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# MAXIMIZING BENEFITS AND MINIMIZING IMPACTS: DUAL-EARNER COUPLES' DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

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MAXIMIZING BENEFITS AND MINIMIZING IMPACTS:  
DUAL-EARNER COUPLES' DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the  
College of Agriculture, Food, and Environment  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Matthew W. Carlson

Lexington, Kentucky

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2013

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### MAXIMIZING BENEFITS AND MINIMIZING IMPACTS: DUAL-EARNER COUPLES' DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

Several socio-structural theoretical approaches attempt to explain the gendered division of household labor, but the dyadic process of dividing labor has gone largely unexplored. Therefore, a grounded theory approach was taken with 20 dual-earner married couples to uncover the process of dividing household labor between spouses. The theory that emerged indicated that couples seek to maximize benefits in their distribution of labor, and do so by dividing tasks according to personal preferences and proficiencies. When a household task goes unclaimed by both spouses' preferences and proficiencies, containment and outsourcing are the strategies employed to minimize the impact of the unclaimed task. The emergent theory can be used by researchers to illuminate the dyadic process of division of household labor in ways that other theories are not able. The theory can also be used by educators to prepare premarital couples for future division of household labor practices as well as by therapists who can identify problematic patterns within clients' division of household labor process.

**KEYWORDS:** Couples, Division of Labor, Household chores, Grounded theory, Qualitative

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December 4, 2013

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Researchers have consistently found that husbands and wives make unequal contributions to household labor. Some attribute this phenomenon to gender inequality within marriage, others describe the difference as a function of time and resources, and still others focus on the influence of culture, economics, and religion (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Shelton & John, 1996). Although numerous approaches have been taken to explain the gendered division of household labor, the process of dividing household labor at the dyadic level within a marriage is seldom considered and is therefore the focus of this study.

Simply defined, household labor is unpaid work completed by family or household members to keep a family and home operating efficiently (Shelton & John, 1996). Household labor has also been referred to as unpaid labor (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), unpaid work (Warren, Pascall, & Fox, 2010), household tasks (Antonides, 2011), household work (Doucet, 1995), housework (Penha-Lopes, 2006; Hook, 2010), division of labor within the household (Webber & Williams, 2008), division of household labor (Gager, 1998), family work (Almeida, Maggs, & Galambos, 1993), and domestic responsibilities (Doucet, 2001). Despite the rich diversity of terminology, there are no apparent or consistent differences to distinguish among these terms. Nonetheless, the terms *household labor* and *household task(s)* will be used throughout this paper to avoid ambiguity.

Household labor researchers have typically examined a common set of household tasks: cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the house, house and car maintenance, shopping, doing the laundry and ironing, paying bills, yard work, and transporting family members

(Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Batalova & Cohen, 2002; Blair & Lichter, 1991; Davis & Greenstein, 2013; Lincoln, 2008; Robinson & Godbey, 1997). Researchers and lay commentators alike often classify these tasks according to gender stereotypes; that is, according to which gender is typically assigned primary responsibility for the task (Kroska, 2004). Feminine household tasks usually are time-consuming, frequently reoccurring, occur inside the home, and are low-control tasks, meaning that they offer little schedule flexibility (e.g., cooking dinner; Blair & Lichter, 1991; Presser, 1994; Sanchez & Kane, 1996). Masculine tasks, in contrast, typically are occasional, occur outside the home, and are high-control tasks (e.g., lawn care; Barnett & Shen, 1997; Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Baxter, 1997; Tao, Janzen, & Abonyi, 2010). Some tasks, such as paying bills and transporting, have been labeled as “gender-neutral” (Coltrane, 2000, p. 1211) and are routinely completed by both men and women.

