

To Marry or Not to Marry: The Impact of Marital Status on the Division of Household Labor

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Abstract

Data from the “Negotiating the Life Course” project, a national survey conducted in Australia in 1996/97, is used to examine domestic labor patterns amongst de facto and married men and women. I also assess the impact of a prior period of cohabitation on domestic labor patterns after marriage. The results show that women spend more time on housework and do a greater proportion of housework than men regardless of marital status. However, the patterns are most traditional amongst married men and women. Women in de facto relationships spend less time doing housework and do a smaller proportion of regular indoor activities than married women. Men in de facto relationships do a larger proportion of regular indoor activities and a lower proportion of traditional male outdoor tasks than married men. The data also show that couples who have cohabited prior to marriage have more egalitarian divisions of labor than those who have not cohabited prior to marriage. The paper concludes by arguing that the institution of marriage is significant for maintaining traditional gender patterns and that the “incompleteness” of the de facto relationship provides a period of relative freedom in which to negotiate more equal roles.

INTRODUCTION

This paper compares the division of domestic labor between couples in de facto and marital relationships. Most research on the domestic division of labor has concentrated on married couples looking at the factors which promote or hinder egalitarian allocations of household labor between husbands and wives. But recently a number of studies have appeared which examine the allocation of housework across households with differing living arrangements, for example amongst de facto and remarried couples (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; South and Spitze 1994; Sullivan 1997; Gupta 1999). Part of the impetus underlying these studies is the trend toward increasingly diverse forms of family living arrangements in which living alone, de facto coupling, divorce and remarriage are increasingly common. For example Australia, like many other advanced countries, has experienced a huge growth in the percentage of couples choosing to cohabit with their partner in a de facto relationship rather than to marry (Glezer 1997; ABS 1998). In Australia, “of those who married in 1976, almost 16 per cent had cohabited prior to marriage. By 1992 this proportion had increased to 56 per cent (De Vaus and Wolcott 1997: 17). Similar figures have been reported for the United States and Europe (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kiernan 2000). Raley (2000) has reported that amongst American women born 1950-54 who had formed a union by age 25, 18 per cent had cohabited in a de facto relationship, compared to 38 per cent for those born 1965-69.

Research has consistently shown that wives do more domestic labor than their husbands, although there is some evidence that the gender gap in household labour may be declining over time (Berk 1985; Shelton 1992; Baxter 1993; Brines 1994; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer and Robinson 2000). We know less about what happens within de facto couple households, although previous research has indicated that de facto couples have less traditional patterns of domestic labor than married couples (Stafford, Backman and

Dibona 1977; Blair and Lichter 1991; Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitze 1994; Gupta 1999). These results have been interpreted in terms of the gender perspective that argues that housework is not simply about doing household tasks, but involves the symbolic enactment of gender within marriage (Berk 1985; South and Spitze 1994).

The current paper reexamines housework arrangements amongst de facto and married couples, but also goes beyond earlier studies by examining whether housework patterns developed within a de facto relationship endure after marriage. This is important since a significant proportion of de facto cohabiters move on to marriage at a later date. While the percentage of people who cohabit in a de facto relationship at some stage of their lives has increased dramatically, the proportion of couples in de facto relationships at any given time, is relatively small (De Vaus and Wolcott 1997; Glezer 1997; Bumpass and Lu 2000). For example, in Australia in 1996 de facto couples comprised only about 10 per cent of all couples (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999). Some of these cohabitation unions will dissolve but many others will move on to legal marriage. Bumpass and Lu (2000) report for the United States that about half of de facto unions result in marriage. This suggests that de facto relationships should be seen as a stage in the “courtship” process, or as a trial marriage, with many people then choosing to marry (Glezer 1997). In other words, for many couples de facto cohabitation appears to be an alternative at a particular stage in the lifecycle, rather than a long-term rejection of marriage.

Earlier research has suggested that the domestic division of labor may be shaped by the experience of previous relationships (Thompson 1991; Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; South and Spitze 1994; Sullivan 1997). But most research to date has concentrated on the experience of remarriage, arguing that couples that experienced conflict over

housework or unfair divisions of labor in a previous marriage, will seek more equitable and congenial arrangements with their new partner. In other words, the focus has been on the impact of a previous negative experience. But as South and Spitze (1994: 345) point out, if people do increasingly move through transitions during their lives from never married to de facto, to married, divorced and remarried, it is important to examine the time men and women spend doing housework in each of these living arrangements. In this paper therefore, I shift the focus to examine the impact of a previous positive experience. Since many de facto couples do move on to marriage we can assume that the cohabitation experience, including the domestic division of labor, was generally positive. The question is how this positive experience impacts upon the domestic division of labor after marriage.

