

First comes love, then comes... housework?

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Kuperberg, A. (2015, May 7). *First comes love, then comes... housework?* Council of Contemporary Families.

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Abstract:

A briefing paper prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families Online Symposium on Housework, Gender, and Parenthood by Arielle Kuperberg, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Does marriage lead women to take on a larger share of housework? In the 1950s and 1960s, marriage was clearly unfair to women. The social and legal definition of marriage made it a woman's duty, but not a man's, to provide services in and around the home. Husbands had the final say over many family matters, such as where a couple would live and how the finances were managed. Married women were expected to take care of the meals and housework without any assistance from their husbands, whether they worked outside the home or not.

Keywords: marriage and family | women and gender studies | gender roles

Article:

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Values have changed since then, but some scholars argue that marriage still carries powerful role expectations that differ by gender and that lead women to start doing more housework and men to start doing less. Since the 1990s, several studies have compared the behavior of couples who are married and couples who live together. They find that unmarried cohabiting couples split the housework and paid work more equally than married couples, where wives tend to do a larger share of unpaid housework and husbands to do more paid work. Some have concluded from this comparison that there is something about marriage roles, and the expectations surrounding those, that *causes* couples to become more traditional after marriage.

But these studies were not comparing the same types of couples *before* and *after* marriage. They were comparing *all* cohabitators, even ones that didn't intend to ever get married, with *all* married couples, even those that did not cohabit before marriage.

This comparison skews the results in several ways. On average, couples who do not live together before marriage have more traditional views about gender and sexuality than those who openly cohabit before marriage. When we compare such directly-married couples to married couples that cohabited before getting wed, we find that the former are much more likely to have the woman do more of the housework and the man take on more of the paid work. But this is not necessarily a change of behavior or values in response to getting married. It probably reflects a pre-existing inclination.

It would be ideal if we could actually study the division of labor between cohabiting couples before and after marriage. But there are no nationally representative studies that collected this information for young adults after the 1980s / early 1990s, when many fewer couples cohabited before marriage, and marriage may have been invested with different expectations. So the closest we can come to assessing the impact of marriage on couples' behavior for more recent generations is to compare married couples who lived together before marriage with couples who are currently living together and think it likely that they will wed.

Unfortunately most surveys don't ask married couples if they lived together before marriage or cohabiting couples if they think they will marry their partner — and the few that do ask these questions don't also ask about housework hours. The one exception is the National Survey of Families and Households, which was collected in the United States between 1987 and 2003. I used this survey to identify cohabiting couples who thought there was at least a 50-50 chance that they would marry their partner and to [compare their division of labor](#) with that of married couples who lived together before marriage. I examined the housework habits of more than 900 such couples aged 18-35 in 2001-2003. Recently I did a follow-up study to investigate what happens to the division of labor in such couples when they have children, and added a comparison to more than 2000 couples of the same ages who were interviewed in 1987 and 1988.

Contrary to the claim that marriage reduces men's housework and increases women's, in neither generation were there any differences in the total time spent on housework between cohabitators who thought they would marry and husbands and wives who had lived together before marriage. This suggests that getting married does not spur women or men to do any more (or less) housework compared to when they were living together before marriage.

I did find some evidence of a conservatizing or traditionalizing effect of marriage in the 1987-8 generation. In that era, married men who had lived together before marriage did a different *type* of housework than their cohabiting counterparts who were intending to marry. They spent less time preparing meals and washing dishes and more time on “manly” jobs, such as mowing the lawn. These patterns persisted even after accounting for differences between married and cohabiting couples in education, race, age, and previous marital status. It is likely, then, that something about entering marriage triggered a change in their behavior. In the case of yardwork, this change may be partly explained by the fact that married couples are more likely to buy a

home (and therefore more likely to have a yard to do work in). But that does not explain why men also reduced their time spent on preparing meals and washing dishes, and it is very plausible that this reduction reflected heightened adherence to normative expectations about the roles of men and women in marriage.

By 2001-3, however, men who had lived together before marriage and men who were living together without marriage and thought they would marry their partner were doing the same amount and the same *type* of housework. This suggests that marriage had ceased to have any effect in making men feel that they ought to play more traditional roles, or can opt out of less traditional ones.

In neither generation was there a difference, controlling for the presence of children, in the amount of housework that women did as live-in partners, or the amount they did as wives who had cohabited before marriage. But there was a huge difference between the two generations in the *proportion* of housework that women and men did. Both types of couples became increasingly egalitarian over the period. By the early 2000s, women in childless couples were only spending one and a half more hours per week on housework than men, compared to ten and a half more hours in the late 1980s.

However, the story doesn't end there – and it does take a turn toward inequity over the course of these couples' lives. In both 1987-8 and 2001-3, my new study shows, couples became more traditional, and women took on more of the housework burden, with each child that was born.

Again though, despite continuing discrepancies in the proportion of men's and women's housework, we do see a move toward more equality in the most recent generation. In 1988, women with one child did 16 hours more hours of housework per week than men, women with 2 children did 23.3 more hours, and women with 3 or more children spent 30 more hours a week than men.

In 2001-3, by contrast, women with three or more children did 20.2 more hours of housework than men each week (down from 30 in 1988), and women with 2 children did 17.6 more hours (down from 23.3). By 2002, women with 1 child did just 10 more hours of housework per week compared to men – a smaller housework gender gap than was found among *childless* couples in 1988.

So does marriage “make couples more traditional”? It did to some extent for men in 1988, but not by 2002, and in neither time period did it change women's housework. Although women did more housework than men in both eras, they did not change how much they did after marriage – once you take into account the fact that married women have more children. *Having children is the turning point at which women begin to take on more of the unpaid housework. In both generations the imbalance between men and women became much more pronounced after the birth of a child, although by the early 2000s it was less pronounced than a generation earlier, in the late 1980s.* Readers can decide for themselves if this is a glass-half-full or a glass-half-empty situation.

For Further Information:

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