
FROM PARENTING TO GENDER GAPS IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT: COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE FOR FRANCE AND THE UK

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1 Introduction

This thesis investigates how gendered parenting practices may shape the development of gender gaps in early childhood, particularly in academic achievement and socio-emotional skills. Despite girls outperforming boys in educational settings [8], this advantage often does not carry over into equivalent labour market outcomes later in life [7]. By exploring the ways parents influence children’s gendered development, my research contributes to understanding how these early differences might set the stage for persistent gender inequalities in adulthood.

Psychologists find that by age 2 or 3, children already tend to play with same gender playmates, select gender-typed toys, and exhibit gender-specific behaviours [32]. This suggests that, to understand the persistence of gender stereotypes and therefore gender inequalities, we need to understand their geneses in early childhood. Though many actors intervene in children’s lives, parents have a front seat¹, especially in the early years. Building on my previous research, this project examines their role (including their expectations and attitudes, their role modelling and behaviour, and children’s access and exposure to resources within families) in the production of gender gaps in child development.

This thesis makes four main contributions. First, while a large share of the literature focuses on specific parenting practices or dimensions, by employing structural equation modelling (SEM), this project adopts a holistic approach to examine whether different dimensions of parenting vary based on child gender.

Second, it examines whether early gendered differences in parenting help explain gender gaps in academic achievement and socio-emotional skills by relying on an interdisciplinary approach, combining decomposition techniques more typical in demography and economics, with sociological and psychological theories of social learning, self-concept, and doing gender.

Third, this project investigates the intersection of social class and gender in shaping child development, as well as the links between the

institutional environment, gendered parenting, and ultimately, gendered differences in child development, motivated by the fact that parents’ agency is limited by the policy context and their socioeconomic background, so that a part of gendered parenting is likely to reflect the gendered influence of the family’s environment, with parents acting as important mediators of societal gender norms in early childhood. The second reason is that inequalities related to socioeconomic background and those related to gender likely have compounding effects on child development, so that gender gaps may evolve differently depending on the layer of society considered [38]. This project therefore stratifies analyses by socioeconomic background, and, while current evidence is based on the US, it provides comparative evidence from two European countries, France and the UK, using nationally representative datasets that provide a rich description of early childhood for around 18000 cohort members in each country.

Finally, this thesis provides causal evidence on parenting’s response to shocks to family resources, and whether this response varies by child gender. More specifically, it uses regression discontinuity design (RDD) to evaluate the impact of the 2014 French child benefit reform, which included exogenous losses of incomes for some families, on behaviours such as formal childcare take-up (i.e., crèche and childminder) and whether these behaviours varied according to child gender. Some parenting behaviours are likely to be more gendered than others; take-up of formal childcare shouldn’t be particularly gendered: this thesis checks this hypothesis, because, if it is gendered, it would have implications for gender gaps in child development as high-quality formal childcare has been shown a positive impact on child outcomes such as language skills [6].

1.1 Why focus on parents and early childhood?

While the gender wage gap has remained a persistent feature of our societies, the last few decades have actually seen a “reversal” of the gender gap in educational achievement: girls now consistently earn higher grades and are

¹Parents spend on average over six waking hours per day with children under the age of 5 [9].

more likely to graduate from high school and college than boys [8]. This can partly be explained by differences in social and emotional skills that are key predictors of academic performance. Indeed, evidence has found that, as early as kindergarten, boys have more difficulty being attentive in class and are less eager to learn than girls [47]; girls have higher levels of attentiveness, organizational skills, self-discipline, and a higher ability to self-regulate [16, 21, 27]; they also consistently expect to go farther in school than boys [37]. Gender differences are not necessarily a problem; however, it is evident that girls do not reap the rewards of their higher academic performance: in spite of this reversal in educational achievement by gender, women still earn lower levels of income, in part because fields of study are still strongly segregated by gender as gender stereotypes, discrimination and gendered interests steer women away from male-dominated and better remunerated fields [5, 11, 7].

To better understand the development of gender gaps over the course of life, this project concentrates on the early childhood period, a key moment for the internalisation of gender norms, for the development of attitudes toward gender and for the production of gendered differences in many domains of child development [14].

