

Case Study: Housework and Care Work as Sites for Life-long Learning

Principal Investigator: Margrit Eichler

Community Partner: Mothers Are Women (MAW), Kathryn Spracklin

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Focus

This study will focus on household work – unpaid as well as paid – and the learning that occurs through performing it. We will explore what counts as work and why, for example, bottlefeeding an infant is usually regarded as work, but is breastfeeding? (Esterik 2002; Knaak 2002) Why or why not? How does the nature of household work, and the learning associated with it, shift with macro-structural changes as well as changes at the micro level? How does performance and learning shift depending on whether the work is performed without pay or for pay?

Literature review

“Housework is contested terrain” within families as well as among scholars (Bianchi et al. 2000) p. 191. The literature on the subject is enormous, but it suffers from severe definitional problems (VanEvery, 1997) and from an almost exclusive focus on married couples, often with dependent children e.g. (South and Spitze 1994); VanEvery 1997) which creates “the false impression that housework occurs only within marital households” (South and Spitze, 1994, p. 330). It also tends to suffer from a micro-structural bias (Eichler 1988a) and a rather static approach to understanding changes. Two of the assumptions embedded in current definitions are that children and disabled people are only recipients care, not providers of care and other work, and that care for others counts as work, while care for self does not (VanEvery 1997). Household work is generally classified as (implicitly) natural, domestic, reproductive and unpaid. We suggest that it is also cultural, and that it may be public, productive and paid, such as when a municipal homemaker works in a household.

The most important lacuna within the literature in our context is the almost complete lack of systematic attention paid to the learning that occurs through the performance of household work.

The nature of household work shifts constantly due to changes at the macro- and micro-levels. At the macro level, changes in world trade patterns, in employment conditions and in housing styles result in new appliances, products, shopping conditions, and un/availability of help that affect greatly what domestic labour is performed within the household and under what conditions (Eichler 1983; Eichler 1985; Eichler 1988a; Eichler 1988b; Eichler 1990; Eichler 1994; Eichler 1997; Eichler et al. 1977; Hayden 1984; Strasser 1982). At the micro level, changes in the life cycle and in other life circumstances (e.g. the onset of a disability) require constant adjustments. Moving out of the parents’ home, establishing one’s own first household, marrying, separating, divorcing, having children, gaining or losing custody of children, looking after aged parents or a chronically ill household member, moving into a different type of residence, and so on, all require the acquisition of different skills.

At present, the literature is dominated by three questions. The most prevalent one asks:

(1) *Who does how much housework and why?*

Women do more housework. This is one of the few social constants we find that holds across time, culture, first world/third world and rural/urban differences, class, race/ethnicity, etc. A small sampling of a huge literature includes (Antill et al. 1996; Arrighi and Maume 2000; Berk 1985; Blair and Lichter 1991; Ferree 1991; Greenstein 1996; Hersch 1991; Hochschild 1989; Kamo and Cohen 1998; Livingstone 2002; Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990; Pittman et al. 2001; Pleck 1985; Presser 1994; Rivières-Pigeon et al. 2001; Ross and Mirowsky 1992; Sanchez 1993; South and Spitze 1994; United Nations 1995; Van Willigen and Drentea 2001; Waring 1988; Zuo and Bian 2001).

The gender gap is affected by variables such as marital status, race/ethnicity, sense of fairness, the man's (but usually not the woman's) paid job, the presence/absence of small children, and other variables (for a succinct overview see (Shelton and John 1996). Over time, the gap has slightly decreased in highly industrialized countries. There are various explanations for the consistent gender gap: the number of resources and/or power each partner brings into the marriage (Beaujot et al. 2000; Coverman 1985; England and Farkas 1986; Kamo 1988); the structure of the labour market (Delphy 1984); time availability (Hiller, 1984), and gender role orientation (Blair and Lichter 1991) (Presser 1994).

A less prominent line of inquiry deals with the question:

(2) *What are the effects of doing housework?*

Mostly, the effects of doing housework are seen as negative (Kandel et al. 1985; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; Oakley, 1974; (Ross et al. 1983)– symbolically expressed in titles such as the “double day, double bind” (Gannage, 1986) and the “double shift” (Hochschild, 1989). Responsibility for unpaid housework and carework is linked to economic vulnerability or poverty, both in the short term and over the long term. (Hewitt and Leach 1993; Kitchen et al. 1991; McDaniel 1993). Women who combine high unpaid work responsibilities with paid work are also said to experience *time poverty* (Douthitt, 1993). Doing too much housework has been found to lead to depression in both women and men (Glass and Fujimoto 1994).

On the other hand, there is an acknowledgement that some household work – particularly childcare, but also activities such as cooking – may be enjoyable, express love toward family members (DeVault 1987); Ferree, 1991; South and Spitze, 1994), and provide an outlet for creative expressions (Kemmer 2000).

