

Family and Gender Roles: How Attitudes Are Changing

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This paper addresses two main issues. The first concerns how attitudes towards marriage, motherhood, and the morality of family behaviours differs across nations, both in Europe and in the United States. I explore whether attitudes are converging over time; and to what extent there are generational differences regarding family values. I also explore the possibility that there may have been pronounced value shifts about some aspects of family life, while other values show greater continuity. The second part of the paper looks more specifically at changing gender roles. In particular, I briefly present some of the research that is being conducted as part of the ESRC Research Network on Gender Inequalities in Production and Reproduction (GeNet) to examine why gender roles in general and, more specifically, gender inequalities in domestic labour are so hard to change.

Individualisation and Family Values

It has been claimed that the family as an institution has become individualized in contemporary European society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2004). What does this mean? Is it true? And does it matter? The claim is an important one. The argument is that there has been a qualitative shift in terms of the understanding of family. From the 1960s onwards, in the era that some social theorists have termed the ‘second modernity’, the very notion of a ‘normal family’ has become redundant. Of course this is not to say that heterosexual parent-child families with traditional gender roles have vanished. Rather, that this particular family type is now one among many diverse family types. This leads on to questions about whether family values are

becoming increasingly relativized. Are traditional absolutes being overturned? Or is the rhetoric concerning the demise of traditional family values exaggerated (Scott, 1999; Scott and Braun 2006)? With my colleague, Michael Braun from ZUMA, I analyse three waves of the European Values Study to look at two sets of values. The first involves core values concerning marriage and motherhood; and the second relates to beliefs about the rights and wrongs of specific family related or sexual behaviours.

We focus particularly on how cross-national differences have changed over time and how far change is related to inter-generational differences in family values. Two major social changes are of relevance to the generational divide. First, the transformation of women's roles – particular in terms of women's increasing participation in the labour market. Second, the increasing secularisation which is likely to have eroded the traditional religious base of many moral absolutes associated with family issues and behaviours, like divorce, adultery, homosexuality and abortion.

The general pattern of change in household and family structures in Western European families has seen marriage rates fall, divorce and cohabitation on the increase and a marked drop in overall fertility, despite the increased numbers of children born out of wedlock. Such trends are used as evidence that the importance of family life is declining, with dire consequences for social integration. The theme of the changing role of women, both in terms of individual autonomy and in terms of female emancipation has been a core part of the conceptualisation of what some demographers call the 'second demographic revolution'. This refers to the changing demographic patterns since the 1960s including high divorce, decreasing fertility,

increased cohabitation and delayed marriage (Lesthaeghe, 1995) . These demographic changes are intertwined with changing ideologies concerning the importance of marriage and motherhood. There have also been important socio-legal changes in the family domain that reflect and encourage new moral stances regarding family related issues and behaviours.

The American sociologist David Popenoe has argued that it is individualism in its modern meaning of ‘emphasis on self-fulfilment’ and ‘pursuit of individual rather than collective interests’ that places the values of familism and individualism in opposition. He stresses that “in the current era, individualism has had a remarkable run. Women especially have been able to achieve self-fulfilment apart from the bourgeois family to a degree never before thought possible” (Popenoe 1988:305). Do country differences regarding support for motherhood go hand-in-hand with more traditional family values, as Popenoe’s notion of familism vs individualism would suggest? Our expectation is that support for motherhood will have much more to do with a country’s pro-natal policies than with traditional family morality. For example, in France, a country that is not renowned for a puritan sexual morality, there are marked economic incentives to have more than one child.

Our first hypothesis therefore is that traditional ideology supporting marriage and motherhood will be on the decline through Europe and the USA, in part because labour market changes that enhance women’s autonomy heighten the costs of marriage and motherhood. As Schumpeter suggested, more than sixty years ago, as soon as men and women weigh up the individual advantages and disadvantages of any

prospective course of action, they cannot fail to see the heavy personal sacrifices involved in family ties, especially parenthood (Schumpeter 1988 [1942]).

The weakening of taboos concerning issues related to family and sexuality has become central to depictions of contemporary 'risk' society, where the individual is faced with a far greater range of acceptable choice. Beck suggests that as modernization proceeds, the decisions and constraints to decide multiply in all fields of social action, but especially with regards to sexuality and the family. He writes: "With a bit of exaggeration one could say, 'anything goes' ... Marriage can be subtracted from sexuality, and that in turn from parenthood; parenthood can be multiplied by divorce, and the whole thing can be divided by living together or apart" (Beck, 1992:116).

