Emerging Adults' Plans for Work and Family: A Freshman-Senior Comparison

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Background

•Past research has documented that women's commitment to work and status attainment has increased substantially since the 1960s.[1] However, women continue to differ from men in their plans for combining work and family. Young women consistently place higher value than men on domestic and nurturing activities[1] and rate household tasks such as caring for young children as more important than men do.[2]

•Viewed through the lens of parental investment theory and maternal adaptations, male-female differences in plans for combining work and family are modern manifestations of evolved psychological differences between males and females in values and priorities. Various pieces of data fit this evolutionary interpretation. Across cultures, women score higher than men in values that emphasize relationships and benevolence, and men score higher in values tied to power and achievement.[3, 4] Across cultures, women prefer working with people and men with things,[5] large differences that manifest themselves in women's prevalence among organic sciences (such as biology and medicine) over inorganic disciplines (such as physics and engineering). And, even men and women of similarly high intellectual aptitude differ in their commitment to various facets of their careers[6] and values in life more generally, such as their desire to live near family and desire for recognition and willingness to work long hours[7, 8] (despite similar levels of life and career satisfaction[8]).

•Social constructionists have argued, however, that sex differences in plans for combining work and family are a manifestation of societal pressures; under this logic, differences between men and women in work-family plans should be ameliorated by progression through four years of a liberal education that emphasizes gender egalitarianism. We conducted the current study to test this idea. If young women's plans are a product of social forces, then first-year male and female college students should differ in their plans for combining work and family, but senior males and females – who have learned about those social forces over four years of a liberal education – should not.

Method

Participants

•Freshmen were recruited from a popular general education option, Psychology 100 (General Psychology). We retained 264 students (62 M, 201F, 1 unstated) who were in their first year of college (*M* age = 18.27, *SD* = 0.88). Nearly 30% were undeclared, but those who declared a major represented over 35 different majors across four broad disciplines (Arts & Humanities, Social Sciences, Math & Natural Sciences, Pre-Professional).

•With the help of faculty and staff across campus (see Acknowledgements), seniors were recruited from over 20 different upper-level courses representing the four broad disciplines (11% Arts & Humanities, 30% Social Sciences, 9% Math & Natural Sciences, 49% Pre-professional). For analyses, we omitted data from participants over 29 years old (*M* age = 22.16, *SD* = 1.52). The sample thus included 130 men and 203 women from 40 unique majors.

Instruments

Participants completed a broad questionnaire on relationship attitudes, social attitudes, life plans, basic scientific knowledge, and attitudes toward science and technology. For the current investigation, we focus on participants' reports of the following:

•Plans to marry (Yes/No/Unsure) and, if applicable, desired age of marriage;
•Plans to have children (Yes/No/Unsure) and, if applicable, desired age of beginning to have children and number of children desired;
•Highest degree desired (Associate's degree/Bachelor's degree/Master's degree or equivalent/Doctoral degree/ Postdoctoral position);
•Preferred annual salary;
•The number of hours per week they would like to work upon completing their education (0-9/10-19/20-29/30-39/40-49/50-59/60-69/70-79/80+);
•The number of hours per week they would prefer to work when they have young children (0-9/10-19/20-29/30-39/40-49/50-59/60-69/70-79/80+);
•The number of hours per week they would prefer their partner to work when they have young children (0-9/10-19/20-29/30-39/40-49/50-59/60-69/70-79/80+).

Results

I. Plans for Marriage and Children

Figure 1. *Desired Age of Getting Married, if applicable*

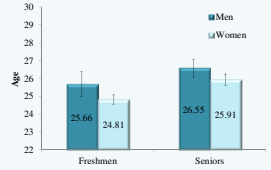


Figure 2. *Desired Age of Beginning to Have Children, if applicable*

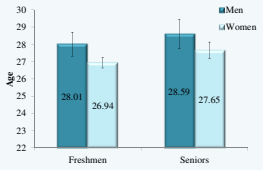
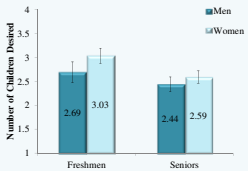


