2007), Italy and Spain (Cooke 2006), Spain (Sevilla-Sanz and De Laat 2006), New Zealand, Denmark and Norway (Feyrer et al. 2008), Hungary (Oláh 2003), Australia (Craig 2007) and the United States (Kaufman 2000; Torr and Short 2004). In some cases the pattern is found to be curvilinear, with the most and least egalitarian men having the highest fertility while those in the middle have the lowest fertility (Torr and Short 2004).

The family-strengthening effect of more egalitarian attitudes and behavior among men with respect to union stability can be explained by men's contribution diminishing the stress their female partners experience in everyday family life (Forste 2002). Such an effect has been much less studied, but findings for the US and Sweden show that more egalitarian men are significantly less likely to experience the dissolution of their partnership than are traditional men (see Kaufman 2000; Oláh 2001). All in all, there is empirical evidence from a number of societies across the developed world supporting the conclusion of the Puur et al. article, that as egalitarian attitudes and behaviors regarding the male role in the private sphere become more prevalent, this may have "in the long run...some positive prospects for Europe's fertility development" (p. 1902).

Puur et al.'s analysis examined surveys of eight European "countries" from the Population Policy Acceptance Study of the early 2000s (treating the two portions of Germany as two countries), and found that the 'egalitarian attitudes of men' predict both higher fertility aspirations and higher attained fertility within these countries (although less conclusively so in their cross-country analyses). A scale of "egalitarian attitudes" was constructed for the study using fairly contrasting statements with regard to men's balancing of work and family roles:

- G2c. It is not good if the man stays at home and cares for the children and the woman goes out to work.
- G2d. Family life often suffers because men concentrate too much on their work.

- G2e. For a man, the job should be more important than the family.

Statements c and e each specifically reject the classic “home economics” perspective of Becker (1991) and his followers, who theorize that gender is *not* the issue in the division of labor, which rather exists as a response to the differential returns to paid and caring work typical of men and women through the 1960s. If a given couple has a *different* combination of returns, with women more productive than their partners in the work force and a difference greater than gender difference in efficiency in carrying out caring roles, such couples should undertake the division of labor which statement c affirms is “not good.” And, they would argue, the family would be worse off if men in such couples acted on the sentiments of statement e. Both statements, then, assert a view of the family as a site for ‘doing gender’ (Berk 1985), not an example of the ‘gains to trade’ (Espenshade 1985). Statement d, in contrast, rejects the male role as being wholly specialized in the public sphere, affirming the importance of the involvement of both parents for a caring home. Despite their differences, all three statements clearly focus the respondent’s attention on men’s obligations to the home and on balancing home and work, as women have been trying to do, and hence, the possibility that work should not dominate men’s lives. Puur et al. focus on ‘the male gender role’ *in the family* and chose items to reflect this.

In contrast, W&H argue that there is actually a single theoretical construct, which they call “more general gender role attitudes,” and affirm that since “the previous literature overwhelmingly has associated more egalitarian gender role attitudes with lower rather than higher fertility,” Puur et al.’s results must be wrong. They even describe the questionnaire items used in Puur et al. as “a proxy for more general gender attitudes” (p. 66). They analyze the same set of countries as Puur et al. (although the former East Germany was excluded), but with “more general” measures of gender role attitudes. The five items they use for their analysis of the European/World Values dataset included:

1. On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.
2. When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.
3. A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.
4. Do you think a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled, or is this not necessary?
5. If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but doesn’t want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove?

W&H agree that the items they use address rather different aspects of gender differentials than the ones in the Puur et al. analysis, but feel they “capture at least some

underlying attitudes toward gender equality” (p. 68). Although the 2nd question might include a concern for men’s role in the family (at least financially), the other items clearly do not, focusing instead on gender equality in the public sphere, as well as women’s ‘need’ to become a mother and hence, presumably even if she works, she should not work much. (This applies even more to Austria, Italy and the Netherlands, as items no. 1 and 3, addressing both the male and female roles, were not available for them.) In fact, the questions on which their measure was based, conform quite closely to Margaret Mead’s conception of the “three sexes”: 1) men (whose lives are focused in the public sphere), 2) professional women (who get their primary satisfaction from their work, as she did), and 3) domestic women (who get their primary satisfaction from home and children (Mead 1965). The two-by-two table of gender and sphere collapses into three categories, not four, disregarding the possibility of men having a serious caring role in the family. Since the other items relied on by W&H focus mainly on women’s choice between work and children (and not on the ways men could make that choice less onerous), not surprisingly their analysis shows a negative relationship between egalitarian attitudes and fertility.

W&H conclude with a discussion that questions their earlier claim that there is a single gender dimension, noting the “lack of consensus about how to measure gender equality” (p. 71) and its “multiple components” (p. 72), and then spend several dense paragraphs on how complex it all is. They end by recommending a “cautionary interpretation” of the Puur et al. article: “...their—and our—results might be best interpreted in the following way: *some* measures of gender egalitarianism in *some* countries appear to be positively associated with higher fertility, while other measures are negatively associated” (p. 72, italics in original).

Identifying the contexts under which changes in men’s and women’s roles affect fertility, however, is critical, and we want to emphasize the importance of context in understanding the relationship between male attitudes towards gender equality and fertility. This requires that we separate measures of male gender attitudes into those associated with the public sphere and those associated with the private sphere. It also requires a historical orientation, and an understanding of the transitional ‘stage’ between the first ‘half’ of the gender revolution and the second, which may be the most problematic. During the transition, gender roles and expectations about them are very unclear, with young men often expecting their partners to combine earning with caregiving (and housecleaning), and young women wanting a good provider as well as a partner who is an involved father who shares housework. We also need to know much more about generational differences during this transition, and the pressures the older generations put upon the younger generations, and about how differences in class hamper or accelerate such a transition, or even “stall” it (Hochschild, 1989). How much do cohabitation and single living postpone couples’ coming to grips with the new

reality of shared roles, as they live in uncommitted unions or even separately, e.g., as LATs (those 'living-apart-together')?

Our argument reinforces the value of comparative analyses, since we have precious little systematic data on historical male attitudes towards gender equality. But that requires a systematic argument to pull these patterns into a theoretical context; only that way will further research clarify these issues, whether examined comparatively or historically. The authors of this reflexion hope that this 'debate' will generate even more research interest, in a wide variety of disciplines and among interdisciplinary teams, so that the challenges of the gender revolution, with its early consequences of lowest-low fertility and rising rates of union dissolution, can be met.

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