PREDICTING THE SHARING OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR:
Are Parenting and Housework Distinct?

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ABSTRACT: Using a representative sample of married couples with preschool-aged children in the United States, this study analyzes the conditions under which husbands share household tasks conventionally performed by wives. Survey data are analyzed using LISREL VII procedures, with proportional hourly contributions to child care (feeding, bathing, dressing, or putting child to bed) and housework (housecleaning, shopping, cooking, meal cleanup or laundry) treated as conceptually distinct dependent variables. Husbands perform an average of 26 percent of the child care and 21 percent of the housework and contribute more to both child care and housework if they are employed fewer hours than their wives. For housework, couples share more if wives earn a larger share of the family income, have more education, and hold more favorable attitudes toward maternal employment. For preschool-aged child care, couples share more if they have more and older children and husbands hold more favorable attitudes toward maternal employment. Theoretical explanations for the observed findings are discussed; we advocate modeling and measuring child care and housework as distinct, but interrelated activities.

Researchers studying household labor often employ theoretical models and research techniques that treat the allocation of housework and the allocation of child care similarly. Typically, both child care and housework are treated as onerous activities that are avoided by more powerful family members—husbands—and relegated to less powerful family members—wives and daughters. Not only are cooking, cleaning, and child care considered to be equal inputs into the overall household economy, but the questions of who washes dishes and who washes young children are typically assumed to result from similar causal forces (for reviews, see Thompson and Walker 1989; Ferree 1990). In this paper, we challenge such formulations by treating child care and housework as
conceptually distinct activities. Using a representative national sample of married couples with children under the age of five, we assess the relative impact of husbands’ and wives’ resources, time availability, and attitudes toward men’s sharing of child care and housework; explore how these two activities might mutually influence one another; and present a case for treating them as separate but interpenetrating domains.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Studies repeatedly show that wives perform about two-thirds of the total household labor in most American homes. Domestic tasks tend to be divided according to gender, with women performing about 80 percent of the daily repetitive and routine indoor tasks, including almost all of the cooking, cleaning, and child care. Men, by contrast, tend to contribute to household labor by mowing the lawn, taking out trash, maintaining cars, or playing with the children (Berk 1985; Kamo 1988; Thompson and Walker 1989). While the primary outcome variable in most household labor studies is the number of hours spent on various chores (Robinson 1988), some studies also include measures of hours spent on child care (Barnett and Baruch 1987). Although aggregate changes have been small (Miller and Garrison 1982), recent research using representative samples indicates that some men are making greater contributions to household tasks previously considered “women’s work” (Robinson 1988; Ferree 1991). Primarily because employed women are contributing significantly fewer hours to household labor, men’s proportionate contributions to household tasks are on the rise (Pleck 1983).

The general middle-range theories have been used to explain the allocation of household labor: (1) Relative Resources; (2) Practicality; and (3) Ideology (see Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz 1992; Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; Kamo 1988; Pleck 1983; Ross 1987; Spitze 1988).

*Relative Resources* are usually measured by comparing spouses’ earnings, educational level, or occupational prestige. Relying on gender-neutral exchange or equity models of household labor allocation, such theories assume that housework and child care are undesirable activities to be avoided and that the person with more outside resources will have more marital power and hence do less household work.

*Practicality* explanations, like relative resource models, assume that couples maximize utility through gender-neutral labor allocation strategies. Couples are assumed to meet household labor demands by assigning tasks to the person with the most available time. Available or “free” time is usually measured in relation to market labor—being employed or the number of hours employed per week. Another part of the practicality calculus, the size of the total household workload, is usually operationalized by the presence and age of children, with more and younger children assumed to increase the overall level of domestic work. *Ideology* is usually measured by surveying respondents’ attitudes toward appro-
appropriate family roles for men and women. Theories of household labor allocation stressing ideology tend to assume that individual preferences to perform various household chores reflect adult or childhood gender socialization. Most such explanations posit conventional values as preceding and limiting the sharing of household tasks. Some versions, however, reverse the causal order and suggest that gender itself is constructed through the performance of gender-typed household tasks (Berk 1985; Coltrane 1989; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Hypotheses derived from all three theories of household labor allocation have received partial support in past research on representative samples. Nevertheless, results have been contradictory and a relatively small portion of the variance in men's assumption of household work has been explained (see Coltrane 1990; Ferree 1990; Thompson and Walker 1989). In this paper, we attempt to clarify earlier findings by focusing on two issues that have received little attention in past studies: (1) the importance of child care to overall division of household labor in families with young children; and (2) potential differences in the causal factors associated with the sharing of child care and housework. In investigating these issues, we also focus on another ambiguous area in past studies: relative importance of wives' versus husbands' initiative in sharing child care and housework.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILD CARE