While we found no direct study that examined empirically whether skills acquired through household work are applicable on the labour market, there is a literature that deals with mothers teaching children (e.g. Collins, 1998, Smith and Griffith, forthcoming). Grace (1998) refers to the value of skills acquired while caring for children, including “coping under pressure”... “dealing with competing demands” ... “mediation and negotiation skills” ... “household management, familiarity with child development, and consumer experience of health and education services” (p. 411). South and Spitze (1994) see housework as offering young adults the opportunity to gain skills that will be beneficial for independent living, such as “shopping, cooking, cleaning, and laundry” (p. 331). (Valadez and Clignet 1984) imply a learning process when they comment that houseworkers’ activities demand “diverse and changing skills” (p. 816). Nonetheless, we found little direct investigation of learning through household work. Interestingly,

we did find a website dedicated to arguing that the skills acquired through household work are directly relevant to the labour market. We will monitor this website as part of the study.

A small but very influential line of inquiry asks

(3) *What is the value of unpaid work done in the home and how do we measure it?*

There is, by now, agreement that unpaid housework **is** work and that it is worth a lot, although imputed value depends on the calculation method. (Chandler 1994) estimates the gross value of unpaid housework in Canada as either 46.3% of the GDP if calculating the opportunity cost, or 41.4% of the GDP if calculating the replacement cost. (Ironmonger 1996) calculates the “Gross Household Product” for Australia as almost equal to the Gross Market Product (GMP), meaning that the total value of unpaid household work is approximately the same as the total value of paid work. (The calculations are complicated by how capital values are attributed.)

One of the interesting aspects of the latter discussion is that it entails an explicit consideration of what is included and excluded under the label of unpaid household activities. Commonly a “third person criterion” is applied if a third person could be paid to do the unpaid activity of a household member, the activity is regarded as work (for a discussion, see Ironmonger, 1996. pp. 39-42).

Objectives:

1. This study will first of all improve on the definition of household work by asking members of different organizations concerned with household work to provide comprehensive descriptions of the household work they perform, rather than by starting with a pre-established list of tasks, as is the norm. On the basis of the responses a new, expanded, definition will be generated that will underlie the rest of the study.
2. The major objective is to examine the learning associated with the performance of household work (based on the definition established by participants) by women, men and teenaged children in different circumstances.
3. Explore how household work has changed (a) over the past five years, and (b) over the life course of individuals, and how this has affected learning practices.
4. Examine the household work and the learning attached to it of several vulnerable groups.
5. Compare paid to unpaid household work and the learning that occurs through its performance.

Research strategy

We will use a variety of methods to explore the topic: as well as the linked survey which will be administered to all participants, we will utilize questionnaires, life histories, focus groups, and analysis of a website.

The work will proceed in three phases:

1. Explore what is included/excluded in household work and why, by conducting a survey of MAW members and other organizations which are concerned about household work. The women in the National Farmers' Union, The National Council of Women, the Disabled Women's Network (DAWN), Women Elders in Action WE*ACT, L'Association féministe d'éducation et d'action sociale (AFEAS) and the Older Women's Network (OWN) are either committed or considering cooperating with the project. Family members of MAW will be asked to participate in the survey. This will allow intra- as well as inter-household comparisons.

The survey will be followed by 14 focus groups, 2 for each participating organization, to probe how the understanding of household work is affected by social location.

2. We will collect life histories of specific groups, focusing on the effect of major life events (e.g., marriage, divorce, birth of a child, onset of a disability, etc.) on the nature of housework performed and the consequences for learning. This will be a sub-sample of the Toronto portion of the NALL survey and will include:

5 female and 5 male disabled persons

5 female and 5 male recently separated people

5 female and 5 male parents on family benefits

5 female and 5 male people who recently left the labour force

5 female and 5 male people who recently (re-) entered the labour force

3. We will interview 10 paid household cleaners and 10 nannies about both the household work they perform for pay as well as the unpaid work they do within their own households. We will focus on what they do differently or the same, and what learning is attached to both of these forms of household work.

4. Throughout the duration of the project, we will monitor the website and analyze what is happening on it.

Overall, this project will be the first to systematically and empirically investigate the nature of the learning that occurs through performing both unpaid and paid household work, and the way this learning varies with life cycle changes, level of ability, social position, etc.

Role of each team member:

The Principal Investigator will carry the overall responsibility for the project. The Community Partner will serve as liaison with the members of the various partner organizations. She will help analyze the data, write the various reports that will go back to all participating organizations and respondents, be involved in the decision-making process concerning the specifics of the project, conduct some focus groups, and present papers to participating organizations on the overall results. She will also monitor and analyze the website.

Training process and responsibilities for students:

Students will be involved in the design, pre-test, and revisions of the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and life histories, code open-ended questions, administer interviews and the life history form, lead focus groups if in Toronto (many will be in Ottawa, one in Saskatchewan, one in British Columbia), analyze the data, and help write up results. It is hoped that some will use the study to write their thesis on the topic. They will be trained for all the tasks.

Output and dissemination:

For each phase, reports will be written and sent to each participating organization. We will present papers at the organizations' annual meetings and at special conferences. We hope that the various organizations involved will organize a conference around this issue, to serve as a follow-up to a conference held in 1997. Since all the organizations are oriented towards policy changes, this will provide an important impetus for new policy initiatives. Besides that, there will be several academic papers on each of the phases and one book on the topic of learning through household work throughout the life cycle, whether the work is paid or unpaid.

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