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Adolescents' Expectations about Mothers' Employment:

Life Course Patterns and Parental Influence

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Abstract

Because of social constraint and personal preference, cutting back and dropping out of the workforce remain common responses to the problem of balancing work and motherhood. To understand whether this phenomenon will continue, adolescents from middle-class, dual-earner families ($N = 194$) were asked how much they expected that they (for girls) or their future partners (for boys) would work while raising children. Nearly all expected new mothers to quit their jobs or reduce their hours temporarily, which signifies either acceptance of, or ignorance of, the penalties of career interruption among girls with high occupational aspirations. Adolescents' expectations were associated with their mothers' employment histories and support for gender egalitarianism, as well as the level of challenge in the home environment.

Keywords: adolescents, expectations, life course, mothers, work-family conflict

It is well-known that compared to most other industrialized nations, the United States has instituted few public policies to help couples to manage the competing demands of employment and parenting (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Moreover, parents tend to perceive the conflict as their own private problem and to seek personal solutions (Hertz, 1986). Even within the range of private arrangements that theoretically are available, some are rarely utilized. For example, fathers could cut back on their employment in order to take care of their children. However, although some reduce their hours in a small way (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000), voluntary assumption of a house-husband's role is extremely rare because breadwinning is so deeply intertwined in mainstream conceptions of masculinity (Nock, 1998; Townsend, 2002). Similarly, although many men in dual-earner couples assume a share of the housework and childcare burden in their non-working hours, equality in this realm is unusual (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Deutsch, 1999). Hiring outside help with childcare or home chores is an increasingly common tactic, but many couples cannot afford to do so. Furthermore, some couples with middle-class incomes have principled objections to outsourcing these tasks (Steunkel, 2005).

Even though a large majority of women with children are now working outside the home (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000), limiting the mother's employment remains perhaps couples' most popular response to the demands of parenthood. The extent to which this is a sacrifice for individual women depends on whether they are home-oriented, work-oriented, or somewhere in between (Hakim, 2000). For those in demanding or male-dominated occupations and professions, the costs of quitting or cutting back to part-time hours will obviously be greatest. However, all couples face an

opportunity cost in foregone earnings when the mother stays out of the labor force (Machung, 1989). The costs to women of not cutting back, by contrast, may include increased feelings of overload and stress (Moen & Yu, 2000).

Given these concerns, it would be valuable to know how the next generation of women expect to resolve the hard choice of how much to work if and when they become mothers. One hint may be found in adolescent girls' expectations about what they will do in the future. Boys' expectations about how much their future partners will work are also of interest, because those who grow up to become fathers in marital and cohabiting relationships will influence their partners' choices. To be sure, young people's expectations offer an imperfect window on the future, as unanticipated contingencies cause many people to change their life plans after they reach adulthood (Gerson, 1985). However, adolescents' expectations for the future are known to be related to later outcomes in domains that range from educational attainment to risky behaviors (Harris, Duncan, & Boisjoly, 2002; Sewell & Hauser, 1980). In a similar way, expectations about mothers' employment can provide an indication of future trends.

Previous Research on Expectations about Mothers' Employment

Research conducted in the last two decades has shown that few female high school students think that motherhood and employment are mutually exclusive. Dennehy and Mortimer (1993) found that over 90 percent of their sample of Minnesota high school girls planned to become mothers and that 96 percent of those future mothers expected to work for pay while raising children. Davey (1998) similarly reported that nearly everyone in her sample of Canadian girls who expected to become mothers also anticipated being employed. Qualitative (Machung, 1989; Maines & Hardesty, 1987) and

quantitative studies (Baber & Monaghan, 1988; O'Connell, Betz, & Kurth, 1989) of college women have provided similar information.

However, female high school and college students did not expect continuous full-time employment, but rather a greater or lesser period of part-time work or total labor force withdrawal following each child's birth. For example, the largest group of high school girls in Dennehy and Mortimer's (1993) study anticipated taking 1 or 2 years off. Moreover, some college women expected to re-enter the full-time workforce slowly, working part-time until their children were in preschool or grade school (O'Connell et al., 1989).

Many researchers did not ask young men what they anticipated that their wives would do, but those who did so generally found that boys' and girls' expectations diverged. Whereas nearly all the high school girls in Dennehy and Mortimer's (1993) study said that they would work after having children, less than 40 percent of boys said that they definitely expected their wives to do so; the majority expressed uncertainty. Similarly, Stephan and Corder (1985) found that high school girls were more likely than boys to prefer a dual-earner arrangement in their future marriages.

Generally speaking, researchers have ignored the life course context of expectations. They usually have asked young women whether they expected to be employed after they had children – a question with no clear time referent – or when they expected to return to work – a question that ignores the possibility that mothers may re-enter the workforce in stages. (The questions asked of young men were analogous.) One previous study collected information about college women's plans for different stages in their children's lives (O'Connell et al., 1989), but the researchers chose to aggregate the

responses into a single scale, and disregarded information about patterns of expected work involvement over time.

What employment trajectories might adolescents expect? Extrapolating from the past studies, I hypothesized that a large number of girls would anticipate working less while raising very young children than later, when their children would be older. This could mean labor force withdrawal after a birth followed by part-time employment, part-time employment followed by full-time employment, or a jump directly from homemaking to full-time employment. Boys might have any of these expectations, but I predicted that they would be more likely to expect their wives to stay at home while raising children than girls would be to expect themselves to stay at home. Finally, considering that rates of employment among mothers have increased since the older studies were done, I hypothesized that some adolescents would expect themselves or their future partners to work full-time regardless of their children's ages.

