

WHAT IS WORK?

Looking at all work through the lens of unpaid housework

by

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Introduction

Without any doubt, work is one of the most important issues for sociology to grapple with. Sociologists have long been concerned about the type of work we do, the conditions under which we perform it, the social relations that both create these conditions and arise from them, etc. But what is work? Various sociological dictionaries define work in a manner that includes paid work as well as unpaid housework, only to proceed to immediately exclude the latter from consideration.

Reskin, for instance, suggests:

“Although the term “work” generally is used to denote the exertion of effort toward some end, economically it refers to activities oriented toward producing goods and services for one’s own use or for pay. The conception of work as a means of generating income underlies most sociological scholarship on work and most of the available statistics. Unpaid productive work, including that done in the home (indeed, homemaking is the largest occupation in the United States) and volunteer work, tends to be invisible. This article focuses primarily on paid work” ((Reskin 2000: 3261)

The other definitions likewise all allow for the inclusion of unpaid housework, but then deal only with paid work (Nolan 1993; Marshall 1998; Johnson 2000). We are therefore confronted with a situation in which unpaid housework is formally acknowledged as work but in fact not considered as relevant in the discussion of it.¹ This neglect has a long history. An older edition of the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences explicitly excludes housewives from the North American definition of the labour force, “because such work is outside the characteristic system of work organization of production” (Jaffe 1972: 470). Jaffe draws an explicit parallel between the work of housewives and those of slaves or serfs, who are also not defined as part of the working

¹ There are other forms of work that are usually excluded from systematic consideration, namely activities which happen below the level of official scrutiny, such as people who work on the black or grey markets, performing work for which they are paid but that is not officially registered because it is a cash transaction that never gets declared. Likewise, transactions which involve swaps of labour (I help you build your garage and you help me re-roof my cottage) tend to fall below the radar.

force. Jaffe cites, in this context Walker (1872) who states that “involuntary or uncompensated efforts are not to be classed as labor. They are merely the result of the use of a given amount of capital. Slaves are owned, like horses or oxen; and what value they confer is from their employment as so much capital.” (cited by Jaffe, *ibid.*) See Eichler (1978)

We both have and have not come a long way since the 1970’s. Few people would use the language today with respect to slaves employed in the above passage, and we have considerable knowledge about the unpaid work performed by housework – yet as we have seen from the recent Encyclopedia definitions above, unpaid housework is still not seen as an integral part of the sociology of work.

Housework has been explored as a specific type of work (Lopata 1971; Oakley 1974; Eichler, Guppy et al. 1977; Luxton 1980; Hochschild 1989; Oakley 1990; DeVault 1991; Shelton and John 1996; Hochschild 1997; Luxton 1997; Luxton 2001) in considerable detail. We know that women continue to perform more of it across the world. We also know that unpaid housework produces services and goods of significant value – just how great a value depends on how it is calculated. Chandler estimates the gross value of unpaid housework in Canada as either 46.3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) if calculating the opportunity cost, or as 41.4% of the GDP if calculating the replacement cost (Chandler 1994). Using a different method of calculating value, Ironmonger concludes that “the aggregate value of the goods and services produced in the household sector of the economy is almost equivalent to the entire output of the market economy.” (Ironmonger 1996)

But what do we mean when we talk about housework? The majority of sociological studies use a list of specific housekeeping tasks, sometimes including childcare as a separate activity, sometimes excluding it. These lists tend to focus on concrete and specific tasks: preparing meals, cleaning, going shopping, etc. They typically do not include the cognitive and planning work and the time management that lies behind these concrete and very mundane tasks.

“Responsibility for the household involves performing work that is largely mental ...” (Hessing 1994: 613) It often involves coordinating schedules, planning while keeping in mind the needs and desires of persons of different sexes and ages, negotiating conflicts, solving crises, and much more. In most of the sociological literature, this complexity is not reflected. Here is not the space to engage in a detailed critique of this literature, however, the dissatisfaction with the manner in which housework is conceptualized and operationalized provided a starting point for this project.

In the project described below, we wanted to start by exploring how people themselves saw the unpaid work they performed within the home. This led to a fascinating set of discussions of what work is and is not. In this paper, we draw on these discussions to reflect on the nature of all work: why are some purposeful activities seen as work and others not? How do the perceptions of people who perform these work activities mesh with how sociology deals with work? We turn the lens that is usually applied to work the

other way: feminist scholars who argued for decades that housework is real work would point out the parallels between paid work and unpaid work to demonstrate the work character of the unpaid work.

In this paper, we will do the opposite: starting with unpaid housework and care work, we will explore what makes some activities work and others not for our respondents. We will then compare their understanding to the way in which the sociology of work conceptualizes and operationalizes work, and explore the consequences of this approach. Using the understanding derived from our respondents, we will end by speculating what issues would come into our view if we adopted an alternative approach.

The Study

The project on Unpaid Housework and Lifelong Learning is part of a large-scale study on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL). (See <http://wall.oise.utoronto.ca/> for a description of the complete project.) The housework study consists of four phases, and at the time of writing this we have completed the data collection for phase 2. The first phase involved sending questionnaires to members of various women's groups, asking about the nature of their unpaid housework as well as community work and the learning attached to it. The second phase involved 11 focus groups that follow up on some of the findings of the questionnaires. We will draw primarily on the focus groups in this paper, although we will also use some of the other data.

