Women’s Work Pathways across the Life Course

Despite numerous changes in women’s employment in the latter half of the 20th century in which the gender pay gap has declined (Mandel and Semyonov 2014) and the majority of women now participate in the paid labor market (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009) and spend an increasing amount of their adult lives employed (Bianchi et al. 2006), recent research suggests women’s employment continues to be “uneven and stalled” (England 2010). While women’s workforce participation grew rapidly through the late 1990s, this progress appears to have arrested or even decreased slightly since the early 2000s (Boushey 2008). Moreover, these patterns are stratified such that the least advantaged women are also the least likely to find full-time employment. Approximately one-third of all employed women are employed part-time and are disproportionately working-class, working-poor, and women of color (England et al. 2004; Milgrom and Petersen 2006). In light of these changes, this paper looks at inequality among women by comparing the diversity of their labor force experiences. We ask, “What are the different ways that women participate in the workforce?” and “Why are some women able to participate steadily in full-time work while other women are not?”

Our goal is to construct a more comprehensive empirical and theoretical model of how women’s personal characteristics and structural positions place them on long-term work pathways. To do so, we use over two decades of panel data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 to study variations in women’s work hours throughout young and middle adulthood. Empirically, we make a novel contribution by estimating group-based developmental trajectories (Nagin 2005) of women’s workforce participation from ages 25-45, building on Damaske’s 2011 qualitative study about women’s work pathways. We extend beyond previous
quantitative studies that were only able to examine short intervals of time or regionally limited populations (Hibbard and Pope 1993; Hynes and Clarkberg 2006; Moen et al. 1992 Pavalko and Smith 1999; Williams and Han 2003). We further advance previous research by including state and county-level data on labor markets to assess the role of structural conditions on women’s work pathways.

Theoretically, we build an innovative framework that synthesizes four theories to understand their interrelated associations with women’s work: cumulative disadvantage, gender beliefs, labor market experiences, and work-family constraints. By testing these theories and looking at women’s workforce participation across adulthood, we can better understand the uneven effects of the gender revolution in paid workforce participation. The article addresses these goals thusly: First, we measure longitudinally how women participate in the paid workforce across the adult life course, from ages 25-45. We then examine the role each of the four theoretical perspectives play in placing women onto long-term pathways of paid work. Finally, we consider what are the strongest predictors of women’s labor force participation over time.

The Gendered Life Course and Women’s Work

Gender shapes workforce participation and family life across the life course (Moen 2001), and women’s occupational experiences across young adulthood are shaped by a series of gendered transitions, including entrance into work and family formation (Moen and Han 2001; Williams and Han 2003). Life course researchers investigate the early life precursors and long-term consequences of ‘pivotal’ events or ‘turning points’, including those related to family formation and workforce participation (Elder 1998). Work stoppages, time out of work, and time
spent caring for children characterize women’s work (Hostetler et al. 2007), yet what remains unknown are the number and type of longitudinal pathways that characterize women’s workforce participation and their precursors early in life.

Previous research provides some insight into how the gendered life course influences women’s workforce participation. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Mature Women, Pavalko and Smith (1999) find that older women followed one of three paid workforce pathways: women were employed fulltime, intermittently (including women who work part-time or moved in and out of the workforce), or not at all (Pavalko and Smith 1999). Prior to this, regional panel studies interviewed women at two distinct time periods and found similar work pathway groupings (Hibbard and Pope 1993; Moen et al. 1992). A more recent study of women in the NLSY79 data enumerates six shorter longitudinal work patterns centered around the transition to parenthood (Hynes and Clarkberg 2005). Finally, a study using retrospective panel data of men and women in New York state identified six distinct work pathways over a 15-30 year period (Williams and Han 2003). In sum, the existing literature provides important insights into women’s work pathways, but remains incomplete, hampered by retrospective rather than prospective data (Williams and Han 2003), limited periods or points of observation (Hynes and Clarkberg 2005), older cohorts experiencing different key transition points into adulthood (Pavalko and Smith 1999), or smaller, regional samples (Hibbard and Pope 1993; Moen et al. 1992; Williams and Han 2003).

Recent qualitative research by Damaske (2011), who uses women’s retrospective work histories to identify theoretically-informed categories of women’s work, provides insight into how the gendered life course creates different opportunities and constraints for women’s paid workforce participation. Tracing women’s work pathways through analysis of qualitative life
histories with 80 randomly sampled women in New York City, Damaske (2011) adds to previous studies by distinguishing between steady workers who work full-time steadily across their adult lives, pulled back workers, who work part-time or not at all, and interrupted workers whose unemployment experiences shape their labor market participation and who exit and reenter the labor market. Damaske calls for these theoretical categories to be tested using a national study. We combine Damaske’s qualitative findings with the findings from prior quantitative analyses to hypothesize:

H1: Women’s workforce participation – measured by average weekly hours of paid employment per year across ages 25-45 – will follow at least three group-based pathways, including a pathway of “steady” continuous fulltime work, a pathway of continuous unpaid work over time, and one or more pathways of “pulled back” intermittent work, i.e. work that is part-time and may include workforce entry and exit across the life course.