Figure 3. *Desired Number of Children, if applicable*

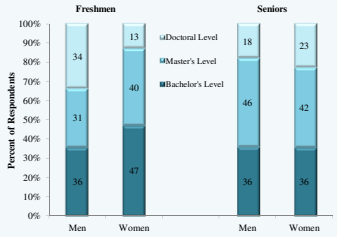


Male and female freshmen were of similar age (Male freshmen averaged 18.34 years and female freshmen averaged 18.25 years), but men wanted to get married later ($t(74.51) = 2.28$, $p = .026$, $d = 0.53$) and begin having children later ($t(241) = 3.03$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.39$) than the women did. Senior men and women were also of similar age (male seniors averaged 22.22 years and female seniors averaged 22.12 years), but senior men wanted to get married later ($t(203.94) = 2.19$, $p = .029$, $d = 0.31$) and begin having children later ($t(283) = 2.08$, $p = .038$, $d = 0.25$) than the women did. Senior males wanted to marry later than freshman males did ($t(167) = -2.11$, $p = .036$, $d = -0.33$), but freshman males and senior males were similar in desired age of beginning to have children ($t(160) = -0.91$, $p = .365$, $d = -0.14$). Among women, seniors wanted to marry about a year later ($t(343.40) = -5.26$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.57$), and begin having children about a year later ($t(364) = -2.47$, $p = .014$, $d = -0.26$), than their freshman counterparts did. Among freshmen, a similar percentage of males (90%) and females (96%) reported a desire to get married someday, $\chi^2(2, N = 262) = 3.21$, $p = .201$, $V = .11$. Among seniors as well, a similar percentage of males (88%) and females (90%) reported a desire to marry, $\chi^2(2, N = 319) = 3.17$, $p = .205$, $V = .10$. A parallel pattern was revealed for desire for children. Among freshmen, 93% of women and 86% of men wanted to have children someday, $\chi^2(2, N = 262) = 3.87$, $p = .144$, $V = .12$. Among seniors, 84% of women and 83% of men wanted to have children, $\chi^2(2, N = 327) = 1.92$, $p = .383$, $V = .08$.

Male seniors wanted marginally fewer children than male freshmen did, $t(163) = 1.91$, $p = .058$, $d = 0.30$; and female seniors wanted significantly fewer children than female freshmen did, $t(365) = 4.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$. In the freshmen sample, women wanted more children than men did, $t(243) = -2.08$, $p = .039$, $d = -0.27$; but this sex difference was not found among the seniors, for whom males and females reported similar plans for number of children desired, $t(285) = -1.45$, $p = .149$, $d = -0.17$.

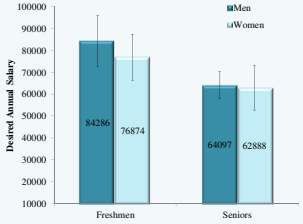
II. Educational and Financial Aspirations

Figure 4. *Degree Plans*



In the freshman sample, men and women differed in their educational aspirations ($\chi^2(2, N = 263) = 13.27$, $p = .001$, $V = .23$), with young women less likely than young men to aspire to advanced degrees. However, seniors' educational aspirations did *not* differ by sex, $\chi^2(2, N = 333) = 1.29$, $p = .525$, $V = .06$. Additional analyses showed that, within each discipline, senior males and senior females did not differ in their educational aspirations, all *p*s > .10.

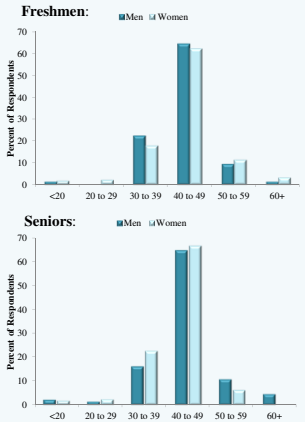
Figure 5. *Desired Annual Salary upon Completion of Degree*



In the freshman sample, men and women did not differ significantly in annual salary desired, $t(228) = 0.75$, $p = .452$, $d = 0.10$. Likewise, in the senior sample, men and women did not differ in salary desired, $t(300) = 0.18$, $p = .858$, $d = 0.02$. Seniors of both sexes reported lower – perhaps more realistic – desired salaries than freshmen did (Males: $t(173) = 3.39$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.52$; Females: $t(355) = 1.91$, $p = .057$, $d = 0.43$).

