Measuring the Division of Household Labor: Gender Segregation of Housework Among American Couples

SAMPSON LEE BLAIR and DANIEL T. LICHTER

Journal of Family Issues 1991 12: 91
DOI: 10.1177/019251391012001007

Despite a large body of research on the household division of labor, surprisingly little is known about how husbands and wives divide their family work time across a variety of domestic tasks. What differentiates couples exhibiting gender specialization or segregation in household tasks from those couples who share tasks? Using newly released data from the National Survey of Families and Households, this study has two major objectives. First, a new *summary* measure of the gender-based segregation of family labor is presented. Second, sources of intercouple variation in the sex segregation of household labor are examined, focusing especially on the effects of time availability, family power, and gender role ideology. The results indicate that, even in the late 1980s, American couples exhibited highly sex-segregated family work patterns, including those couples in which the male partner contributes many hours to housework. The study shows that American males would have to reallocate over 60% of their family work time to other tasks before sex equality in the division of labor is achieved. The analysis indicates that this gender-based division of family work is symptomatic of continuing gender inequality and gender role socialization in American society.

Measuring the Division of Household Labor

Gender Segregation of Housework Among American Couples*

SAMPSON LEE BLAIR
DANIEL T. LICHTER
Pennsylvania State University

The intransigence of gender inequality is perhaps most apparent in the home. American women—even those employed full time—continue to work longer hours than do their husbands on household tasks, and there is little evidence that men's proportionate share of family work has changed much during the past decade or so (Coverman, 1985; Gershuny & Robinson, 1988; Hochschild, 1989). But this focus on each partner's hourly contribution to housework also gives a rather incomplete picture of the household division of labor. Indeed, the concept of a household division of labor implies more than the simple arithmetic of relative shares

**An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1990 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association. The authors also acknowledge the helpful comments of three anonymous reviewers.*

JOURNAL OF FAMILY ISSUES, Vol. 12 No. 1, March 1991 91-113

of time devoted by each marital partner to domestic chores. It also implies that husbands and wives *divide* their available labor time among various tasks. In the present study, we redress the current preoccupation with husbands' family-work time by evaluating the extent to which household chores are divided or *segregated* by gender.

To be sure, the gender specialization of domestic tasks has been addressed in previous research (e.g., Berk, 1985; Coverman & Sheley, 1986; Hiller, 1984), but only in a very restricted sense. For example, some tasks, such as house cleaning or child care, have typically been defined as "women's work," with men generally contributing little time to these activities (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Unfortunately, much less is known about how husbands and wives divide their family work time across a variety of tasks. What differentiates couples exhibiting gender specialization in household tasks from those couples who have a more equitable distribution of responsibilities? Using newly released data from the 1988 National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988), this study has two major objectives. First, we present a new summary measure of the gender-based segregation of family labor. Second, we examine sources of intercouple variation in the sex segregation of household labor, focusing especially on the effects of time availability, family power, and gender role ideology.

HOUSEHOLD DIVISION OF LABOR: CONCEPT AND MEASUREMENT

As a concept, the division of household labor has two analytically distinct dimensions: number of *hours* and types of work *tasks* assigned to each spouse. But this conceptual definition is rarely reflected in empirical research. Instead, household labor has typically been operationalized as the hours of time allocated by each spouse to the maintenance, upkeep, and care of both the material household and the well-being of household members. Previous studies have drawn a single overriding conclusion: Women spend a disproportionate share of total family labor time on household chores (see review of Thompson & Walker, 1989; see also Robinson, 1977).

That some partners spend many hours on domestic chores has no necessary connection, however, to whether housework tasks are segregated or shared. Some egalitarian couples (as defined by the husband's share of family labor) may in fact exhibit a highly sex-segregated division

of labor across specific tasks. Partners may share housework but not specific tasks. Indeed, the evidence is clear that domestic tasks remain highly sex-typed in most American families. For example, Berk and Berk (1979; see also Berk, 1985) found that wives perform over 96% of the cooking, 92% of the dishwashing, 90% of the vacuuming, 94% of the bed making, and 94% of the diapering of children. Such tasks tend to be repetitive and boring. These chores also allow less discretion in deciding when they are completed (e.g., dinner is usually prepared in the early evening) and they typically lack a leisure component (Meissner, 1977). Husbands, on the other, spend the majority of their time on less routinized "masculine tasks." Husbands do over 86% of the household repairs, 80% of the disciplining of children, 75% of the lawn mowing, and 77% of the snow shoveling. Family work hours and family work segregation clearly are conceptually distinct dimensions of the household division of labor (Schooler, Miller, Miller, & Richland, 1984).

EXPLAINING THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

Recent theoretical and empirical assessments have focused mainly on explaining variations in the husbands' (proportionate) hourly allocations to domestic chores (e.g., Coverman, 1985; Warner, 1986). These studies reveal little, however, about the sources of intercouple variation in the gender-based specialization or segregation of family labor. Below we discuss three prominent theories of the household division of labor – *time availability, power theory,* and *gender role ideology* – especially as they relate to the gender segregation of family work.