#### Measurement of Household Labor

The most common methods researchers have used for collecting information on household labor are survey questionnaires and time diaries (also called time-use diaries, Sullivan, 2013; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Survey questionnaires typically ask respondents to estimate or recall the amount of time spent doing household labor over a set period of time. One of the most widely used datasets including a set of household labor items, the National Survey of Family and Households (NSFH), asked participants how many hours they spent completing each of eight household tasks in a “normal” week (see Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). Time diaries, in which respondents routinely record how they are spending their time each day, have increasingly become the

“gold standard” (Sullivan, 2013, p. 73) for measuring household labor (see Bianchi et al., 2000; Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Craig & Mullen, 2011; Hook, 2006, 2010; Sayer, 2005; and Sayer & Fine, 2011 for examples). Although research reports utilizing survey data outnumber those using time diaries, the time diary approach appears to produce more reliable and valid data (Hook, 2010; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Sullivan, 2013).

### Who Does the Household Labor?

Over time and across cultures, research has consistently indicated that gender is the best predictor of time spent on household labor (Blood & Hamblin, 1958; Bianchi et al., 2000; Blair & Lichter, 1991; Davis & Greenstein, 2004; Fuwa, 2004; Fuwa & Cohen, 2007; Hook, 2006, 2010; Sayer & Fine, 2011; Stafford, Backman, & Dibona, 1977). That said, relative contributions to household labor between men and women in the United States have changed dramatically in recent decades; women have decreased their contribution to household labor while men have increased their contributions. Married women spent 700% more time on household labor than men did in 1965, compared to spending about 50% more time on household labor than men did in 2000 (Bianchi et al., 2000). However, division of labor remains gendered regardless of women’s employment status, race, and age (Sayer & Fine, 2011).

### Demographic Factors

Married women spend more time on household labor than cohabitating women, and married men spend less time on household labor than cohabitating men (Bianchi et

al., 2012; Davis, Greenstein, & Gerteisen Marks, 2007; Shelton & John, 1993).

However, married couples who cohabited together before marriage often have a more equal distribution of household labor than do couples who did not cohabit together prior to marriage, perhaps in part because those who cohabit prior to marriage tend to hold less traditional views of gender than those who do not cohabit prior to marriage (Batalova & Cohen, 2002).

Women perform more household labor than men regardless of race or ethnicity (Lincoln, 2008), but Sayer and Fine (2011) found that ethnic Asian and Hispanic couples in the United States were less egalitarian—that is, the couples reported a larger gap between partners' time spent on household labor—than White couples. They also found that Black couples were the most egalitarian group, but this was primarily because Black women spent less time on household labor than other women. In fact, White and Black men were found to make similar amounts of household labor contributions (but cf. Perry-Jenkins, Newkirk, & Ghunney, 2013); Asian men, however, spent less time on household tasks than their non-Asian counterparts.

Women who have more education tend to do less household labor than other women (Coltrane, 2000; Davis & Greenstein, 2004; Sullivan, 2013), but men who have more education tend to do more household labor than other men (Coltrane, 2000; Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; Sullivan, 2013). According to the relative resources perspective, education is seen as a resource that women can use to stave off the household labor (similar to monetary earnings), and women's education is also positively associated with egalitarianism within the couple relationship (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane,

1992; Mannino & Deutsche, 2007; Poortman & van der Lippe, 2009; Shelton & John, 1996).

Children increase the amount of household labor that needs to be completed (Killewald, 2011; Lincoln, 2008; Perry-Jenkins, Newkirk, & Gunney, 2013; Shelton & John, 1996), and this is especially true of young children (Poortman & van der Lippe, 2009). However, the increase in time spent on household labor when children are in the household is disproportionately greater for women than men (Davis & Greenstein, 2004; Pinto & Coltrane, 2008).

#### Paid Labor

The amount of time women spend on paid labor is a strong predictor of how much time they spend on household labor; women who do not engage in paid labor typically report spending about 50% more time doing household labor than women engaged in paid labor (Robinson & Godbey, 1997). Husbands tend to do more household labor when their wives are employed (Almedia et al., 1993; Blair & Licther, 1991; Erickson, 2005; Greenstein, 1996), although wives still do more than half of household tasks even when employed full-time (Lincoln, 2008) and even if their husbands are unemployed (Gough & Killewald, 2011). That said, higher-earning wives do fewer household tasks than lower-earning wives (Gupta, 2007). The tasks that higher-earning wives do not complete are sometimes taken on by their husbands, but may also be outsourced to hired help, substituted (e.g., eating at restaurants more often), or simply not attended to at all (Killewald, 2011).