Moreover, Damaske’s (2011) research suggests that cumulative disadvantages, local labor market experiences, gender beliefs, and work-family opportunities and constraints all contribute to shape women’s work pathways—factors which we explore in depth below.

A Life Course Approach to Women’s Work Pathways

Cumulative Disadvantages

The cumulative advantages/disadvantages perspective suggests that early socioeconomic inequalities may restrict poorer women’s opportunities to engage in fulltime, steady work as they enter into adulthood. Early advantages and disadvantages related to poverty, race-ethnicity, educational attainment, and single parenthood accumulate over time, affecting socioeconomic
status, health, and well-being (Dannefer 1987; Elder 1998; O’Rand 2006; Willson et al. 2007).

Despite research demonstrating the ways that early socioeconomic status (SES) plays an important role in women’s life chances (Frech and Damaske 2012; O’Rand 2006), we know of no research that explicitly examines the relationships between women’s longitudinal work pathways and a range of early socioeconomic, race-ethnic, family formation, and other advantages/disadvantages. In other words, women’s ability to work full-time across the life course may be an accrued advantage.

There is substantial evidence of socioeconomic variation in adult women’s workforce opportunities and participation. Middle-class women are more likely to be employed full-time than are working-class women, differences often attributed to variation in educational attainment (England et al. 2004; Percheski 2008). Educational attainment also has recently been shown to be associated with better marital prospects (McClenond et al. 2014). Working-class, Black, and Latina women are also more likely to have interruptions to their paid labor—including workforce exits and time spent unemployed—which may have long-term effects on wages and average hours spent in the workforce (Alon and Haberfeld 2007; Reid and Padavic 2005). White women are also less likely to enter motherhood at a young age than are Black and Latina women. Age at first birth may truncate women’s anticipated educational attainment and curtail attachment to the labor force by disrupting a work trajectory before it begins (Hoffman and Maynard 2008).

Early SES may not only play a role in these early life transitions, but also may continue to have repercussions across the life course. Cumulative advantage/disadvantage theory (CAD) posits that early differences in structural location, skills, and resources accumulate over time, widening the gap between the more and less advantaged (Dannefer 2003). As individuals age
and face pivotal transitional periods such as marriage, childbearing, educational opportunities, and workforce participation, those with fewer resources face greater constraints in their choices and the greatest “life course risks” (O’Rand 2006: 149). The life course risks of cumulative disadvantage that might differentiate women’s hours spent in paid work or likelihood to be unemployed could include single parenthood, poverty early in life, or low educational attainment, each limiting women’s opportunities to find and keep stable employment (Hoffman and Maynard 2008; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; O’Rand 2006). The possible cumulative effect on work pathways of these early disadvantages leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: Consistent with literature on cumulative advantages and disadvantages, we expect that socioeconomically disadvantaged women (less educated women, those whose mothers did not graduate high school, those living in non-intact families during adolescence, or those living in poverty during young adulthood) will be less likely to engage in “steady” work throughout their adult lives than more advantaged peers.

Labor Market Differences in Employment

Labor market conditions and occupational segregation structures the type of work that is available to women (Reskin and Maroto 2011). The opportunities and constraints facing women in the labor market at the time they first enter paid work may shape their longitudinal work pathways. Women’s ability to find a job—and the kind of job available—is highly dependent upon the local labor market (McCall 2001). Research shows that women may be less likely to remain employed if their local labor market provides limited employment opportunities (McCall 2001; Reskin and Maroto 2011).

Occupational segregation is maintained in local labor markets via a demand for either
male or female labor: metropolitan areas and states with high levels of typically female occupations will likely have a greater demand for female labor (Collver, O. 1968; Cotter et al. 1996). Moreover, nonmetropolitan areas have higher levels of occupational segregation than metropolitan areas, particularly during the late 1970s and early 1980s when the women in the NLSY79 were entering the labor force (Cotter et al. 1996). Occupational segregation is also positively related to union density, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s when unions were predominantly made up of men (Fritsma 2007). Areas with high union density, therefore, may have had higher demand for male labor, leading to fewer jobs for women in our sample.