EXPLAINING HOUSEHOLD LABOR

Two main kinds of models have emerged to explain the allocation of household labor. On the one hand, is the economic exchange model which argues that women perform housework in exchange for economic support (Walby 1986; Brines 1994). Under this model, the allocation of labor in the household is seen as fundamentally economic and rational. Men provide income for the household, and in exchange, women perform unpaid domestic labor. The expectation is that as women's time in paid labor increases and as their contribution to the household income increases, the division of labor in the home will become more equal. In other words, childcare and housework are performed in a rational and efficient manner in which the person with the most time, and the least economic resources, performs the most domestic labor.

While some support has been found for this model (Pleck 1985; Coverman 1985;

Ross 1987; Baxter 1992) the results are less than clear cut. There is evidence that women's time in paid labor impacts on the amount of time that women spend on domestic labor, with longer hours in paid employment leading to a reduction in women's time on domestic work (Baxter 1992). But there is contradictory evidence of the relationship between paid and unpaid work for men. Some research has found no relationship between paid and unpaid work for men (Ross 1987), some has found that increased hours of paid work lead to decreased hours of unpaid work for men (Coverman 1985; Western and Baxter 2001), while others have suggested that reduced time in paid work leads to a decrease in men's time on domestic work. For example, unemployed or retired men have been found to do less domestic work than employed men (Shamir 1986; Morris 1990). This finding has prompted some researchers to suggest that unemployment or retirement challenge men's masculine identity as the family breadwinner (Warr and Payne 1983; Shamir, 1986). During these periods it is unlikely that men will challenge their identities further by performing increased amounts of domestic labor. There is more consistent evidence of a relationship between relative economic contribution to the household and level of involvement in domestic labor. The research suggests that the smaller the gap between husband's and wife's economic contribution to the household the more equal the domestic division of labor (Ross 1987; Baxter 1993).

While the logic of the economic exchange model is gender neutral, the alternative model for understanding the allocation of household labor focuses precisely on the symbolic importance of gender for the organization of housework (Berk 1985; West and Zimmerman 1987; Ferree 1990). The gender display model points to the symbolic construction of housework as women's work and as a display of women's love

for her family and subordination to her husband (Berk 1985; Ferree 1990). West and Zimmerman (1987) specify the model by proposing an “ethnomethodologically informed” account of gender as an accomplishment.

Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126).

Berk applied this model to housework arguing that the current arrangements for the organization of domestic labor support two production processes: household goods and services and, at the same time, gender (1985: 201). She argued that the marital household is a “gender factory” where, in addition to accomplishing tasks, housework produces gender through the everyday enactment of dominance, submission and other behaviours symbolically linked to gender. The process of “doing gender” does not operate at a conscious level. But rather gender, or gender identity, is produced as men and women carry out routine household tasks. Doing housework then is an important component of doing gender and helps to explain why gender far outweighs other factors in explaining who does housework, why housework is not allocated efficiently or rationally according to who has the most time, and why men and women are likely to see the division of labor as fair, even though it is objectively very unequally distributed (Ferree 1990: 876-877).

HOUSEWORK IN DE FACTO AND MARRIED HOUSEHOLDS

Elements of both of these models have been incorporated into studies focusing on housework patterns across marital status. Some studies have argued that the production of gender is likely to be more pronounced in married couple households than in de facto

couple households (Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitze 1994). Rather than “producing only gender, differences in the way that husbands and wives divide their time between paid labor and household labor reflect the production of the particular, and gendered, roles of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’. As such, the accomplishment of gender may be different for wives and husbands than unmarried cohabitators” (Shelton and John 1993: 403). South and Spitze also argue that “if heterosexual couples indeed produce gender through performing housework, we would expect women in married-couple households to spend more time doing housework than women in any other living situation; we would expect men’s time spent doing housework to be lower in married-couple households than in other household types” (1994: 330). Alternatively, a pattern across households of more or less constant gender difference would cast doubt on the gender perspective (South and Spitze 1994: 330). In other words, the accomplishment of gender is situation-specific and is likely to be more pronounced within married couple households than in de facto couple households.

At the same time, de facto and married couples are likely to differ on certain key characteristics relating to the economic exchange model. For example, women in de facto relationships have been found to spend more time in paid work per week and to contribute more to the household income than married women (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Shelton and John 1993). This is likely to be due in part, to the fact that de facto couples are less likely to have children than married couples, but may also be due to differing orientations to paid work amongst women who choose to cohabit rather than marry. Thus in terms of the economic exchange model, women in de facto couples are likely to be less dependent on their partners than married women, and hence to have reduced responsibility for domestic labor compared to married women.