## Chapter Two: Theory and Purpose of Study

### Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical perspectives have been used to understand research findings concerning the division of household labor. The four most common among the theoretical perspectives taken are the (a) relative resources perspective, (b) time availability perspective, (c) gender ideology perspective, and (d) macro-level perspective (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Each of these theoretical perspectives provides a unique insight that aids in understanding the division of household labor.

The relative resources perspective (also called resource dependence theory; see Braun, Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Baumgartner, 2008) states that resources external to the relationship (e.g., social status, educational attainment, income, etc.) affect the power balance within the relationship (Mannino & Deutsch, 2007). Because household labor is generally viewed as undesirable (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), the relative resources perspective posits that individuals with resources external to the relationship can opt out of unpaid household labor, and those without external resources are tasked with providing the labor themselves.

The time availability perspective purports that the spouse with more discretionary time does more household labor (Gager & Yabiku, 2010). Although valued time commitments beyond paid employment may be factored in as well, the availability perspective generally implies that the spouse who works fewer hours in the paid labor market will spend more time on household tasks.

The gender ideology perspective views gender roles as the primary determinant of the division of household labor. According to the gender ideology perspective, attitudes

toward gender roles range from traditional to egalitarian. Traditional couples assign feminine tasks to wives and masculine tasks to husbands, which results in wives doing more time-consuming and frequently-reoccurring tasks (e.g., cooking) than their husbands. Couples who hold more egalitarian attitudes tend to have a more balanced division of household labor (Davis, Greenstein, & Gerteisen Marks, 2007).

The macro-level perspective, a relatively new theory, focuses on how the overarching societal context—political, economic, climatic, philosophical, and religious circumstances—affects couples’ distribution of labor (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). This perspective is useful for explaining some cultural variations in how couples tend to organize their relative paid and unpaid labor contributions.

These theories do well to explain the larger social structures and influences that guide division of household labor, but they do not explain the dyadic processes that occur between spouses as they attempt to negotiate their own division of household labor. This gap is best addressed by an experience-informed approach to theory production.

### Experiences and Essences of Household Labor

The division of household labor has been extensively studied and theorized, but much remains to be answered; particularly, research questions that require a qualitative approach (Davis, 2010; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Most qualitative studies on household labor have focused on specific types of tasks (e.g., food preparation; see Brown & Miller, 2002), special contexts (e.g., job loss; see Legerski & Cornwall, 2010), particular aspects of the decision-making process for couples (e.g., assertiveness, see Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; communication practices, see Alberts, Tracy, & Trethewey,

2011), or specific ethnic minorities (e.g., Black men; see Penha-Lopes, 2006) or marginalized groups (e.g., low-income mothers in the United Kingdom; see Warren, Pascall, & Fox, 2010). Other studies have examined the division of household labor process somewhat tangentially. Risman and Johnson-Sumerford (1998) identified four groups of “postgender” couples who disregard gender in their division of household labor: (a) dual-earner professionals who value both their careers and equal parenting, (b) both spouses value family life far above career aspirations, (c) intentional transition to an egalitarian arrangement following dissatisfaction with a traditional division of household labor, and (d) situational circumstances such as illness. Consistent with the contextual intentionality of postgender couples, a study of Dutch couples found that those with a traditional division of labor often used implicit decision-making strategies (e.g., silent agreements, automatic assumptions) and couples with an egalitarian division of labor often used explicit decision-making strategies (e.g., planning, making agreements, engaging in disagreements) when dividing household labor (Wiesmann, Boeije, van Doorne-Huiskes, & den Dulk, 2008).

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to generate a grounded theory of the dyadic process of division of household labor for married couples. Although the previously discussed mid-range theories do well to unpack large-scale trends in division of labor, none of them explain the process that actually occurs between spouses. The overarching research question of the current study is: How do married couples divide household labor? This main research question is composed of three sub-questions:

- How do married couples determine how much each partner will engage in household labor?
- How do married couples determine which chores each partner completes?
- What is the underlying process that produces this division of household labor?