Parental Influence on Expectations about Mothers' Employment

Why should adolescents anticipate different trajectories of mothers' employment from one another? One possible answer is that their parents' behaviors and attitudes might influence the content of their expectations. The most obvious hypothesis in this vein is that adolescents would tend to expect that their own or their partners' employment patterns would follow their own mothers' work histories. Social learning theory predicts that if adolescents observe their mothers participating in the paid labor force, they should evaluate such behavior as normal. In accord with the theory, several researchers found that adolescents whose own mothers were employed were more likely to expect similar

behavior for themselves or their wives (Dennehy & Mortimer, 1993; Stephan & Corder, 1985).

Adolescents' expectations may also be shaped by their parents' attitudes. Many researchers have found correlations between mothers' and children's attitudes toward gender roles within the family (Cunningham, 2001; Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997; Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983), including the appropriateness of mothers' employment (Starrels, 1992). Much less is known about possible links between fathers' and children's attitudes because many data sets have included limited information about fathers. When data have been available, fathers' attitudes have sometimes been found to be less similar to children's attitudes than mothers' attitudes were (Acock & Bengtson, 1978). In the present study, I tested for associations between adolescents' expectations and both parents' attitudes.

Although it has been considered in the literature less often, parents also influence their adolescent children's plans and expectations through their style of interaction. Rathunde and colleagues (Rathunde, 1996; Rathunde, Carroll, & Huang, 2000) identified two dimensions of family interaction, i.e., family support and family challenge, that are particularly consequential for adolescents' thoughts about their futures. Family support is defined as "the parents' responsiveness to the child. In a responsive family, the child is comfortable in the home, spends time with other family members, and feels loved and cared for" (Rathunde et al., 2000, p. 115). Family challenge, by contrast, "refers to the stimulation, discipline, or training that parents and other family members direct towards the child. Challenge also includes the expectations the child perceives family members to have of him or her and the child's desire to fulfill those expectations" (Rathunde et al.,

2000, pp. 115-116). Rathunde and colleagues found that family support promoted optimism in adolescents, family challenge promoted motivation, and the combination of the two encouraged an achievement orientation. Further evidence has been provided by Schneider and Stevenson (1999), who found that adolescents of both genders tended to have high educational and occupational aspirations for themselves if their parents were supportive and challenging.

The research reviewed above suggested several hypotheses about parents' influence. First, I predicted that adolescents would expect more continuous and extensive employment for themselves or their partners when (a) their own mothers have been continuously and extensively employed, and (b) their parents have egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles within the family. Given that family support and challenge are known to promote an achievement orientation, I also predicted that girls would expect more continuous and extensive employment when they perceive their parents to be supportive and challenging. I hypothesized that this effect would be gender-specific. Although the sons of supportive and challenging parents would have high ambitions for themselves, their expectations about their future wives' employment would be more strongly influenced by their mothers' work behavior and their parents' attitudes.

In investigating the above hypotheses, care was taken to control for several factors that might complicate or confound the investigation of parents' influence. Demographic factors such as age (Davey, 1998) and ethnicity (East, 1998) are known to affect expectations about family and employment, at least for girls. Also, measures of socioeconomic status – parents' education and family income – were taken into account in order to clarify the effects of parents' gender attitudes. Some have argued that

observed attitude similarity between parents and children may not result from socialization, but rather from the family's shared socioeconomic status (Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1986; Starrels, 1992). If parents' attitudes are related to children's expectations once variables such as parental education and income are taken into account, then it is less likely that attitude similarity is a result of status similarity.

Method

Data Source

Data for this research were drawn from the Sloan 500 Family Study, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and conducted at the University of Chicago between 1998 and 2000. This was a study of 540 families with adolescents and/or kindergarten-aged children. The sample was mainly composed of families with two employed parents, and most could be characterized as middle-class. Families were drawn from eight urban and suburban communities throughout the United States. Participation was solicited on a voluntary basis through local public high schools and elementary schools. In families with an adolescent, parents and child provided multiple forms of data via a survey instrument, an in-depth interview, and a beeper study of activities and feelings. A more complete description of the methodology is available elsewhere (Hoogstra, 2005).

During the Sloan 500 Family Study, adolescent respondents were asked about their expectations about mothers' employment at four separate future time points. This makes possible an analysis of trajectories of expectations. Analogous measures are simply not available in the public-use data sets most commonly employed in family studies (e.g., the National Survey of Families and Households, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health). In addition, the Sloan 500 Family Study researchers

collected extensive information from both parents, which facilitates the analysis of parents' influence on expectations.

I used data from the survey responses of mothers, fathers, and adolescent children age 12 to 18 years from participating families that contained two cross-sex parents who were dual-earners, that is, both were employed or actively looking for work. In all cases used here, each parent had a biological, adoptive, or step relationship to the adolescent, and all three family members resided in the same household at the time of data collection. As the research question concerns what adolescents imagined life would be like if they were to get married and have a child, cases were excluded if adolescents said that there was less than a 50-50 chance of experiencing either event. Only four cases that met the other selection criteria and had no missing data on any of the variables of interest were excluded for that reason.

The final sample was based on 157 households, including 122 with one participating adolescent, 66 with two, and 6 with three. Because the unit of analysis was the triad of an adolescent and two parents, there were 194 cases. All tests of significance were based upon robust standard errors that adjusted for the clustering of cases within households.

An additional 65 cases that met the criteria for inclusion were dropped because of missing data on one or more measures in the regression analysis. A comparison of the cases with complete data and missing data revealed very few significant differences on the measures used in this study. (All findings of statistical significance refer to the 95% confidence level unless otherwise specified.) Included adolescents reported their family

environments to be more supportive and more challenging than excluded adolescents did, but there were no other differences.