We held 11 focus groups in 3 cities. The cities were chosen to accommodate clusters of people who had either volunteered in phase 1 of the project to participate in a focus group, or where we could recruit a group of people who were significant to us (specifically, women with disabilities, black women, Chinese women, and aboriginal women as well as two groups with men).² The groups ranged in size from 4 participants to 9 and were constituted as follows:

The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 84 years. There was a range of ages in all groups except for two: one was a group of young women, the other a group of old women. Nine of the groups consisted only of women (n = 57), two only of men (n = 9). With respect to racial/ethnic background, most groups were homogeneous: one consisting of Chinese women, two of black women, one of Aboriginal women and one group of women with disabilities from varying backgrounds. The rest of the participants were white. Overall, the ethnic composition was as follows: 21% black, 14 % Aboriginal, 14% Chinese, 4% other, 47% white. All the men, except for one Chinese man, were white. We

² We would like to thank the following people for helping us to get some of these groups together: Kathryn Spracklin is the MAW representative on this project and helped us get access to MAW and other groups which yielded the first volunteers for the focus groups. Mary Anne Burke for putting us into contact with Barbara Anello, who organized a group of women with disabilities for us, Njoki Wane who put us in contact with the International Black Women's Congress, Willa Liu for organizing the Chinese focus group, Linda Hearst who put us in contact with Mary Laronde, who not only organized a group of Aboriginal women for us on very short notice, but re-organized the group when our flight was cancelled and we had to re-schedule the meeting for another day. Also, Mojgan Shojaei for arranging an ethnically diverse group of women, with and without disabilities.

also had two groups consisting of women with disabilities (one of them included one able-bodied woman). Overall, 20% of the participants had disabilities. There was also good diversity across the groups in other key demographic areas. Fifty-two percent had children at home, 48% did not, 14% were never married, 62% currently married or partnered, 21% separated or divorced, and 3% widowed. Fifty percent had a personal income below \$20,000 (11% a household income below \$20,000) and 5% a personal income (11% a household income) of over \$100,001. Finally, 36 percent did not work for pay, 26% worked part-time for pay, and 30% worked full-time for pay. In terms of education, our participants were disproportionately well educated: only 8% had high school or less, and 30% had a graduate degree.

Every person we recruited after phase 1 was completed also filled out the questionnaire, in which we asked people to list the unpaid housework, care work and community work they performed and discuss what they learned from these activities. The questions were open-ended. Our intent was not to find out who does what – the literature on this issue, at least with respect to husbands and wives, is quite extensive. (See Eichler forthcoming, for some references) Instead we wanted to know what tasks people would list – would they restrict themselves to the lists usually employed by sociologists or would they also list some of the cognitive, administrative, emotional and management functions? Who would list the latter tasks, who would not?

As we expected, the majority of respondents tended to list specific tasks in the questionnaire, and only a few listed the superordinate functions.

INSERT TABLE WITH WHAT TASKS ARE LISTED BY ORDER OF FREQUENCY

This finding could have two reasons: either people did not engage in these superordinate functions, or they were not aware of the fact that they did. We suspected that the latter was the case, and this is what we explored in the focus groups. Eichler facilitated all the groups, Matthews served as assistant facilitator in all but two of them (the Chinese group, where two Chinese students served as assistant facilitators,³ and the second black women's group⁴).

We posed eight questions to the group. The questions that are relevant here are the following ones: After an icebreaker, we asked them to list some of the household and care work they normally did, and received, as expected, much the same picture as is found in table 1. We then asked them:

“Did you do any of the following tasks?

- provide emotional support to someone (comfort, console, counsel, give advice, listen to)
- organise, plan, manage or arrange matters (e.g. family events or schedules, arrange repair people, tutors, play dates for children)
- deal with crises

³ Willa Liu and Lingqin Feng.

⁴ Lingqing Feng served as assistant facilitator.

- maintain contact with family members or friends through telephoning, writing letters or visiting
- take care of yourself
- resolve conflicts”

Without exception, people in each of the groups would agree that this was certainly what they did. One participant exclaimed spontaneously “This is my life!” while the others in the group nodded and agreed verbally.

We then discussed in some detail some of the ways in which people engaged with these tasks, and then discussed whether or not this constituted work. After the group interview was completed, the tapes were transcribed and analyzed.

In the following, we will draw on this discussion to identify how respondents defined work.

Definitions of Work

There were five distinct conceptions of work that emerged from the 11 groups. They are not mutually exclusive definitions, instead, they represent conceptions of work that draw the boundaries differently in each case, thus including and excluding different sets of activities and utilizing different rationales:

- a) the conventional definition (activities that are paid are work)
- b) the extended conventional definition (activities are work if they either could be paid or are directly related to paid work, even though unpaid)
- c) the goal achievement definition (purposeful activities that are oriented towards achieving some goal without being enjoyable at the moment)
- d) the social coercion definition (activities that are unpleasant, would not be done by choice, but must be done)
- e) the energy expenditure definition (any activity that requires energy and effort is work)

Each of the definitions draws a boundary of what counts as work and what does not. To understand the various conceptions of work, we look at the boundaries from the inside out and the outside in: what is included – what is work? what is excluded – what is non-work? Why?

a) The conventional definition

With a few exceptions, people agreed that activities that are paid are work. There was relatively little discussion around this issue, since there was little disagreement. As one older woman said: “If it’s work, you pay somebody to do it. It’s the money that makes it work.” (North Bay group)

The only people who disagreed were some people who took a view of work that understood work as socially coerced and who argued that paid work that was enjoyable

did not constitute work. Patricia, who had just started her own business, for instance said: “I think work is something that ... you have to do and you don’t really want to do it. I work at my own business and get paid for it, and I enjoy it. I love it. I don’t consider it work. “

But by and large people accepted the conventional definition of work as one form of work. It was interesting to hear some of the old women (over 80 years of age) struggle with two conflicting views: The view that only paid work is real work, with the recognition that certainly some of the housework feels like work not only to others but to them as well. “I’m of a different generation, and I have trouble, I guess... I’m a social worker, and work, for me, was out, and I worked outside the home. ... it’s partly my generation.”(Ottawa group)

The old women were women who had had paid employment at a time when having a job was still much less common for women than today. Their paid work preceded the animated discussions around unpaid work as work that started in the 1970s among feminists.

The Chinese women, as a group, all agreed that none of the housework/care work activities under discussion were work, but yet acknowledged that they sometimes felt like work.

In China, women always do the housework. But we don’t take it as work. It’s really work, but we don’t take it as work, because [there is] no pay. There’s no pay.

This is exactly the type of distinction made by some of the old Canadian women – an adherence to the notion that only paid work is work with a simultaneous acknowledgement that housework is work but is not seen as such by themselves or others.

