

Gender Inequalities in the Home

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Abstract

Gender inequalities in the home are reflected across a range of issues centering on care. In this essay, we focus on household labor which is persistent, structured by individual, couple, and structural differences and reflective of broader issues of gender inequality. Initially, we identify the theoretical approaches that serve as the foundation of empirical work on domestic arrangements: relative resources, time availability, and gender display theories. Then we discuss cutting-edge approaches to household arrangements focusing on emerging research that expands definitions of housework, investigates existing theories for new family forms, and identifies housework as fluid by situating these divisions over the life course. Next, we discuss the methodological concerns that limit the generalizability of existing housework research. Finally, we identify remaining theoretical, methodological, and empirical issues plaguing housework research to provide further directions for future research. Ultimately, we provide a road map for emerging research on the gendered distribution of household labor.

INTRODUCTION

Inequalities in the home that reflect unequal gender relations involve various life domains and can be addressed from multiple perspectives. Evidence from around the world shows that the way the household's collective resources are used and women's role in household decision-making processes largely determine inequalities in the household, including nutrition, health care, education, and the protection that each family member receives. In this essay, however, we focus on one specific aspect of inequality in the home: gendered domestic arrangements and the division of household labor.

Research on housework has been motivated by a need to better understand gender inequality and social change in work and family domains in contemporary societies. Work, paid and unpaid, is central to family life, reflecting a complex interplay between gender inequality in the home and in the labor market. Gender-based specialization between unpaid and paid work, and differences in men's and women's combination of paid work and housework affect the social position of individuals, their economic

independence, and social relationships. Gender is a major organizing feature of household labor, and housework reflects broader expectations of gender, family, and employment.

Women shoulder a disproportional share of responsibility for housework and this specialization increases after marriage and parenthood. Numerous studies have consistently identified a sizable gap between the changes in women's paid employment, women's political empowerment, and the shift toward more egalitarian gender role attitudes in contemporary industrial societies on the one hand, and disproportionately minor changes in the division of unpaid labor at home on the other. This persistence of gender inequality in housework has intrigued scholars for decades. We briefly present the established approaches to household division of labor, identify recent lines of inquiry, and discuss some key lingering questions that require additional investigation.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Most of the research on the division of household labor has focused on individual and couple levels of analysis (see for review Coltrane, 2000; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Regardless of how household labor is defined, how it is measured, or in which country it is studied, research has consistently shown that women contribute a larger share of the household labor than do men. Initial studies identified the theoretical underpinnings of household allocations, determining who did what and how housework was divided among couples. From this research, theoretical explanations evolved in the direction of relative resources, time availability, and gender display.

The relative resource perspective has evolved along two different strands. Proponents of the economic theory of the family (Becker, 1981) draw attention to the fact that an individual's decision making about the allocation of time to paid market work and unpaid domestic work must be understood within the context of the family. The sex-specific specialization of labor is an outcome of a comparative or relative advantage in couples and is beneficial for the family household as a unit. The division of labor is not gendered per se; the person who has more marketable skills, higher productivity, and higher earnings capacity will specialize in paid work; the other partner's main responsibility will be the maintenance of the home and rearing of children. The efficiency of labor specialization is sometimes operationalized as time availability, according to which partners allocate time for household work as a residual to their time spent in employment.

The second theoretical strand is the resource-bargaining model (Brines 1993). This perspective views the division of housework as a negotiated outcome of power relations between spouses, reflecting the resources men and

women bring to the relationship. Household tasks are considered onerous, unattractive activities that partners wish to “buy out of”—either through purchasing services or securing greater participation of their partner. Spouses consider the union to be open to negotiations and adjustments are made in response to changes in either partners’ resources. Most researchers who apply this argument explain husbands’ power in conventional marriages in terms of economic exchange: by providing income and status, husbands are entitled to be the principal decision maker. A special case of the resource bargaining model is the economic dependency model, wherein one partner is economically dependent on the other, which explicitly addresses the way in which the distribution of market incomes affects housework sharing between the spouses. Men and women are assumed to agree upon a contract wherein housework is exchanged for financial support.

Similar to the economic approach to the family, resource bargaining theories are symmetrical in their implications. If wives do more paid work and earn more money, they will do less housework, and their husbands will do more housework. Note that in this approach, too, the exchange activity follows “market” rules, and the outcome is, in principle, gender neutral.