A further reason advanced in the literature to explain possible differences in housework patterns across marital statuses concerns the concept of “incomplete institutionalization” (Cherlin 1978). Cherlin suggested that remarried and step-families may be under greater stress than other families because “they lack normative prescriptions for role performance, institutionalized procedures to handle problems, and easily accessible social support” (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992:217). On the other hand, incomplete institutionalization also leaves open the possibility of negotiating more equal relationships precisely because of the lack of rules prescribing the conduct of behaviour in remarriages (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; Sullivan 1997). The same explanation might be applied to the situation in de facto relationships. De facto relationships are subject to some, but not all of the institutional rules surrounding legal marriages. The “incompleteness” of these rules may well leave space for de facto couples to negotiate more egalitarian relationships than is the case in conventional marriages.

Thus to the extent that de facto couples reject marriage as an institution, it may be that they will also explicitly reject the roles of breadwinner/housewife that go along with traditional marriage. Clarkson, Marin and Waite’s (1995) work would support this view. They find that couples who choose to cohabit in a de facto union tend to be those who find marital roles constraining and who are looking for some flexibility and freedom in their relationships. Of course, de facto couples are not a homogenous group; they may include couples who view cohabitation as a forerunner to marriage, as well as those who have rejected marriage and plan to permanently cohabit in a de facto relationship. But either way, they are likely to identify less with homemaking and breadwinning roles, either because they have explicitly rejected those roles, or because

they have not yet reached a point in their relationship where they are ready to define themselves as husband and wife.

In sum then, the gender display model, the economic exchange model and the incomplete institutionalization model would all lead us to hypothesize that the domestic division of labor will be more egalitarian amongst de facto couples than amongst married couples.

THE IMPACT OF PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

A number of studies have investigated the impact of previous marital relationships on the domestic division of labor in current marriages (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; Sullivan 1997). Underlying the research is the notion that couples compare their current situation to a previous relationship as a means of justifying current arrangements, or alternatively negotiating for a different kind of relationship. The idea of a comparison referent stems from the work of Thompson (1991) who argued that women's sense of entitlement in terms of domestic work is based on comparisons with people other than their husbands. For example, women may compare their domestic load with that of their mothers or female friends. Hence women may be more likely to perceive their current arrangements as fair and equitable than if they compared themselves with their husbands. South and Spitze (1994) take this further suggesting that "spouses may compare themselves to their own past or projected experiences in another marital status, or even to others who are not currently married ..." (South and Spitze 1994: 344).

This hypothesis has been explicitly tested by Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane (1992) and Sullivan (1997). Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane used the National Survey of Families and Households in the United States to compare housework patterns between first married

couples and remarried couples. They found that husbands in remarried households were significantly “more likely to participate in mundane housework than their first-married counterparts” although the amount of time spent on housework by husbands and wives did not vary across family type (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992: 229; see also Pyke and Coltrane 1996). They use Cherlin’s incomplete institutionalization hypothesis to explain their findings, arguing that the lack of prescribed roles and models in remarriages and step-families might have positive impacts by allowing for more experimentation and bargaining over housework allocation.

Sullivan (1997) using data from the British Household Panel Study produces similar findings. She finds that the proportion of time that the partners of women in their second-plus partnerships spend on housework is greater than the proportion of time spent by partners of women in their first partnership. Like Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane (1992) she interprets these results in light of the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis, arguing that the “explanation is related to issues of interaction involved in the negotiation of housework responsibilities within new partnerships” (Sullivan 1997: 10). Furthermore she suggests that men who have experienced conflict within previous relationships over the domestic division of labor will be more likely to adopt less conflictual habits in their new marriage, while women who have experienced unequal divisions of labor in earlier relationships will be likely to seek new partners who are more involved in domestic labor.

However when investigating the impact of previous relationships on current domestic labor arrangements, Sullivan does not distinguish between couples who have been previously married from those who have previously cohabited in a de facto relationship. Her justification for this is that she is primarily concerned with “live-

together relationships within which negotiations and issues of equity surrounding housework would apply” (Sullivan 1997: 3). However, I would argue that it is important to distinguish between these two groups since, as Sullivan notes, the issue is complicated by the fact that de facto couples do appear to have more egalitarian relationships than married couples.

Gupta (1999) has also examined the impact of transitions in marital status on changes in men’s time on housework. This is the only study that examines the impact of the transition from de facto cohabitation to marriage on the domestic division of labor. Using two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households in 1987-1988 and 1992-1993, she finds that men substantially decrease their housework hours when they enter coresidential unions while women substantially increase their housework hours when they enter unions. Furthermore she finds that never married men decrease their housework time by the same amount when they cohabit in a de facto relationship and when they marry, while women increase their housework by the same amount when they cohabit in a de facto relationship and when they marry suggesting that “entry into a coresidential union is of greater consequence than the form of that union” (1999:710). Finally she finds no differences for either men’s or women’s housework time when they move from de facto cohabitation to marriage. It is unclear from Gupta’s work however whether those who move from de facto cohabitation to marriage have married a new partner or the same partner they had cohabited with in their de facto relationship. This is important if the concern is to focus specifically on changes in marital status rather than changes in choice of partner. In other words, it is important to hold the couple constant when examining the impact of de facto cohabitation on the domestic division of labor in a later marriage.