Occupational segregation may be negatively impacted by a poor economy (Blau et al. 2013). Women’s wages are much more likely to be negatively affected by high unemployment levels than are men’s wages (McCall 2001). If wage inequalities are impacted by high unemployment levels, it seems likely that women’s labor force participation may also be. Moreover, time spent unemployed may be an indicator of the strength of the local labor market with a high number of weeks spent looking for a job suggestive of a poor local economy (McCall 2001; Hout et al. 2011). This leads to our third hypothesis:

H3: Adjusting for cumulative advantage and disadvantages from H2, (a) women living in counties with lower unemployment rates when they are young adults (19-22 years old) will be more likely to engage in “steady” fulltime work. Women (b) who spend more than four weeks out of work and looking for work as young adults, or who experience involuntary job loss before age 25 (via firing, layoff, or discharge) will be less likely to engage in steady work. Further, (c) larger state-level gender wage gaps among fulltime workers when women are young adults, or higher state union participation rates when women are entering onto work pathways (at 25 years old) will be associated with a lower
likelihood to work steadily, as higher union density and larger wage gaps suggest fewer opportunities for “good” work for women and higher levels of male jobs and occupational segregation. Finally, (d) women living in rural areas will be less likely to follow steady work pathways.

Gender Beliefs

To understand how and why women participate in paid work over the course of their lives, prior research has also investigated gender beliefs (Gerson 1985; Risman 1998; Correll 2004). The gender beliefs perspective suggests that women’s gendered perceptions of the workforce, expectations about gendered occupations, and expectations about motherhood shape their continued employment, making some women more likely to track into unpaid or part-time work (Blair-Loy 2003; Correll 2004; England 2010). Gender beliefs guide decisions about workforce participation, marriage, and family formation (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 1998). These beliefs are widespread and “effectively salient,” meaning that they influence behavior (Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Beliefs about gender are particularly influential during transitional periods in the life course, such as entry into the paid labor market, marriage, or childrearing (Damaske 2011; Vespa 2009), suggesting that they may also influence women’s work pathways.

Gender beliefs may lead women to enter occupations that are stereotyped as (often lower-paying) female fields and working-class women may be particularly reluctant to enter male fields such as blue-collar occupations that may provide greater economic opportunities (England 2010). Instead they either experience upward mobility by moving into clerical or secretarial “pink-collar” jobs or stagnate in low-wage and lower-skill work. Women who anticipate low job
prospects or who see women’s jobs as ancillary may anticipate working only occasionally (Damaske 2011).

Women’s beliefs about who is most responsible for caring for children may also influence their workforce patterns, as it continues to be almost universally held that women are the preferred caregiver for young children (Folbre 2001). Women who believe that they will leave the workforce once they become mothers may choose not to enter the workforce or may enter into more transitional employment as they anticipate leaving in the future.

H4: When adding women’s workforce ideologies to our previous models, we expect that women who (as young adults) held more traditional gender beliefs or who did not have expectations of long-term participation in full-time paid work will be more likely to follow stay-at-home pathways and less likely to work steadily fulltime across adulthood than women who held more egalitarian gender beliefs or early expectations of working fulltime throughout adulthood.

Work and Family Opportunities and Constraints

Women’s dual responsibilities in the home and at work may explain their ability to remain in long-term stable employment, with women most likely to stay employed when they find both opportunities in the labor market and support for their paid work at home (Gerson 1985; Stone 2007). In other words, micro-level experiences in the workplace and at home may shape women’s work pathways (Cha 2010; Gerson 1985; Stone 2007). Indeed, many researchers have noted that the conflict between work and family begins following the transition to parenthood and is most intense when children are young (Bianchi et al. 2006; Moen 2001). Thus it is important to capture women’s work transitions throughout young adulthood in order to
understand their participation in the workforce as they age.

When women find “good jobs,” that is full-time, year-round jobs with benefits, they are more likely to remain employed (Nelson and Smith 1999). Moreover, long-term employment appears to be more common when women find work interesting, find opportunities for advancement, feel a sense of accomplishment, and believe that employers and peers respect their work (Damaske 2011). On the other hand, women are more likely to leave work if they perceive that there are constraints to advancing within the company, if they are pushed into less rewarding career paths, and if they work in fields that demand “overwork” and have inflexible schedules (Cha 2013; Gerson 1985; Stone 2007).

Responsibilities at home factor into how and whether women work for pay. When husbands work more than 50 hours a week, wives are less likely to participate in the labor market because their husbands do not participate in second shift tasks at home (Cha 2010). A husband’s high wages may decrease women’s workforce participation, particularly when husband’s earnings are significantly higher than their wives (Shafer 2011). Women are more likely to stay employed when they have support at home or when they are able to hire outside help to lighten the second shift workload (Gerson 1985).