Studies by psychologists and sociologists remind us that parenting is a complex and contradictory endeavor for both mothers and fathers. Mothers, more than fathers, assume responsibility for the day-to-day feeding and supervising of younger children, and are also more apt to provide them with emotional and physical comfort (Barnett and Baruch 1987; Leslie, Anderson, and Branson 1991; Thompson and Walker 1989). The performance of "mothering" can be monotonous and irritating, but most mothers also report a profound sense of fulfillment as a result of taking responsibility for children (Chodorow 1978; Devault 1990; LaRossa and LaRossa 1981). Fathers tend to derive their primary parenting identity from being a "provider," rather than from the direct performance of child care, and are more likely to instruct or play with children than to respond to their physical or emotional needs (Hood 1986; Parke 1981). Nevertheless, fathers who actively participate in routine child care report behaviors and experiences similar to those reported by mothers (Coltrane 1989; Risman 1987).

When couples have their first child, the household division of labor often shifts toward more conventional, gender-based, allocations, with wives performing most of the housework and child care (Belsky, Lang, and Rovine 1985; Cowan 1988). This is likely even for couples who had previously shared housework, and for those who expected to share infant care (LaRossa and LaRossa 1981; Thompson and Walker 1989). Even among those who consciously attempt to share the daily tasks of parenting, mothers typically end up assuming primary responsibility for monitoring the children and setting schedules for their care.
The oft-cited drop in marital satisfaction that follows the arrival of children (Ishii-Kuntz and Seccombe 1989; Lee 1988) may, in fact, be due to a shift toward mothers performing most of the child care and housework. Researchers have found that women experience more strain in the parental role than do men (Scott and Alwin 1989), and that psychological distress is greater among wives when husbands do not assist with household chores (Kessler and McCrae 1982; Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983).

Because the experiences of, and responsibility for, child care are difficult to measure, household labor studies tend to reduce parenting to the number of hours spent directly caring for children (Leslie, Anderson, and Branson 1991; Marsiglio 1991). Feeding, bathing, dressing, or putting a young child to bed come to stand for parenting, even though responsibility for planning child care, leisure time with children, and a portion of housework tasks like laundry, shopping, housecleaning, and meal cleanup are also forms of child care. Housework and child care are conceptually and empirically related in other ways as well.

The practicality hypothesis noted above uses the presence or age of children to predict more sharing of housework by focusing on an increase in the overall level of household labor demand. Accordingly, some household labor studies find that the presence of more and younger children is associated with greater contributions by husbands (Berk and Berk 1979; Farkas 1976; Geerken and Gove 1983; Pleck 1985). Nevertheless, other studies find that husbands contribute more when children are absent (Blair and Lichter 1991; Rexroat and Shehan 1987) or when there are fewer children (Perrucci, Potter, and Rhoads 1978; Robinson 1988). Kamo (1992) reports a curvilinear effect, with husbands doing more when there are two or fewer, or four or more children. Some researchers report that, when the household workload increases, husbands assist wives by doing the "nicer" tasks, such as playing with the children so that the mother can prepare meals or clean the house (Berk and Berk 1979; Coleman 1988). Others have found that men who are initially motivated to spend time with their children become more aware of housework through the performance of child care (Coltrane 1990).

These research findings raise questions about the relationship between child care and housework: should we treat child care and housework as conceptually distinct dimensions of household labor?; are men more likely to perform child care or housework?; finally, do couples with young children divide child care in response to the same forces that shape their division of housework?