In the current paper, I investigate the impact of de facto cohabitation on the domestic division of labor amongst married couples. Using this earlier work as a starting point, I argue that it is important not only to compare the domestic division of labor amongst currently cohabiting and currently married couples, but also to examine the impact of a previous period of cohabitation on subsequent arrangements after marriage. I focus specifically on those who marry their former cohabiting partner. While Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane (1992) focus on the impact of remarriage and Sullivan (1997) and Gupta (1999) on the impact of previous partnerships (de facto and married) I focus here on the impact of a previous period of de facto cohabitation on the domestic division of labor within marriage. If the de facto cohabiting experience is a positive experience characterized by more egalitarian divisions of domestic labor than in marriage, we might expect to find that some of this experience is carried over into the marital relationship. On the other hand, married couples who have not lived together prior to marriage and who have thus not experienced a time of “incomplete institutionalization” in which to negotiate more equitable roles may adopt more traditional arrangements. Similarly, if married couples have a previous period of de facto cohabitation as a comparison referent, to use Thompson’s term, then it may be that they will be more likely to negotiate a more equitable arrangement than if they did not have a period of de facto cohabitation as a comparison referent.

In the following analyses then I distinguish between three groups: currently cohabiting respondents in a de facto relationship; currently married respondents in their first marriage who cohabited with their spouse in a de facto relationship prior to marriage; currently married respondents in their first marriage who did not cohabit with their spouse in a de facto relationship, or anyone else, prior to marriage. When

examining the impact of de facto cohabitation on housework patterns after marriage, I confine the sample of married couples to those who are in their first marriage in order to avoid complications relating to previous relationships. I also confine the sample to those who have married the person they cohabited with rather than respondents who have cohabited in a de facto, but then married a different person. It may be that cohabitating relationships that did not lead to marriage were negative experiences. My concern here is with the impact of a previous *positive* de facto cohabiting relationship on the organization of domestic labor after marriage.

DATA, VARIABLES AND STRATEGY

The data used in this paper come from a national Australian survey conducted in 1996/97 titled “Negotiating the Life Course: Gender, Mobility and Career trajectories.” The sample comprised 2,231 respondents between the ages of 18 and 54 years, selected from the electronic white pages. The data were collected by means of a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) with a response rate of 55 per cent.

The dependent variables in these analyses are a set of measures of the domestic division of labor – two relating to childcare and five concerning housework activities. In both cases I distinguish between the proportionate contribution of husbands and wives to particular activities, in addition to the amount of time spent doing them. This is important since some activities require very little time to complete, while others are more time consuming. Often the tasks undertaken by men, for example taking out the garbage and mowing the lawn, are tasks that are undertaken only once a week or less, whereas the tasks routinely completed by women, such as cooking and cleaning up after meals, tend to be daily activities and often more time consuming. It is possible therefore

to have an equal division of labor where both husband and wife undertake 50 percent of the domestic work, but in which women spend considerably more time than men on domestic labor.

The childcare tasks were helping with homework; listening to problems; taking children to activities and appointments; playing with them; bathing and dressing; and getting children to bed. 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. 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 had 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 %

The housework tasks 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 housework tasks" is the sum of all seventeen tasks.

For the childcare scale, respondents with at least 3 valid responses out of 6 possible responses were assigned a gender specific mean score on the missing items. Respondents with more than 3 missing items were excluded. A similar procedure was adopted 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 gender specific 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 gender specific mean scores to the missing items. The total tasks scale gives gender specific mean scores to those with at least 10 valid responses out of 17 possible responses. This procedure resulted in less than 1 per cent of the sample being excluded due to missing data on the housework scales and 20 per cent for the childcare scale.

Respondents were also asked 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. For childcare the question asked about childcare as a whole, while for housework the question specified hours per week on three main activities: a) Preparing meals and doing dishes; b) grocery shopping, and c) other housework, including laundry, vacuuming and cleaning.

I construct two measures of marital status. The first measure is a bivariate measure that distinguishes between those who are currently cohabiting in a de facto relationship (N=179) and those who are currently legally married (N=1231). A de facto relationship is defined as living together in an intimate relationship for at least three months. I use this measure to first investigate differences in housework patterns for de facto and married couples. In the second stage of the analyses I construct a different version of marital status that distinguishes between married couples who cohabited prior to marriage and those who did not cohabit prior to marriage. The aim here is to examine the impact of de facto cohabitation on housework patterns after marriage. In these analyses I subdivide the married group into those who cohabited with their spouse for a period of at least three months prior to marriage (N=453), and those who did not cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage (N=630). I also confine the married sample to those in their first marriage, and exclude those who have lived with someone for more than three months but who did not marry that person. Since my focus here is on the impact of a previous positive experience of cohabitation, I want to minimize, as far as possible, the impact of previous negative relationships on the negotiation of housework arrangements in marriage.

