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Women and Work

The Emergence of Multiple Role Patterns Among Women: A Comparison of Germany and the United States

by Janet Z. Giele* and Rainer Pischner

Women's employment has risen dramatically over the last half century throughout the world. Most sociological and economic explanations have treated this as a micro-phenomenon which reflects rising demand for women's labour and increasingly attractive market wages relative to the rewards of household work.

In this paper based on German and United States longitudinal data, we suggest that another phenomenon is also occurring, a long-term trend toward restructuring women's life course to combine work and family roles. This trend challenges classical sociological and economic theories of the division of labour which argue that strong specialization and differentiation between men's and women's roles results in smoother integration of work and family life and in greater comparative advantage for each of the marital partners. We argue instead that very specialized gender roles may result in high risk to which women are responding by developing roles that allow them to adapt to unknown future social and economic conditions with greater flexibility.

Classical Theories on the Household Division of Labour

Traditional theory and research has argued that women in modern societies specialize as wives and mothers, and depend on husbands to earn income. This theory is meant to explain why daughters are given less education than sons, married women spend less time in the labour force than married men, and why those women who are employed suffer from the expectation that their attachment to the labour force is tenuous, and that they are less well prepared for intense full-time, year-round jobs than are men. It also explains why women's wages will be lower, why more women than men will be engaged in part-time work, and why occupational roles will tend to be sex-typed. It also predicts that occupations such as the professions, high

level management and administration or construction, where the demands of the work appear less compatible with family life, will be dominated by males, while occupations such as elementary school teaching, clerical work, or retail sales, which permit interruptions and longer vacations and thus seem more compatible with family life, will be dominated by females. Although occupational segregation by gender and pay differentials varies widely by country, it is nevertheless universal, ranging from a minimum of 10 percent lower wages for women in the Scandinavian countries to a more than 40 percent difference in Japan (Kahne and Giele 1992).

The universality of these differentials suggests that there must be some powerful social or economic dynamic which explains them. Classical sociological theory as discussed, for instance, in the work of Talcott Parsons emphasizes the advantages of a division of labour by gender to integrate the demands of the workplace and the needs of the family. Human capital theory, developed by Gary Becker, uses the theory of comparative advantage to explain how two marital partners gradually become almost totally specialized, one in paid employment, the other in household work.

Parsons: Specialization for Optimum Functioning

The best known modern sociological theory of gender differentiation appeared in Parsons and Bales' (1955) book, *Family, Socialization, and Interaction Process*. There they frame the modern nuclear family against the backdrop of the industrial revolution. In an agrarian society, the family and the economic unit which supported it were one and the same. Although the tasks of men and women were different, both sexes were workers on the family farm or family enterprise. After the industrial revolution, the working worlds of men and women were wrenched apart; males became specialized in the breadwinner role and women in childcare and housekeeping. Smelser's (1957) study of the industrial revolution in England from 1830-1850 suggests

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that parents resisted the separation of child-rearing from the workplace and briefly for this reason tried to lengthen the work day and bring their children with them into the factory.

A century after the industrial revolution, Parsons and Bales explained the gender roles of men and women by the emergence of a nuclear family which no longer had an independent role in production but was specialized in reproduction. The husband father provided his family with economic support by linking the family to the outside world of the workplace. The wife-mother was the "expressive" leader who managed the internal emotions of family life and took principal responsibility for child care. Legal and informal normative structures surrounded these roles with sanctions such as nepotism rules, or social stigma for working mothers, which kept the wife from competing on an equal occupational level with her husband. Long working hours and expectations about masculinity and social status kept men from falling into dependency or inactivity of the kind that would undermine their protective breadwinner role. Parsons (1942) moreover argued that it was the husband's occupational status which determined the family position in the class system. A wife and children took their status from the husband-father. This system reinforced the importance of the husband's work role by making the material fate of the whole family dependent on him. At the same time, the system communicated to women that their lower individual educational or occupational standing did not matter but ultimately served the whole family's interests by contributing to the status and earning power of the husband and to upward social mobility for all.

