

# **Exploring gender, work and families**

– Gender attitudes and relationship  
satisfaction

Lauren Bird

ICLS Policy Seminar  
Work, Family and Health  
December . 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015

OP18.2

[www.ucl.ac.uk/icls](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls)

Good afternoon. My name is Lauren Bird and this talk is on gender attitudes and relationship satisfaction in UK families. This research has been carried out with Dr Anne McMunn and Professor Amanda Sacker.

## What are gender attitudes and behaviours?



OP18.2

[www.ucl.ac.uk/ics](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ics)

To begin with I want to identify what I mean by gender attitudes and behaviours. We define gender separately from sex. When we are thinking of sex we are thinking of biological differences between men and women. When we talk about gender we are talking about social cultural differences. And social cultural differences can vary across countries or regions and can also vary across time and even within an individual across their life course.

Types of gender attitudes can include attitudes to employment - not only whether or not you are in employment but also types of employment can be shaped by various gender attitudes. Common gender attitudes include distinctions between men's and women's roles within the home domestic sphere, an example would be a belief that childcare is best performed by women or paid labour is more suited to men.

When we talk about gender behaviours we are talking about what people actually do.

Gender attitudes do not necessarily agree with gender behaviours. Some individuals may believe that paid work should be divided equally between men and women but in reality consequences of having a family, such as expensive childcare, can result in gender behaviours contrary to gender attitudes. An individual may wish to work but you cannot afford to, while another individual may wish to spend more time with their children but cannot afford to reduce their work hours.

What happens when disagreements between couples or workplace cultures, conflict with an individual's beliefs about work and family life?

The big questions are:

- What happens when there are disagreements within a relationship or within a couple regarding these gender attitudes and gender behaviours?
- What happens when there are differences between an individual's gender attitudes and their workplace environment or culture, their family or their social environment?
- What happens when these attitudes and behaviours do not match up?
- Can conflict between an individual's attitudes about work and family life and actual behaviours in work and family life, actually affect their outcomes?

The outcome of focus today is relationship satisfaction.

- The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), children born between 2000 and 2002 across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- Selected only those children with a response from two parents (*not necessarily married, not necessarily natural parents*)
- Our sample approx. 12 000 families
- Data from when child was 9 months old



[www.ucl.ac.uk/icls](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls)

The study that I use is the Millennium Cohort Study and as was mentioned previously this is the most recent of the large British birth cohorts studies. This study follows children across the United Kingdom born between 2000 and 2002.

The study follows a target child and that target child's parents or carers were interviewed. We had a rich variety of data from most of the mothers as well as many of the fathers on not only the child's life and the child's environment but on the parents' behaviours and attitudes too.

We have selected families where there was a response from two parents and we focus only on two parent families because of that interest in conflicts or disagreements, however, they are not necessarily married and they are not necessarily natural parents but they are two parents or social parents who are living together in the same household.

We have around 12,000 families in this sample and all of the data that I am using was collected when the child was about nine months old so we can particularly talk about family life when there is at least one young child in the household.

## Gender attitudes

- 1) *"A child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works before he/she starts school."*
- 2) *"All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job."*
- 3) *"A mother and her family would all be happier if she goes out to work."*

[www.ucl.ac.uk/icls](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls)

These are the gender attitude questions that got asked in the survey, they are all focused on maternal employment. They are: "whether a child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works before he or she starts school;" "all in all family life suffers when a woman has a full-time job;" and "a mother and her family would be happier if she goes out to work".

**Relationship Satisfaction:  
Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State**

- 1) My partner is usually sensitive to and aware of my needs.
- 2) My partner doesn't seem to listen to me.
- 3) I sometimes feel lonely even when I am with my partner.
- 4) Our relationship is full of joy and excitement.
- 5) I wish there was more warmth and affection between us.
- 6) I suspect we may be on the brink of separation.
- 7) We can always make up quickly after an argument.

The outcome is relationship satisfaction. There are seven questions in the Millennium Cohort Study on relationship satisfaction, they are from the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State. "My partner is usually sensitive to and aware of my needs." "My partner doesn't seem to listen to me." "I sometimes feel lonely even when I am with my partner." "Our relationship is full of joy and excitement." "I wish there was more warmth and affection between us." "I suspect we may be on the brink of separation." "We can always make up quickly after an argument."