Independent Variables

Means and standard deviations for all independent variables are shown in Table I. Most of the predictors of theoretical interest were measures of parents' characteristics, including mothers' employment, gender attitudes, and family support and challenge. Mothers' employment was represented by two dummy variables: the first indicated whether the respondent's mother ever quit her job to be a full-time homemaker, and the second indexed whether she worked part-time, defined here as fewer than 38 hours per week in her main job, at the time of the survey.¹ If the mother was unemployed and looking for work at the time of the survey, hours at her most recent previous job were used.

Parents' gender attitude scores were based on their responses to four questions. Participants were asked to rate the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree": "It should not bother the husband if a wife's job sometimes requires her to be away from him overnight"; "If his wife works full-time, a husband should share equally in household chores such as cooking, cleaning and washing"; "It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have a career herself"; "Parents should encourage just as much independence in their daughters as in their sons." The responses to these four items were averaged, and the resulting score was standardized to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Cronbach's alpha was 0.57 for mothers and 0.64 for fathers. These reliability coefficients are low, but after I reverse-coded the third item to make all the correlations positive, the inter-item

correlations ranged from .22 to .32 for mothers and .23 to .37 for fathers. This indicates that the items tapped a single dimension of gender egalitarianism.

Family support and family challenge were measured by the Support/Challenge Questionnaire designed by Rathunde and colleagues (Rathunde et al., 2000). These scores were based upon adolescents' ratings of whether 11 and 12 statements, respectively, about patterns of interaction with their family members were often, sometimes, rarely, or never true. "I feel appreciated for who I am" and "We enjoy having dinner together and talking" are typical statements from the support scale. Examples of challenge statements are "I'm expected to do my best" and "I'm given responsibility for making important decisions affecting my life."² As with parental egalitarianism, the responses were averaged, and the resulting scale was standardized. Cronbach's alpha was 0.82 for support and 0.66 for challenge.

In this sample, the bivariate Pearson correlation between family support and family challenge was fairly high ($r = .66$). However, the two measures were differentially associated with adolescents' behavior in expected ways. For example, challenge, but not support, was correlated with the number of hours that adolescents devoted to paid employment at the 95% confidence level, as befits a measure designed to tap the encouragement to work hard that an adolescent receives at home. Also, Maier (Maier, 2005) reported that family support was associated with adolescents' grades in the Sloan 500 Family Study, and that family challenge was associated with aspirations to go to graduate school. Because of these associations, and because support and challenge are conceptually distinct, I treated them as separate dimensions of family interaction.

The final predictor of theoretical interest in the present study was the adolescent's gender (a dummy variable set to one for a girl). Control variables to measure the adolescent's characteristics included age and a dummy variable that indexed whether the adolescent was any ethnicity other than single-race, non-Hispanic White. (It was not possible to utilize a more refined measure because 87 percent were White.) Controls to measure the parents' characteristics included family income (as reported by the mother) and the educational attainment of the more highly educated parent. Responses to the question about family income were originally categorical but were recoded to continuous values for this analysis.³

Latent Indicator Variables

Adolescents who completed the Sloan survey were asked a series of four questions about expected employment behavior by mothers. Girls were asked to what extent they expected themselves to work when a child is: less than 1 year old, 1 to 4 years old, in grade school, and in high school. Possible answers included full-time employment, part-time employment, or no outside employment at all. Boys were asked identical questions about their future spouses/partners.⁴

Fewer than 10 percent of respondents said that they expected themselves or their partners to work full-time when raising a child of less than 1 year old. Therefore, this variable was recoded into two categories: no employment versus some employment. Similarly, fewer than 10 percent expected the mother to stay home when a child is in grade school or high school. These variables, too, were recoded into two categories: full-time employment versus less than full-time employment. Only for the question about a

child aged 1 to 4 were all possible answers selected by large numbers of the sampled adolescents. This variable's original coding was preserved.

Statistical Methods

In this analysis, the four expectation measures just described were treated as indicators of adolescents' latent expectations about employment trajectories for mothers. Latent class cluster analysis (Hagenaars, 1990; McCutcheon, 1987), which is a clustering method for nominal and ordinal variables, was used to describe the most common trajectories. Adolescents were asked four questions about future employment, and because three of them had two response choices (after recoding) and the fourth had three, there were 24 possible combinations in the data. The goal of the latent class method was to reduce these 24 possibilities to the smallest number of patterns that parsimoniously fit the data. These patterns describe adolescent respondents' most commonly-held images of what they expected women's outside employment to look like while raising children. To perform this analysis (and to do all subsequent analyses reported here), I utilized a software program called Latent GOLD 4.0 (Vermunt & Magidson, 2005).

To answer the question of what parental characteristics were associated with adolescents' expectations, I employed multinomial logit latent class regression (Yamaguchi, 2000). In the past, regression models to predict latent class membership could only be run by assigning each respondent to the most likely class, and then using those assignments as the dependent measure. This is problematic because no respondent is actually a member of a latent class; rather, each individual has a numerical probability of belonging to each of the classes. Thus, assigning respondents to only one class means losing information about the magnitude of the probabilities. Multinomial logit latent

class regression solves this problem by simultaneously estimating a latent class measurement model and a structural model, just as structural equation modeling does when the latent dependent variable is assumed to have a continuous form. This allows full information about class membership to be utilized.

Along with the regression results, tests of statistical significance are reported. As the data were not drawn from a probability sample, it is important to remember that these tests do not have the conventional meaning, namely that the relationship or effect under discussion differs from zero in some larger population. However, significance tests are still useful for indicating the relative strength of effects in this sample.

