

Families in Transition: Domestic Labour Patterns over the Lifecourse

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All of the available research on domestic labour patterns shows little evidence of change in the ways in which husbands and wives organise household responsibilities (Bittman; Baxter 2000). While there may be some variations at the margins (Coltrane 1996) research shows that women still bear the main burden of domestic and caring work. This is despite the massive changes in women's involvement in paid labour outside the home.

In Australia in 1970 the labour force participation rate for females aged 15 to 64 was 36 percent; the corresponding male rate was 84 percent. In 1966 by contrast, the female rate had increased to 54 percent while the male labour force participation rate had declined to 74 percent (ABS 1996). In 26 years, in other words, the gender-gap in labour force participation had more than halved, falling from a 48 percentage point difference in favour of men in 1970 to a 20 percentage point difference in 1996. Even more striking however, is the increase in participation rates for women aged 25 to 34, the major childbearing years. In Australia in 1996, just under 68 percent of women aged 25 to 34 were in the labour force. In 1970, the corresponding rate was around 41 percent (De Vaus and Wolcott 1997). On the other hand, men typically work full-time in paid employment throughout their lives, although there has been a small convergence in men's and women's working hours with a slight increase in the percentage of men employed part-time with about 10 percent of male workers employed part-time in the mid 1990's.

But the fact that these changes have had little impact on the organisation of domestic work is not surprising when we consider that the links between home and work are markedly different for men and women. Research on the relationship between men's participation in domestic work and paid work suggests only very weak links between work in the two spheres. Most men tend to be in full-time employment and to do only small and unchanging amounts of unpaid work regardless of institutional arrangements, lifecourse stage or socio-economic conditions. Pleck (1984) has consequently referred to the boundaries between home and work as "asymmetrically permeable" for men and women. My own earlier research confirms that the links between home and work are gendered (Western and Baxter, forthcoming). While men are able to keep the boundary between work and home

relatively distinct, women experience much more overlap between the spheres of work and family, with family life influencing paid work involvement and paid work impinging on family obligations.

We know then that the impact of factors external to the household, such as paid work involvement, seem to have very little impact on domestic labour organisation. It is less clear however, what impact factors internal to the household, have on domestic labour arrangements. Moreover, we know little about how the patterning of household labour varies over the lifecourse. This is the focus of the current paper. For example, it may be that domestic labour arrangements are organised equitably when couples are young, are both employed in paid labour and have no children. The presence of young children, particularly in an institutional context where there is little support for working mothers in the form of childcare or maternity leave and a gender gap in wages which favours men's earnings over women's earnings, may help to establish more traditional patterns where women are forced to adopt a greater share of the domestic and caring work.

This implies viewing domestic labour organisation as a process over the lifecourse rather than a static and unchanging event. While domestic labour patterns may be static across groups with similar characteristics, it may be dynamic within a household over the lifecourse. In other words, domestic labour may vary according to household structure and lifecourse stage. In the past, most research has relied on snapshots of households at one point in time which tend to imply static and unchanging patterns. What we need however, is data that enables us to track possible changes in a single household over the lifecourse to accurately map the ways in which patterns emerge, are consolidated and then replaced with new patterns as the household structure changes as individuals move through different lifecourse stages.

The "Negotiating the Life Course" project, which I am currently involved in with Peter McDonald and others at ANU, is, in part, an attempt to address this kind of question. We hope to collect longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample of approximately 2200 individuals over a 10 year period. This data will enable us to track changes over the lifecourse in the ways in which individual negotiate paid and unpaid work. In particular we are focusing on people in the early childbearing and

childrearing stages when there are likely to be significant interruptions to employment involvement for women and when households are undergoing fundamental changes in structure and organisation with the arrival of new children.

At the moment, however we are in the early stages of the project and I can only report analyses from the first wave of data collection. We will be going into the field to collect the second wave in a few weeks time. All I can do at this stage then, is to approximate the effect of changes in lifecourse on domestic labour by using our first cross-sectional survey to compare groups at different lifecourse stages. The aim then is to examine variations in domestic labour organisation for groups at different stages of the lifecourse.

