

## THE OTHER HALF (OR MORE) OF THE STORY: UNPAID HOUSEHOLD AND CARE WORK AND LIFELONG LEARNING

**Margrit Eichler**

*Ontario Institute for Studies of Education, University of Toronto, CA*

Looking at how adult educators see adult learning, we would expect to see family and housework front and center as an area of utmost importance. Consider the following: Informal learning is the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment – from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media (Garrick, 1996).

It involves “[1]earning to love the world and make it more human; learning to develop in and through creative work” (Williams as quoted in Collins, 1998).

Indeed, adult educators agree that civil society itself depends critically on lifelong learning.

In sociological language, we can speak of the cultural, social and personal reproductive tasks of civil society. This rather flat language does not fully communicate what is at stake. If the reproductive tasks are interfered with, or cannot be carried out for systematically rooted reasons, then the spiritual, moral and social infrastructure of the economy and state will be imperiled. (Welton, 1998)

In considering various perspectives on informal learning, Garrick (1996) sums up the overall understanding as follows: “... people engaged in day to day situations and interventions; people trying to make sense of their lives.” Much of contemporary adult education is influenced by Habermas’ notion of a lifeworld, who himself derived the concept from Alfred Schutz (Williamson, 1998). Collins (1998) notes that “The concept also accounts for how in social relations we blend our individual experiences with the lifeworld of others. Thus, the lifeworld incorporates community-forming processes that actively and passively shape it into a social world.”

One would expect that such a conception of lifelong learning has generated a

*International Handbook of Educational Policy, 000–000*

*Nina Bascia, Alister Cumming, Amanda Datnow, Kenneth Leithwood and David Livingstone (eds.)*

© 2005 Springer. Printed in Great Britain.

great wealth of information about what is learned in the family and the home. After all, this is the generally acknowledged place where biological and social reproduction occurs, where “attitudes, values, skills and knowledge” are acquired from daily experience of interacting in a social context, where people’s character and citizenship are shaped, an essential part of our lifeworld.

Canadian adult education, in particular, has a “historic commitment to helping Canadians ‘live a life’ and ‘earn a living’ (Coady’s metaphor of the ‘good and abundant life’” (Welton, 1998). However, it seems that only the second part of this commitment is actually undertaken: a concern with earning a living, and definitely *not* with living a life if the work involved is carried out within the home and is unpaid. When I was invited to write this chapter on unpaid housework and lifelong learning, I eagerly went to the literature to enjoy and learn from the surely abundant reflections of adult educators on this important topic. Three computer searches, conducted by three different people, using a variety of synonyms such as housework, domestic labour, caring work, etc., resulted in zero references. In some panic, I asked knowledgeable colleagues: what had I done wrong? Would they guide me to the important works in this area? At the end of this process I still had only two references. There are, of course, two huge literatures on lifelong learning and on housework but it seems that they almost never cross paths. The two exceptions are Livingstone’s 1999 NALL survey, which did ask questions about housework and learning and at least demonstrated that this is an area in which much learning occurs, and the other a set of German studies on worker-self-managers that will be discussed below (Frey, 2003).

The first question that arises, then, is why is there such a monumental oversight of this topic within adult education? The second issue that follows is: what are some of the questions that we might profitably investigate with respect to lifelong learning and unpaid housework, and of what relevance might they be to the larger understanding of adult education? I will address both of these questions in the following, and in the second section draw on some preliminary findings of an empirical study on lifelong learning and unpaid housework. I will here briefly introduce the study to set the context.

### **Study on Lifelong Learning and Unpaid Housework**

This study is one of a series of studies of the WALL project (Work and Lifelong Learning, 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 are at 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 involves focus groups that follow up on some of the findings of the questionnaires. To date, four focus groups have been held. The intent is not to determine how much housework individuals perform. Instead, our intent is to discover what category of work is mentioned when questions are posed in an

open-ended manner, and, equally important, what category of work is *not* mentioned although we know that it is performed in many households. It is this latter question that we probe in the focus groups, since it allows us tap into some of the invisible work that is performed within households and the tacit learning that accompanies it.

### **The Monumental Oversight: Why the Overwhelming Neglect of Lifelong Learning through Unpaid Housework?**

Due to the fact that lifelong learning has largely been the domain of adult education, the enormous amount of informal learning that children acquire in the home is generally omitted in this context. I shall here conform to this practice.

#### *(a) Sexism in Adult Education*

I define sexism in research as a tripartite problem of a) maintaining a gender hierarchy, (b) gender insensitivity, and c) double standards based on sex (Eichler, 1988b, 2002). Several authors have remarked on a prevailing androcentric tradition within adult education, part of maintaining a gender hierarchy. puts this argument in a most forceful manner.

Welton (1998) notes that the contributions of women in adult education are routinely ignored in the literature – another aspect of maintaining a gender hierarchy:

Women's associations and movements were important oppositional learning sites in Canada's time of great transformation. Why have references to Women's Institutes, the YWCA, the Women's League for Peace and Freedom, the Home and School associations been so marginal in Canadian adult education history? ... These sites enabled women to school themselves for active citizenship. It was in these lifeworld institutions that women entered public debate and began to transform Canadian society.

This point is echoed by Selman (1998). There are, of course, feminist adult educators who have vigorously challenged such androcentric tradition, and many educators do make formal bows in their direction. Miles (1988), e.g., argues that the women's movement provides possibilities for important linkages between adult education and a new paradigm of looking at the world. Scott (1998) looks at feminist theory as one of the radical orientations in adult education. Hart (1992) probably comes the closest to looking at housework. She uses the concept of subsistence work (following Mies & Shiva, 1993) in order to argue that the ultimate purpose of subsistence work is "to maintain and improve *life*" (Hart, 1992). Others argue that lifelong learning would have a different focus if the emphasis was on the homeplace rather than the marketplace (Gouthro & Plumb, 2003). In a useful summary of feminist research, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) discuss feminist contributions, which center around a feminist pedagogy that is

liberatory and promotes personal emancipation and public action. In spite of such potential openings, I did not find any empirical investigation of how people might learn through housework, besides Livingstone's statistical data.

