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ABSTRACT

It is well-established that women perform the vast majority of household tasks. This study examined conflicts over the household division of labor. The study respondents (N=140) were obtained from a mailed survey to a national sample of 500 households in the winter of 1991. Of the 140 respondents, 78 were couples. Each household was sent a survey which requested information on who most often performed the six most time-consuming tasks; the reasons why those who performed the tasks did so; the level of satisfaction with the division of household tasks; and possible reasons for conflicts over household tasks. In addition, data was collected on yearly household income, personal income, current job title, hours worked for pay each week, race, religion, education, marital status, and a list of all household members by age and sex. The majority of the women engaged in traditional female household tasks while the vast majority of men did not. The tests that assessed the reasons for women's housecleaning indicated that women and men did not identify gender reasons any more often than practical reasons. It appeared that younger women were less satisfied with the division of household labor because they felt it burdened the person engaging in it or it was unfairly shared. Such results challenge the notion that housework is a welcome opportunity to demonstrate gender, at least among younger women. (ABL)

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Couples and Conflicts over the Household Division of Labor

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Couples and Conflicts over the Household Division of Labor

It is well-established that women perform the vast majority of the daily, repetitive, and necessary household tasks (Ferree, 1990; Hochschild, 1989; Robinson, 1988; Sutor, 1991; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Such tasks include: cooking, laundry, cleaning house, doing dishes, and caring for small children. Both sexes engage in shopping and caring for older children (Berk, 1985; Coverman & Sheley, 1986; Hiller & Philliber, 1986; Kamo, 1988). Though there is some variation among studies, women typically do two to three times more housework than men (Berk, 1985; Hochschild, 1989; Kamo, 1988; Warner, 1986). However, researchers are surprised by the high levels of satisfaction reported by women and men around the issue of the household division of labor (Ferree, 1990; Berk, 1985; Komter, 1989).

A number of models have been proposed to explain why women continue to do the majority of household tasks even though most are also employed in the paid labor force. Becker's (1981) "new home economics" model posits that the family unit determines whose labor is worth more in the market and then assigns unpaid household duties to the member who is less marketable. In essence, the reason is practical and economical. Kamo (1988) suggests that power (consisting of women's employment, resources, and partners' sex-role orientations) is the basic issue. The more power wives have, the less house work they perform. However, empirical research appears to contradict both models in that

womens' employment does not appear to be related to their husbands' household labor in relation to the hours women work, women's earnings, or time availability (Atkinson & Boles, 1984; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987; Ferree, 1988). For instance, Atkinson and Boles found that women who earn more money than their husbands (and presumably have greater economic power and status) attempt to salve their husbands' egos and interact with their husbands in more sexual ways. Such households also exhibit a very traditional division of labor.

A more compelling model is associated with the concept of gender. The notion of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) posits that to be judged a competent member of a gender class, one must engage in interactions that will be perceived as culturally acceptable expressions of our masculine or feminine "nature". The performance of particular household tasks is an opportunity to fulfill culturally "appropriate" expectations and in doing so, sustain individual gender identities. Because housework is viewed as "women's work", it provides women with an opportunity to demonstrate love, subordination and femininity.

Berk (1985) noted that gender, more than any other variable, accounted for the amount of women's childcare and housework. Also, when housework must be done and the "wife" is not available, other women are often hired, or daughters are pressured to assume the tasks. Further, women with paid jobs often reduce their housework and settle for a lower set of standards for cleanliness rather than recruit their husbands to perform the necessary

household tasks.

The gender model suggests that a woman who wants to be judged a socially competent female will seek out and readily engage in housework regardless of the inequities by sex. In addition, women and men may engage in gendered behavior in order to protect their partners from the social disapproval associated with "inappropriate" task performance.

However, while "doing gender" may explain why many women and men maintain an unequal distribution of household labor, the norms for gendered behavior may be shifting. A change appears to be underway in the gendered meaning of housework--in terms of who certain persons engage in it and in the conflicts that develop over the division of labor.