Becker:

Specialization for Comparative Advantage

Several decades after Parsons, Gary S. Becker (1981), in his *Treatise on the Family*, used the economic theory of comparative advantage to demonstrate that partners in the family, although they begin as fundamentally similar, over time differentiate their contributions to market work and the household so that ultimately they are almost completely specialized in their respective roles. The person who accumulates more human capital in market work is able to earn a higher wage and thus makes their time spent in household work more expensive in terms of lost market work, compared with the other partner whose human capital commands a lower market wage. Conversely, the household worker with less human capital will be able to do the dishes or mend the socks less expensively in terms of lost market wages than the market worker. The distinctive biological capacity of women to bear children almost certainly contributes to the process, because time out of paid work for childbearing and child care tips the balance so that women lose competitiveness in the workplace and vis à vis the male market worker who has not taken time out. In a number of related theorems, Becker goes on to show that if a household has several members who can do both market

and household work, it will ultimately turn out to be advantageous for only one member at most to invest in both market and household capital and to invest in both sectors.

Confirming Evidence: The Classical Theories Upheld

Before subjecting these two major theories to the test of recent changes in women's roles, it is worth noting that they have been used to explain a number of important changes in gender roles reasonably well, such as the secular rise in women's labour force participation, or the differences between married women who are employed and those who are full-time housewives.

The Parsonian model of optimum functioning explains most of the change in women's roles attributed to demographic characteristics of the population. Cain (1966), for example, using cross sectional United States census data demonstrated that married women were more likely to be employed, the higher their own education, the lower their husband's income, and the fewer and the older their children. All of these correlations are consistent with the Parsonian model which associates maximum gender role differentiation with higher occupational status of the husband and a high level of family demands (such as young children) on the wife. Oppenheimer (1970) explained the rise in women's labour force participation during the 1950s by demonstrating that the size of cohorts of young eligible women was decreasing precisely at the time of a rise in labour demand. Female-labeled occupations such as teaching, clerical work, and social services that ordinarily employed single young women, when faced with a severe shortage, were forced to redefine eligibility to include middle-aged and older married women. Here again the Parsonian model could be used to interpret the change: the married women being redefined as eligible for employment were older and therefore presumably free of the claims of motherhood which would interfere with employment of younger married women. Moreover, the expansion of employment to include older married women was serving the integrative function of linking work and family systems, but in a new way that partitioned paid work and household work not for all time between men and women but for periods of time within the individual life course.

The Becker model of comparative advantage is also consistent with much of the change in women's economic roles attributed to changing relative labour demand and women's and men's wage rates. Whereas Parsons' theory is most relevant to change in the structure of the family or the age and sex structure of the labour market, the Becker's theory is most appropriate for analyzing the individual bargaining decisions of marital partners relative to each other and to the choice of investment in market or household work. A classic example is Mincer's (1962) explanation of the long-term rise in women's employment. Rising wages for market work rose so far above women's "reservation wage" (the

imputed pay for work in the home) that women were drawn into the labour market. Modern cohort comparisons in Germany showing the rise in education among younger women and their shorter interruptions in work after childbearing also fit nicely within this theoretical tradition (Lauterbach 1992). Because highly educated women can command higher market wages, they are less likely to have children in the first place, and then to shorten their time out of the labour force because staying out of the labour market to do household work is very expensive.

An Empirical Challenge: Women's Multiple Roles

While classical theory in both sociology and economics explains much of the change in women's economic roles, it does not explain the fact that over the last 40 years modern societies are experiencing a trend toward less differentiation between women's and men's roles. Nor does either the sociological or economic theory predict the increasing flexibility in the changing overall structure of women's life course which permits a greater capacity for crossover between work and family life rather than exclusive specialization in one or the other. Longitudinal data from both the United States and Germany show a long-term trend toward multiple roles in both countries. Historical and biographical accounts suggest that a process of building more flexibility into the life course occurred along with greater education and entry into marriage and parenthood.

