The Gender Socialization of Children Growing up in Non-Traditional Families

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I. Introduction

The traditional family, consisting of a father that specializes in labor market work and a mother that specializes in home production, is on the decline. Fewer and fewer children are growing up under this traditional arrangement. Two main trends account for this decline, both a reflection of women’s growing economic power and increasing financial independence from men. First, more mothers today than in the past are raising their children alone. According to the Census, the percentage of children living with only their mother increased from 8 to 23 percent between 1960 and 2016.¹ Second, women’s labor market progress has been accompanied by a steady increase in the share of couples where the wife is employed and, when employed, the primary breadwinner in the household. The share of employed married mothers has increased from about a quarter in 1960 to nearly 60 percent in 2011; the share of married couples with children under age 18 where the mother earns more than the father has grown from less than 4 percent in 1960 to nearly 23 percent in 2011.²

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the decline in the traditional family remains unsettling for many in society, and men in particular. For example, a recent wave of papers have documented some of the adverse effects associated with wives out-earning their husbands. Bertrand et al. (2015) show that the marriages where the wife is the primary breadwinner are less happy and less stable. Murray-Close and Heggeness (2018) show that in couples where the wife earns more than the husband according to administrative income-tax records, there is systematic under-reporting of the wife’s income and over-reporting of the husband’s income in (Census) survey data. In experimental data, Ratliff and Oishi (2013) finds that men’s self-esteem is

¹ https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/ch16-192.html. The percentage of children living with only their father is small but also growing (from 1 to 4 percent during the 1960-2016 period).
lower when their partner succeeds while women’s self-esteem is unaffected by their partner’s performance. Using wage and prescription medication data from Denmark, Pierce et al. (2013) find that men who are out-earned by their wives experience higher usage of erectile dysfunction, insomnia and anxiety medication. Political scientists argue that sexism among lower educated white men, whose relative economic power compared to women might have taken a particularly strong negative hit over the last few decades, was an important driver of the Trump vote in the 2016 presidential election (Schaffner et al., 2018).

While this evidence suggests that some of today’s primary age males might still be troubled by the relative labor market progress of women, what is most relevant looking forward is how the next generation’s gender role attitudes are being affected, if at all, by growing up in such non-traditional families. Does exposure to a non-traditional family make a child develop more gender liberal attitudes, or is the role model effect force pushing towards more gender liberal norms cancelled out, or even dominated, by other countervailing forces, such as the influence of a father whose male identity might be threatened by the situation? Do these dynamics differ between sons and daughters? Do these dynamics differ based on parents’ own gender role attitudes, and whether the non-traditional arrangements are in violation of these attitudes? We take on these questions below, exploiting the NSLY79’s rich multi-generational data.

This paper contributes to a literature that has aimed to endogenize norms related to gender roles, often using women’s (mothers’ and wives’) labor market behavior as a “manifestation” of more liberal gender norms: see for example Fernandez et al. (2004) and Blau et al. (2013). Another related paper is Farre and Vella (2013), who uses the NLSY79 to study the intergenerational transmission of gender role attitudes. Most closely related to our work is Mavrokonstantis (2017) who studies how exposure to a mother that is the primary breadwinner affects gender role attitudes among children in UK data; in contrast to this work, we consider how gender role attitudes are shaped by all deviations from the traditional family in childhood.

II. Data

The NLSY79 survey is a nationally representative sample of nearly 13,000 individuals living in the United States who were between 15 and 22 years of age when surveyed in 1979. These individuals have been interviewed annually until 1994 and biennially since. Since 1994 and biennially, children ages 15 and older born to NLSY79
female respondents have been completing an interview modeled on the NLSY79 questionnaire. Information collected from these young adults includes the socio-psychological indicators that we focus on in this paper. For the purpose of our analysis, we combine these NLSY79 young adult surveys with the longitudinal records of their mothers.

The main outcome variable we consider are gender role attitudes. Following Farre and Vella (2013), we define gender role attitudes in the NLSY based on whether the respondent strongly agrees, agrees, disagrees or strongly disagrees with each of the 6 following statements: 1) “A woman's place is in the home, not the office or shop”; 2) “A wife who carries out her full family responsibilities doesn't have time for outside employment”; 3) “Employment of wives leads to more juvenile delinquency”; 4) “It is much better for everyone concerned if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family”; 5) “Men should share the work around the house with women, such as doing dishes, cleaning and so forth” and 6) “Women are much happier if they stay at home and take care of their children.” After reversing the ranking of responses for all statements except 5), and assigning numbers from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) to the answers to each statement, we construct a gender role attitude index that is the sum of these numbers, with a larger value of the index corresponding to more liberal gender attitudes. The maximum value of the index is 24.

