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Gender Threat and Men in the Post-Trump World: The Effects of a Changing Economy on Men's Housework

Men and Masculinities
2019, Vol. 22(1) 44-52
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DOI: 10.1177/1097184X18805549
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmm



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Abstract

The article provides an overview of the effects of broader economic changes on the division of housework among dual earner heterosexual couples. It summarizes some of the broader methodological and theoretical trends in the field and calls for an interdisciplinary, intersectional approach in studying men today.

Keywords

men, housework, inequality, gender

I served as the managing editor of *Men and Masculinities* (2003–2005) and this was my first real exposure to the body of research on *Men and Masculinities*. I do not define myself as a masculinities scholar, I see myself as a feminist scholar of work and gender, particularly inequalities in the workplace. I spent most of my days at the journal office reading all the submitted manuscripts on masculinities. Masculinities scholars were predominantly men, and I saw myself as a feminist scholar who occasionally studies men with an intersectional feminist perspective. This large body of research I read at the time helped me connect the dots years later and gave me perspective on understanding men today especially in the new economy.

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Men and Masculinities Today

Today, we hear “the end of men,” “the decline of men,” and “the crisis of men” in the media. Concepts like *mancession* or *toxic masculinity* have become household concepts, and understanding men has been central in the media and in our understanding of media and politics today. In my current project with Dan Cassino, I focus on the reactions of men to the changing world: economically, socially and politically. While the concepts were ubiquitous, there was absence of research and real evidence in many media accounts. With rising women’s labor force participation, increased visibility of women in higher authority positions in business and politics, what happens to men? How do they experience unemployment or loss of breadwinner status? Especially focusing on heterosexual, married men, what happens to them at home, particularly how they divide housework?

Reactionary Masculinities and Housework: A Gender Threat Story

In our study (Besen-Cassino and Cassino 2014) we explore the division of labor in house chores. Despite the enormous amount of time spent on household chores, housework has often been trivialized as something less than “real work” (Coltrane 2000; Crittenden 2005). Many researchers have studied housework among dual income couples focusin on the time spent performing chores, planning chores as well as the division of tasks (Blair and Lichter 1991; Berk and Berk 1979; Berk 1985; Bielby and Bielby 1989; Bittman et. al., 2003; Starrels 1994). Despite women’s increasing labor force participation and increase in time spent at work, women still . . . perform most of the necessary chores, do more mental perpetration of chores, do more multitasking and still are seen as the primary responsible party for house chores. Men’s contribution is seen as help and is often characterized in lower quality (Coltrane 2000; Bittman 2003).

Typically, we focus on individual explanations to explain why couples divide chores the way they do, but the explanations do not need to focus on individual explanations. Hook (2006) has argued, for example, that increases in men’s housework, where it has occurred, has less to do with the individual circumstances of the household than the aggregate female employment rate in the country. Larger-scale social and economic changes seem to be the most important contributor to the hours men spend on housework. This is an interesting perspective to connect the national-level changes in society—larger economic trends, bigger social movements—to explain who does the dishes.

Many theories have explored this particular division of labor. First, bargaining and social exchange theories (Blau 1960; Blood and Wolfe 1960) suggested that the amount of time men spend on housework increases as their income relative to that of their spouse’s decreases. Gupta (2007) finds that the more money a woman earns, the less housework she does, by using additional economic resources to buy out of

additional housework. These bargaining and exchange theories have also led researchers to argue that when one spouse spends more time on an activity like housework or leisure, the other does as well (Sullivan 1996; Hamermesh 2000; Hallberg and Klevmarcken 2003; Jenkins and Osberg 2005). This could be because of outside trends impacting both partners in a marriage similarly or because people tend to marry people with similar interests in how they want to spend their leisure time. (Lam 1988). This line of research, argues that the amount of time we spend on chores is purely an economic calculation based on income. When we have more money, we do fewer chores. When we are not able to bring in more resources, we are stuck with doing more. So it is an economic negotiation and not one about gender.

In the past few decades, despite the rapid increase in the women's chores force participation and the increase in their work hours, their contribution to the household has not decreased in proportion (Coltrane 2000). At the same time, the hours men spend on housework have increased only marginally (Bianchi et al. 2000; Gershuny 2000; Hook 2006; Sayer 2005) and not commensurate to the increases in women's wages (Coltrane 2000). The data seem clear that the time spent on household labor isn't just about relative earnings like the social exchange theories suggests, and there's good reason to believe that a lot of it is driven by gender identity.

