

Children of the Revolution: How Progressive are Younger Birth Cohorts in their Attitudes towards Gender Roles?

Introduction

For over 40 years, social scientists have been studying attitudes towards women's roles and responsibilities to gauge societal views on gender and gender equality, and to measure the impact of wider social changes, resulting from women's increased labour force participation. This body of research has revealed a 'rising tide' of gender egalitarianism, reflecting some of the revolutionary changes in the gender system, in which both men and women's attitudes have shown a greater acceptance of women outside the familial home in the labour force and qualified support of mothers combining work and caregiving. In tandem, the meaning and practice of fatherhood has also undergone a revolutionary change. Such change has been driven in large part due to cohort change. However, some have suggested that this revolution stalled in the late 1980s and early 1990s amidst cultural backlash from progress made in earlier decades. This research asks whether the children of the revolution, young birth cohorts born after the Baby Boom and reared during this backlash and beyond are as revolutionary and progressive about women's and men's roles.

Background and aims

Previous research in this area of research has long emphasized the role of birth cohorts and the effects of birth cohorts in shaping attitudes. Cohort replacement theory predicts that changes in attitudes at a societal-level, such as those attitudes towards gender roles, occur through the succession of birth cohorts (Brewster & Padavic 2000; Brooks & Bolzendahl 2004; Ciabattari 2001; Scott, Alwin & Braun 1994). Birth cohorts reflect the unique, cultural and historical circumstances in which they were raised in and it is these circumstances during their formative and impressionable years that shape their attitudes towards gender roles (Alwin & Scott 1995; Brooks & Bolzendahl 2006; Ciabattari 2001). Attitudes are not just shaped by wider social and historical forces, but also historical patterns of parental attitudes and behaviours during childhood (Brooks & Bolzendahl 2004; Davis 2007).

Cohort replacement theory assumes that attitudes acquired during these formative years not only hold over the life course, stabilising during mid-life, but also influence subsequent beliefs, preferences and behaviours (Alwin 1994; Brooks & Bolzendahl 2004; Scott, Alwin & Braun 1996; van Egmond, Baxter, Bulcher & Western 2010). As members of birth cohorts are participants in a shared 'social history', experiencing phases of the life course—birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age—during the same historical period of time, they have unique cohort experiences, which are sometimes referred to as 'cohort effects'. Cohort effects differentiate birth cohorts from one another. Changing social conditions affect different birth cohorts in different ways and consequently birth cohorts may respond to the same social condition in different ways (Alwin, McCammon & Hofer 2006; Ciabattari 2001; Ryder 1965). Attitudinal change thus occurs as later-born birth cohorts replace earlier-born birth cohorts who have different attitudes because of their unique exposure to historical and cultural circumstances during their formative years (Scott, Alwin & Braun 1996; van Egmond *et al.* 2005).

Cohort replacement theory implies that birth cohorts reared during historical periods in which societal-level attitudes, practices and relations are more 'traditional'—for example attitudes, which are modelled on the 'separate spheres' doctrine—will result in those birth cohorts holding largely more traditional attitudes in line with those attitudes and practices. Conversely, birth cohorts reared during periods in which attitudes, practices and relations are more egalitarian produce birth cohorts that are more egalitarian and liberal. There is overwhelmingly evidence from most Western nations, including Australia, that support this hypothesis as some researchers have observed that birth cohorts born in the

latter half of the twentieth century hold significantly more egalitarian attitudes than those earlier-born cohorts (Brooks & Bolzendahl 2004; Ciabattari 2001; Inglehart & Norris 2003; Scott 2011; van Egmond *et al.* 2005). This paper tests whether attitudes

Method, Data and Analysis

This paper uses data from the HILDA (<https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/hilda>) survey, a large household panel survey with a specific focus on three key research areas: family and household dynamics, income and welfare dynamics and labour dynamics. The survey commenced in 2001 and there are currently 17 waves of data available. The reference population for the initial wave was all members in private dwellings across Australia. From the responding households, 13,969 responding persons over the age of 15 were interviewed. Since then, 65.6 percent of initial wave respondents have been re-interviewed over the course of 15 waves.

Analytical sample

The analytic sample was constructed using data from Waves 1 to 15 to create a person-period data set so that each respondent has one record for each wave in which they are observed. The analytic sample was restricted to all responding persons aged 15 years who participated in waves 1, 5, 8, 11 and 15, and returned an SCQ for each of these five waves (because attitude questions are administered through the SCQ) (n=23, 436).

Measures

The dependent variables analysed were attitudinal measures focusing on men's roles and responsibilities in relation to paid work and parenting:

1. A father should be as heavily involved in the care of his children as the mother
2. Whatever career a man may have, his most important role in life is still that of being a father
3. Many working fathers seem to care more about being successful at work than meeting the needs of their children
4. A working father can establish just as good a relationship with his children as a father who does not work for pay
5. Mothers who don't really need the money shouldn't work
6. A working mother can establish just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work for pay
7. Many working mothers seem to care more about being successful at work than meeting the needs of their children
8. Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother

Each dependent variable has the same response categories across a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). There is no neutral category (i.e. neither disagree or agree) included and each measure is treated as a continuous variable

Approach

The vast bulk of prior research into attitudes towards gender roles has relied on cross-sectional data, but longitudinal data are more appropriate to explore changes over time

(and between birth cohorts), and multilevel modelling techniques are required. This research used growth curve models, which are well suited to studying life course dynamics because they can estimate differences within- and between- individuals over time simultaneously (Curran, Obediat and Losardo 2010; Hedeker 2008; Singer and Willet 2003). Growth curve models extend hierarchical linear modelling techniques, which use a multi-level modelling framework to 'nest' individuals within groups or, in the case of longitudinal data, individuals within time periods (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Curran, Obediat and Losardo 2010). They are also advantageous in estimating ageing and cohort effects.