## Chapter Three: Method

The grounded theory approach to research is used to develop substantive theories grounded in rich descriptions of experiences. Because the theory is developed a posteriori—that is, after data are collected and analyzed—the grounded theory approach can inform and improve current knowledge by mapping a process or phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This approach is ideal for the current study given the absence of a theory of division of household labor that is grounded in experience.

### Recruitment Procedures

Inclusion criteria required that participants be married, heterosexual couples who (a) shared a residence in common and with at least one biological child under the age of 18, and (b) were both employed at least 35 hours per week outside the home in wage-earning jobs. Dual-earner couples with dependent minor children were ideal participants for two reasons. First, both members of the couple are pressed to accomplish necessary household labor while maintaining employment, thus fostering a division of household labor that is more intentional (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). Second, if both husband and wife work outside the home, any gender inequalities that exist in the relationship are magnified and more likely to be discussed by the couple (Gager, 1998). The underlying presumption was that couples who have had to be intentional and explicitly discuss the division of household labor would be more likely than their counterparts to provide rich data.

Convenience and snowball sampling procedures were used to recruit staff employed at a large Southern land-grant university. A recruitment message describing

the study and inclusion criteria was sent to staff email addresses until the data reached saturation—that is, the point where no new information is being gleaned from interviews (Creswell, 2007). At that point, 20 couples had completed the interview. The majority of the sample was White, 30 to 40 years of age, lower to middle class, and lived in an urban area. Couples length of marriage ranged from 2 to 21 years ( $M = 9.6$  years). The most common occupations were clerical or support staff and medical nurse, although a wide range of professions were represented. Most professions represented did not require more than a bachelor's degree.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the sole form of data collection (see Appendix A for interview protocol). Previous qualitative researchers of household labor have interviewed both husband and wife simultaneously (e.g., Brown & Miller, 2002), husbands and wives separately (e.g., Gager, 1998), a combination of simultaneous and separate (e.g., Doucet, 2001, Primeau, 2000, Legerski & Cornwall, 2010), or only interviewed one member of the couple (typically the wife; e.g., Warren, Pascal, & Fox, 2010; Webber & Williams, 2007; Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; but cf. Penha-Lopes, 2006). Aside from research questions that only require interviews with one spouse (e.g., Penha-Lopes, 2006), few published studies have given or implied a rationale for the chosen interview arrangement. For the current study, husbands and wives were interviewed separately and together, which allowed for triangulation of the data and provided a richer description of the dyadic process than could otherwise be obtained. Also, individuals have their own perspectives and those individual perspectives may be suppressed or

altered when a counter-perspective is present (Matthews, 2005). Conversely, the division of household labor is a relational issue so observing the dyadic process and narrative provides a perspective that cannot be assessed by simply merging the individual perspectives of spouses.

Twelve interviews were conducted via an internet video chat using Skype<sup>®</sup>, which resembled a face-to-face interview in that nonverbal communication was possible (Hanna, 2012). Eight interviews were conducted over the telephone with couples who were not Skype<sup>®</sup> users; semi-structured telephone interviews illicit detailed information from respondents similar to, and sometimes even superior to, face-to-face interviews (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Participants were interviewed for 20-30 minutes as a couple, then the couple was asked to separate to ensure privacy for answering questions and individual interviews were completed one after the other for 10-15 minutes each, and the couple was then reunited and a few follow-up questions were asked for 5-10 minutes. Participants were asked to describe experiences, stories, and examples concerning the division of paid and household labor in their marriages to elicit information about the process (Matthews, 2005). As themes emerged from the data, interview questions were adjusted prior to subsequent interviews to focus on specific subcategories or to capture broader dimensions as needed to fully saturate all aspects of the data (see Appendix A). Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed for analysis, pseudonyms were assigned to participants in order to maintain confidentiality, and memos were written throughout the interviewing and coding processes to provide memory prompts as the substantive theory emerged (see Appendix B; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After the

interview, participants were paid \$30 compensation for their time and were invited to review the research findings at a later date (i.e., member checking).