H5: Adjusting for previously measured characteristics, we expect women’s work/family opportunities and constraints at age 25 will structure their long-term pathways of work such that women with the fewest work constraints (i.e. report few barriers to work, do not have a spouse working long hours, have fewer or no children) and the greatest work opportunities (i.e. work in professional occupations or are continuing their higher education at age 25), will be most likely to work steadily.
Data, Methods, and Measures

Data and Sample

We identify longitudinal group-based pathways of women’s workforce participation using the National Longitudinal Study of Youth – 1979. The NLSY79 is a nationally representative sample of over 12,000 youths ages 14-21 in 1979, interviewed annually through 1994 and biennially thereafter. Our sample is first limited to the 4,930 women who were not part of the military or low-income oversamples that were not followed after 1984, and is then further limited to the 4,713 women who provide at least three cross-sectional measures of workforce participation (or non-participation) between the ages of 25-45. A significant strength of the NLSY79 is its high retention rate; roughly 80% of the baseline sample interviewed in 2010, the last year from which we draw employment data. We impute missing values due to item nonresponse for explanatory variables (but do not impute information related to weekly paid work hours, our dependent variable) using the ice command in Stata 12. For all imputed measures with the exception of spousal wages, well under 15% of data are missing (about 30% of spousal income data are missing and imputed among married women at age 25).

Measures

Dependent Variable

Weekly work hours. We begin tracking the hours women spend in paid work at age 25 – which is at or after the age at which we measure our explanatory variables – and continue through age 45, the youngest age in our sample when women were last interviewed in 2010. At each interview beginning in 1979, women report the number of weeks and hours spent in paid work at a “main” job over the last twelve months, including ‘0’ hours for no paid work hours in
the last year and ‘0’ weeks of paid work if there was no paid work in the last year. We divide the total number of yearly work hours at a “main” job by the number of weeks worked at that job over the last year to calculate the average number of hours in paid work per week during employed weeks. Scores of zero are assigned only to women who reported zero weeks of paid work in the last year.\(^1\) Nearly 90\% of our sample provides eight or more reports of average weekly work hours at a main job between ages 25-45, with a total range of three waves of data provided (n=28 women, under 1\% of the sample) to eleven waves (n=2,656 women, 55\% of the sample). Table 1 details the number of observations at each age, the means and standard deviations of women’s work hours, and the range of hours.

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

*Explanatory Variables*

Explanatory variables predicting women’s pathways of workforce participation are presented in Table 2.\(^2\) These include race-ethnicity and US nativity, household poverty status between ages 19-22 [1=household falls below poverty threshold], respondent’s years of completed education by age 25 (centered at 12 years), whether the respondent ever becomes a parent (included to allow for interactions), teen birth [1=gives birth before age 18, conditional on becoming a parent], and non-marital birth [1=not married at first birth, conditional on becoming a parent]. We use two proxies to measure family of origin socioeconomic status: whether a

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\(^1\) Work hours are topcoded at 80+ hours per week to aid in model convergence. Under 1\% of women worked more than 80 hours per week at a main job at each wave. Results do not change when work hours remain continuous, but some models do not achieve convergence.

\(^2\) Individuals are assigned to groups with varying probabilities of placement, and as such descriptive statistics by group are not precise unless weighted to adjust for each individual’s probability of correct placement (Nagin 2005: 91). As such, we do not provide descriptive statistics according to pathways of workforce participation but they are available upon request.
residential mother did not graduate high school because maternal education levels are associated with offspring cultural capital (Domina and Roksa 2012), and whether a respondent lived with two biological parents as an adolescent, because single-parenthood and economic hardship are strongly associated (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

To construct variables related to women’s individual, state, and county-specific labor market opportunities at and before women enter onto pathways of work, we use the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) versions of the Current Population Survey (CPS) from 1979-1984 (King et al. 2010), historical Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports of employment status by state and county, and a report estimating union density levels by state based on data from the CPS and the BLS publication Directory of National Unions and Employee Associations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.; Hirsch et al. 2001). We merge these data with the restricted NLSY79 Geocode data identifying respondents’ states and counties of residence at each interview to calculate variables for women’s labor market opportunities during the years prior to women’s entry onto workforce pathways. These variables include a respondent’s county-level unemployment rate when the respondent is 19-22 years of age (and potentially just entering or having just entered the workforce), the median gender wage gap (in whole dollars) for full-time working men and women in the respondent’s state when the respondent is 19-22 years of age, the percent of the workforce in the respondent’s state reporting union participation when the respondent is 25 years old, and residence in a rural area at age 25. At the individual level, we control for whether a woman experienced four weeks or more of unemployment in any one year prior to age 25, as well as whether a woman experienced an involuntary job loss (via being fired, discharged, or laid off) by age 25 (researchers have recently suggested that job loss and unemployment should be measured as two distinct experiences, see Strully 2009).
Between 19-22 years of age women are asked about their gender beliefs (using a scale where higher scores indicate more traditional gender beliefs), whether they believe gender is a barrier to a “good” job [1=perceives gender as barrier], and whether a woman expects to work at age 35 [the reference and modal category], work and raise a family, or raise a family.