Early brain development malleability means that children are more vulnerable to their environment and its evolutions during the early years [40]. Theoretical models underline the lifelong consequences of early childhood experiences: life course models suggest that exposure to risk factors in early life have deeper consequences for later development, often accumulating over time and across exposures [25, 1]. Scarring effects have also been documented by one-off negative experiences if occurring at a critical or sensitive period in child development. These insights have been used to understand a variety of different domains of child development. For example, human capital theory posits that educational investments in childhood lay the groundwork for later cognitive development [13], with empirical evidence supporting this theory [20].

The adults that children are dependent on play a crucial role in delimiting the pos-

sibilities and experiences available to children [17, 29]. Parents have a particularly important role in early childhood. Their influence is at its highest in early childhood and diminishes over time as children's worlds expand beyond the home environment, the influence of their peers and the media becoming stronger. This project contributes evidence on pre-school gendered differences in parenting and in child development (specifically focusing on academic achievement and socio-emotional skills), and on the relation between the two, complementing the current literature on parenting that focuses mostly on children once they have started school.

The definitions of parenting and child development are both subject to variation and their measurement is likely to be contingent on social contexts and on the age group of children studied.

"Parenting" is a vast concept that the literature tends to operationalise as specific parenting practices (e.g., reading with the child, helping with homework), or as more dimension-based parenting styles. One such typology is Baumrind's that classifies parents along dimensions of responsiveness and demandingness [4]. This approach highlights the importance of seeking out the latent variables that structure parenting, rather than measure specific practices, allowing for more flexibility, especially given that parents' social context shapes their expression of parenting, and that they need to adapt to their child's development.

Children develop in different domains that contribute independently and jointly to well-being: being in good health, acquiring the skills needed to build relationships, doing well at school, etc. This project focuses on academic achievement and socio-emotional skills, up until and including the start of primary school. In the context of early childhood, academic achievement refers to the first grades and evaluations at the start of school and to standard tests that measure basic literacy and numeracy skills (e.g., the British Ability Scales). Standard tests such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) can also help measure socio-emotional skills, such as self-control, stress resistance, co-operation, sociability, curiosity and so on; these skills are foundational for learning and educational

achievement, as they help children overcome challenges and interact with others [35].

Evidence recognises that parents have a role to play in the development of their children’s academic achievement and socio-emotional skills [44, 19]. This evidence also highlights the importance of taking into account reverse causality (i.e. the possibility that parents’ behaviour is shaped by their children’s initial outcomes), for example, through longitudinal methods used in this present project.

1.2 Gendered parenting, child development and social context

Based on the theories of social learning [3] and of self-concept [23], I focus on three key dimensions of parenting: expectations and attitudes, parental role modelling, and children’s access and exposure to resources. Below, I explain how each of these dimensions could have an impact on children’s own gender beliefs and attitudes and hence their development, with possible interactions with social class (see Figure 1). I focus on indirect effects through children’s own beliefs and attitudes, but other direct and indirect effects could happen through other pathways, such as the home learning environment and the distribution of resources within the household.

1.2.1 Parents’ expectations and attitudes

Parents tend to foster different expectations for their sons’ and daughters’ aptitudes, behaviours, and accomplishments. They en-

courage agreeableness among girls [22] while expecting boys to feel and express less anxiety, fear and sadness and more anger [39].