Results

Expected Employment Trajectories for Mothers

Table II displays percentage distributions of the recoded expectation variables for the total sample and for each gender. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to expect mothers to be employed part-time rather than full-time while a child is in school. They were also slightly more likely than girls to expect the mother to stay at home when a child is between 1 and 4 years old. On the other hand, girls were more likely than boys to expect the mother to stay home when the child is less than 1 year old. In contrast to the findings reported by past researchers, gender differences in expectations were not very large. Only expected employment when a child is in high school significantly differed by gender.

A similarity to previous studies is also apparent. Although virtually all respondents expected the mother to work eventually, the majority (63%) expected some period of time outside the labor force. Expectations for part-time work were also quite

common. What is difficult to say, based on the information in Table II, is how these responses fit together over time. What kinds of employment trajectories did adolescents expect mothers to have over their child-raising years?

The procedure for latent class cluster analysis involves estimating measurement models with different numbers of latent classes and then choosing among the models that fit the data. Even though expectations for mothers' employment did not appear to vary much by gender, I began by estimating separate measurement models for boys and girls. Table III shows the results. For each gender, models with one, two, and three latent classes did not fit, but a model with four latent classes fit the data. Because a five-class model could not be estimated (not enough degrees of freedom were available), the four-class model was the only choice.

Because the optimal solutions for boys and girls contained the same number of clusters, it was possible to employ McCutcheon's (1987) test of simultaneous latent structure to determine whether the genders could be combined in a single cluster model. The results of this test indicated that a single latent class solution was more parsimonious than separate models for each gender. (This result, and all results not shown, are available from the author upon request.)

Table IV provides details about the combined-gender, four-class measurement model of expectations. The first section contains the latent class probabilities, which are the overall chances that a randomly-chosen respondent was a member of each class. These are reported for the total sample and for each gender. The rest of the table shows the conditional response probabilities. These numbers represent the likelihood that an adolescent would have given the response indicated, conditional on being a member of

that specific class. For example, consider the first class. Members of this group were 77% likely to expect that the mother would return to work immediately after having a child. They were also 72% likely to expect her to be employed full-time by the time the child is between the ages of 1 and 4, and overwhelmingly (100%) likely to expect her to hold a full-time paying job when the child is in grade school. Thus, this class is labeled the quick return group.

Compared to the quick return group, members of the second class expected a slower return to full-time employment in stages. They were likely to expect a short period of time out of the labor force after a birth, followed by a transitional period of part-time employment before the mother eventually returned to full-time work. Therefore, this class is called the gradual return group. The third, or home-oriented group, overwhelmingly expected a mother to stay home until the child goes to school. They also expected her to be employed part-time thereafter, at least when the child is in grade school.

If these were the only three groups, then they could be arrayed along a single dimension that represents how quickly the mother was expected to return to paid employment. However, the fourth class, labeled the permanent part-time group, cuts across this uni-dimensional ordering. Adolescents in this group expected the mother to return to part-time work quickly after a birth, but then to remain with this type of employment throughout most of her child-raising years, rather than moving to a full-time work schedule. The fact that the permanent part-time group does not fit along a single dimension with the other groups demonstrates the value of latent class analysis, which can reveal complex patterns in the data.

The quick return class had the highest membership probability, and adolescents of both genders were just about equally likely to be members of this group. They were also equally likely to be in the permanent part-time group. Compared to boys, however, girls appear to have had a slightly higher probability of being in the gradual return group, and a slightly lower one of being in the home-oriented group. A global test is available to determine whether the probability of being in one group rather than another differs by gender (McCutcheon, 1987). According to the results, the latent class probabilities were not significantly different for boys and girls. In other words, expectations about mothers' employment were not substantially different for these adolescent boys and girls from middle-class, two-parent families, the results of previous research notwithstanding.

Parental Correlates of Adolescents' Expectations

Table V reports the findings from multinomial logit latent class regression models where measures of parental characteristics were used to predict membership in the four latent classes. To avoid problems caused by multicollinearity, particularly between the measures of family support and family challenge, the parental characteristics were divided among four models: one for adolescents' mothers' employment, one for parents' egalitarianism, one for family support, and one for family challenge. Every model included the adolescent's gender, as well as all the control variables. Only the results from the structural component of each model are shown here; the measurement model coefficients (the latent class probabilities and the conditional probabilities) always remained similar to Table IV.

In these models, the quick return group is the comparison group. This means that the reported coefficients represent the odds of being in another group compared to the

quick return group. For example, consider Model 1, which assesses the influence of their mothers' past and present employment on adolescents' expectations for their own or their partners' future employment. According to the results, having a mother who was ever a full-time homemaker was associated with adolescents expecting less employment.

Respondents whose mothers ever left the labor force were 1.26 times more likely to be in the permanent part-time group than the quick return group, 2.12 times more likely to be in the gradual return group, and 6.83 times more likely to be in the home-oriented group. Only the last coefficient was statistically significant. Having a mother who was employed less than full-time at the time of the survey also made adolescents less likely to expect a quick return trajectory, but this effect was smaller and did not reach statistical significance for any of the three contrasts.

A comparison of the effects of mothers' and fathers' gender attitudes (Model 2) shows that the former were more closely associated with expectations. An adolescent whose mother expressed egalitarian views about gender was only .48 times as likely as another whose mother was one standard deviation lower on the egalitarianism scale to be in the gradual return group, compared to the quick return group. Put differently, the adolescent with the more egalitarian mother was slightly more than twice as likely to expect a quick return, rather than a gradual return. This difference was statistically significant. Although the other two regression coefficients for mothers' egalitarianism were only slightly closer to unity, they were not significant. Fathers' attitudes were not as strongly associated with adolescents' expectations as mothers' were.⁵

Family support and challenge were predicted to be associated with girls' orientations toward occupational achievement. Before turning to the question of whether

their effects differed by adolescents' gender, consider Models 3 and 4, which included respondents of both genders. In Model 3, family support was not associated with the odds that adolescents were in one group or another. By contrast, adolescents who felt that their family environment was challenging were significantly more likely to be in the quick return group than in the permanent part-time group according to Model 4. A one standard deviation increase in the scale that measured parental challenge meant that adolescents were only 0.35 times as likely to be in the latter group. This corresponds to a 2.88 times greater likelihood of expecting a quick return to full-time employment.

