THE GENDER GAP IN HOUSEWORK HOURS: CONVERGENCE OR DIVERGENCE IN AUSTRALIA, 1986 AND 2005?

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ABSTRACT
The increased labour force participation rate of married women with dependent children has given rise to the increasing prevalence of dual earner families and the consequent decline in ‘traditional male-breadwinner’ families. Previous research has shown that this trend towards partners in couple families sharing the breadwinner role has not been accompanied by a corresponding trend for partners to share the homemaker role. In this paper we use data from two nationally representative surveys, the 1986 Class Structure of Australia Project and the 2005 Neoliberalism, Inequality and Politics Project to assess whether the amount of time men and women spent doing ten specific housework tasks changed between 1986 and 2005. We ask two questions: First is there evidence of a convergence over time in men’s and women’s time spent on housework, and if so, is this trend driven by a reduction in the amount of time women spend on housework, an increase in the amount of time men spend on housework, or both? Second, is there evidence that the domestic division of labour is being “de-gendered”? In other words, are men spending more time than in the past doing stereotypically male tasks? Or is there evidence that both men and women are doing non-traditional housework tasks?

1 INTRODUCTION

During the last three decades, the prevalence of the traditional male breadwinner household comprising a male full-time earner with a dependent spouse and children has steadily declined due to changes in social expectations and economic conditions that have given rise to an increase in the labour force participation rate of married women with dependent children. In 1986, 41 percent of couple families with dependent children (0-14 years) were dual earner families but by 2003 the proportion had increased to 57 percent. Thirty-seven percent of families with dependent children have one parent in full-time employment and one parent in part-time employment and 20 percent have both parents employed full-time (ABS, 1986, p.16; ABS, 2003, p. 27). Previous research has found that the spread of the two-income household has been accompanied by little change in the gender distribution of unpaid work leading to ‘gender-skewed work arrangements’ (Pocock, 2003, p. 113) by which the female partner takes responsibility for unpaid domestic labour and the male partner ‘helps out’, often choosing less arduous tasks such as preparing meals or playing with the children as his contribution (Baxter, 2002).
2 DISCUSSION

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW
Two major theories explain the division of domestic labour, the economic exchange model and the gender display model. The economic exchange model assumes that partners in couple families make rational decisions regarding the division of domestic labour (Baxter, 2002; Coltrane, 2000) with the female partner trading her contribution of unpaid domestic labour for the economic support provided by the male partner (Brines, 1994). On the other hand, the gender display model links the persistence of the unequal division of domestic labour to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of ‘doing gender’. Housework is constructed as ‘women’s work’ and paid work is constructed as ‘men’s work’ (Ferree, 1990; Berk, 1985). When men do gender they provide the income and when women do gender they take care of the home. Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre and Matheson (2003, pp. 190-1) argue that the behaviour of individuals is ‘affected by the expectations held by others’. That is, individuals internalize the expectations that others have and reproduce the behaviour that explains to others whether they are male or female. Therefore, females take responsibility for housework as a consequence of their internalization of the norm that women are responsible for housework. For men, doing gender primarily involves providing financial support and doing minimal stereotypical male housework tasks. For women on the other hand, doing gender involves taking care of the home and children by doing unpaid housework and caring tasks.

There is some evidence that the allocation of paid and unpaid work along gender lines has become less rigid, leading Sayer (2005) to suggest that women’s performance and men’s avoidance of housework and childcare has lessened over time and that housework work hours for men and women are converging. Sayer’s research showed that men in 1998 invested ‘significantly more time in all core unpaid work activities’ than men in 1965. Similar results have been reported by Bianchi et al. (2001, p. 206) who found that men’s weekly housework hours increased from 7 hours in 1975 to 10 hours in 1995. On the other hand, Baxter (2002) found that men’s and women’s housework hours were converging due a decrease in women’s time on housework rather than an increase in men’s time on housework.

There is also the question of who takes responsibility for specific housework tasks. Research has shown that housework tasks are segregated by gender and that this segregation reinforces women’s unequal position by superimposing the gender division of labour in the labour market on the gender division of labour in the home (Bittman, 1992, p. 33). Traditionally, women have been regarded as being responsible for all housework tasks that need to be completed within the home, such as cooking, cleaning and laundry, and men are responsible for all the outdoor tasks, including yard work and home maintenance (Greenstein, 2000, p. 323). Traditional female tasks are seen as being the ‘least attractive housework activities’ and are more time consuming and time constraining than stereotypical male tasks (Bianchi et al., 2000, p. 195; Coltrane, 2000, p. 1210). For example, preparing the evening meal is a daily chore completed at around the same time each day whereas gardening can be carried out on a more flexible schedule.