Work-family barriers are measured using marital status at age 25 [never-married as reference], number of residential children by age 25 [conditional on ever becoming a parent], current occupation (including categories for students, homemakers, and the unemployed, with service-sector work as reference), perceived barriers to a good job (including those related to transportation, race, age, language, and nationality), and spousal wages (centered) and spousal weekly work hours (centered at 40 hours) among married women. Internal moderators (Mirowsky 1999) are used to include both the married and nonmarried in these models.

Analytic Strategy: Group-Based Developmental Trajectories

We use group-based developmental trajectory models, a type of finite mixture modeling (Nagin 2005) in Stata 12 (Jones and Nagin 2012) to identify group-based pathways of women’s average weekly hours across ages 25-45. Group-based trajectory models identify clusters of women following common pathways, or “developmental trajectories” of work hours as they age, and can identify “risk factors” for entering these pathways as well as outcomes associated with these pathways (Nagin 2005). This analytic approach differs from hierarchical or growth curve modeling because of its focus on group-specific, rather than within-individual, trajectories of change over time. Developmental trajectories are better aligned with our hypotheses and with recent scholarship identifying three to four distinct patterns in women’s work pathways (see Damaske 2011; Williams and Han 2003).
After identifying pathways of work hours and unemployment, we test additive models predicting women’s entry onto these pathways. Although these theories are distinct, the variables that test these theories are interrelated under a life course framework and as such we build our models additively rather than test them separately. For example, our cumulative advantages model includes measures of single parenthood, educational attainment, and poverty during young adulthood, each of which is likely to influence (or has been shown to influence) a woman’s traditional gender attitudes, her early expectations for workforce participation, her odds of marrying, and her barriers to finding and keeping a good job. Our goal is to build a more comprehensive empirical and theoretical understanding of how women’s personal characteristics and structural positions place them on long-term pathways of paid workforce participation.

Results

Table 3 about here

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Identifying Group-Based Pathways of Women’s Workforce Participation

Nagin (2005) argues that a model of best fit is parsimonious and both empirically and theoretically sound. To select our preferred model of women’s work hours, we use existing research describing women’s workforce participation across the life course and conduct post-hoc tests of model fit to identify the optimal number of groups and shape of pathways describing women’s average weekly work hours across ages 25-45. Table 3 describes the model parameters for a six-group model and Appendix I includes the average predicted probability of group membership (APP) for women in each group-based pathway along with Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) statistics for models tested with as few as three and as many as eight groups of
women’s pathways of workforce participation. Consistent with Nagin’s (2005) recommendation that members of each group average a predicted probability of correct group membership of at least .7 for each group, our six-group model reports APPs of .946, .897, .928, .833, .914, and .856. Although seven and eight-group models had lower BIC statistics and high values for the APP, the additional groups were quite small in size and did not meaningfully vary from those depicted in the six group model. Specifically, the eight group model broke out the gradually “increasing” and “decreasing” hours pathways into two separate pathways each, and the seven-group model identified two groups of women who gradually decreased hours over time but began this decline in hours at different ages (early versus mid-30s). As such, we select the six-group model as the most parsimonious model depicting common group pathways of women’s workforce participation across ages 25-45. We plot the six-group model in Figure 1.

Figure 1 provides strong support for Hypothesis 1, which drew from Damaske (2011) and other studies, predicting a pathway of “Steady” fulltime workforce participation, a pathway of workforce non-participation across adulthood, and one or more categories of “pulled back” intermittent or part-time participation. First, we see evidence of two distinct categories of fulltime working women, one including women averaging work hours persistently at or above forty hours a week (which we term “Overwork”) and a modal category of women steadily working at or near forty hours a week during weeks spent employed across ages 25-45 (termed “Steady”). Also in line with previous research, we identify 8.2% of women engaging in continuous non-participation in paid work (“Stay-at-Home”). We identify three distinct pathways of intermittent or part-time workforce participation among women. Figure 1 shows women engaging in “Pulled back” pathways of “Increasing hours” (10.5%), “Decreasing hours” (8.6%), and “Workforce re-entry” (10.6%). These pathways support Damaske’s (2011) finding that
“Pulled back” intermittent or part-time workers are heterogeneous when examined over time, and advance her research by identifying the three distinct types of intermittent work.

In sum, women’s paid workforce participation varies over time and across women, likely reflecting women’s dual roles as workers and primary caregivers. The pathways are consistent with previous research, showing a majority of women following a Steady work pathway while employed, averaging near forty hours a week across much of their working years. Smaller proportions of women move in and out of the paid workforce or forego paid work entirely, consistent with Damaske’s (2011) finding that many women find different ways to “pull back” from working full time to accommodate changing family and personal needs. Very few women – fewer than the proportion who do not participate in paid work – enter into what are likely higher-paying “Overwork” pathways averaging more than forty hours a week during employed weeks.