The other independent variables included in the analyses measure factors found

in previous research to be significantly related to the domestic division of labor, or are included as controls for key socio-demographic differences between de facto and married couples that might influence the domestic division of labor.

The economic exchange model is examined with two variables – paid work hours, and the household income gap. Paid work hours is a measure of the number of hours worked in the week prior to the survey including overtime. The gender gap in household income is a measure of the gap in annual income, in Australian dollars, between the male and female partner in the household. Annual income includes wages and salary, in addition to any income from self employment or business, pensions, benefits, allowances, rents, dividends and interest in the financial year preceding the survey. The household income gap is constructed by subtracting the female partners' income from the male partners' income to give a measure of the gender gap in household income.

The gender perspective is measured by a gender role attitudes scale based on four items. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statements: (1) If both the husband and wife work they should share equally in the housework and care of the children. (2) There should be satisfactory facilities so that women can take jobs outside the home. (3) It is better for the family if the husband is the principal breadwinner and the wife has primary responsibility for the home and children. (4) Ideally, there should be as many women as men in important positions in government and business. Responses to these items ranged from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). A principal components analysis of these four items identified one factor. Item 3 was reverse coded and the items were then summed to create a scale ranging from 4 to 20 with a low score indicating a more egalitarian attitude. Cronbach's

alpha for the scale is .52. Respondents with one or two missing items on the scale were assigned gender specific mean scores on the scale (less than 1 per cent of the sample).

Socio-demographic variables included in the analyses are whether or not there are pre-school children in the household, level of education attained, household income, age of respondent and whether or not the respondent is a home owner. The presence of pre-school children is both a measure of lifecycle stage and an indicator of the amount of time required for housework. It is measured with a dummy variable coded 1 if there are children under the age of five living in the household and 0 if not. Level of education is coded as three dummy variables: primary education includes respondents who have primary school education only or incomplete secondary schooling; secondary education includes respondents who have completed secondary schooling but have no further qualifications; post school qualifications, the contrast category, includes respondents who have completed high school and have a post school qualification. Household income is the sum of the respondent's and partner's annual income in Australian dollars. Age is the respondents age in years ranging from 18 to 54 years. Home owner is scored 1 if the respondent owns or is buying their own home and 0 if they are in rental accommodation. We might expect that respondents who are home owners will spend more time on household work than those who are in rental accommodation. Gender is coded 1 for men and 0 for women.

The analyses first examine whether de facto couples have more egalitarian housework arrangements than married couples. The first set of OLS regression equations examine the impact of the explanatory variables on housework, and in particular, whether any observed differences by marital status remain when key socio-demographic differences are held constant. The second set of OLS regression equations focus on the

impact of a previous period of cohabitation on housework arrangements after marriage. It is in these later analyses that I further restrict the sample of married respondents to those who are in their first marriage and differentiate between those who cohabited with their partner prior to marriage and those who did not cohabit prior to marriage. Missing data dummy variables are included in the regression analyses for the missing cases on paid work hours, the gender gap in household income, household income and home ownership (data not shown in tables).

DOMESTIC LABOR AND MARITAL STATUS

Table 1 shows a bivariate analysis of men's and women's involvement in childcare and housework in relation to marital status. The first point to note is that women do a much larger proportion of childcare and routine indoor housework tasks than men regardless of marital status. Additionally women spend more time on housework than men, an average of 19 to 25 hours per week compared to 9 hours per week. Men report most responsibility for outdoor housework activities and women report least responsibility for these activities. In terms of gender then, the differences are quite stark and similar to those reported in other studies of the domestic division of labor (South and Spitze 1994; Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; Sullivan 1997).

Table 1. Mean Scores on Domestic Labor Variables by Gender and Marital Status (N's in brackets)

	Men		T-Value ^a	Women		T-Value ^a
	<i>Cohabiting</i> <i>g</i>	Married		Cohabiting	Married	
Childcare Hours	25 (20)	23 (325)	.29	65 (41)	57 (407)	1.52
Childcare Tasks	40 (20)	42 (326)	-.75	67 (41)	67 (405)	-.02
Housework Hours	9 (66)	9 (521)	-.30	19 (111)	25 (701)	-4.43***
Indoor Tasks	40 (65)	28 (522)	5.81***	71 (111)	79 (701)	-5.73***
Outdoor Tasks	70 (66)	81 (523)	-5.32***	31 (111)	29 (697)	1.01
Other Tasks	54 (65)	55 (521)	-.24	56 (111)	58 (699)	-.81
Total Housework Tasks	51 (65)	47 (523)	2.67**	58 (111)	62 (701)	-3.81