**WIVES' VS. HUSBANDS' INITIATIVE**

Another area of ambiguity in past research relates to the relative influence that each spouse has over the allocation of domestic responsibilities. While most researchers agree that women often act as household managers and gatekeepers to husbands' involvement in family work, the question remains whether more egalitarian arrangements result from husbands' or wives' initiative. Researchers
find that, even though wives do most of the housework, only a minority want to
do less or desire their husbands to do more (Berk 1985; Pleck 1985). Similarly,
mothers often voice concern over giving up authority over child care (Gerson
1985; Jump and Haas 1989). While many mothers report that they would like
their husbands to be more involved fathers, this is often predicated on the
assumption that it will benefit the children, not on a desire to share the daily
child care. Women’s reluctance to give up family work is based, in part, on the
sense of purpose they derive from being needed by their children and husbands
(DeVault 1990; Thompson and Walker 1989). Thus, some qualitative studies have
focused on the ways that mothers and fathers collude in making relatively unfair
divisions of parenting appear “natural” (Backett 1982; Hochschild 1989; LaRossa
and LaRossa 1981).

Whose initiative, then, would be more likely to bring about change in asym-
metric divisions of household labor? Although this issue often remains implicit,
the theories outlined above make certain assumptions about who exerts influ-
ence over the distribution of family work. Two of the three hypotheses, i.e.,
resource and time availability, are “gender-neutral” (Ferree 1990) in that they
model the causal forces shaping divisions of household labor as being the same
for both men and women. These theories typically assume that exogenous
forces, coupled with individual choices, shape spouses’ earnings and hours of
market labor, with more equal resources and time constraints resulting in more
equal divisions of household labor. These approaches allow for spousal competi-
tion, but treat husbands and wives similarly, insofar as they consider a unit
increase in one spouse’s resources or time constraints to be equal to a unit
decrease in the other’s. The spouse with fewer resources and fewer time con-
straints, regardless of gender, is assumed to do more housework. One potential
problem with gender-neutral approaches is that concepts like time availability,
child care, and housework can carry different meanings for each spouse.

Study results concerning the impacts of relative resources and time availability
are mixed. Although some researchers have found that wives’ higher incomes
(Spitze 1988) or the difference between the husband’s and wife’s income (Ross
1987) are related to the performance of more housework by husbands, many
find that the wife’s relative income is unrelated to the division of household
labor (Farkas 1976; Huber and Spitze 1983). Some researchers have found that
the number of hours employed for both husbands and wives strongly influences
the division of household labor (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz 1992; Ferree 1991), but
others have concluded that partners do not allocate family work on the basis of
time availability (Thompson and Walker 1989). One study (Nock and Kingston
1988) found that, compared with mothers’, fathers’ time in employment affects
their participation in more types of activities with children, and another recent
study (Marsiglio 1991) found significant negative effects of fathers’ employment
on men’s time spent reading to preschool children. Nevertheless, Marsiglio
(1991) found no significant impacts of either mothers’ or fathers’ employment on
time fathers spent playing with preschool children.
By focusing on gender ideology, the third theoretical approach includes consideration of difference in the meaning of various resources and tasks, but does not specify whether men’s or women’s education or ideology might be more important in shaping divisions of labor. Not only is there disagreement among researchers on the overall impact of ideology on divisions of household labor (compare Thompson and Walker [1989: 857] with Pleck [1983: 275]), but there is no consensus on whose ideology is more important. Many researchers suggest that the husbands’ initiative is paramount if he is to assume a greater share of family work. Lending support to this hypothesis is the frequent finding that husbands’ attitudes toward appropriate family and gender roles are a better predictor of sharing than wives’ attitudes (Ferree 1991; Hiller and Philliber 1986; Huber and Spitze 1983; Kamo 1986, 1988; Ross 1987). This would suggest an individualistic model of behavioral change: as men adopt more progressive attitudes toward appropriate gender and family roles they will be motivated to assume a greater proportion of housework and child care.

Assuming a conflict model of task allocation, other researchers have suggested that more equitable divisions of labor are dependent on explicit scheduling and overt bargaining by wives (Komter 1989; Szinovacz 1984). This approach grants wives a pivotal causal role in household labor sharing and is consonant with descriptive research detailing the ways in which wives and mothers regulate men’s involvement in child care by setting standards, keeping schedules, and facilitating father-child interaction (Ehrensaft 1987; Lamb 1981; LaRossa and LaRossa 1981). Supporting this position, one recent study using a representative sample found that wives’ attitudes are more important than husbands’ attitudes in predicting more equitable distributions of domestic labor (Hardesty and Bokemeier 1989), and other studies have found that wives’ characteristics are more strongly correlated with paternal involvement in child care than are characteristics associated with fathers (Barnett and Baruch 1987; Radin 1988). Generalizing from these studies, one would predict that women’s attitudes toward family and gender roles would be more important than men’s in bringing about more equitable divisions of labor.

