

*WOMEN* continue to carry disproportionate responsibility for household tasks. A study of 650 Detroit women reveals that attitudes, employment status, life cycle, and husband's income all contribute to husband's housework effort. Some evidence is presented that the greater the earnings differential of husband over wife, the less he contributes in help at home.

## **Housework by Husbands**

### **Determinants and Implications\***

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The handicaps women face at home and on the job become more apparent as females increase their participation in education and employment. The women's movement has heightened awareness of sexual inequality (Mason et al., 1976), yet women remain at a disadvantage. Home obligations detract from their ability to seek top jobs and command high wages. Working hours, commuting distance, overtime demands—all must be minimized to allow time and energy for housework and child care.

The research reported here indicates that the sexual nature of the division of labor is not changing. Although women's labor force activity creates substantial overload, husbands are unlikely to relieve the strain. Under optimal conditions, we note the wife doing five times as much domestic work as her spouse and usually more. When husbands contribute, they do so with the understanding that they are operating in "female territory."

Many investigators have examined the division of conjugal roles. Two disparate interpretations arise in these studies. The first opinion is that low-income families are more likely to

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observe sex-role segregation. Whether this behavior is a result of strong kin involvement (Bott, 1957), committed homemakers (Rosser and Harris, 1965), or sex-role socialization (Perucci et al., 1978), lower-class men are not inclined to domesticity (Schneider and Smith, 1973).<sup>1</sup>

Other studies contradict these propositions. Blood and Wolfe (1960) report significantly greater husband housework effort in blue-collar than in white-collar homes, as, more recently, do Ericksen et al. (1979). Both these research investigations also indicate that the employment status of the wife is an additional factor inducing husband's household participation.

Studies of more egalitarian relationships, such as those by Rapoport and Rapoport (1976), note that husbands of high-status career women are quite active in family chores. This finding raises the possibility that not only do time limitations created by the wife's employment influence male outputs at home (Blood and Wolfe, 1960), but that the greater her contributions to the provider role, the more help she receives. Scanzoni (1978) observes that the wife's bargaining power in sharing household tasks is associated with the meaning of her work. Women who are career oriented, self-confident, and continuous in labor force participation are both more likely to contribute a substantial increment to the family living standard and to share housework with their spouses.

The operationalization of such a relative resource balance between mates has varied. Ericksen et al. (1979) found both a positive association between wife's educational achievement and husband's household help, and a negative relation between husband's earnings and his home efforts. These results suggest a relative resource explanation but do not demonstrate one. Farkas (1976) examined wage rate ratios but did not take into account actual earned resources. Scanzoni (1978) explored the effect of husband-wife income ratios among couples 22 to 33 years of age. He found that as the wife's relative income rose, so did male participation in cooking and dishwashing.

Our analysis concludes that attitudes, wife's employment status, husband's income, and stage of the family life cycle each

contribute to explaining variance in husband's efforts. When scrutiny is directed at an equal earner subsample, an additional effect is noted. The smaller the income differential between spouses, the greater male housework participation becomes. Since high-paying positions are overwhelmingly held by males, this differential is larger in more affluent families. Implications will be addressed following a discussion of our general results.

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data set studied comes from the 1978 Detroit Area Study conducted by University of Michigan students and staff. A stratified sample of 650 women within the Detroit metropolitan area was interviewed.<sup>2</sup> All respondents were currently married; only about 8% were black.

While not the main focus of the investigation, several questions on conjugal role division were asked. Five dependent variables and their relationships are here reported. These include wives' sex-role ideology and four measures of husband housework participation, as reported by the wife.

#### BELIEFS

A number of attitude statements were included in our survey, the centrally relevant one being, "There is some work that is men's and some that is women's, and they should not be doing each other's." Respondents reacted to this judgment, hereafter labeled SHARATT, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on a five-point scale. Since the statement as worded reflects a traditional outlook, higher scores indicate a more modern viewpoint. The mean response was 3.52, with a standard deviation of 1.20.