For instance, Robinson (1988) reports that from 1975 to 1985 a significant shift in who does certain household tasks began to occur. Men began taking on more household chores (cooking and cleaning) and spending somewhat more time doing them (up to four hours per week) while women reduced the amount of time they spent on household tasks (from 24 in 1965 to 16 hours per week in 1985). Pleck (1985) and Coverman and Sheley (1986) also report that wives are reducing their total amount of housework. Some of the reductions, but not all, can be traced to increases in women's paid labor.

Further, studies find that 25-30% of wives complain about the inequity in the division of household labor or feel it is unfair

(Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Rosen, 1987; Yogev, 1981). In the past, household conflicts were viewed as a failure of adjustment. But Ferree (1990) points out that conflict may be a positive sign. Benin and Agostinelli (1988) claim that arguments over the household division of labor are an important but under studied area. Conflict may be an indicator of women's sense of entitlement to an equitable division of labor as well as a sign of men's resistance or willingness to change.

This paper is an exploratory attempt to understand the reasons couples conflict over the household division of labor. Conflict may be an important indicator of women's and men's sensitivity to inequity and a harbinger of change. The study reported below explores perceptions of conflict (over the household division of labor) among both members of a couple. The issue of "doing gender" will be assessed by examining the rationales behind the activity of housecleaning. In addition, potential precursors of conflict such as: satisfaction with the division of labor, age, family stage, and economic power will be tested.

Scholarship on the household division of labor indicates that conflict can be predicted from satisfaction with the household division of labor. That is, Benin and Agostinelli (1988) found that both women and men perceived more conflicts when they were dissatisfied with the division of household chores. Conflict has also been linked to age, income, and job status. Suitor (1991) claims that a strong and consistent relationship has been found between age and family conflict (not necessarily conflict over the

division of labor, however) for over a decade. Her research also found that age was a strong predictor of conflict; younger couples were significantly more inclined than others to engage in verbal aggression.

Family stage may help to explain why family conflict varies by age since it is related to satisfaction with the division of household labor. That is, Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Garrett, Coysh, Curtis-Boles, and Boles (1985) as well as White, Booth, and Edwards (1986) found that couples' satisfaction with household labor was higher in the preparental years than during the early years of childrearing. Schafer and Keith (1981) noted that couples in the postparental years felt that tasks were more equitably divided than during the child-intensive phases of the family cycle. Thus, the preschool stage of the family life cycle (which for most couples occurs in young adulthood) may mark the zenith of conflicts and the nadir of satisfaction with the household division of labor. However, Sutor (1991) found an important sex difference in levels of satisfaction. Wives' satisfaction with the household division of labor was lowest during the childrearing years and highest before and after children. On the other hand, husbands' satisfaction was stable across the family life cycle.

The sex difference may be due to gender practices at certain points in the life cycle. That is, researchers have noted a sex difference in the division of household labor which shifts over the course of the family life cycle. For instance, the tasks undertaken by spouses are more similar during the preparental and

postparental years but dissimilar during the early childrearing period (Rexroat & Shehan, 1987; White, Booth & Edwards, 1986; and Yogev, 1981).

Economic factors are also an important part of the equation. Benin and Agostinelli hypothesized that in economic terms, a woman could be dissatisfied but not argue about the division of labor if her spouse contributed more income or job status to the family. But Coleman's (1988) research indicates that income and class status may interact with the household division of labor. That is, husbands in lower-class families may participate in traditional female tasks out of necessity; the couple may disagree about who should do which household tasks but the woman's income is necessary and her time at home is limited. On the other hand, higher-class couples may have a larger earnings gap but a more egalitarian ideology so that the husband (who earns significantly more money) may take on responsibility or hire others to perform certain choice household tasks. But as Coleman (1988) concludes, in general "the greater a woman's net economic power, the more likely her husband will be involved in housework and childcare...the more likely her husband will see himself as 'responsible' for tasks...the more equitable the division of the nice versus the nasty jobs between husband and wife" (p. 141).

In view of the complex relationships noted above, the following questions were examined among the couples: 1) who most often performs the "female" household tasks identified by Walker and Woods? 2) To what degree do rationales for housecleaning vary

by sex? 3) What sort of conflicts are most commonly reported over the household division of labor? 4) How satisfied are couples with the household division of labor? and 5) To what degree are conflicts related to or predicted by: their sex, age, family stage, income, and job status.