### Data Analysis Procedures

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously in an iterative process to illuminate and grow the evolving theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); transcription and the initial stage of coding occurred as recruitment and data collection with subsequent participants continued. The coding process followed Corbin and Strauss' method, which is comprised of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the process through which concepts are discovered within the data. According to Corbin and Strauss, concepts are “labeled phenomenon” (p, 103); principally, any item in the data that the researcher sees as valuable or essential. Axial coding—the process of relating those concepts into categories and subcategories for the purpose of understanding the phenomenon in question—followed open coding. In axial coding, relationships are formed between categories by asking “why or how come, where, when, how, and with what results” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 127) while examining the open codes and raw data. The third and final coding stage was selective coding, wherein related categories are synthesized to form an overarching thematic structure drawn from the data (i.e., the grounded theory or central category). Essentially, the researcher identifies the overall process that explains the main categories of concepts (e.g., a researcher studying a classroom may uncover categories such as *discipline*, *encouragement*, *teaching*, and *editing*, and subsequently determine that *education of youth* is the process that encompasses those categories). Thus, a central category thought

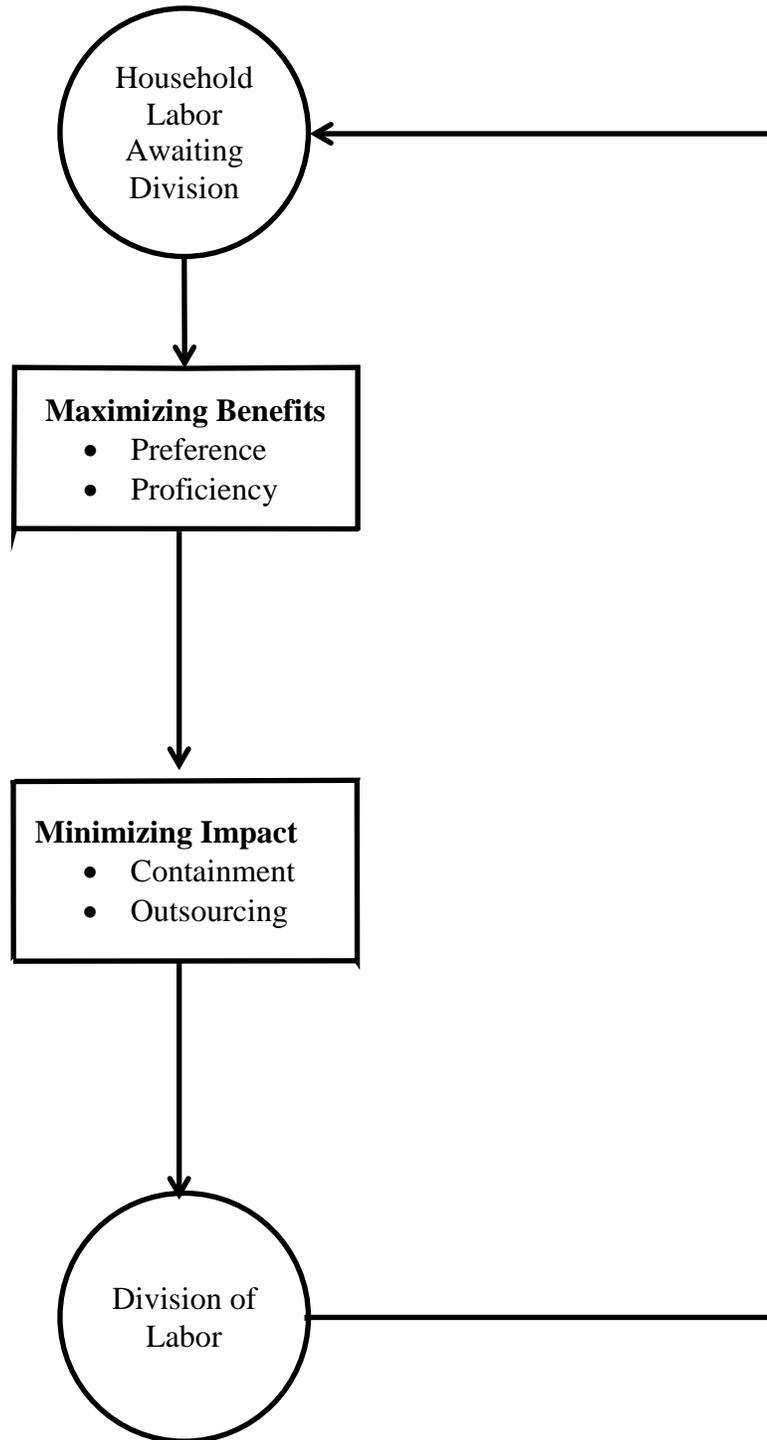
to explain the data was identified and a model was created to describe the relationships within and surrounding that central category.