Unpaid housework is seen as an activity engaged in by women. It is true internationally that women do perform significantly more unpaid housework (Benéria & Roldán, 1987; Ross, 1987; Coverman, 1989; South & Spitze, 1994; Massey, Hahn et al., 1995; Kiger & Riley, 1996; Perkins & DeMeis, 1996; Baxter, 1997; John & Shelton, 1997; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Sullivan, 1997; Kamo & Cohen, 1998; Speakman & Marchington, 1999; Beaujot, Haddad et al., 2000; Bond & Sales, 2001; Leonard, 2001; Pittman, Kerpelman et al., 2001; Windebank, 2001) than men although most men probably do *some* housework. The strong empirical connection of housework with women has led to a strong theoretical connection as well (see Doucet 2000). This goes some distance to explain why a discipline with a historic androcentric bent would have overlooked this area.

*(b) Unpaid Housework is Not Seen as Real Work*

Beyond its association with women, for the longest time housework was not only not seen as work, it was explicitly excluded from the concept of work. Hence, the home was not seen as a workplace, and if housework was not work, then obviously adult education did not need to consider the relationship between unpaid housework and adult learning.

By now, most researchers would acknowledge that work comes in two versions – paid and unpaid – and that the unpaid work performed within the home is of tremendous economic importance. Just how enormous the economic importance of housework is depends on the way it is conceptualized (cf. Eichler, 2003). 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).

The Australian economist Ironmonger has argued that in order to make meaningful comparisons between the value of market work and unpaid housework, we need to calculate the gross values in comparable ways, by including both capital and labour in both instances. We thus need to include the capital goods used in household production (housing, vehicles and domestic appliances) along with the value of unpaid labour to arrive at a figure that is comparable to the GDP. He calculates the Gross Household Product (GHP) in this manner at about 98% of the Gross Market Product (GMP). “In other words, 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). Whatever method we use, clearly the economic importance of unpaid household work is very large and very important.

Furthermore, paid work and unpaid housework intersect in a number of significant ways. Macroeconomic theory usually excludes unpaid household labour from consideration, in spite of its massive value. This, in turn, distorts policies (Bakker, 1998) with particularly important consequences for women (see

below for some examples). Some of the ways in which paid work and unpaid household labour intersect include the following:

1. The money economy rests squarely on the basis of unpaid household labour. Without the social and biological production and reproduction of the labour force, there would be no paid labour force (Boserup, 1970; Benéria & Roldán, 1987; Waring, 1988; Ironmonger, 1996; Bakker, 1998).
2. Household work maintains the human capital that the market economy requires (Ironmonger, 1996). Changes in the money economy result in changes in unpaid labour. For instance, if hospital downsizing results in patients being released earlier into their families, this intensifies the work conducted at home. What is claimed as a cost reduction in public accounting thus becomes a cost increase for family carers (Aronson & Neysmith, 1997) This might even take the extreme form that a person, usually a woman, has to give up her paid work in order to look after an adult in need of care –with lifelong negative consequences in terms of seniority and entitlement to pension benefits. If we considered the value of unpaid work for policy formation, such cost-cuttings might therefore possibly be shown to be economically inefficient.
3. Workplace organization and regulations influence the division of labour within the household. For instance, Arrighi and Maume found that men's contributions to household work decreased as their subordination in the workplace increased (Arrighi & Maume, 2000). Women's household work decreases as they engage in more paid work (Baxter, 1997).
4. Higher earnings of women result in their purchasing more household services, thus reducing their household labour and affecting the market through increased consumption of services, although this is mediated by race and the husband's education (Cohen, 1998).
5. The amount and type of household work for which people are responsible affects their earnings on the labour market (Noonan, 2001). Some authors suggest that "The subordination of women in the family leads to their subordination in the labour market" (Leonard, 2001). However, it is probably more appropriate to postulate a two-way interaction than a one-way effect.

Family life events influence the nature and amount of household work performed which in turn influences the labour force participation of women and to a lesser extent that of men. For example, marriage, separation, divorce, arrival and departure of children, chronic illness or disability of oneself or family members can all affect patterns of labour force participation. They are also major occasions for learning new skills.

In other words – housework is real work in terms of the time and energy it requires, in terms of the goods and services it produces, and in terms of its economic impact, but it tends not to be regarded as such because it is unpaid, and because it tends to be devalued. People spend about the same amount of

time on unpaid work as on paid work, although this varies by sex: men spend more time on paid work, and women on unpaid work. (See Livingstone chapter, table 1, and Ironmonger, 1996.)

*(c) Adult Education has Become a Corporate Enterprise*

There is an on-going critique of adult education that charges that it has become too much of a corporate enterprise. Collins (1998, p. 56) notes that modern adult education practice “has become effectively commodified and given over largely to the ethos of bureaucratic control and corporate enterprise”. This compromises the notion of the adult as an autonomous participant who learns voluntarily. In a review of the adult education literature, Solar (1998) found that by far the greatest attention is now oriented towards the labour market.

