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Playing catch-up: Partnered women's housework on weekends versus weekdays

ABSTRACT

A key, typically tacit, assumption of the quantitative housework research—indeed of time allocation scholarship generally—is that there is an average daily pattern of time use which can fairly represent most days. We usually ignore the distinction between weekdays and weekends by using measures like "usual weekly hours" spent on activities like domestic labor. Even when we have data on separate days, we tend to aggregate them into weekly estimates. In this paper we analyze separately the time spent on housework on weekdays and weekends by women in heterosexual marital and cohabiting relationships (hereafter, "partnered women"). Our results show that these women behave quite differently on weekdays and weekends, and motivate a substantial refinement of the conventional "time availability" model of women's domestic labor.

INTRODUCTION

The "time availability" hypothesis is simply that individuals allocate time for housework from the hours left over from paid work. It has been one of the most successful models of women's housework time to date: virtually every quantitative study using data from the U.S. and other countries has found the expected negative relationship between women's employment and housework hours (Bianchi et al. 2012; Cooke and Baxter 2010). This research has generally used weekly measures of time expenditure, initially because earlier retrospective surveys contained data at the weekly level; this subsequently became the convention even for studies using time diary data (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006).

Here we refine the time availability model by explicitly recognizing that employment structures time very differently on weekdays and weekends. Despite the emergence of the 24/7 economy and growth of nonstandard work hours (Presser 2003), the majority of employed individuals work most of their paid work hours during weekdays, so that there is markedly less time available for housework on those days compared to weekends. All else being equal, therefore, we would expect women to spend more time on domestic labor on weekends than on weekdays. On the other hand, weekends also make more time available for activities such as leisure, socializing with friends and family, and so on. This could intensify the competition for women's time on weekends and reduce their time allocated to housework. A few studies have examined how child care varies by type of day and found that mothers do less child care but fathers more child care on weekends compared to weekdays (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004; Yeung et al. 2001). The literature has not yet examined how housework varies across type of day; we address this gap in this analysis.

To better understand the differences in women's time allocation on weekdays and weekends, we conduct separate analyses for women in three distinct employment categories: not employed, employed part-time, and employed full-time. We distinguish also between two kinds of housework, one which needs to be performed regularly during the week, and another that is easier to defer to the weekend. We choose cooking as an exemplar of the first kind of domestic labor and cleaning of the second because of distinct temporal aspects. Cooking and cleaning also have different outsourcing markets. Outsourcing is more readily available and affordable for activities like cooking and weekly cleaning than activities like tidying up the house each evening and reheating leftovers or take-out food.

DATA

We use pooled time diary data from the 2003-2007 American Time Use Study, or ATUS (Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S.Census Bureau 2008). This is the first federally administered time diary survey in the United States and was designed to collect nationally representative data on how adults allocate time to paid work, unpaid work, self care, and leisure (Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S.Census Bureau 2004). Time diaries cover the period from 4 am to 4 am on the day prior to the telephone interview, and information is collected on all types of activity episodes, persons present during the activity, and where the activity took place. The ATUS sample consists of all noninstitutionalized U.S. residents age 15 and over and is drawn from outgoing rotations of the Current Population Survey. As such, the ATUS also contains high-quality data on employment, earnings, and salient household and individual characteristics. The response rate was 57% in 2003, 58% in 2004, 57% in 2005, 55.1 in 2006 and 52.5 in 2007. We pool the five years of data to reduce variability from relying on only a single year of data and increase the sample size of women. Our analysis sample includes 18790 diary days reported by married and cohabiting women. We exclude women who are self-employed or employed in a family business because ATUS does not collect earnings data from them and exclude women who are retired, full-time students or disabled. Weights are used in all analyses to correct for nonresponse and adjust for the ATUS oversample of weekend days. A number of studies have established the accuracy and reliability of the time diary method, in particular for household activities (Juster 1999; Marini and Shelton 1993; Robinson and Godbey 1999)

RESULTS

Here we present our descriptive findings; the paper will report the results from multivariate models with the standard controls.