Data

The data for this paper come from the first wave of “Negotiating the Life Course: Gender, Mobility and Career Trajectories.” This is a longitudinal study of 2231 respondents across Australia. The first wave of data were collected by means of a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) in late 1996 and early 1997.¹ The interviews were undertaken by trained interviewers at the Institute of Family Studies. The data is a national representative sample of respondents between the ages of 18 and 54 years, selected from the electronic white pages. Of these, 1405 respondents were married and 918 of these couples had at least one child under the age of 15 years living at home. The analyses for patterns of childcare are based on the latter sample, while the analyses for patterns of housework are based on the former sample.

Variables

The variables included in the analyses are summarised in Table 1. The relative contribution of husbands and wives to domestic labour measures husbands’ and wives’ levels of involvement in particular childcare and housework tasks. Activities are divided into a number of categories: childcare tasks, indoor tasks, outdoor tasks, other tasks and total tasks. These variables enable examination of the extent to which having one’s partner participate in particular kinds of domestic labour is an important

predictor of perceptions of fairness. The activities included in each category are shown in Table 1. The response categories were “I do most”; “I do more”; “we share this equally”; “my partner does more”; and “my partner does most.” These responses were subsequently coded as percentages, as shown below, and then summed to create a scale ranging from 0 to 100 percent reflecting the relative contribution of each spouse.ⁱⁱ For example, a respondent who reported doing most of a particular task was coded as 100 indicating that they take full responsibility for this task, while a respondent who reported that their partner has most responsibility for a task was coded as 0.

I do most=100%

I do more=75%

We share this equally=50%

My partner does more=25%

My partner does most=0%

Table 1. Variable Definitions

Variable	Definition
Childcare tasks	Relative contribution (coded as percentages) to 6 childcare activities: Helping with homework; listening to problems; taking children to activities and appointments; playing with them; bathing and dressing; getting children to bed.
Childcare hours	“About how many hours per week would you (or your partner) spend looking after your child (ren) in these ways?” (6 activities listed above). “About how many hours per week would your partner spend looking after your child (ren) in these ways?”
Indoor tasks	Relative contribution (coded as percentages) to 9 housework activities: Doing the dishes; preparing breakfast; preparing the evening meal; cleaning and vacuuming; doing the laundry, ironing; cleaning the bathroom and toilet; grocery shopping, keeping in touch with relatives.
Outdoor tasks	Relative contribution (coded as percentages) to 4 housework activities: Repairing things around the house; taking out rubbish; mowing the lawn; driving the car.

Other tasks	Relative contribution (coded as percentages) to 4 housework activities: Caring for pets; gardening; organising your social life; making arrangements to have repairs done.
Total tasks	Relative contribution (coded as percentages) to 17 housework activities (indoor, outdoor and other) as listed above.
Housework hours	“About how many hours a week would you spend: Preparing meals and doing the dishes; shopping for food and other essentials; other housework, including laundry, vacuuming and cleaning?” “About how many hours a week would your partner spend?”
Employed	1= Employed in paid labour; 2= not employed in paid labour.
Household Type	1= Couple, children under 5; 2= couple, children over 5; 3= couple, no children.
Age	Respondent’s age in years (18 to 54 years)

The housework tasks included in the questionnaire were repairing things around the house; making arrangements to have repairs done; doing the dishes; preparing breakfast; preparing the evening meal; cleaning the house and vacuuming; doing the laundry; doing the ironing; cleaning the bathroom and toilet; caring for pets; taking out rubbish; grocery shopping; mowing the lawn; gardening; driving the car when going out together; organising your social life; and keeping in touch with relatives. As with the childcare tasks the responses to these questions were coded from 0 to 100 indicating the relative contribution of husbands and wives to housework. In order to distinguish between different kinds of household tasks, three housework scales were constructed on the basis of these questions. “Indoor tasks” combines those items which are conventional female chores: Doing the dishes, preparing breakfast, preparing the evening meal, cleaning and vacuuming, doing the laundry, ironing, cleaning the bathroom and toilet, shopping and keeping in touch with relatives. “Outdoor tasks” is based on items considered to be conventional male tasks: Repairing things around the house, taking out rubbish, mowing the lawn, and driving the car. The remaining four tasks, caring for pets, organising your social life, gardening and making arrangements to have repairs done, were combined into a scale referred to as

“other tasks.” “Total tasks” is the sum of all seventeen tasks. ⁱⁱⁱ

In addition to measuring the relative contribution of spouses to childcare and housework, the questionnaire also asked for information about how much time was spent on childcare and housework. In both cases, respondents were asked to indicate how many hours they would spend on each activity in an average week, as well as how much time was spent by their spouse.^{iv} We would expect that as time on childcare and housework increases, then respondents will be less likely to define the domestic division of labour as fair. For childcare hours the question asked about childcare as a whole, while for housework hours the question specified hours per week on three main activities: Preparing meals and doing dishes, grocery shopping, and other housework, including laundry, vacuuming and cleaning. These items enable the construction of measures of childcare hours for self, childcare hours for partner, housework hours for self and housework hours for partner.