Although it is conventional when reporting the results of multinomial logit regression to compare the largest group to all of the other groups, it is possible to compare any two groups by calculating functions of the parameter estimates. In this case, the comparison between the home-oriented and permanent part-time groups in Model 4 is informative. A one standard deviation increase in family challenge made adolescents 3.02 times more likely to be in the home-oriented group rather than the permanent part-time group. The difference was highly significant ($p < .01$). However, family support did not affect the odds of being in these two groups. To sum up, family challenge increased adolescents' odds of expecting one of the extreme employment trajectories (home-oriented behavior, or a quick return to full-time employment), but family support was not associated with employment expectations.

Although the control variables are not the main focus of this article, it must be noted briefly that higher family income was sometimes associated with being in the quick return group rather than in the home-oriented group or the gradual return group. Also, being non-Hispanic White was sometimes associated with greater odds of expecting a

quick return to work, rather than a gradual return or a home orientation. Because the respondents of Color were racially and ethnically heterogeneous, it is difficult to draw any conclusions from this finding.

Gender Differences in Parental Correlates

Because boys and girls were pooled in Table V, the models were based on an implicit assumption that parental attitudes and behaviors would have the same associations with adolescents' expectations regardless of the adolescents' gender. Even though gender has been shown to have very little to do with the kind of expectations adolescents hold, this assumption of identical parental correlates should not go unexamined. In fact, one of the hypotheses offered earlier – that girls' expectations, but not boys', would be associated with parental support and challenge – explicitly posits a gender difference.

To test for differences, I ran additional regression models that contained interactions between adolescents' gender and the measures of parental characteristics. I then utilized conventional likelihood-ratio tests to determine whether the interaction terms supplied additional information, or whether the models without interactions were more parsimonious. According to the results (not shown), in no case did the interaction terms produce a sufficient improvement in the model fit to justify their inclusion. In other words, the same parental factors were associated with adolescents' expected employment trajectories for mothers, regardless of gender. This was true even for family support and challenge, which had been predicted to matter more for girls than for boys.

Parental Egalitarianism and the Effects of Parenting Style

According to the results in Table V, a family environment that was high on challenge tended to bifurcate adolescents into those who expected a great deal of mothers' employment and those who expected very little. One possible explanation is that parents' gender attitudes might have influenced which of these extreme groups adolescents fell into when they were challenged. Perhaps those with egalitarian parents responded to challenge by expecting extensive employment for themselves or their future partners, while those with more traditional parents responded by expecting little involvement in the workplace.

To test this hypothesis, models were run that contained family challenge, mothers' gender egalitarianism, and interactions between challenge and egalitarianism along with the control variables. An interaction between family challenge and having a mother at or above the 75th percentile in terms of egalitarianism was highly significant ($p < .01$), according to the likelihood-ratio test. An interaction between challenge and having a traditional mother (at or below the 25th percentile in terms of egalitarianism) was equally significant.

The results, which are displayed graphically in Figure 1, confirm the hypothesis. A one standard deviation increase in family challenge raised the odds of being in the quick return group, compared to the permanent part-time group, by 12.27 times among adolescents with egalitarian mothers, but it increased the odds to a much lesser extent (1.24 times) for adolescents with traditional mothers. The former odds ratio was significantly different from 1.0, but the second was not. Similarly, a more challenging family environment increased the odds of being in the home-oriented group, rather than

the permanent part-time group, by 3.54 times for those with traditional mothers, but only by 2.79 times for those with egalitarian mothers. While this second result is less dramatic than the first, it is meaningful; the effect of challenge was statistically significant for children of traditional mothers, but not for those whose mothers had egalitarian attitudes.⁶

Discussion

The results of the present study have shown that adolescents from a sample of middle-class, dual-earner families have four different mental images of mothers' employment over the life course. Although I had initially hypothesized that some adolescents would expect mothers to work full-time throughout their children's upbringing, or to stay home for a long period, the results were more nuanced. The quick return group expected the mother to return to full-time employment quite soon after a birth. However, even in this group, part-time employment was the expected norm in the child's first year. The home-oriented group expected the mother to stay out of paid employment for some time after a birth, but members of this group expected her to rejoin the part-time labor force eventually rather than to remain at home when a child goes to school. The gradual return group was intermediate between these two and expected a slow transition from homemaking to full-time employment as the child ages. Finally, the permanent part-time group, as the name suggests, expected the mother to work part-time throughout the child's upbringing. The existence of the permanent part-time group shows that the sample's expectations are too complex to array along a single dimension of less versus more involvement in outside employment. This demonstrates the value of looking at patterns of expectations, rather than at simple summary measures. Latent class

techniques proved to be very valuable here because of their ability to summarize complex patterns of data parsimoniously with minimal loss of information.

There is surprisingly little evidence of gender differences in adolescents' expectations about mothers' employment. Boys were more likely to expect part-time employment after a child reaches school age, whereas girls were more likely to expect full-time employment. As a consequence, there was a small gender difference in the probability of being in the gradual return group compared to the home-oriented group. In a global test, however, gender was not associated with holding one set of employment expectations rather than another. This not only runs counter to the small literature on adolescents' expectations, but also to the much larger body of work that has consistently shown greater support for gender equality among women than among men (Brewster & Padavic, 2000; Thornton, 1989).