Reduction in Specialization by Gender

By focusing on a single aspect of women's life patterns such as the rise in education or employment, or the fall in fertility, scholars have generally missed the forest for the trees and have thus failed to note the change in role constellations or role patterns of women. According to a coding scheme that Giele began using over a decade ago, we have used a different descriptive strategy for comparing the lives of older and younger women. This scheme particularly notes the number and combination of multiple simultaneous roles which a woman holds at a specific age. Four roles are of particular importance: education (E), work (W), marriage (M), and parenthood (P). When one codes a woman's role patterns according to whether or not she is active in each of these four roles, sixteen different role combinations are possible. By comparing role patterns of older and younger birth cohorts at a given age such as 35, it becomes possible to chart trends in single and multiple roles.

Role Patterns by Age and Cohort. The rise in multiple role patterns was first discovered among college educated women in the United States. Perun and Giele (1982), in an analysis of a 1962 census of Wellesley College alumnae, found that at the beginning of the century the single most common role pattern of college educated women who graduated between 1911 and 1915 was to remain single, gain further education, and continue working. However, the

great majority of graduates in the 1930s eventually married, had children, and built some work history. A 1982 mailed survey of 2902 college educated women who graduated between 1934-79 (born 1912 to 1957) collected retrospective life event histories that made possible a comparison across age cohorts of role patterns at age 35. The proportion of women with some further education beyond college who were working, married, and mothers at age 35 rose from 6 percent in the class of 1934 to 36 percent in the class of 1969 (Giele and Gilfus 1990). Analysis of the United States National Longitudinal Surveys of Mature Women revealed a similar pattern among a nationally representative sample of largely noncollege educated women (born 1923 to 1938). In 1969, among women aged 40 (born in 1929), 40 percent were both employed and married with children. By 1972, of women aged 40 (born in 1932), 50 percent were combining work and family roles. In 1974, the percentage had risen to 60 percent among women aged 40 (born in 1934) (Giele 1991).

Cross-National Similarities. Reduced specialization by gender appears to be occurring in societies outside the