Analyses, Part II: Testing Theories of Women’s Workforce Participation

The second stage of our analyses uses existing explanations of women’s work to build a series of models predicting women’s entry onto long-term pathways of weekly work hours. We build our models additively, beginning with cumulative disadvantages to set the stage for women’s initial socioeconomic resources and strains. Our models progress by adding in labor market factors during early adulthood, gender beliefs and expectations prior to entry onto a work pathway, and work-family opportunity and constraint at the start of a woman’s work pathway at age 25. In Models 1-4 of Table 4, log-odds coefficients report women’s increased or decreased likelihood to experience the group pathway under investigation, relative to Steady work (our modal category).

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE
Cumulative Advantages and Disadvantages

The life course concept of “cumulating advantages and disadvantages” (see Elder 1998) emphasizes the long-term role of early-life conditions for later life socioeconomic attainment and well-being. Indeed, we find in Model 1 of Table 4 that the least advantaged women in our sample had the greatest difficulty securing Steady work, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Specifically, women whose mothers did not graduate high school were more likely to follow a pathway of Increasing hours relative to a Steady pathway, and less likely to engage in Overwork. Also consistent with Hypothesis 2, early poverty and lower educational attainment limited women’s long-term prospects for Steady work. Relative to women without a history of poverty, women living in poverty during young adulthood were more likely to follow Stay-at-home, Increasing hours, Decreasing hours, or Re-entry pathways relative to a Steady pathway.

Building social capital is important for women’s labor force attachment. As women’s education increased, they were less likely to follow a pathway of Stay at home or Increasing hours and more likely to engage in Overwork. Parenthood also strongly and significantly patterned women’s work, with women who became mothers less likely to follow a Steady and Overwork pathway and more likely to follow the three Pulled back or the Stay-at-home pathways. The exception to this is single mothers, who were more likely than mothers with marital births to Overwork across adulthood. Non-Latina black respondents and Latina respondents were less likely to report Decreasing hours or Re-entry pathways than non-Latina, non-black peers.

Labor Market Experiences
Adding individual, state, and county level labor market variables to our baseline cumulative advantages and disadvantages model does not markedly reduce the statistical significance of Model 1 variables (see Model 2 of Table 4), yet the lower BIC statistic indicates an improvement in model fit, providing initial evidence that theories predicting how women participate in paid work operate independently. Hypotheses 3a-3d hypothesized that high local unemployment and a high level of union work participation within the state, a respondent’s early unemployment or job loss experiences, greater state-level wage and education gaps by gender, and residing in a rural area would limit women’s access to Steady work. Our main finding in Model 2 of Table 4 is that higher levels of state union participation and higher county-level unemployment selected women out of Steady work and increased their likelihood to follow Stay-at-home and Increasing hours pathways. Greater union presence was also associated with a greater likelihood to experience a re-entry pathway. In other words, women may have greater access to stable fulltime work across their working years if, as young adults, they lived in counties with a lower unemployment rate and states with a lower union presence.

A woman’s personal job loss or job search experiences were not as consistently associated with long-term workforce participation. Job loss via firing, discharge, or layoff by age 25 was not associated with long-term workforce participation, but four or more weeks of unemployment in any one year by age 25 was associated with a lower likelihood to Stay at Home or report Increasing hours and an increased likelihood to report a Decreasing Hours pathway. The gender wage gap and residence in a rural area were not meaningfully associated with workforce participation. In sum, we find partial support for Hypotheses 3a-3d. County unemployment, union work, and a woman’s early unemployment experiences were associated
with work pathways, but involuntary job loss, residence in a rural area, and the gender wage gap were not strongly associated with workforce participation.

**Gendered Beliefs and Expectations**

To estimate the role of women’s gendered beliefs as young adults (around ages 19-22) in shaping their long-term workforce participation, we add variables related to women’s gendered beliefs and expectations to participate in paid versus unpaid work in Model 3 of Table 4. We continue to adjust for cumulative disadvantages and early labor market experiences, which contextualize women’s perceived prospects for paid work participation. After adjusting for women’s gender beliefs, previously significant variables continue to be associated with women’s work pathways and the BIC statistics decrease, indicating an improvement in model fit. Again these results indicate that these theories of women’s work are interrelated but empirically independent.

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, women with more traditional gender beliefs were more likely to Stay-at-home or to follow an Increasing hours pathway (gradually spending more hours per week in the workforce with time) than participate in Steady work. Moreover, women who anticipated as young adults that they would raise a family or balance work and family in adulthood indeed work differently than their peers who expected to work fulltime: women who aspired as young adults to balance family and work were more likely to Stay at home or report Increasing or Decreasing work hours with age rather than work Steadily, and were less likely to Overwork across adulthood. Women who expected to raise a family at 35 were expectedly more likely to Stay at Home or report an Increasing hours pathway. Unexpectedly, women’s perception during young adulthood that their gender was a barrier to finding a good job selected
women out of Re-entry pathways relative to Steady work, making it less likely that they would move out of fulltime work in their thirties and then re-enter the workforce later in adulthood.