In interpreting these findings, it must be kept in mind that the families in the Sloan 500 Family Study were not representative of the U.S. population in general. Rather, they were two-parent, dual-earner families with children, and most were quite comfortable financially. Just as middle-class adults are more egalitarian than others (Brewster & Padavic, 2000), their children are more likely than other adolescents to expect mothers to be committed to paid employment. It is worth noting that many of the earlier cited studies of expectations about mothers' employment were based upon samples that were similar to this one in the sense that they also were economically privileged (especially Stephan & Corder, 1985). Although no firm conclusions can be drawn in the absence of longitudinal data, it is possible that middle-class boys' and girls' expectations have grown more similar over time. Future researchers should investigate

the mothers' employment expectations of other adolescents, including those from less privileged socioeconomic circumstances and those who live with a single parent.

A further reason why these results do not conform to the bulk of the literature on gender attitudes is that it was expectations, and not norms, that were studied here.

Adolescents who support mothers' employment may nevertheless believe that they or their spouses will need to take time off following a birth. In addition, those with a more traditional bent may believe that the mother will need to work for the family's support.

The results that the majority of girls in the sample expected to leave the labor force temporarily following a birth, and that most of the rest expected to work part-time for a greater or lesser period, corroborate earlier research on expectations. These results also suggest that the current situation, in which most mothers are employed but work fewer hours on average than non-mothers do (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000), may continue to be a common response to work-family conflict. Although information on occupational aspirations was not available, it seems likely that girls who aspire to traditional women's jobs would tend to be in the gradual return, permanent part-time, and home-oriented groups, whereas those who aim for traditionally male-dominated occupations, which penalize career interruption more severely, would be in the quick return group. Even those in the quick return group, however, expected to cut back to part-time hours for a brief period. If they follow through, they will pay a number of serious penalties, including slower advancement, lower pay, less challenging work (Drobnic & Wittig, 1997; Machung, 1989), and marginalization from colleagues and superiors (Barker, 1993; Hochschild, 1989).

This is not to suggest that an employment history with interruptions is a bad idea for women, even if they wish to pursue careers. Given the lack of policy to support mothers' employment in the United States (Gornick & Meyers, 2003), and given a culture that still expects women to be primary caregivers for children, taking some time off may be the most rational plan for those who value both career and family (Davey, 1998; Maines & Hardesty, 1987). The greatest concern, however, may be that young women are unaware of the costs of this approach, and thus set themselves up for bitter disappointment in the future (Schroeder, Blood, & Maluso, 1992).

A drawback of the data is that all of the variables were measured at the same time, so the findings from the regression models do not have a clear causal interpretation. On the assumption that any statistical associations would be likely to indicate parents' influence, I nevertheless investigated whether parents' characteristics were related to adolescents' expectations. The prediction that adolescents' expectations would be related to their own mothers' employment was partly confirmed. Those whose mothers ever stayed home to raise children were more likely to be in the home-oriented group than the quick return group. It is consistent with social learning theory that being the child of a homemaker is especially salient for expectations about whether girls, and boys' partners, will be homemakers themselves. However, mothers' current employment behavior was not associated with adolescents' expectations. This may be because the data were collected from dual-earner households, and the mothers differed only in their hours, but not their employment status, at the time they responded to the survey. Such a dual-earner arrangement reflects the experience of the majority of adolescents who now live with two parents in the United States (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000).

The hypothesis that adolescents would expect more employment if their parents held egalitarian beliefs about gender was supported with respect to mothers but not fathers. Children of egalitarian mothers were significantly more likely to be in the quick return group than the gradual return group. In addition, they tended to be more likely to be in the quick return group than either of the remaining two. The finding that fathers' attitudes were unrelated to children's expectations confirms some older research on the relative influence of parents' attitudes (Acock & Bengtson, 1978).

It was predicted that family support and challenge would be associated with an achievement orientation in girls, that is, that girls would expect more employment for themselves, but that support and challenge would not be associated with boys' expectations. The results turned out to be different than hypothesized but quite intriguing. Parental support was not related to expectations, but adolescents who reported that their family environments were challenging were unlikely to expect themselves or their partners to be employed part-time in the long term. Instead, some expected a quick return to full-time employment, particularly if their own mothers espoused egalitarian attitudes about gender. Others anticipated relatively little employment outside the home, especially if their mothers had a traditional orientation. Contrary to prediction, all of this was equally true for boys and girls.

How might the results about family challenge be interpreted? Rathunde and colleagues (Rathunde, 1996; Rathunde et al., 2000) have argued that the value of family challenge lies in the way that it encourages motivation and an orientation toward achievement in children. Although research has shown that adolescents raised in challenging family environments often have high educational and occupational ambitions

(Schneider & Stevenson, 1999), the findings here suggest that girls may fix a desire for achievement and accomplishment upon the home instead, particularly if their own mothers support traditional, differentiated family roles. In other words, challenging parents may push girls to have high aspirations that are focused upon one sphere of activity, either employment or domesticity.

To speculate further, adolescent boys' responses to family challenge are likely to be based upon a different mental calculus. Because employment is such a critical part of mainstream American masculinity (Nock, 1998), the sons of challenging parents are much more likely to conceive *for themselves* an ambition to achieve in the workplace rather than the home. With regard to their future wives, some expect continuous and extensive employment. Perhaps they assume they will marry a woman who will be just as dedicated to work as they will be, especially if their mothers espouse egalitarian views about gender. Others who have challenging parents, however, expect their partners to focus on the home. They may have decided that it is easier to be career-oriented if one has a traditional wife, the kind who facilitates her husband's career by taking responsibility for chores and child care. Thus, they hope to marry such a woman.

