

You Can't Imagine Facts Away: A Response to Brigid Schulte and Gary Barker

ifstudies.org/blog/you-cant-imagine-facts-away-a-response-to-brigid-schulte-and-gary-barker

In my recent blog post, "[Lean In's Biggest Hurdle: What Most Moms Want](#)," I made two principal arguments. First, most mothers with dependent children do not want to work full-time outside the home, but most fathers do—for reasons that include biological sex differences. Second, policies seeking to help women thrive while ignoring gender differences in work preferences will not be successful.

In her critique of my piece, "[Imagining an Egalitarian World](#)," Brigid Schulte professes bafflement as to how I "could claim to speak for the life preferences of women." However, I was not speaking for women myself; I was reporting on the conclusions of several studies of highly-educated women, as well as more broadly representative surveys from Gallup and the Pew Research Center. I could also have offered an [article](#) by Linda Hirschman, a strong feminist, in *The American Prospect*. As Hirschman recounts (and laments), even elite and highly-educated mothers tend to prefer to work part-time or not at all. Hirschman believes women should change their preferences to become more work-centered, but she is willing to state the facts as they are.

Gary Barker, in a [separate critique](#), also objects to my characterization of how men and women want to balance work and caregiving. He is right that fathers now perform significantly more childcare than they did in previous decades, and that most Americans do not want to return to strict breadwinner/homemaker roles. Men and women do indeed want to share household work and childcare, and often breadwinning. However, by and large they do not want to share them *equally*. To reiterate: [per the Pew Research Center](#), three-quarters of fathers with children under 18 believe working full-time is ideal for them. Less than one-third of women say the same thing.

Culture and Biology

To what extent are these differences a matter of social construction as opposed to biology? Culture certainly matters, but it cannot begin to override the biological reasons why mothers are more inclined to nurture. There is no theory of the social construction of gender which would predict that upper-class, well-educated women would be more chained to tradition than women from lower classes with less education. Yet the evidence is clear: it is the best-educated mothers who are the least likely to want full-time work. In my blog post and book [Taking Sex Differences Seriously](#),¹ I present biological and evolutionary evidence that could explain why gendered patterns of parenting are so resistant to change.

My son and I chose to study [assistant professors in universities](#) precisely because we thought they would be particularly open to new patterns of gendered parenting. Moreover, we knew universities had many of the policies which Barker and Schulte say we need to achieve equality in the workplace: flexibility (quite common in the timing of teaching), gender-neutral parental leave, and in many cases subsidized childcare. We were right about professors' views: 75% of females and 55% of males in our study agreed that "families usually do best if the husband and wife share equally in child care, household work, and paid work." But behaviors were not in accord with these stated principles. On average, female professors did every one of our 25 caregiving tasks more often than their spouses and male professors did every one less than their spouses. Moreover, the women liked doing most of the tasks more than the men did.

Along similar lines, I presented evidence showing that the [brightest mothers with MBA's](#) are 30 percentage points *less* likely to be working full-time than less bright MBA graduates. How do Schulte and Barker understand this? Surely, the most intelligent women with MBA's are *more* likely to have heard feminist arguments for working full-time and are *less* likely than other women to be in the grip of archaic gender roles. Typically, if they continue to work full-time, their family income would make it possible to hire a terrific nanny. Why are they still more drawn to family and part-time work than their husbands are?

One could ask the same thing about another finding I discussed in my article: that the most mathematically talented women are [four times more likely](#) than their male counterparts to favor part-time work, even in their

ideal job. The women were more attracted to part-time work because they gave more weight than the men to community and family involvement and time for close relationships. Why would this be?

From Preferences to Policies

The second principal argument I made in my blog post was that policies that ignore gender differences in work preferences will not help women combine work and family in the way that they desire. Universities have created gender-neutral post-birth leaves and allow new parents additional time to present their case for tenure. These policies have [helped more men achieve tenure](#) and have led to fewer women achieving tenure. Men seem to take the added time to publish more, while women recover from pregnancy and giving birth, breastfeed, and [tend to their babies](#). Schulte and Barker are willing to let these unjust results from their gender-neutral dogma continue—while they await an imagined world where men's and women's work patterns and work preferences become identical.

The only justification for ignoring fathers' and mothers' actual preferences about work and parenting is ideological. There is an authoritarian streak in modern progressivism, abundantly evident in Barker and Schulte's insistence that paid family leave be gender-neutral and nontransferable between parents.

When Sweden allowed fathers to transfer their leave days to mothers, they transferred almost all of them. So Sweden, unhappy with parents making their own choices about who cared for their young children, began giving fathers paid nontransferable days—now up to 90. They even give bonus days of paid leave to families that share parental leave equally. But even with this strong economic incentive, only 14% of families share them equally.