While many adult educators critique this trend, it certainly does not help put unpaid housework onto the research agenda. On the other hand, it is worth serious study to examine to what degree and in what way corporations actually do try to educate housewives and other consumers in order to increase consumption of items they wish to sell. The supermarket at which I shop at present routinely lists information on how to choose and utilize the exotic fruits and vegetables it offers for sale, and it also offers an astonishing array of classes. In June of 2003, there were 34 seminars offered just in that month, ranging from cooking classes – for kids and speciality cooking for adults – to seminars about computing, various health issues and pregnancy and labour. While the health courses are free, the cooking courses (the vast majority) charge a modest fee (Loblaws, 2003).

*(d) Adult Education Tends to Focus on the Educator, Not the Learner*

There is a prevailing concern with what is an appropriate pedagogy for today’s world – in other words: how and what should I teach? rather than: how and what should I learn? For instance, in exploring the difference between lifelong learning and lifelong education, Collins suggests that

... it is useful to think of lifelong learning as referring to the actual experience of the individual or of groups of learners. The focus, then, is on how psychological factors, social contexts, teaching practices, curriculum formation and educational management techniques come to bear on the shaping of learning experiences in their immediacy. (Collins, 1998)

This is clearly a notion of lifelong learning that is structured, planned, and organized by adult educators – not informal self-directed learning that is self-initiated and undertaken by an individual in her home – which is likely a particularly important form of learning that occurs through the performance of housework. (See Livingstone’s chapter in this volume for a clarification of the concepts of formal, informal and non-formal learning and education.) In her

review of the adult education literature, Solnar (1998) noted the relative unimportance of the adult learner in the literature.

### **Overcoming the Monumental Oversight**

In order to deal effectively with learning through household work, adult education will need to overcome its sexist bias, accept housework as real work and shift the focus to include informal learning that occurs through housework and care work and that is self-initiated and self-managed by the learner.

If we were to engage in this endeavour – what might be the benefits? In the next section I will first look at some preliminary findings from our study. I will then consider some of the questions directed to lifelong learning and paid work, and speculate on what might be some of the insights we would derive if we were to expand our notion of work to include unpaid housework.

### **Asking Questions Concerning Housework and Lifelong Learning**

I will draw here on some preliminary findings from our questionnaire and the first four focus groups. Our first wave of 254 respondents to the questionnaire were all drawn through a number of women's groups. In one of our groups we asked the women to hand the questionnaire to their partners. Therefore, 38 of the respondents are men. The respondents are not representative of the general Canadian population, being mostly middle class, white, and very socially active. Our intent was to examine how housework is conceptualized by a group of women who mostly define themselves as feminists and who are likely more alert to some of the invisible work performed under the rubric of housework and care work than most other people. This, we reasoned, would enable the women to recognize the learning that takes place through this work. If people are unaware of the actual work they perform, they are likely to be "competence-blind" (Butler, 1993) with respect to the skills required.

Of the questionnaire group, then, 46.5% did not identify anything they had learned through their housework/care work, while 53.5% indicated that they had learned something. At the more formal end, people learn by taking courses, attending lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences or tutorials, although it is not clear from the data just how formal or informal these courses are. They range from university courses to training for specific activities, such as learning to breastfeed through the La Leche League or by attending a once only seminar on bladder control.

Most learn more informally, by discussing issues, talking and sharing information with friends and neighbours, or by learning from professionals in informal ways, as well as participating in e-mail lists, on-line help lists, internet searches and through meetings. Reading is of course of major importance, and some use tapes, mention TV, or participate in study groups. Finally, learning by doing is a major aspect, in other words, experiential learning. Many people state that they learn both on their own as well as together with others.

In our focus groups (consisting so far only of women) we asked people again what housework/care work they had done during the last year, and we received mostly (but not entirely) the standard list of specific tasks that are the concern of most of the studies on housework – namely housekeeping functions such as cleaning, doing the laundry, preparing meals, transporting children, etc. We then provided a list of six activities drawn from the critical literature: providing emotional support; organizing, planning, managing or arranging matters; dealing with crises; maintaining contact with family members or friends; self care; and conflict resolution and asked whether they engaged in this work, and uniformly respondents all agreed they did. This is my life! One of them exclaimed to the nodding of heads around the table.

Even in this group of mostly feminist women, then, much of the work they did was not perceived as work at the conscious level, although there were some exceptions to this. If people do not know that they are performing work, clearly they will not realize what they may learn through it. The task in recognizing learning through housework, then, is a double one: first, to bring to consciousness what work is actually done, and then to get people to think about what they learned through it.

The exceptions to the rule were women who had to reflect very carefully about their unpaid work, for instance, because they had chosen to become full-time mothers and felt considerable pressure from other people to take up paid work, or because they had lost their paid job due to disability and had to re-think the value and meaning of their work in a world which discriminates against people with disabilities.

We approached the learning issue by asking the women how their work had changed over the past five years, and following this, what they had to learn in order to be able to manage these changes. Most of the women – although not all – had experienced some dramatic changes within the last five years, although for some others the most important changes were farther back in their lives. Some of the examples include the death of their children's father, losing one's job, retiring, having another baby, children growing older, finding out one's child is autistic:

My son, 5 years ago, I didn't even know he was autistic. You know, he was, just seemed a little slow in his speech development. I didn't have a 14-year-old son 5 years ago. This is like, over night this kid just goes from child from heaven to child from hell. And I have very little support at home in terms of my partner helping out, because he's had a year of 18 hours in bed. So you know, I've been it. And it's just been devastating.<sup>1</sup>

Sill more changes include the death of a husband who required constant care, grandchildren grown up, a son "who fried his brain on drugs, adult children moved away, living alone, turning blind, going back to school, caring for a husband who has become less self-reliant, an adult child moving back home, both husband and wife losing their jobs, their house and having to move into a

dump in a different city, becoming the care-giver of elderly parents, and much more.”