In devising a model to explain variance in SHARATT, a number of hypotheses were incorporated. First was the inclusion of influences stemming from women's domestic investments. Large family size or the presence of young children was expected to confirm traditional values. Another perspective

posits an achievement-oriented determinant. High levels of education and labor force participation were thought to promote liberalism. Finally, attitudes about conjugal role division may be influenced by individual factors such as age, ethnoreligious commitments, and social class. It was anticipated that younger, higher-status, later generation women would hold the more modern views.<sup>3</sup>

Data analysis confirmed the hypothesis of a traditional impact associated with the two domestic constraints, but this effect disappeared with the introduction of controls. Social class, operationalized as husband's income, contributed no understanding to the variance in SHARATT, nor did the other personal factors. The persistent and meaningful dimension was that of women's achievement: work status, income, and education. Further, the introduction of multivariable techniques deleted all but two predictors of SHARATT views: wife's labor market participation and her education. The standardized equation is:

$$\hat{Y} = .128 X_1 + .215 X_2 \quad N = 650 \quad R^2 = .0756$$

where  $\hat{Y}$  is SHARATT,  $X_1$  is wife's employment status, and  $X_2$  is her education. Both coefficients are significant at the .01 level. It must be admitted, however, that the great majority of variance in SHARATT remains unexplained.

## BEHAVIOR

We created four different measures of male housework contribution from our survey material. Respondents were asked, "For each household task, tell me how many times it was done by the wife alone, the husband alone, or the husband with someone else." The tasks were: grocery shopping, laundry, dinner preparation, dinner dishwashing, and vacuuming. The variable HEALON is the sum of all efforts the husband undertook by himself in these household areas. We wondered if some men engaged more in shared than in solitary tasks. We thus added the number of husband activities done only with some-

TABLE 1  
Weekly Male Household Tasks: Summary Statistics

Parameter	N	Mean	Standard	Range	% Husbands
			Deviation		Not Involved
HEALON	650	1.51	2.68	0-18	58.8%
HEWITH	650	1.26	2.47	0-22	58.4%
HISSUM	650	2.14	3.24	0-21.5	40.6%
HIS%	650	10.9%	17.02	0-82.9%	40.6%

one else, creating the measure HEWITH. An assumption which the data substantiate has been that the husband's primary coworker is his wife. We judged husband's total contribution to home maintenance by adding each man's HEALON score to half that of HEWITH. We label this result HISSUM.

Finally, families vary in the amount of housework they perform. As Slocum and Nye (1976) illustrate, the household division of labor is frequently measured by the relative rather than absolute contribution of each spouse. To control for the variance in fastidiousness between homes, we devised HIS%. HIS% is the ratio of HISSUM, the husband's share of the work, to the total number of household jobs in areas recorded by the interviewer. A summary of the four above-described measures is presented in Table 1.

In selecting a model to explain husband's household chore contributions, we anticipated, first, that the sex-role attitudes of our female respondents would have relevance. In addition, the domestic, achievement, and environmental factors cited above in the explanatory model of attitudes merited reexamination. Finally, when analyzing behavior, theory suggests the incorporation of temporal contingencies. Available time may determine the choice of actor for some household jobs. A listing of the significant predictor variables for the four male housework measures, as well as their net coefficients, is found in Table 2.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 2  
 Husband Household Participation: Standardized Net Coefficients

Parameter	Coefficient <sup>a</sup>			R <sup>2b</sup>	N
	SHARATT	Husband's Income	Wife's Work Status		
HEALON	.0912	-.1413	.1434	-.0943	580
HEWITH	.1177	0	0	-.0386	625
HISSUM	.1134	-.1334	.1540	-.1160	580
HIS%	.1431	-.1136	.1828	-.1501	580

a. All coefficients are significant at the 0.01 level.

b. R<sup>2</sup> is the squared multiple correlation with all significant contributors, including family life cycle, in the equation.

c. Since there are six different vectors, their relative effects are presented separately in Table 3.

A number of attitude items were analyzed for effects on behavior. The positive feeling toward domestic activity suggested by Rosser and Harris (1965) was operationalized as the response to a question, "When you consider your feelings about household tasks, would you say that you liked all, most, a few, or none of them?" Replies showed no relation to husband housework efforts. The only attitudinal variable demonstrating an impact, though small following the introduction of controls, was SHARATT.

Among the domestic factors tested, only life-cycle stage made a contribution to understanding husband's household behavior. A comparison of the coefficients reveals the continued salience of these shifts on responsibilities in the female domain, as suggested by Spanier et al. (1979). Greater male participation is usually associated with newlywed and retired status, lending support to our suspicion that the wife is the husband's major housework partner. When children are available as substitutes, the smallest contribution is made by their fathers on all measures.