Figure 1

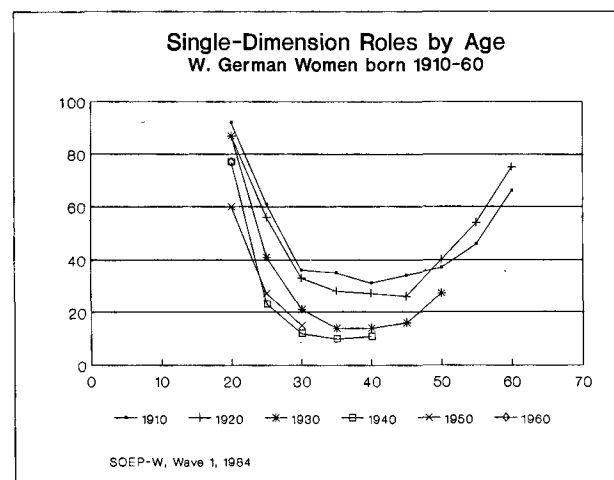
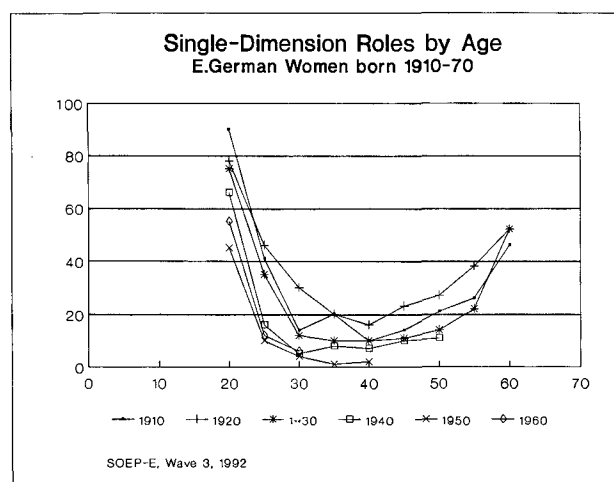
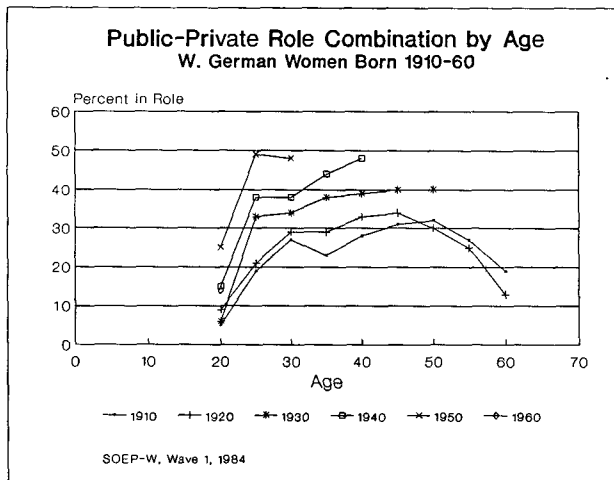
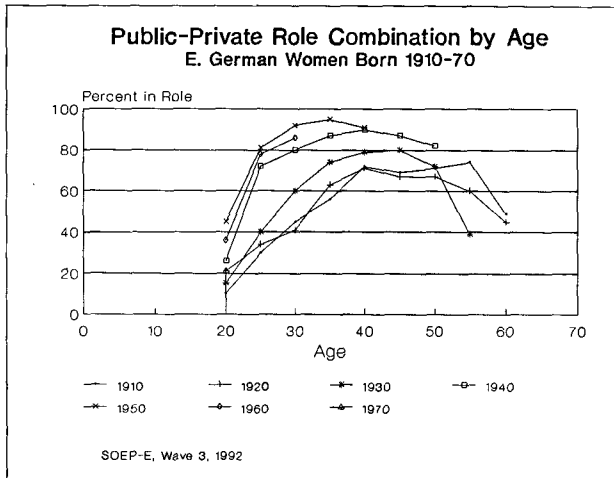


Figure 2



United States. Longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP) permit a comparison across different cohorts at the same age, as well as between East and West Germany. Comparison on single variables such as education, marriage, and parenthood are not especially revealing. Education is strikingly higher among the youngest cohorts. At age 20 marriage and parenthood are higher for the mothers of the generation born in the 1930s and 1940s than for the older cohorts of 1910 and 1920. But what is most striking in Figures 1 and 2 is the regular fall in single roles from the oldest to youngest cohorts and the regular rise in multiple roles defined as some combination of education and/or work roles in the "public" world and marriage and/or parenthood in the "private" world. Even though there are stark differences in the frequency scale for East and West, with over 80 percent of the 1940 cohort of East German women in multiple roles as compared with half that many of the West German women, the rise in multiple roles across cohorts is basically similar.

Using a single and multiple role comparison with the United States National Longitudinal Survey data reveals a

remarkably similar picture. These data had to be transformed to create retrospective work histories for the biennial surveys conducted between 1967 and 1982 among women who were ages 30-45 in 1967. Compared with the GSOEP, the age ranges for which comparisons are possible are thus quite truncated. In addition, the figures presented here have not been weighted to assure representativeness of the sample after attrition of respondents between waves 1 and 10. Nevertheless, the results when superimposed on the West German data, coincide quite closely. The early and mid-1930s cohorts of United States women have under 30 percent of their members in single roles at ages 35, 40, and 45, as do the West German women of comparable age. Among United States women born a decade earlier, however, about 10 percent more occupy single roles during their middle years, a pattern which is quite comparable to the West German women born in 1920.