The women talked about what they learned primarily in terms of self-growth, rather than in terms of learning to perform specific skills (e.g., learning new recipes, learning how to do home repairs, etc.). They mentioned having to learn discipline, acquiring a different attitude towards time, learning to cope with depression, and becoming self-aware. The disabled women, in particular, talked about having to find the inner strength to value themselves when all external props are gone and in the face of rampant external de-valuation.

Naomi, a mother of two young children had spontaneously said self-awareness when I asked what they had learned through the changes they had experienced. She explained:

Naomi: I wasn't sure if I wanted to have another child, because it's a lot of work, and it hurts. And, my first daughter, I had a lot of health problems related to having a baby. And so, I had to learn literally about my body. When I say self-awareness', I mean every aspect, because I had to learn.

ME: And how did you do that? Did you read? Did you go to classes? Did you see something on TV? Did you talk with people?

Naomi: I just got used to myself. In terms of what changes my body went through. I had sudden allergies that were death-related allergies, and so, I had to figure out what I was allergic to. I went to an allergist for that. But other things, you know, like, you eat and you get a different reaction. So, it's more self-observation, I guess.

She, like others, also mentioned interest courses, such as learning how to ski, reading, traveling, counseling, talking with other women, talking with her doctor, and using the internet.

Another mother of two young children, Barbara, also said that self-awareness was the most important thing she learned, along with the capacity to change – a theme that was repeated over and over again.

I maybe talk to peers my own age group, or in similar situations, and go, 'Nah, that's not me. I very much know who I am, and am at the point where there's growing to be done. It's understanding that we go through phases in our life. For a long time, I always thought it was going to be one way, and then it hits you, no, you're going through a phase. This is the phase – welcoming that, accepting it. I hear you guys saying accepting', right? And not anticipating, but knowing that it's not a static state – it will change. And, I will be required to change with it, whether I'm ready or not. And again, right now, that direct link goes to my children.

In contrast to the answers to the questionnaire, *all* of the women in the focus groups realized that they had learned significant skills. When we asked them *how* they acquired these skills, the answers were complex and defy simple

categorization. Self-observation and awareness emerged as two important ways of learning, as well as “just doing it”, and unexpectedly therapy played such a strong role in the first focus group that we included a probe about it in the subsequent groups. It was important for the women in two of the other groups, but not for the group of disabled women, who were too poor to pay for therapy, but who mentioned group support instead.

As became clear in the focus groups, change, sometimes very dramatic changes, are part of most people’s life cycle. While some women, particularly the disabled women, but also some of the others had gone through traumatic changes, everyone had experienced changes that required new skills from them. What happens if people fail to acquire the necessary skills to cope with new situations? The next segment provides an example.

Dorothy talked about having to cope with her adult son moving back with her. She realized that she had to learn to say no to him, and mused that she might sell her house and move into a condo if he was not going to move. This led another participant to recount the following about people she knew:

I know people who’ve done that. I’m going to move into a condo. Or I know one family that moved to Vancouver (laughs). Their son was separating from his wife, and he had quit his job in another city and he was moving back to Toronto, he was going to move in with them. Well it was amazing. They had been talking about moving out to the West coast for a long time, but I mean it was just done (laughter). Gee I’m sorry for going to Vancouver!

Another participant replied:

That would be a bit sad, though. Because when I lived on the West coast, there were 3 or 4 families I met who said they had moved out West because they were tired of babysitting, they were tired of being put upon. And they didn’t really like it. There they were, hundreds, thousands of miles away from their family, because they wouldn’t put their foot down and stay put and live their lives as they really wanted to.

We could identify the latter families as people who did *not* learn how to set the appropriate boundaries and hence they disrupted family ties very severely. Clearly, the learning that takes place in the home is of the most profound importance.

Now, turning back to the literature on learning and paid work, let us see how themes from lifelong learning and paid work might or might not apply to unpaid housework.

(a) *The Interplay Between Motivation and Incentives to Learn*

I will here consider an edited book that claims that it “looks at what makes adults participate in education and training, particularly in relation to work” (Hirsch & Wagner, 1995). The book explores the nature and effectiveness of various types of incentives.

Ryan (1995) defines training as incorporating both “vocationally relevant education and learning by experience”, which means that it should be relevant to housework. The major “incentive for adults to undertake training is an expectation of gains in job rewards, supplemented sometimes by consumption and developmental benefits.” He then focusses on pecuniary gains (p. 14), which may take the form of wages or bonuses for workers who engage in training (Hirsch & Wagner, 1995; Mikulecky, 1995; Ryan, 1995). Some countries have legally mandated access to training programs (Luttringer, 1995; Noyelle & Hirsch, 1995) and employer incentives to provide training (Bishop, 1995; Mikulecky, 1995).

At first look, this seems completely inapplicable to housework. There are no wages or bonuses, since the work is unpaid, and no employers who require incentives to provide training.

However, the basic assumption that adults engage in learning primarily in expectation of job rewards may no longer be tenable once we start to include unpaid housework and care work. There may be some pecuniary gain, such as when people research major purchases, and achieve significant savings, which is an activity that was mentioned by some of our respondents on the questionnaire. Other savings may be effected by producing items at home that would otherwise have to be purchased. Nevertheless, willingness to learn is likely mostly of intrinsic value to unpaid houseworkers. Exploring this might shed important light on understanding motivations for learning not only where externally financed incentives are missing, but also in situations where financial incentives are present. Educators in the humanistic tradition hold that “the individual may be most productive when she feels that work is personally meaningful and not simply an instrumental means to another end” (Garrick, 1996).