Thus, competing hypotheses regarding the different impact of wives’ or husbands’ characteristics and initiative on men’s assumption of child care and housework have received support. Representative samples have been employed in some of these studies, but results remain contradictory, in part because of overly broad conceptualization and operationalization of ideology or gender/family “traditionalism.” Further investigation and conceptual refinement are needed before we can hope to understand the interplay of forces that might privilege one spouse’s ideology, income, education, or time availability over the other’s in allocating household responsibilities.

MODELING THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

The foregoing analysis suggests a model of household labor allocation for married couples with young children that includes a variety of factors. Consonant
with previous studies, we include the major existing explanatory concepts: relative resources (education and earnings); practicality (time availability and household labor demand); and ideology (attitudes toward maternal employment). Because some researchers have found sharing to covary with total family income, we also include couples' earnings as a control variable. To explore relative contributions of husbands and wives, we include variables measuring education, time availability, and ideology for each spouse, and construct a variable measuring wife's relative contribution to family earnings. We also separate child care from housework in an effort to specify how the independent variables differentially affect these two aspects of household labor, and how they might influence each other.

METHODS

Sample

The data used in this study come from the National Survey of Families and Households conducted in 1987–88 by the Center for Demography and Ecology, the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). The respondents for this survey, adult household members age 19 and older, were selected by a multistage probability sampling and represent about 17,000 housing units in the coterminous United States. The data set is a rich source of information on many aspects of family and nonfamily lives. The subsample used for the present investigation consists of all two-parent households in the main sample with children under the age of five who were queried about child-care arrangements (N = 640).1

Measurement: Husbands' Share of Housework

Husbands' contribution to housework is measured by the proportion of housework men do compared with their wives. Five types of housework included in the analysis are (1) preparing meals, (2) washing dishes and meal cleanup, (3) shopping, (4) washing and ironing, and (5) cleaning house. We include these items, and exclude the tasks of household repairs, car maintenance, paying bills, and driving, in order to isolate the extent to which men are assuming tasks conventionally performed by women. For each item, wives and husbands made independent estimates of the number of hours per week that they and their spouse "normally" spent in the above types of housework. Following Huber and Spitze (1983), we use mean husband-wife estimates for each spouse. Husbands' relative contribution to each type of housework is computed by dividing their time spent on the five tasks by the total number of hours spent by both spouses. We are interested in potential changes in the relative distribution of these tasks and so employ a proportionate measure.
Husbands' Share of Child Care

Main respondents whose children were under five were asked: "About how many hours in a typical day do you spend taking care of [focal child's] physical needs, including feeding, bathing, dressing, and putting [him/her] to bed?" Main respondents were also asked this question to estimate their spouses' child care burden. We first sum these hours to obtain total hours parents spent in child-care activities, then we compute the husbands' proportionate contribution to child care. As for housework, we also employ a proportionate measure because we are interested in the relative contribution of husbands and wives.

Relative Resources

Wife's relative economic resource is measured by the proportion of family income she earned. First, a couple's earnings is computed by summing the husband's and wife's gross annual income. The wife's earnings are then divided by couple earnings. Wives who were not employed are included in the zero-earning category. Higher scores for this variable indicate greater relative economic resources for the wife. In addition, we include husband's and wife's educational attainments measured by years of schooling completed.

Practicality

Husband's and wife's time availability are measured by the number of hours spent in paid employment. Hours of market labor are assessed by asking how many hours the respondent worked for pay in the previous week. If the previous week was unusual, then the respondent provided an estimate of the usual number of employed hours per week. Nonemployed respondents are included in a zero-hour category. Other aspects of practicality are assessed by the number of children in the household and the age of the youngest child. We assume that younger children and more children represent a greater demand for parental care, attention, and time.

Ideology

Husband's and wife's attitudes toward maternal employment are measured independently by five survey items asking for the extent of agreement/disagreement with the following statements:

1. "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family."
2. "Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed,"

and approval/disapproval of:
Predicting the Sharing of Household Labor

(3) Mothers who work full-time when their youngest child is under age 5.
(4) Mothers who work part-time when their youngest child is under age 5.
(5) Children under 3 years old being cared for all day in a child-care center.