In order to achieve a high level of trustworthiness, four validation methods were employed: clarification of researcher bias, triangulation, external review, and member checking. Clarification of bias is an introspective process, in which I examined my own biases on the division of household labor before any data were collected (see Appendix C). Triangulation is the use of multiple data sources, theories, or researchers to create numerous vantage points throughout the research process (Creswell, 2007), and was incorporated by conducting interviews with each spouse independently as well as with the couple together. An external review is when an outside party (typically another researcher) examines the links between the data and the findings to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. For this paper, I gave the data and the findings to another qualitative researcher who confirmed the links between the two. Member checking is the incorporation of participants in the analysis process. For the current study, participants were invited to read the written results and provide feedback, which was then incorporated as needed to ensure that I had properly understood both the phenomenon being studied and the views of the participants.

## Chapter Four: Results

The central category—that is, the process around which the other the concepts revolve (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)—that emerged from the data was *maximizing benefits and minimizing impacts*. In short, couples first attempted to divide household labor in ways that they perceived as being the most beneficial for them as a couple. When issues arose with a particular task or arrangement, or with the division of labor more generally, they made adjustments intended to minimize the negative impact of those issues. The primary considerations for *maximizing benefits* were *preference* and *proficiency*, and the primary solutions for *minimizing impacts* were *containment* and *outsourcing* (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. The emergent theory of the process of division of household labor in dual-earner couples.



## Maximizing Benefits

Maximizing benefits was the first stage in the process of dividing household labor. Respondents did the chores that they enjoyed (preference) to achieve a better experience or that they did particularly well (proficiency) to attain a higher-quality or more efficient outcome.

*Preference.* The importance of preferences in the division of labor was conveyed in all 20 interviews, and one couple even reported that a premarital education program they had attended encouraged this approach. The primary perceived benefit of dividing household labor according to preferences was that the partner assigned any particular chore would have a better experience doing that chore than would the other partner, which in turn would enhance the couple's net satisfaction with household labor. As Connor stated, "We try to focus on things we enjoy and [therefore] it doesn't seem so much like a chore." In some cases the preferred chore was described in a way that resembled a hobby and would likely still be done even if it was somehow made unnecessary, such as in Hank's case with maintaining the lawn: "I enjoy to do it. It just kind of is a break from school and work and it is kind of something I can get lost in." Most, however, did not think of their preferred household chores as hobbies; they simply perceived their preferred chores to be less burdensome than other chores, like Jodi's preference for cleaning the toilets: "I hate washing dishes by hand . . . I would clean toilets gladly before I do that."