The focus on paid work led to three definitions of unpaid activities that constitute work, all centering around paid work. We are therefore calling it an extended conventional definition, since the rationale is still organized around pay.

b) The extended conventional definition

The three versions of an extended conventional definition are the third person criterion, the two-person career, and unpaid work that is necessary background work for paid work.

b1) The third person criterion

This definition is favoured by economists when they are computing the value of unpaid work. It was first proposed by Margaret Reid in 1934. (Ironmonger 1996) The question posed is: Could this activity be done by someone else for pay? If so, it counts as work. Our respondents explicitly put forward this criterion. In particular, one of the two men’s

groups spend a considerable amount of time discussing this criterion, and people within the group largely agreed.

Paul, for instance, suggested:

When you're looking at it from the standpoint of a lot of the things we do, we can actually hire people to do them for us, but we choose not to. So ... we're not getting paid to do it, we're kind of using our time instead to do tasks.⁵ (Men's 1)

When asked which tasks could be performed by someone else, people listed primarily housekeeping and child care tasks: "... you could hire a maid, people to clean your house, or nannies, child care, you can hire people to walk your dogs, home renovation, any repair work that you do."

Everybody within the group agreed that these tasks were work, but there was a discussion about some of the tasks we had listed on our sheets (from providing emotional support to conflict resolution, see above).

Michael, for instance, mused:

I agree that the other ones are work ... but a lot of these things require ... your own touch. And it's private. It's not as close as having to breathe to live, and you can't give somebody else the job to make you breathe ... but the example you have about conflict resolution. I mean, technically you could have a counselor doing something like that as well, but in a way, maybe the people you're dealing with wouldn't want to go to the counselor, they would probably think you're nuts to even suggest it. (Men's 1)

Michael wavered whether or not conflict resolution between family members did or did not constitute work. Bryan challenged him by arguing that because of the pleasure one gets from helping, for instance, one's parents, it is not necessarily work:

... for example, you said that you went over and helped your mother. I think in that situation, you did it partly for yourself. Would you be getting any of that satisfaction if you dialed up somebody, a friend or professional to go over and say look, my mother's sick, could you ... drop in just to take care of her. ... you might go help your parents by shoveling the driveway. Well that's the work. The non work part is the pleasure you get from being proud that you could do that for your parents, or that they appreciate it. And that's not work.

However, when we challenged them asking whether paid work is never pleasurable, people agreed that paid work could be highly pleasurable as well.

In the women's groups, the third person criterion definition came up as well and was pretty much accepted.

⁵ All quotes have been slightly edited for readability and all names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

I do think it's work, because ... almost everything that some people can afford to pay other people to do it, and those who can't afford will just take on everything and do it. So it's all work. (black women's 1)

One particular case deserves special mention: a woman who had actually implemented the third person criterion by getting herself paid by her husband. Babette recounted:

... the way we do our finances, my husband pays me for the time that I take care of the kids during the week, and he pays me for doing the finances and things, because otherwise, we would have to pay someone else. And what I was realizing is, I wasn't even breaking up my time into manageable tasks until he paid me for them, because I was just thinking that I have to get all of this done, and I should just be able to get everything done and everything. But, it just wasn't possible, so then I started paying other people and I thought, "Well, wait a second? Why don't I just pay me to do that?" You know, so, we shifted things around. So yeah, I do think of it as work ...

Since they do not claim the money transfer on their taxes, we can think of this approach as a transaction with symbolic rather than legal meaning.

The third person criterion tends to be the one that is invoked when economists calculate the value of unpaid work. Ironmonger, for instance, uses this criterion in his calculations of the value of unpaid housework (Ironmonger 1996), as does Chandler, who defines it as "those economic services produced in the household and outside the market, but which could be produced by a third person hired on the market without changing their usefulness to members of the household." (Chandler 1994: 3.1) Marshall uses the third person criterion to make a distinction between unpaid domestic labour and employment. Thus "School work, studying, participating in sport for exercise, cooking or gardening for pleasure cannot be employment, even if they involve strenuous effort" (Marshall 1998: 706). Grint refers to the third person criterion to critique the distinction made between work and non-work (work that is not paid). He says "Since almost every activity undertaken without payment in the home is also undertaken for money in the formal economy the distinction between work and non-work is seriously flawed" (Grint 1998: 30).

b2) The Two-Person Career

Papanek (1973) defines the two-person career as a career that requires a husband-wife team to perform it but in which only the man is paid, while the wife renders supportive and necessary but unpaid assistance. The classic example is the wife of the "corporation man" of the 1950's-1960's (Whyte 1956) but it includes many other occupations. It also described the work of some of our participants.

Gloria, a retired university teacher in her 80's, recounts how she helped her second husband, who was a politician:

... he said, when we got married and the Privy Council gave a dinner for us, he concluded his bridegroom's remarks by saying, "I hope you agree that a politician and a political scientist make good bedfellows." And then, along comes an election. That's when I really worked. I would knock on the doors and all the things you used to do for politics. I opened four and five church bazaars every Saturday. I found that work, although it was fun. I enjoyed it, too. But, one time, we'd been walking the streets and knocking on the doors, seeking votes and so on ... and, so one night, I came home. I was just exhausted, and he said, "Let's have a drink." He would never touch a drink during election campaign, but this night we did. And I was so tired, and he said, "Well, I'm sorry that you've had to work so hard." I said, "You married me under false pretenses. You didn't tell me I had to be a street walker." Well, I didn't earn any money that way, either. But, I don't know that I thought it was work. I just thought I was part of the team, doing something. (Ottawa group)

It is interesting that this woman describes her unpaid work as work, but then adds that she did not think of it as work at the time, although she does now. Consciousness intervenes in what is defined as work or not work. We will come back to this issue later.