Our second hypothesis is that there will be a general move towards greater liberalism regarding family behaviour and sexual morality, as modernisation, including greater secularisation, proceeds. We consider four attitudinal indicators of family behaviour and sexual morality concerning adultery, divorce, homosexuality and abortion.

There is of course huge variation from country to country in legislation and legislative changes on such issues. For example, abortion remains illegal in Ireland, in part because of the continuing political influence of the Catholic Church. The Netherlands is perhaps at the other extreme on many family behaviour issues, particularly with its early liberal stance on the acceptability of homosexual partnerships. Our analysis is guided by two basic questions. First, how do attitudes concerning marriage, motherhood and the morality of behaviours differ across Europe and the United States

of America and have attitudes converged over time? Second, are there generational differences regarding family values and, if so, are they equally prevalent across nations?

Data and Measures

Our data uses three waves from the European Values Study, 1981, 1990 and 1999/2000. We have selected countries which have information for all three points in time: France, West Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Sweden. We also include for comparison the United States. The dependent variables were all recoded so that higher values show pro-marriage, pro-motherhood and pro-traditional values. Traditional values refer to viewing as wrong divorce, adultery, homosexuality, and abortion. Our measure for pro-marriage is based on a single item: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement – Marriage is an outdated institution?” Pro-motherhood is also a single question: “Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled?” Both questions have a score ranging from one to two. Sexual values were measured as the average of the valid values of four items which ask whether homosexuality, abortion, divorce, and adultery can always be justified, never be justified, or somewhere in between. Respondents were shown a card that illustrates the scale range from 1=never to 10=always. We reverse this scale so that high values mean more traditional attitudes. The overall reliability of the scale is .78.

Changing Attitudes Across Nations and Time

As we would expect there are marked differences between the countries regarding people's views as to whether marriage is an outdated institution (Fig 1), whether women need children to be fulfilled (Fig 2), and sexual values (Fig 3).

Fig 1. Cross-national differences in pro-marriage

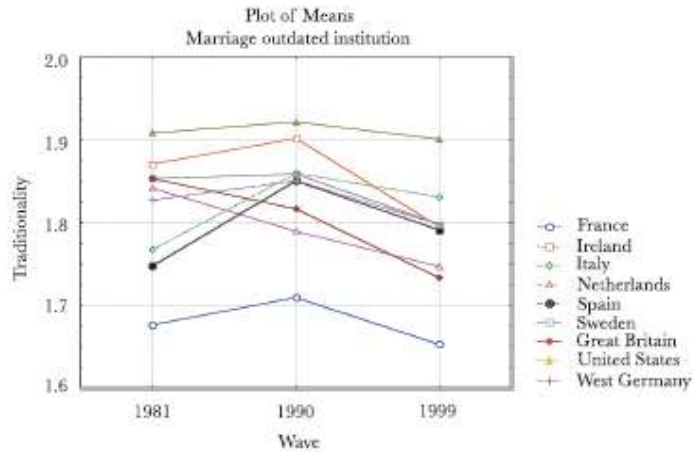


Fig 2. Cross-national differences in pro-motherhood

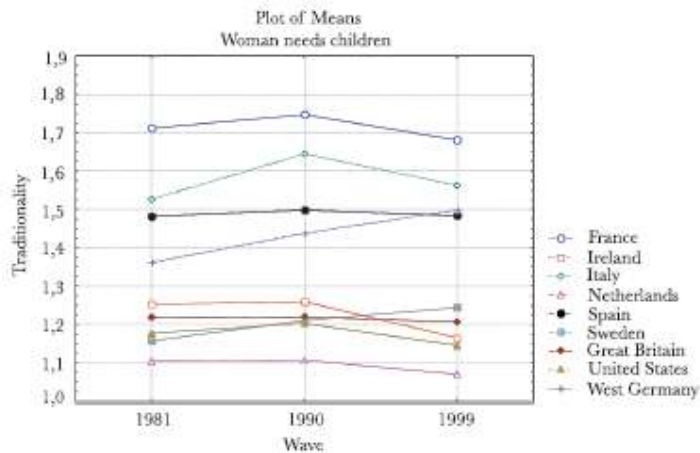
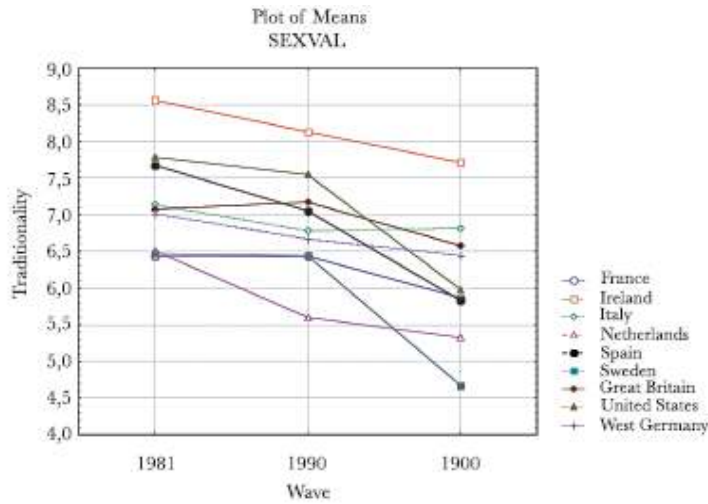