III. Plans for Work in the Context of Family

Figure 6. *Number of Hours Men and Women Want to Work per Week Upon Completing their Education*



Freshmen and seniors reported similar work plans, $t(594) = 1.16$, $p = .247$, $d = 0.095$. In the freshman sample, men and women did not differ in the number of hours per week they reported wanting to work, $t(259) = -0.28$, $p = .782$, $d = -0.03$. In the senior sample, men reported a slightly higher mean number of hours, $t(331) = 2.20$, $p = .028$, $d = 0.24$. This was partially a function of more senior men than women reporting a willingness to work 50 or more hours per week.

Figure 7. *Number of Hours Men and Women Want to Work per Week When they Have Young Children*

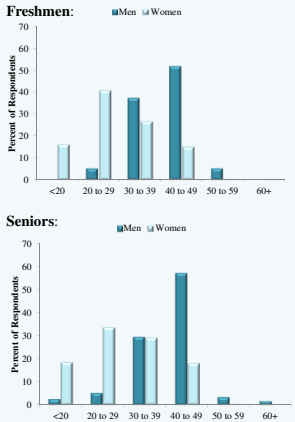
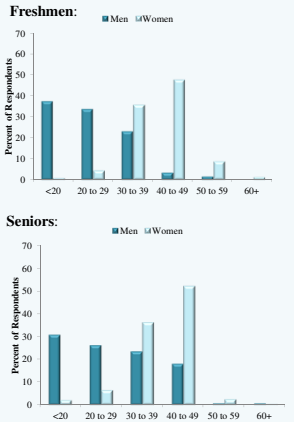


Figure 8. *Number of Hours Men and Women Want **their Partner** to Work per Week When they Have Young Children*



Although men and women nearing graduation held similar educational aspirations, salary aspirations, and similar desires to marry and have children, their work plans differed considerably in the context of children. With young children in the home, women reported plans to work fewer hours than men did; this was revealed among both freshmen ($t(150.33) = 9.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.60$) and seniors ($t(275.29) = 9.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.17$). At both time points, in the context of raising young children, men planned to work more than they foresaw their partner working (Freshman paired $t(55) = 10.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.39$; Senior paired $t(110) = 9.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.91$) and women planned to work far less than they foresaw their partner working (Freshman paired $t(190) = -13.72$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.99$; Senior paired $t(181) = -10.28$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.76$).
Male freshmen and male seniors did not differ from each other in their plans for working when they have young children in the home, ($t(166) = -0.19$, $p = .85$, $d = -0.03$); and they differed just marginally in their plans for their partner, with senior males showing a trend toward wanting their partner to work more hours than freshman males did, $t(165) = -1.80$, $p = .073$, $d = -0.28$. However, women's own plans didn't differ at all as a function of freshman/senior status: Senior women and freshmen women reported the same plans for working when they had young children at home, $t(371) = -0.15$, $p = .88$, $d = -0.02$. And, both freshmen and senior women reported similar preferences for how much their partner would be working, $t(373) = 1.75$, $p = .08$, $d = 0.18$, with a slight trend toward senior women wanting their partners to work fewer hours than freshman women did.

Discussion

Key Findings

•Several findings indicate that differences in young men's and women's career and family aspirations may be ameliorated by a college education. Senior men and women desired a similar number of children, held similar aspirations for potential salaries, held very similar educational aspirations, and differed only slightly in their stated preferences for time spent working each week. These findings replicate previous studies[2] and speak to the potential positive influence of a college education on men's and women's awareness of their potential.
•In the context of having young children, however, men and women differed sharply at both points in college. Women approaching graduation looked nearly identical to first-year women in their plans to work far less than baseline, and far less than their partner, when they have young children at home. These findings support the position that, if some male-female psychological differences have biological underpinnings, then those differences will be maintained and sometimes exacerbated when men and women are free to choose their own paths.[3, 4]

Limitations

•Our data are limited in at least two ways. First, the data are cross-sectional. We do have plans to follow our freshmen when they are seniors (during the 2012-2013 academic year), so that we can determine whether freshmen and seniors differ because of systematic change over time (as opposed to cohort effects, which could be operating in the current comparison).
•Second, our data reflect men's and women's *plans* for their future, not their actual work and family decisions. As any parent will note, it is not easy to predict how the actual experience of becoming a parent (and all the other variables operating at the time) will affect people's decisions about work and family. Notably, in one study following gifted men and women at similar potential for scientific excellence from age 25 to 35, sex differences intensified among those who became parents from one time to the next, with men favoring a more career-focused perspective and women favoring a more communal perspective emphasizing community, family, and friendships.[7]

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