These items are summed to create a scale of attitudes toward maternal employment with higher scores indicating more traditional attitudes. Reliability for husband’s and wife’s ideology scales are .821 and .823, respectively.3

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. Although men’s contribution to routine housework ranges from 1 to 91 percent of the total, husbands contribute only an average of 21 percent of the couple’s total time devoted to housework. Husbands are slightly more likely to assume responsibility for the care of young children than they are to do housework. On average, fathers participate in about 26 percent of the total hours spent in direct child-care activities. Wives’ average financial contribution to the couple’s income is about 26 percent. While husbands are employed an average of 41 hours per week, wives spend an average of 16 hours per week in paid employment.

TABLE 1
Range, Means, and Standard Deviations of the Key Variables

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<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>Husband’s housework (%)</td>
<td>.01–.91</td>
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<td>.154</td>
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<tr>
<td>Husband’s child care (%)</td>
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<td>Wife’s earnings (%)</td>
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<td>.273</td>
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<td>Wife’s employment hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wife’s attitudes toward maternal employment</td>
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<td>18.23</td>
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<td>Age of youngest child</td>
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<td>Number of children</td>
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Table 2
Correlations Among the Key Variables

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<td>.01</td>
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<td>.14*</td>
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<td>-.12**</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>11. Husband's education</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.12**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
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<td>12. Wife's education</td>
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<td>-.08</td>
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<td>.34**</td>
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*p < .05; **p < .01.
Sample husbands tend to hold slightly less favorable attitudes than wives toward maternal employment and its impact on children. The average age of the youngest child in the household is about 16 months and the mean number of children is 1.8. Couples’ average annual income is $34,531. Finally, husbands and wives, on average, have completed 13 years of schooling.

Bivariate correlations (see Table 2) indicate that most hypothesized independent variables are associated with the husband’s share of housework in the predicted direction. Men do a larger proportion of the housework when they do more child care ($r = .45$), spend fewer hours in paid employment ($r = -.26$), are more accepting of maternal employment ($r = -.31$), and have more education ($r = .11$). In addition, husbands’ greater participation in housework is significantly associated with their wives’ earning a larger proportion of the family income ($r = .28$), being employed more hours ($r = .34$), having more education ($r = .18$), and being more accepting of maternal employment ($r = -.28$). Contrary to our expectations, number of children is found to be negatively correlated with husbands’ participation in housework ($r = -.14$). That is, husbands with more children are less likely to be involved in housework. Age of the youngest child and couple’s income are not significantly associated with the husband’s share of housework.

A somewhat similar pattern emerges for men’s involvement in child care. Fathers are more likely to share child care if they are employed fewer hours ($r = -.21$), and hold more favorable attitudes toward maternal employment ($r = -.24$). Mother’s higher relative earnings ($r = .19$), longer work hours ($r = .34$), and greater acceptance of maternal employment ($r = -.21$) are also related to men sharing more of the child care. Interestingly, age of the youngest child is related to child care in the opposite direction from its relationship with housework. In other words, fathers of younger children are likely to do more of the housework, while fathers of older children are likely to do more of the child care. Unlike housework, the husband’s share of child care is not significantly correlated with number of children, husband’s education, or wife’s education.

To examine the relationship between men’s housework and child-care contributions and to analyze the impact of independent variables on these two aspects of men’s household labor, a nonrecursive model is analyzed using LISREL VII. Figure 1 depicts the proposed model and presents direct effects (standardized coefficients). Supporting our hypothesis, husbands sharing housework and child care have mutually reinforcing effects: men who participate in child care are significantly more likely to share routine housework ($\beta = .326$) and those who share housework are significantly more likely to share child care ($\beta = .339$). Although these simultaneous effects are similar, the effects of the independent variables on the two types of household labor are more distinct, as discussed below.