#### *(b) Benefits to Civil Society*

There is some recognition that On-the-Job-Training has social benefits, besides benefits to the individual workers who take/receive the training and the employer. Bishop, for instance, notes that

... private benefits account for only part of the total benefits to society of education and training, however. People who have received more or better education and training or who achieved more during the experience benefit others in society by paying higher taxes, by making discoveries or artistic contributions that benefit others in society, by being more likely to give time and money to charity, by being less likely to experience long periods of hospitalization that are paid for by insurance or government, and in many other ways ... (Bishop, 1995).

Similarly, Sticht argues that “not only may companies influence the productivity of their current workplace, but the intergenerational transfer of educational outcomes from parents to their children may also improve the productivity of

schools and a more competent future workforce will be available ...” (Sticht, 1995).

How might society profit if people were encouraged to learn more about household and care work? Part of care work directly saves money for governments, hospitals, etc., particularly when we are dealing with preventive actions. More importantly, however, it creates healthier and stronger people. Health maintenance is one of the most important activities that are fostered (or neglected) within the home. In our study, we found that health maintenance is an very important activity undertaken by people – and not just for their immediate family, but also for extended kin and unrelated people.

Various countries provide some modest legal access for workers to vocational training (Luttringer, 1995; Noyelle & Hirsch, 1995). Garrick (1996) argues that “[t]here is scope for the extension of a public subsidy beyond its traditional associations with unemployment and formal schooling in order to provide more loans and grants to individuals sponsoring their own learning” (p. 36). Should we have legally mandated access to training for unpaid household and care work occurring within private households? Implementing such a scheme would *not* present a theoretically insurmountable problem. There might be some very concrete benefits along with some very real dangers. The benefits are potential better care and health maintenance of people. The dangers include its possible misuse for political reasons. If such training was provided within a neo-conservative climate, it might lead to further downloading of services onto the family – meaning primarily onto individual women – and a subsequent potential deterioration, rather than improvement of care, together with a substantial danger to the health of the care provider.

Home economics used to teach a range of housekeeping skills, but tended to do so in a very gendered manner, thus reinforcing the separate spheres of women and men – not a result most of us would wish to see today.

With respect to democracy, Okin (1989) has mounted a strong argument that gender equality in society is dependent on gender equality within the family. She suggests “Until there is justice within the family, women will not be able to gain equality in politics, at work, or in any other sphere” (Okin, 1989). While I disagree with the monocausal nature of the statement, there is nevertheless clearly a strong interdependence between the status of women in various social spheres. Children will learn – or fail to learn – within the family to accord equal dignity to all, and to deal with conflicts in a constructive (or destructive) manner. They will also pick up attitudes towards environmental issues, social responsibility, and much more. Parent training could potentially have a great impact on civil society, depending on how it is undertaken.

### *(c) Has Housework Become More Knowledge Based?*

One of the much discussed shifts in paid work is the move towards a knowledge-based economy (Livingstone, 1999), and its corresponding needs for skills, training and education.

In asking what shifts have occurred within housework, and what knowledge is therefore needed for competently performing unpaid housework, we are at the disadvantage that there is no clear evidence how the nature of housework has shifted. There are a number of studies which allow us to point to some of the very broad changes that have occurred. For instance, the change from an agricultural to an industrial and post-industrial society has had significant impacts on the housework of women (Cohen, 1988) and children (Rollings-Magnusson, 2003). The influx of machines into the home has to some degree industrialized housework and child care has to some degree been professionalized (Eichler, 1988). We have some notion of the differences in housework performed by women of three generations (Luxton, 1980). However, we are missing detailed studies of how housework and care work have changed and continue to change over the life course and with the introduction of new appliances and products. When new practices appear, we need to learn new things – most of us have learned how to operate a computer, a microwave oven, various other appliances and a car, for instance – but we are likely to also forget old skills when they are no longer as necessary or functional as they used to be, such as baking our own bread, sewing, darning socks, making jam and preserves, etc.

The disappearance of certain knowledges seems to me to be a missing puzzle piece when looking at “the knowledge-based economy” – there is a suggestion that knowledge is added, not that knowledge may also be lost. Both in housework as well as in paid work it would seem to be valuable to ask What new knowledges have people acquired? What old knowledges and skills have people lost? In immigrant countries such as Canada, Australia and the United States, but also increasingly in Europe, it would be interesting to examine what new ways of running households and caring for people are learned by immigrants – and what old ways are forgotten? For instance, is the new way of running households more or less ecologically damaging?

To answer such questions for housework requires, first, an assessment of the changes that have taken place, and second, an assessment how the necessary (or desirable) skills are acquired. I would guess that there has been a significant loss of skills with respect to some of the household tasks, but a gain in care for chronically disabled or sick children and adults – because of changes in medical knowledge and technology that keep children as well as adults alive who would in earlier times have simply died, coupled with de-institutionalization, which sends people back into their homes. One of our questionnaire respondents stated something along these lines: “I think hospital should give guidance to relative when a person leaves hospital after a very short stay and serious surgery”.

This said, we need to look at disabled people not just as care recipients, but also as workers (for pay as well as with respect to unpaid housework) and as care providers – particularly as care providers. We found in our focus group that all of the disabled women provided very significant care to family members as well as friends and others. It would be very worthwhile to study the particular learning required of a disabled person in order to understand how she is able

to perform the regular daily tasks of living while often to providing care for others. As Marlene recounted:

ME: Marlene, you were talking about that you actually took a course on how to learn to navigate with much less sight than you used to have, right?

Marlene: Oh, yes. Well, CNIB gave these courses. For instance, it took me an hour's course, ... not lecture, seminar or something, to learn how to use my walking stick so that you don't ram everybody with it, and so on.