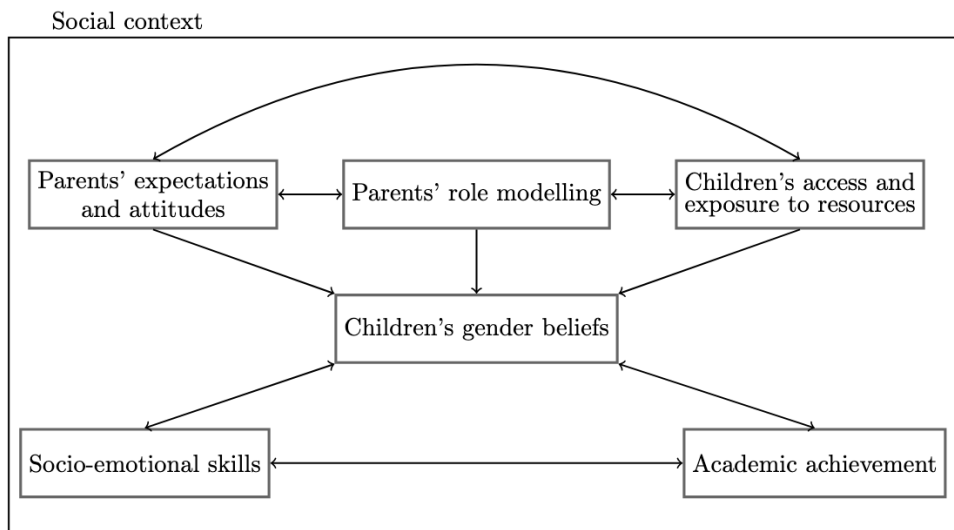
Academically, parents of boys tend to believe that their child has higher maths abilities and expect their child to achieve more in maths than parents of girls [45, 18]. This could undermine girls’ confidence, reducing their likelihood of choosing and succeeding in mathematical and scientific subjects, as evidence shows that parents’ educational expectations are associated with children’s academic achievement, with bi-directional effects [33].

This mechanism may vary from one social class to another as higher-income families tend to have a greater college-going “habitus”, (assuming from a very young age children will go to college) and this tends to have a greater influence on girls than boys [24].

1.2.2 Parents’ role modelling

The development of gender attitudes and beliefs is potentially particularly sensitive to parental modelling. The theory of “doing gender” [43] suggests that gender is practised through interactions and participation in activities, behaviours, and feelings that are culturally scripted as feminine or masculine. Children could learn how to do gender as they watch their parents do gender in the way they share paid and unpaid labour. Indeed, despite mothers’ increased participation in the paid labour market, they still do more unpaid labour: they spend more time than fathers on childcare tasks, and this gap is

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



even larger concerning traditionally feminine-associated tasks of routine housework (i.e., cleaning, clothes care and daily cooking) [42].

This gendered parenting labour gap is highest for parents with less education [41], potentially because higher-income mothers can buy their way out by hiring other women to take on that work instead [26]. Lower-income families are also more susceptible to not having two coresident parents, which means potentially less resources (e.g., time available, income) and a different type of role modelling, with single parents being most often single mothers.

Finally, this project pays special attention to the macro factors that are overlooked in the doing gender approach, because while this approach stresses personal agency, the way parents do gender when they are doing housework is structured by the cost and ability to get good childcare or by public policies that still institutionalise the ideal worker as male [42]. This calls into question a better understanding of these processes within different contexts.

1.2.3 Children's access and exposure to family resources

Research shows how parents allocate family resources (e.g., time, purchases, investments) differently depending on their child's gender. Parents spend more time with boys [46], in particular fathers [36], and they use this time differently: for instance, with girls, they do more activities related to cognitive development, e.g., reading and playing games [2]. Qualitative research provides a rich description of the way parents also gender their children as they choose and give access to games, clothes, shows, décors, and extra-curricular activities [12, 34, 10, 31], creating a range of experiences shaping children's gendered self-concepts, especially as different activities help foster different skills (e.g., nurturing, communication, spatial skills, problem-solving), setting children on trajectories that reinforce self-concepts.

Research shows that more privileged families often engage in 'concerted cultivation', directing children's activities to foster skills that align with academic success, while lower-income families may adopt a more hands-off 'natural growth' approach [30]. We could ex-

pect concerted cultivation to be associated with smaller gender gaps in children's development, as these parents tend to have less traditional gender attitudes [28] and more influence in their education. On the other hand, it is harder to tell whether the natural growth approach would be associated with greater gender gaps: these parents tend to have more traditional gender attitudes but they also spend less time instructing and directing their children, weakening their gendered influence.

More recent evidence (and for other contexts than the US) on these class differences is essential given the rising stakes around higher education that encourage parents to adapt their strategies to help their children succeed [15].

2 Thesis structure

This thesis is composed of three chapters written to be submitted for publication in sociology journals, following open science practices.

2.1 Chapter 1 on gendered parenting

Using SEM, this chapter provides quantitative evidence on gendered parenting and examines differences in its intensity by socioeconomic background. The same analyses are run parallelly in France and the UK, to compare results. This chapter sets theoretical and methodological for Chapter 2.