One frequent argument is that the household division of labor simply reflects differences in the availability of time (e.g., Kamo, 1988). The partner with the most available time presumably will assume the greatest share of household duties. One interpretation is that husbands and wives allocate time to the marketplace and to home tasks on the basis of the relative productivity in each sphere (Becker, 1981). Presland and Antill (1987) showed that men working long hours outside the home typically devote less time than do other men to household chores and child-care tasks (also see Atkinson & Huston, 1984). For women, increases in labor market hours translate into only a small reduction in family work, and the amount of time devoted to child-care tasks remains unchanged (Presland & Antill, 1987). Although time availability (or efficiency) provides an obvious basis for explaining husbands' hourly contribution to housework, there is little a priori reason why the gender segregation of tasks should be related

to time availability. On the other hand, the increased availability of time may provide greater opportunities for spouses to share domestic responsibilities. For example, unemployed husbands may be more likely than men working full-time to be physically available at times of the day when traditional female sex-typed tasks are typically completed (e.g., cooking meals). The availability of time may thus provide a fundamental basis for assigning domestic tasks on the basis of gender.

Power theory offers a different perspective, suggesting that women's influence in family decision making is limited by their low status relative to their husbands'. Women's diminished power in marriage arises from "their disadvantaged labor market status, from their disadvantaged status in the remarriage market as they age, and from their role in rearing children" (Huber & Spitze, 1983, p. 78). Indeed, Maret and Finlay (1984) suggested that income is critical in family decision making, and thus provides a basis for dividing household chores. They found that husbands' income was positively associated with wives' time allocations to home responsibilities, whereas women's income had the opposite effect (1984, p. 362). Berk and Berk (1979), on the other hand, concluded that the wife's employment status has little or no effect on the husband's family work time, although it reduces her time allocation to domestic tasks. Wives nevertheless still assume the bulk of family responsibilities in dual-earner families (Berardo, Shehan, & Leslie, 1987; Bird, Bird, & Scruggs, 1984; Maret & Finlay, 1984). We argue here that family power, which is typically measured by the personal resources of each spouse (e.g., employment or income), may also affect the allocation of domestic tasks by reinforcing traditional assignments of tasks by gender. Powerful men are better able to avoid undesirable female sex-typed tasks. Powerful women, on the other hand, are better able to "extract" labor from their husbands as well as influence the types of family work these men do.

A final explanation holds that the household division of labor is rooted in gender role ideology; women are socialized early in their lives to assume traditional feminine role sets (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Hiller (1984, p. 1005) suggested that "the more deeply one or both partners has internalized a traditional sex role, the more likely the wife will be solely responsible for family work." Cogle and Tasker (1982) found substantial evidence of sex role stereotyping in the tasks assigned to male and female children. Females were more likely to be assigned to traditional female-oriented tasks, such as cleaning, washing, and cooking. Moreover, parents often base their assignment of tasks on personal sex-typing ideals (Brody & Steelman, 1985). Such behavior implies that the parents'

conceptions of sex-typical task assignments largely reflect their own family work roles. Traditional gender role ideologies are thus expected to reinforce a traditional gender-based division of labor in American households. Role-traditional couples are hypothesized to exhibit a more segregated division of labor than are couples with egalitarian gender role orientations or family structures.

There is overwhelming evidence today that females continue to contribute disproportionately to household labor and that each spouse tends to "specialize" in certain chores. But as described above, we know a good deal less about the extent and etiology of the latter than the former. Part of the problem is methodological—how best to measure and summarize the degree of task specialization or segregation in American households. We now turn to this issue.

A NEW MEASURE OF THE GENDER-BASED SEGREGATION OF FAMILY WORK

We propose here that the index of dissimilarity (D) provides a useful summary measure of the gender segregation of household labor. The D is a well-known measure of segregation or concentration (e.g., White, 1986) and is typically associated with research assessing racial segregation in the percentage distribution of Whites and Blacks across areal units (Lichter, 1985; Massey & Denton, 1989). In this study, we use D to measure the extent of segregation in the *distribution of time* allocated by the husband and wife to various household tasks. For each couple, this measure is calculated as

$$D = \tfrac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^{k} | w_i - h_i | \qquad [1]$$

where w_i is the percentage of the wife's total labor (measured in hours) that is devoted to task i, and h_i is the percentage of husband's total time devoted to task i. D indicates the percentage of the husband's time that would have to be allocated to other tasks before equality was achieved in the husband's and wife's percentage distribution across all household tasks. A D of zero indicates that the percentage distribution of time across household tasks is equal for the husband and wife. On the other hand, a D of 1.0 indicates complete segregation of family labor (i.e., there is no overlap in the tasks that the man and woman do). Thus, as D increases,

the distribution of the husband's and wife's family labor contribution becomes increasingly specialized or segregated.

Because *D* is based on husband-wife differences in percentage distributions of family work time across all tasks, this measure has the desirable property of implicitly "controlling" for husband-wife differences in total time allocated to family labor. That is, husbands and wives may be quite dissimilar in the numbers of hours each contributes to family work, but nevertheless exhibit great similarity in how the hours of each are distributed over various tasks. *D* thus allows us to maintain our conceptual distinction between the segregation of housework and the husbands' (or wives') contribution of hours to housework. Despite these useful properties, this measure of segregation has not previously been used to study the sex-based assignment of household tasks.