Likewise, those who live with disabled people need to learn how to behave appropriately. One of our questionnaire respondents, for instance, wrote: I have learned, am learning, how to support and accommodate the work methods of a woman labeled mentally handicapped in order to be able to provide weekly work for her (paid work) as our housekeeper (an agency helps me).

The disabled women, in particular, as well as the other women, needed to learn how to spend their energy, how much they can do, deciding what is too much.

*(d) Looking at Prior Learning Assessment in a More Radical Way*

Thomas (1998, p. 330) considers PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition)<sup>2</sup> the “potentially most radical innovation in education since the development of mass formal education during the last century”. Even a cursory look over the literature demonstrates, however, that it is still oriented either towards recognizing formal education obtained in a context different from the one within which it is to be recognized, or looking at experiential learning in terms of what has been learned through (and for) paid work. A more radical approach would be to recognize knowledge that has been acquired in whatever manner – completely outside a formal structure, for instance, thus opening the door to credit people with learning they may have acquired through household and care work.

Michelson (1996, p. 649) has argued for the need of a feminist intervention in the retheorizing of assessment practice based on epistemologies that do not reify the university as the unitary arbiter of knowledge claims or reinscribe the universal and disembodied knower of abstract masculinities. However, she also suggests that “skills such as ‘parenting’ and ‘family management’ are unlikely to be accredited, although some sporadic attempts to do so have been made” (Michelson, 1996, p. 647) However, a very interesting study by Butler (1993) lays the groundwork for assessing the skills acquired through housework by utilizing a systematic functional analysis of housework that makes visible the competencies involved in successfully running a household. She therefore demonstrates implicitly that the problem in recognizing learning through housework is neither a theoretical nor a practical one, but instead one of ideology and power differentials.

(e) *Transferability of Knowledge Acquired Through Housework*

The key to the transferability of work-based learning, suggests Stevenson (1994), resides in the rich base of higher order procedural knowledge. The optimum path to these higher order cognitive functions is, argues Pea (1987), through engagement with authentic (workplace) activities within a 'purposeful' cultural and social context (Garrick, 1996, p. 24).

There can be little doubt that the household is an authentic workplace with a purposeful cultural and social context – most people see raising their children, and caring for family members as highly authentic and purposeful, in terms of household and caring work.

However, whether or not we consider skills acquired through housework as transferable depends to a large degree on how we define housework. If the work is defined solely as a set of discrete specific skills, such as cooking, cleaning, etc., then we will see only the learning that attaches to these specific skills. Such skills would have a very limited applicability for paid work. Unfortunately, most of the operationalizations that are employed in research on housework are composed of just such specific sets of tasks. Hence, if we ask for the learning attached to these tasks, we will *not* be informed about higher order skills, such as the capacity to organize, administrate, communicate, establish lasting and positive human relations, time management, crisis management, adaptability to change, dealing with difficult personalities in a tactful and effective manner, kin-keeping, emotion work (cf. Hochschild, 1983), etc.

In fact, [r]esponsibility for the household involves performing work that is largely mental (Hessing, 1994, p. 613), because the planning and management aspects determine how well a household and a family will function.

In our questionnaire we found that women do a lot of managerial work, e.g., co-ordinating complicated family events, arranging moves for self or family members, co-ordinating family schedules, handling the business affairs of a disabled sibling, and so on. Nevertheless, when it came to learning, people tended to mention lower-order skills – e.g., learning about pet care, gardening related issues, renovations, etc. Remarkably few respondents actually listed higher-order skills, except when related to parenting.

When we probed on these issues in the focus groups, it became obvious that beyond these lower-order skills, women learn tremendous amounts about planning, time management, conflict resolution, health maintenance, avoiding crises and handling them when they arrived, dealing constructively with their own and other people's emotions, and much more. In particular, women learned how to deal with changes, expecting them, and adapting creatively to them. As Betty said: "I learned how to deal with change".

These findings resonate with a set of recent studies that have been carried out in Germany. In Germany, as elsewhere, the structure of the labour force has changed significantly in the past decade. To a much higher degree than before, workers must organize their own labour, paid work has lost its clear limits (*Entgrenzung der Arbeit*), requirements are more diffuse, only the bottom line

counts, the workplace has lost its physical stability due to project work or for other reasons, and the boundary between management and workers has become blurred. The workplace is less secure than it used to be. This has led to the thesis that the modern worker needs to be a “worker-self-manager” (*Arbeitskraftunternehmer*) in the sense that s/he needs to manage his or her own work, although s/he is an employee. It is thus different from being an independent entrepreneur.

To the surprise of the researchers, a set of studies demonstrated that women cope much better with these new requirements than men. First this was attributed only to women who had lived in the former GDR, but a new set of studies found that this was also true for women from the west. In both cases, it is particularly mothers who combined paid work with unpaid work who have acquired the skills demanded by the new labour market. This is explained by the gender division of labour within the home. The conditions that are now starting to dominate the labour market are similar to those experienced by women in their work at home. Women who are doing much of the housework and care work are therefore more adept at dealing with the changed labour market conditions (Frey, unpublished).

Fenwick (2002, p. 15) studied the learning involved in Canadian women who became entrepreneurs, and noted that “In the stories of transition from an organizational job to self-employment ... [w]omen seemed more conscious of learning instrumental or ‘technical’ knowledge of their new role, than of developing the communicative or personal changes they said they experienced” – although these changes must have been unfolding simultaneously. One possible interpretation of this finding might be that the women had less to learn in this area, due to their prior life experiences, than in the technical area. Fenwick notes that “most seemed to have internalized an expectation that they be self-reliant, autonomous architects of their own economic fates” (Fenwick, 2002, p. 21).