- RQ1: Do parents raise boys and girls differently?
- RQ2: How does the reproduction of gender intersect with the reproduction of social class?

The French Longitudinal Study of Children (ELFE) and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) are national, longitudinal, and representative birth cohort studies that both follow around 18000 children born in France in 2011 and in the UK in 2000 respectively, asking their parents batteries of questions about many areas of their lives, including their attitudes, how they engage with their children, how they divide labour in the household, and how their children are developing. Parents also provide a large range of details

on their socio-economic situation and family structure.

We cannot directly measure latent variables such as parents' expectations and attitudes, their role modelling, and children's access and exposure to resources. Instead, using multi-group SEM, we can measure latent constructs using several observed indicators for each dimension for boys and girls separately, overall and by socioeconomic background. For example, to construct the latent variable capturing children's access and exposure to family resources, we can mobilise observed variables about what activities they engage in, how many books they have at home, and how much time they spend with their parents. Validated with confirmatory factor analysis, I then use these latent variables as predictors in Chapter 2.

2.2 Chapter 2 on the mediating role of gendered parenting in gender gaps in child development

This chapter quantifies how much of the gender gaps in child development gendered parenting explains, with decomposition techniques using the latent variables from Chapter 1.

- RQ3: Does parenting mediate the gender gaps in academic achievement? in socio-emotional skills?
- RQ4: Is the mediation highest in certain socioeconomic background?

Both MCS and Elfe include widely used and validated scales for child development, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (for socio-emotional difficulties), MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventories (for vocabulary size), British Ability Scales (for cognitive abilities such as problem solving), as well as school results.

Using the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition technique, I first estimate average gaps in these outcomes by regressing them on the gendered parenting latent variables and on possible confounders (e.g., family structure) separately for boys and girls. I then decompose these gaps into explained parts (the share parenting differences explain) and unexplained parts (the portion they don't explain). I follow this procedure on the pooled

sample before stratifying by socioeconomic background.

2.3 Chapter 3 on the responses of gendered parenting to shocks on family resources

This chapter uses a quasi-experimental approach to examine how parenting responds to shocks to family resources, and whether this varies by child gender. Specifically, I measure the impact on formal childcare take-up following the reductions in income for some families as a result of the 2014 reform of the French *allocations familiales*. Child benefits went from being universal to being means-tested: starting with children born in April 2014, households became eligible for benefits only if their income from two years earlier (i.e., in 2012) fell below certain thresholds.

- RQ5: Does a sudden constraint on family resources (reduced child benefits) change parental behaviour (take-up of formal childcare) differently for boys and girls?

The Survey on Resources and Living Conditions (SRCV) collects data annually for around 12000 households. I include in my sample variables measuring formal childcare take-up and fine-grained, reliable income for households present from 2012 to 2015.

With RDD, stratifying by child gender, we compare a parenting behaviour (the take-up of formal childcare) for households whose income is just below and above the reform's threshold. The intuition is that households close to the cut-off are very similar in both observable and unobservable characteristics, except for the fact that one group receives the child benefits and the other does not. Thus, any sudden change (or discontinuity) in formal childcare take-up at the threshold can be attributed to the effect of the income drop.

Characteristics of this reform provide the prerequisites for a successful RDD: we can exclude manipulation around the cut-off, meaning that parents adjusted their income to fall below the threshold. Indeed, they did not have time to do so, as the reform was implemented less than one year after the public first became aware of it (June 2013).

3 How this project addresses common limitations in the literature

3.1 Capturing complex concepts

Parenting and child development take on meanings that evolve with child age, differ depending on the social context, and encompass a large palette of specific behaviours and characteristics. While qualitative research offers unrivalled nuance, the quantitative empirical evidence has used simple and unidimensional measurement of parenting. This project makes use of rich birth cohort data to explore the complexity and multidimensionality of parenting, distinguishing which parenting-related mechanisms shape gender gaps in child development.