DATA AND VARIABLES

This study is based on data from the 1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; Sweet et al., 1988). The NSFH provides a cross-sectional national sample of 13,017 respondents aged 19 and older. The sample used here is limited to the 3,190 married or cohabitating couples included in the sample.[1] We include cohabitating couples because cohabitation represents an increasingly common living arrangement among young adults, with over one third of 25- to 34-year-olds cohabitating before their first marriage (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

For each couple, the NSFH includes self-reports of the contribution of each partner/spouse to family labor. Each partner has provided an estimate of the hours spent per week on eight specific household tasks. The tasks are (a) preparing meals, (b) washing dishes, (c) cleaning house, (d) outdoor tasks, (e) shopping, (f) washing and ironing, (g) paying bills, and (h) auto maintenance. From this information, the measure of segregation (*D*) is calculated using each partner's percentage distribution of labor time across all tasks (see Equation 1). As in Kamo (1988), we do not include time devoted to child care because the "work" component (e.g., bathing and feeding the child) cannot be satisfactorily separated from the leisure component (e.g., playing with the child). Given that child care cannot clearly be categorized into its "work" and "leisure" dimensions, it is not included here.[2]

As a summary measure of household labor segregation, *D* is included as the dependent variable in several ordinary least squares regression

models that evaluate the relative efficacy of the power, gender role ideology, and time availability explanations of family work. We first consider several measures of family power. *Female employment status* indicates whether the wife currently is employed. *Female education* and *male education* are measured by the number of years of formal education. We also calculate the *female/male education difference* as a measure of relative power (see Rank, 1982).[3] *Female earnings and male earnings* are measured by the income earned in the previous year. Following Ross (1987), we also calculate an alternative indicator of relative power—the difference between male and female earnings (i.e., *female/male earnings difference).*[4]

We measure gender role orientations using both attitudinal scales and family structure variables typically associated with nontraditional role relationships. First, a summated-rating scale (*sex role ideology*) is calculated from responses (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) to four statements assessing the degree of egalitarian or traditional sex role attitudes of the respondents.[5] The statements are as follows: "Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: (a) It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and the family. (b) Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed. (c) Parents should encourage just as much independence in their daughters as in their sons. (d) In a successful marriage, the partners must have freedom to do what they want individually." Scores ranged from 4 to 20, with a low score indicating more egalitarian attitudes and a high score indicating more traditional attitudes (Cronbach's alpha = .5099). Because *sex role ideology* provides only a general measure of sex role attitudes, a second attitude measure is used to assess specific attitudes about the household division of labor. This indicator (*family role ideology*) is based on responses to the following statement: "If a husband and a wife both work full time, they should share household tasks equally." Responses varied from strongly agree (i.e., egalitarian) to strongly disagree (i.e., traditional). Third, because cohabitation is often associated with less traditional gender roles (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), we include a dummy variable (*cohabitation*) indicating whether the couple is currently cohabitating. Stafford, Bachman, and diBona (1977) showed, for example, that cohabitating couples are less likely than married couples to exhibit traditional gender-based family work patterns. Finally, we include a measure of the number of years the couple has been married or has cohabitated (*duration of relationship*). The duration of the union is expected to be positively related

to the segregation of household labor, reflecting intercohort changes in gender role attitudes (Thornton, 1989). Partners also may "specialize" overtime in tasks that reflect individual preferences, abilities, or needs for efficiency.[6]

Finally, we use several variables to measure, either directly or indirectly, the time available for household labor. *Male labor force hours* and *female labor force hours* measure the number of hours per week that each spouse spends in the paid labor force. As the number of hours increases (for either sex), the number of hours available for housework necessarily declines. Time availability is also affected indirectly by the number and ages of children (Kamo, 1988). Consequently, we assess the effects of the *number of children* and whether *children less than age 4* are present in the home (coded 1 if children under age 4 are present; 0 otherwise). Finally, a variable measuring the actual work schedule of males is included in the form of *male shift work* (coded 1 if the male has a shift work schedule; 0 if he has a regular work schedule). Presumably, male shift workers are more likely than other men (i.e., those working 9-5 schedules) to be exposed to the "high-risk" periods when family labor, such as cleaning or cooking, is typically done.

RESULTS

FAMILY WORK SEGREGATION

Table 1 provides the percentage distributions of household labor time by sex. Consistent with previous research, females contribute approximately twice the amount of total household labor that males do (bottom line). Men work at household labor about 14 hours per week, but spend roughly one third of it on outdoor tasks (30.8%). This is roughly equivalent to the total hours males give to meal preparation, cleaning dishes, and ironing and washing. Females, on the other hand, allocate most of their family work time to meal preparation (28.7%), cleaning dishes (17.1%), and cleaning house (22.8%). As these data indicate, comparisons of total hours devoted to particular tasks reveal very large sex differences during the late 1980s in the amount and type of household labor.

