Gender-role attitudes and parental leave decisions: A longitudinal dyadic perspective with dual-earner couples

Anna M. Stertz & Bettina S. Wiese
Gender-role attitudes and parental work decisions after childbirth: A longitudinal dyadic perspective with dual-earner couples

Anna M. Stertz, Thorana Grether, Bettina S. Wiese

Highlights

- Investigation of parents' work decisions with a longitudinal dyadic design
- Use of two independent dyadic data sets
- Mothers with traditional partners take longer maternity leaves after childbirth.
- Mothers with traditional partners decrease working hours to a larger extent.
- Fathers' behavior is not influenced by mothers' attitudes.
Couples’ Work & Family Situation


- Work and family life courses of couples are interdependent

Parental leave?

How long?

Both of us?
Gender-Role Attitudes

- Beliefs about ideal behaviors and responsibilities for men and women (Eagly, 1987)
  
  traditional  ←  egalitarian

- Traditional attitudes: male breadwinner/female homemaker model

- Closely related to ideals about the mother role:
  
  • Central caregiver
  
  • Maternal employment → harmful to the child’s development

  (cf. Sieverding, 1990)
Gender-Role Attitudes & Parental Leave Decisions

Past research

Individual level:
– Women with traditional attitudes were more likely to interrupt their labor force participation after childbirth (Glass & Riley, 1998)


Couple level:
– In retrospect, couples’ attitudes were important for decisions on parental leave (Neumann & Meuser, 2017; Peukert, 2015)

Present research

Longitudinal dyadic perspective

Mothers’ and fathers’ attitudes

Mothers’ and fathers’ leave decisions
Present Research

Analytical approach & hypotheses

Actor-Partner-Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Cashy, & Cook, 2006)
Study Design & Sample

Project: Expectant parents’ career and family plans (PI: Bettina S. Wiese)

from 20. week of pregnancy

T1-questionnaire
- pregnant women
- partner

6 months

T2-questionnaire
- women
- partner

12 months

T3-questionnaire
- women
- partner

24 months

T4-questionnaire
- women
- partner

N = 138 couples

CH: 54 %; D: 45 %; AU: 1 %

73 % first parenthood

≥ 50 % university degree

Relationship duration (in years): $M = 7.59; SD = 3.90$

Married: 78.7 %

Shared household: 98.6 %
Measures

Gender-role attitudes (Sieverding, 1990)

- 4 Items; 6-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 6 = very much)
  
  e.g., “A child of preschool age is likely to suffer if his mother is working.”

Mothers: $M = 3.03$; $SD = 1.16$; $\alpha = .70$  
Fathers: $M = 3.30$; $SD = 1.11$; $\alpha = .78$

Length of leave

- Mothers: difference (1st day back at work – child’s birthday)

- Fathers: sum of leave days at T2/T3/T4

Mothers: $M = 11.65$ months; $SD = 10.45$  
Fathers: $M = 38$ days; $SD = 53.61$
Results

Control variables: country of residence, couple’s income, first parenthood, mother’s educational level, father’s educational level, mother’s prenatal working hours, father’s prenatal working hours, main earner (i.e., higher paternal income, higher maternal income, equal income)

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.
## Additional Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender-role attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>2.97 (1.15)</td>
<td>3.06 (1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>3.01 (1.05)</td>
<td>3.52 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of leave</strong> (in months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>15.36 (10.67)</td>
<td>8.46 (9.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>1.84 (2.06)</td>
<td>.78 (1.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Gender-role attitudes: German mothers have a mean score of 2.97 with a standard deviation of 1.15, compared to 3.06 (1.18) for Swiss mothers. German fathers score slightly lower at 3.01 (1.05) compared to 3.52 (1.11) for Swiss fathers.

- Length of leave: German mothers take an average of 15.36 months (SD 10.67) compared to 8.46 months (SD 9.25) for Swiss mothers. German fathers take an average of 1.84 months (SD 2.06) which translates to approximately 56 days, compared to 0.78 months (SD 1.30) or approximately 24 days for Swiss fathers.
Results – Subsample

Traditional gender-role attitudes
MOTHER

Traditional gender-role attitudes
FATHER

Length of leave
MOTHER

Length of leave
FATHER

Control variables: couple's income, first parenthood, mother’s educational level, father’s educational level, mother’s prenatal working hours, father’s prenatal working hours, main earner (i.e., higher paternal income, higher maternal income, equal income)

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.
Results – Subsample

Control variables: couple's income, first parenthood, mother’s educational level, father’s educational level, mother’s prenatal working hours, father’s prenatal working hours, main earner (i.e., higher paternal income, higher maternal income, equal income)

***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.
Discussion

Main findings

Mothers’ parental leave decisions are influenced by their partners’ gender-role attitudes, not vice versa.

When considering both parents’ attitudes simultaneously, the preferences of the partner have a stronger impact on mothers’ decisions than their own preferences.

Explanatory approaches

– The birth of a child is more life-changing for mothers than for fathers
   → new situation causes insecurity → orientation in line with the partner’s attitudes might be helpful

– Women are expected to be sensitive toward the needs of their family members (i.e., communal), men to behave in an independent way (i.e., agentic)
Continuation of this Research

Current research project: Couples’ parental leave decisions and experiences: A dyadic perspective on gender-role influences

Sample:

> 300 heterosexual dual-earner couples who are expecting their first child at T1
Thank you very much for your attention!

Dr. Anna M. Stertz

RWTH Aachen University
Institute of Psychology
Personnel and Organizational Psychology
stertz@psych.rwth-aachen.de