The picture for multiple roles is again obverse to that for single roles with an ever higher proportion of younger cohorts combining "public" and "private" roles. Between 40 and 50 percent of American women born in the 1930s combined public and private roles at ages 35 and 45, a level similar to the West German women born in 1930 and 1940. But frequency of multiple roles among older United States women born in the 1920s was about 10 percent lower. The rising trend toward multiple roles among younger cohorts is very comparable to that found among West German women born in 1920 and 1930.

Together these longitudinal cohort comparisons of role patterns by age provide evidence that gender specialization in market and household work is moving in a direction opposite from that projected by either Parsons or Becker.

Individual Innovation in Composing a Life

Further challenge to the specialization theories is found at the level of the individual woman who is making choices concerning education, employment, marriage, and childbearing. Here again the classical theories have failed to note or to explain why thousands of individual women made education or fertility decisions earlier in their lives which resulted over time in the capacity to enter the labour market rather than to become ever more specialized in household work. Historical and biographical evidence suggests that they departed from traditional expectations ahead of time to prepare for a world they knew was changing, but in ways they could not fully anticipate.

Departure from Traditional Expectations. Both the longitudinal survey data and biographical accounts suggest that women sought more education, had fewer children, and were employed more as wives and mothers than they ever thought possible when they were young adults. The Wellesley College classes of the late 1920s and early 1930s that were surveyed in 1962 had already gained further education before the great demand for women's work began in the 1950s and 1960s (Giele 1982). College

women from the classes of 1934 through 1979 also revealed a steady rise in the multiple role pattern before the women's movement which peaked in 1970 (from 6 to 15 percent in the classes of 1934 to 1954).

Reports of a more qualitative nature from United States college women who were surveyed in young adulthood and in middle age also confirm that women ended up living a different life pattern from what they had originally expected. Those born in the 1930s and 1940s expected to marry early, have three or four children, and be full-time housewives. In reality it turned out that they had fewer children, more divorce, higher education, and longer work experience than they had imagined (Giele 1993).

Preparation For the Unknown. What appears to have happened is that each woman acting alone made decisions which departed from the traditional expectation of being a full-time housewife. Each woman thought her decision was unique, but taken together these individual decisions became a trend. This trend, was not toward greater specialization but toward contingency planning on many different fronts — education, work, marriage, and childbearing. In the United States even rather traditional husbands might encourage their wives and daughters to have an education and a profession as an "insurance policy" in the event that something unforeseen would happen to the principal breadwinner. Women themselves could compare their situation and the society around them with the lives of their own mothers and see that conditions were drastically changed. Less time was needed to perform necessary household tasks. Nor could household production produce much cash income if there were no market worker in the family. Moreover, the number of children born to a woman over her lifetime was declining just as her life expectancy was increasing. In addition, it was becoming increasingly evident that time out of the labour force worsened chances for later reentry. The upshot was that a woman could see down the road that specialization in housework was potentially not only less rewarding but more risky compared with a broader and more flexible preparation for unknown conditions ahead. The result of these individual decisions was the replacement of the old M-shaped age curve of women's labour force participation (the three phase model) with a smoother inverted U-shaped curve increasingly similar to that of men (Kirner and Schulz 1992).

Such life course decisions leading to a new role pattern appear to have been reinforced by both economic and psychological gains. Despite the frequent explanation that women work because "they have to" or "to make ends meet," the statistics suggest otherwise. The poorest women (on welfare in the United States) are those with the least education and work experience and the lowest labour force participation. Two-earner families, on the other hand, are much better off, with wives' labour force participation frequently found among the middle and upper middle class where the woman's income goes toward supporting expensive higher education for children and a more comfortable life style.

In addition, women with multiple roles in the United States report higher satisfaction with life and better physical and mental health than women who are housewives only. In a survey of Boston-area mid-life women, Baruch and Barnett (1983) found that those women who were most satisfied had outlets for developing a sense of competence at work as well as intimate relationships within the family. In her longitudinal study of Mills college graduates of the 1950s, Helson (1990) similarly found that women who had maintained involvement in a career were happier and healthier than women who had become full-time housewives. Such findings suggest that the multiple role pattern represents a positive adaptation to longer life expectancy and economic uncertainty, and not just the "need for two incomes."

