

Future family plans don't influence how men and women choose their college major or occupation.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/12/future-family-plans-dont-influence-how-men-and-women-choose-their-college-major-or-occu

9/12/2016

Many traditional social science theories explain the persistence of occupational segregation between men and women with the idea that anticipating family responsibilities, women choose qualifications and jobs which will lead them to presumably more flexible women-dominated occupations. In new research which examines the future plans of college students, [Erin A. Cech](#) finds that only a small minority of women had integrated family plans into their career choices by seeking a financially stable occupational field or one which might be more flexible.



Despite growing support for gender parity in the workforce, many jobs still continue to be comprised of mostly men or mostly women. Because women-dominated occupations tend to be accompanied by lower pay and prestige, the persistence of occupational gender segregation in the US labor market helps reinforce gender inequality more broadly.

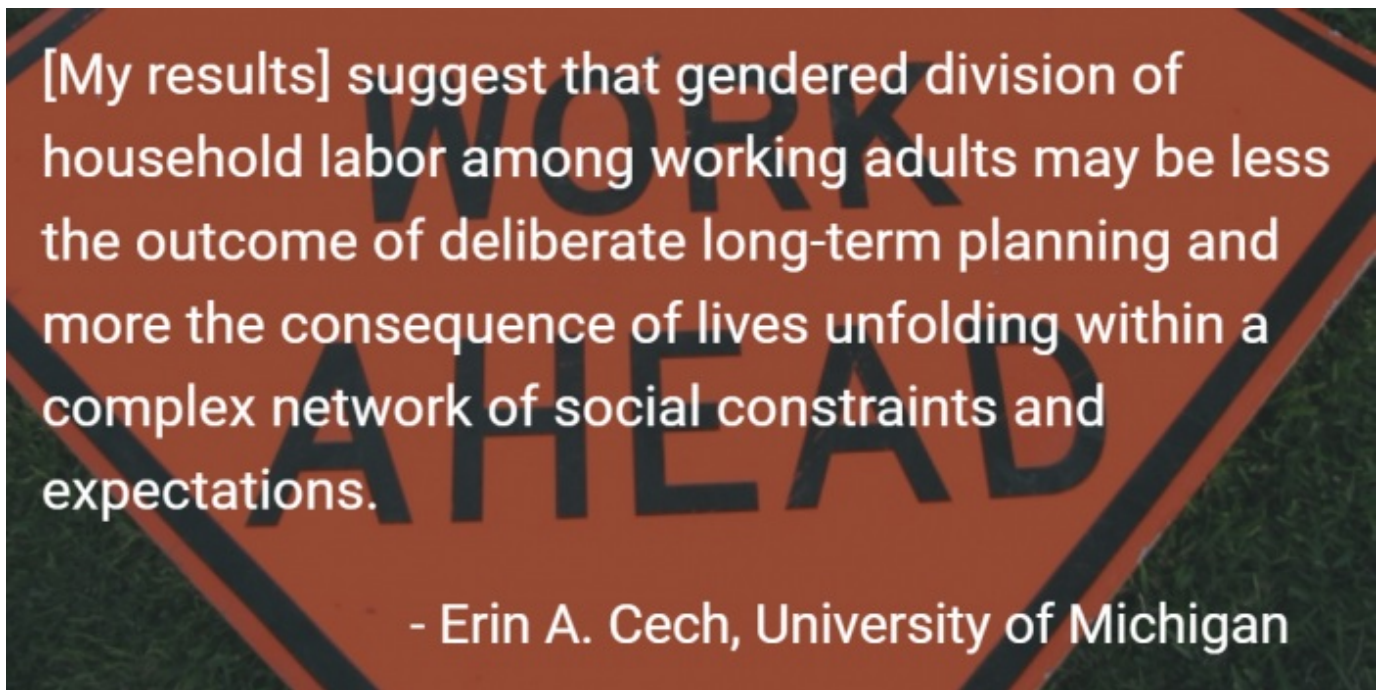
A number of prominent social sciences theories have attempted to explain the endurance of this segregation by pointing to the relationship between work and family. Many such theories assert that women who plan to have children incorporate anticipated caregiving responsibilities into their initial selection of occupations, and tend to choose women-dominated fields which they assume are more flexible than fields dominated by men. Men who anticipate families, on the other hand, choose men-dominated fields which they assume will maximize their lifetime earnings and be conducive to them having a provider role.

This “family plans thesis” has traction in public discourse about the “opt-out revolution”, the “planning generation,” and whether women can really “have it all.” Threaded through these arguments are assumptions about men’s and women’s “biological realities” which make such choices appear natural and inevitable.

But, do young men and women who plan to have families actually adjust their occupational decisions to accommodate those plans? And, does this funnel women and men into gender-typical occupations?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 100 students (56 women, 44 men) enrolled at three universities; my results are widely inconsistent with the family plans thesis. Although a great majority of students plan to have a family in the future, more than half of women and men dismiss *any* role of family plans in their choice of college major or occupation and don’t consider future difficulties balancing work and family in their career decisions.

About a quarter of men (and 13 percent of women) report accommodating a planned provider role in their career choices by seeking financially stable fields. However, the academic majors in which such students are enrolled are not more men-dominated on average than those of their peers.



Further, only 13 percent of women and a handful of men note that they chose a particular occupation in part because they believe it will provide the desired flexibility for childrearing. Counter to the family plans thesis, students who seek flexible occupations do not have majors with a higher proportion of women, compared to other students.

These results have implications for gender scholarship and policy. First, they suggest that gendered division of household labor among working adults may be less the outcome of deliberate long-term planning and more the consequence of lives unfolding within a complex network of social constraints and expectations. Second, the results indicate that these young adults are generally not self-selecting into particular occupations in ways that accommodate their future family plans. This makes workplace flexibility policies and re-entry programs all the more important to retain talented employees.

Given problems of the family plans thesis I've identified, it may be more appropriate to consider the family plans thesis to be a cultural myth that draws on popular stereotypes about women's and men's preferences and abilities. As such, the family plans thesis may help reproduce occupational segregation by coloring how parents steer their children, how teachers advise students, or how employers think about their employees. By repeating the family plans thesis without careful investigation of its assumptions, scholars risk lending legitimacy to a cultural myth that blames women for "preferring" lower-paid, lower status occupations because such fields are presumed to accommodate women's desired caregiving roles.

*This article originally appeared at the [Gender & Society blog](#), and is based on the paper 'Mechanism or Myth? Family Plans and the Reproduction of Occupational Gender Segregation' in *Gender & Society*.*

Featured image credit: [Courtney Rhodes](#) (Flickr, CC-BY-2.0)

Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/2ciKH0x>

About the author

Erin A. Cech – *University of Michigan*

[Erin A. Cech](#) is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan. Before coming to UM, she was faculty at Rice University and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University. Cech earned her Ph.D. in Sociology in 2011 from the University of California, San Diego. Her research examines cultural mechanisms of inequality reproduction—specifically, how inequality is reproduced through processes that are not overtly discriminatory or coercive, but rather those that are built into seemingly innocuous cultural beliefs and practices.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP