Recessionary Labor Markets and Male Breadwinner Ideology among Heterosexual, Married Couples

Huiyun Kim, University of Michigan

Background

A temporal perspective has dominated U.S.-based demographic research agendas among gender scholars studying the causes and consequences of gender inequality in the labor market. For example, scholars have well documented a national-level temporal change in gender inequality in a labor market and resulting overall shift to egalitarian gender attitudes in the U.S. A smaller set of scholars have focused on space, rather than time, and have documented substantial variation in gender inequality across labor markets within the U.S., measured by dimensions such as the gender wage gap (McCall 1988, 2000). However, unlike their colleagues who have mapped change over time in these measures of gender inequality, and how they may coincide with changing gender attitudes, scholars interested in spatial variation in markets like the gender wage gap have rarely examined whether gender attitudes also vary spatially in ways that suggest an association. To build on these past literatures, this paper examines whether the conditions of local labor markets shape individual attitudes about the appropriate gender of a primary earner. I also examine the impact of relative earnings that arises when households rearrange labor contributions between spouses during this recessionary period on individual attitudes about who should be a primary earner. I limit my analytic sample to married men and women under age 65 in the mainland U.S. as a proxy for local labor markets, which draws boundaries of population. I use the first two waves of the NSFH data, two observations are available per individual. I use a random intercept model to exploit this panel data structure. A random intercept model allows dependency among observations within the clustering unit, which is an individual in this study, by introducing a person-specific term that randomly varies across individuals.

Data & Methods

I use the first two waves of the National Survey of Family and Households (1987-88, 92-94) data and merged them with Current Population Survey in order to construct gender wage gap in local labor markets. I use census-defined, 741 Commuting Zones in the mainland U.S. as a proxy for local labor markets, which draws boundaries of economically-homogeneously labor markets based on commuting patterns of census population. I create a random sample to married men and women under age 65 (N=5,109) and conducted multivariate analyses with married couple weights. Since I use the first two waves of the NSFH data, two observations are available per individual. I use a random intercept model to exploit this panel data structure. A random intercept model allows dependency among observations within the clustering unit, which is an individual in this study, by introducing a person-specific term that randomly varies across individuals.

Results & Conclusion

Findings of this study suggest that individuals have less traditional attitudes about the appropriate gender of a primary earner when they reside in a local labor market where average earnings of women are closer to those of men. This suggests that a local labor market is an important level of analysis in understanding individual attitudes about the male breadwinner ideology. Also, the results of this study suggest that all individuals do not experience recessionary labor markets in the same way. The ways households respond to economic insecurity in recessionary labor markets, for example, with household labor rearrangement and its consequences for working relative income in a two adult household, does shape individual perception of who should be a primary earner even when individuals are embedded in the same labor market. Lastly, findings of this study suggest that the impact of women's relative earnings in the household on individual attitudes about the male breadwinner ideology differ by household economic status.

Acknowledgement

This work was presented at the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development (SWSD) 2016 and generously funded by Global Social Work Learning Community.