Of central interest here, however, is the degree of segregation or specialization of household labor. Using the task categories shown in Table 1, an index of dissimilarity is calculated for each couple (see equation 1). Our calculations reveal rather remarkable variation in segre-

TABLE 1
Mean Hours per Week Spent on Household Tasks, by Gender

	Males		*Females*	
Household Tasks	*Hours/Week*	*Percentage of Total Hours*	*Hours/Week*	*Percentage of Total Hours*
Meal preparation	2.27 (3.19)[a]	15.7	9.49 (6.27)	28.7
Dishes	1.73 (2.39)	12.0	5.66 (4.32)	17.1
Ironing/washing	0.58 (1.27)	4.0	4.11 (3.21)	12.4
Cleaning house	1.48 (2.29)	10.2	7.56 (6.05)	22.8
Outdoor tasks	4.45 (5.04)	30.8	1.70 (2.85)	5.1
Auto maintenance	1.43 (1.76)	9.9	0.14 (0.70)	0.4
Managing bills	1.19 (1.63)	8.2	1.55 (1.85)	4.7
Shopping	1.31 (1.63)	9.1	2.89 (2.09)	8.7
Total household labor	14.44 (10.03)	100.0	33.10 (16.84)	100.0

N = 3,594

a. Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

gation across American couples (D range = 0 – 1.0), with an average index of dissimilarity of .61. Substantively, this means that the average male would have to reallocate 61% of his family labor to other chores before gender equality was achieved in the percentage distribution of labor time across all domestic tasks. Clearly, household labor is highly segregated by sex, and the D provides an easily interpretable summary measure of sex-based patterns of family work.

As shown in Table 2, it also is apparent that family work segregation is more likely to characterize some couples than others. In the first column of Table 2, we provide the average D for each category of our independent variables (measuring aspects of power, sex role ideology, and time availability). These results serve to illustrate the usefulness of our measurement-based approach. For example, the educational attainment

TABLE 2
Mean Levels of Family Work Segregation

Variables	*Means*	*Eta*	N
Female education		.28	
< 12 yrs.	.73		511
High school degree	.66		1,300
Some college	.57		742
16+ yrs.	.54		803
Male education		.28	
< 12 yrs.	.72		571
High school degree	.65		1,006
Some college	.57		738
16+ yrs.	.53		971
Female/male education difference		.07	
Male education more	.59		1,234
Same level	.63		850
Female education more	.62		972
Female employment status		.21	
Nonemployed	.68		1,336
Employed	.58		1,999
Male earnings		.07	
< $20,000	.64		1,357
$20,000-$34,999	.61		1,143
> $35,000	.60		1,094
Female earnings		.20	
< $20,000	.64		2,882
$20,000-$34,999	.54		556
> $35,000	.49		156
Female/male earnings difference		.10	
Male earnings more	.63		2,948
Female earnings more	.57		646
Sex role ideology[a]		.23	
Egalitarian	.55		1,094
Mixed	.63		1,494
Traditional	.69		857
Family role ideology[a]		.12	
Egalitarian	.61		3,031
Mixed	.69		353
Traditional	.72		90
Cohabitation		.11	
Married	.63		3,382
Cohabitating	.52		212

TABLE 2 Continued

Variables	*Means*	*Eta*	N
Duration of relationship		.24	
< 5 yrs.	.52		687
5-9 yrs	.59		663
10-19 yrs.	.63		850
20+ yrs.	.68		1,357
Male labor force hours		.07	
< 20	.55		193
20-39	.61		1,157
40+	.60		1,328
Female labor force hours		.14	
< 20	.63		473
20-39	.58		1,132
40+	.54		433
Number of children		.07	
0	.63		1,617
1-2	.60		1,562
3+	.64		415
Children less than age 4		.08	
Not present	.63		2,690
Present	.58		904
Male shift work		.08	
Shift work	.58		600
Regular work schedule	.63		2,993

NOTE: Grand Mean = .61.

a. Categories and scores on the 20-point *sex role ideology* scale are defined as follows: egalitarian (4-9), mixed (10-12), and traditional (13-20). Categories on the 5-point *family role ideology* scale are: egalitarian (strongly agree and agree), mixed (neither agree not disagree), and traditional (disagree and strongly disagree). See text for items.

of both males and females is highly associated with the sex-based allocation of tasks. Specifically, increases in education are associated with decreases in segregation. Among couples in which the female is highly educated (16+ years of formal education), D is .54, whereas the corresponding figure for couples in which the female has less than 12 years of formal education is .73. Nevertheless, despite the apparent gradient of segregation by education, household labor clearly is highly segregated *even for highly educated couples.*

At least in this bivariate analysis, the earnings of males do not greatly affect the sex specialization of household labor, yet the earnings of females reveals a strong inverse association with D. In addition, although

high income among females apparently provides some leverage for attaining a more equitable sex distribution of labor across tasks, it does not ensure complete gender equality. For example, couples in which the woman earned over $35,000 annually still exhibit relatively high levels of segregation (D = .49).

Not surprisingly, data in Table 2 also indicate that sex role attitudes are highly associated with the household segregation of labor. Those couples with egalitarian sex role orientations report a segregation index of .55, whereas those households with traditional orientations reveal an index of .69. The results for *family role ideology* support a similar conclusion; egalitarian couples are less sex-segregated in family work. Moreover, nontraditional couples, such as cohabitating partners, also are slightly less segregated in work patterns than are married couples. And, as expected, couples in relationships of long duration are likewise more sex-segregated in family work patterns than are newly formed couples (.68 vs. .52).

At least in this bivariate analysis, support for the time availability argument is generally weak. For example, the presence and age of children have only small effects on family labor segregation, and couples in which the wife worked 40 or more hours have only slightly lower levels of segregation than do couples in which the wife worked less than 20 hours. The time availability hypothesis nevertheless receives some support in the finding that household work is more highly sex-segregated if the husbands' labor force hours are high (as opposed to low). In addition, couples in which the male is working a shift work schedule report slightly lower levels of task segregation (.58 vs. .63) in the household.