III. Analysis

The unit of observation in all of the analysis below is a child born to an NLSY79 mother who is old enough to have completed at least one of the NLSY Young Adult survey where at least one of the outcomes we study is included.

In our first specification, we ask how young adults’ gender role attitudes are affected by the intensity of their exposure to non-traditional family arrangements over the first fifteen years of their life. In particular, we define the fraction of years being age 0 and 15 a given individual was exposed to: a non-working married mother, a working married mother, and a non-married mother. Because these fractions mechanically sum up to 1, we drop the first of them (non-working married mother) from the empirical specification; in other words, the estimated coefficients on the variables of interest are to be interpreted relative to a counterfactual of 15 years of exposure to a “traditional family.” We are also interested in measuring the differential effect of being exposed in childhood to a working mother that further breaks away from tradition by being the primary breadwinner in the household. We
therefore also include in the main specification a variable that represents the fraction of years from age 0 to age 15 one’s mother was married and with labor and self-employment income strictly greater than her spouse’s.

Because our focus is on family structure and allocation of work and income between parents, it is important to account for family income given its correlation to our main variables of interest. We do this by controlling for the average log (total income) in the mother’s household over the first 15 years of the child’s life, as well as the standard deviation of that income over those 15 years. We note that there is likely systematic mismeasurement of this variable for broken families in that we only measure the mother’s household income in those cases.

Included in all specifications is a rich set of controls about the mothers’ background characteristics. These include mother’s highest grade completed, religious affiliation, race and age at time of birth. From the 1979 baseline interview of the mother in the NLSY, we also extract as controls: mother’s mother’s education, whether the mother’s mother/father was present when the mother was 14, whether the mother’s mother was working when the mother was 14, whether the mother was living in a city at 14, and mother’s age in 1979. We also control for the mother’s gender role attitudes as measured in 1979 (using responses to the same six statements as those used to measure their children’s gender attitudes) and her self-esteem score as measured in 1980. We crudely proxy for exposure to external influences by computing the fraction of years from age 0 to 15 the child lived in each of the 4 following regions of the US: Northeast, North Central, South or West. In all specifications, we control for the (average) age at which the young adult completed the survey used to measure the outcome of interest as well as the (average) year in which this survey was completed. Finally, in all specifications and summer statistics below, we weigh each observation by the mother’s weight in the 1979 survey.

There are close to 7,000 children of NLSY79 mothers for which we can measure gender role attitudes. On average, the measurement of gender norms took place in 2007 and at the age of 20. The mean of the gender norm index is 19.3 for women and 18.1 for men. The average individual in our sample spent 45 percent of her/his first 15 years with a mother that has a spouse and is working, 13 percent with a mother that has a spouse and out-earns this spouse, and 25 percent with a mother that is without a spouse.
Columns 1 and 2 of Table 1 present the first results. Recall that the missing category is the traditional family, i.e. a married stay-at-home mother. Among girls, we see that deviation from the traditional family do not significantly affect gender role attitudes as long as the mother remains married. In particular, in contrast to Mavrokonstantis (2017), we do not observe any evidence of breadwinning married mothers having perverse effects on the gender attitudes of their daughters. Among boys, we find that having a married working mother as well as having a married mother that is the primary breadwinner both significantly move gender attitudes in a more liberal direction. The magnitudes are consequential. Having a married mother that is the primary breadwinner over all first 15 years of a boy’s life increases his gender norm index by .486+.693~1.2, which roughly corresponds to the average gender gap in gender role attitudes between the young men and young women in our data.

Exposure in childhood to a non-married mother is associated with more liberal gender norms for both boys and girls and the magnitude of the effects is comparable across genders. Everything else equal, 15 years of exposure to a non-married mother increases the gender norm index by about .6 compared to 15 years of exposure to a traditional family.