**Work Family Opportunities and Constraints**

Model 4 of Table 4 adds our work-family variables to the variables included in Model 3 to assess their role net of early advantages and disadvantages, the labor market, and women’s expectations for work-life balance. Across Models 1-4, our BIC statistics progressively decline, suggesting a continually improving model fit. Also, as we observed in the previous models, adding work-family variables to Model 4 of Table 4 does not reduce the magnitude of many (but not all) previously significant variables, again indicating that existing theories of women’s work are best studied together rather than separately.

In support of our fifth hypothesis, Model 4 indicates that both family and work circumstances at age 25 were strongly associated with women’s weekly work hour pathways after adjusting for other variables. Practical barriers to a good job and women’s own work experience also impacted work pathways over time. For women working in a professional field at age 25 relative to service-sector work, Overwork and Decreasing hours pathways were more likely than Steady pathways. Women with clerical work experience at 25 were more likely to Stay at home or pull back from the workforce via Increasing or Decreasing hour pathways. School enrollment without paid work at age 25 increased women’s likelihood of Increasing hours and Overwork across ages 25-45. Women who were unemployed and seeking work at 25 were more likely to report Stay at Home or Increasing hours pathways, which may indicate that women with low levels of labor force attachment were discouraged by poor employment prospects early in the life course rather than consciously ‘choosing’ to stay at home while young.
At the same time however, women who were already homemakers at 25 were far more likely to remain homemakers or to delay working via Increasing hours rather than participate in a Steady pathway. Finally, women with practical work barriers – particularly access to reliable transportation – limited their long-term work pathways, making it more likely that women would pull back or Stay at home through their forties.

On average, married women were more likely to follow an Increasing hours or Re-entry pathway relative to Steady work, and divorced women were (perhaps not surprisingly) less likely to Stay at home. Spousal wages were statistically significant, but the coefficient is nearly zero and unlikely to be substantively meaningful. Married women who had spouses working long hours were more likely to Overwork than engage in Steady work, which may reflect marital homogamy in education and profession among the most advantaged women. Although parenthood per se continued to be associated with women’s greater likelihood to participate in pathways of Decreasing hours or Re-entry relative to engagement in steady work, the interaction between parenthood and number of children was negative for some groups, indicating that greater numbers of children made it progressively less likely for women to Decrease hours or Re-enter work relative to engaging in Steady work, but more likely that women would stay at home or report Increasing hours.

Discussion and Conclusions

Understanding why some women work steadily throughout their lives while others work part-time or not at all has long been of significant interest to gender and work-family scholars (see Gerson 1985; Jacobs 1989; Risman 1998; Stone 2007). This study makes two significant contributions to these research aims. First, we draw from repeated observations of women over
time to demonstrate significant variation in women’s work hour pathways across adulthood. We find two pathways of stable fulltime work for women, three pathways of part-time employment, and a pathway of unpaid labor. This study provides strong support for the work pathways identified in Damaske’s qualitative research (2011). We add to these qualitative findings by identifying two distinct patterns of engaging in “steady” full-time work and three patterns of “pulling back” from the paid workforce.

Second, we expand upon existing theoretical and empirical explanations of women’s workforce participation by using a life course perspective to combine four theories of women’s work to explain women’s workforce participation during their twenties, thirties, and forties. Using a life course framework enables us to examine the interrelated nature of these theories and to build a model that considers how these theoretical perspectives cumulatively shape women’s life chances. We find strong support for the lasting effects of cumulative disadvantages for women’s work hours, with women’s race, early experiences of poverty, educational attainment, and early family characteristics playing significant roles in shaping women’s work careers. Labor market experiences further shaped women’s work hours, as did a woman’s gendered beliefs and expectations and her work-family opportunities and constraints. While prior research has documented (Gerson 1985; Jacobs 1989) the importance of work-family opportunities and constraints on workforce participation and suggested a more limited role for gender beliefs (England 2010; Risman 1998), our models add both early cumulative disadvantages and labor market experiences which appear to have profound influences on women’s work pathways. The role of cumulative disadvantages has received little attention in past research, but our findings demonstrate the lasting influence of early socio-economic advantages and disadvantages on women’s work pathways. Additionally, local labor market conditions and experiences, again less
studied in the literature, also appear to matter for women’s future work trajectories. Moreover, we demonstrate that these four theories of workforce participation appear to operate mostly independently—yet when combined improve overall model fit—suggesting that they must be studied in concert to best understand women’s work pathways.