Methods

The study respondents were obtained by mailing a two-page survey to a national sample of 500 households in the winter of 1991. Names and addresses were supplied by Survey Sampling Inc. of Connecticut who randomly selected a balanced sample from phone directories and automobile registration lists from across the country. A total of 140 people (28%) returned the surveys; 78 of whom were couples. The couples were 88% Caucasian and nearly half (49%) had children living at home. Almost half the women (44%) and 77% of the men worked 35 or more hours per week for pay. Thirty-three percent of the women were not working for pay as were 18% of the men. The average age for women was 47 years while men were 48 years; age distribution was normal. Over half the sample had more than a high school education; that is, some college, college, and graduate education.

Each household was sent a cover letter explaining the need to learn more about the household division of labor and a two page survey which requested data on: who most often performed the six most time-consuming tasks, the reasons why those who performed the housecleaning did so, the level of satisfaction with the division of household tasks, and possible reasons for conflicts over

household tasks. In addition, data were collected on: Yearly household income, personal income, current job title, hours worked for pay each week, race, religion, education, marital status, and a list of all household members by age and sex.

The survey was pre-tested on a group of 60 undergraduate students in two different Gender Roles classes at a midwestern state university as well as five faculty members in the Department of Human Development at the same school. The pilot study entailed an open-ended response category for conflicts. The conflicts identified during the pilot study tended to be either of a practical nature (lack of time; tasks remain undone) or were concerned with issues of equity (others not doing their fair share; person who does most of the tasks feels burdened). This distinction is consistent with positions taken in the social-psychological literature (Ferree, 1987). As a result, the question on conflict that was used in the actual study presented respondents with the four options above as well as an "other" category. In this study, conflicts that referred to "lack of time" or "tasks [that] remain undone" were classified as practical preferences and ranked at a lower level than conflicts over equity i.e., one's "fair share" or "feels burdened".

When conflict was tested with parametric measures, responses were arranged along an eight point continuum ranging from no conflicts to single, practical reasons and their various combinations at the low end of the scale, to a merging of both practical and equity issues in the middle, and finally to a

combination of equity issues at the high end of the scale. Respondents were asked "If applicable, please circle the reasons for any conflicts or disagreements that arise over doing household tasks in your home" and offered four options (as above) and an "other" response category.

The kinds of conflicts circled were subsequently coded on an eight point scale with 0, 1, and 2 indicating either no conflicts or practical conflicts only. Scores of 3 and above were those that mentioned some type of equity conflict (as well as various combinations i.e., with other equity conflicts or equity and practical conflicts). Generally, a higher score indicated higher level conflicts i.e., a concern with equity. When conflicts were analyzed categorically, the reasons for conflict were broken down into four categories: No conflicts reported, practical conflicts (no time or tasks not done), equity conflicts (unfair or burdened), and a mixture of both practical and equity conflicts.

In order to determine whether this sample was consistent with the trends in the literature in regard to the performance of household tasks, an examination of traditional female tasks was first undertaken. Couples were asked to indicate who most often engaged in six household tasks that Walker and Woods (1976) indicated were the most time consuming (entailing 77% of housework time): meal preparation, housecleaning, laundry, child or parent care, cleaning up after meals, and food shopping. Such tasks are considered typical "female" tasks. Respondents were asked to check columns under: the self, partner, son, daughter, other or

not applicable. Data for each individual task was then summed to determine which person(s), if any, most often performed the tasks.

The list of reasons for why certain household members engaged in house cleaning consisted of the practical, gendered, and preferential and other options: The practical were categorized by: She/he has more time, his/her job is less demanding; the gendered were: It is her/his sex role, it is consistent with male/female nature; and the preferential were: She/he enjoys or prefers it; other was a collection of unique reasons or combinations of the above rationales. The options were modeled on questionnaire categories designed by Huber and Spitze (1983) to measure: time availability, relative power, sex-role attitudes, and taste for housework.