We also briefly discuss the estimated coefficients on some of the other controls in our regressions. First, it is interesting to note that family income appears more strongly correlated to the gender socialization of boys than girls: higher and more stable income growing up both predict more liberal gender norms among boys. Maybe not surprisingly, mother’s education and mother’s own gender attitudes in adolescence both positively affect the gender norms of boys and girls. However, it appears that, holding everything else constant, the intergenerational transmission of gender norms from mothers to daughters is more robust than from mothers to sons (.098 vs. .056); similarly, mother’s education is more strongly correlated with gender attitudes among daughters than among sons.

### Table 1 - Gender Norms and Non-Traditional Families

| Sample | Dependent variable: Gender norm index | | | |
|--------|---------------------------------------|--------|--------|
|        | Women | Men | Women | Men |
| Exposure from 0 to 15: | | | | |
| Mean log family income | 0.130 | 0.356*** | 0.156 | 0.319*** |
| St.dev. family income | (0.100) | (0.086) | (0.101) | (0.096) |
| Mother married and working | 0.255 | 0.496*** | 0.157 | 0.154 |
| Mother married and primary breadwinner | 0.250 | 0.693*** | (0.233) | (0.196) |
| Mother not married | 0.159*** | 0.174*** | (0.166) | (0.171) |
| Exposure from 15 to 25: | | | | |
| Mother married and working | -0.135 | 0.173 | (0.151) | (0.146) |
| Mother married and primary breadwinner | -0.122 | 0.079 | (0.221) | (0.196) |
| Mother not married | 0.030 | 0.177 | (0.173) | (0.196) |
| Exposure from 25 to 35: | | | | |
| Mother married and working | 0.549** | 0.281** | (0.171) | (0.180) |
| Mother married and primary breadwinner | 0.499* | 0.768*** | (0.200) | (0.181) |
| Mother not married | 0.059*** | 0.311*** | (0.189) | (0.176) |
| Mother’s gender norm index (1979) | 0.036*** | 0.046*** | 0.006*** | 0.025*** |
| Mother’s self-esteem index (1980) | (0.010) | (0.013) | (0.013) | (0.013) |
| Mother’s education | 0.129*** | 0.046*** | 0.020*** | 0.020*** |
| Observations | 3,100 | 3,200 | 3,186 | 3,186 |
| R-squared | 0.046 | 0.037 | 0.056 | 0.049 |

Note: Sources are NLSY79 Surveys and NLSY79 Young Adult Surveys. Also included in each regression are: mother’s religious affiliation, mother’s race, mother’s age at time of birth, mother’s mother’s education, whether the mother’s mother/father was present when the mother was 14, whether the mother’s mother was working when the mother was 14, whether the mother was living in a city at 14, mother’s age in 1979, fraction of years from age 0 to age 15 the child lived in Northeast/North Central/South/West, (average) age and (average) year the young adult completed the survey used to measure gender role attitudes. Each observation is weighted by the mother’s weight in the NLSY79. Standard errors in parentheses: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.
Our preferred interpretation of the findings in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 1 is that it is exposure to these non-traditional family arrangements that affect the gender norms sons and daughters report in early adulthood. There are of course alternative interpretations that our specification cannot rule out. In particular, it is possible that there are other unobserved but correlated attributes of the mother, father or household that shape these gender norms and that these attributes would have led to more (or less) gender-liberal children even absent the exposure to non-traditional families. For example, while we can control for the gender role attitudes of the mother, we do not observe the gender role attitudes of the father, and these attitudes are likely related to whether the child grows up in a non-traditional family.

We take a step towards ruling out such alternative explanations by separating childhood experiences into two separate periods: from age 0 to 5, and from age 6 to 15. If the exposure variables are truly capturing the influence these mothers have as role models for their children, we might expect this influence to be more muted in the first years of life, as small-age children might not be as aware of their mother’s work, and certainly not as aware of their mother’s dominating income position within the household. In contrast, if these exposure variables are capturing other fixed traits of the mother or father or household, there is no strong a priori reason to expect differential effects of the earlier vs. later exposure measures.

These results are presented in Columns 3 and 4 of Table 1. The findings are broadly consistent with our preferred interpretation in that we see that it is the family arrangements that children are exposed to from age 6 to age 15 that are more strongly correlated with gender norms in young adulthood. In fact, focusing on exposure over that period, there is now evidence that exposures to married working mothers and to married mothers that are the primary breadwinners are also statistically significantly associated with daughters growing up to be more gender liberal.