All of these questions were combined to make a scale so that you have a total score of relationship satisfaction. Out of interest when you look at these variables individually, the most common thing for both men and women to feel is missing in their relationship was question five. Approximately 25% of men and 20% of women agreed or strongly agreed that they wish there was more warmth and affection in their relationship. The next most common one for both men and women was number three, I sometimes feel lonely. Remember that these are families with a young child in their households. Generally many are quite satisfied but a lot are feeling that they wish there was more warmth and affection and sometimes feel lonely with their partner.

Do couples have greater relationship satisfaction  
when they share the same gender attitudes?

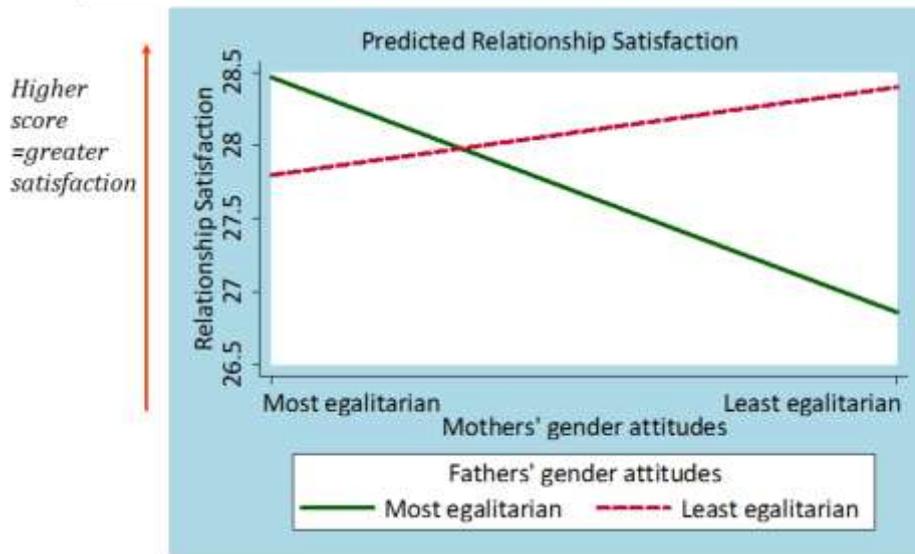
And

Can we say whether more egalitarian couples have  
better relationship satisfaction than less egalitarian  
couples?

So the two questions I want to begin with are do couples have greater relationship satisfaction when they agree or they share the same gender attitudes, and can we say whether more egalitarian couples have better relationship satisfaction than less egalitarian couples.

## Results

Mothers' relationship satisfaction by interaction of couples gender attitudes to maternal employment



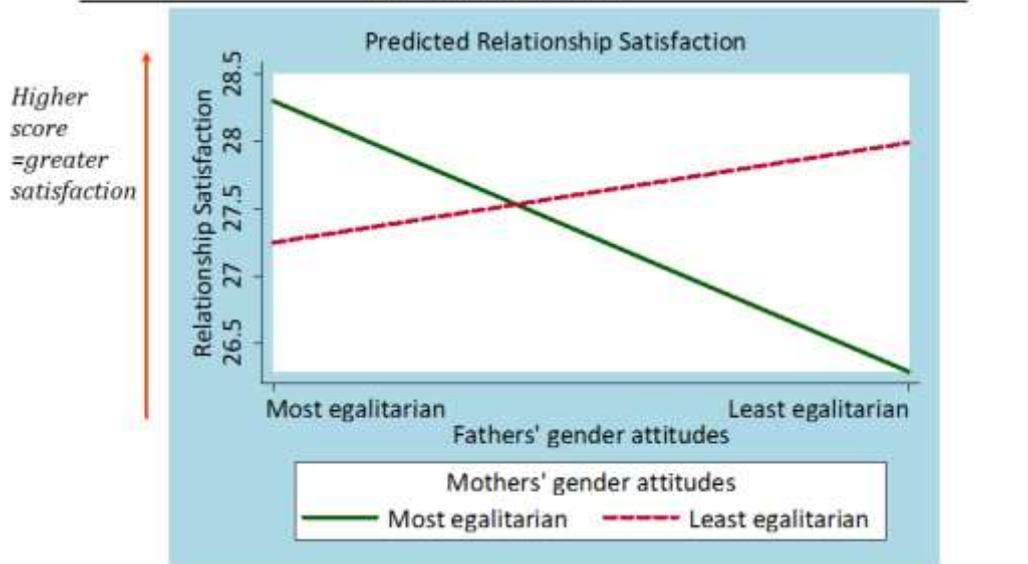
This graph shows our first set of results. This graph plots mothers' relationship satisfaction; on the left axis we have a prediction for the satisfaction score where the higher the score the greater their satisfaction in their relationship. This graph plots relationship satisfaction in relation to the results of a regression analyses but is focused on our variables of interest – the lines represent interacting mothers' gender attitudes with their partners' gender attitudes. The mothers' attitudes are along the horizontal axis and the different coloured lines represent the father's attitudes. Therefore, the left side of the graph has the most egalitarian mothers and to the right are the least egalitarian mothers. The green line represents the most egalitarian fathers and the red the least.