Employment status is measured by a single variable where 1 is employed in paid labour and 2 is not employed in paid labour. Household type is coded into 3 categories distinguishing between couples with children under 5 years in the household, couples with children over 5 years in the household and couples with no children. Age is the respondent’s age measured in years.

Results

The first stage of the analyses examines the domestic division of labour between husbands and wives. Table 2 reports the average number of hours spent on childcare and housework for cohabiting men and women. The table presents the average number of hours spent on childcare and housework per week by the respondent, as well as the respondents’ reports on the number of hours spent by their partner. The results show that women spend more time on childcare and housework than men, a finding consistent with all other studies of the domestic division of labour in western industrial societies. For example, women report spending approximately 58 hours per week on childcare and about 24 hours per week on housework. On the other hand, men report spending about 24 hours per week on childcare and about 9 hours per week on housework.

Table 2. Average Hours per Week spent on Childcare and Housework for Cohabiting Men and Women

Tasks	Men		Women	
	Self	Partner	Self	Partner
Childcare ^a (N = 918)	23.5	50.2	57.9	22.3
Housework (N = 1405)	8.8	21.9	24.2	6.7

^a The childcare scale is calculated on a sample restricted to couples with at least one child under 15 years living in the household.

Table 3 examines husbands’ and wives’ relative contributions to domestic labour in terms of the kinds of tasks usually performed by each spouse. The results indicate a clear division of labour with women taking most responsibility for childcare and indoor tasks. In contrast men do about 80 percent of outdoor tasks. Other tasks are shared roughly equally, but overall women report responsibility for about 64 percent of all domestic labour while men report responsibility for about 45 percent of domestic work.

Table 3. Relative Contribution to Childcare and Housework for Cohabiting Men and Women ^a

Tasks	Men	Women
Childcare Tasks	41.9	66.9
Indoor Tasks	29.5	78.1
Outdoor Tasks	80.1	29.5
Other Tasks	54.8	57.5
Total Tasks	45.3	63.7

^aThe distribution of childcare tasks is calculated on a sample of cohabiting respondents with at least one child under 15 years living at home (N = 918). The distribution of total tasks, which includes childcare, is also based on this sample. The distribution of housework tasks is calculated on a sample restricted to cohabiting respondents (N = 1405).

I turn now to the main focus of the paper which is to consider how these patterns vary in relation to lifecycle stage. I measure lifecycle stage with a variable that distinguishes different household types. As Table 4 shows I distinguish between households containing a couple with children under 5 years of age, households with a couple with children over 5 years of age and households with no children. Table 4 shows the mean scores on each of the domestic labour scales for each of these household types.

Table 4. Mean Scores on Domestic Labour Scales by Household Type

	Couple with Children Under 5		Couple with Children Over 5		Couple with No Children	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Respondents Hours on childcare	28(174)	68(247)	19(169)	45(201)		
Partners hours on childcare	64(173)	23(246)	35(169)	21(199)		
Relative contribution to childcare	38(174)	69(247)	45(170)	64(199)		
Respondents hours on housework	9(176)	23(249)	9(262)	26(356)	7(157)	16(208)
Partners hours on housework	26(176)	7(249)	23(262)	6(356)	12(157)	7(209)
Relative contribution to Indoor tasks	26(176)	80(249)	28(262)	81(356)	37(150)	71(208)
Relative contribution to Outdoor tasks	83(176)	26(249)	80(262)	30(356)	78(150)	32(208)
Relative contribution to Other tasks	55(176)	44(249)	55(262)	60(356)	55(150)	56(208)
Relative contribution to Total tasks	46(176)	62(249)	46(262)	64(355)	51(149)	58(208)

There are a couple of possible interpretations of this finding. It may be that in households with young children women are more likely to work part-time or not at all, while men remain in full-time employment. In these cases, it is likely then that women will contribute a greater share to childcare duties. At the same time, some research has suggested that men are more likely to be involved in leisure activities with children than activities of basic care (so they are more likely to take them to sporting events and play with them than to feed them, bathe and dress them and so on). If this is the case then it is likely that men will take a greater share of childcare with older children than with younger children.