Fig 3 Cross-national differences in Sexual Values



The data do not support our hypothesis that the ideologies of marriage and motherhood have increasingly come under challenge. The data do however lend support to the hypothesis that the country stance regarding pro-motherhood has more to do with pro-natalist policies than with traditional morality. In Figure 1 we can see that the Americans are most supportive of marriage, and the French the least. However the differences between countries are quite slight, with most values being in the range 1.7- 1.9, where the highest possible score is 2.0. It is clear therefore that most countries still regard marriage as an important institution. It is also apparent that in most countries support for marriage rose slightly through the 1980s and then declined somewhat. The only two countries to show a decline across all three waves are Great Britain and the Netherlands.

In Figure 2, it can be seen that countries differ markedly in views about whether women need children to be fulfilled. France is by far the most supportive of motherhood, whereas the Netherlands is the least supportive of the pro-natalist

position. What is remarkable about these pro-motherhood responses is how very little change there has been in two decades.

In Figure 3 we can see the trends for the sexual values index which is the average of response means for abortion, adultery, divorce and homosexuality. For all countries attitudes became less traditional from 1981 to 1990, and from 1990 to 1999 attitudinal change in the liberal direction is even more marked. However there are clear country differences in the pattern of change. In 1981, Ireland, the United States, and Spain are the most traditional, whereas France, the Netherlands, and Sweden are the least traditional. In 1990, Ireland and the United States are still the most traditional countries, but Spain has become less traditional taking a position very similar to that of Britain and other countries.

It is also worth noting that when we look at the cross-national trends in the component parts of sexual values, the rank order of countries is fairly consistent in terms of whether the behaviour can ever be justified (data not shown). Adultery is seen as the least justifiable behaviour across all countries whereas divorce is the most justifiable. The one exception is the Netherlands where homosexuality is seen as more justifiable than divorce.

Adultery is the only aspect of family behaviour to buck the increasingly liberal trend – if anything there has been greater condemnation of adultery, over time. However, the change should not be over-stated as the vast majority of people across two decades in all countries disapprove of adultery (country means fall between 7 and 9 of a 10 point

scale). Although country differences are slight, not surprisingly Ireland is the most disapproving and France the least.

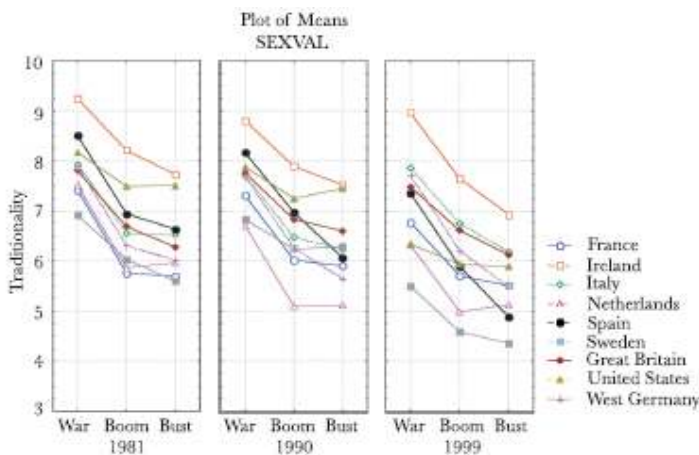
It could be expected that younger generations in particular will adopt a less traditional stance towards family values. In our analysis we contrast three generations - the war generation born before 1940, the boom generation born between 1940 and 1959, and the bust generation born in 1960 or more recently. Table 1 summarizes whether a significant difference is found using *one-way anova* to test the post-hoc multiple comparisons of generational mean scores.