Revising Specialization Theory to Include Flexibility

The evidence on frequency and growth of multiple roles and their apparently beneficial results suggests that the classical theory of gender specialization should now be revised. Both the Parsonian theory of optimum system functioning and Becker's theory of comparative advantage failed to predict or even to explain one of the most far-reaching social changes of this century, namely, the widespread emergence of married women from the housewife role into the paid labour market outside the home.

Hannan (1982) questions two basic assumptions: the predictability of the environment, and the predictability of personal motives. These comments suggest that the classical theory of the division of labour must be revised at both institutional and individual levels to take a less certain future into account. Each must incorporate a new set of assumptions about the changing environment and the changing "utility functions" of individual actors. Fortunately there are clues in the recent sociological and economic literature regarding the ways that differentiation theory can be modified at both system and unit levels to account for these new realities.

System-Level Strategies for Managing Change

In his critique of Becker's theory Michael T. Hannan (1982) notes that the theory of specialization presumes a "fine grained" environment, by which he evidently means one that presents no surprises. But population ecology recognizes the possibility of "coarse-grained" environments, meaning a surrounding context that is quite variable or uneven. How will a social system such as a household react under such conditions?

In their theoretical works on social change sociologists Parsons (1966) and Smelser (1963) both identify a form of evolutionary change in modern society which they characterize as "adaptive upgrading." Old institutions encounter new conditions and must be reworked to fit the

reality. The process entails withdrawal of investment from established roles and relationships, then a reference to more general purposes and principles, and finally a restructuring of institutional arrangements.

Gernot Grabher (1993) refers to a similar phenomenon of de-differentiation and re-deployment in his concept of "redundance." Drawing on the experience of East German firms which are trying to modernize in order to be competitive, Grabher discovers that the most successful companies are those which are not overspecialized but are "embedded firms" with "slack" available for new and pressing needs.

Life-Course Strategies for Personal Development

Capacity for flexible response is similarly important for individuals, especially under conditions of uncertainty. In extensive studies of individual intelligence, Melvin L. Kohn (1980) argues that persons handle time pressure and complex situations best who have intellectual flexibility — the capacity to envision different potential solutions. Moreover, experience handling complexity further develops a capacity for intellectual flexibility.

Notburga Ott's (1992) micro-economic theory about household members' decision-making under uncertain conditions brings out a similar theme — that partners will avoid a very high degree of specialization which is risky if they become separated or their contractual obligations to each other are weakened. Ott demonstrates that classical theories assume a linear relationship between decisions over time and hence predict specialization between two marital partners. When the theory is restated to assume that the partners think ahead to what will happen at period

2, this modification results in avoidance of complete specialization.

Conclusion

Summing together empirical evidence and recent theoretical developments, we find that there are sufficient grounds for questioning the universality of gender specialization in the household. Trends in women's changing life patterns in both the United States and Germany are toward less specialization in the roles of men and women. The proportion of women in multiple roles has steadily risen with younger cohorts. The proportion in single roles has steadily fallen. In addition, psychological data on the positive link between satisfaction and well-being and multiple roles suggests that these changes were embraced willingly.

When we examine recent theoretical developments to find some explanation for these trends, we discover a new theme linking adaptation to uncertainty with capacity for flexibility and ability to pull back from one form of specialization in order to take on another that is more promising. Taken together these developments suggest a promising new line of inquiry. Rather than assuming that comparative advantage leads to complete specialization between household partners, we should now investigate when flexibility and capacity for re-deployment present the better outcome.

Such rethinking suggests a paradigm shift. But in order for it to take hold, there are several other kinds of work which still need to be done: further international cohort comparisons of women's life patterns, dynamic analysis of household change and individual career paths, parallel study of men's lives, and further theoretical work. Discovery of the similarities between German and American women's new roles is just the beginning.

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