Barker says that in Scandinavian countries, the time men devote to caregiving is approaching the time women spend. I have seen no evidence of this. The Swedish government says that in 2014 men took [25% of parental leave](#). Husbands are allowed to take leave at the same time as their wives, and many take parental leave [for family vacations](#).

I'm sure that if you make economic incentives even stronger, you can get still more men to take parental leave. Why do you need such incentives if men are equally inclined to parent intensely?

Fathers and Mothers Aren't Interchangeable

Schulte and Barker both emphasize the fact that having children changes the bodies and brains of caregiving fathers as well as mothers. That is true, but it does not mean that men and women are interchangeable as parents, whether to infants or to older children. Consider several pieces of evidence. [One experiment showed](#) that women are quicker and more accurate at identifying infant emotions such as joy, interest, sadness, fear, surprise, and distress. Prior experience as a mother or a babysitter did not explain these sex differences.

Another study found that even in families where fathers took leave after a child's birth and expressed a desire to be the primary caretaker of their new infants, the traditional parenting differences [emerged nonetheless](#). For example, as Anne Campbell reports, the "mothers displayed affectionate behavior, vocalized, smiled, tended, held, disciplined and soothed the infant more than fathers."

Oxytocin is the principal chemical encouraging nurturing; [women have much more of it](#). Testosterone is the principal hormone which [weakens humans' inclination to nurture](#); men have more of it.

Janet Hyde thinks the public and many researchers [overemphasize the importance of sex differences](#). But she acknowledges that women are much more likely than men to be "tender-minded," and tender-mindedness does much to explain the female inclination to nurture.

It seems that Schulte and Barker wish that men were more tender-minded—more like women when it comes to caregiving. But there is evidence that the male style of parenting is helpful for children precisely because it is *less* tender-minded than women's. If a child has trouble putting on his shoes, mothers are relatively more likely to help him. Fathers are relatively more likely to remind him of how he did it yesterday and ask him to try harder. In infant swimming classes, mothers typically ask their child to swim to their arms. Fathers stand behind the child and ask her to swim to the side of the pool. Mothers are the source of well-being and security, whereas fathers

push children to take the initiative in overcoming obstacles.

In his fascinating 2004 [review article](#), David Paquette says that “the need of children to take risks is as great as their need for stability and security.” Children from “involved and differentiated parents (with distinct functions such as caregiver versus playmate) are better prepared for both competition and cooperation than those with involved but undifferentiated parents....[They have] fewer conflicts with peers, fewer aggressive interactions, and more affiliative interactions.” Furthermore, just last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics [issued a new clinic report](#) on the unique and necessary contributions of fathers, noting that, “fathers do not parent like mothers, nor are they a replacement for mothers when they are not at home; they provide a unique, dynamic, and important contribution to their families and children.” Mothers and fathers are different—and children benefit from the difference.

Back to the 1950s?

Schulte ends her blog with the following sentence: “Steven, be a man. It’s your turn to load the dishwasher.” I don’t need to be lectured to on this subject. I do all the dishes every day in my house. It is the least I can do for a wonderful woman who does more of the cooking and shopping and all of the work to make our home beautiful.

Schulte wants her readers to believe I want all families to have 1950s-style gender roles. In fact, my book makes clear that I have great respect for women who want full-time careers and wish them well. Moreover, I know that I did much more to help raise my children than my father did to raise his. And my sons are doing still more to help raise *their* children. I think these trends are great. As I noted above, fathers typically bring a distinctive and developmentally important style to parenting. But the trends have not changed the beliefs of mothers (and fathers) about which sex should take the lead in parenting young children. According to [Pew’s 2013 survey](#), “Among fathers with children under age 18, 17% say the ideal situation for mothers of young children is to work full time. Only 7% of mothers agree with this.” The answers are very different if the question is about what’s ideal for fathers: “75% of fathers say the ideal situation for fathers of young children is to work full time; 66% of mothers agree.”

I don’t see these beliefs changing in the future precisely because they are not arbitrary. I think the general public senses that women are better than men with young children, especially babies. My book shows that the public’s judgment is correct about this. Mothers not only enjoy infant and toddler care more than fathers; on average, they are better at it. It’s time for these facts to be recognized in media discussions and public policy.

Steven E. Rhoads is Professor of Politics Emeritus at the University of Virginia and the author of [Taking Sex Differences Seriously](#).

Editor’s Note: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or views of the Institute for Family Studies.*

1. Despite Schulte’s claims about my arguments, the book has garnered much praise from well-credentialed scholars. For example, David Geary is the author of *Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Differences*, a standard reference book published by the American Psychological Association. He says my book shows “a solid footing in the scientific literature” and “makes a strong contribution to disseminating what we understand about sex differences.”