I'd like to draw your attention to the top left corner of the graph where you can see that women who have more egalitarian attitudes and are partnered with a partner who also has egalitarian attitudes (green line) have the highest relationship satisfaction.

This graph also highlights the importance of agreement between couples because the second highest satisfaction is in the least egalitarian mothers partnered with the least egalitarian partners (top right corner & red line). So we really see the effect of the conflict that as you move from more to less egalitarian attitudes if you disagree with your partner your relationship satisfaction goes down quite strongly.

## Results

Fathers' relationship satisfaction by interaction of couples' gender attitudes to maternal employment



For men we have the very same picture. The most egalitarian fathers partnered with most egalitarian wives have the highest relationship satisfaction, and least egalitarian fathers with most egalitarian wives have the lowest. So there is a strong influence of the conflict between couples and overall the most egalitarian ones have higher satisfaction.

Do couples have greater relationship satisfaction when they share the same gender attitudes?

**Yes**

Can we say whether more egalitarian couples have better relationship satisfaction than less egalitarian couples?

***Overall, couples who shared egalitarian views had the greatest satisfaction in their relationships***

[www.ucl.ac.uk/ics](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ics)

In answer to the first question: do couples have greater relationship satisfaction when they share the same gender attitudes - the answer is yes.

Both concordant egalitarian and concordant non-egalitarian partnerships had higher relationship satisfaction than the couples that had disagreeing gender attitudes.

Our second question: Can we say whether more egalitarian couples have better relationship satisfaction than the less egalitarian couples? Overall we can say that as well.

It's also interesting to note that where the couples were discordant an individuals relationship satisfaction was higher if they were the egalitarian partner in the relationship compared to being the one with less egalitarian gender attitudes in a couple.

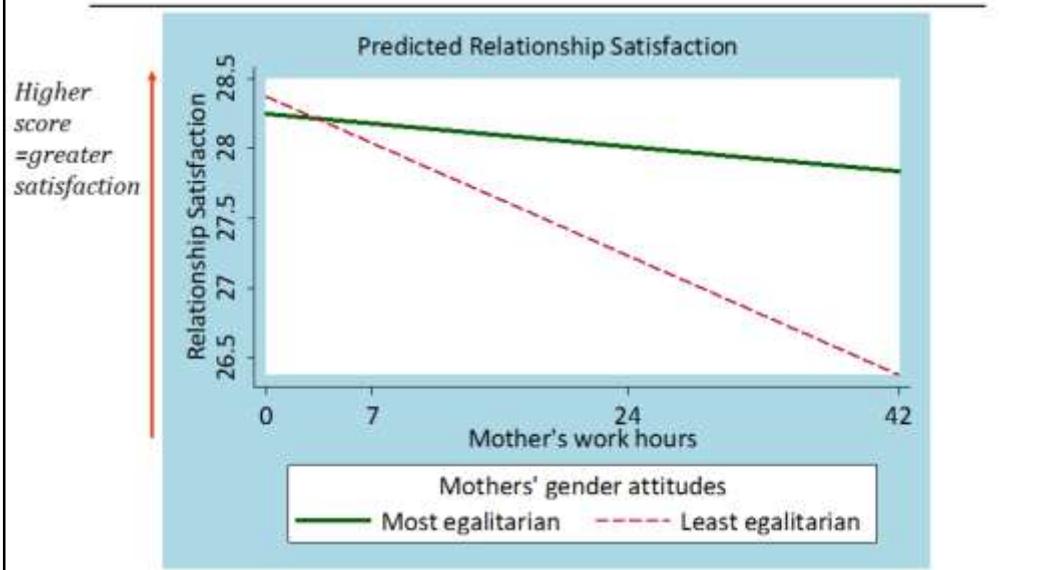
Does relationship satisfaction decline when there is a conflict between a person's gender attitudes and the actual maternal employment in the household?

The next question focused on conflict between the gender attitudes of an individual (both the mother and the father separately) and the actual maternal employment in that household.

