Socialized choices: Labour market behaviour of Dutch mothers

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Outline of the thesis

This research, which aims at a better understanding of mothers’ diverse labour market decisions, is carried out in the Netherlands. The wider structural and cultural context of the Netherlands is therefore relevant. The first chapter will provide a concise historical overview of the Dutch context within the period 1945 to 2012. The most important institutional and cultural turning points in relation to mothers’ labour market behaviour are addressed specifically, such as the enduring cultural Dutch tradition of ‘proud’ housewives (Kloek, 2009), which became brittle at the end of the ‘60s with the plea of Joke Smit (1967), and the typically Dutch ‘polder’ solutions of the ‘80s which, as remedies for the declining economy, create possibilities for part-time work. This chapter ends with the question of whether part-time work has, by 2012, put a stall on the emancipation process, since part-time work for mothers seems to have turned into a moral obligation rather than an alternative choice.

In chapter two, the main theoretical grounds of this study are described. Research areas where I could find explanations for different employment decisions on a micro level are micro-economic theory (Becker, 1965), the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1973, 2005), preference theory (Hakim, 2000, 2003a-d) and socialization theory (Bandura, 1977; Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Handel, 2006). The theory of planned behaviour is useful since it understands that the influence of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (the sense of self-agency) on behaviour is mediated by intentions (what a person intends to do or would do in a certain situation). Within this study, intentions are understood as preferences (the number of hours a person wants to work). It is assumed theoretically that (gender and work) values and attitudes affect work preferences, and that work preferences in turn have impacts on the labour market behaviour of Dutch mothers. Previous research has shown that the causal relationships between values and attitudes on the one hand, and preferences and labour market behaviour on the other, are not unambiguous causal relationships, but are reciprocal and can be contradictory as well. Such an understanding of the attitudinal-behavioural relationship is acknowledged in this study, however my primary concern is to look toward the more consistent and robust areas of values, attitudes, and therefore also of preferences, by revealing their social roots. Subsequently, the main assumption of this study is that preferences do not arise in a void, but rather are (at least partly) embedded within prior social relations, by means of individuals’ socially-shaped values and attitudes, on which their preferences are based. To understand how values and
attitudes are shaped by the influences of significant others, I make use of the theoretical insights of socialization theory. It is theorised that in order to understand individuals’ values, attitudes and preferences, it is important to shed light on the construction and reconstruction of these attitudes and preferences within prior micro social relational contexts. In socialization theory, the intergenerational relationships of early life, and other social relational contexts later in life (in the form of teachers, partners, friends and colleagues) are viewed as vital social contexts within which individuals’ values and attitudes are shaped (Bandura, 1977; Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

Chapter three is based on the first empirical qualitative study, which explores whether and how mothers with differences in working patterns also differ in their ‘narratives of choice’ and their values and attitudes towards work, gender and motherhood. This is achieved via 39 semi-structured interviews with mothers living in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. This qualitative study reveals a typology of Dutch mothers based around the variety of their narratives of choice and considerations regarding paid and unpaid work and motherhood. Similarities emerged in the narratives of all of these interviewed mothers, despite their diverse work preferences and subsequent behaviour. These similarities include a ‘narrative of non-complaining’ regarding their spouses’ contribution to the unpaid work, accompanied by a disappearance of gender concerns.

Mothers’ diverse work preferences and subsequent decisions are not only examined with qualitative research, but also with a quantitative analysis. Chapter four is based on a quantitative structural path analysis of a representative national survey among 935 Dutch mothers. The analysis demonstrates that the effect of values and gender and work attitudes on a mother’s labour market behaviour is largely mediated by the variable work preference, which influence on actual labour participation appears much larger than the influence of objective background characteristics. Secondly, the analysis shows that part of work preferences and related gender values and attitudes are influenced by the labour market participation of the respondent’s mother during childhood. It is assumed that this stable part has a balancing effect on otherwise more flexible work preferences. Dutch mothers’ preferred number of work hours seems therefore to be, to some extent, a good predictor of her future labour market behaviour.

In chapter five, I dive deeper into socialization factors by examining whether and which parental values and attitudes, remembered from childhood, still affect Dutch mothers’ current general and personal gender attitudes. This cross-sectional analysis is based on the same large national sample of Dutch mothers. The analysis shows that parental socialization (via mental and verbal codes) plays a role in explaining both mothers’ general gender values and their personal gender attitude (i.e. their ideal family life). In this chapter, I also demonstrate the impact of perceived professional and career support by significant others on a mother’s current general gender values and her personal general attitude. Job encouragement earlier in life by significant others such as teachers, partners, colleagues and supervisors, relate to a mother’s present egalitarian gender values.
and attitudes. Besides these social influences, the quantitative analysis shows that a mother’s personal ideal family life strongly relates to her own general gender values (also socially embedded), her marital status and her educational level.

The following chapter (chapter six) functions as an intermezzo: in this chapter, the separate path-analyses addressed in the previous two chapters (chapters four and five), are put into one large path-analysis. The aim of this chapter is to examine how the different main (dependent) variables of this study – namely labour market behaviour, work preferences, personal gender attitudes and general gender values – relate to each other, while allowing for control variables and also examining the influence of primary and secondary socialization factors. The results of this extensive analysis are described herein. An advantage of such analysis is that I can also explain the work attitudes ‘I work in order to be economically independent’ and ‘I like to work’ as dependent variables, which is relevant because these work attitudes are significantly related to a mother’s work preference. In particular, the analysis shows that a mother’s adherence to financial autonomy can largely be explained by the influence of parental socialization during childhood.

In chapter seven, which is also based on the qualitative analysis of the 39 in-depth interviews with Dutch mothers, I address the range, direction and intensity of the social influence of significant others on mothers’ current gender and work attitudes. In this chapter it is shown how life histories of women, in particular of being exposed to the behaviour, attitudes, and support of their parents, and also the perceived support of their partner and people at work, have shaped and re-enforced mothers’ present gender and work attitudes, referring to the process of self-selection and reality-maintenance. In other words, people (often subconsciously and automatically) look for social relationships that are likely to confirm their identities (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

In chapter eight (the synthesis), besides summarising the most important findings of the study, I also confront the similarities and differences of the qualitative findings and quantitative results, while simultaneously addressing the merits and limits of both research methods. While comparing the results of the two methods, the findings mainly demonstrate a mutual correspondence. The two methods supplement each other, providing a method through which a comprehensive and subtle understanding of the heterogeneous labour market decisions among Dutch mothers, as well as their relations with diverse socialization processes, could be understood. This section describes how mothers’ individual work preferences, that come to form the basis of their employment actions, are enmeshed in recognisable patterns of social interactions, having their roots in childhood and being intertwined with social institutions and cultural forms.

The book ends with an epilogue (chapter nine) in which I consider the limitations of the study, pose some questions for future research, and address some relevant political implications.