The task of housecleaning was chosen over other possible activities because Hood (1983) found that women typically performed this least attractive task while men "Chose child care, cooking and shopping over house cleaning" (p. 179). Further, Robinson's data indicated that housecleaning was consistently identified as one of the least attractive tasks.

A question on how satisfied respondents were with the division of household tasks offered options ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. The selection of very satisfied corresponded to the number one whereas very dissatisfied was rated a seven. Satisfied (three) and unsatisfied (five) were options found between the two extremes. For categorical tests, satisfaction was collapsed into either satisfied or dissatisfied.

Family stage was measured by recording the age of the youngest child in the family. Responses were then chronologically arranged from the youngest to the oldest age of the child. Those without children in the home were coded as zeroes because past research indicated that both pre and postparental couples engage in the same kinds of household tasks and experience similar levels of satisfaction.

Economic power was examined with: Measures of income, hours worked per week, and occupational status. Two questions on yearly income were utilized: 1) That of the household and, 2) what "you alone earn". In each case, one of seven options could be circled. For household income, the range was: Under \$12,000; \$12-19,999; \$20-29,999; \$30-49,999; \$50-74,999; \$75-99,999; and \$100,00 and over. For personal income, the range was: Under \$6,000; \$6-14,999; \$15-29,999; \$30-44,999; \$45-59,999; \$60-74,999; and \$75,000 and over. The hours worked per week were taken directly from the questionnaire while occupational status was determined by classifying the occupational titles according to the occupational group codes (that combine scores for women and men) designed by Nam-Powers (Miller, 1991).

Age and sex were recorded directly from the listing of household members' current age and sex at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Results

The question of who most often performed the household tasks indicated that adult women did the vast majority of tasks. Of the

couples, 77% of the women reported that they most often engaged in traditional female tasks while 72% of the men claimed that their partners did the majority of the household labor. The remaining responses indicated that tasks were shared. Women performed the majority of housework regardless of their age.

The issue of whether couples differed in the rationales offered for housecleaning indicated no overall differences. A t-test comparing the overall scores of women and men was not significant. In fact, two-thirds of the couples agreed on the reasons; half cited practical reasons while the remaining agreements were divided among gender, preference, and the other category. However, a chi-square test of the couples who disagreed (13 women and men) about reasons for housecleaning indicated that a sex difference existed. That is, more women than men cited gendered reasons as opposed to preference/other and the difference approached significance at the .05 level. Since couples who disagreed constituted a small portion of the overall sample, however, this trend did not influence the group results. Overall, the rationales offered for why women engaged in housecleaning did not emphasize gender over any other category.

The kinds of conflicts couples experienced over household tasks indicated that 32% of the couples reported no conflicts, however, 21% identified practical issues while 47% cited some type of equity conflict. When the conflict responses of each of the 39 couples were examined separately, equity was the most commonly agreed-upon issue. Both members of 11 couples identified some

type of equity conflict while 7 couples claimed that they experienced no conflicts and 4 couples claimed there were only practical conflicts. Of those who disagreed about their conflicts, 7 couples exhibited a pattern in which the men cited no conflicts while the women cited equity conflicts. Six couples were in disagreement about whether the conflicts were practical or equity and four couples cited some other combination. See Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

However, a t-test comparing the average conflict scores of women and men revealed significant differences beyond the .05 level of confidence. Women's mean conflict score was 2.9, men's was 1.85 indicating that women were more inclined to cite higher level conflicts such as equity issues while men were more inclined to cite either no conflicts or practical conflicts. An examination of the no conflict category indicated that 23% women versus 41% of their male partners claimed there were no conflicts over the household division of labor. In general, women were more likely to identify equity issues and to cite more than one kind of equity conflict.

Benin and Agostinelli's research indicated that a significant predictor of conflict was a couple's level of dissatisfaction with the household division of labor. Further, Suitor's (1991) study noted that the level of satisfaction with the household division

of labor differed dramatically by sex. That is, men's level of satisfaction was higher than women's. In the present study, a t-test comparison of the seven point satisfaction scale indicated that the means of women and their partners differed by a full point (3.28 v. 2.28), well beyond the .0001 level of significance.