However, despite the dramatic increase in women’s human capital investments and earnings potential, empirical studies show that the division of labor continues to be highly gender specific. Gender ideology theories seek explanations for the observed gender gap, addressing the mechanisms that limit working wives’ ability to capitalize on their labor force gains rather than focusing exclusively on gender-neutral rational decision-making processes of the resource perspective. One prominent example is the “doing gender” approach, which asserts that both men and women have a stake in the gender identities that have to be produced and reproduced in recurrent, everyday social interaction (Berk 1985; West & Zimmerman 1987). In this sense, housework and childcare not only mean producing commodities and services but also reaffirming one’s gendered relationship. Husbands and wives “do gender” as they exchange resources and women often use housework to exhibit their gender identities within heterosexual unions. Gender theories clearly eschew assumptions of gender neutrality evident in resource-bargaining theories. Following the gender arguments, one would not expect rapid and automatic changes in private and social arrangements as a consequence of women’s increasing participation in the labor market. Rather, gender remains a central organizer of couples’ housework arrangements. Empirical evidence shows that couples’ division of domestic labor does adapt somewhat to changes in wives’ employment status, with relative housework shares becoming more equal. Women adapt more readily than men to their changed employment circumstances by reducing their daily

hours of housework. Yet a persistent gender gap, whereby women perform a larger share of the housework, remains.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

On the basis of these well-established and broadly applied theories, recent research has moved in new directions, some of which we highlight here. To this end, we discuss expansions across the following dimensions: conceptualization of housework, new family forms, housework over the life course, housework across national and institutional settings, and methodological advancements.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HOUSEWORK

In its broadest form, housework is conceptualized as all work performed to maintain the home. Of course, some forms of housework are identified as more routine, time dependent and onerous while others are shown to be episodic, flexible, and less intense (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). These allocations—routine versus episodic housework—are shown to be highly gendered, with women assuming the largest burden of the routine tasks. It is this division between the core and episodic chores that has dominated most of the previous housework research. However, recent studies highlight the need to expand housework studies beyond this dichotomy. For example, Hook (2004) finds the gendered allocation of time extends to volunteer and informal care, highlighting the importance of investigating broader measures of unpaid care work to deepen our understanding of the trade-offs around family and work in the home. Also, Eichler and Albanese (2007) challenge four implicit assumptions that underlie empirical studies on housework: housework as exclusive work by couples performed in their own home, that it consists primarily of repetitive physical tasks, that it may include childcare but not elder care, and that it remains largely stable over the life course. They propose a new definition of household work and identify four dimensions of household work that should be considered in research: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimension. These studies identify the breadth of ways gender structures unpaid domestic time with important consideration for life course effects.

NEW FAMILY FORMS

The vast majority of housework is theorized and empirically tested for heterosexual married or cohabiting couples. This partially reflects limitations in data availability as well as the influence of hegemonic norms around

marriage. However, scholars are increasingly investigating housework for a wider range of family forms. For example, Kurdek (2007) finds lesbian women share housework more equally than homosexual men. Further, the transition into parenthood resulted in greater specialization in childcare but not housework for lesbian couples (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Goldberg & Sayer, 2006), a relationship that counters research on heterosexual couples. These, of course, may reflect racial and class differences, with white educated lesbians holding gender role expectations consistent with second-wave feminism (Moore, 2008). Among homosexual male couples, one partner tends to specialize, reporting larger shares of housework and childcare, yet with greater equity, on average, than heterosexual couples (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). An additional stream of research investigates housework within transgender and transsexual families. Specifically, Pfeffer (2010) applies qualitative data of women partnered with transgendered and transsexual men to document important differences from same-sex couples. Transgendered women negotiate "family myths" reconciling their unequal housework divisions with their feminist ideologies, a process seen in heterosexual couples as well. These studies document the multidimensional way in which gender, sexual orientation, family, and housework are negotiated.

HOUSEWORK OVER THE LIFE COURSE

Socialization and gender role expectations, such as a breadwinner/homemaker model, are shown to influence adults' housework allocations (Berk, 1985; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The process through which gendered housework expectations are transferred to children is an emerging area of research. For example, the time spent in childcare is tied to fathers' but not mothers' more egalitarian gender role ideologies which may influence children's future housework divisions (Bulanda, 2004). Indeed, children report ideal housework allocations consistent with their parents' division when the child is in adolescence (Cunningham, 2001). Major life course transitions—marriage, parenthood, and retirement—are also shown to structure housework allocations. Gupta (1999) finds that men reduce and women increase the time they spend on routine housework when they form couple households. The pattern, however, varies cross-nationally with a large gender gap in housework emerging during the transition to parenthood, not into marriage, for Australian (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008) or German couples (Schulz & Blossfeld, 2006). Of course, these transitions are highly tied to cultural expectations for women's work across these life course transitions (Treas & Widmer, 2000). Housework decisions made during major life course transitions have long-term impacts. Indeed, couples who divided housework the most unequally upon the

birth of their first child reported the greatest likelihood of divorcing a decade later (Helms-Erikson, 2001). The transition into retirement also structures housework, with retirees reporting more time than the employed with less gender specialization in chores (Szinovacz, 2000). With long-life expectancies, retirement spans multiple decades, and thus, most individuals require some form of help with household chores. Informal care more generally often disproportionately falls to adult children with important gender differences (Dautzenberg, Diederiks, Philipsen, & Tan, 1999).