This article has shed light on the expectations children in middle-class, dual-earner homes hold regarding mothers' employment, but it has not been possible to assess how likely it is that adolescents', and particularly girls', expectations are borne out when they grow up. In her interview study, Gerson (1985) reported that young women's anticipated work orientations have no systematic relationship to their later lives, but Hoffnung (2004) showed that college seniors' plans for work and family predicted their educational achievements and occupational status seven years later. Considering the

disagreement within the existing literature, this would be a valuable area for further investigation.

If researchers find that young women's expectations for combining motherhood and paid employment are often fulfilled, then they can legitimately be seen as an indicator of future work-family decisions. On the other hand, if expectations have little relation to career outcomes, then scholars should assess the extent and consequences of the disappointment that women may feel as a result of their frustrated plans (Schroeder et al., 1992). Regardless of the answer, these expectations deserve further attention from researchers interested in the problem of women's (and couples') work-family trade-offs.

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¹ Although part-time work is conventionally defined as fewer than 35 hours, 38 hours was the cutoff here because respondents were asked to select their weekly hours of work from a categorical list of ranges, including 26-37 and 38-45 hours.

² The Support/Challenge Questionnaire included 32 questions: 16 designed to measure support, and 16 intended to measure challenge. For this study, I used only the positively worded items because the negative items formed a distinct factor of their own in an exploratory factor model. "Family members can't be counted on," is a typical negatively worded support item. An example of a negative challenge item is, "Family members lack ambition and self-discipline."

³ A control for the father's relationship to the child (married biological father vs. other) was included in early models but was dropped due to its lack of impact on the results.

⁴ Adolescents were also asked about expected employment for fathers. As most respondents expected the father to work full-time at all points, the responses are not analyzed here.

⁵ Models were also fit to the data where one parent's egalitarianism score was omitted. The resulting regression coefficients for the other parent's attitude were very similar to Model 2.

⁶ I also tested interactions between family challenge and fathers' egalitarianism. These interactions did not improve model fit, and the results did not suggest that fathers' attitudes shaped the ways adolescents responded to challenge. For brevity, the results are not reported.

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Table I

Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables (N = 194)

| Variables | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Range |
|--|----------|-----------|--------------|
| Mother ever full-time homemaker ^a | 0.47 | 0.50 | 0 - 1 |
| Mother employed part-time ^b | 0.42 | 0.50 | 0 - 1 |
| Mother's gender attitude score | 0.00 | 1.00 | -4.76 – 1.08 |
| Father's gender attitude score | 0.00 | 1.00 | -3.21 – 1.19 |
| Family support | 0.00 | 1.00 | -5.55 – 1.25 |
| Family challenge | 0.00 | 1.00 | -4.63 – 1.84 |
| Adolescent's gender ^c | 0.55 | 0.50 | 0 - 1 |
| Adolescent's age | 15.19 | 1.69 | 12 - 18 |
| Adolescent's ethnicity ^d | 0.13 | 0.34 | 0 - 1 |
| Higher parental years of education | 18.13 | 1.83 | 13 - 20 |
| Household income (thousands) | 115.77 | 43.19 | 37.5 - 175 |

Note: All data presented in this paper are from the Sloan 500 Family Study.

^aMother ever full-time homemaker: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*. ^bMother employed part-time: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*. ^cAdolescent's gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*. ^dAdolescent's ethnicity: 0 = *single-race, non-Hispanic White*, 1 = *any other ethnicity*.

Table II

Percent Distribution of Responses to Questions about Expected Mothers' Employment at Four Stages of a Child's Life (N = 194)

| | Boys (%) | Girls (%) | Total (%) |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Less than one year old | | | |
| No work | 57 | 68 | 63 |
| Work | 43 | 32 | 37 |
| Age one to four | | | |
| No work | 31 | 21 | 25 |
| Part-time | 44 | 55 | 50 |
| Full-time | 25 | 24 | 25 |
| In grade school | | | |
| Part-time | 43 | 36 | 39 |
| Full-time | 57 | 64 | 61 |
| In high school | | | |
| Part-time | 29 | 17 | 22 |
| Full-time | 71 | 83 | 78 |

Table III

Goodness-of-Fit Statistics for Latent Class Measurement Models (N = 194)

| Model | G^2 | df | P |
|--------------------------------|--------|------|------|
| Boys (N = 87) | | | |
| One class (independence model) | 169.88 | 18 | 0.00 |
| Two classes | 39.95 | 13 | 0.00 |
| Three classes | 20.65 | 8 | 0.01 |
| Four classes | 3.61 | 3 | 0.31 |
| Girls (N = 107) | | | |
| One class (independence model) | 131.17 | 18 | 0.00 |
| Two classes | 32.77 | 13 | 0.00 |
| Three classes | 18.92 | 8 | 0.02 |
| Four classes | 2.46 | 3 | 0.17 |

Table IV

*Latent Class Probabilities and Conditional Response Probabilities for Four Class**Measurement Model (N = 194)*

| | “Quick return” | “Gradual return” | “Home- oriented | “Permanent part-time” |
|---|-------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Latent Class Probability | | | | |
| Total | 0.34 | 0.29 | 0.28 | 0.09 |
| Boys | 0.35 | 0.23 | 0.33 | 0.09 |
| Girls | 0.33 | 0.34 | 0.24 | 0.09 |
| Conditional Response Probability | | | | |
| Less than 1 year old | | | | |
| No work | 0.23 | 0.89 | 1.00 | 0.20 |
| Work | 0.77 | 0.11 | 0.00 | 0.80 |
| 1 to 4 years old | | | | |
| No work | 0.00 | 0.04 | 0.86 | 0.02 |
| Part-time | 0.28 | 0.96 | 0.14 | 0.97 |
| Full time | 0.72 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| Grade school | | | | |
| Less than full-time | 0.00 | 0.07 | 0.99 | 0.98 |
| Full time | 1.00 | 0.93 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| High school | | | | |
| Less than full-time | 0.03 | 0.00 | 0.59 | 0.50 |
| Full time | 0.97 | 1.00 | 0.41 | 0.50 |