^a T-test for difference between means

** p < .01

*** p < .001

In terms of differences across marital status, the results show no significant differences between de facto and married respondents in relation to childcare (although the cell sizes are very small in some cases), but there are significant differences between these two groups in relation to housework. Men in defacto relationships do a greater proportion of indoor housework activities than married men (40 per cent compared to 28 per cent) and a smaller proportion of outdoor housework activities than married men (70 per cent compared to 81 per cent). But although men in de facto relationships do a greater proportion of housework tasks overall, as shown in the total housework tasks scale, there are no differences in the amount of time spent on housework for the two groups. In both groups men report spending 9 hours per week on housework. For women

however there is a significant difference in time spent on housework in relation to marital status with married women spending an additional six hours per week compared to women in de facto relationships. This finding supports the work of Shelton and John (1993) who report that marital status affects women's time on housework but not men's. Married women also report significantly greater responsibility for indoor work than women in de facto unions and greater involvement in housework tasks overall.

To what extent are these differences due to marital status or to other socio-demographic differences between de facto and married couples that may lead to differences in domestic labor patterns? As Table 2 shows there are clear differences between married and de facto respondents in terms of paid work hours, gender role attitudes, income, levels of home ownership and demographic characteristics. For example, men and women in de facto relationships have more egalitarian gender role attitudes than married men and women and are less likely to have pre school age children in the household. These are two factors that may contribute to less time spent on housework by women in de facto relationships. Additionally, women in de facto unions also spend longer hours in paid employment than married women whereas the pattern is reversed for men with married men spending longer hours in paid employment than men in de facto relationships. In line with these trends, the gender gap in household income is lower in de facto couple households than in married couple households. These differences may contribute to more traditional divisions of labour in married couple households than in de facto couple households. The question is then, do the differences in domestic labor patterns according to marital status observed in Table 1 remain when these possibly confounding differences are held constant.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations (in brackets) for Independent Variables by Gender and Marital Status

	Men					
	Cohabiting		Married		Total	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Paid work hours	36.8	(20.5)	43.7	(21.0)	42.9	(21.0)
Gender role attitudes	7.72	(2.5)	8.80	(2.5)	8.68	(2.5)
Gender gap in household income	12,022	(23,210)	33,776	(57,197)	31,393	(54,927)
Pre school children (1=Yes)	.18	(.38)	.31	(.46)	.30	(.46)
Home owner (1=Yes)	.49	(.50)	.85	(.36)	.81	(.39)
Household income	54,943	(30,964)	70,542	(60,210)	68,729	(57,777)
Education						
Primary	.29	(.46)	.22	(.42)	.23	(.42)
Secondary	.13	(.34)	.09	(.30)	.10	(.30)
Post-school Qualification	.57	(.50)	.68	(.47)	.67	(.47)
Age	32	(8.8)	39	(7.6)	38	(8.1)
Women						
	Cohabiting		Married		Total	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
Paid work hours	27.7	(20.7)	19.9	(19.8)	20.94	(20.1)
Gender role attitudes	6.8	(2.0)	8.2	(2.5)	7.97	(2.5)
Gender gap in household income	6,923	(20,330)	14,326	(33,667)	13,329	32,284
Pre school children (1=Yes)	.28	(.45)	.31	(.46)	.31	(.46)
Home owner (1=Yes)	.67	(.47)	.85	(.36)	.83	(.38)
Household income	58,524	(29,973)	59,110	(36,453)	59,029	35,614
Education						
Primary	.23	(.42)	.27	(.45)	.27	(.44)
Secondary	.18	(.39)	.16	(.36)	.16	(.37)
Post-school Qualification	.59	(.49)	.57	(.49)	.57	(.49)
Age	33	(9.3)	38	(8.1)	38	(8.4)

The answer is yes, for both men and women. Since the numbers of de facto cohabiting respondents with young children in the household are quite small and since there were no observable differences in childcare patterns between de facto and married respondents, I focus solely on housework activities in the remaining tables. As Tables 3 and 4 indicate, marital status is a significant determinant of domestic labor involvement when differences in the socio-demographic characteristics of men and women are held constant. Married men do significantly less indoor work and significantly more outdoor work than men in de facto unions, although the difference between these two groups on the total housework measure is not significant. On the other hand, married women do significantly more indoor work than women in de facto unions, and spend an additional 3.3 hours per week on housework. In general then, the differences observed in Table 1 hold in the multivariate analyses suggesting that married respondents have less equal and more traditional housework arrangements than de facto cohabiting respondents.

