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Housework: Who Did, Does or Will Do It, and How Much Does It Matter?

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“Is Anyone Doing the Housework?” (Bianchi et al. 2000) was motivated, like much of the research on housework, by a desire to better understand gender inequality and social change in the work and family arena in the United States. During the 1990s, Arlie Hochschild’s (1989) influential book, *The Second Shift*, provided the dominant assessment of the gender division of labor in the home (Konigsberg 2011): men were unwilling to share the burden of work in the home and thus employed women came home to a “second shift” of housework and childcare, increasing gender inequality. Her rich qualitative study was based on a small sample of unknown generalizability, however (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi 2009).

The collection and release of the large and nationally representative 1987–88 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) unleashed a flurry of housework articles in the quantitative sociological literature. The NSFH had the advantage of reports of housework from both members of a couple and husbands’ and wives’ assessments of fairness in the household division of labor, but these data could not provide the trend analysis critical to the understanding of social change that time diary data collections allowed. “Is Anyone Doing the Housework?” used the NSFH but also presented analysis of the only nationally representative data available – time diaries – with which to assess trends in housework and broaden the discussion of how women and men might be reallocating time in the home during a period of rapid change in women’s work outside the home.

The citation count in Google Scholar stands at 910 citations (as of April 20, 2012), with those citations continuing to the present.¹ In the article, we showed that the gender division

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Note

This article and the original article reflected upon are available for free at oxford.ly/sfanniversary.

¹For three of the four of us, this is our most highly cited article. Only John Robinson has articles and books on other topics with higher citation counts. This high citation count suggests that the article continues to provide a useful introduction to the sociological literature on the gender division of housework. The writing is clear and provides a thoughtful discussion of the theoretical perspectives on the gender division of labor in the home. The empirical work is careful and comprehensive.

of labor in housework became more equal over this period, in part because men increased their time in housework but more importantly because women dramatically decreased the time they spent in these activities. Men increased their propensity to do housework and the increase was *not* a result of change in population composition, whereas for women it was a mix of decreased likelihood of doing housework but also an increase in the proportion of women least likely to spend time in housework (e.g., employed women). We compared time diary data to the NSFH, demonstrating that the NSFH survey questions resulted in estimates that were about 50 percent higher than time diary estimates but that both data sources yielded similar conclusions about the gender gap in housework. Finally, using the NSFH data, we provided a multivariate description of the correlates of wives' housework time, husbands' housework time and the gender gap in housework time of married couples. The findings remain relevant today, save the need for the update of trends provided here.

Using time diary data for 1965, 1975, 1985 and 1995, our observation window on housework was one in which the pressure on women to “shed load” to accommodate increased market work was high and in which the pressure on men to “pick up some of the slack” was perhaps also high. Our data analysis spanned the 1970–90 period of greatest labor force increases for U.S. women, particularly married women with young children. Subsequent trend analyses of women's labor force participation, housework and childcare in the 1990s showed much less increase and a leveling off in rates by the end of the 20th century (Sayer 2005; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson 2004), causing some to argue that the gender revolution was over (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman 2011).

Who is Doing the Housework Today?

Table 1 updates trends in men's and women's weekly hours of housework through 2010, the most recent data we have available at this writing. Panel A and B show estimates for the two universes we used in the original article: all individuals, aged 25 to 64 years and the subset of married individuals in these age ranges. Table 1 also adds a universe that was not the focus of our 2000 article – Panel C on married parents. This group became a major focus of our subsequent work.

Women's time in housework declined throughout the 1965–2010 period, with the most sizable declines between 1965 and 1985. Men's housework time more than doubled between 1965 and 1998/9, when it reached a high of 11 hours per week, and then dropped to 10 hours a week by 2009/10.² In 2009/10, women are estimated to do 1.6 times the amount of housework as men, on average (with wives averaging 1.7 times the housework of husbands, and married mothers averaging 1.9 times the housework of married fathers). Changes are concentrated in core housework; women's time in other housework has changed little and men's has increased, perhaps because houses are bigger, home renovation more prominent and household finances more complicated to manage. In other work we show that as women increased the time they allocated to market work, they had to reduce other activities and they reduced housework hours in almost a one-for-one trade with their increase in market hours (Bianchi 2011; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie 2006).