With the decline in the proportion of couple families fitting the male breadwinner model it is timely to consider how housework is allocated within couple families. This study updates previous research by using data collected in 2005 and comparing it with data collected in 1986 with the aim of answering two questions: 1. Is there any evidence that men are spending more time doing housework than in the past? In other words, is there evidence of a convergence in men’s and women’s time on housework? 2. Are housework tasks still allocated according to gender or are they becoming more or less gender neutral? In other words, is there evidence of a convergence in men’s and women’s responsibility for specific tasks? If housework hours are converging because men are doing more and women are doing less this would provide evidence that the homemaker
role is being increasingly shared. If men are spending more time doing traditional female
tasks and if women are spending more time doing traditional male tasks then this would
provide evidence that housework tasks are becoming increasingly gender neutral.

2.2 DATA
Data from two nationally representative cross-sectional surveys, the 1986 Class
Structure of Australia Project and the 2005 Neoliberalism, Inequality and Politics Project,
were used in this study. Only one person per household was interviewed in each survey.
The 1986 Class Structure of Australia Project was designed to be nationally
representative of the employed population and was therefore restricted to male
respondents working at least 30 hours per week and female respondents working at least
15 hours per week (N=1195) (Baxter, Gibson, & Lynch-Blosse, 1990). All respondents
were aged 18 years or over and the data were collected via face-to-face interviews and a
self-complete questionnaire. The Neoliberalism, Inequality and Politics Project collected
data from a national random sample of 1623 individuals aged 18 years or over in 2005
(Western, Baxter, Pakulski, Tranter, Western & van Egmond, 2005). Data were collected
via computer assisted telephone interviews. In this survey there was no restriction on
working hours therefore a sub-sample, including only male respondents working 30+
hours per week and female respondents working 15+ hours per week, was selected so
that comparisons could be made with the 1986 data. Our analyses is further restricted to
respondents living in couple families.

2.3 METHOD
We conduct t-tests and ANOVAs to determine whether there are any statistically
significant differences between the mean hours male and female respondents in 1986
and in 2005 spent doing ten specific housework tasks. A comparison of these differences
will indicate whether there has been any convergence in the amount of time males and
females spend doing housework and whether housework tasks remain gendered.

2.3.1 VARIABLES
The dependent variables are ten specific housework tasks and three housework indexes.
The indexes are a measure of time spent on indoor housework comprising the following
tasks- preparing meals, doing the dishes, shopping, cleaning, washing and ironing; a
measure of outdoor housework comprising the following tasks- taking out the garbage,
mowing, gardening and home repairs and maintenance; and finally a measure of total
time spent on all ten tasks. Although most researchers define domestic labour as a
combination of housework and childcare tasks, in this paper we are concerned with only
the housework component of domestic labour. Childcare is a qualitatively different
activity to housework, closely bound up with issues of love and dependence of children. It
thus involves a very different set of tasks and responsibilities compared to most routine
housework tasks. It is also a set of activities that vary widely depending on the age of
children with caring tasks associated with infants and pre-school children very different
to those associated with caring for a young teenager. On the other hand, the activities
associated with housework are broadly similar across households regardless of the age of
occupants.

2.3.2 RESULTS
Our analysis was conducted in three stages in order to determine: the difference in male
housework hours in 1986 and 2005 and the difference in female housework hours in
1986 and 2005 (time difference); the difference in male and female housework hours in
1986 and the difference in male and female housework in hours in 2005 (gender
difference); and the difference between the gender difference in 1986 and the gender
difference in 2005 (gender/time difference). The results are presented in Figure 1 (see
Appendix A for full results including tests of significance levels).
**Gender Convergence of Men’s and Women’s Time on Housework**

*Difference in male housework hours 1986-2005*

In 2005, males spent significantly more time doing four indoor housework tasks: an additional 0.7 hours preparing meals, an additional 0.65 hours doing the dishes, an additional 0.3 hours shopping and an additional 0.4 hours cleaning. At the same time, men also increased their time on taking out the garbage (by 0.3 hours) and doing home maintenance (by 1 hour). Consequently the total time males spent doing indoor housework tasks increased by 2.5 hours per week; doing outdoor housework tasks increased by 1.3 hours per week, while the overall total time males spent doing housework increased by nearly 4 hours per week.

