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Understanding the household division of labour in a comparative perspective

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According to economists, men allocate their time between work and leisure, but married women choose between work, leisure, and household production. The trade-offs that women face in parcelling their time between home and market point up entrenched gender inequalities. Although more women have entered the labour force, men have not been fully incorporated into household work. Even in dual earner families, most housework is still done by women.

Background

A computer search for “housework” in Sociological Abstracts identifies 853 articles in peer-reviewed journals published since 1978. Nearly all studies are micro-level analyses focused on understanding how the characteristics of the husband, the wife, and their household shape the division of household tasks between partners. Four arguments are used to explain the allocation of household labour: 1) the partner with more time available (i.e., with less paid employment) will do more housework, 2) the partner with fewer resources (e.g., income) will do more housework, 3) those with gender egalitarian views will divide housework more equally, and 4) housework is allocated so that gender will be reproduced in everyday interaction.

Only recently has research recognized that household labour plays out against the backdrop of distinctive cultural, economic, political, and family patterns that set the parameters for gender relations at all levels in the society. For instance, strategic case comparisons and multi-level models with large numbers of countries reveal that what-

ever their personal circumstances, couples share the housework more equally if they live in a country where cohabitation is more common (Batalova/Cohen, 2002), where divorce is more widely accepted (Yodanis, 2005), and where women have greater parity with men in public life (Fuwa, 2004). Other research links the division of housework to welfare state regimes (Geist, 2005).

Housework in country context

Our own research (Drobnič/Treas, 2006) examines the division of household labour in societies differing in female employment, gender ideology “traditionalism,” and family-related social policies. To capture cross-national differences in a theoretically informed way, we apply Esping-Andersen’s typology, examining (West) Germany as a conservative, USA as a liberal, and Finland as a social democratic welfare state regime. Data from the 2002 International Social Survey Program reveal differences between countries in hours spent on household labour, particularly for women, and in the gap in housework hours between spouses. Not only does the country context predictably shape the division of housework via gender ideology and married women’s employment, but the context also colours the effects of individual and household characteristics.

German women report spending about 60% more hours on housework weekly than do Americans or Finns, and their household hours are more responsive to their partners’ circumstances – his work and housework hours, his retirement, and his income. Strikingly, German women with higher income than their husbands do not capitalize on their relative resources. Their violation of gender norms is apparently sanctioned, and they do more housework than in other couples. Thus, conservative welfare states not only seem to augment the demand for household labour, but they also support the male breadwinner family model with a clear separation of life spheres, women’s responsibility for the household, and their economic dependency on husbands.

Across countries, there is a consistent relationship between the housework hours of wives and husbands. Contrary to the expectation that males' housework serves as a substitute for females' housework, we observe a positive correlation between partners' weekly housework hours, thus, refuting the specialization argument in the economic theory of the family. This finding calls for greater attention not only to the division of housework, but also to the way country context determines the volume of housework that is carried out.

International Research Network

Work linking the organization of household labor to broader family institutions, cultural models of gender relations, and state regimes prompted the development of the Cross-National Working Group on the Division of Household Labour. Fifteen sociologists met in Montreal during the 2006 Meetings of the American Sociological Association to discuss questions raised by a comparative perspective.

■ Do people in different countries see household work in the same way (e.g., as drudgery)? Do they agree about the unfairness of an unequal division of household labour?

■ Do partners' gender role attitudes still determine household behaviour? Are there new ideological forces for domestic change in a post-feminist world?

■ Do state and corporate policies affect how husbands and wives divide the labour? Do family-friendly policies foster household gender equality, or do they just make it easier for working women to do more housework?

■ How is the division of household labour responding to macro-level developments – globalization, immigration, declining welfare states, the growth of nonstandard employment, technological innovations, consumption trends, rising cohabitation, falling fertility, and aging populations?

Organized by Judith Treas (University of California, Irvine) and Sonja Drobnič (University of Hamburg) with the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, participants included Suzanne Bianchi (University of Maryland), Maria Charles (University of California, San Diego), Mary Blair-Loy (University of California, San Diego), Lynne Prince Cooke (University of Kent), Marie Evertsson (Yale University), Makiko Fuwa (University of California, Irvine), Claudia

Geist (Indiana University), Karin Gottschall (University of Bremen), Jennifer Hook (Pennsylvania State University), Heather Hofmeister (Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg), Johannes Huinink (University of Bremen), Liana Sayer (Ohio State University), and Carrie Yodanis (University of British Columbia).

Judith Treas is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. With the support of the U.S. National Science Foundation, she is engaged in cross-national research on the household division of labour. Recent work examines childhood experiences of maternal employment, adult residential mobility, and kin networks as they influence how married people divide household responsibilities. Other research considers the limits to Becker's argument on the efficiency of gender specialization in the household. Treas has published over 70 articles and chapters as well as the recent book, The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Families (with J. Scott and M. Richards).

Sonja Drobnič is Professor of Sociology at the University of Hamburg. She received her degree in Sociology from the University of Ljubljana, M.A. from Syracuse University and her Ph.D. from Cornell University. Her main research interests include life course, social stratification, comparative research and longitudinal research methods. She is a coeditor (with H.-P. Blossfeld) of Careers of Couples in Contemporary Societies: From Male Breadwinner to Dual Earner Families (Oxford, 2001). In addition to her current collaboration with Treas comparing the division of household labour in Germany, Finland and the U.S., she is studying social networks, social capital, and the quality of life in a changing Europe.

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