As we have described, the family work patterns of most American families are highly segregated, regardless of couple characteristics. At the same time, the general lack of task sharing by marital partners *may or may not* connote gender inequality. Family work segregation (as measured here) does not necessarily mean that each couple exhibits work patterns that are segregated along traditional gender lines (i.e., the husband does the outdoor work and the wife does the often repetitive "dirty" indoor tasks, such as cleaning the bathroom). We address this issue in Table 3 by examining the association between D and the hourly contributions of males to female sex-typed tasks. Specifically, the distribution of husbands' family work time across tasks is provided for couples with high ($D > .60$), moderate (D = .40 to .60), and low ($D < .40$) segregation.

The results here give an affirmative answer to the question of whether high task segregation is associated with a traditional division of labor by

TABLE 3

Average Hours per Week and Percentage of Total Household Labor Performed by Males, by Segregation Levels

	Low Segregation (D < .40)		*Moderate Segregation (.41 < D < .60)*		*High Segregation (D > .61)*	
Household Tasks	*Hours/Week*	*Percentage of Total Hours*	*Hours/Week*	*Percentage of Total Hours*	*Hours/Week*	*Percentage of Total Hours*
Meal preparation	4.31 (3.28)[a]	22.7	2.88 (3.01)	17.7	1.02 (2.62)	9.0
Dishes	3.06 (2.25)	16.1	2.15 (2.01)	13.2	0.89 (2.31)	7.8
Ironing/washing	1.41 (1.50)	7.4	0.65 (1.39)	4.0	0.19 (0.87)	1.7
Cleaning house	2.92 (2.49)	15.4	1.84 (2.13)	11.3	0.63 (1.90)	5.5
Outdoor tasks	3.12 (3.23)	16.5	4.38 (4.05)	27.0	5.03 (6.00)	44.3
Auto maintenance	1.13 (1.29)	6.0	1.44 (1.50)	8.9	1.56 (2.06)	13.7
Managing bills	1.18 (1.30)	6.2	1.35 (1.81)	8.3	1.10 (1.64)	9.7
Shopping	1.82 (1.58)	9.6	1.54 (1.71)	9.5	0.94 (1.47)	8.3
Total household labor	18.95 (9.83)	100.0	16.23 (8.89)	100.0	11.36 (9.71)	100.0
	N = 743		*N* = 1,012		*N* = 1,747	

a. Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

sex. Differences in male participation in various tasks are clearly revealed in the type of work specialization and in total hours given to family work. For example, in households with low family work segregation, males contribute nearly 19 hours per week on average, and their labor time is spread relatively evenly across the various tasks. Indeed, they spend the greatest amount of time on meal preparation, a task typically associated with females. For those couples with a moderate level of segregation, males work slightly fewer hours (i.e., about 16 hours). Yet, even for these couples, the husbands on average contribute more time to meal preparation and cleaning than to outdoor tasks. The shift of household labor time is most apparent for those couples with a high level of task segregation. Here, males work only about 11 hours per week, mostly on outdoor tasks and auto maintenance. As these results suggest, our measure of segregation nicely summarizes intercouple variation in the segregation of household labor and family work patterns that display traditional sex-typical patterns.

MODELS OF FAMILY WORK SEGREGATION

As a dependent variable, the percentage or raw distribution of female and male work time across tasks does not lend itself to an obvious modeling strategy. It is not surprising then that so few studies have developed appropriate multivariate models that assess the sources of gender segregation or specialization of household tasks (cf. Maret & Finlay, 1984; Stafford et al., 1977). A useful feature of D is that it can be easily accommodated in conventional modeling strategies (e.g., ordinary least squares regression).

This is illustrated with the results in Tables 4 and 5, which identify the sources of intercouple variation in housework segregation for all couples and for dual-earner couples, respectively. The regression models include the previously described independent variables, which measure aspects of family power, gender role ideology, and time availability. For purposes of comparison, we also examine effects on several conventional measures used in previous research. *Total male hours* is calculated as the total weekly hours the husband devotes to household tasks, as defined previously in Table 1. Another common measure, *proportionate male hours*, is defined as total male hours divided by the combined hours of both spouses/partners (i.e., the male's share of total family labor). Finally, *proportionate male hours in female tasks* measures the male percentage of total family labor devoted to female sex-typical tasks. These include

TABLE 4

Regression Models of the Household Division of Labor: All Households

Variables	*Family Work Segregation* (1)	*Total Male Hours* (2)	*Proportionate Male Hours* (3)	*Proportionate Male Hours in Female Tasks* (4)
Female education	–.252**	.035	.137**	.185**
Female/male education difference	.144**	.010	–.075**	–.097**
Female employment status	–.151**	.117**	.208**	.199**
Sex role ideology	.063**	–.019	–.104**	–.109**
Family role ideology	.118**	–.089**	–.116**	–.135**
Cohabitation	–.057**	–.015	.008	.042*
Duration of relationship	.184**	–.073**	–.158**	–.182**
Male labor force hours	.085**	–.101**	–.162**	–.153**
Number of children	.067**	.028	–.089**	–.080**
Children less than age 4	–.039	.034	–.045*	–.027
Male shift work	–.049**	.037	.053**	.028
R^2	.205	.049	.192	.227
F	55.07**	10.99**	50.79**	62.71**
N = 2,363				

