Visualizing Shifts in Gendered Parenting Attitudes during COVID-19

Trenton D. Mize¹, Gayle Kaufman², and Richard J. Petts³

Abstract
Many scholars have expressed fears that the 2019 coronavirus pandemic may exacerbate gender inequalities. Indeed, studies have suggested that women, and mothers in particular, have been particularly affected by reducing their participation in the paid labor market to meet increased caregiving needs. What is less clear is whether the pandemic has also shifted attitudes about mothers’ and fathers’ roles. We collected data on gendered parenting attitudes both before and during the pandemic and report shifts in attitudes in this data visualization. Consistent with fears of exacerbated gender inequality, we find a shift toward more conventional gender parenting attitudes. We also find an increase in the importance placed on mothers’ and fathers’ earning money and a decrease in the role mothers and fathers play in child development, both of which may be due to the pandemic’s effects on the economy and schooling.

Keywords
gender, parenting, attitudes, COVID-19

Increasingly, more Americans hold egalitarian gender beliefs, while those with traditional ideals have been replaced by those with more ambivalent attitudes (Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019), with increased support in particular for working mothers (Kaufman and Bair 2021). Although attitudes have generally shifted slowly over time, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has forced society to confront a new work-family situation for most families. Numerous studies show that the pandemic has reinforced traditional gendered divisions of labor among parents (Landivar et al. 2020; Petts, Carlson, and Pepin forthcoming), but less is known about how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped attitudes about parenting roles.

We collected data on a range of gendered parenting attitudes at two opportune time points for examining how the pandemic influenced attitudes: March 2019 and August 2020. To isolate the effect of the pandemic, we use causal inference methods to produce an “average treatment effect,” which represents the difference in attitudes mid- versus pre-pandemic, accounting for differences across samples (see the Online Appendix for a detailed description of our sample and statistical methodology).

Our data visualization (Figure 1) is an effects plot with a row for each attitude and the corresponding pandemic effect visualized. We center all effects at zero, which is the baseline rate of the attitude (i.e., the rate in the pre-COVID-19 sample for that variable). Lines and arrowheads are added to show the shift in the attitude (i.e., the average treatment effect of the pandemic). We have coded all items so that positive changes reflect a shift in attitudes in the direction of more traditional attitudes. Solid lines indicate statistically significant changes (at the $p < .05$ level in a two-tailed test).

Findings
Increasing Importance of Moms’ and Dads’ Making Money
Attitudes regarding the importance of parents making money have shifted. Specifically, there was a significant increase in agreement that both “Dad should make money” and “Mom should make money.” We also note there was an increase in agreement that “Dad can work and parent” and “Mom can

¹Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA
²Davidson College, Davidson, NC, USA
³Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

Corresponding Author:
Trenton D. Mize, Purdue University, Department of Sociology & Advanced Methodologies, 700 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA
Email: tmize@purdue.edu

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work and parent,” though the latter increase is not statistically significant.

Decreasing Importance of Moms and Dads for Child Development

Attitudes regarding the importance of parents for child development have also shifted. Specifically, there was a decrease in agreement that “Dad is key to child development” and “Mom is key to child development.” We note that there was a decrease in agreement that “It is fulfilling to be a mom” and “It is fulfilling to be a dad,” though the latter decrease is not statistically significant.

Increasing Support for Some Traditional Roles

Several traditional gender role attitudes gained support. The largest shifts show increased support of fathers as disciplinarians and mothers as schedulers for their children. There were also significant decreases in agreement that it is essential for fathers to play with their children and that they should spend less time working. Furthermore, there were significant increases in agreement that mothers are happier at home, should not work when they have young children, and should usually stay home.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had mixed effects on gendered parenting attitudes, although the primary effect has been a shift toward more traditional attitudes. Since the start of the pandemic, greater importance has been placed on parents’ making money. Within the pandemic context, it is likely that more people recognize the financial needs of families and encourage income contributions from both parents. In addition, shifts in attitudes during the pandemic have resulted in less importance placed on parental roles in child development. Lengthy school closures have likely elucidated how important schools are not only for children’s academic needs but also their physical and mental well-being (Hoffman and Miller 2020). There is also increased support for some traditional roles within families. This may be related to the particularly large declines in labor force participation rates for mothers of young children during the pandemic (Landivar et al. 2020) and the impact of homeschooling and lack of childcare affecting
mothers more than fathers (Petts et al. forthcoming). Overall, we find evidence that the pandemic has shifted public opinions about mothers’ and fathers’ roles in ways that coincide with how the pandemic has affected parents’ economic and domestic outcomes.

ORCID iDs

Trenton D. Mize https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9654-3709
Richard J. Petts https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6658-1387

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online. Data and coding files to reproduce the analyses and visualization presented in this article are available at www.trentonmize.com/research.

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Author Biographies

Trenton D. Mize is an assistant professor of sociology and core faculty member of advanced methodologies at Purdue University. His current research program focuses on two main areas: (1) applications of social psychological theories of status, identity, and stereotyping to the intersections of gender and sexuality and (2) nonlinear models, latent variable models, and experimental design. Recent publications examine sexual orientation inequalities in the labor market (American Sociological Review), how status processes influence sexual orientation categorization (American Sociological Review), gender inequalities in leadership positions (Social Problems), and interpreting and testing nonlinear models (Sociological Methodology, Sociological Science). His Web site is at www.trentonmize.com.

Gayle Kaufman is the Nancy and Erwin Maddrey Professor of Sociology and Gender & Sexuality Studies at Davidson College. Her research focuses on gender, work and family, with particular attention to parental leave and fatherhood. She is the author of Superdads: How Fathers Balance Work and Family in the 21st Century (2013, NYU Press) and Fixing Parental Leave: The Six Month Solution (2020, NYU Press) as well as recent articles in Community, Work & Family, the International Journal of Comparative Sociology, Journal of Family Issues, and Sexuality Research and Social Policy. She is a coeditor of the International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research. Her Web site is at www.gaylekaufman.com.

Richard J. Petts is a professor of sociology at Ball State University. His research focuses on family inequalities, focusing on parental leave, father involvement, and workplace flexibility as policies and practices that can reduce gender inequality, promote greater work-family balance, and improve family well-being. He is a member of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research and coeditor of the journal Community, Work & Family. He has published in outlets such as American Sociological Review, Social Forces, the Journal of Marriage and Family, and Sex Roles, and his research has been featured in numerous media outlets such as the New York Times, CNN, USA Today, and Bloomberg.