

PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN'S OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY AND THE
UNITED KINGDOM*

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This study assesses the impact of socio-economic status and family life on perceptions of women's opportunities among German and British women and men. Our theoretical framework links national characteristics to individual characteristics and perceptions. We hypothesize that the influence of work-family status on perceptions of women's opportunities varies by gender and country because of cross-national differences in ideology and policy. Separate multiple regression analyses for women and men in each country indicate important variations in the effects of labor force participation, family income, age, and family status on perceptions of women's opportunities for education and employment.

Studies of the relationship between work-family status and perceptions of women's opportunities in society are scant. Cross-national efforts dealing with this relationship have been particularly neglected. However, perceptions of women's opportunities are shaped by both personal experiences at work and in the family as well as by the larger cultural and political context. The relative neglect of this research area may be partially attributed to the difficulty of integrating societal characteristics, individual position in the social structure, and the public's perceptions of women's opportunities into a single model. These relationships are made even more complex by the mediating role of state ideology and policy. This study estimates the empirical connections between individual characteristics and perceptions of women's opportunities among

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women and men in two European countries - the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the United Kingdom (UK).

NATIONAL CONTEXTS

The FRG and the UK were chosen for this study because of the differential degree to which their governments developed labor market legislation and family policy during the 1970s. Across Western Europe, this decade was characterized by dramatic shifts in the economic structure, educational gains, decreasing fertility rates, and the resurgence of women's movements. It was also an era of militancy, political activism, and increasing demands for social change. This atmosphere raised the general public's awareness of gender inequality. As a result, new legislative efforts targeted women's opportunities in the labor force. Nevertheless, these reforms often left a gap between policy and actual experience.

Although the FRG and the UK were similar in many respects during this time period, their governments' approach to gender inequality, and their response to decreasing birth rates and associated family issues differed substantially. The FRG's government was motivated mainly by concerns over low fertility and high unemployment, and thus became increasingly involved in labor market and family policy reforms (Neidhardt 1978). In order to encourage larger families, the German state developed a policy of incentives that includes among others paid maternity leave, child support payments for each unemployed child up to age 23 (age 27 if the child is in higher education), paid leave to take care of sick children, rent allowances for families with children and training grants for children, and subsidized family vacation places (see Shaffer 1981). In addition, a relatively restrictive abortion law was passed in 1974, which requires "social indications" (health of mother or child, economic hardship, etc.) by physicians for an abortion (Shaffer 1981).

In contrast, the government of the UK was relatively less concerned with explicit family policy issues (Land and Parker 1978). According to Gelb (1986), the persistent traditional family values and "norms for 'good' motherhood" are evidenced by consistently high marriage rates. Research reports that inter-generational changes in attitudes supporting women's liberation have been more limited in Britain than in other European countries (Jennings, Aurbuck and Rosenmeyer 1979). Part of the reluctance to change both public attitudes and policy in Britain has been attributed to the inflexible nature of the British political institutions and their lack of responsiveness to pressures from the women's movement (Gelb 1986). Nevertheless, the Employment Protection Act of 1975 provided women with the right to paid maternity leave and job security during and after pregnancy. Although the 1967 Abortion Act is similar to the one in the FRG, it seems to have been more liberally enforced than in Germany (Gelb 1986).

The development of feminist priorities within the women's movement in these two nations paralleled the basic differences in state policy. In the early 1960s the organized women's movement in the FRG confronted traditional

family relations with demands for wages for housework, abortion, child care, and alternative sexuality (Kawan and Weber 1982). Rather than merely appealing to norms of fairness, the German women's movement targeted the "moral" core of the societal structure, i.e. values associated with family and economy. The British women's movement, on the other hand, focused on the less controversial demands of equal pay and equal opportunity, and thereby delayed pursuing issues that posed a greater challenge to fundamental societal values until the 1970s (Bouchier 1983).

The issue of gender equality has been on both the public and government agenda in the FRG for a relatively longer time than in the UK. While the FRG's 1949 Constitution, subsequently reinforced by the 1972 Work Constitution Act, formally granted equal rights to women, Great Britain's official stance on the legal equality of the sexes was delayed until the 1970 Equal Pay Act (Sullerot 1976). However, the practical implementation and impact of the FRG's theoretical commitment to enhancing women's status and opportunities remains marginal even today (Schoepp-Schilling 1985). By the mid 1970s German women may have become disillusioned by the slow progress made since the enactment of constitutional equality. Thus, the FRG's rapidly falling birth rate and rising divorce rate have been interpreted by scholars as an indication of German women's "discontent and rebellion" (Altbach et al. 1984, p. 5). Therefore, by the mid 1970s German women should have been acutely aware of the discrepancy between state policy and everyday experience. The UK's more recent initiation of legal equality may, in the minds of British citizens, have symbolized better opportunities for women, thereby assuaging a critical attitude toward the real gap between formal equality and actual opportunity.