*Difference in female housework hours 1986-2005*

In 2005 females spent less time doing three indoor housework tasks: preparing meals (2 hours), washing (0.6 hours) and ironing (1 hour). Women also decreased their time mowing by 0.13 hours per week compared to females in 1986. However, females in 2005 spent more time taking out the garbage (0.5 hours) and doing home repairs and maintenance (0.9 hours) than females in 1986. Consequently, the total time females spent doing indoor housework tasks decreased by 4.6 hours per week, doing outdoor housework tasks increased by 1.4 hours per week and overall total housework time decreased by 3.15 hours per week.

Figure 1. *Time Spent on Housework Tasks by Gender: 1986-2005.*

Source: Class Structure of Australia Project and Neoliberalism, Inequality and Politics Project Datasets.
GENDER CONVERGENCE OF TASKS?

Difference in male and female housework hours 1986

Females spent more time doing each of the traditional female housework tasks than males in 1986. Females spent 7 hours more preparing meals; 2.5 hours more doing the dishes; 1 hour more shopping; 4.5 hours more cleaning the house; 3 hours more doing the washing and 2 hours more ironing. For all four of the traditional male housework tasks, the mean hours for males were greater than the mean hours for females. Males spent 0.13 hours more taking out the garbage; 0.6 hours more mowing; 0.4 hours more gardening and 1 hour more doing home maintenance. Females spent 20 hours more than males doing indoor housework; males spent 2 hours more than females doing outdoor housework. Therefore females spent 18 hours more doing housework compared to males in 1986.

Difference in male and female housework hours 2005

In 2005, females spent more time doing each of the traditional female housework tasks than males. Females spent 4 hours more preparing meals; 1.5 hours more doing the dishes; 1 hour more shopping; 3.6 hours more cleaning the house; 2.5 hours more doing the washing and 0.7 hours more ironing. For three of the four traditional male housework tasks, the mean hours for males were greater than the mean hours for females. Males spent 0.25 hours more taking out the garbage; 0.6 hours more mowing and 1.4 hours more doing home maintenance. Females spent 13 hours more than males doing indoor housework; males spent 2 hours more than females doing outdoor housework. Therefore, females spent 11 hours more than males doing housework in 2005.

GENDER/TIME DIFFERENCE IN MALE AND FEMALE HOUSEWORK HOURS 1986-2005

For five of the six indoor housework tasks the difference between the gender difference in 1986 and the gender difference in 2005 is statistically significant. Between 1986 and 2005, the difference between the amount of time males and females spent preparing meals declined by nearly 3 hours; doing the dishes declined by 1 hour; cleaning the house declined by 1 hour; washing declined by 0.75 hours; and ironing declined by 1.4 hours. Of the outdoor tasks, the difference between the amount of time males and females spent taking out the garbage declined by 0.13 hours and gardening declined by 0.6 hours between 1986 and 2005. The differences between the gender difference in 1986 and the gender difference in 2005 for indoor tasks (7 hours) and total housework (7 hours) are also statistically significant.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to assess whether there has been any convergence in the housework hours of males and females in couple families between 1986 and 2005. We found that although women are still responsible for the majority of housework, there is evidence that males in couple families are doing more housework. In 1986, males spent around 12 hours per week doing housework but by 2005 this had increased to nearly 16 hours per week. During the same period, females decreased their housework hours from 30 to 27 hours per week. Therefore, the gender gap in housework hours narrowed with males spending more time and females spending less time doing housework. This convergence is primarily due to changes in time spent doing traditional female tasks. In 2005, males spent an extra 2.5 hours and females spent 4.5 hours less doing traditional female tasks compared to males and females in 1986.

These results suggest that there has been some convergence in housework hours with both men and women contributing to this convergence. Housework tasks are becoming less 'gendered' with males increasing their hours on traditional female tasks. Bianchi et al (2001) and Sayer (2005) found that housework hours in the United States were
converging due to an increase in male hours and decrease in female hours with much of the change occurring between 1970 and the mid 1980s. Both of these studies examined change over at least two decades, which may account for their results differing from those of Baxter (2002) who only examined change in housework hours between the mid 1980s and late 1990s. The 2005 Neoliberalism, Inequality and Politics Project has provided the first opportunity to study long term trends in the housework hours of men and women in Australia. Further analyses of these data, controlling for the various factors that previous researchers have found to be associated with housework hours including paid work hours of the respondents and their partners, the presence of dependent children, the respondents’ gender role attitudes, the proportion of household income contributed, and their age and level of education, may provide an understanding of why these changes have taken place.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Neoliberalism, Inequality and Politics Project was supported under Australian Research Council’s Discovery Projects funding scheme (DP0449516).

5 REFERENCES


### 6 APPENDIX A

Table 1 Comparison of males in 1986 and 2005 and females in 1986 and 2005

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