



“Summary of article by Jonathan Gershuny and John P. Robinson: Historical Changes in the Household Division of Labor” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 316-319

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In the last half of the twentieth century, as women have rapidly moved into the paid workforce, there has been concern about how women's traditional responsibilities in the home will be fulfilled. One possibility is for men to increase their share of time spent in household work. This article reviews data on time use, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, to evaluate changes in patterns of household labor time for men and women.

THE HOUSEHOLD TIME DEBATE

Contemporary discussions of women and housework tends to present a pessimistic portrait of women as trapped in low-status household chores because of their role in social reproduction, i.e., maintaining the family for societal continuity. This role means that women have less time and energy to devote to paid work than men have. "With power in modern societies increasingly defined by position in the paid labor market, therefore, women's housework responsibilities perpetuate their inferior status." [537] Empirical analysis of time budgets confirms that women do indeed bear the lion's share of responsibility for work in the home. However, this research is mainly reported on a cross-sectional basis which cannot capture changes over time. When these studies are compared historically they show declining gender differentials; women's share of domestic work is decreasing while men are doing more.

Why, then, the pessimism? There is, first, the observation that women who enter paid work still retain significant home responsibilities. Note has also been taken of cases in which household technology improves the quality of housework without reducing the time spent doing it. Cross-sectional studies comparing women with and without access to domestic technology, countries at different stages of development, and countries in different periods of technological development, have, indeed, suggested that the time spent on domestic work is constant or, counter intuitively, may even increase with greater access to technology.

These observations are contested by an analysis that couples a new look at older data with more recent survey evidence. The results show that time spent by women in at least some kinds of household work has, in fact, declined in recent years.

METHODOLOGY: BEHAVIORAL VERSUS COMPOSITIONAL CHANGE

"The basic measures of time use in this article are derived from time-budget surveys in which the respondents report all their daily activities within a structured diary format." [539] Time diaries have been shown to be reliable methods of self-reporting, easy for respondents to use, and able to capture periods when more than one activity is going on. The time diary data analyzed here was collected in the United Kingdom in 1961, 1973-74, and 1983-84 and in the United States in 1965-76, 1975, and 1985. The analysis focuses on activities of the 25-49 age group to achieve greater standardization and reduce the effects of demographic shifts affecting older and younger groups (e.g., longer education, later marriage, or early retirement).

At first glance, the data suggests that time spent in child care is increasing in the U.K. but decreasing in the U.S., while time spent by women in routine domestic work is declining in both countries. It is important to investigate whether these changes simply reflect structural shifts, e.g., women moving from the household to the paid workplace, or changes in family structure. If working women generally spend less time in routine household chores than full-time homemakers do, when more women move into paid employment then average time spent on routine chores will drop. This would represent a change in the structure of women's time rather than a change in the behavior of women in similar circumstances.

The pessimistic view holds that there is a core amount of household work from which women cannot escape, whether or not they work outside the home. Interpretation of the data as a structural shift is consistent with this view; it could simply mean that more women are moving toward this inescapable core. This issue can be analyzed by distinguishing the effects of more women working outside the home, on the one hand, from, on the other hand, the reality of whether each category of women (with and without paid employment) are spending less time in housework.

Statistical techniques (e.g., shift-share analysis) were used to decompose structural and behavioral effects. Examination of the data and a literature review from several social sciences indicates that involvement in paid work (full-time, part-time, or none) and family status (no children at home, at least one child under 5 years old, or children 5-18 years old) are the most relevant structural variables. To examine the behavioral variables, household activities were divided into four categories: shopping and related travel; child care; routine domestic chores like cooking and cleaning; and odd jobs like pet care or gardening. (The last category was not evaluated due to problems with the U.K. data.)

CHANGES IN UNPAID WORK TIME

Between the 1960s and 1980s, both countries witnessed an overall drop in the time women spent in routine domestic chores. "Does this really reflect a change in behavior or merely a change in the structure of the population? In the U.K., most of the reduction took place during the 1960s and early 1970s; in the U.S., most of the reduction happened during the later 1970s and early 1980s. In both countries, then, the major reduction in core housework took place over the period that women's participation in paid work increased most." [544] There is also a compositional change that shows up in the details: women with children reduced their time spent in routine domestic chores, while women with no children increased housework time somewhat -- although the absolute amount of time remained less than for women with children. These changes were

virtually identical in the two countries. Shift share analysis indicates that ninety percent of the reduction in time spent on domestic work in the U.K. was due to behavioral change, while in the U.S. sixty percent of the reduction can be attributed to behavioral change. A second type of share analysis indicates that the time women spend in routine household chores has been dropping and the time spent by men has been increasing. However, the absolute amount of time men spend is still well below that spent by women.

Share analysis of the time spent in child care reveals more similar patterns in the U.S. and U.K. than the raw data would indicate. Once the large increase of women in the U.S. into paid work is accounted for, there is an increase in child care time for both U.S. and U.K. women. This may reflect changing norms (e.g., Dr. Spock-inspired child-raising practices) or a perception that children need more protection from crime or traffic. It could also be an artifact of the research; in earlier surveys attention to a child may have been reported as a secondary activity while the mother was doing laundry or other chores. More recently, child care may be identified as the primary activity while an automatic washing machine runs in the background.

British women have dramatically increased shopping and related travel behavior, compared to only a slight reduction in the U.S.. This may reflect an increase in purchasing power and the introduction of self-serve markets to the U.K. at a later period than in the U.S., where such facilities predate the survey period. Time spent in both child care and shopping by men in the U.S. dropped slightly, while it increased for men in the U.K..

A final form of analysis, variance decomposition using multiple classification analysis, was applied to the U.S.-U.K. surveys as well as to data for four other countries: Canada, Denmark, Norway, and Holland. Across all countries and all studied decades, women spent an average of 214 minutes per day in routine domestic work, while men spent 27. Of most interest, though, is the effect of structural components and the change in behavior over time. Working outside the home reduces the time women spend on housework: on average, for each 100 minutes in paid work there is a 31 minute drop in housework. The reduction for men is much smaller. Women with children spend more time than average on housework, while women with no children spend less time than average. Children have little or no effect on the amount of time men spend on housework.

Overall, it appears that the time women spend on housework in the U.S. and the U.K. is falling, even when structural changes are accounted for, while the time spent by men is increasing (but at a slower rate). Similar trends exist in the four other countries examined. Patterns of change for child care and shopping are more mixed, but absolute amounts of time devoted to these activities by men and women are on converging paths.

The explanations for women's reduction of time in these activities may be variously explained by the movement of women into paid work, the low status and unpleasantness of housework, support for gender equality from women's movements, and the diffusion of household technology, where time-saving effects of new appliances like dishwashers and microwave ovens may be apparent only over the long-term. However there is not enough evidence on which to draw firm conclusions about causal relationships. Based on the evidence presented here, a less ambitious assertion can be made: "that it is the trends that we have outlined -- the declining

totals of domestic work, with a marginal redistribution from women to men -- rather than the previously assumed constancy of domestic work over historical time, that constitutes the facts to be explained by theorists of domestic production." [551]