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

TABLE 5

Regression Models of the Household Division of Labor: Dual-Earner Households

Variables	*Family Work Segregation* (1)	*Total Male Hours* (2)	*Proportionate Male Hours* (3)	*Proportionate Male Hours in Female Tasks* (4)
Female education	–.232**	.029	.153**	.212**
Female/male education difference	.153**	–.018	–.127**	–.146**
Female earnings	–.039	.020	.077**	.054*
Female/male earnings difference	–.074**	.053	.037	.057*
Sex role ideology	.049*	–.019	–.088**	–.090**
Family role ideology	.168**	–.098**	–.166**	–.192**
Cohabitation	–.074**	–.031	.007	.049*
Duration of relationship	.131**	–.065*	–.124**	–.142**
Male labor force hours	.067**	–.105**	–.171**	–.161**
Female labor force hours	–.111**	.093**	.177**	.159**
Number of children	.074**	.024	–.088**	–.074**
Children less than age 4	–.059*	.070**	–.007	–.002
Male shift work	–.046*	.045	.061**	.036
R^2	.186	.056	.208	.237
F	27.79**	7.26**	31.99**	37.82**
N = 1,594				

*p < .05; **p < .01.

meal preparation, washing dishes, ironing/washing clothes, and cleaning house.

Model 1 of Table 4, which includes results for all couples, provides the effects (i.e., standardized regression coefficients) of the various predictors on family work segregation. For the most part, these results reinforce the bivariate results reported in Table 2. Indeed, the R^2 in our model of family work segregation is larger than the corresponding values in the models of total male hours (Model 2) and proportionate male hours (Model 3). Although hours worked and segregation are analytically distinct aspects of the household division of labor, the variables in these models often exert similar effects on husbands' hours (whether measured absolutely or relatively) and family work segregation. For example, female employment has the expected positive effects on males' hourly contributions (Models 2-4) and negative effect on segregation, a result consistent with power-based explanations of the household division of labor.

At the same time, several variables clearly have different effects on the different measures of the household division of labor. Two of the strongest predictors of household segregation are *female education* ($B = -.252$) and *female employment status* ($B = -.151$).[7] Yet, female education is statistically unrelated to total male hours, and only modestly associated with the male share of family work (Model 3). In addition, each of the gender role variables is significantly associated (in expected directions) with family work segregation. But, although cohabitation is associated with less gender specialization of work tasks, it is largely unrelated to men's hourly and proportionate contribution to family labor (see Models 2-3, Table 4).

A similar pattern exists for the *number of children* variable. The number of children has no appreciable effect on the absolute hours that men contribute to household labor, but has a significant positive effect on household labor segregation. The inference is that the presence of children reinforces traditional (and segregated) divisions of labor within the household. This is also supported by results in the models of the relative contribution of male labor to all household tasks (Model 3) and "female" sex-typical tasks (Model 4). In each case, children are associated with a *lower* proportionate male involvement in household tasks.

The conclusions described above are generally reinforced in the analysis on dual-earner couples (i.e., couples in which the female is currently employed) reported in Table 5. For this analysis, we include *female earnings* and the *female/male earnings difference*, as well as an additional variable measuring female time availability—*female labor force hours*.

This variable is measured as the number of hours the female spends per week in the labor force. As shown in Table 5, Model 1 explains nearly 20% of the variation in housework segregation among dual-earner couples. Indeed, only one variable (i.e., *female earnings*) is statistically unrelated to family work segregation, a smaller number than in any other model.

Although each theory of family work segregation finds some support in our analysis, one of the most interesting findings is the effects associated with the *female/male earnings difference* variable. As female earnings increases relative to her husband's, the extent of segregation declines ($B = -.074$). But this contrasts sharply with results indicating that relative earnings is statistically unrelated to total male hours (Model 2) and to proportionate male hours (Model 3). Indeed, the results here indicate that the power variables are much more important in explaining intercouple variation in segregation than in men's *absolute* work contributions. That these power variables are positively related to men's *proportionate* contribution (Models 3-4) undoubtedly reflects the reduced family labor inputs of "powerful" women (rather than increases in male labor).

The results also indicate that sex role ideology clearly is an important part of any explanation of male work contributions and of family work segregation. *Sex role ideology* and *family role ideology* have statistically significant and positive effects on the segregation of family labor (as well as on the other dependent variables in Models 2-4). On the other hand, *cohabitation* is unrelated to men's hourly and proportionate contribution to family labor, but has a statistically significant negative effect on segregation. Such results again reinforce our view that family work and family segregation are distinct aspects of the household division of labor, and often have difference "causes."

Male labor force hours and the *number of children* are positively associated with task specialization, whereas *female labor force hours* is negatively associated with this variable (Model 1). The presence of young children, however, is related to reductions in segregation, while at the same time encouraging men to contribute more hours to family work. Finally, *male shift work* is positively related, as expected, to declines in segregation, but is significantly associated with only one of the three alternative dependent variables (Models 2-4).[8] Given such results, one possible inference is that time availability explanations may be more appropriate in explaining family work segregation patterns than men's absolute and proportionate work contributions to family labor (Models 2-4).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber (1983) suggested that contemporary marriages are increasingly shifting away from *complementary* work patterns in which the husband and wife perform different but interdependent household tasks to a *parallel* pattern in which tasks are shared by partners. Others emphasize the shift from asymetrical to symetrical role relationships (see Voydanoff, 1987, for discussion). But as we have shown here, this transition is largely incomplete. Domestic tasks remain highly segregated in most American families, including those in which the husband contributes many hours to housework and espouses egalitarian gender role attitudes. Indeed, based on our new measure of family work segregation, American males would have to reallocate over 60% of their family work time to other tasks before sex equality in the division of labor was achieved.