Table 3.OLS Coefficients of Regression of Domestic Labour Responsibility on Marital Status and Other Explanatory Variables for Men

	Indoor Tasks	Outdoor Tasks	Other Tasks	Total Housework Tasks	Housework Hours
Marital Status	-6.35*** ^a (2.00)	7.56*** (2.14)	1.15 (2.36)	-1.28 (1.39)	1.36 (.98)
Paid work hours	-.07 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.09* (.03)	-.05* (.02)	-.05*** (.01)
Gender role attitudes	1.84*** (.24)	.36 (.26)	.33 (.28)	-.80*** (.17)	-.45*** (.12)
Gender gap in household income (unstandardised estimate x 10000)	-1.22*** (.20)	.45* (.21)	.50* (.23)	.87*** (.13)	-.17 (.09)
Pre school children (1 = yes)	-2.84* (1.43)	3.69* (1.52)	-.04 (1.67)	-.62 (.98)	.93 (.70)
Home owner (1 = yes)	-3.37* (1.65)	.65 (1.77)	2.68 (1.95)	.98 (1.14)	-1.64* (.81)
Household income	.88*** (.18)	.49* (.19)	.06 (.21)	.60 (.13)	.03 (.09)
Education					
Primary	-3.91** (1.42)	-3.45* (1.52)	1.71 (1.68)	-2.48** (.98)	-1.76* (.70)
Secondary	-.42 (1.98)	-2.59 (2.12)	-1.34 (2.35)	-1.16 (1.37)	.14 (.97)
Post school qualification	-	-	-	-	-
Age	-.009 (.08)	.03 (.09)	-.08 (.10)	-.01 (.06)	.04 (.04)
Constant	55.35	68.58	56.52	58.64	13.81
Root mean square error	13.90	14.92	16.40	9.63	6.84
Adjusted R ²	.24	.06	.03	.15	.07
Number of cases	586	588	585	587	586

^a Coefficient with standard error in brackets

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001

Table 4 OLS Coefficients of Regression of Domestic Labour Responsibility on Marital Status and Other Explanatory Variables for Women

	Indoor Tasks	Outdoor Tasks	Other Tasks	Total Housework Tasks	Housework Hours
Marital Status	4.55*** (1.44)	-1.12 (2.01)	.42 (1.98)	2.25 (1.19)	3.28* (1.33)
Paid work hours	-.16*** (.03)	.02 (.04)	-.02 (.04)	-.09*** (.02)	-.20*** (.03)
Gender role attitudes	1.10*** (.20)	-.13 (.28)	-.13 (.28)	.52** (.16)	.43* (.18)
Gender gap in household income (unstandardised estimate x 10000)	.46** (.17)	.07 (.23)	.82*** (.23)	.42** (.14)	.10 (.15)
Pre school children (1 = yes)	1.47 (1.20)	-3.70* (1.69)	-2.65 (1.66)	-.70 (.99)	3.24** (1.11)
Home owner (1 = yes)	-3.86* (1.34)	-3.27 (1.89)	-1.34 (1.85)	.97 (1.11)	.07 (1.24)
Household income	.04 (.15)	.03 (.21)	.28 (.21)	.05 (.12)	.32* (.14)
Education					
Primary	2.70* (1.14)	.30 (1.60)	-.42 (1.57)	1.42 (.94)	3.93*** (1.06)
Secondary	.70 (1.35)	-1.45 (1.89)	-2.90 (1.87)	-.58 (1.12)	-.20 (1.25)
Post school qualification	-	-	-	-	-
Age	.02 (.07)	.06 (.09)	.17 (.09)	.07 (.06)	.05 (.06)
Constant	63.92	31.55	51.88	53.32	20.40
Root mean square error	13.38	18.64	18.40	11.05	12.37
Adjusted R ²	.18	.005	.02	.09	.19
Number of cases	812	808	810	812	812

^a Coefficient with standard error in brackets

* p < .05

** p < .01

*** p < .001

In terms of the competing models for explaining the gender gap in housework, there is support for both the economic exchange model and the gender perspective, although the patterns are different for men and women. For men there is support for the impact of gender role attitudes, paid work hours, the gender gap in household income and education on involvement in housework. In support of the gender perspective, men with egalitarian gender roles attitudes and higher levels of education, do a greater proportion of indoor work and spend more hours on housework than their counterparts. In support of the economic exchange model, as men's time in paid work increases and their contribution to the household income increases relative to their partner's, men's involvement in housework declines.

For women, time spent in paid work is also a key determinant of women's domestic labor load as shown in Table 4. As women's hours of paid work increase, their proportionate involvement in indoor tasks declines along with the amount of time they spend on housework. Gender role attitudes, the gender gap in household income and education also have an impact on women's involvement in housework as they did for men.

The final analyses assess the impact of a previous period of cohabitation on housework patterns after marriage. I confine the analyses here to the three key housework scales for which most variance was explained in the earlier models. Additionally, while each of the models include all of the control variables shown in Tables 3 and 4, for reasons of simplification I only report the coefficients for the marital status dummy variables.

Table 5. OLS Coefficients for Regression of Domestic Labour Responsibility on Cohabiting Experience and Other Explanatory Variables for Married Men.