Therefore, in order to determine where the differences in satisfaction occurred, a chi-square goodness of fit test was run of satisfaction and dissatisfaction by sex. Women were significantly more dissatisfied than men; one man checked dissatisfaction whereas 33% of the women indicated dissatisfaction. See Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Suitor's research also indicated that age played an important role in verbal conflicts (younger couples had more conflicts). First, a chi-square goodness of fit test was run with couples divided into the young adult, midlife, and old age categories. Conflicts were categorized by: none, practical, and equity (including a mixture of both equity and practical). The chi-square was significant beyond the .01 level of confidence. Indications were that couples beyond the age of 65 were significantly less inclined to cite conflicts of any kind. Young adults were more inclined than others to cite equity conflicts. See Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Since age and satisfaction showed significant relationships with conflict, a linear regression was tested with the predictors of satisfaction and age on the dependent variable of conflict. Both factors had a significant effect on conflict but satisfaction was much more powerful than age. The equation indicated that younger couples who are less satisfied with the division of tasks report higher level conflicts. See Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Next, a linear regression was tested with the predictors of age and sex on the dependent variable of conflict. Both factors contributed to conflicts over the household division of labor in a significant way although age was a slightly more powerful predictor than sex. See Table 5. Indications are that younger women are those reporting higher level conflicts. The variable of family stage was examined by entering the age of the youngest child into a linear regression with the dependent variable of conflict. Family stage was not a significant predictor of conflict.

Insert Table 5 about here

The economic factors of: job status, hours worked per week for

pay, own yearly income, and yearly household income, were initially tested by comparing the mean scores of women and men. The couples differed only in terms of the hours worked for pay and the amount of income earned by individuals. A t-test indicated that women worked significantly fewer hours per week for pay (20.7) than their spouses (35). As one might expect, the income levels of the spouses were significantly different (beyond the .0005 level) in that women earned between \$12-19,999 per year whereas their spouses earned between \$20-29,999 per year. The status of one's job (as measured by the Nam-Powers Scale) did not differentiate spouses.

However, when the hours worked for pay each week as well as the amount of income earned by individuals were entered into a linear regression (as predictors of conflict) no significant relationships emerged. That is, the Betas and F-tests indicated that income and employment factors did not predict conflicts in a significant manner.

Discussion

The results of the present survey study should be considered suggestive of directions for future research on conflicts over the household division of labor since the caucasian, middle class couples may not be representative of the general population. However, the relationships between conflict, sex, satisfaction and age that were found in this study are consistent with the results of previous studies. As such, the sample used in this study re-

flects broader trends that are valuable in understanding household conflicts and can be used as the basis for further research.

As in previous studies of the household division of labor, the majority of women in this study engaged in traditional female household tasks while the vast majority of men did not. The overall finding that between 72-77% of couples identified women as the persons most often engaging in traditional household tasks is consistent with the literature (e.g., Hochschild, 1989, found that, between couples, women performed 80% of the household labor).

In this sense, these couples continue to "do gender" by performing or avoiding tasks considered appropriate or inappropriate for their sex. However, the rationales offered for this gendered division of labor were not explicitly linked to gender roles. Thus, there appears to be a dissonance between attitudes and behaviors such that behaviors continue to be gendered but attitudes reflect ambivalence. Evidence for the ambivalence about gendered domestic labor was found in two domains: The rationale for why women engaged in housecleaning, and the relationships among conflict, dissatisfaction, and age. Each will be discussed below.

The tests that assessed the reasons for women's housecleaning indicated that women and men did not identify gender reasons (either biological or sex role factors) any more often than practical reasons. In fact, more than half the respondents cited either preference or practical rationales. In essence, most of

the sample does not explicitly link gendered activities to a female "nature" or to cultural norms for their sex as the West and Zimmerman concept of "doing gender" would suggest.

The relationship between conflict over housework divisions and its predictors in Tables 3 and 5 is also indicative of ambivalence. The regressions showed a relationship among higher level conflicts, dissatisfaction, young adulthood, and sex. Since both dissatisfaction and conflict varied by sex, it appears that younger women are less satisfied with the division of household labor because they feel it burdens the person engaging in it or it is unfairly shared. Such results challenge the notion that housework is a welcome opportunity to demonstrate gender -- at least among young women.