Table 1. Summary of significant differences in generational means (War, boom and bust generations, using 1999 data)

	Pro-Marriage	Pro-Motherhood	Traditional Sex Values
France	Yes/war	Yes	Yes/war
W Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes
Great Britain	Yes	Yes/war	Yes
Ireland	Yes/war	Yes/war	Yes
Italy	Yes/war	Yes	Yes
Netherlands	No	Yes/war	Yes/war
Spain	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sweden	No	No	Yes/war
USA	Yes	No	No
Total	Yes	Yes	Yes

We can see from Table 1 that the generational differences for pro-marriage and pro-motherhood are largely positive. For the most part, as expected, the war generation is the most in favour of motherhood and marriage and the bust generation is the least favourable. However, in some cases it is only the war generation that is different from the others, with no discernible difference between the boom and bust generations. For example the French lack of support of marriage has bottomed out after the baby boom generation. This implies that, in France, further social change will be slow as there is no cohort difference to drive forward future change. Also, in Sweden, in 1999, the bust generation is, if anything, more pro-motherhood than the boom generation, although the difference is not significant ($p > .05$).

Fig. 4 Generational divide on sexual values



As Figure 4 shows, on sexual values, particularly in the most recent time period, the generational differences are pronounced. The difference is especially marked between the more traditional war generation and more liberal recent generations. Not surprisingly the generational divide for sexual values is most marked in Spain and

Ireland. These two predominantly Catholic countries have both experienced dramatic social change in the last two decades.

We used multivariate regression analysis in order to assess how important generation is as a predictor of family values, when other relevant variables like marital status, religiosity and gender are taken into account (for full details see Scott and Braun 2006). The results suggest that it is not generational change but secularism that provides the strongest challenge to family values. Unless secularism trends are reversed, traditional family values are likely to continue to be challenged. It is important to note, however, that there are powerful secular reasons for resisting liberal trends on sexual behaviours and for boosting marriage and motherhood. For example, given concerns about increasing longevity, falling fertility, and worsening dependency ratios, there are sound political and economic reasons for boosting pro-natal values. There are equally sound social and economic reasons for promoting fidelity given the huge costs that are incurred through the pan-epidemics of STDs and AIDS.

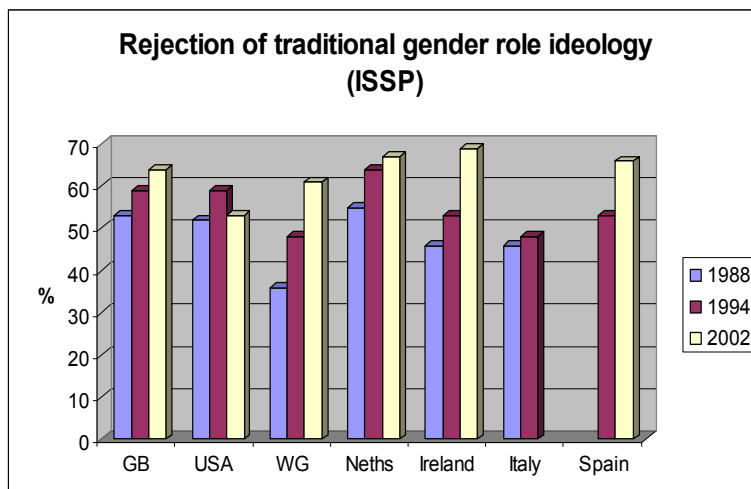
How different would family morality be if based on secular interest rather than religious constraint? It is quite plausible that the answer is that the difference would not be marked. Even for the most liberal countries it is wrong to assert that old proscriptions and prescriptions about sexual morality have been abandoned. Extra-marital sex is almost universally condemned. Homosexual relations are regarded with suspicion by a majority in most nations.

Changing Gender Role Attitudes

It is quite clear that attitudes on gender roles are changing. One of the best measures of gender role ideology is the item that asks whether people agree or disagree ‘that a man’s job is to earn money and a woman’s job is to look after the home and family’. Figure 5 shows the cross-national time trends from the International Social Survey Programme which fielded questions on gender role attitudes as part of their family and gender role module in 1988, 1994 and 2002.

It seems likely that this trend towards increased rejection of traditional gender roles will continue. Both secularisation and increased education are working in the same direction to challenge traditional gender role ideology. What is not clear, however, is whether and how shifts in gender role ideology will pan out in terms of a more equitable gender division of labour.