Marjorie, who was also involved in a two-person career speaks of it as follows:

My husband was in the foreign service, so I spent a lot of my time abroad. ... I had no doubt that was work. You know, it was supporting him, but I wouldn't have given a choice. ... My role as the wife of ambassador - that was work. Now, nobody paid me for it, and I was involved in efforts to ... try and get the department to look at whether they could do something about payments for the wives of ambassadors, because they really do ... a job. (Ottawa group)

Both women are typical examples of wives in two-person careers, which used to include wives in a number of other jobs, such as Minister's wife, executive's wife, etc. While it seems that the number of two-person careers has somewhat diminished, due to the fact that most wives today have their own job or career, it is by no means dead. (Mederer and Weinstein 1992; Frame and Shehan 1994)

b3) Self-care in preparation for a paid job

The third way in which unpaid work was directly linked to paid work and hence recognized as work involved self-care that consisted of making oneself presentable for a paid job. Self care represents a most interesting borderline case of how work is defined, and we will consider it below in some detail. Here, we are only considering one particular aspect of it which was non-controversial. As Dorothy explained:

.. if I'm going to work, ... that's when you feel like you really have to make the effort, and to me, that's work. I mean, just getting up and washing your face and going about your day, that's one thing. But having to go to work, you have to do a little extra. ... I'm that much older, and I figure if I start looking sloppy or something, then I'll get dumped. ...now it's not that easy, so I have to make a little effort to look, you know, as presentable as you can. And that, to me, is a little bit more work. (Ottawa group)

Overall, then, the expanded conventional definition still takes its cues from our understanding of paid work. Unpaid work is recognized as work either because it unambiguously could be paid for because the service is in fact available on the labour market (the third person criterion), or it is the acknowledged support role for a paid position (the two-person career), or it is seen as necessary for successfully engaging in one's paid employment (self care in preparation for a paid job).

c) The Goal-Achievement Definition

The next definition was not one of the more prominent ones and was put forward only by a relatively smaller number of people. We are including it as a definition here anyhow, because it straddles some of the other definitions in an interesting way. It first appeared when discussing the role of a student in one of the men's groups. Was studying work or not was the question that was debated. All agreed that studying is definitely work. The question then was what made it work? The student responded:

There's no immediate gratification. I guess. You know, I'm sure once I get out into the working world again, when school is over, it'll all be worthwhile... for the moment, I would say when you're working at any kind of academic work, I would consider it work, yeah.

Another group member responded: "So you're going to ultimately get paid for your education, in a sense." (Men's 1)

One man cited his father to specify when studying was work, when not:

My father loves languages. He doesn't need to know other languages, but he has a bunch anyway. So he goes and teaches himself, but, now would I consider that work for him? Just knowing my dad, I know that's pleasure. Because that to him would mean he could go travel to that country, and go speak the language and blend in and the whole thing. (men's 1)

If, however, this had been the only application of the goal achievement definition, we would have classified it as another version of the expanded conventional definition of work. However, various people also applied it to non-paid work.

When talking about whether playing with one's own kids was work or not, the first response was "Depends on the kids!"(laughter)

One man continued:

It is work... If I was at his age, I wouldn't consider that work, because it would be something that I would want to do, and I would enjoy doing. But as an adult, I don't really get a lot out of the things that interest him, so it's not really pleasurable for me as much. ... You know, or if you see something, some development on his part, you get a reward. But I would still consider it work in that regard. (Men's 1)

A mother of young children concurred:

We all put effort into all of these things, and don't necessarily get much back, sometimes, immediately. Sometimes, with children, it's years down the road that the effort you put into a particular thing will get ... some benefit for somebody down the road, in terms of a healthy adult. (Toronto young)

The goal achievement definition of work implies that activities that are not intrinsically enjoyable, and that are engaged in because of some desired outcome in the future are work, because there is no immediate gratification, and a definite goal is to be achieved. It may be something as specific as improving one's job opportunities through studying or something as diffuse as helping a child develop in a positive way. This means that the goal achievement definition cross-cuts the paid/unpaid divide. However, it was not a definition that was put forward by many people.

d) The Social Coercion Definition

A quite different view is an alienated view of work that considers as work those activities which are hard, unpleasant, not freely chosen, drudgery, and difficult.

As one woman said: "For me, work is often something that you don't want to do that you have to do in order to provide for your family. It can be paid, it can be not paid." She cited as examples "Oh, I just love scrubbing toilets! (laughter) Or killing spiders, yeah that's right up at the top." (North Bay group)

Someone in one of the men's groups suggested: "I'd say that work would be anything you feel like you must do. Or, or have to." He goes on to say that if you do something "out of your own good will, then I don't believe that would be considered work" and cites as an example providing emotional support. (men's 1)

Another man argues:

It brings to me connotations of something that you have to force yourself to do, ok, necessary, forced - it brings me connotations of I get some sort of reward ... I work in my backyard, the grass is cut, it looks good, that's my reward and my wife's off my back. (men's 1)

In spite of the fact that in all groups people tended to agree that paid work could be very enjoyable while still being work, there was widespread agreement that unpaid work that was not enjoyable was definitely work. An example of unpleasant work was filing your papers. “That’s definitely work.” At the query of why this was so, the answer was “Well, if it’s unpleasurable and you don’t like doing it then it’s definitely work.” (Ottawa group)

Another woman volunteered:

I enjoy baking, so that’s not work. But cleaning the snow, that is work. And, yes there’s no one else to do it, and we have a very short walk, it’s not worthwhile to try to hire somebody to do it, because it doesn’t take more than 5 minutes. ... It’s just something I don’t want to do. I resent the time. I think I’d rather do something else, sewing or reading or whatever it is I enjoy. (old women)

There is also the notion that an activity is work if the locus of control is external rather than resting with the person. As Mary stated:

I guess it depends on how much control you have over it. Which is another factor for me, if I have to do something then I have to go into the work column [rather] than the pleasure column. (old women)

Providing emotional support to others was one of the activities where opinions diverged greatly as to whether this was work or not. Most people either stipulated the conditions under which it would be work and when it would not be – if it was strenuous, difficult, not convenient at the moment but necessary, it was work. Barbara, for instance, recounts that “... when I’m taking care of my son, and supporting him emotionally, and I feel like I’m making a difference, that doesn’t feel like work.” She contrasts this with a situation which in which she feels this turns into work:

But then, when I have to really dredge it up to, you know, to really do the mental machinations. Okay, how do I tell him what words not to say without saying all those swear words myself? You know, that was work to do that. So, I think it’s the amount of effort, the amount of satisfaction I get out of it. (Toronto young)

Another mother of a young child included her own personal situation at the moment to decide whether something was work or not:

Sometimes, the exact same situation can feel like work or not feel like work. If you’re feeling confident, well rested, on top of things, you can handle a meltdown really well, and you’re satisfied at the end of it. You say, “Oh, I handled that really well.” But, if you’re hungry, and you’re losing it, and your husband just told you he’s going to work late another three hours, then it’s work, so it depends, also, on those kinds of things. (Toronto young)

Here again we find a situation in which a mother of a young child would prefer not to have to deal with a situation, but she is compelled to do so by circumstances. Like the provision of emotional support, maintaining contact with family and kin also generated considerable debate as to whether it constitutes work or not. One person summed it up quite succinctly when she stated: “To me, it depends on the quality of the relationship.” She then recounted an example where it constitutes work:

My in-laws were just in town for six weeks from Greece. They come once a year. Luckily, they don't stay with us because any time they come, it's work. They are just high maintenance people who have high expectations and expect to be catered to, and always ask very difficult, probing questions, and put you on the defensive. Those people I find really difficult to have around. Whereas, we have some friends who we don't see enough of, because when they do come over, it's a pleasure to have them and cook for them, because they're happy with whatever I do. I don't feel I have to clean the house, or make a fancy meal, or whatever – they just want to come and visit, and be with you. And so, the quality of that interaction is so much better, and the amount of stress I feel is lower. And so, to me, that doesn't seem like work. That seems more like pleasure. (Toronto young)

In this view, work is not determined by pay or its relation to pay, but by a number of variables which make it unpleasant. Either the work itself is intrinsically unpleasant – scrubbing toilets, killing spiders - or the work itself can range from pleasant to unpleasant, and it depends on the circumstances into which part of the continuum it falls – e.g. friends whose visit is a pleasure versus in-laws whose visit constitutes work. The quality of the experience can be affected by one's own personal situation at any given moment in time: if feeling rested and energetic, an activity may not feel like work, but if feeling tired and stressed, the same activity may turn into work. It is definitely work when the locus of control is external – it is something that one must do, against one's wishes. It can be either paid or unpaid.

Work, in this case, is defined in terms of the experience of working, as well as by a feeling of being compelled. This feeling may be a reflection of an external compulsion – for instance, when a woman is married to an abusive man who insists on a certain level of being serviced – or it may be an internalized standard of a behaviour that is socially generated, but where some considerable leeway exists with respect to its implementation. For instance, when entertaining visitors there are considerable differences in internalized standards as to what degree of cleanliness and hospitality are necessary. This may affect whether such visits are experienced as work or pleasure.

One of the men sums this definition up perfectly: “I think work is something that you have to do and you don't really want to do it” – for whatever reasons, be they personal, impersonal, external, internal, inherent in the work or not.

e) The Energy Expenditure Definition

The energy expenditure definition came up in each and every group, including the group of Chinese women, which was the only group in which there was unanimity that most of the unpaid housework activities do not constitute work. While not every participant agreed with this definition, it was clearly the one that was most frequently put forward. The wording is almost identical between members of the different groups.

“Anything that requires conscious effort is work.” (Ottawa group)

A woman with a disability said: “I consider it work because...no matter what I do, because of my disability, everything I do requires energy. And energy is not something that I have a lot of.” (North Bay)

“I think anything that takes time and energy is work. Whether you’re paid or not.” (North Bay)

“Work, to me, is energy, and it’s effort, and discipline, to sit down and do it.” (Toronto young)

This definition jives with that given in various social science dictionaries and encyclopedias. Reskin defines work as “the exertion of effort toward some end” (Reskin 2000: 3261), Marshall defines it as “The supply of physical, mental, and emotional effort to produce goods and services” (Marshall 1998: 706), Nolan as “the transformation of nature through the expenditure of mental and physical capacities” (Nolan 1993: 715-716). The difference, of course, is that they then proceed to ignore the unpaid dimension of it, while in the focus groups the whole discussion centered around this type of work.

The most extreme version of this definition was put forward but just a few women, such as Heidi, who stated that all activities are work because life is work. “To me, anything that I do is work, whether I enjoy it or not, because ultimately, I reap something from it.”

I consider what I do, things that work. They work for my life, they honour my life. ... I think the simplest way to say is, my life works, so everything I do in my life is a part of that [which] works. (Toronto young)

This included, for this woman, all activities, including those which would have been clearly identified as non-work by others, such as taking a bath, going to the movies, going out for dinner. This was not a point of view shared by many people. In effect, for her, non-work did not exist, but it was a distinction that just about everyone else could and did draw, albeit in very different ways.

What is not work?

What is perceived as not-work is clearly contingent on one’s definition of work. If the definition of work is that it is paid or that it supports paid work, then activities that are not paid and do not support paid work are not work (the conventional and expanded conventional definitions). If activities are defined as work if they directed towards

achieving a specific goal, then those activities which are engaged in because of immediate gratification, where the activity itself is the goal, are not work (the goal-achievement definition). If work is defined as undesired activities which are engaged in because of some external or internal constraint, those activities that are freely chosen are defined as not-work (the social coercion definition). And finally, if work is defined as energy expenditure, then those activities that regenerate our energies are defined as non-work (the energy expenditure definition).

It was interesting to note that the term leisure did not crop up even once in the discussions. Instead, people talked about pleasure, enjoyment, relaxation, as receiving, rather than giving energy.

You know, when I call my friends, to me, that's a joy, that's a pleasure. I do it because it fills my soul, and I want to do it, and I enjoy that communication, and it's a give and take relationship. As opposed to what I feel I do at home, which is give. A lot of giving, or the volunteer work is giving. I do get return – I'm not saying that. I see the joy, you know, I see my son developing. But that's how I view it. It's almost an equally reciprocal relationship with my friends, and I enjoy doing that because I feel filled, I feel happy at the end of it. (Toronto young)

For those who used the energy expenditure definition, non-work was whatever restored energy – which meant different things for different people.

Spiritual activities such a prayer, meditating, going to church, participating in healing circles for the First Nations' women were all examples of activities which replenished energy, and which were definitely non-work for most (but not all) people.