²Small sample sizes in 1995 and 1998/9 make these estimates more unstable than those for more recent years.

Panel C shows an indicator that was not included in our 2000 article on housework, the average number of weekly hours married parents spend in direct or primary childcare activities. Time in childcare declined for married mothers between 1965 and 1975, as the United States moved from the large family sizes of Baby Boom households to family sizes that have stabilized around replacement fertility, an average of two children per family. But after 1975, married mothers' time in childcare rose from 7.3 hours in 1975 to 13.7 hours in 2009/10, a trend that differs significantly from the trend in housework. Married fathers' time in childcare also increased from a low of 2.4 hours per week in 1975 to 7.2 hours per week in 2009/10. The gender gap in childcare declined over the period: the ratio of married mothers' to fathers' childcare declined from 4.0 in 1965 to 3.0 in 1975 and 1985 to 2.5 in 1995 and then further to 1.9 in 2009/10. Married fathers are doing less housework than in 1995 (the last data point in our 2000 article) but they seem to have shifted to doing more child-care. Indeed, changes in the gender division of childcare—or lack thereof—may have become central to future gains for women vis-à-vis men in the labor force.

How Did Our Views Change After Publishing “Is Anyone Doing the Housework?”?

Our views changed in three fundamental ways. First, we became much more convinced that studying housework hours in isolation of men's and women's allocation of time to other unpaid work in the home, especially childcare, and the allocation of time to paid work was leading to an incorrect – or at least incomplete – assessment of gender inequality. We showed that overall work hours of men and women were similar in total number, despite “second shift” claims of overburden for women but not men (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie 2006; Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi 2009; Sayer 2005). Total hours of work, combining unpaid work in the home with paid work in the market, remained gender specialized in that women did a higher fraction of their hours in unpaid family care and men in paid work. Among parents, the group with the shortest work week was not fathers, however, but rather the subgroup of mothers who were *not* in the labor force (about one third of all married mothers with children younger than 6 years of age even today; Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi 2009). This is true even when “multitasking” – combining two housework tasks or doing childcare and housework – is considered (Sayer et al. 2009). However, assessments of gender inequality are incomplete when they not only isolate housework from other work but also do not consider how gendered time patterns evolve over the life course. Mothers who are employed part time or not at all may benefit from low total work hours at one time point compared with their partners, but at a later point they risk wage discrimination, career tracks that have gone adrift or divorce that leaves them in poverty.

Second, we became convinced that analyses focused on individual or couple-level factors were missing a big part of the story: how contextual factors influence housework levels and gender differences. Cross-national trends in housework mirror U.S. trends: more substantial declines in women's housework coupled with modest increases in men's housework and relative stasis in housework levels since the 1990s (Hook 2006; Sayer 2010). Yet the comparative literature also documents substantial variation in levels of and gender gaps in housework that micro-level theories alone, with their emphasis on individual, couple and

household determinants of who does the housework, were not able to explain. Multilevel theories and analyses revealed that women do less housework and men do more housework in countries with higher levels of full-time employment among women, greater provision of publicly funded childcare, shorter maternal leaves and more egalitarian gender attitudes (Cooke & Baxter 2010; Treas & Drobnic 2010). The political, economic and social history of countries embeds “time circuits” (Ferree 2010) among individuals in families and between families and institutions. These feedback loops broadly influence social welfare policies and ideologies about how much housework should be done and who should do it – families, the market or the state.

Third, we became much more convinced that the analysis of housework, motivated by a desire to understand gender inequality, was not sufficient. The sociological literature of the 1990s concentrated on housework in assessing inequality in the gender division of labor and gave relatively little attention to childcare. This fit with the 1950s ideology that “good wives” prioritized providing a welcoming, adult environment for cosseted husbands. Today, what women and men want from a spouse is similar: a partner with a good education, strong labor force prospects and shared interests (Gerson 2010; Sweeney 2002). Newly married couples (in first marriages) share employment and housework relatively equally. But the surge of mothers into the labor force foregrounded women’s work as mothers. Intense devotion to children emerged as central to the mark of a good woman, trumping housewifery, as children were seen to require more maternal devotion (Hays 1996). Thus, the equality among married couples diminishes as they transition to parenthood, a transition that solidifies women’s responsibility for household work and men’s for wage work (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes 2008).