Regardless of one's rationale for preferring particular chores, "everybody has things they don't mind doing and things they just despise doing" (Daniel) and many respondents indicated that each partner doing his and her preferred chores is an ideal

approach to the dividing household labor between spouses. Indeed, several respondents noted that they had adopted chore specialization based on complimentary likes or dislikes. Alvin, for example, said that his wife “doesn’t like cleaning the bathtub, so I’m like, ‘Okay, I don’t like cleaning the sink, I reckon, so I will clean the bathtub, you do the sink.’” Similarly, Ray said he liked cooking but not cleaning the kitchen, so he did all the cooking and his wife did much of the kitchen cleanup afterward. Daniel also spoke of a similar compromise with his wife, Lila, concerning complimentary dislikes: Daniel did not like cleaning bathrooms and Lila did not enjoy cleaning kitchens. “So [I said], ‘If you wanna do the bathrooms, I will do the kitchen,’ but the rest of it didn’t matter. We share [everything else]” (Daniel). Although preferences were always present, they were not always complementary. Sometimes one spouse reported acquiring a chore because he or she was indifferent to it while his or her spouse disliked it. This was the case with Zoe and Alvin. Zoe made it clear that she disliked cleaning the bathtub, and Alvin’s response was “I don’t [mind, so] . . . I’ll do it.”

Although personal preference was an ever-present guiding factor in the division of household labor, exceptions and variations did occur. Occasionally, a spouse would complete a chore that did not fit his or her preference. Alvin provided a simple example when he said he preferred not to fold towels but would complete the task if it needed to be done. Also, preference was not necessarily a stagnant quality; for some it changed over time. Cathy reported a cyclical pattern of like and dislike: “We go through phases where Denis will cook more or I will cook more; I guess it’s whoever is more tired or has time, because you go through phases where you wanna cook and then [other phases where you wanna] lean back.”

*Proficiency.* Although less common than preferences, most respondents also reported dividing up household labor according to proficiency, or task mastery. As Alan pointed out, “When it comes to division of labor, I kind of view it playing to your strengths.” The benefit received of dividing household labor according to task proficiency was that the chore would be completed either more efficiently (e.g., quicker, with less energy, etc.) or to a higher degree of quality. Jodi reported that she was “able to stack more dishes in a dishwasher” than her husband, Robert, and that Robert was “awesome at doing floors, so that’s all him.” Partners reported actively seeking out chores at which they were particularly proficient, such as in Alan’s example. Alan knew his wife was capable to doing laundry, but to Alan laundry was “one of those things where I’m like, ‘I can do that . . . quickly [and] efficiently.’”

Alternatively, those lacking proficiency often avoided certain tasks or were guided elsewhere by their partners due to poor performance. Hank’s lack of proficiency with folding laundry was relayed in both he and his wife’s individual interviews. During Hank’s individual portion of the interview, he stated, “I am definitely secondary on laundry. Amy is primary, just primarily because I can’t fold worth a crap. My idea of folding is a ball.” Later, during his wife Amy’s individual portion of the interview (not having heard Hank’s comment), Amy stated, “Hank does laundry, but he cannot fold. He is not good at hanging it up. He is good at putting it in the washer and dryer.”

Heidi described a similar situation with her husband, Mack, who repeatedly attempted the laundry, but in doing so created work than he completed. “He was hurting more than he was helping because I would find clean laundry all over the house” (Heidi). Consequently, Heidi said that she began steering Mack away from future attempts at

doing laundry. Sometimes, the lack of proficiency (and occasionally the resulting task-banishment) was mutual. In Tammy's case, "[Jacob] tried to teach me how to mow lawn the right way, but it just never catches on." Conversely, Tammy indicated that Jacob was particularly ineffective at cleaning the bathroom: "I go in [the bathroom after he cleans and] there's still toothpaste on the faucet. I'm just like, 'I'll just do it from now on.'" Many partners reported that some aspects of their division of labor resulted from one partner's lack of proficiency, rather than the other partner's superior or even adequate proficiency.

Although lack of proficiency often led to chore acquisition by the more proficient partner, some couples found a way to mediate the effects of each other's weaknesses. Tammy and Jacob portrayed this with some childcare strategies. At night, Tammy would organize their children's clothing for the next day due to her proficiency at picking out suitable outfits for their daughters. In the morning, Jacob would assist the girls in putting on the outfits Tammy had pick out, largely due to his proficiency at simultaneously readying himself and their daughters for the day early in the morning.