As I mentioned at the beginning, you may have personal attitudes towards the gender division of labour that you would prefer but that doesn't necessarily translate into the actual employment behaviours in the household because of the types of economic and childcare requirements in the household. Therefore an individual can have a conflict within their own attitudes and behaviours.

## Results

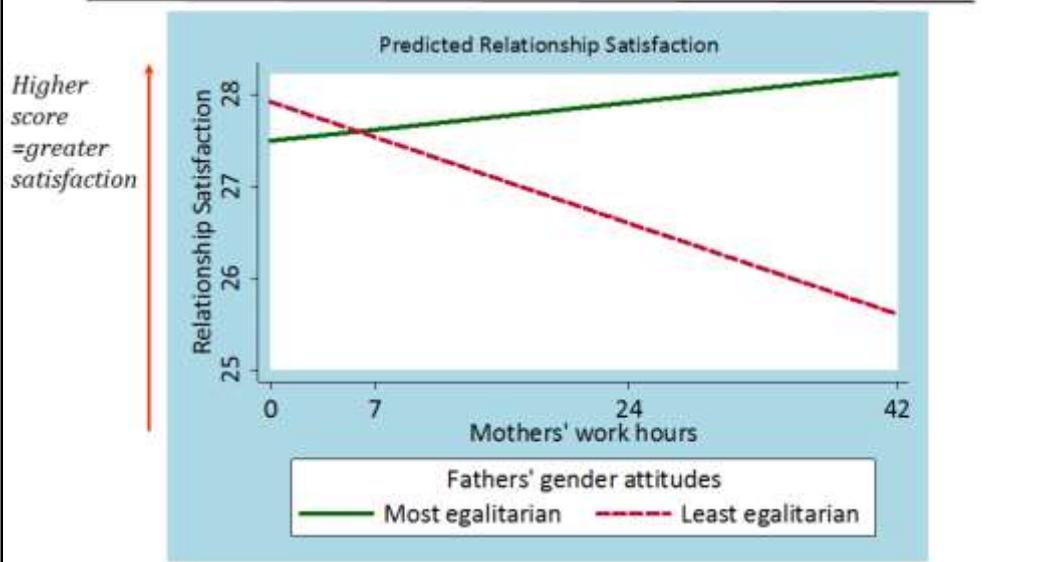
Mothers' relationship satisfaction by interaction of work hours and gender attitudes



So what I am looking at in this graph is the gender attitudes for mothers and their relationship satisfaction by the hours of work. And you can see when you don't work any hours, this is zero hours on the left, doesn't actually matter what your gender attitudes are but as a mother with low egalitarian attitudes increases her work relationship quality declines quite significantly. You will also notice that the most egalitarian mothers have a slight decline in their relationship satisfaction the more hours they work. But this graph is from a model which actually adjusts for income, education and occupational social class. So if you don't adjust for those variables women actually in the most egalitarian groups their satisfaction goes up. It's just that that seems to be an effect of their income and their education.

## Results

Fathers' relationship satisfaction by interaction of work hours and gender attitudes



Fathers with the most egalitarian attitudes relationship satisfaction improved as their wives worked more hours even again accounting for all education, economic and social class variables (green line). But the fathers with least egalitarian attitudes had, like the mothers, a very stark decline in their relationship satisfaction (red dash line).

Does relationship satisfaction decline when there is a conflict between a person's gender attitudes and the actual maternal employment in the household?

***Yes, individuals with the least egalitarian attitudes experienced declines in relationship satisfaction as mothers' hours spent in paid work increased.***

This research shows that it is important to consider the relationship between what you believe and what you are actually do for maternal employment. To return to the question "does relationship satisfaction decline when there is a conflict between a person's gender attitudes and the actual maternal employment in the household" the answer is yes, people with the least egalitarian attitudes experience the greatest declines in relationship satisfaction as mothers' hours are increasingly spent in paid work.

## Division of domestic labour is also important!

Both mothers and fathers benefit from more egalitarian divisions of housework and childcare



OP18.2

[www.ucl.ac.uk/icls](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls)

Another important area to acknowledge is the division of domestic labour. We've focused on gender attitudes to employment. We did not have a comparable variable on gender attitudes to domestic labour, however, we did have data on domestic labour behaviours in the household. The mothers in the Millennium Cohort Study were asked a series of questions on both housework and childcare. Questions included: who does the most cooking, cleaning, laundry, as well who has most responsibility for feeding the baby, changing the baby's diapers and a few more similar questions.