With respect to men’s housework, we support the relative resource hypothesis by finding that the larger the percentage of couple earnings accounted for by the wife, the larger is the husband’s share of housework ($\beta = .090, p < .05$). The
practicality hypothesis is also partially supported for housework: husband’s shorter hours of employment ($\beta = -0.173, p < .001$) and wife’s longer work hours ($\beta = 0.089, p < .05$) predict increased husband participation, but age of the youngest child and number of children do not have statistically significant ef-
fects. The ideology hypothesis is also partially supported, with husband’s percent of housework predicted by wife’s acceptance of maternal employment \((\beta = -0.082, p < .05)\) but not by husband’s. Finally, while more years of education for the wife are associated with the husband’s increased sharing of housework \((\beta = 0.100, p < .05)\), no such impact is found for husband’s educational attainment. Overall, we found that characteristics associated with wives, including their share of family earnings, educational attainment, employment hours, and attitudes toward maternal employment have a greater impact on husband’s share of housework than did child care.

Turning to the variables associated with men’s child care, we find that husband’s fewer employment hours \((\beta = -0.139, p < .01)\), husband’s acceptance of maternal employment \((\beta = -0.100, p < .05)\), and wife’s greater employment hours \((\beta = 0.216, p < .001)\) predict husband’s sharing more child care. Men are more likely to participate in child care if the children are older \((\beta = 0.150, p < .01)\) and if there are more children in the household \((\beta = 0.101, p < .05)\). Although wife’s earnings, education, and attitudes have a substantial impact on husband’s housework, effects are not significant for husband’s child-care involvement and the direction of effects are reversed for wife’s earnings and education. At the same time, while the number of children and the age of the youngest child have a negative but nonsignificant impact on husband’s housework participation, they have a significant positive impact on husband’s share of child care.

These differences suggest that there might be different and independent forces affecting husbands’ contributions to child care and housework. This may be due largely to the differences in the nature of work associated with these two types of household labor. Since housework is more mundane than child care and offers fewer intrinsic rewards to most people, it may take more of the wife’s “power” to encourage the husband to participate in the routine activities of cooking, cleaning, and laundry.

**DISCUSSION**

In summary, we find strong support for the mutual effects of husbands’ contributions to housework and child care: men who participate more in one activity are significantly more likely to participate in the other. We assume that engaging in either child care or housework places men in the home for more hours and encourages them to take responsibility for other associated domestic activities. The cross-sectional data we analyzed do not allow for directly measuring whether child care or housework is more likely to have temporal priority.

Perhaps the most provocative set of findings from this study concerns the different pattern of associations for child care and housework. While men’s and women’s hours of employment are related to husbands’ share of both housework and child care, other independent variables show mixed effects. For instance, women’s greater share of family earnings is associated with men performing more of the housework, but is not significantly related to men’s share of child care. Thus, theories that stress the importance of the wife’s resources and
bargaining position may be more applicable to divisions of routine housework than to divisions of child care. In a similar fashion, the number of children in the family is positively and significantly related to men's assumption of responsibility for child care, but negatively and nonsignificantly related to men's share of housework. Thus, having two or more young children may increase the father's propensity to share in their care, but having more than one child does not, in itself, encourage him to do more housework.

Another interesting distinction between men's participation in child care and housework is reflected in correlations with age of the youngest child. Men with younger children are somewhat more likely to share more of the housework, though results did not reach statistical significance. This could reflect new fathers' attempts to "help out" around the house while the mother is preoccupied with infant care. By contrast, men whose youngest child is older are significantly more likely to share direct child care with their wives. Because the sample was selected on the basis of the youngest child being under the age of five, the above findings mean that fathers whose children are approaching school age are the most likely to participate in caring for children. We assume that fathers are spending more time with older children because fathers are more comfortable engaging in such activities as verbal exchange, energetic play, and explicit instruction that are more feasible with older preschoolers.

Concerning the relative influence of husbands and wives on the sharing of housework and child care, it appears that the wife's initiative is more influential for housework, but that the husband's initiative may be more important for child care. Although we do not measure initiative directly, we assume that the significant association between one spouse's resources or attitudes and the sharing of domestic labor reflects the exercise of initiative. Wives who earn more of the household income, those with more education, and those who are more accepting of maternal employment, are probably better able to bargain effectively for greater participation from husbands, especially when their husbands are employed fewer hours. It is likely that wives with higher relative resources are less attached to the homemaker role and therefore will more readily share the tasks associated with it. This interpretation supports a conflict model of household labor allocation that conceives of the sharing of housework as resulting from a power dynamic: a wife's economic and educational resources and liberal attitudes enable her to do less around the house and encourage her husband to do more.