One interpretation is that this gender-based division of family work is symptomatic of continuing gender inequality and gender role socialization in American society. Women continue to work more hours than men on domestic tasks, and the sex segregation of housework typically means that husbands and wives define their domestic chores along sex-typical lines (e.g., Table 3). The potential implications here are nontrivial. For example, the lack of sharing of housework is associated with poor mental health among married women, especially in the form of elevated levels of depression (Ross et al., 1983). Moreover, the gender segregation of domestic tasks presumably has implications for the sex role socialization of children (Brody & Steelman, 1985). The fact that some tasks come to be defined as "men's work" and others as "women's work" is likely to reinforce traditional gender roles among children in the home.

Our results perhaps give greater weight than do results from previous research to power-based explanations of the household division of labor (cf. Hochschild, 1989; Huber & Spitze, 1983). Recent studies, for example, typically report that women's employment is largely unrelated to husbands' family work (see review by Thompson & Walker, 1989; also Shelton, 1990). Our data, based on the recently-released NSFH, indicate that this may no longer be the case. Female employment is positively related to men's absolute and proportionate contribution to housework (see Table 4). Our findings also fail to confirm recent findings that wives' earnings are largely unrelated to husbands' proportionate hourly contribution to family work (see Kamo, 1988). And, unlike previous research,

the employment of the wife also is related to decreases in the level of sex segregation in housework. Presumably, employment and earnings provide a power base that enables women to achieve a more equitable division of labor across tasks. Power-based explanations may have as much (if not more) to offer theoretically about the *kinds* of work that men and women do as about how much work they actually do.

At the same time, traditional sex role attitudes also are important and continue to reinforce conventional definitions of "women's work." Any optimism implied by increasing time commitments by husbands to housework (Pleck, 1985) should be balanced with the recognition that role sharing apparently is still limited among many couples, including two-paycheck couples. Indeed, we have provided rather striking evidence that spheres of domestic work activity in the late 1980s remain highly segregated by sex. Despite public support of the notion that dual-earner couples should share equally in household tasks (Kamo, 1988), the reality is that only a small percentage of couples exhibit any real gender similarity in the division of family tasks.

In conclusion, the present study has redirected attention away from the uncritical reliance on hours of husbands' family work as the best (or sole) indicator of the division of household labor. As we have argued here, *hours* and *tasks* are conceptually distinct dimensions of household labor. Indeed, the singular focus on husbands' hours worked may be inappropriate or even misleading. The segregation measure presented here provides a point of departure for thinking more carefully about how husbands and wives divide or share family work.

NOTES

1. The NSFH oversamples Black and Hispanic households, households with stepparents, and newly married couples. Consequently, we used a weighted sample in our analysis to ensure representativeness. The weighting slightly inflates the sample size to 3,502 couples.

2. We also exclude child rearing for methodological reasons. Many of the tasks associated with rearing children are included in the domestic tasks considered here. For example, children should increase the amount of family labor devoted to cleaning (dishes and clothing), as well as affect the sex-based division of labor in the household. Furthermore, children are included as independent variables in our models of household labor and segregation (Tables 4 and 5). As a result, we indirectly measure children's effects on housework in our analysis (see Rexroat & Shehan, 1987).

3. Although education has been used in previous research as a power measure (Kamo, 1988; Rank, 1982), the results based on this indicator have often produced equivocal conclusions. The equivocation reflects conceptual ambiguity about whether men's education actually measures marital power or is simply a proxy for more egalitarian gender role

attitudes. We are unable to resolve this issue in this article, but in the interest of completeness and continuity with previous research, we include both wive's and husbands' education in our models of family work.

4. In some preliminary analysis, we also calculated the male-female earnings ratio. The alternative measure of relative power produced results very similar to those using the difference measure reported in this article.

5. *Sex role ideology* is measured for the respondent only, who may be male or female. Thus our measure is a proxy for the couple as a whole.

6. A simple scenario can be used for illustration. A young couple may wish to share certain tasks, such as grocery shopping or washing dishes. But as they age, they may regard such shared activity as inefficient (e.g., shopping for groceries may consume more person hours weekly because it requires the same numbers of hours to complete whether one spouse or both spouses are involved). Thus task specialization may increase as the desire for greater efficiency increases.

7. We cannot include male education, female education, and female/male education difference in the same regression model because any one of these variables is a simple mathematic function of the other two variables (e.g., analogous to separating the effects of age(A), period(P), and cohort(C) in A-P-C models). Consequently, in this analysis we focus on the female power variables—female education and female/male education difference. However, in separate analyses (not reported), we substitute male education for female education. The results reveal very similar effects to those reported in Tables 4 and 5. For these models, the regression coefficients for male education were –.289 for all couples and –.262 for dual-earner couples. This large negative effect of husband's education helps to explain the (apparently anomalous) finding that the female/male education difference is positively associated with segregation. One interpretation here is that highly educated husbands have more egalitarian gender role attitudes. But even this explanation is not totally satisfying. Sex role attitudes are "controlled" in this analysis, but the strong effect of husband's education persists.