Barbara, a retired accountant over 80 years of age, who is astonishingly active as a volunteer in multiple organizations, stated:

When I was getting paid to be in public relations or advertising, it was work. ... But now that I'm doing that work as a volunteer, I do it because I believe in the organization's mission statement, and I do it because I'm working with women I enjoy being with. It's not work. It's like gardening. If it's a creative endeavour, it's therapeutic. (Toronto old)

The volunteer work is not draining, not done for an extrinsic reason – namely pay – but for the pleasure it conveys, it's therapeutic. In energy terms, it provides energy, rather than drains energy.

An interesting set of thoughts is brought forward by people who do not see unpaid housework as work, because of the fact that it is unpaid, but who simultaneously experience it as work. There is thus a discrepancy between the cognitive and the emotional experience of activities as simultaneously work and non-work. As noted, all of the Chinese women maintained that the housework/care work tasks under discussion did not constitute work. This was in sharp contrast to the two black groups, in which all

participants regarded all of the activities under discussion as work, and in the Aboriginal women's group was the only group in which a number of the tasks, listed earlier in this paper, were mentioned spontaneously by the participants prior to the facilitator asking about them.

We asked the Chinese women, if providing emotional support, solving crises, etc. is not work, what is it? "If you call your parents in China, or if you talk with a friend, is that work, or is it not work? And why, or why not?" One answer was "I think that's my responsibility." and it is definitely not work. The women also maintained that it was enjoyable, and did not admit the possibility that it could ever be anything but a pleasure. This was very different from, for instance, the black women who talked freely about the complications of maintaining contact with their parents and relatives in Africa or the Caribbean – and who eloquently expressed both the joys and frustrations of maintaining such relations.

In the Chinese group, the discussion then turned towards looking after children. Xiaoming said:

For the take care of the children, sometimes, you must supervise him, like, every day, and ... It's very boring, but I have to. So, I just think, I must do that. It's not work, but it's my duty.

We explored this issue further. Why was supervising your children not work? The answer was provided in very explicit cultural terms, and agreed to by all group participants: "Usually we don't think some work happening in our family as work. We just felt as a duty, responsibility. We don't take it as work." Consciousness is the important issue here, as is manifested by the parting remarks of some of the Chinese participants. One of the Assistant Facilitators⁶ took notes of the comments made by the participants as they left the room, talking among themselves in Mandarin. An excerpt from her notes reads as follows:

I see everyone still excited from the conversation just held with Margrit. ... they are talking in Chinese. One says: "I've learned from Margrit that housework is work." Another says: "Next time, I may argue with my husband and tell him what I have learned here if he would say I do nothing at home. I can even ask for payment for housework I do every day, hahaa –" Someone else agrees to say: "Now I know housework is work, but I did not realize/know housework is work before."

When housework and care work are not seen as work because one simply does it, as part of one's role as a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, daughter or friend, we are essentially dealing with a pre-feminist as well as non-sociological understanding of housework as something that is attached to being a wife or a mother, and that is accepted so unquestioningly that it is seen as natural, rather than socially constructed. One of our old woman, for instance, stated:

⁶ Lingqing Feng

... talking to my daughter late at night when she's in Alberta. I don't really think of that work. I think of that as... you know, that's part of being a mother. And when one of my grandchildren this fall broke his leg, I... you know, when we could do something about getting him somewhere or something, I think of it as being a grandparent. (Ottawa group)

An immigrant from Africa reflected on the cultural differences:

When you think of work coming from Kenya, work is actually when you leave your house and go to the office, but you never used to think of work like in the house as work. I remember coming to North America for the first time and people are talking about work, and they're talking about house work, I never used to conceptualize that as house work, because that was not work as far as I was concerned. (Black group 1)

By the time she participated in the focus group, she definitely considered this type of activity work.

One definition of non-work that crosscuts the five definitions of work are activities associated with family or friendship roles that are taken as natural. This coincides with another divide: for whom the work was performed in order to determine whether it counted as work or not. Many - but not all - people drew the line narrowly around the self - if something was done for oneself, this was a reason for not counting it as work. However, as we will see below, the thoughts around self care were considerably more complicated than stated here. People who drew the line this way very clearly included work done for their children, spouse, or close friends as work.

Others drew the line a bit wider. If the work was performed for members of one's own family, it did not count as work. This was the case with those who used a conventional or extended conventional definition of work. Those who held a social coercion view of work did not make the distinction whether the work was performed for their family or others, but looked instead at the quality of the experience.

Whatever the definition of work employed, the vast majority of participants did regard unpaid housework as work and not as non-work or leisure. Nolan (1993: 716) thus is wrong when he writes: "For millions of people work is synonymous with *paid* employment, and many activities which would qualify as work on the broader definition are described and experienced as non-work leisure pursuits".

How Do Participants See Self Care?

We now have five definitions of work generated by our participants and some understanding of what constitutes non-work for them, but we have not yet managed to bring the two together.

As we have seen, there was no agreement across groups or within most groups what aspects of housework or care work constitute work or not. The one point where participants differed the most and where therefore the various definitions came into clearest view was self-care. We will therefore examine why people included are excluded various aspects of self-care in their definition of work.

Originally, we included self care into the list of questions we used in the focus groups because we had found a suggestion within the literature that people with disabilities would have a different definition of what aspects of housework constituted work, and specifically that they would include self care when others would not.⁷ This did not turn out to be the case. There were no discernible differences between the groups consisting primarily or exclusively of women with or without disabilities, or within groups when there were women with and without disabilities regarding this issue.