Turning now to the figures for housework, we see that women spend over twice as much time on housework compared to men. Interestingly, housework hours do not vary greatly for men or women in relation to age of children in the household, but they do decline considerably for women when there are no children in the household. This could be either due to the fact that when there are no children in the household women are more likely to be in paid employment and hence to have less time available for housework, or that having no children in the household means that there is less housework to do (we know that children can create extra work in the form of cleaning, washing, cooking etc). Note too that the relative share of tasks in the household, is most equal when there are no children in the household. This is seen in relation to both indoor housework particularly and total tasks. This finding lends some support to the view that the arrival of children leads to the development of more inequitable household arrangements than in households without children.

Some of these patterns may be influenced by variations in employment participation of men and women, or by age. For example, some of what we observe in relation to domestic labour patterns in households with no children may be due *not* to the presence or absence of children, but to the fact that couples in these households may both be in paid employment, or may both be typically much younger than couples in other household types. To isolate the effects of household type on domestic labour while controlling for these possible spurious effects I run a series of multiple regression equations predicting each of the domestic labour scales. The models control for age and employment status thus allowing us to examine the “unbiased” effect of

household type on domestic labour. It should be noted that the purpose of the models is not to examine the main determinants of domestic labour involvement (this has been done in a lot of earlier work including my own and would involve including a lot more variables in the model such as attitudes, education and so on). Rather the aim is to focus on the effects of lifecourse stage. I thus only include two key variables which are likely to impact on my interpretation of the impact of lifecourse stage. These are employment status and age. Table 5 reports regression coefficients for the childcare scales, while Table 6 focuses on the housework scales.

Table 5. Regression Coefficients for Division of Labour on Childcare

	Hours Spent on Childcare		Relative Contribution to Childcare Tasks	
	Men <i>b</i>	Women <i>b</i>	Men <i>b</i>	Women <i>b</i>
Children under 5 in household	8.69 ^{xxx}	13.99 ^{xxx}	-7.67 ^{xxx}	3.04 ^x
Employed	-21.05 ^{xxx}	-25.77 ^{xxx}	-4.78 ^x	-2.78 ^x
Age	-.10	-.33	-.04	-.06
R Square	.13	.24	.10	.03
Total	343	448	344	446

^x p<.05
^{xxx} p<.001

In relation to childcare, the regression coefficients confirm the bivariate patterns from the earlier tables in relation to men's relative contribution to childcare tasks. The table shows that men with children under 5 in the household score about 8 percentage points lower on the division of childcare scale than men with older children. The fact that this pattern is statistically significant even when you control for employment status indicates that men's lower involvement is not due to spending greater time in paid work. Rather it may be that it is something to do with the kind of tasks that men typically do for children. At the same time, though, both men and women spend longer hours on childcare when there are young children in the household with women doing an extra 14 hours per week compared to women with older children and men doing an extra 9 hours per week compared to men with older children.

In terms of the impact of employment, hours spent on childcare decline considerably when men and women are in paid employment. This is particularly so for couples with children under 5 years in the household with women doing about 26 hours less per week and men doing about 21 hours less per week. Age has no significant impact on the patterning of labour in relation to childcare.

Note that for hours spent on childcare these models do quite well, explaining between 13 and 24 percent of the variance.

Table 6 presents the models for housework tasks. For women, having children in the household leads to significantly longer hours on housework (an extra 10 hours per week regardless of age of children) but no significant increase for men. Moreover, as with childcare, men's relative contribution to housework declines when there are children in the household even when employment status is controlled. But interestingly, men's contribution to outdoor housework significantly increases, and women's significantly decreases when there are young children in the household compared to when there are no children, suggesting that the arrival of children leads to more inegalitarian pattern of labour at home.