Identifying women’s long-term pathways of work refines our understanding of how prevalent each pathway of work is for women. Even though annual data shows that about 20% of mothers are not employed in a given year (Bianchi et al. 2006), a long-term pathway of stay-at-home mothering is experienced by only 8.2% of women in our sample. Consistent with prior research, we find that while some women do leave the labor market upon becoming a parent, they generally are not leaving the paid workforce permanently (see Hynes and Clarkberg 2005). This is not to say that women are as likely as men to work continuously fulltime in paid labor. The prevalence of women following Pulled Back pathways of Increasing hours, Decreasing hours, and Workforce Re-entry (29.7% total), in addition to those 8.2% who stay-at-home, means that 37.9% of women have weaker labor force attachment than a fulltime worker through their mid-forties. This supports previous research finding that women’s overall participation in the workforce is uneven relative to men (see England 2010). Yet a majority of women in our sample (62.1%) worked steadily with full-time or overwork hours across adulthood. On average, then, a majority of women are participating in the labor market at fairly high levels through the age of 45.

By mapping the diversity of women’s work pathways, we build a more complete theoretical and empirical model through our life course analysis. We find strong support for cumulative advantage and disadvantage in our test of Hypothesis 2. Overall, women on Steady pathways were more advantaged both during their childhood and throughout young adulthood
relative to the majority of their counterparts. Women who followed Overwork pathways also experienced early advantages, including higher education and lower poverty. Finding an association between socioeconomic advantage and greater workforce attachment builds on previous cross-sectional research indicating that higher SES women are more likely to work (see England et al. 2004; Percheski 2008), and shows that this pattern appears to persist over the course of women’s working lives. The intersection of race and gender also appears important. Black and Latina women were less likely to follow Decreasing or Re-entry pathways relative to Steady pathways, which could reflect the greater need for two incomes in nonwhite households.

In the labor market experiences model, we saw that women were more likely to Stay-at-home or report Increasing hours relative to a Steady pathway if they lived in counties with high unemployment rates or high state union participation when women were young adults, consistent with our third hypothesis. Four or more weeks of unemployment was associated with a reduced likelihood to Stay at home or report Increasing hours and an increased likelihood to report Decreasing hours. Thus, searching for work and not finding it or living somewhere with fewer work opportunities may discourage continued labor force participation, although women with less labor force attachment may be less likely to spend longer times searching for work. Union participation in a state also discouraged women’s paid work, perhaps because union presence is an indication of more traditionally masculine jobs and higher levels of occupational segregation.

Gender beliefs also influenced women’s working lives. More traditional gender beliefs and aspiring to raise a family rather than work or balance work and family at age 35 was associated with an increased likelihood to follow a Stay-at-home or Increasing hours pathway relative to Steady work. Those holding the expectation that they would balance work and family at age 35 were less likely to Overwork and more likely to follow Stay-at-home, Increasing hours,
or Re-entry pathways. Holding more traditional gender ideologies, then, decreased the likelihood that women would work steadily or would overwork.

Finally, the work-family opportunities and constraints model adds nuance to our understanding of women’s workforce participation by exploring how factors known to influence work hours do so after controlling for CAD, the labor market, and gender beliefs. For women’s work hours, Model 4 of Table 4 largely supports previous research: occupation at age 25, marital status, and barriers to work all predict women’s work hour pathways. Similarly, parenthood (both ever becoming a parent and number of children) was associated with differences in women’s work pathways.

There are several limitations to this paper. We may be limited by our methodologies. Our focus on group, rather than individual, trajectories of change over time means that we cannot investigate fixed-effects estimates of individual change over time, which would give us better leverage for our early-life variables as causal rather than correlational. Still, our methods are consistent with previous research finding that women’s experiences are best understood by a focus on group, rather than individual, experiences, especially as they are structured in group-specific ways by early inequalities. We also do not include time-varying estimates of how trajectories are altered by mid-pathway events such as the birth of an additional child, job loss, marital status changes, and residential changes. This means that we are likely underestimating the effects of a woman’s current setting across her career, including factors that are directly related to our theories of interest.

Moreover, while ours is the first study to our knowledge to incorporate data on county-level annual unemployment rates and state-level annual union participation rates, the gender wage gap, and the gender gap in education, we were only able to find county level data for the
Women’s workforce participation has increased dramatically since the 1960s, and women now enjoy a broad range of opportunities to earn a wage, continue education, delay marriage and childbearing, remain at home as a caregiver, or cycle in and out of work to meet the changing demands of families. However, as scholars have long articulated, women’s workforce decisions are not made freely based on personal preference for paid or unpaid work. Rather, women’s long-term pathways of work are structured by the early home environment and socioeconomic disadvantage, early labor market experiences, women’s own beliefs about how and whether they should work, and opportunities and constraints in work and family life. Our study provides evidence that women’s employment pathways are largely a product of their changing social environment and the resources available to them rather than a product of individual agency. Significantly, we point to social stratification, labor market experiences, and work-family
constraints as key explanations for how women are “tracked” onto work pathways from an early age, allowing some women to cumulate advantages through access to good and continued work, and others to experience persistent unemployment and repeated workforce exits.
References


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