Wives’ and husbands’ time allocation may be more similar, but mothers’ and fathers’ work patterns remain quite different. Thus, we have come to appreciate the importance of studying the gender division of care work. Housework can be left undone – at least for awhile – and it can be “fit in” around busy work schedules. Consequently, it does not present the barrier to women’s market work and occupational mobility that caring for children often does. Young children have to be minded 24/7. If a mother (or father) of young children is to engage in an activity that is incompatible with child minding – and most paid work is – alternate arrangements for care of children must be made. Women reduce their paid work to care for children; men tend not to do this. Thus, gendered care giving retards movement toward gender equality in the labor market, perhaps far more so than gender differences in housework.

So understanding why women do so much more of the care work – of which housework is a component but not the most inflexible component – is central to the study of gender inequality, as is studying what might motivate men to more equally share in childcare activities. We do not yet have a very good understanding of which men – or the conditions under which men – involve themselves in the care of others. Quantitative within-country and across-country analyses provide mixed results about the effects of education and employment on men’s housework and childcare but concur that socioeconomic and family characteristics explain less for men than they do for women. Country variation suggests

distinct cultural models of parenting that influence levels and gender gaps in childcare and associations with paid employment (Sayer & Gornick 2011).

Some of the theoretical perspectives that have been useful in studying housework are also more difficult to apply to the gender division of care. The bargaining perspective, for example, hypothesizes that women's economic power enables them to bargain out of housework. But parents report greater enjoyment of childcare activities than housework (Robinson & Godbey 1999). There is an investment component to childcare that gives it greater meaning than housework (Connelly and Kimmel 2010), particularly because relationships with children are irreplaceable and lifelong (Nelson 2010). Hence, it can less often be assumed that mothers want to bargain out of rearing their children (Raley, Wang, & Bianchi 2012). Mothers more often want to control childrearing than housework, referred to as "maternal gatekeeping" (Allen & Hawkins 1999). Qualitative evidence suggests that investing large amounts of time in childrearing goes to the very identity of being a good parent, especially a good mother (Hays 1996).

Childrearing is also a fundamental mechanism of class reproduction. Time intensive class differentiated parenting philosophies and practices, like the "concerted cultivation" model practiced by middle-class parents today (Lareau 2003), are as much (if not more) a response to the heightened importance of elite educations in securing more precarious employment opportunities – and children's upward mobility – than they are about reproducing gender disadvantage. To be sure, concerted cultivation requires continued differentiation of mothers' and fathers' daily time, with implications for economic well-being because of mothers' reduced labor force participation and subsequently less favorable job and wage trajectories. But a focus on gender alone ignores how gender systems intersect with class and racial-ethnic hierarchies. Market or public sector substitutes for unpaid work transfer housework and childcare from (unpaid) wives and mothers to poorly paid racial-ethnic and immigrant women (Glenn 2010) and thus reduce the need for men to pick up the housework slack (Misra, Woodring, & Merz 2006; Williams 2004).

What are the Promising Research Directions for the Future?

What is emerging is a fruitful examination of context in the arena of unpaid work, by using differences across countries to better assess overall gender inequality in housework and childcare. There is increased attention to fathers because we need models that explain fathers' as well as mothers' behavior. Quantitative studies suggest fathers' housework and childcare are influenced by complex relationships between individual and family characteristics and state regulatory frameworks, policy packages and cultural norms (Hook 2010; Pfau-Effinger 2005). Qualitative studies highlight the importance of cultures of masculinity, within occupations and across countries, their effect on men's attitudes about housework and childcare and the opportunities for and constraints on doing unpaid family work (Gerson 2010; Shows & Gerstel 2009).

Finally, studies of the current recession may prove illuminating, as periods of economic change often shake up the status quo in gender relations. "Is Anyone Doing the Housework?" showed that there was a change in men's involvement in the home as women

dramatically increased their labor force participation. Perhaps it was not as extensive as it could have been, but it occurred. The current economic recession may be another opportunity for change, as it becomes clear how precarious jobs can be, how necessary paid work of women and men is to the income security of families and consequently how important it is for all adults to also participate in the care work that complements paid work. A small number of published studies report that one response of fathers to job loss is a shift in anchoring identity from being a breadwinner to being an involved, active father (Chesley 2011; Sherman 2011). This suggests the historical centrality of breadwinning in securing both a positive masculine identity and entry into family roles may be waning. It is plausible that persistent high levels of unemployment during the Great Recession are altering the meaning of male unemployment, norms and attitudes about the gendered division of labor and gendered relationships between economic resources and power.

