

The Gendered Division of Unpaid Work: A Cross Cohort Comparison

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Trends in the form and function of family life have changed substantially in recent decades. There has been a notable decline in the specialised gendered division of paid and unpaid work within partnerships. This has been mainly due to women's increased participation in the labour market, but men's contributions to unpaid domestic work and child care have increased as well. Rates of family disruption have increased as well. In Great Britain, divorce rates started on an upward trend in the early 1960s and stabilised at a relatively high level in the mid-1980s. A good deal of research in the social sciences has sought to examine the impact these changes have had on children. A substantial number of studies have sought to examine the relationship between mothers' paid employment and short-term measures of child well-being. An equally substantial (if not larger) body of literature has examined the relationship between parental divorce and child outcomes, both in the shorter and longer term. When longer-term outcomes have been considered, researchers have tended to focus on demographic or employment related outcomes. Few studies have examined the relationship between children's experiences in the family of origin and their subsequent organisation of partnerships and family life.

Only a small number of previous studies have examined the association between experiences during childhood and subsequent divisions of unpaid domestic work. Using data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience (NLS), Goldscheider and Waite (1991) find that those who experienced a parental divorce during childhood, those who have experienced independent living in early adulthood, and males with higher educational attainment were more likely to report that they share domestic work equitably. Nevertheless, they found that entry into parenthood seemed to encourage more traditional gendered divisions of labour even in relationships that were previously more egalitarian. More recently, analysing data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Gupta (2006) found that, for men, the link between mother's employment and subsequent contributions to unpaid work is moderated by experience of parental dissolution so that men whose mother worked when they were children perform more housework as adults, but only if their fathers were present throughout their childhood.

Findings from both of these studies suggest that family experiences both early and later in the life course are likely to be associated with subsequent adult behaviour, but neither has examined change over time. The analyses by Goldscheider and Waite (1991) focuses on women and men who were aged between 14 and 24 in 1968, and so is somewhat dated. With the rise of second wave feminism, female labour market participation, and changing expectations about what men and fathers should do in the home may have altered the relationships between childhood experiences and adult behaviour. It is unclear whether the relationships between family background factors and gendered division of domestic labour have remained stable or weakened as, in the wider society, women have taken on more traditionally male roles and responsibilities and men have been increasingly asked to share domestic and parenting responsibilities. Gupta (2006) included (only) men who were aged 18 to 65 in 1987 in his sample, but there was no attempt to test for

evidence of cohort differences, most probably because the sample size was fairly small. Moreover, information on childhood experiences was collected retrospectively and was rather limited. The focus was primarily on mothers' paid labour market participation at early and later stages of childhood.

This study complements and seeks to extend previous work by examining the relationship between childhood, adolescent, and early adult experiences and the gendered division of housework later in the life course. Specifically we are interested in assessing whether parameter estimates linking early life course experiences to the gendered division of domestic work differ significantly across cohorts. To this end, we make use of prospective data from two British cohorts, born in 1958 and 1970. Although born only twelve years apart, the social contexts in which the two cohorts grew up were very different. Pertinent for this study, rising divorce rates meant that the cohort born in 1970 were far more likely to see their parents divorce and to grow up in a social environment where divorce was more common and alternative family structures increasingly condoned. They were also more likely to grow up with a mother who worked for pay and in an environment where gender roles were increasingly questioned and challenged.

The data are drawn from the National Child Development Survey (NCDS) and the British Cohort Study (BCS), two nationally representative, longitudinal studies of birth cohorts in Great Britain. Both studies are similar in design and have followed the cohorts over time. Although cohort members were not always interviewed at exactly the same ages, the survey instruments are similarly designed and include a broad range of socio-economic, demographic, health and attitudinal measures. This similarity makes it possible to construct similar measures for both cohorts (see for example Sigle-Rushton, Hobcraft, and Kiernan, 2004). The prospective nature of the data allows us to examine whether the size of the effects of earlier experiences on the gendered division of housework at about age 30 (at age 30 in the case of the 1970 cohort and age 33 in the case of the 1958 cohort) have changed. Because for the older cohort, the same information was collected eleven years later, we can examine change over time for men and women in the same birth cohort as well.

In both surveys at the fifth wave of data collection, cohort members who were in a partnership were asked about their contributions to several domestic tasks. Responses include: "I do most of it"; "my partner does most of it"; "we share more or less equally"; and "someone else does it". The dependent variable is constructed using four stereotypically female tasks: cooking the main meal, laundry and ironing, shopping, and cleaning the home. Each item is coded from 0 to 2 so that the higher scores reflect a larger share on the part of the cohort member. The four items are averaged and those with scores in the range of 0.75-1.25 are identified as sharing household tasks fairly equally. Drawing from the results of previous studies, family background controls include experience of family disruption (parent divorce or father's death) before the age of 16 and a measure of the mother's labour market participation. Individual level independent variables include the cohort member's experience of independent living before forming his or her first partnership; marital status at the time of interview; previous partnerships; the presence of children in the household (distinguishing between own children and non-biological children); educational attainment; and own and partner's labour market hours. Separate models are estimated for women and men and for each cohort, but we explicitly test the equality of parameters across the different models. For those cohort members living in families with children, models of shared child care are also estimated.

Preliminary findings suggest that consistent with previous findings, those who have experienced independent living before forming a partnership or who have been in a previous partnership (and presumably experienced some independent living between partnerships) report a more egalitarian division of housework. Also consistent with previous studies, we find that the presence of children is associated with a more traditional division of housework. In contrast to previous studies, however, parental disruption is not significantly associated with the gendered division of domestic work.

References

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