## Conclusion

There is a barely a glimmer of a dawning realization in the literature on lifelong learning that by focusing on paid work only, some important paths have remained unexplored. Rather than regarding the home as a site of non-traditional learning that is “not yet as fully accredited by the world of organized institutional education” (Whitman, 2003, p. 4, emphasis in the original), it seems to me more appropriate to recognize the home – and the unpaid work performed within the home – as a traditional but not yet fully acknowledged site of learning. Yet unpaid housework is of tremendous social and economic value, and studying it is likely to open up new vistas on understanding lifelong learning.

Housework and housework-based learning also have important policy implications. For instance, some of the disabled women in the focus group who all had university education talked indignantly about the fact that some government programs are oriented towards teaching them basic skills which they emphatically do not need, but that they cannot access the services they do need.

If we were to recognize the value of unpaid care work, we would have a public pension for people who spend their time looking after others who cannot look after themselves (Eichler, 1988a, 1997). They would have access to holidays, replacement help when they were sick, etc. Recognizing the home as a very important work place would mean that health and safety measures would have to be developed and implemented, and that education for greater safety would be provided, to mention just a few issues.

It is clear that studying lifelong learning through unpaid housework is both an interesting and important topic. It will also shed new light on our understanding of lifelong learning in the paid labour force, by providing a test site for the generalizations that have been made in that setting. For instance, we need to reconsider how incentives interact with motivations to learn given the vast amount of learning that happens without subsequent job advancement. We can explore the benefits to civil society if we were to provide non-formal training on housework-related issues (oriented to members of both sexes, of course!). We can investigate what knowledge has been gained and lost with respect to both paid and unpaid work. Drawing on Butler's (1993) work, we can test for and recognize knowledge that has been acquired through running a household, both for credit at educational institutions and for paid work. We need to explore the capacity to adapt to changes that is generated through involvement in housework and caring work, and utilize it in the paid labour force. This could become a potent argument for fostering the advancement of women into managerial positions.

Clearly, then, extending the investigation of lifelong learning to include unpaid housework and care work is not only valuable for understanding for its own sake, but also for understanding the whole process of lifelong learning better.

## Notes

1. All quotes have been slightly edited to make them more readable, and all names, when used, are fictitious to protect anonymity.
2. The acronyms are sometimes difficult to follow. Other, comparable terms are PLA (Prior Learning Assessment), PLV (Prior Learning Validation) and RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) – see Thomas, 1998: 330 & 342 – as well as APL (Assessment of Prior Learning) and APEL (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning) see Evans, N. (1994). *Experiential Learning for All*. London, Cassell.

## References

- Aronson, J., & Neysmith, S. M. (1997). The retreat of the state and long-term care provision: Implications for frail elderly people, unpaid family careers, and paid home care workers. *Studies in Political Economy*, 53, 37–66.
- Arrighi, B. A., & Maume, D. J. (2000). Workplace subordination and men's avoidance of housework. *Journal of Family Issues*, 21(4), 464–487.
- Bakker, I. (1998). *Unpaid work and macroeconomics: New discussions, new tools for action*. Ottawa, Status of Women Canada.

- Baxter, J. (1997). Gender equality and participation in housework: A cross-national perspective. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 220–247.
- Beaujot, R., Haddad, T. et al. (2000). Time constraints and relative resources as determinants of the sexual division of domestic work. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 25(1), 61–82.
- Benéria, L., & Roldán, M. (1987). *The crossroads of class and gender: Industrial homework, subcontracting, and household dynamics in Mexico City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bishop, J. H. (1995). Do most employers and workers under-invest in training and learning on the job? In D. Hirsch & D.A. Wagner (Eds.), *What Makes Workers Learn? The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 37–48). Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Bond, S., & Sales, J. (2001). Household work in the UK: An analysis of the British household panel survey, 1994. *Work, Employment, & Society*, 15(2), 233–250.
- Boserup, E. (1970). *Women's role in economic development*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Butler, L. (1993). Unpaid work in the home and accreditation. In M. Thorpe, R. Edwards & A. Hanson (Eds.), *Culture and processes of adult learning: A reader* (pp. 66–86). New York: Routledge (in assoc. with the open university).
- Chandler, W. (1994). The value of household work in Canada, 1992. *Canadian Economic Observer*, 3,1–3,9.
- Cohen, M. G. (1988). *Women's work, markets, and economic development in nineteenth-century Ontario*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cohen, P. N. (1998). Replacing housework in the service economy: Gender, class, and race-ethnicity in service spending. *Gender and Society*, 12(2), 219–231.
- Collins, M. (1998). Critical returns: From andragogy to lifelong education. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 46–58). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Coverman, S. (1989). Women's work is never done: The division of domestic labor. In J. Freeman (Ed.), *Women: A feminist perspective* (pp. 356–367). Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield.
- Doucet, A. (2000). 'There's a huge gulf between me as a male carer and women': Gender, domestic responsibility, and the community as an institutional area. *Community, Work, & Family*, 3(2), 163–184.
- Eichler, M. (1988). *Families in Canada today: Recent changes and their policy implications*. Toronto: Gage.
- Eichler, M. (1988). *Non-sexist research methods. A practical guide*. Boston: Allen & Unwin.
- Eichler, M. (2002). *Measuring gender bias and more*. Gender Based Analysis (GBA) in Public Health Research, Policy and Practice. (Documentation of the International Workshop in Berlin). Berlin: Landesvereinigung fuer Gesundheit Niedersachsen.
- Eichler, M. (2003). "Faire mon lit: est-ce un travail socialement utile? Un nouveau regard sur le travail ménager vu dans le contexte de l'amélioration de la sécurité économique des femmes". La securite économique des femmes: Les critiques féministes du discours économique dominant et les nouvelles avenues de politiques sociales, Université Laval, Institut de recherches et d'études féministes UQAM.
- Evans, N. (1994). *Experiential learning for all*. London: Cassell.
- Frey, M. (2003). Ist der "Arbeitskraftunternehmer" weiblich? "Subjektivierete" Erwerbsorientierungen von Frauen in prozessen betrieblicher Diskontinuitaet. Berlin: Humboldt University.
- Garrick, J. (1996). Informal learning: Some underlying philosophies. *CJSA/RCEEA*, 10(1), 21–46.
- Gouthro, P. A., & Plumb, D. (2003). *Remapping the tripartite register: Moving beyond forma, non-formal, and informal learning*. Toronto: Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE).
- Hart, M. U. (1992). *Working and educating for life: Feminist and international perspectives on adult education*. London: Routledge.
- Hirsch, D., & Wagner, D. A. (1995). Introduction. In D. Hirsch & D. A. Wagner (Eds.), *What makes workers learn? The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 1–10). Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Hirsch, D., & Wagner, D. A. (Eds.) (1995). *What makes workers learn? The role of incentives in workplace education and training*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.