The incomplete gender revolution has been attributed to gendered incentives that pushed women into societally valued “masculine” activities and pulled men away from societally devalued “feminine” activities, like care work (England 2010). Institutional frameworks and individual changes among men that “walk the talk” of valuing childcare and housework are promoted as the path to jump-starting the gender revolution. The Great Recession may be fertile soil for such change. Shifts in population composition, from immigration to the aging of the baby boomers, growing levels of family income inequality and diverging patterns of fertility and legal marriage by social class may also affect incentives.

Forecasting the future of the gendered division of labor will require two things: (1. continued attention to intersecting systems of inequality within and across countries and (2. contextualizing the division of household and child labor within complex and changing life courses of work and family relations.

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Table 1

Trends in Average Weekly Housework Hours by Gender for Individuals Aged 25 to 64

Panel A																					
	All Women						All Men						Ratio of Women's Time to Men's Time								
	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998/9	2003/4	2009/10	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998/9	2003/4	2009-10	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998-99	2003-04	2009-10
Total housework	30.0	23.7	19.7	17.5	16.4	16.9	16.2	4.9	7.2	9.8	10.0	11.3	9.9	10.0	6.1	3.3	2.0	1.8	1.4	1.7	1.6
Core housework	26.9	21.0	16.3	13.9	12.7	13.0	12.7	2.3	2.5	4.0	3.8	5.6	3.7	4.4	11.9	8.3	4.0	3.7	2.3	3.5	2.9
Other housework	3.1	2.7	3.4	3.6	3.7	3.8	3.5	2.6	4.7	5.7	6.2	5.7	6.1	5.5	1.2	.6	.6	.6	.6	.6	.6
N	579	927	1,725	493	486	12,918	9,807	469	783	1,405	359	383	10,201	7,795							
Panel B																					
	Married Women						Married Men						Ratio of Women's Time to Men's Time								
	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998/9	2003/4	2009/10	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998/9	2003/4	2009-10	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998-99	2003-04	2009-10
Total housework	33.9	26.1	21.9	19.4	18.1	18.4	17.8	4.7	6.7	10.4	10.4	12.5	10.1	10.3	7.2	3.9	2.1	1.9	1.4	1.8	1.7
Core housework	30.4	22.9	18.4	15.8	14.6	14.5	14.2	1.8	1.9	4.0	3.7	5.8	3.5	4.2	16.6	12.3	4.6	4.3	2.5	4.2	3.4
Other housework	3.6	3.1	3.5	3.7	3.4	4.0	3.6	2.9	4.9	6.4	6.7	6.7	6.6	6.1	1.2	.6	.6	.5	.5	.6	.6
N	452	722	1,175	296	297	8,061	5,601	416	678	1,041	211	228	7,217	4,964							
Panel C																					
	Married Mothers						Married Fathers						Ratio of Mothers' Time to Fathers' Time								
	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998/9	2003/4	2009/10	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998/9	2003/4	2009-10	1965	1975	1985	1995	1998-99	2003-04	2009-10
Total housework	35.7	26.6	22.5	21.3	20.0	19.3	18.3	4.7	6.3	10.5	11.6	11.6	9.5	9.5	7.6	4.3	2.1	1.8	1.7	2.0	1.9
Core housework	32.4	24.0	19.1	17.4	17.4	16.0	15.5	1.7	1.7	4.2	3.8	6.8	3.9	4.7	19.1	13.8	4.6	4.6	2.6	4.1	3.3
Other housework	3.3	2.6	3.3	3.9	2.6	3.2	2.8	3.0	4.5	6.3	7.8	4.8	5.6	4.8	1.1	.6	.5	.5	.5	.6	.6
Child care	10.5	7.3	8.5	11.2	12.0	13.9	13.7	2.6	2.4	3.0	4.5	6.9	6.4	7.2	4.0	3.0	2.9	2.5	1.7	2.2	1.9
N	312	454	614	185	181	4,957	3,820	302	439	584	160	156	5,202	3,954							

Source: Authors' calculations, historical USA time diary sample (1965-1999) and American Time Use Survey 2003-2010.