Studies have shown that women do more housework when they earn more than their husbands do and not less (Atkinson and Boles 1984; Thebaud 2010) or when their husbands are unemployed (Brayfield 1992), a finding entirely at odds with the traditional exchange models. Bittman et al. (2003) find that the degree of gender inequality in housework decreases as the wife makes more money, but only up until she makes as much as he does. After that point, couples tend to resume traditional divisions of housework. They argue that this counterintuitive effect is the result of the violation of gender norms and expectations that comes along with the wife's increased income, with the husband's reduced housework as a mechanism for resolving the inequality in gender. This is referred to as gender deviance neutralization (Greenstein 2000; Bittman et al. 2003). In essence, the fact that the husband is now earning less money represents a threat to the gender identities of both the husband and the wife, and both work to find some way to resolve what's seen as a threat to the status quo. Since the husband is not fulfilling one aspect of hegemonic masculinity borrowing from R.W. Connell, he avoids activities that might further call his gender identity into question, like household chores. He might not be the breadwinner anymore, but he's certainly not going to do the dishes. In addition, the traditional gendered expectations from women as emotional supporters means that the wife might well see it as her responsibility to bolster her husband's masculinity by engaging in more household labor than she might otherwise do.

The gender inequality is not just in the time spent doing chores, but the household tasks are also highly gendered. (Blair and Lichter 1991; Brayfield 1992; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; Mederer 1993). Women tend to carry out day-to-day cooking, washing, ironing, and clean up from food preparation (Blair and Lichter 1991; Robinson and Godbey 1997). Men's tasks involve home repairs, yard work, and

snow removal. On the whole, the tasks dominated by women tend to be more time-consuming, tedious, and need to be completed by a deadline, while men's tasks can be more enjoyable, flexible, and can easily be rescheduled or delegated (Coltrane 1998; Larson, Richards, and Perry-Jenkins 1994; Devault 1991; Robinson and Milkie 1997, 1998). Heidi Hartmann (1981) characterized the family as "a primary arena where men exercise their patriarchal power over women's labor" (377). Therefore, the meaning of house chores is highly gendered.

Doing household labor means doing gender because traditionally household chores are considered women's work. (Crittenden 2005), doing household labor means doing gender for both men and women (West and Zimmerman 1987). while gender identities within the household matter in the division of household labor, so too do gender expectations within society as a whole: men may feel that they have to avoid certain types of work around the house in order to reinforce their masculinity, but they should only do this to the extent that the culture treats the activity as gendered. No task is intrinsically gendered: each task can take on a different meaning depending on time, place and culture. A task or chore that is seen as a feminine task can easily be considered as a masculine task in another culture or change its social meaning over time. Therefore, paying attention to moments of change is essential for this research.

In our study, we have used the Great Recession as a kind of shock to the system of traditional gender expectations, because many men either lost their jobs or lost their breadwinner status. This shift in the economic status of many American men, especially relative to their wives, has been shown to have had an enormous impact on how men behave in the workplace and at the ballot box—so why not in the home? What happens when economic conditions change rapidly: what happens to these men at home?

The Great Recession is also valuable in that it provides variation in the financial composition of households that simply wasn't there previously. Job losses in the early stages of the Great Recession were disproportionately felt by men: it wasn't until later, when state and local governments began to engage in austerity measures, that women's unemployment rates caught up with men's. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, male and female unemployment rates were at comparable rates in 2007 (5 percent and 4.8 percent, respectively), they have diverged significantly afterward. In 2009, the unemployment for men was 10.9 percent, while it remained at 8.2 percent for women (Sahin et al. 2009). In particular, manufacturing jobs where men tend to be more concentrated have suffered from higher unemployment rates. Women, who tend to be concentrated in service sector jobs, remained firmly in the labor force. This is not to imply that women weren't impacted by the recession. The second wave of the recession, which was linked with decreased spending in the public sector linked with budget austerity measures carried out in the states, disproportionately impacted women. The recession, though, still functions as a both an experimental moment, a time at which the past gender income relationship was upset

in many households, and a potential inflection point, after which relations never quite reverted back to their initial state.

In my earlier work with Dan Cassino (2014), we explored how these recent changes in the economy and culture changing the breadwinner status of men (and hence masculine self-definitions of many heterosexual men) affected their behavior at home. Using American Time Use Study, we looked at both the amount of time men spent on housework and that spent on cooking. As might be expected, there is a negative relationship between the overall income in a household and how much time the occupants spend on housework. Such a relationship makes sense: higher-earning households can afford to bring in help to do some of the housework or can afford devices (think robot vacuum cleaners) that can get chores done more quickly. However, even this relationship is gendered. The decrease in time spent on housework as income rises is entirely among women, with mean minutes of housework done by men in the lowest income bracket statistically indistinguishable from mean minutes of housework done by men in the highest income bracket.

