

GENDER DISPLAY AND COUNTER-DISPLAY: WOMEN'S HOUSEWORK ADAPTATIONS TO MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

BACKGROUND

If time spent doing housework is the only consideration, entering heterosexual coresidential unions is a bad deal for women. Not only do married and cohabiting women do more housework than single women; women actually increase their housework hours upon entering coresidential unions with men, while men reduce theirs (South and Spitze 1994, Gupta 1999). Currently, a popular explanation of these findings is that housework is a mechanism for constructing and affirming gender identity. By increasing their housework upon entering unions, in this view, women are demonstrating that they are women, or 'doing gender.'

Our aim in this analysis is to examine the cracks in this tendency of women to increase their housework following union formation. That is, we investigate the sources of flexibility in women's housework responses to union formation. Given that the average effect for women of entering unions is to increase their housework hours, what are the factors that counteract this tendency or account for variation around it? What are the characteristics of women who *reduce* their housework after marriage or cohabitation? What factors are associated with lower than average housework hours for women following their entry into unions? What are the characteristics of their partners that facilitate gender-atypical housework adjustments to union formation?

In asking these questions, we seek to complicate the view of women's housework response to union formation as being an automatic result of 'doing gender.' Our objective is to analyze the space for gender-atypical adaptations by examining the forces that counteract women's average housework response to union formation. Further, if housework is a point of negotiation for men and women prior to marriage or cohabitation, our analysis may tell us something about the process of bargaining inherent in union formation. Given that both men and women increasingly expect to be in more gender-egalitarian unions, we hope to illuminate the factors that actually facilitate egalitarian

adjustments in women's housework upon union entry. Such adaptations may also have implications for union quality and stability at the individual level, given the documented links between housework and marital satisfaction.

We use data from the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to answer the question: What are the characteristics of women, their partners, and their unions that make possible gender-atypical adjustments in women's housework hours after union formation? Specifically, what factors are associated with greater than average housework hours, and increases in those hours, following entry into coresidential unions? In our analysis we compare the determinants of women's housework prior to their entry into coresidential unions with those that operate subsequent to union entry. In this way we identify the characteristics that pre-dispose women towards making gender-symmetric adaptations to union formation, as well as the ones that are activated after they enter unions. We also determine the characteristics of their partners that are associated with women's gender-atypical housework responses.

Our theoretical starting-point is the 'doing gender' or 'gender display' perspective on housework. The performance of housework, in this view, provides a script for creating and reproducing gender identity (West and Zimmerman, 1987). We accept this argument as a plausible explanation for the average positive effect of union entry on women's housework. We then consider the following possible sources of dispersion around this mean effect: economic exchange, time availability, socialization, and gender-role ideology. The economic exchange or bargaining theory of housework proposes that partners in couples divide housework on the basis of relative earnings: the partner with greater earnings does less housework (Brines 1994, Bittman et. al. forthcoming, Greenstein 2000). According to the time availability hypothesis, individuals' time spent on housework is inversely related to their employment hours, and directly related to their partners' employment hours. It is possible also that individuals' housework hours are influenced by their

parents' gender roles—the socialization hypothesis (Cunningham 2001). Finally, their own pre-union attitudes regarding gender propriety may affect women's housework once they enter unions.

METHODS

For our analysis we use data from the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), conducted in 1988-89 and 1992-94. We select women who were single in the first wave—never married, separated or divorced, and widowed—and were married or cohabiting in the second wave. There were 620 such women. We consider two sets of factors in our analysis of women's post-union housework hours, and of changes in their housework following union formation. The first consists of the women's own pre-union and post-union characteristics. Second, we consider partner characteristics that could be related to their post-union housework. Once the women are in unions, their housework behavior is likely to be a function of their partners' characteristics as well as their own. We focus particularly on the effects of their partners' relative earnings and employment hours.

We use three models. The first is an analysis of women's pre-union housework hours, i.e. while they were single. This model establishes the baseline for our analysis of their post-union housework performance. The second model looks at their housework hours following their entry into coresidential unions. This post-union model identifies the factors, including partner characteristics, which are associated with greater than average housework hours following union formation. By putting together the pre- and post-union results, we determine which factors operate before women enter unions, and which factors are triggered only upon union entry. Our third model analyzes the change in women's housework between the two waves. It adds the dynamics of housework to the picture, so that we can see how women's housework responds to changes in their circumstances. In particular we can identify the factors related to gender-atypical changes, i.e. increases, in women's housework following their entry into unions. Taken together, the three models—pre-union, post-

union, and change—enable us to trace the housework trajectory of women as they move from being single to being in coresidential unions with men.

Our dependent variable for the first two models is the total number of hours the sample women spent per week in the “female” tasks of laundry, housecleaning, cooking, and dishwashing. The dependent variable for the third model is the change in the number of hours spent on these tasks between the two waves. Our independent variables for the pre-union model are household composition—including an indicator for whether the women were living with their parents—and gender role attitudes. To operationalize the socialization hypothesis, we employ an indicator for whether the women’s mothers were in the labor force during the women’s childhood. We control for the women’s age, race, education, income and employment hours (the time availability hypothesis). The post-union model uses post-union measures of all the variables except for gender role attitudes. We retain the pre-union measure to address a problem with prior cross-sectional studies of the effects of gender role attitudes on housework, namely the difficulty of establishing the causal order of attitudes and housework. In this model we add the partners’ characteristics, including their shares of the couples’ total incomes, employment hours, and educational levels. The independent variables for the final model are measures of changes in all time-varying independent variables in the earlier models except for gender role attitudes. We retain the second wave measures of partner characteristics in this model. All models include an indicator identifying women in cohabiting unions.

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