	Men			Women		
	Indoor Tasks	Outdoor Tasks	Housework Hours	Indoor Tasks	Outdoor Tasks	Housework Hours
Currently cohabiting	6.16** ^a (2.06)	-6.66** (2.20)	-1.45 (1.01)	-3.39* (1.51)	-1.40 (2.09)	-2.85* (1.40)
Married, cohabited prior to marriage	-	-	-	-	-	-
Married, did not cohabit prior to marriage	-.51 (1.28)	2.41 (1.37)	-.23 (.63)	2.63* (1.05)	-5.68*** (1.46)	0.98 (0.97)
Constant	48.94	76.39	15.15	67.99	31.50	23.51
Root mean square error	13.92	14.90	6.85	13.33	18.48	12.37
Adjusted R ²	.24	.06	.07	.18	.02	.19
Number of cases	586	588	586	812	808	812

^a Coefficient with standard error in brackets

* $p < .05$

** $p < .001$

The results indicate that a previous period of cohabitation has no impact on men's involvement in domestic work. For women however, there are significant differences in terms of relative contribution to indoor and outdoor activities, but not in terms of time spent on housework. Married women who did not cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage do significantly more indoor work and significantly less outdoor work, suggesting a more traditional division of labor amongst this group. This suggests that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage for women is important for establishing less traditional arrangements that may be then carried over into the marital relationship.

CONCLUSION

This paper adds to our understanding of the relationship between marital status and the household division of labour by examining differences in housework patterns between de facto and married couples. Importantly it also considers the effect of a previous period of de facto cohabitation on housework patterns after marriage, thereby shifting the perspective from a focus on the impact of a previous negative period to the impact of a previous positive period on housework patterns.

In support of previous studies, these analyses indicate that de facto cohabiting couples have more egalitarian domestic labor arrangements than married couples (Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitze, 1994). The gender perspective, the economic exchange model and the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis all predict that housework will be shared more equally between de facto cohabiting partners than married partners. The results presented here show that the gender division of labor between partners in a de facto relationship is less traditional, and at least for women, de facto cohabitation is also associated with less time spent on domestic labor compared to married women. What this suggests is that, for women, it is not just the presence of a man that leads to spending more time on housework and having greater responsibility for more of the household tasks, but it is the presence of a *husband*. It appears that the institution of marriage exerts influence on men and women to behave in particular kinds of ways, independently of the social and economic differences between married women and women in de facto unions which we know lead to women doing more housework (for example, having young children in the household, women spending less time in paid work and women contributing less of the household income).

In terms of the gender perspective, there is some support for the view that “doing

gender” is less important in de facto households than in married households. Of course, “doing gender” is clearly also important in de facto households as indicated by the large gender gaps in housework time and responsibility across these household types. But to the extent that the gender gap in time and responsibility is larger between married partners, this suggests that “doing gender” is more important here than in other kinds of relationships. This is further supported by the importance of the gender role attitudes scale which is a significant predictor of both men’s and women’s involvement in particular kinds of household activities and their time spent on housework.

But there is also significant support for the economic exchange model that argues that women perform housework in exchange for economic support. For both men and women, time spent in paid work is a key factor predicting not only what kind of work one does in the household, but also how much time is spent doing it. On the other hand, the gender gap in household income is a predictor of what kind of work one does, with greater resources leading to a lower percentage share of work, but does not influence how much time is spent on housework.

Additionally, the results show that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage changes the balance of labor after marriage, at least for women. Like Gupta (1999) I find no differences in the number of hours spent on domestic labor after marriage, but my results show that women who have not cohabited with their husband prior to marriage do proportionately more indoor work and less outdoor work compared to women who did not cohabit with their husbands prior to marriage. This suggests a less traditional division of labor amongst those who have spent some time as de facto cohabitantes prior to marriage. The implication is that, at least some, of the patterns established in the cohabiting period carry over into the marital relationship. Alternatively, women who

have cohabited in a de facto relationship with their husband prior to marriage may use this period as a positive point of comparison allowing them to establish and maintain more equal arrangements than would otherwise be possible.

One way of thinking about these findings is to see de facto relationships as “incompletely institutionalized.” Following Cherlin (1978), de facto relationships may lack the normative prescriptions set out for marital relationships. His argument was that this “incomplete institutionalization” would lead to greater stress, dissatisfaction and marital breakdown. But what the current research would suggest is that “incomplete institutionalization” also provides greater freedom to negotiate alternative roles and responsibilities. While this may still lead to greater stress and less social support from other outside agencies or other family members than is the case for married couples, alternative kinds of living arrangements may also open the way for more equal sharing of domestic roles (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992).

At the same time, it appears that a period of “incomplete institutionalization” may also open the way for more egalitarian relationships after the institution has been completed, in other words, after the relationship has been legally sanctioned as marriage. Although the data clearly show that all marriages, even those that involved a prior period of cohabitation, are less egalitarian than cohabiting relationships, the evidence indicates that for women the patterns established during the de facto cohabiting period carry over after marriage.

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