

A qualitative study on gender attitudes, fertility intentions and the suffering child

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Abstract

Previous studies register a trend toward more egalitarian attitudes since 70s. However little changes are observed after the mid-1990. The same stall is observed in women and men domestic hours. Some authors posit the emergence of a "new cultural frame": egalitarian principles had been interiorized, while prioritization of children makes the couples to choose a more traditional framework concerning the division of domestic labour. This hypothesis is difficult to test with quantitative data. Our first aim is to explore the existence of an "egalitarian essentialism" at individual level through a qualitative analysis of 18 in-depth interviews. The questions asked are particularly suitable to this purpose as they measure women's and men's gender attitudes, together with prioritization of children. In a second step, man's and woman's gender attitudes will be related to their fertility intentions.

Introduction

Individual gender attitudes are of overall importance for a change toward a greater gender equity, as they are a precondition for changes in social stereotypes and material conditions of men and women at the societal level (Ridgeway, 2011). Previous studies register a trend toward more egalitarian attitudes. The literature is particularly rich for the American context (see for example Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Brewster and Padavic 2000; Thornton and Freedman 1979). Recently, Cotter et al. (2011) show for U.S. little changes since the mid-1990. On the base of four questions concerning gender attitudes, they show an egalitarian peak in 1994, but a stalling after that. A similar evidence is presented for the European countries by Scott (2008).

Interestingly, men and women domestic hours vary according a similar pattern. Kan et al. (2011) shows that woman's domestic hours decrease till 90s but then begin to stall. The opposite is true for the man's hours of domestic hours, increasing till 90s and then stalling or decreasing. Cotter et al. (2011) posit the emergence of a "new cultural frame, an "egalitarian essentialism" that blends

aspects of feminist equality and traditional motherhood roles” (Cotter et al., 2011). In other terms, women see huge progress toward a greater equity between genders, but some negative outcomes could have emerged, especially related to the child well-being.

The Cotter et al. hypothesis is difficult to test with quantitative data. Our first aim in this study is to explore the existence of an egalitarian essentialism at individual level through a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews. The questions asked are particularly suitable to this purpose as they measure women’s and men’s gender attitudes, together with prioritization of children.

Through the same qualitative approach, we want also to investigate how gender attitudes are related to fertility intentions. At the macro level, Oláh (2011) classified countries in two main categories: those who have relatively favourable attitudes toward gender equity and those with more traditional attitudes. A higher fertility rate (TFR of 1.5 and above) is observed in the first group of countries (Northern Europe, North America), while birth rates are lower (TFR below 1.4) in the second group (Southern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe). This suggests that, in our Western societies, negative attitudes towards gender equity make more difficult to reconcile private and professional life, and thus lead to a lower fertility.

At the micro level, a similar relationship can be assumed: a woman with egalitarian gender attitudes is more likely to negotiate a greater participation of the partner in domestic tasks, with positive effect on fertility and fertility intentions (Torr and Short, 2004; Mills et al. 2008). We can also assume that the formation of the woman fertility intentions is affected by the partner’s intentions. Testa (2012), considering the couple’s disagreement about short-term childbearing desires, finds that childless women are less affected by the partner’s disagreement in their fertility intentions, but that a stronger influence exists at higher parities. Moreover, if a disagreement with partner’s about short-term childbearing desires exists, the man participation in the family work makes the woman more likely to express a positive fertility intention.

In addition, it has been shown that men with egalitarian gender attitudes are less concerned about the costs of parenthood and would have higher fertility intentions (Miettinen et al., 2011; Puur et al., 2008). We can also assume that men with egalitarian gender attitudes make women to expect to receive an help once the baby is there.

Aims

Our research question is twofold (1) how to explain the mismatch between individual gender attitudes and division of domestic labour? (2) how gender attitudes and division of domestic labour are related to partners’ fertility intentions?

The first research question is articulated in four hypotheses. 1.1. Women and men have egalitarian gender attitudes but adopt a traditional behaviour in order to guarantee the better care for their children. 1.2 When partners’ gender attitudes differ, partners have to negotiate their division of domestic work. The actual organization of tasks depends on the outcomes of this negotiation. 1.3 Partners agree as to the gender equality principle, but they find several obstacles to an egalitarian division of domestic work. 1.4 The statement chosen to measure gender attitudes is unclear.

As to the second research question, hypotheses are the following. 2.1 The man egalitarian gender attitudes are positively associated with his intention to have another child, when an egalitarian

division of domestic labour is reported at the time of the interview. 2.2 Similarly, the man egalitarian gender attitudes are positively associated with the woman's fertility intentions, when an egalitarian division of domestic labour is reported at the time of the interview.

Data and Methods

We conducted 18 in-depth interviews to partners of 9 couples. The respondents were between 28 and 44 years old, they have at least one child less than 6, and they live in the French-speaking region of Belgium (Wallonia). Partners are interviewed separately.

The provisional hypotheses formulated above were obtained after a first exploration of data and after a first literature review. However, we need a systematic analysis of narratives material according to the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach to build accurate "individual causal network" and to explore new emerging hypotheses.

During the interview, several questions concerning the family life are asked, as division of domestic tasks and fertility intentions. To explore gender attitudes we asked open-questions coming from the Generations and Gender Survey for Belgium: "A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works" and "Children often suffer because their fathers concentrate too much on their work".