There were two extremes with respect to self care: on the one hand, the view that everything that takes energy is work, hence self-care is work, and on the other hand, the view that nothing one does for oneself is work, work is by definition performed on behalf of others. Most people fell somewhere in between these two understandings of self-care. They drew the line between work and non-work in the following terms:

Preparation for self-care is work; enjoying the activity itself is not. For instance, preparing for taking a bath, going out for dinner, driving to do yoga, scheduling time for such activities is work, but engaging in the activity is not. As one young woman explains:

I would say it's work to make to make it happen. I had to make the decision to not go shopping, I had to come home, and then I had to assert with my family and say, "I'm going up to take a bath." And then I had to, you know, set the mood, with the candle in the bubble bath. I mean, that's work, right? But then, it wasn't work once I was in there – it was great. (Toronto young)

Then there is the notion of minimal self-maintenance, which includes all activities that are needed to maintain your health and well-being and which may not be enjoyable or relaxing, but which are necessary. A middle-aged woman recounted:

I enjoy my yoga class, but all the way there, I'm sort of thinking, I'd rather sit in a coffee shop and read. My feet keep moving, but it's like, I really want these two hours in the coffee shop to just read. But afterwards, I'm always glad I did it. So, it is work, but I know ... I need it. ... I've found now that it really is rewarding on many level. So, it's a double-edged sword there. So, I think taking care of myself physically, I try and make an effort to walk more. Just before I came here, I joined Weight Watchers for the first time. So, I had to make the effort to go there, and it was like work, and I thought, "Do I really want to do this?" And it's like, "Yes." For years, I've been trying to lose some weight in a healthy fashion, and I haven't been able to do it properly, and it seems like work. I think this is a good step. So, I made the decision, but it was work. I had to pay for it, and it's going to be work to

⁷ Unfortunately, we have mislaid this reference and therefore cannot give proper credit to the author.

go every week, and figure out all this point stuff. But, that is work, but I know I have to take care of myself, too. In terms of what wouldn't be work, self care would be sitting in a coffee shop and reading. (Toronto young)

Everyone agreed that minimal self-maintenance meant different things for different people. It included looking after one's health, such as getting blood tests done, which no one saw as pleasurable, and it included for at least one woman getting a massage – which others, with less muscle tension, saw as an explicit example of non-work.

Both preparation for self-care and minimal self maintenance are goal-oriented activities, engaged in to achieve a specific purpose: In the first case, to be able to engage in a pleasurable activity, in the second, to maintain oneself in order to be able to engage in one's daily work. This statement was made very explicitly by various participants.

Our Definition of Work

If we put the discussion of what is work together with the discussion on self-maintenance, it leads us to what we consider a useful and interesting definition of work:

Work includes any activity that involves the expenditure of human energy, and that is undertaken in order to achieve some specific goal, rather than solely for its own sake.

This excludes, as non-work, anything in which we engage for its intrinsic pleasure, or because it is necessary for survival, such as breathing, sleeping, etc. Exactly which activities constitute work and which non-work depends on the conditions under which they are performed. If we watch a movie because we want to see it, it is non-work, if we watch it to be able to discuss it with our children; it becomes work, although it may be pleasurable work.

In the next two sections, we will examine how sociology of work deals with work, and what would happen if we were to adopt the above definition of work.

What Approach Does the Sociology of Work Take?

To understand the conceptual focus of the sociology of work a selection of books and articles in sociological journals were surveyed (Caplow 1954; Nosow and Form 1962; Berger 1964; Simpson and Simpson 1981; Wipper 1984; Watson 1987; Ritzer 1989; Abbot 1993; Lowe and Krahn 1993; Bender and Leone 1995; Auster 1996; Grint 1998; Castillo 1999a; Castillo 1999b; Vallas 2001; Cornfield and Hodson 2002).⁸ We disregarded publications that discussed work in a specific context. The intent was to find out the way in which the sociology of work discusses unpaid housework and care work.

⁸ Although the books and articles selected were published in the latter half of the twentieth century, the sociology of work existed prior to this time, most prominently in the work of Everett Hughes at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s (Ritzer, 1989). The earlier history and focus of the sociology of work is adequately captured in the literature surveyed.

The literature indicates, that historically and to the present, the sociology of work is associated most closely with the sociology of occupations and industrial sociology (Grint 1998). The focus in both areas is on the paid work of both men and women. The discussion of unpaid housework and care work is not entirely ignored in the sociology of work but is circumscribed in a particular way. Cornfield and Hodson note that one of the core topics is the movement of women from the home into the paid workforce (Cornfield and Hodson 2002). Unpaid housework and care work are discussed specifically within this framework, often under the general heading of ‘gender’ which, in turn, is largely equated with a focus on women. Furthermore, “most empirical studies are based on male workers and tend to assume that women are oriented towards the home rather than work” (Grint 1998: 27). Abbott’s research reinforces the finding that that articles about work and gender (women) are connected to paid work concerns (Abbot 1993); the closest these articles come to talking about unpaid housework and care work is in discussions of the relationship between family and work. For instance, Auster (Auster 1996) and MacBride-King and Paris (MacBride-King and Paris 1993) discuss the balancing act women perform in combining work and family. In Bender and Leone’s edited book (Bender and Leone 1995) the benefits for families who have working mothers (Valente 1995) are contrasted with the benefits that accrue to families’ from having stay-at-home mothers (Neuman 1995). Although authors such as Caplow {, 1954 #10} and Grint (Grint 1998) refer to unpaid household work as ‘work’, they fail to recognize this work in any way other than its relationship to paid work.

At issue here is the way that various authors frame their research on work. Although a broad definition is theoretically inclusive of paid and unpaid work, the problem comes in with the operationalization. For instance, Grint indicates at the beginning of his book that he will look at work in a very broad context. He states:

The ambiguous nature of work is a central theme running through this book. Rather than restricting the review to paid labour, and concentrating on male factory workers as much of industrial or occupational sociology does, it considers work in a rather wider perspective which includes unpaid domestic labour, which highlights the links between the sphere of employment and the domestic sphere, and which incorporates the notions of ethnicity and gender as well as class (Grint 1998: 1).

Grint has the fullest discussion of domestic labour⁹ of the books and articles surveyed, however, the discussion is limited to the gendered and subordinated status of domestic labour, the time women spend in the domestic role¹⁰ and the ways in which domestic

⁹ Grint (1998) defines domestic labour as “a blanket term often associated with ‘housework’, involving all unpaid activities related to the production and reproduction of the household” (p. 326). Grint’s description of ‘housework’ corresponds to specific housework tasks and childcare. Of the superordinate tasks identified in our focus groups only one, the organizing of family affairs is mentioned by Grint.

¹⁰ Studies indicate that there is still an unequal division of domestic labour. Women spend more hours at work than men, whether this is a combination of paid work and household work or household work alone (Grint, 1998, pp. 33-34).

labour and women's orientation towards this role define and constrain opportunities for women in paid work. (Grint 1998).