In terms of economic development, both the FRG and the UK had a comparable degree of industrialization and urbanization in the 1970s. Yet several economic indicators reveal that West Germany was somewhat wealthier, exhibiting more rapid growth than the UK (Table 1). While neglecting educational expansion, West Germany far exceeded Great Britain in terms of domestic government expenditures in general and spending in the social sector in particular.

Although the FRG already had a significantly lower fertility rate than the UK, the percentage of women in the labor force was similar in both countries in the mid 1970s (Table 1). Nevertheless, unlike the recent increase in labor force participation rates for British women, the share of employed women in West Germany remained relatively stable since prior to World War II. This pattern may be indicative of an extensive exposure to the "public sphere," where opportunity structures shape women's personal experiences. While the unemployment rate for German women exceeded that of German men, the reverse was true in the UK. This pattern reflects the drastic oversupply of labor in West Germany. In other words, the demand for cheap female labor was low because of a high amount of cheaper foreign labor. This circumstance may have restricted the German opportunity structure for women. Data on the wage gap between men and women reveal that German women historically have earned higher

wages than British women, relative to their respective countrymen (MacLennan and Fonda 1985; Schaffer 1981).

Table 1
Selected National Economic and Social Indicators for 1974-75 by Country

National Indicators	FRG	UK
Gross Domestic Product (million \$)	420,691	231,471
% Growth in GDP (1970-1981)	2.6	1.7
% 1972 Central Government Expenditures		
Education	1.5	2.6
Health	17.5	12.2
Housing & Welfare	46.9	26.5
Population Size (millions)	61.8	55.4
Crude Birth Rate	9.7	12.5
Total Fertility	1.5	1.9
% Urban Population	83.1	89.8
% Women Ever Married (Age 15-64)	78.3	86.9
% Women in Labor Force	47.2	42.8
% Women Unemployed	4.6	1.6
% Men Unemployed	3.8	4.4
Women Industrial Workers'		
Gross Hourly Wages as % of Men's	71.3	65.0

Sources: Central Statistics Office, 1986; MacLennan and Fonda, 1985; Ruggie, 1984; Schaffer, 1981; Statistisches Bundesamt, 1974; United Nations, 1977, 1980; World Bank, 1983; World Tables, 1983.

THE THEORETICAL MODEL

The lack of research on perceptions of women's opportunities forces us to seek guidance from literature on a related topic - gender role attitudes. Although

studies on gender role attitudes generally focus on ideas of what *should* be, our model concentrates on perceptions of what *is*. However, valuable insights can be drawn from previous studies of orientations toward appropriate gender role behavior.

Research generally concludes that the overall trend in industrial societies is toward increasingly egalitarian attitudes (Cherlin and Walter 1981; Huber and Spitze 1981; Mason et al. 1976; Miller 1984). Several scholars attribute this phenomenon to changes in socialization and education (Holter 1971; Scanzoni and Fox 1980; Schreiber 1978). Schaffer (1981) argues that increased education and occupational status reduces the traditionality of outlook with respect to women's roles. In support of this thesis, Thorton and Freedman (1979) find that young, highly educated employed American women have the most egalitarian gender role attitudes, while mothers of large families tend to retain traditional outlooks. In contrast, Agassi (1982) finds that German men are an exception to this pattern in that socio-economic status does not seem to affect their traditional attitudes.

Our theoretical model links an individual's structural position (socio-economic status and family characteristics) to perceptions of women's opportunities. Since objective status as well as the effect of state policy on an individual vary by gender, we expect that women's and men's evaluations of women's opportunities differ accordingly. Based on Agassi's (1982) work, our model assumes that a positive perception of women's opportunities relative to men's reflects a traditional attitude toward gender roles, while a negative perception indicates a more egalitarian point of view. In other words, perceptions of opportunities are not a measure of inequality, but an expression of individual assessments of the degree of inequality. A pessimistic evaluation of the opportunities available to women represents a critical attitude toward women's position in society.