Results and Discussion

The results of the growth curve estimates are presented in Table 1. On the measures towards fathers and modern fatherhood (items #1 to #4) there is clear evidence of cohort effects. Older birth cohorts are more likely to agree that fathers should be as heavily involved in the care of his children (#1) and that fatherhood is the most important role in a man's life (#2) than later-born birth cohorts. Beginning with the oldest birth cohort, born between 1901 to 1926, the level of support expressed for these two attitudinal measures has decreased amongst each successive birth cohort and in the case of the birth cohort between 1986 and 2000, the results indicate that they are no significant different in their attitudes towards the level of involvement of fathers in the care of their children than the Baby Boom cohort (1946 to 1965). This finding must suggest that later-born birth cohorts may not necessarily support the 'new father' ideal. However, this research does also find that these attitudinal positions do not necessarily hold. The growth rates illustrate that the youngest birth cohort (1986-2000) has become a little more agreeable as it has grown older in attitudes towards the level of involvement of fatherhood while the second youngest (1966-85) and the oldest have become more inclined to disagree as they have aged. The two youngest birth cohorts have also become less inclined to disagree with age about the importance of fatherhood. This is evidence that cohort attitudes do indeed change over time, contradicting previous research which has suggested they hold from young adulthood onwards.

Later-born birth cohorts born after the Baby Boom hold attitudes which disagree that with the idea that working fathers 'care more about being successful at work than meeting the needs of their children' (#4). In contrast, the attitudes of those born before the Baby Boom are very much in agreement. This perhaps reflects the changed cultural expectations around working fathers undertaking more childrearing. With the exception of the birth cohort just born immediately after the Baby Boom (1966-1985), the other birth cohorts agree that working fathers can establish good relationships with their children. This is a curious finding, suggesting distinct cohort attitudes. Attitudes, however, have become more agreeable towards the that working fathers can have good relationships with their children over time, however, the rate of change has been slower than the overall change in the general sample.

Later-born birth cohorts, especially those born between 1986 to 2000 were in strong disagreement towards the measure 'mothers who don't need the money shouldn't work'. In contrast, older birth cohorts were in more agreement, reflecting the cultural context they were reared in, which favoured the male-breadwinner role and traditional division of labour. The later-born birth cohort are also more likely to agree that working mothers can have good relationships with their children. In regards to working mothers caring more about being successful than meeting the needs of their children, later-born birth cohorts were more likely to disagree with the proposition whereas older birth cohorts are more likely to agree. All birth cohorts agreed that that whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother, however, the level of agreement

wanes with each subsequent birth cohort, suggesting later-born birth cohorts are becoming less 'essentialist' about women and motherhood.

While later-born birth cohorts seem to very progressive in their attitudes towards mothers and motherhood, the growth rates suggest that perhaps there was small shifts in their attitudes as they aged, however, later-born births hold very progressive attitudes overall towards attitudes about mothers roles, which suggests this might be some rebalancing or tapering off. Their progressiveness is further reinforced by the growth rates in attitudes towards motherhood being the most important role in life, in which their attitudes have come to disagree with that statement even more with age.

Conclusion

Findings have shown clear cohort effects. Later-born birth cohorts hold more supportive attitudes towards working motherhoods and less essentialist attitudes. In contrast, they are less supportive about level of involvement of fathers and the importance of fatherhood and hold mixed attitudes about working fathers. This research suggests that these cohorts are indeed children of the gender revolution, especially when it comes to women's roles. However, their attitudes towards fathers may reflect the lingering uncertainty about men's roles, particularly fatherhood. Importantly, this research makes an important contribution to the field, finding that attitudes do not hold over time and that cohort attitudes change independently of age.

1 = strongly disagree 7 = strongly agree	FHI <i>A father should be as heavily involved in the care of his children as the mother</i>	MRL <i>Whatever career a man may have, his most important role in life is still that of being a father</i>	WFR <i>A working father can establish just as good a relationship with his children as a father who does not work for pay</i>	WFS <i>Many working fathers seem to care more about being successful at work than meeting the needs of their children</i>	MSW <i>Mothers who dont really need the money shouldnt work</i>	WMR <i>A working mother can establish just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work for pay</i>	WMS <i>Many working mothers seem to care more about being successful at work than meeting the needs of their children</i>	WRL <i>Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother</i>
Birth cohort (1946 – 1965)								
1986 – 2000	-0.0005	0.1049**	0.2280***	-0.5926***	-0.4634***	0.3420***	-0.4155***	0.1278***
1966 – 1985	0.0428**	0.1127***	-0.0900***	-0.3245***	-0.2130***	-0.0131	-0.2257***	0.1152***
1926 – 1945	0.1317***	0.2564***	0.2529***	0.1132***	0.4163***	-0.0039	0.2183***	0.3408***
1901 – 1925	0.3658***	0.4576***	0.2627***	-0.0689	0.9040***	-0.1030	0.2578***	0.5244***
Growth Rate	-0.0001	-0.0061***	0.0226***	-0.0162***	-0.0175***	0.0305***	-0.0124***	-0.0085***
Birth cohort (1946 – 1965)								
1986 – 2000	0.0098**	-0.0185***	-0.0156***	0.0202***	0.0213***	-0.0221***	0.0179***	-0.0185***
1966 – 1985	-0.0084***	-0.0096***	-0.0087***	0.0097***	0.0035	-0.0141***	0.0010	-0.0116***
1926 – 1945	-0.0023	0.0033	-0.0125***	-0.0083**	-0.0081**	-0.0026	-0.0069**	0.0008
1901 – 1925	-0.0285***	-0.0154	-0.0151	-0.0073	-0.0265**	-0.0006	0.0039	-0.0102