Table 6. Regression Coefficients for Division of Labour on Household Tasks

	Hours on Housework		Relative Contribution to Indoor Tasks		Relative Contribution to Outdoor Tasks		Relative Contribution to Other Tasks		Relative Contribution to Total Tasks	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b
Children under 5 in the household	.73	9.77***	-11.03***	7.93***	5.77**	-6.42***	.27	-.52	-4.39***	2.57*
Children over 5 in the household	-.05	9.30***	-8.18***	8.34***	.05	-2.15	.38	3.99*	-4.22***	4.88***
Employed	-4.43***	-7.39***	-4.12	-5.46***	5.80*	-2.01	-4.93*	-.45	-1.98	-3.45***
Age	.01	.04	-.09	.13	.29**	-.00	-.04	.12	.01	.09
R Square	.03	.18	.07	.10	.04	.02	.01	.02	.03	.06
Total	586	812	588	813	588	813	588	813	587	812

In terms of the impact of employment on household labour, the table shows that for both men and women being employed leads to fewer hours on housework, but much more so for women than for men. Women do about 7 hours less of housework per week if they are employed while men do about 4 hours less. Employment also decreases women's relative share of indoor housework but has no impact for men.

As for childcare, age has virtually no impact on the division of housework labour.

Finally overall, the model does very well in explaining the variance for women's hours spent on housework, but less well for each of the other models. This suggests either that there is less variance to be explained in the other models (this is probably the case according to my earlier research) or that there are some very significant variables left out of the model.

Conclusions

The analyses reported here suggest three main conclusions. First the gender division of labour in the home is intact. The expectation that women's movement into paid employment would lead to changes in the organisation of household labour between men and women has not been realised. Women do the bulk of domestic work, although there is some evidence that the division of labour, if not the division of time, in relation to childcare is more egalitarian than the division of labour in relation to housework. It is perhaps worth noting too that there is little evidence that households are moving toward outsourcing domestic labour, with only 19% of people in this sample reporting using paid help with domestic labour.

Second there is evidence that household type (in this case used as an indicator of lifecycle stage) impacts on the organisation of domestic labour. There is evidence that the division of labour is most inegalitarian in the early years of the lifecycle when there are young children in the household. At this point women are not only performing the bulk of childcare but also the bulk of housework. Interestingly too this pattern is not due to differences in men's and women's labour force involvement, but rather appears to be due to differences in the kinds of activities that men and women do in the home. At the same time, the division of labour appears to be most egalitarian when there are no children in the household.

Third, employment participation has a greater impact on women's involvement in domestic labour and childcare than men's. This suggests that the boundaries between home and work are asymmetrically permeable. There is a much closer link between paid and unpaid work for women than there is for men. Men's involvement in unpaid work is not subject to the same amount of variation in relation to paid work as is the case for women.

Finally this paper began by arguing for the need for longitudinal analyses to examine these patterns fully. Clearly the cross-sectional data presented here can only approximate the impact of lifecycle stage on household labour organisation. The second wave of data from the "Negotiating the Life Course" project, which will be available later this year, will enable much more fine-grained investigation of these issues.

Notes

ⁱ The main aim of the project is to examine the impact of changes throughout the lifecourse on employment participation and career progression. We plan to follow these individuals for a period of approximately ten years, focusing on their experiences during the early to mid stages of the lifecourse when the problems of combining paid and unpaid work are most acute. The first wave of fieldwork was conducted in two stages. The first stage, conducted in 1996 resulted in a sample of 819 respondents with a response rate of approximately 55 percent. The second stage was conducted in 1997 and resulted in a sample of 1412 respondents with a response rate of approximately 51 percent.

ⁱⁱ Measuring relative contribution to housework in percentage terms is a standard way of assessing the domestic division of labour (see for example, Wright et. al. 1992; Kalleberg and Rosenfeld 1990)

ⁱⁱⁱ For the childcare tasks scale, respondents with at least 3 valid responses out of 6 possible responses were given a mean score on the missing 3 items. Respondents with more than 3 missing items were excluded. A similar procedure was used for the housework scales. For the indoor tasks scale respondents with at least 5 valid items out of 9 possible responses were included in the scale by assigning mean scores to the remaining items. For the outdoor tasks scale and other tasks scale, both of which contained 4 items, respondents with at least 2 valid items were included by assigning mean scores to the missing items. The total tasks scale gives mean scores to those with at least 10 valid responses out of 17 possible responses.

^{iv} Although asking respondents to indicate the amount of hours spent by their partner on childcare and housework may be open to bias or error, the key issue here is not the actual number of hours spent by one's partner on domestic work, but rather the perception of how many hours is spent by one's partner on domestic work. For example, if the respondent believes that their partner is doing less housework than they are, it is likely that they will perceive the division of labour to be unfair.