Though Grint (Grint 1998) takes a broader view of work and emphasizes the social construction¹¹ of the term he, like other authors and editors (Caplow 1954; Nosow and Form 1962; Simpson and Mutran 1981; Lowe and Krahn 1993; Bender and Leone 1995; Cornfield and Hodson 2002) only gives a nod to unpaid housework and care work. The majority of Grint's book continues to be focused on paid work. The problem, therefore, is not so much with the definition of work, but rather with the way that it is operationalized within the sociology of work.

Taking the Energy Expenditure Definition Seriously

None of the definitions of work offered by our participants clashed with those offered in the sociology of work, as expressed in various social science encyclopedias as well as textbooks and articles, with the crucial difference that the definitions offered here were developed within the context of unpaid housework, rather than paid employment. Our definition presents a refinement of other definitions, not a radical departure. The crucial difference between our approach and the common approach in the sociology of work is that we suggest that this definition be taken seriously, rather than be offered pro forma. In the following, we speculate on how the sociology of work would change were we take this approach seriously.

The current focus on paid work has led to some significant insights in understanding various occupations as well as the particular concerns of women in paid work. We have learned a considerable amount about work organizations; the labour process; trade unions; worker consciousness; the impact of technology and globalization on work; issues surrounding different occupations and much more.

However, the current approach limits our understanding of the totality of work performed by failing to consider all work. Largely excluded are unpaid housework and care work, unpaid community work, as well as non-legal work (work performed on the grey or black markets) that may be paid or unpaid. In other words, at present the sociology of work concerns itself only with a slice of work that, although very important, represents nevertheless only a portion of the work that is actually performed. This becomes particularly problematic within policy contexts. When ignoring unpaid work, we cannot adequately assess the effect of various policies. For instance, the Canadian health system is currently being squeezed in terms of money and available staff, with the effect that patients are discharged to their homes much earlier than used to be the case. Such early

¹¹ "...what counts as work is dependent on the specific social circumstances under which such activities are undertaken and, critically, how these circumstances and activities are interpreted by those involved....we should consider the past and present definitions of work as symbols of cultures and especially as mirrors of power: if what counts as work is glorified or despised or gender-related, then the language and practice of work allows us to read embodied fragments of wider social power" (Grint, 1998, pp. 6-7). **I KEPT THIS ALIVE AT THE MOMENT IN CASE IT FITS IN AS WE REVISE THE DISCUSSION**

discharges will likely result in a steep increase in the intensity of the unpaid care work performed by family and friends. This should be factored into policy decisions.

Likewise, we found in our questionnaires that mothers of young children engaged in an astonishing amount of so-called voluntary labour on behalf of their children's schools. If such efforts are truly voluntary and result in an enrichment of school programs, this is probably a positive factor, but we need to critically examine the effects of such voluntary work where it replaces work that used to be performed by professionals.

If we were to take our definition of work as energy expenditure towards some specific goal seriously, what would happen?

The line between paid and unpaid work would not disappear, but would lose a fair amount of its significance. We would routinely look at all work performed by people, rather than just one segment, and consider all work as of equal relevance for understanding how societies work.

Energy expenditure raises the question of energy regeneration. Energy may be expended – and re-generated – through both paid or unpaid work or neither, depending on the nature of the work and the circumstances under which it is performed. Once aware of the need for energy regeneration we can ask: under what circumstances is work totally energy depleting, leading to burnout and eventual incapacity to work at all? Under what circumstances will energy be regenerated through work? For instance, conducting the focus groups for this project took a fair amount of energy in the short term, but also provided us with a considerable amount of energy for the long term, with many ideas for other papers and spin-off projects.

We could assess working spaces in terms of their effects on energy expenditure. For instance, what are the effects of workstations in various settings on energy levels of workers? Does working in cubicles separated by baffles rather than in offices have a discernible effect on the energy levels of workers? If so, is it positive or negative?

Work takes energy. Failing to look at what replenishes it is somewhat parallel to the way we look at the natural environment. Most often, the natural environment is treated as a resource to be exploited, without regard to the limits of this exploitation and to the need to restore a balance between what is taken out of it and channeled back into it. This raises the question whether our patterns of work are sustainable?

Taking the energy expenditure approach to work seriously, we could take into account the variable amounts of energy that are available to specific groups of people. People with disabilities have long argued that we may have to re-define what counts as full-time work for particular subgroups.

Such an approach would also let us integrate an equity concern. It takes energy to deflect discrimination on the basis of race, age, sex, disability, etc. The WALL survey demonstrates that black and aboriginal people, as well as people with disabilities, feel

that they are discriminated against more frequently than white people or people without disabilities, and they also report more stress on their jobs. What are the costs of being discriminated against in terms of energy expenditure? How can the energy thus expended be replaced?

In order to develop this approach, we would have to develop measures for energy output and regeneration. Some obvious indicators spring to mind: number burnouts, breakdowns, etc. We would also need to identify different types of energy, for instance, physical, emotional, intellectual (or mental) and spiritual. This is beyond the scope of the present paper.

We could then assess whether energy is used efficiently: within households, nations, and internationally. What is the relationship between total energy expenditure and outcome? How does energy expenditure get shifted from paid work to unpaid work and vice versa? What are the effects of such shifts?

Clearly, taking the energy expenditure definition of work seriously would open the way to some interesting, important and innovative new questions.

Conclusion

The sociology of work and occupations is currently restricting itself largely to studying paid work, some gestures towards unpaid housework notwithstanding. Castillo (1999b) suggests that the discipline needs a “critical evaluation and reformulation” (Castillo 1999b: 21) and that the sociology of work should provide an “analysis of real social problems” (Castillo 1999b: 31). He argues that the field should move beyond “the most serious type of sociological censorship, namely the use of ‘categories of thought which prevent certain things from being thinkable’” (Castillo 1999b: 34).¹²

He concludes “The future of the sociology of work lies in contribution to the theoretical (and political) task of revealing the real and complete nature of work, of production and of the situation of the men and women who work” (Castillo 1999b: 36). We concur, and wish that Castillo – as well as the other authors we surveyed - had taken his suggestion seriously.

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¹² Reference is to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, 1992, Thinking about limits. *Theory, Culture and Society* 9(1):37-49.

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