TABLE 3  
Life Cycle Coefficients for Husband Housework

Parameter	Life Cycle Coefficient <sup>a</sup>					
	Newly wed	Pre- School Parent	Latency Parent	Teen Parent	Children Grown	Retired Couple
HEALON	-.0158	.1402	-.3639	-.3981	.0560	1.547
HEWITH	.7059	-.1339	-.5910	-.3018	-.0640	1.060
HISSUM	.2331	.0853	-.3973	-.5624	-.0107	2.265
HIS%	3.997	1.468	-2.325	-4.477	.3761	13.09
N	23	124	116	184	112	66

a. These coefficients have been recalculated to include the category eliminated to obtain the regression estimate. All values are expressed as deviations from the grand mean of their measure.

From the vantage point of personal achievement, only employment status held explanatory value. A weak relationship between wife's years of labor force participation and husband's helpfulness disappeared under multiple regression procedures. For this sample, wife's education level had no impact whatsoever, nor did husband's.

In accordance with the findings of Blood and Wolfe (1960) and Aldous (1969), time serves as a constraint. When wives have more free hours, they accomplish more work around the home both absolutely and relative to their husbands. Male participation is mildly associated with shorter working hours for the husband and longer ones for the wife. This effect, as well as a weak trend favoring the older husband, disappears under multiple regression.

To test the thesis that ascriptive loyalty reinforces a sexual division of labor, as suggested by Harrell-Bond's (1969) work, we correlated generations in the United States, intensity of ethnic identification, religiosity, ethnic group, and religious

affiliation with household activity. While wife's religiosity had a small gross effect, none of these variables made any net contribution in explaining the variance.

The validity of Bott's (1957) hypothesis, that the more connected the wife's social network, the more segregated the family roles, was explored in the survey setting. Respondents listed their three closest friends and stated whether or not these were good friends of one another. Networks were scored from unconnected to completely connected. This scale showed no relation to husband's housework participation. A similar measure of consanguinity addressed the possibility that a greater preponderance of relatives in the friendship network was associated with traditionalism in the division of labor. This proposition failed as well.

While no relation was found between husband's income and SHARATT, a negative association obtains for husband's earnings and most of our housework behavior indicators. The liberal effect of education on attitudes is neutralized by high male income, which mitigates sharing behavior for our respondents. Support for a conjoint resource exchange theory, to be outlined below, begins to appear.

Our results lend no confirmation to theories of pronounced conjugal role segregation among working-class couples. Both absolute and relative involvement of husbands fit the model of Blood and Wolfe (1960). Tests for interaction among explanatory variables were negative. As male income went up, husband's chore involvement generally went down. Wife's employment status, sex-role ideology, and the family life stage all add pressure for spouse effort. The determinants of shared housework are less clear, with only attitude and life stage making contributions in this analysis.

## DISCUSSION

### THEORETICAL APPROACHES

As thinkers in the functionalist tradition, Blood and Wolfe (1960) interpret their results in terms of systemic strain. Female



job activity decreases time available for home chores. This tension may result in an increase in husband efforts. However, they too note the lower performance by white-collar husbands. The status of the high-income man, however, does not become a causal factor. According to their view:

Not that successful husbands disdain household tasks—they are just too busy being successful to have the time [Blood and Wolfe, 1960: 61].

While most women endorse husband's success, the double-duty day is not so functional for working wives.

According to Scanzoni (1972), the resolution of this conflict will be to the advantage of the spouse with the stronger bargaining power. In reviewing studies similar to ours, he proposes a comparative resource theory. He labels the wife a "junior partner." Despite her level of ability, she is almost always dependent on her husband for the major part of the family income. Most women do not engage in careers, regardless of the number of hours or years worked. Unless women are able to draw equally from that major source of position in our society, income, they cannot hope to move beyond the rank of junior partner.

#### EMPIRICAL TRENDS

We sought to determine if sex-role relationships were affected by equality in the market place. Defining egalitarian earnings very broadly as wife's income of not more than \$1000 per annum below that of her husband, we were only able to generate 55 cases.

On all measures we developed, this subsample shows higher husband participation. Not unexpectedly, the majority of equal-income families were in the low-income range. Wage and education differentials are usually smaller between spouses of this group. It is the wife of the more successful husband who is more likely the status inferior. Only in three of our egalitarian households did each spouse succeed in earning \$20,000 or more annually, a reflection of the low salaries offered females.