Table V

Effects of Covariates on Latent Class Membership (Expressed as Odds Ratios) from Multinomial Logit Latent Class Regression

Models (N = 194)

| Predictor | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Gradual return vs. quick return | Home- oriented vs. quick return | Permanent P/T vs. quick return | Gradual return vs. quick return | Home- oriented vs. quick return | Permanent P/T vs. quick return |
| Mother ever full-time homemaker ^a | 2.12 | 6.83* | 1.26 | | | |
| Mother employed part-time ^b | 2.50 | 2.06 | 2.05 | | | |
| Mother's gender attitude score | | | | 0.48* | 0.50 | 0.54 |
| Father's gender attitude score | | | | 1.52 | 1.44 | 1.16 |
| Adolescent's gender ^c | 1.74 | 0.88 | 1.48 | 4.10* | 1.79 | 2.97 |
| Adolescent's age | 0.94 | 0.84 | 0.99 | 0.92 | 0.86 | 0.96 |
| Adolescent's ethnicity ^d | 0.22 | 0.55 | 0.14 | 0.10* | 0.15* | 0.09 |
| Higher parental years of education | 1.25 | 1.35 | 0.95 | 1.43 | 1.49 | 1.14 |
| Household income (thousands) | 0.99 | 0.98 | 1.01 | 0.98* | 0.98* | 1.00 |
| χ^2 | 718.17 | | | 800.68 | | |
| <i>df</i> | 153 | | | 153 | | |

Table V (cont.)

| Predictor | Model 3 | | | Model 4 | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Gradual return vs. quick return | Home- oriented vs. quick return | Permanent P/T vs. quick return | Gradual return vs. quick return | Home- oriented vs. quick return | Permanent P/T vs. quick return |
| Family support | 1.41 | 1.32 | 0.96 | | | |
| Family challenge | | | | 0.92 | 1.05 | 0.35** |
| Adolescent's gender ^c | 1.78 | 0.83 | 1.75 | 2.10 | 0.92 | 2.56 |
| Adolescent's age | 0.88 | 0.82 | 0.96 | 0.93 | 0.85 | 1.12 |
| Adolescent's ethnicity ^d | 0.17* | 0.27 | 0.14 | 0.15* | 0.26* | 0.11 |
| Higher parental years of education | 1.20 | 1.24 | 0.97 | 1.25 | 1.26 | 1.10 |
| Household income (thousands) | 0.99 | 0.98* | 1.01 | 0.99 | 0.98* | 1.01 |
| χ^2 | 771.61 | | | 779.80 | | |
| <i>df</i> | 156 | | | 156 | | |

^aMother ever full-time homemaker: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*. ^bMother employed part-time: 0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*. ^cAdolescent's gender: 0 = *male*, 1

= *female*. ^dAdolescent's ethnicity: 0 = *single-race, non-Hispanic White*, 1 = *any other ethnicity*.

* = $p < .05$. ** = $p < .01$.

Figure 1

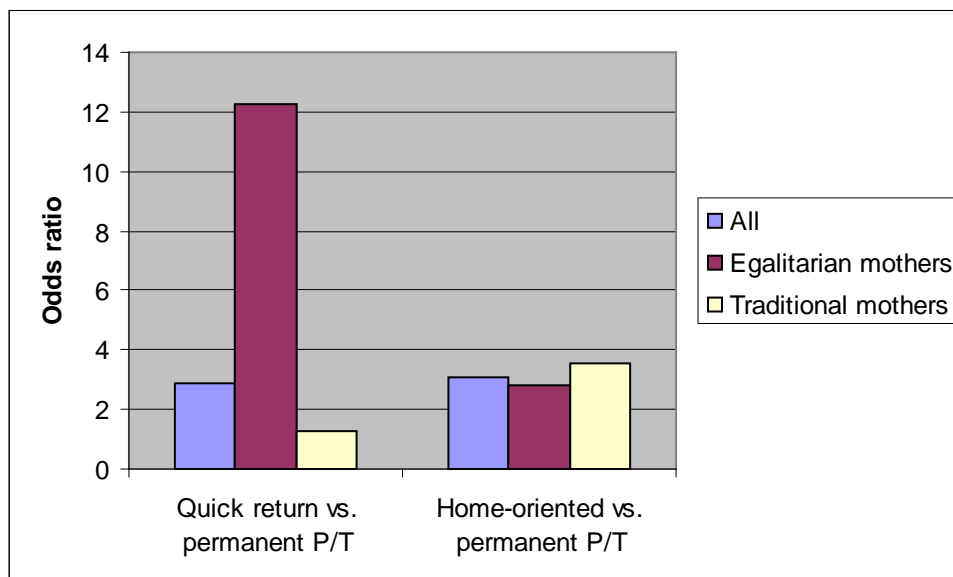


Figure caption

Figure 1. Predicted effect of a one standard deviation increase in family challenge on the odds of mothers' employment expectations among all adolescents, adolescents with egalitarian mothers (top quartile on mother's gender attitude scale), and adolescents with traditional mothers (bottom quartile on mother's gender attitude scale)