- Ironmonger, D. (1996). Counting outputs, capital inputs, and caring labour: Estimating gross household product. *Feminist Economics*, 2(3), 37–64.
- John, D., & Shelton, B. A. (1997). The production of gender among black and white women and men: The case of household labor. *Sex Roles*, 36(3/4).
- Kamo, Y., & Cohen, E. L. (1998). Division of household work between partners: A comparison of black and white couples. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 131–145.
- Kiger, G., & Riley, P. J. (1996). Gender differences in perceptions of household labor. *The Journal of Psychology*, 130(4), 357–370.
- Leonard, M. (2001). Old wine in new bottles? Women working inside and outside the household. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24(1), 67–78.
- Loblaws (2003). What's cooking in your community? Toronto: Loblaws.
- Luttringer, J. M. (1995). Worker access to vocational training: A legal approach. What Makes Workers Learn. In D. Hirsch & D. A. Wagner (Eds.), *The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 51–64). Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Luxton, M. (1980). *More than a labour of love: Three generations of women's work in the home*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Massey, G., Hahn, K. et al. (1995). Women, men, and the 'second shift' in socialist Yugoslavia. *Gender and Society*, 9(3), 359–379.
- Merriam, S. B., & Caffarella, R. S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood. A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mies, M., & Shiva, V. (1993). *Ecofeminism*. London: Zed Books.
- Mikulecky, L. (1995). Workplace literacy programs: Organization and incentives. In D. Hirsch & D. A. Wagner (Eds.), *What makes workers learn? The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 129–148). Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Miles, A. (1998). Learning from the women's movement in the neo-liberal period. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 250–258). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Noonan, M. C. (2001). The impact of domestic work on men's and women's wages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 1134–1145.
- Noyelle, T., & Hirsch, D. (1995). Legal incentives and the new workforce. In D. Hirsch & D. A. Wagner (Eds.), *What makes workers learn? The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 65–69). Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Okin, S. M. (1989). *Justice, gender, and the family*. USA: Basic Books.
- Perkins, H. W., & DeMeis, D. K. (1996). Gender and family effects on the 'second shift' domestic activity of college-educated young adults. *Gender and Society*, 10(1), 78–93.
- Pittman, J. F., Kerpelman, J. L. et al. (2001). Stress and performance standards: A dynamic approach to time spent in housework. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 1111–1121.
- Rollings-Magnusson, S. (2003). Heavy burdens on small shoulders: The invisible labour of pioneer children of the western Canadian prairies 1871–1913. *Sociology*. Edmonton: University of Alberta.
- Ross, C. E. (1987). The division of labor at home. *Social Forces*, 65(3), 816–833.
- Ryan, P. (1995). Adult learning and work: Finance, incentives, and certification. *What Makes Workers Learn*. In D. Hirsch & D. A. Wagner (Eds.), *The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 11–36). Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Sanchez, L., & Thomson, E. (1997). Becoming mothers and fathers: Parenthood, gender, and the division of labor. *Gender and Society*, 11(6), 747–772.
- Scott, S. M. (1998). Philosophies in action. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 98–106). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Selman, G. (1998). The imaginative training for citizenship. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 24–34). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Solar, C. (1998). Trends in adult education in the 1990s. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 71–84). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

- South, S. J., & Spitze, G. (1994). Housework in marital and non-marital households. *American Sociological Review*, 59(3), 327–347.
- Speakman, S., & Marchington, M. (1999). Ambivalent patriarchs: Shift-workers, ‘breadwinners’ and housework. *Work, Employment, & Society*, 13(1), 83–105.
- Stalker, J. (1998). Women in the history of adult education: Misogynist responses to our participation. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 238–249). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Sticht, T. G. (1995). Functional context education for schoolplaces and workplaces. In D. Hirsch & D. A. Wagner (Eds.), *What makes workers learn. The role of incentives in workplace education and training* (pp. 117–126). New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Sullivan, O. (1997). The division of housework among ‘remarried’ couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 18(2), 205–223.
- Waring, M. (1988). *If women counted. A new feminist economics*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Welton, M. R. (1998). The struggle of memory against forgetting. In S. M. Scott, B. Spencer & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life. Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 35–45). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Williamson, B. (1998). *Lifeworlds and learning. Essays in the theory, philosophy, and practice of lifelong learning*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Windebank, J. (2001). Dual-earner couples in Britain and France: Gender divisions of domestic labour and parenting work in different welfare states. *Work, Employment, & Society*, 15(2), 269–290.