We investigate the proposed linkage between individual characteristics and perceptions against the backdrop of cross-national differences in economy, demography, and state policy in the 1970s. This exploratory study examines how the relationship between work-family status and perceptions of women's status varies across two countries. Specifically, we empirically examine three fundamental research questions:

1. Do German and British citizens differ in their evaluation of women's opportunities? We suspect that perceptions of women's opportunities vary cross-nationally because of historical differences in culture and legislation.
2. Is there a gender gap in the evaluation of women's opportunities in both countries? In general, we expect men to perceive women's opportunities in a more optimistic, positive light than women. The perceptual gap between German men and women should be wider than between British men and women because Agassi (1982) finds that socio-economic status and gender role attitudes are not related among German men.

3. Are there cross-national differences in how women perceive their opportunities? We hypothesize that family characteristics will have a greater influence on women's perceptions in the FRG than in the UK because of national differences in fertility. In a nation like the FRG, where extremely low fertility is the rule, childbearing and rearing may express adherence to traditional gender roles. Employment should have a positive effect on British women's evaluations because of the relatively recent growth in female labor force participation, whereas employment should reduce German women's optimism because of their longer exposure to discrimination as a class and their greater dissatisfaction with the gap between legal equality and reality. Thus, individual characteristics will have a differential impact on perceptions in the two countries under investigation.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

The data for this study come from the Euro-Barometer III data set (Rabier and Inglehart 1978), produced by the Commission of European Communities, Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. The data for the FRG and the UK, which were collected in May 1975, are based on nationally representative, stratified quota samples of the population age 15 and older. For the purpose of this study, the sample only includes persons of typical working age, i.e. between the ages of 16 and 65. The qualifying samples consist of 481 West German women, 422 West German men, 444 British women, and 420 British men. Separate multiple regression analyses are performed for men and women in each country to compare the relative impact of selected individual characteristics on perceptions by gender and country. Listwise deletion of missing data further reduces the separate samples to 355 German women, 312 German men, 253 British women, and 268 British men.¹

VARIABLES AND MEASUREMENT

Perceptions of Women's Opportunities

The dependent variable for this study is a scale measuring the degree to which respondents evaluate women's opportunities in a positive light. Respondents were asked to evaluate seven areas of opportunity in the following way:

Would you say that the present situation of women around you is better, worse, or no different from that of men with regard to opportunities for (1) study, (2) vocational training, (3) jobs, (4) working conditions, (5) job security, (6) promotion, and (7) wages?

After the responses are recoded to '0' for worse, '1' for the same, and '2' for better, all items are summed. Thus, the resulting scale ranges from 0 (a very negative

perception of women's opportunities relative to men's) to 14 (a very positive perception). We acknowledge that this scale may tap inaccurate perceptions of reality since the questions refer to perceptions about "the women around you" without specifying the exact location of these women. Thus, as with other attitudinal measures, interpretations must be sensitive to this limitation. Yet, a test using the entire data set indicates high reliability for the scale with an Alpha of .80. A test for all men and women separately confirms approximately equal reliability for both sexes. Factor analysis indicates that all items load higher than .50 on the first factor.

Individual Characteristics

The selected independent variables fall into two basic categories of individual-level experiences: socio-economic status and family characteristics. Socio-economic status is indicated by family income, employment status, education, and age. Respondent's personal income is not available in this data set. Thus, we use the logged midpoint of the monthly family income categories in each country's own currency. Employment status is dummy coded into working for wages versus not gainfully employed.² Education is extrapolated from the question "How old were you when you finished your full-time education?" The first response category is 'up to 14 years.' Assuming that children begin formal schooling at age 6 in most European countries, the first category is recoded to '8 years of education' and all subsequent categories are converted to years of education accordingly. Age is coded in years.

The family characteristics in this empirical model are marital status and number of children at home. In accordance with the literature, marital status is coded into ever married and never married because it is assumed that widowed, divorced, or separated women are more likely than never married women to have residual family obligations (see Roos 1983; Treiman and Roos 1983). The experience of marriage *per se* is thought to affect the individual's perceptions of women's opportunities. The survey asked two questions about children: "How many children live at home between ages 8 and 15?" and "How many children living at home are less than 8?" These two items are combined for the total number of children at home.

RESULTS

Descriptive sample statistics indicate that several national differences in work-family characteristics exist (Table 2).³ While 62 percent of the German women in the sample are in the labor force, only 48 percent of the British women are working for wages. The employment gap between British women and men is almost twice the size of the gap between German respondents (45 versus 24 percentage points). Furthermore, 94 percent of the British women (88 percent of the British men) as compared to only 78 percent of the German women (82 percent of the German men) have ever been married. The most

striking difference emerges with respect to the presence of children at home. Whereas 54 percent of the British women and 52 percent of the British men have one or more children at home, only 39 percent of the German women and 42 percent of the German men report have children at home (not shown). Thus, German women are more likely to be employed outside the home and less likely to be married or have children than British women.