Our results so far suggest that growing up in non-traditional families where mothers display greater labor market power move children’s views on gender roles in a more liberal direction. However, one may naturally wonder whether there is heterogeneity in these dynamics of gender socialization. Indeed, in some families, mother’s work might be in accordance with the values of the mother and/or father, while in other families, mother’s work might be more a reflection of economic circumstances and needs, possibly in violation of the values of the mother and/or the father.
To address this, we now consider how the relationship between non-traditional families and the gender socialization of young adults differ across two sets of mothers. In particular, we contrast the patterns of gender socialization of children exposed to non-traditional families based on whether the mothers of these children scored below or above 16 on the gender norm index they reported in their NLSY79 baseline interview. While the NLSY unfortunately does not include information on fathers’ gender role attitudes, it is reasonable to expect some marital sorting on gender attitudes. About a third of young adults in our sample have mothers with a gender norm score of 16 or below.

Not surprisingly, traditional families are more common among conservative mothers. For example, the average individual in our sample with a more (vs. less) gender conservative mother spent 38 (vs. 49) percent of her/his first 15 years with a mother that has a spouse and is working, and 10 (vs. 14) percent with a mother that has a spouse and out-earns this spouse.

We present these results in Table 2. Given the patterns in Table 1, we focus on exposure to non-traditional families between the ages of 6 and 15.

We observe heterogeneity when it comes to exposure to intact (i.e. with spouse present) non-traditional families. In particular, the more liberal gender norms young men exhibit after exposure to a working married mother or a married mother that is the primary breadwinner in the family appear stronger and more robust among the subset of boys growing up with more liberal mothers (column 4 vs. column 2).

This can be best illustrated in simple two-by-two tabulations. Among boys growing up in more conservative families, the mean gender role index is 18.1 if these boys were continuous exposed to a primary breadwinner mother from age 6 to 15, compared to 17.7 if these boys were never exposed to a primary breadwinner mother. In contrast, among boys growing up in more liberal families, the mean gender role index is 19.3 if these boys were continuous exposed to a primary breadwinner mother from
age 6 to 15, compared to 18.1 if these boys were never exposed to a primary breadwinner mother. In other words, the point estimates suggest that meaningfully moving a son in a more liberal direction with regard to gender attitudes requires the combination of growing up in a more gender liberal environment and being exposed to a strong mother role model.

This is in contrast to girls where the role model effect associated with having a married mother that is the primary breadwinner in the family is if anything stronger when the mother is more gender conservative.

Finally, for both gender conservative and gender liberal mothers, we observe positive effects on boys’ and girls’ gender norms associated with growing up with a non-married mother. The point estimates suggest that the impact of this family structure on gender socialization is similar across the genders; the point estimates also suggest somewhat stronger role model effects among children born to more conservative mothers.

Finally, in results not reported here but available upon request, we take our discussion of the gender differences in the patterns of gender socialization one step further in terms of identification by replicating the analysis in Table 2 for siblings, i.e. by including mother fixed effects and doing comparisons between brothers and sisters. This additional analysis broadly confirm our main takeaways. In particular, looking in the full sample of mothers, we see greater sensitivity of gender role attitudes to exposure to a married mother that is the primary breadwinner among sons than daughters. However, confirming the evidence in Table 2, this effect appears solely driven by the subset of children born to more gender liberal mothers. Also, there are no statistically significant differences between sons and daughters in the effect of exposure to a non-married mother.

III. Conclusion

The gender socialization of young adults is shaped by their exposure to non-traditional family arrangements. Both boys and girls appear to develop more liberal gender norms as they spend more time growing up with an unmarried mother. In intact families, boys’ gender norms, more than girls’, appear to be positively influenced by the role model they find in their working mother, especially if she is also the primary breadwinner in the household.

However, our results also suggest that the role model effect for boys associated with mother’s work and relative economic power in the household is lessened in more gender conservative environments (as proxied for by mother’s own gender role attitudes). While a
full study of mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper, one possible interpretation is that, in those more conservative environments, the role model effect force pushing towards more gender liberal norms is subject to other countervailing forces, such as the influence of a father whose male identity might be threatened by the situation.

REFERENCES


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