Table 1: Minutes spent on diary day on all core tasks (cooking, cleaning, dishes and laundry)

		Weekly employment hours			
Type of day		0	<35	>=35	Total
weekday	mean	169	112	69	112
	sd	121	101	80	109
	n	3,211	1,694	4,378	9,283
weekend	mean	131	120	123	125
	sd	117	111	116	115
	n	3,250	1,635	4,622	9,507
Total	mean	150	116	97	119
	sd	120	106	104	113
	n	6,461	3,329	9,000	18,790

Looking across the “Total” row we see the usual time availability results: on average, women employed full-time during the week spent substantially fewer minutes on all routine housework tasks than their peers who were not employed, with women employed part-time falling in between. Disaggregating this total by type of day reveals, however, that this variation by employment status is concentrated on weekdays; the differences on weekends are much smaller. Further, though the difference by type of day

is modest for all partnered women (on average, 13 more minutes on weekend days), it is dramatic within employment categories. Moreover it actually reverses direction with increasing employment hours—while women with zero weekly employment hours spent nearly 40 *fewer* minutes on housework on weekends, those employed full-time during the week spent 50 minutes *more* on domestic labor during weekend days.

Table 2: Minutes spent on diary day on cooking

		Weekly employment hours			
Type of day		0	<35	>=35	Total
Weekday	mean	56	39	28	40
	sd	48	39	33	42
	n	3,233	1,696	4,380	9,309
Weekend	mean	48	38	37	41
	sd	50	46	45	47
	n	3,254	1,638	4,630	9,522
Total	mean	52	38	33	40
	sd	50	42	40	45
	n	6,487	3,334	9,010	18,831

Next we consider the time spent specifically on cooking, which prior scholarship has documented to be the single most chronic and time-consuming chore for women. We again obtain support for the time availability hypothesis in the "Total" row, with women employed full-time spending nearly 20 fewer minutes on the diary day than their non-employed counterparts. But again the difference is most visible on weekdays, during which women employed full-time spent only half the time cooking of those not employed. And as with the time spent on all core tasks, women employed full-time spent more time cooking on weekends, while those not employed did the opposite.

Table 3: Minutes spent on diary day on cleaning

		Weekly employment hours			
Type of day		0	<35	>=35	Total
weekday	mean	62	36	18	37
	sd	83	61	46	67
	n	3,249	1,697	4,383	9,329
weekend	mean	44	41	44	44

	sd	72	71	76	74
	n	3,271	1,650	4,638	9,559
Total	mean	53	39	31	40
	sd	78	66	65	71
	n	6,520	3,347	9,021	18,888

Finally we report the time spent on cleaning, which appears to be considerably easier to postpone to the weekend than cooking, as shown by the very large difference in time spent doing it on weekdays and weekends by women employed full-time.

DISCUSSION

Our descriptive results show that the time availability model of partnered women's housework applies most directly on weekdays, the days on which their time is most constrained by their employment. On these days, women's housework time is negatively associated with their weekly employment hours, just as the model predicts. There is much less variation on weekend days, when women have the most time available for domestic labor. This pattern holds for all core housework tasks together and also separately for cooking and cleaning. It is especially sharp in the case of cleaning, the task which may be most amenable to postponement.

In the final paper we will confirm this pattern with predicted values from multivariate models. For now we note that our results offer support for a refinement of the conventional time availability hypothesis, one which differentiates between days during which women's time is more or less constrained by employment. Our findings for weekdays are not surprising in view of the hypothesis. The results for weekends, however, suggest that time availability really does operate day by day and therefore more starkly on some days than others. Women who are not employed concentrate their domestic labor on weekdays and then cut back on weekends, while those employed full-time during the week defer much of theirs to the weekends. Though these trade-offs result in overall differences in housework time by employment hours that are consistent with the time availability model, they also show striking similarities in housework standards across employment statuses.

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