Table 2
Means of Selected Variables by Country and Gender
(Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

Variables	Federal Republic of Germany		United Kingdom	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Monthly Family Income	1797.65 (909.98)	1838.01 (745.93)	236.25 (142.78)	271.71 (146.90)
Employed	.62 (.49)	.86 (.35)	.48 (.50)	.93 (.25)
Education	9.66 (2.05)	10.10 (2.27)	9.73 (1.91)	9.83 (2.23)
Age	40.31 (15.13)	42.93 (13.75)	39.71 (13.65)	40.86 (13.24)
Ever Married	.78 (.42)	.82 (.38)	.94 (.23)	.88 (.32)
Number of Children	.62 (.91)	.76 (1.01)	1.02 (1.14)	1.04 (1.16)
Perception Scale	3.99 (2.99)	4.54 (2.73)	5.48 (3.48)	6.04 (3.10)
Number of Cases	355	312	253	268

Note: Monthly family income is in national currency; in 1975 the exchange rate was 2.46 DM and .452 Pound Sterling per U.S. Dollar (World Tables, 1983).

Without controlling for individual experiences, German women have the most negative perception of women's opportunities (lowest score), while British men have the most positive perception (highest score) of all groups. Yet all

groups have a fairly pessimistic view of women's opportunities on average. Nevertheless, British respondents are generally more optimistic about women's opportunities than German respondents, despite the fact that the earnings gap between men and women is larger in the UK than in the FRG.

Even after other individual characteristics are taken into account, we find that gender significantly affects respondents' evaluations of women's opportunities in the FRG (Table 3). German men's perceptions are significantly more optimistic than those of German women. In contrast, gender has no impact on respondents' perceptions of women's opportunities in the UK. This finding supports our expectation that women and men are more similar in their assessments of opportunities in the UK than in the FRG.

Table 3
OLS Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Estimating the Relationship
between an Optimistic Evaluation of Women's Opportunities and Gender
by Country, Controlling for Other Individual Characteristics

	FRG	UK
Gender (female=0, male=1)	.643** (.237)	.402 (.329)
Intercept	7.53	8.96
R ²	.03	.07*
Number of Cases	668	521

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * p<.05; ** p<.01.

The differential effects of individual characteristics on women's and men's perceptions are examined with regression equations estimated separately by gender and country (Table 4). The overall percentage of explained variance for both sexes in the FRG is low and not statistically significant. Because gender itself is a strong predictor of German perceptions of women's opportunities, socio-economic status and family status fail to explain a lot of variation in German perceptions. On the other hand, these individual characteristics are more important to our understanding of British perceptions. Socio-economic status and family status account for 7 percent of the variance in British women's evaluations and 8 percent of British men's.

Although the overall model does not fit the German case well, the parameter estimates for the four separate equations indicate that certain individual characteristics do affect respondent's perceptions of women's opportunities. First, family income reduces optimistic evaluations among both women and

men in the UK. All else being equal, the higher the family income, the more pessimistic the outlook. This finding suggests a British class effect in that upper class respondents are more critical of the available opportunities for women. No such effect is present among German respondents.

Second, the effect of labor force participation on perceptions of women's opportunities varies significantly by nation. Employment affects the perceptions of German men and British women. Being employed reduces German men's optimism about women's opportunities. However, British women are more likely to have positive perceptions of women's opportunities when they are employed, as predicted. British women who are employed evaluate their own position as being better than their unemployed counterparts. For German women, we hypothesized that employment would increase their pessimistic evaluations of their opportunities. While this effect is in the hypothesized direction, it is not statistically significant.

Third, education has no significant independent effect on perceptions of women's opportunities in either country. Fourth, older British women and men are more optimistic in their perceptions of women's opportunities, everything else being equal. However, age is irrelevant to German perceptions. This may reflect the notion that the younger generation is not necessarily the most critical in the FRG and that older British women and men are more impressed with the recent progress made by women in their country.

Fifth, family life significantly affects only German women's evaluations of their opportunities. Contrary to our expectations, ever-married German women perceive women's opportunities in a less positive light than never-married women. German women who have not yet married may feel that the doors of opportunity still await them, while German women who have already been married may be more disillusioned. As hypothesized, however, having children increases German women's optimistic evaluation of women's opportunities. This finding supports our contention that women with higher levels of fertility are less critical of women's current position in a country where the birth rate is below replacement.