TABLE 4  
 Mean Male Household Help in Egalitarian Income Homes

Parameter	Mean Effort <sup>a</sup>		
	Total	Each Spouse	Each Spouse
	Subsample	Earns < \$15,000	Earns > \$15,000
		Annually	Annually
HEALON	2.55	3.07	1.36
HEWITH	2.20	1.60	3.53
HISSUM	3.65	3.88	3.12
HIS%	21.7%	22.3%	20.2%
N	55	38	17

a. Statistical testing for group mean differences between all egalitarian households and the remainder of the sample yielded t values significant at the 0.01 level for all four indicators.

Informal study of the data shows that high-income men contribute more to housework if they are married to equal-earning wives. Otherwise, they rank lowest. The 146 husbands whose annual earnings were \$25,000 or more averaged a housework contribution of 6.39%. Conversely, working-class husbands exhibit a high level of participation regardless of wife's status. There were 100 husbands with incomes of \$10,000 or less who shared 18.3% of the household chores included in our survey. As Table 4 indicates, an additional increment of help is associated with egalitarian earnings at lower levels as well. Unfortunately, the meager case base following the introduction of additional controls on this subgroup makes detailed analysis impossible.

The high HEWITH mean noted among better-income couples is intriguing. Although it cannot be carefully investigated in so small a population, it could indicate a togetherness commitment within the dual-career family, as expected by Rapoport and Rapoport (1976). Of course, more joint efforts might be an artifact of the life-cycle shifts noted above. The newly

married, more-educated woman, for example, may more easily achieve wage parity with her husband *before* she drops out of the labor market to have children.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Much larger samples of equal-earner spouses from all classes, ages, and backgrounds are necessary for investigators to sort out the causally relevant phenomena. Weighting HEWITH by half when creating HISSUM and HIS% may underestimate husbands' contributions to household endeavor. Some joint tasks, such as grocery shopping, take almost as long done individually as together.

We have not done a time budget study. We have relied on wives' impressions rather than husbands' or joint reports. We have neglected to tap many necessary jobs. Of course, there is no standard method for measuring housework. We believe our approach, based on reported behavioral incidence, rather than estimates of frequency, provides a sound empirical basis for conjugal role analysis.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Buying her way to equal partnership is no easy task for a woman. A segregated labor market employs most women in lower-paying, poor-status posts. In our sample alone, full-time working women's mean earnings were only 46% of those of the men. Surely one of the reasons women do not have careers is because of their family duties. Pleck (1977: 423) explains:

For women, the demands of the family role are permitted to intrude into the work role. . . . For husbands, the work-family role boundary is likewise asymmetrically permeable, but in the other direction. Many husbands literally "take work home."

These norms further the husband's status and earnings, while concurrently limiting the wife's.

Regretfully, little relief is in sight. Labor force participation among all women continues to grow. But, married women who

work for the second income so common in our inflationary economy are likely to accept a smaller salary, the more so the more successful the husband. Unknowingly, such women have reinforced their second-class status at home. They remain in a weak bargaining position with respect to their husbands. Their caretaking chores at home simultaneously legitimize their weak labor market position. Prospects for disrupting this vicious circle are not very bright.

### NOTES

1. In Bott's (1957) research, the connectedness of the wife's social network, that is, whether she had an interacting group of friends, was the primary determinant of sex-role segregation between spouses. The connected network, however, was more common in working-class households. Similarly, for Rosser and Harris (1965), the central determinant of household sex-role behavior was a very favorable attitude in the wife toward being a homemaker. Again, a strong commitment to domesticity was reported as more common among blue-collar wives.

2. The stratification procedure involved components of geography, race, marital status, and socioeconomic position.

3. Variables used in this part of the analysis are coded as follows: six education and seven income intervals were determined by a combination of their distribution in the data and their meaningfulness. All interval values were then coded at the midpoint. For example, cases of completion of grades 9-11 were combined and coded 10. Age was entered as raw data. Employment status and family life cycle were dummy variables. The latter was constructed following Blood and Wolfe (1960), who view couples as occupying one of six stages, depending on the age of their oldest child. Childless couple stages were categorized by years of marriage and retirement status of husband. Of the wives, 286 were employed; 178 full time.

4. Additional coding procedures are as follows: wife religiosity was rated on the basis of frequency of church attendance, scaled 1 (weekly or more) to 6 (never). Years of wife's employment were reduced to four categories, while both spouses' hours were trichotomized.

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