Figure 5 *Rejection of traditional gender role ideology across nations and time*

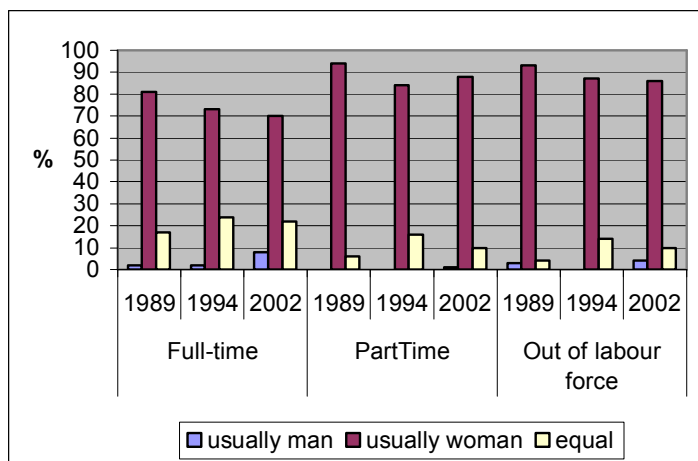


One of the puzzles that the ESRC Research Network on Gender Inequalities in Production and Reproduction was set up to answer is whether the ‘paradigm shift’ in gender relations that has accompanied the demise of the male breadwinner family will result in more or less equality. New research from the Network shows that while there has been immense shifts in women’s lives, in the way family and work responsibilities are combined, the evidence does not support great optimism about the future involvement of men in family chores and care. Here, I briefly refer to research findings from just two of the projects, but full details of all projects can be found on the Network website (<http://www.genet.ac.uk>).

Developments in Spain have been followed with great interest by the British Press, as the new marriage contract law for use in civil ceremonies obliges men to share household chores and family care. The report by Katya Adler for BBC News was not atypical. Under the headline “Housework looms for Spanish Men” there was a picture of a washing machine and illustrative stories about undomesticated Spanish males struggling with their lack of knowledge about how to do household chores and laundry (Adler, 2005).

British men are not much better according to data from the International Social Survey Programme which asked couple households who does the laundry. Figure 6 shows the results broken down by women’s labour force status (adapted from Crompton, Brockman and Lyonette 2005). The results suggest that not only is there little equity in the way such tasks are gendered, but also, even when women are working full time, there are relatively few ‘new men’ to be found.

Figure 6 Who does the Laundry in Britain, by women's labour force status (ISSP data)



Crompton et al (2005) compare change in gender roles attitudes, women's employment and the domestic division of labour in three countries: Britain, Norway and the Czech Republic. They conclude that there is a worrying possibility that social, economic and employer policies might be pulling in different directions. Increasing individualization in careers and employment relations, together with work intensification, are working against men taking up domestic tasks. If this is the case then policies supportive of women's equality and equal rights and shares in caring and family life for men and women may fall on stony ground, and a 'modified male breadwinner' model of the 'one and a half earner' family will be likely to be perpetuated.

Similar issues are addressed by Gershuny and Bittman (2005), in a fascinating cross-national longitudinal study of how couples adapt to the changing employment patterns of women. Inspired by Hirschman's famous title 'Exit Voice and Loyalty', they

discuss three potential responses to the disquiets that might arise as women suffer the dual burden of increased labour force participation and continuing domestic responsibilities. They can **Exit** by quitting the marriage or quitting the job. They can **Suffer**, or they can **Voice** protest through argument or negotiation. The study highlights the notion of 'lagged adaptation'. The relative share of men's and women's domestic tasks becomes more equal over time. However, women respond to increased labour force participation speedily by reducing their daily hours of home chores, while men's adaptation takes longer and is less reliable.

Conclusions

The story of revolutionary change in sexual and family domains has a momentum of its own and catapults us into believing that there is an almost limitless range of acceptable choices. It is easy to understand why such a representation appeals to intellectuals and academics who want to tell an exciting story. But the data do not support the claim that there has been a revolutionary change in attitudes towards family behaviours and sexual values. This cross-national analysis of attitudinal change suggests that the demise of traditional family values has been exaggerated.

Is the same true of gender role attitudinal change? Some have claimed that, in this age of new individualism, ascribed gender roles are undermined. Others are rightly sceptical about the extent of change (Nolan and Scott 2006). But undoubtedly ideology is changing, and gender patterns of domestic behaviour are also changing, albeit very slowly and with men changing less quickly and to a lesser extent than women. The virtue of cross-national research is that it allows a glimpse of the way normative climates may vary in part because of different traditions and policy

regimes. Inglehart and Norris (2003) have described the rising tide of gender equality. They rightly point out that tides can ebb and flow, with some reversals in the opportunities for men and women to share work and family life more equitably. The Spanish 'housework law', as it is dubbed, might have greater symbolic value than influence on court judgements. Paternity leave in Britain is somewhat similar, with its symbolic importance far greater than its puny entitlements. But such policies do help shift expectations and this in turn may make public opinion more willing to embrace future efforts to reduce gender inequalities.

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