3.2 Reverse causality and confounders

It is possible that, to some extent, parents behave differently with boys and girls because children themselves display different preferences to start with, for example through interactions outside their home (crèche, extended family, etc.). Furthermore, the literature has debated whether and/or how hormones, genetics and epigenetic interact with childhood gender socialisation. The evidence tends to point to the higher importance of the latter, but it does not entirely dismiss the former, and isolating each of them remains an im-

portant challenge. Using longitudinal data, I will be able to provide evidence that limits this reverse causality bias.

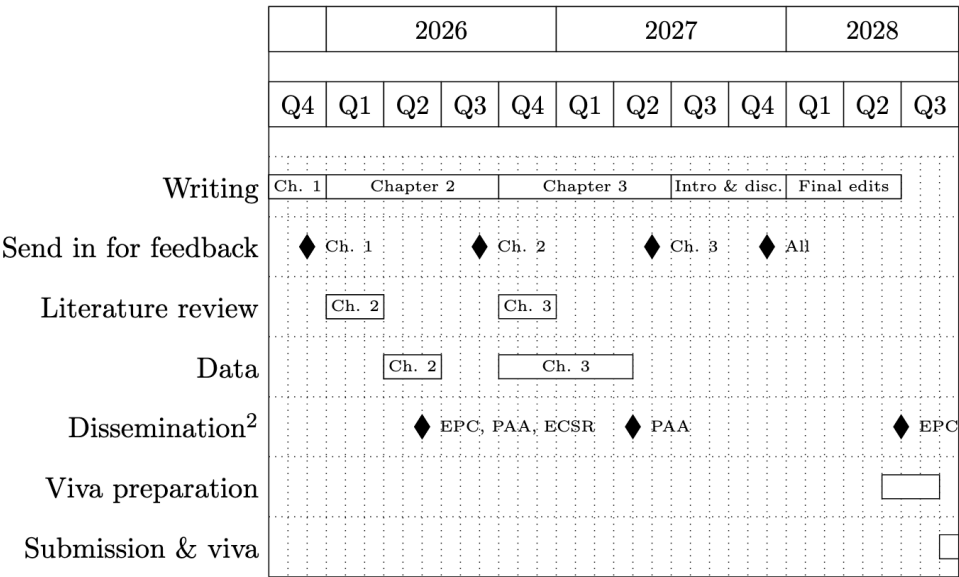
In addition, estimations of the role of parenting for child outcomes can be biased because of observed confounders (e.g., education, family structure, income), which the rich birth cohort data I will use allow controlling for, and because of unobserved confounders (e.g., whatever the surveys have not measured and/or is difficult to capture in quantitative data, such as personality, cultural capital, etc.), which can be controlled for to some extent by the proposed longitudinal and (even more so) regression discontinuity design methods.

3.3 Addressing the social and institutional context

More evidence is needed to understand how gender, socioeconomic background, and national contexts intersect to shape parenting and child development. While many studies rely on single country data, this project addresses that limitation by providing comparative evidence for two different countries, and by stratifying analyses by socioeconomic background.

Comparative research can provide rich insights on how national contexts create constraints and opportunities for parents and

²These are the dates that have been announced for the next rounds of conferences I’ve already attended in the last four years, and which I could apply to again, within budget constraints: European Population Conference (EPC), Population Association of America (PAA)’s annual meeting, European Consortium for Sociological Research (ECSR).



children. However, it can be especially time-consuming when it involves using two national surveys because of data harmonisation; on this account, my workload is lightened as MCS and ELFE have already been partly harmonised as part of the DICE project³, a process I contributed to. Thanks also to DICE, I understand the need for cautious interpretations of results, to account for different data collection processes (e.g., timing of collection, different questions included) and for cultural variations.

Furthermore, the large and nationally representative samples I will use will allow to stratify analyses by socioeconomic background in both countries, in order to study whether the relationships of interest differ

within different groups.

4 Feasibility and contribution of this project

I am confident in completing my thesis within the three-year time frame, especially given that my EDSD 8000-word personal research provides the foundation for the first chapter of my PhD thesis. The above Gantt chart outlines the next steps until my viva in 2028.

The interdisciplinarity of this project, its innovative comparative and causal methods, and its focus on the formation of gender and social inequalities by exploring micro-, meso- and macro-level factors make it a strong fit for CRIS.

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³Development of Inequalities in Child Educational Achievement: ORA-funded project that involved six-country comparative research.

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