A Longitudinal Study of Emerging Adults’ Plans for Work and Family

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Background
Women’s commitment to work and status attainment has increased substantially since the 1960s, yet women continue to differ from men in their plans for combining work and family. In particular, young women place higher value than men do on domestic and nurturing activities and they rate nurturing tasks such as caring for young children as more important than men do.1

Recent research has 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.2 Across cultures, women prefer working with people and men with things,3 large differences that manifest themselves in intergroup discourses about a scientific revolution and engineering. And, even men and women of similarly high intellectual aptitude differ in their commitment to various facets of their careers in life more generally, such as their desire to live near family and desire for recognition and willingness to work long hours.4

The current study was designed to determine whether differences between men and women in work-family plans are ameliorated by progression through four years of a liberal education that emphasizes gender egalitarianism. If young women’s plans are influenced by social forces, then first-year male and female college students should differ in their plans for combining work and family, but senior male and female students—who have learned about those social forces over four years of a liberal education—should not.

Method
Participants
Students were recruited in the fall of 2009 (“Time 1”) from a popular gender education course, Psychology 100. We surveyed 377 students from across campus, over 50% of whom were first-year students. In the fall of 2012 (“Time 2”), we contacted those who were still in the Psychology 100 field and invited them to complete a follow-up questionnaire in return for $25. We obtained 200 of the original students, 43% of whom had been first-year students at Time 1 and 96% of whom had been first- or second-year students at Time 1. Importantly, those who were still enrolled in the university and who we obtained for follow-up did not differ significantly on any variables of interest from those included only in the initial data collection.

Our data are limited in that the data reflect men’s and women’s plans for their future, not their actual work and family decisions and behaviors. As any parent will attest, it is not easy to predict how the actual experience of becoming a parent (and 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 across time.5 Large differences that manifest themselves in a variety of life domains and aspects of the life course may begin to kick in during the college years.6

Results
I. Career Plans
Educational Aspirations

[Table with relevant data]

Upon Completing their Education

At Time 1, men and women differed in their educational aspirations (t 169 = 0.01, p = .967). At Time 2, men’s desired college major was more likely than women’s major to be business, engineering, or science. (t 196 = -2.46, p = .018). At neither time did men’s or women’s educational aspirations differ by sex; (t 185 = 0.00, p = .997). In addition, women (as well as men) delayed their plans for marriage and children by about a year, which may be tied to women’s increased educational aspirations. These findings suggest that college may have a positive influence on men’s and women’s awareness of their potential life plans.

II. Plans for Marriage and Children
Desired Age of Getting Married, if applicable

[Table with relevant data]

Men’s and women’s plans for marriage and having children showed substantial stability from Time 1 to Time 2 (all test-retest coefficients significant at p < .05). For example, people who reported at Time 1 that they wanted to have children at a young age (relative to the rest of the respondents) were significantly more likely to want children at an even younger age at Time 2 (t 131 = 2.17, p = .032). As shown in this row of figures, at both time points, men’s plans for marriage and children were about a year behind women’s plans (consistent with U.S. Census data), all sex differences significant at p < .01. In addition, sex differences in plans for marriage at Time 1 (t 200 = 2.00, p = .023) and Time 2 (t 185 = 2.52, p = .01) were significant. This sex difference at Time 2 may be tied to the higher desire for partner (that is, women) who planned to work less than they had reported at Time 1 and 99% of whom had been first- or second-year students at Time 1 and 96% of whom had been first- or second-year students at Time 1. Importantly, those who were still enrolled in the university and who we obtained for follow-up did not differ significantly on any variables of interest from those included only in the initial data collection.

Discussion

Some of our findings indicate that differences in young men’s and women’s career and family plans may be related to gender socialization and education. When asked about educational aspirations at Time 1, more men than women reported that they wanted to pursue an advanced degree beyond the bachelor’s degree. By Time 2, however, men and women held similar aspirations, due in part to increased aspirations of an advanced degree among the women in the sample. In addition, women (as well as men) delayed their plans for marriage and children by about a year, which may be tied to women’s increased educational aspirations. These findings suggest that college may have a positive influence on men’s and women’s awareness of their potential life plans.

In the context of having young children, however, men and women differed sharply at both points in college. Women did not change over the college years in their plans to work less than full-time when they have young children at home; nor did they change significantly in their plans to work far less than their partner when they have young children at home. These findings suggest the position that, if some male-female psychological differences have biological underpinnings, then these differences will be maintained and sometimes exacerbated when men and women are free to choose their own paths.8,9

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Select References

Acknowledgements
This research is supported by the NSF/NEH Collaborative Infrastructure Grants for the Development of Digital Humanities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UW-Eau Claire.

The authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and assistance on this project, the many faculty who took time to review the study’s materials, and the students who participated.