Even in this most basic analysis, there is some indication that cooking might be different than all the other chores. As with housework, American men aren't spending a lot of time on food preparation, and there's no real relationship between household income and time spent. However, among women, higher-income levels don't lead to less time spent on cooking, with thirty minutes per day staying pretty constant across income groups.

These findings are interesting, but we were more interested in how men's time spent on housework changes when their traditional masculine identity is threatened in some way. The most obvious source of threat to men's traditional identity in the home is the money earned by their wives. If men are expected—and expect themselves—to be the chief breadwinners, they may well be threatened if their wives make more money than they do, especially if the wife makes significantly more money. The clearest threat to a man's economic dominance in the home would come from unemployment, and thanks to the Great Recession, there are lots of unemployed people in the data set. Unemployment alone, we found, doesn't decrease the amount of time that men spend on housework: employed men average about fifteen minutes a day of housework and that figure goes up by about six minutes a day for unemployed men (Besen-Cassino and Cassino 2014). When women become unemployed, they spend an extra five minutes a day on housework, going from forty-five to fifty minutes a day, on average. However, it isn't surprising that unemployment doesn't decrease men's time spent on housework: unemployment alone isn't necessarily a threat to the man's position in the household. Short-term unemployment, or unemployment when the wife isn't working either, doesn't represent a threat that would come if the unemployment is prolonged or if the wife is making much more money than the now-unemployed husband is. Transitional, or short-term, unemployment may even be one of those areas in which traditional exchange models of housework function pretty well: unemployed people may be doing more housework simply because they're at home more (Besen-Cassino and Cassino 2014).

The more money a wife earns in absolute terms, the more housework the husband does. However, this increase is mediated by the effects of a wife's relative income. All told, men who make less money than their wives are much less responsive to their wife's earnings: they increase the amount of housework they do, but not by nearly as much. Suppose a wife comes to earn an extra five hundred dollars a week. If she still makes less than her husband does, she can expect him to do an extra thirteen minutes of housework a day—a significant gain. However, if she now earns more than her husband, he'll still increase the amount of time he spends on housework, but only by an extra five minutes per day. In either case, exchange models would hold that she should be able to negotiate to do less housework, but in one of the cases, her income is a threat to her husband, who is seemingly responding by doing less housework than he otherwise would.

One exception to this trend is cooking. We found that cooking is not seen as being as intertwined with masculinity as housework with many men cooking regularly and as a hobby. Preparing food often involves high technology, new equipment and knowledge-based technique and skills: all closely related to masculine identity. Unlike Hollows (2003) argues that cooking can be seen and experienced as “recognizably manly” and is rather a leisure activity (see also Aarseth and Olsen 2008) or a hobby where men can show off their mastery of skill and knowledge. Other approaches cast cooking as a necessary skill for well-rounded men to learn (Mechling 2005), often promoted on cooking shows with celebrity chefs or popular men's magazines. And that's when it doesn't involve grilling: any meal involving meat—and that's all “proper” Western meals—can be seen as recognizably masculine (Julier and Lindenfeld 2005). Cleaning and other chores like scrubbing the toilet do not really have high-tech devices or television shows dedicated to them: so these tasks do not give men an opportunity to express masculine identity.

Understanding Masculinities Today

Today, we need to study men more than ever. One important change has been how mainstream some sociological concepts have become. It is quite common nowadays to see read about concepts like hegemonic masculinity in *Teen Vogue*. This is an important shift from a subfield of sociology to more mainstream. However, with men and masculinities receiving more public attention, an important task for sociologists is to connect their research with a more mainstream audience.

One of the most striking characteristics of reading the incoming papers to *Men and Masculinities* at the time was true interdisciplinary nature of the papers. In my research of men's housework, I found a multifaceted argument combining political trends, economic constraints, and culture. To paint a more comprehensive understanding of what is happening to men, truly interdisciplinary work is necessary. Interdisciplinary work is necessary in this field not just to being in different theoretical perspectives and traditions but also to include a wide range of methods. For example, in our study of men's housework, we found that both individual-level

factors (such as individual and household income) and more macro factors (such as men's unemployment rates in the state) had an impact. Using both micro-level and macro-level data as well as bringing together a wide range of methodologies including qualitative and quantitative methods, it is important to study men bringing together both broader trends and understanding the everyday processes. Another strength of the journal has been the diverse editorial board and the inclusion of international masculinities. A global, comparative perspective in the understanding of masculinities is central in understanding men and masculinities today. Many trends we see are experienced in other countries, and the field will benefit from the inclusion of comparative analyses and inclusion of voices, including a more inter-sectional perspective.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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