Wives' employment characteristics also strongly influence their husbands' share of child care. For instance, while both men's and women's employment hours are associated with more child care by fathers, the standardized coefficients for wives' employment are higher than for husbands'. In addition, husbands contribute more when children are older and less dependent on their mothers, and when there are two or more children under the age of five in the home. This suggests that most fathers remain in a helper role and are assuming responsibility for less onerous tasks—such watching over preschoolers—while
the mother performs primary care for a new baby. While we are suggesting that the wife's time availability serves to regulate the husband's participation in child care, our findings also show that the husband's time availability and gender ideology are important. With an increasing proportion of couples employed a comparable number of hours and exposed to media images of actively participating "new" fathers, men's attitudes about parenting are becoming more salient. Our findings about ideology suggest that a father's attitudes toward maternal employment and children's needs may be relatively more consequential for the sharing of routine parenting than his wife's corresponding attitudes.

The finding that wives' characteristics influence divisions of housework more than husbands' characteristics resonates with the expectation that housework has been defined as "women's work." In the context of cultural prescriptions holding women accountable for messy houses, it is no surprise that women most often assume housekeeping duties. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that, when women accumulate enough resources to equalize power imbalances, they will do less housekeeping and encourage husbands to do more.

Some neoclassical economic theories of household labor allocation (Becker 1981) mistakenly assume that the family, as a unit, maximizes the utilities of all family members. As studies of struggles over housework attest, domestic divisions of labor more often serve the interests of husbands than wives (Hartmann 1981). While the economists' concept of "tastes" for housework masked internal family power inequities, it did at least acknowledge that domestic tasks could carry different meanings for men and women. By contrast, some recent versions of exchange and rational-choice theories invoked to explain divisions of domestic labor may err by assuming that men and women automatically follow similar reasoning processes when allocating household tasks. Although relative resources and both wives' and husbands' time availability are associated with divisions of household labor in this study, we need not assume that these are gender-neutral commodities with fixed values. Rather, they operate in the context of a symbolic system that defines men and women as essentially different and "naturally" responsible for specific tasks. Our finding that men's share of child care is significantly associated with their concerns about the potential impacts of maternal employment on young children confirms that gender ideology is important. Relative resources do not exist apart from, nor do they stand in opposition to, gender ideology, as our mathematical models sometimes imply.

In general, we replicate past studies by documenting how little men contribute to domestic chores. On average, women perform about three-fourths of the housework and child care. The social structural factors promoting such divisions of labor are relatively easy to isolate: women in this sample earn an average of only about one-quarter of what the men do, and are employed for fewer than half as many hours. Nevertheless, we do not subscribe to the notion that domestic relations are static and unchanging. On the contrary, we find that a substantial minority of men are assuming significant responsibilities for household labor, probably in response to the enhanced bargaining position of wives and their
willingness to negotiate change. In addition, men's involvement with young children—an increasingly prevalent phenomenon—is found to be associated with more sharing of housework. Driven by practicality, relative resources, and changing attitudes, men are performing slightly more of those stereotypical tasks traditionally assigned to women. By treating child care and housework as mutually dependent but conceptually distinct in future studies, we might be able to better understand and predict changes in the division of domestic labor.

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NOTES
1. In the National Survey of Families and Households, a "focal child" was randomly selected from the roster of household members, and the primary respondent was asked questions about this child. Since we needed data on direct child care, and these questions were only asked of respondents whose focal child was under five years old, the available sample was reduced significantly. Nevertheless, because of random selection techniques, our subsample of 640 households remains representative.

2. Since maternal employment status is assumed to differentially affect the division of household labor, we analyze the proposed model for three groups: couples with nonemployed wives; part-time employed wives; and full-time employed wives. The significant reciprocal relationship between husbands' sharing of housework and child care is found for all three groups. Findings for the three groups are also similar in terms of direction and magnitude of effects of independent variables on housework and child care. Unlike our overall results, however, in couples with nonemployed wives, husbands' favorable attitudes toward paternal employment are significantly associated with increased sharing of housework.

3. Other researchers have selected alternate items to measure gender ideology in household labor studies using the same data set (Blair and Lichter 1991; Kamo 1992), but have either sacrificed inter-item reliability or excluded family-related items. We choose these items because they reflect subjects' attitudes toward maternal employment and its potential impact on children.

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