The explanation for these age cohort differences in conflict may be that young women have greater expectations for equality in household tasks. Such expectations could have been based on ideologies about shared work in the family that were common during their early developmental years. For instance, nearly 15 years ago (during the childhood and teenage years of our current young adults) social scientists such as Giele (1978) began noting the shifting cultural ideologies around gender roles in the family:

On the one hand, there is wider recognition that work patterns of men and women are becoming more similar over the life span. On the other hand, there is increasing recognition that

responsibilities for parenthood and household work fall unequally on the shoulders of men and women and there are frequent suggestions as to how the tasks might be more evenly divided. These two themes signal an emerging norm of sex equality to be achieved by flexible role allocation over the lifetime of the individual (pp. 193-4).

To support such shifts, Giele pointed to media stories about men taking care of children, doing needlework, or cooking. Pleck (1977) claimed that men with working wives were slowly increasing their amount of housework. And, Coverman and Sheley (1986) reported that from 1965 to 1975 women were significantly decreasing the time given to household labor. In other words, the cultural milieu during which the current generation of young adults was initially socialized emphasized fluid gender roles.

The current study did not examine ideological differences between age groups, but a plausible explanation for the age cohort differences in conflict and dissatisfaction would be the following: The notions of equality emphasized during the young women's early socialization experiences provided them with an ethical foundation for engaging in conflict when imbalances in household labor surfaced. Conflicts may result from the dissatisfaction that arises between the disparity of expectations of equality and the realities of gendered household tasks.

This thesis might also account for why the variable of family stage was not able to predict conflict. It may not be the amount of gendered work that is at issue for the young adults but the

fact that certain tasks are gendered that they are reacting against. Thus, even childless couples who have a more even but still somewhat gendered division of labor will be as inclined to engage in conflicts over equity as those couples who have a more dichotomized division of labor during the childrearing years. Older age cohorts may have accepted their gender roles and are less likely to conflict or to be dissatisfied.

The issue to address is why the vast majority of women (including young adult women) continue to perform the traditional female household tasks. The young adult women are in quite a dilemma. On one level, they are concerned with equality. On another level, they have not abandoned the "doing" of gendered tasks. Significantly, when the two issues (equity vs. gendered behavior) are confronted in everyday life, gendered behavior is given priority. Why are the ethical issues less powerful than gender? This is the domain which needs further exploration.

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Table 1

Couples and their Conflicts over the Household Division of Labor

Agreements Between <u>Couples</u>		Disagreements Between <u>Couples</u>	
Equity/Mix	11	Women=E*, Men=None	7
No Conflicts	7	One=P*, One=E*	6**
Practical	4	Other combinations	4
	—		—
N	22		17

Note: E* = equity conflicts, P* = practical conflicts.

** = four women cited practical issues, their male partners cited equity; two men cited practical while their partners cited equity.

Table 2

Satisfaction with the Household Division of Labor by Sex

	Satisfaction	Dissatisfaction
Women	26	13
Men	38	1
	--	--
TOTAL N	64	14

Chi-square = 12,5, 1df, $p < .001$

Table 3

Life Stage and Kinds of Conflicts over the Household Division of Labor

	Young Adult	Midlife	Old Age
No Conflicts	4	11	10
Practical	7	10	0
Equity Conflicts (Combinations)	18	14	4
	--	--	--
TOTAL N	29	35	14

Chi-square = 16.47, 4df, $p < .01$

Table 4

Predictors of Conflict over the Household Division of Labor

Category	Unstandardized Beta	t-score	Significance
Conflict			
Satisfaction	.90	5.38	.0001
Age	-0.03	-2.47	.016
(Constant)	1.46		

R-square = .31

Equation F = 18.39

Sig. F = .0001

Table 5

Predictors of Conflict over the Household Division of Labor

Category	Unstandardized Beta		t-score
Significance			
Conflict			
Sex	1.02	2.00	.049
Age	-0.04	-2.38	.020
(Constant)	2.61		

R-square = .12

Equation F = 4.97

Sig. F = .009