Table 4
OLS Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Estimating the Relationship between an Optimistic Evaluation of Women's Opportunities and Selected Independent Variables by Country and Gender

Independent Variables	Federal Republic of Germany		United Kingdom	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Log Monthly Family Income	-.555 (.348)	-.202 (.482)	-.713* (.382)	-.750** (.379)
Employed	-.344 (.365)	-.917* (.537)	.882** (.442)	-1.213 (.797)
Education	-.014 (.084)	-.041 (.073)	-.053 (.125)	-.100 (.089)
Age	.017 (.013)	.002 (.015)	.047*** (.018)	.030* (.016)
Ever Married	-.760* (.463)	.010 (.511)	-.764 (.979)	-.192 (.625)
Number of Children	.527*** (.204)	.095 (.175)	.170 (.215)	.012 (.176)
Intercept	8.04	7.07	8.08	11.17
R ²	.03	.02	.07**	.08**
Number of Cases	355	312	253	268

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * p<.1; ** p<.05; *** p<.01; the interaction between employment and nation is statistically significant (t=2.18) for women; the interaction between marital status and gender is statistically significant (t=2.344) for the FRG.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This investigation has examined the impact of individual characteristics on perceptions of women's opportunities in two countries with distinct histories, cultures, and patterns of social organization. Several interesting findings have emerged from the analyses. First, the gap between women and men's perceptions varies cross-nationally. Not only do British women and men assess women's potentialities in a more similar manner than German women and men, they are also generally more optimistic than Germans. Among Germans, women perceive women's opportunities much more negatively than men. Surprisingly, however, British women seem to perceive greater opportunities for women around them than do German women. This difference points to an intriguing paradox. According to national indicators, women in the U.K. occupy a less advantageous position vis-a-vis men in comparison to women in the FRG. These findings raise questions not only about women's reference point in forming opinions about the opportunity structure within a national context and about the role of culture. National differences in perceptions can be attributed in

part to the effects of varying historical developments in demography and public policy on women's status.

Second, this analysis lends some support to the hypothesis that the effect of an individual's location within the social structure on his/her perceptions of women's opportunities varies by gender and by country of residence. Family status, as manifested by the number of children at home and marital status, helps explain perceptions of women's opportunities only among German women. Motherhood may increase their positive assessment of the opportunity structure partly because of an acceptance of traditional roles and partly because of state incentives for mothers. On the other hand, the experience of marriage *per se* decreases that optimism among these women. Furthermore, labor market participation increases British women's positive evaluation of women's opportunities, even when other individual characteristics are taken into account. While employment is conducive to less critical evaluations of women's position for British women, no such effect is observed for any other group. Employment *per se* might be considered a reflection of progress in the eyes of British women. Specific aspects of employment may be more relevant to women's evaluations of their opportunities, especially those of German women. Thus, future research needs to examine the effects of work-related experiences such as wage rates and supervisory position.

Like previous research on sex role attitudes, this study finds that socio-economic and family characteristics account for only a small portion of the variance in perceptions of women's opportunities. The relatively minor effect of individual background may be partly attributed to the influential role of the mass media in disseminating information about women's status in society. Publicity about the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s has increased public awareness of women's issues across Western Europe. Given different cultural contexts, however, the media's portrayal of women's protest activities may vary cross-nationally. Therefore, the perceptions of women's opportunities may be shaped less by individual status than by media exposure.

Educational attainment is less important to perceptions than we expected. The general assumption that individuals with higher levels of education are more aware of women's limited opportunities was not confirmed by this analysis. Again, the public's greater access to information through the mass media may equalize the effects of education on perceptions.

This study raises several interesting questions and confirms the need for cross-national research on perceptions of women's opportunities. The linkage between national-level characteristics and individual perceptions remains largely unspecified. Our exploratory comparison of the UK and the FRG suggests that national economic, demographic, and normative characteristics indirectly influence both women's status and the public's evaluations of gender inequality. Future research should attempt to pinpoint how additional factors, such as media exposure, socialization factors, and state policy affect perceptions of gender inequality.

ENDNOTES

1. The large number of missing cases is attributed to missing values on the dependent variable and family income. About 20 percent of the responses to questions about women's opportunities and about 13 percent of the responses to family income are missing. The analysis was also performed using pairwise deletion. This strategy yielded a larger sample size but did not significantly alter the results.
2. The data set does not include any detailed occupational variables. Preliminary analysis, excluding farmers and business owners, indicated that employment status itself, not the distinction between manual and nonmanual occupation, affects perceptions of women's opportunities. Therefore, the final analysis does not include occupation as a variable.
3. Overall the sample characteristics approximate the national demographics, except that ever-married British respondents are overrepresented slightly.

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