8. To be sure, many of the variables considered here are statistically related both to segregation and husband's hours of domestic labor. To what extent, then, are segregation and husbands' hours of domestic labor analytically distinct? Perhaps the independent variables considered here affect segregation only by affecting husbands' hours of domestic labor. That is, husbands' hours mediates the relationship between these predictors and segregation. In some additional analysis, we found little evidence to support this argument. Specifically, in separate models we included male household hours, the male percentage of total household labor, and male percentage of female-dominated tasks (data not shown). In general, our independent variables continued to be significant predictors of segregation. Such a result supports our argument that household labor hours and household labor segregation are distinct dimensions. These results are available from the authors on request.

REFERENCES

Atkinson, J., & Huston, T. L. (1984). Sex role orientation and division of labor in early marriage. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46*, 330-345.

Becker, G. S. (1981). *A treatise on the family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Berardo, D. H., Shehan, C. L., & Leslie, G. R. (1987). A residue of tradition: Jobs, careers, and spouses' time in housework. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 49*, 381-390.

Berk, R. A., & Berk, S. F. (1979). *Labor and leisure at home: Content and organization of the household day*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Berk, S. F. (1985). *The gender factory: The apportionment of work in American households*. New York: Plenum.

Bird, G. W., Bird, G. A., & Scruggs, M. (1984). Determinants of family task sharing: A study of husbands and wives. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46*, 345-355.

Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. W. (1983). *American couples*. New York: William Morrow.

Brody, C. J., & Steelman, L. C. (1985). Sibling structure and parental sex-typing of children's household tasks. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 45*, 265-273.

Bumpass, L. L., & Sweet, J. A. (1989). National estimates of cohabitation. *Demography, 26*, 615-625.

Cogle, F. L., & Tasker, G. E. (1982). Children and housework. *Family Relations, 31*, 395-399.

Coverman, S. (1985). Explaining husband's participation in domestic labor. *Sociological Quarterly, 26*, 81-97.

Coverman, S., & Sheley, J. F. (1986). Men's housework and childcare time, 1965-1975. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48*, 413-422.

Gershuny, J., & Robinson, J. P. (1988). Historical changes in the household division of labor. *Demography, 25*, 537-552.

Hiller, D. V. (1984). Power dependence and division of family work. *Sex Roles, 10*, 1003-1019.

Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift*. New York: Viking.

Huber, J., & Spitze, G. (1983). *Sex stratification: Children, housework, and jobs*. New York: Academic Press.

Kamo, Y. (1988). Determinants of household division of labor. *Journal of Family Issues, 9*, 177-200.

Lichter, D. T. (1985). Racial concentration and segregation across U. S. counties, 1950-1980. *Demography, 22*, 603-609.

Maret, E., & Finlay, B. (1984). The distribution of household labor among women in dual-earner families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46*, 357-364.

Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1989). Hypersegregation in U. S. metropolitan areas: Black and Hispanic segregation along five dimensions. *Demography, 26*, 373-391.

Meissner, M. (1977). Sexual division of labor and inequality: Labor and leisure. In M. Stevenson (Ed.), *Women in Canada*. Toronto: Women's Educational Press.

Pleck, J. H. (1985). *Working wives/working husbands*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Presland, P., & Antill, J. K. (1987). Household division of labour: The impact of hours worked in paid employment. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 39*, 273-291.

Rank, M. (1982). Determinants of conjugal influence in wives' employment decision-making. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44*, 591-604.

Rexroat, C., & Shehan, C. (1987). The family life cycle and spouses' time in housework. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 49*, 737-750.

Robinson, J. P. (1977). *How Americans use their time*. New York: Praeger.

Ross, C. E. (1987). The division of labor at home. *Social Forces, 65*, 816-833.

Ross, C. E., Mirowsky, J., & Huber, J. (1983). Dividing work, sharing work, and in-between: Marriage patterns and depression. *American Sociological Review, 47*, 198-211.

Schooler, C., Miller, J., Miller, K. A., & Richland, C. N. (1984). Work for the household: Its nature and consequences for husbands and wives. *American Journal of Sociology, 90*, 97-124.

Shelton, B. A. (1990). The distribution of household tasks: Does wife's employment status make a difference? *Journal of Family Issues, 11*, 115-135.

Stafford, R., Bachman, E., & diBona, P. (1977). The division of labor among cohabitating and married couples. *Journal of Family Issues, 37*, 43-59.

Sweet, J. A., Bumpass, L., & Call, V. (1988). *The design and content of the National Survey of Families and Households* (NSFH Working Paper No. 1). Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for Demography and Ecology.

Thompson L., & Walker, A. J. (1989). Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 51*, 845-871.

Thornton, A. (1989). Changing attitudes toward family issues in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 51*, 873-893.

Voydanoff, P. (1987). *Work and family life*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Warner, R. L. (1986). Alternative strategies for measuring household division of labor: A comparison. *Journal of Family Issues, 7*, 179-195.

White, M. J. (1986). Segregation and diversity measures in population distribution. *Population Index, 52*, 198-221.