HOUSEWORK ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS

In an emerging stream of research, housework is shown to be structured by broader societal characteristics and cultural institutions. Couples report more equal divisions of housework in more gender-empowered countries, net of their own resources and gender role ideologies (Fuwa, 2004). Housework is structured by welfare state regimes (Geist, 2005), sociopolitical contexts (Cooke, 2006), has differential effects for cohabitators compared to the married couples (Batalova & Cohen, 2002), has distinct effects by gender empowerment type (Ruppanner, 2010) and has diverse cross-national manifestations and consequences (Treas & Drobnič, 2010). A complementary stream of research documents the impact of macro-level factors on housework, such as economic development (Knudsen & Waerness, 2008) and conflict over housework (Braun, Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Baumgärtner, 2008; Ruppanner, 2010). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that country-to-country structural differences impact individual allocations of and satisfaction with housework.

Yet, an emerging stream of research situates these experiences over time. For example, Geist and Cohen (2011) find the biggest reductions in the gendered allocation of housework occurred in the most traditional, not the most egalitarian, countries. In sum, the cross-national multilevel investigation of household labor theoretically grounds our understanding of housework within broader institutional structures. These studies focus on country-to-country variation but a more detailed understanding of theoretically grounded levels of analysis (metropolitan statistical areas, cities, and regions) should guide future research.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Empirical research on housework is still predominantly based on cross-sectional data, which makes it difficult to disentangle trends over time in terms of age—cohort—period effects. In a longitudinal study on Swedish data, Evertsson and Neremo (2007) show that changes in spouses' relative

resources result in only a moderate change in women's share of the housework. Another methodological advancement is the establishment of a range of data sources on housework: surveys, time diaries, and qualitative interviews. Each has its strengths and limitations. Time diary studies offer superior data on time use over time, but the long series tend to measure fewer covariates than cross-national surveys. Cross-national surveys are rich in individual-level data, but until recently they covered relatively few countries. Furthermore, cross-national survey analyses that aim to wed the macro to the micro are often constrained because institutional indicators are not comparable and available for all countries. A mixture of various data sources is required for an optimal exploration of the complex organization of family life. Besides survey and time diary data, comparative ethnographies of housework, consumer expenditure data linked to time use information, and even natural experiments formulated around the introduction of new household products could all enrich our understanding of household labor.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The literature on housework is dynamic and multidimensional. Housework demands are persistent as very few households can afford to outsource all care. As such, the study of housework will provide important insight into gender inequality and family and structural processes. Research over the past 30 years has identified individual determinants of housework allocation, housework allocations across varying family forms, longitudinal processes to housework, and structural impacts on housework. Yet, lingering questions remain. On the broadest level, the concept of housework needs to be reexamined. Activities that go beyond repetitive physical tasks should be recognized as important dimensions of housework, including "soft" tasks, such as providing emotional support to family members, maintaining contacts with kin and networks of friends, resolving conflicts among family members, managing financial and health issues, as well as planning and managing the overall organization of the household. In other words, work for the family and household not only consists of grocery shopping but also the steps required to create a shopping list. It is not only bringing a child to the doctor but also keeping the required check-up in mind and making an appointment. Certainly, the articulation of housework with household management, child care, elderly care, and emotional support activities warrant more attention in housework research and gender inequalities.

Another question requiring more attention centers on the concept of outsourcing. With the decline of the homemaker/breadwinner model, women's full-time labor force participation is becoming normative in many

societies as families rely on dual-earner wages. This introduces interesting questions of housework and care. Specifically, are families outsourcing housework and if so, how? The measurement of outsourcing is often limited or lacking from most datasets. As such, a measured and theoretically grounded understanding of outsourcing should be undertaken and applied consistently across data sets.

An additional issue of representativeness plagues cross-national research. To date, comparative research on housework has typically been limited to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in North America, Europe, and advanced Asian and Pacific economies, where suitable data and research expertise are more readily available. But a more diverse range of countries and an analysis on a truly global level is essential for better understanding the national-level conditions and experiences of families as well as global processes and policies (Heymann, Earle, & Hanchate, 2004). A particularly important aspect is the dramatic worldwide increase in the demand for domestic helpers and live-in workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). As the number of dual-earner couples has increased in the affluent countries, so, too, has the demand for domestic workers who carry out the household chores and caring tasks in private households. Domestic work is a large growth industry worldwide for migrant women (Anderson, 2000), and this complex phenomenon has an impact on housework production in sending countries as well as in host countries. This raises a variety of domestic and international issues that require investigation.

Further, class inequalities and disparities in housework volume are two areas that demand further attention. Research shows that more prosperous women have a time use advantage vis-à-vis the poor when it comes to housework. Perhaps it is our own middle-class standpoint that has led sociologists to focus on gender inequality at the expense of class inequality. It is obvious that a wide range of social, economic, and interpersonal factors combine to influence household labor. Ideally, a closer collaboration of disciplines that address issues related to housework—such as sociology, economics, social policy, and psychology—would be beneficial to fully grasp the complex phenomenon of household work and gender inequalities in the home.

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