These questions were combined into a single variable of five categories moving from the most egalitarian group where couple split most chores more or less equally and some fathers were also reported to do more than their partners on certain household tasks to the least egalitarian group where mother's reported that they were responsible for every task. Considering this division of domestic labour in our models of relationship satisfaction, we found that both mothers and fathers benefited from being in a more egalitarian household in terms of domestic labour.

It's not too surprising that women whose partners contribute to domestic labour (both chores and childcare) had greater relationship satisfaction as that has been observed in the research literature, but

we additionally reinforced that more egalitarian divisions of labour was also positive for men.

## Policy Implications - Improving Satisfaction

- Promote and support communication of expectations and gender attitudes between couples
- Support understanding of the relationship between gender attitudes and work for individuals
- Promote shared engagement/responsibilities in the household division of labour

To conclude, I want to give you some policy implications - you may think of some other ones relevant to your areas of expertise:

Firstly, in terms of improving satisfaction for individuals and couples,

It's important to promote and support open communication about expectations and gender attitudes between couples because the conflict between individuals' attitudes in a relationship can have considerable connections to areas of concern such as relationship satisfaction. As was mentioned earlier, when a child is born and when a child comes into the household there's often a reset in terms of the gender division of labour. If this reset occurs when a child is born and a couple have not actually discussed who will do what before the birth there may be negative consequences.

Supporting understanding for the relationship between gender attitudes and work for individuals – ensuring that people are aware that if gender attitudes to work and actual work behaviour are in conflict may also be associated with poorer satisfaction.

Promoting or supporting shared engagement and responsibilities in the household division of labour would be beneficial for both men and women.

## Policy Implications - Supporting Equality in the workplace

- Promote shared parental leave – make it the new norm
- Be alert to gendered expectations or stereotypes in the workplace
- Promote equal access to support systems that allow for greater balance between home and work life: e.g. flexitime, childcare, career breaks, unpaid leave

Policy Implications for the workplace?

What can we do to support equality in the workplace?

Promote shared parental leave. Shared parental leave recently got a boost in April 2015 whereby men have a far greater access to shared parental leave. But having the policies in place for shared parental leave does not necessarily mean that men and women equally take up shared parental leave. So there is a need for a commitment to actually make that the workplace norm.

We know from the example of other countries that have had shared parental leave programmes (or similar) for longer periods of time, that the opportunity to take up leave by fathers is often not used due to cultural or workplace stereotypes, fears about job security etc. Therefore there is considerable need to really promote equality in parental leave to help make it the new norm, otherwise men may not take it up because of social pressures, whether or not that pressure is actually in the workplace.

Be alert to any gendered expectations or stereotypes in the workplace, making sure that when new staff start both men and women are made aware of policies and benefits such as opportunities for flexible leave arrangements.

Promote equal access to those support systems. Make sure that everyone is aware of flexible time, childcare availability, career breaks, unpaid leave, all these types of

policies that we've discussed throughout the day. Make sure that those policies are promoted equally to men and women. Opportunities for equality in the workplace will benefit households as well, because couples can more equally share domestic obligations if they each have access to workplace benefits.

Thank you for listening,

Any Questions?

To get in touch:

lauren.bird.12@ucl.ac.uk



**Notes:**

ICLS hosted a policy seminar on Work, Family and Health at UCL in December 2015. The seminar was chaired by Richard Bartholomew, (former), Chief Research Officer, Children, Young People and Families Directorate, Department for Education and the presentations coordinated by Dr Anne McMunn, ICLS Co-investigator and UCL Graduate Tutor . Transcripts from this event, including this paper, have been made available via the ICLS Occasional Paper Series. This series allows for those who were not able to attend to read an account of the presentation. Other papers in the series include:

OP18.1 Work to Family conflict and Family to Work conflict- who is more at risk? Tarani Chandola, University of Manchester and ICLS

OP18.3 Balancing work and family over the life course and women's health in later life. Juliet Stone CPC, University of Southampton

OP18.4 Work-family life courses and stress and inflammation in mid-life. Rebecca Lacey, UCL

**Speaker:** Lauren Bird is a PhD student in the UCL Department of Epidemiology & Public Health. She is currently completing her PhD as part of a European Research Council funded project under Dr Anne McMunn. Lauren's research focuses on the dynamics of gender attitudes and the division of labour in UK families.

ICLS Occasional Paper 18.2, Jan 2016

© 2016 Bird, L. All rights reserved

[www.ucl.ac.uk/icls/publications/op](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls/publications/op)