

## A Comparison of the Division of Household Labor in the United States and Sweden

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### ***Background***

Sweden is viewed as a model for universal welfare and solidarity, praised for its health care, its welfare state, its attitudes toward immigrants, and its treatment of children, women, and the elderly. Working parents in Sweden receive universal parental leave from their jobs, regardless of income. By contrast, in the United States, one is eligible only if their employers offer such a benefit. In Sweden, government policies favor women remaining in the workforce, even after the birth of a child. In the U.S., women must often relinquish their workplace roles for domestic duties in the home following the birth of a child. Mothers in both countries have high labor force participation and often find themselves working a “second shift.” That is, in addition to paid work, they do a disproportionate share of the domestic work at home, such as the laundry and the cooking. Even though recently women are doing less housework and men are doing more, women are generally spending twice the amount of time in housework than are men.

This paper explores the division of the housework in Sweden and the U.S. I ask whether ideological differences between Swedes and Americans affect their divisions of household labor. This study evaluates four models that explain the division of household labor. The first model utilizes *gender role socialization* to predict the household division of labor. It argues that children are socialized to believe that housework is less important than paid work, and that these attitudes result in an unequal distribution of household labor. The second model links *gender role ideology* to the division of household labor. People with “feminist” attitudes are expected to have more equal distributions of housework than people with traditional attitudes. The third model posits a relationship between *economic power* and housework which results in an equal distribution of the domestic work. Finally, the *time availability* model posits that housework is a function of the available time that household members have to realistically spend on household chores, after considering time spent in paid work.

### ***Methodology***

To test whether the household division of labor differs between Swedes and Americans, I compare representative samples of American and Swedish residents from the 1994 “family and gender roles” module of the International Social Survey Program. The respondents included in the analyses are individuals living in two-earner, marital and cohabiting relationships. Six household tasks were analyzed in a succession of logistic regression models: doing the laundry (washing and ironing), making small repairs around the house, looking after sick family members, shopping for groceries, deciding what to have for dinner, and organizing the household income. Each household task represents a dependent variable. Respondents were asked: who did the housework items; whether they were usually or always done by one spouse; or, whether the activities were about equally shared. The Lickert scale responses were condensed into two

categories, usually or always the man or woman (coded as “unequal” division of labor), or usually done by both household members (coded as “egalitarian”).

The independent variables include the subjects’ demographic characteristics, their attitudes toward housework compared to paid work, and their attitudes toward cohabitation. Demographic variables include age, sex, education, subjective social class, urbanicity, and whether the respondents ever cohabited with a partner. Gender role socialization was measured with a variable which asked respondents whether their mothers had ever worked before they were 14 years old. Gender role ideology was constructed using a factor analysis of items which are believed to tap into domestic role ideology and division of labor ideology. With respect to domestic role ideology, items included attitudes toward working mothers, their relationships with their children and family, and attitudes about the wives’ roles in their homes. Items that tapped into division of labor ideology included attitudes about work and women’s independence, and whether both partners should contribute to the household income. The economic dependency model utilized four independent variables: 1) whether both partners earned the same amount of income; 2) whether the women earned more income than the men; 3) whether the respondents believed that financial security is the main advantage of marriage; and 4) whether respondents supervised others at work. Finally, the time availability model included two items: 1) whether both partners had equal employment status (that is, for example, both partners worked full time or both were students); or, 2) whether respondents employment statuses were greater than their partners (that is, the respondents worked more time than their partners).

## ***Results***

In the U.S., gender role ideology predicts a more equal division of household labor. That is, individuals, both male and female, with more “feminist” attitudes about domestic roles and the division of labor were more likely to state that doing the laundry or caring for sick relatives were activities that both partners were involved in. Gender role ideology is made up of two factors. The first is domestic roles. Americans, who felt that the household is not only the wife’s job and that working mothers can establish good relationships with their children, were more likely to state that the division of household labor in their homes was equal. The second factor is the division of labor. Individuals, who believed that work is best for a woman’s independence and that both individuals should contribute to the household income, were more likely to state that the division of household labor in their homes was equal.

In Sweden, the explanation for the division of household labor is less clear. This is primarily because three of the models explained how domestic work is divided among partners. As the gender role socialization model predicts, Swedes, who were socialized early on by their mother’s labor force participation, were more likely to say they divided the household duties in an equitable fashion. “Feminist” ideologies about domestic roles and the division of labor also affected the division of household tasks among Swedes. The time availability model also explained the division of household labor in Sweden. When both partners spend equal amount of time in the labor force, the division of housework, according to the respondents, is also more equal. One model, the economic dependency model, did not hold in Sweden. When women earned more income than men, the division of housework, such as laundry and doing repairs around the home, remained equal among the partners. The economic dependency model argues

that women should do less housework if they are earning more money than their partners. A discussion of these findings will follow in the final paper.