

How young women view men affects how they imagine their future selves

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Whether young women picture themselves as the primary caregiver or primary breadwinner for their future families may depend on how they believe men's roles in society are changing—or not changing—according

to a new study from the University of Arizona.

When unmarried young [women](#) believe that men are becoming significantly more active in childcare, they are more likely to imagine themselves as the primary breadwinners for their [future](#) families. On the other hand, when young women believe men are only becoming slightly more involved in childcare, they are more likely to imagine themselves as the primary caregivers for their future families, researchers found.

How women imagine their future selves could potentially impact the educational and career decisions they make years before they actually begin their families, suggests the study, published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"This shows how dependent women's role choices can be on their expectations of their future male partners," said lead study author Alyssa Croft, an assistant professor in the UA Department of Psychology.

"Those expectations could have implications for what women are willing and able to do in their own lives."

Croft's findings are based on a series of experiments conducted in the United States and Canada, in which she and her collaborators asked single female college students, ages 18 to 25, to write about how they imagine their lives 15 years in the future. The researchers focused on young women who plan on one day getting married and having children.

Participants were told they were part of a study on how people are affected by statistics in everyday life. They were presented a fact sheet that included a series of graphs on a range of topics, such as smoking rates, precipitation trends, fruit and vegetable consumption, and how the percentage of stay-at-home dads has increased over time.

Participants in each experiment saw the same data—either from the U.S.

Census Bureau or Statistics Canada, depending on where the experiment was conducted. However, the graphs on stay-at-home dads were presented differently to different participants.

Some saw the increase in stay-at-home dads represented as a steep line on a graph, which gave the appearance of a more rapid and dramatic shift. Others saw a flatter line, suggesting a more gradual change. Researchers merely tweaked the y-axis of the graph to get two different visual representations of the same data.

The researchers also manipulated the text accompanying the graphs. In the U.S. versions of the graphs, which showed that the percentage of stay-at-home dads in America increased from 4 to 12 percent over two-and-a-half decades, the graph was titled either "Rapidly increasing prevalence of stay-at-home dads" or "Low prevalence of stay-at-home dads." Text beneath the graphs either read, "These numbers are projected to continue increasing at a similarly rapid rate over the next two decades" or "These numbers are projected to remain relatively low in the next two decades."

After seeing the graphs, each study participant was asked to provide responses to a series of questions about how they imagine their lives in 15 years, including whether they see themselves as being the primary financial provider or primary caregiver for their family.

In both the U.S. and Canada, [young women](#) who saw the graph depicting a sharper increase in stay-at-home fathers were more likely to see themselves as breadwinners, while those who saw the flatter line were more likely to imagine themselves as caregivers. The researchers replicated the findings across a series of similar experiments.

The fact that this effect was seen in college students—whom one might assume are particularly career-oriented—is especially interesting, Croft

said.

"These are the individuals who we would think might be most likely to balk at traditional gender stereotypes, and yet they're still showing this pattern of [role](#) expectations that is in direct response to what they believe men will be or will not be doing," Croft said.

Croft said the research was motivated by the fact that although gender roles have changed significantly, that change has been asymmetrical. An estimated 70 percent of U.S. families today have two working parents, and women are increasingly more likely to be the primary economic providers for their families. However, [family](#) responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately to women, Croft said.

"Women's roles are changing much more quickly than men's, but we wondered, could it be that there is still a sense in which women's roles are restricted because of the way [gender roles](#) are intertwined with one another?" she said. "Could it be that women are picturing, before they're even in a relationship, a very stereotypic division of labor in their future families? And does that affect the education and career decisions they make when they're young?"

More research is needed to understand how and to what extent women's perceptions of men's roles affect the education and career choices they make early on, but the fact that those perceptions are shaping their future visions of themselves at all is significant, Croft said.

"This may be one reason we should care about the degree to which men's roles aren't changing as much as women's," she said.

More research also is needed to understand whether men's visions for their futures are similarly influenced by their perception of women's roles. Some men, for example, might welcome relief from the

stereotypical expectation that men should be the financial providers, Croft said.

"Perhaps thinking about women changing their roles to relinquish some of the caregiving control would be appealing to men who want to be more involved with their children," she said. "But that's an open question at this point."

More information: Alyssa Croft et al, Life in the Balance: Are Women's Possible Selves Constrained by Men's Domestic Involvement?, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167218797294](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218797294)

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