### Minimizing Impacts

Sometimes, neither preference nor proficiency were sufficient for assigning responsibility for a household task. When this occurred, couples resorted to either sharing the task to minimize the negative experience (containment) or to finding an alternative or indirect method of completing the task (outsourcing).

*Containment.* When couples could not reach an agreement on a particular household task, or set of tasks, according to preference or proficiency, they attempted to

minimize the negative impacts of a task (e.g., time lost, ungratifying experience, etc.) while still containing the task within the couple's division of household labor (i.e., not outsourcing the task elsewhere). Two containment strategies were alternating responsibility and task bartering. Through alternating responsibility (i.e., "taking turns"), couples were able to prevent burnout from the task and minimize the negative impact experienced by each partner. As Jacob put it, "We try to kind of take turns because we both hate to wash dishes even though it's just loading the dishwasher." Ray provided a similar example about cleaning the shower: "It's almost as if we naturally take turns with that one, mostly out of the fact that one of us gets fed up with it."

The other form of containment was task bartering. One partner would request that his or her spouse complete an unclaimed task and in return promised completion of another task or set of tasks. Gina said that both she and her husband, Leo, bartered tasks with each other: "He'll be like, 'I really don't want to do the dishes,' and I'm like, 'Fine, I'll do the dishes [if] you do this for me.' So, we do that back and forth." Occasionally, the partner initiating the barter will offer or request a favor unrelated to household labor in exchange for completion of a task. Bree said that she traded sexual favors with her husband, Gus, for not having to do tasks she distained. Likewise, Brooke would complete extra tasks for the promise of a "foot or back massage."

*Outsourcing.* When couples could not divide labor through preferences or proficiencies nor contain the tasks between themselves, they rid themselves of the task entirely via outsourcing. Couples outsourced tasks in multiple ways, such as buying marketplace alternatives (e.g., eating out instead of cooking a meal) or shifting responsibility for the task to a third party (e.g., a maid, their children). In Ryan's

example of outsourcing, it started with a common lack of preference: “We hated doing dishes.” Specifically, Ryan and Sandra disliked doing the dishes by hand. Their home did not have a dishwasher, nor did it have space for a built-in dishwasher. Once they were no longer willing to contain the chore, they “ended up buying a portable [dishwasher]” (Sandra). Cathy also explained the use of marketplace alternatives with cooking. When she did not want to cook after a day at work, she would “pick up food on the way home.” Sandra provided an example of making someone else responsible for leftover tasks: “I don’t mind folding laundry, but I hate putting it away [so] I make my kids put their own clothes away.”

## Chapter Five: Discussion

The current study found couples first divided up household labor with respect to their individual preferences and proficiencies, thereby maximizing any benefits (e.g., enjoyable experience, better final product) that could be attained from a specified division of labor. Then couples attempted to minimize any negative impacts associated with the remaining tasks (e.g., unenjoyable experience, time demands) by utilizing both containment and outsourcing strategies.

Two additional aspects of the model presented in Figure 4.1 could perhaps be intuited from the results section but were not explicitly stated. First, the division of labor is not a static structure; rather, it is a process that is negotiated throughout the marital life course, sometimes even on a day-to-day or hour-to-hour basis (Pittman, Solheim, & Blanchard, 1996). The grounded theory presented here should not be interpreted as a one-time event; it is an ongoing and recurring process; hence, the cyclical nature of the model. Second, the process of dividing household labor is not necessarily accomplished with explicit verbal communication. Although some couples reported having “sit-down” discussions about household chores or filling out “chore charts,” other couples indicated that they rarely talked about household chores, which is consistent with previous findings about couples’ communication practices over household tasks (Wiesmann et al., 2008). Thus, the process depicted in the model should not be assumed to occur explicitly or strictly verbally.

The grounded theory that emerged from these data complements the time availability, relative resources, and gender ideology perspectives. More importantly, however, it describes a process that those perspectives miss by explaining the dyadic

division of household labor. For example, the relative resources and the time availability perspectives predicts that when a physician who works 60 hours per week marries a school teacher who works 35 hours a week, they will have an uneven division of household labor. The division will likely be such that the physician will do fewer household tasks than the school teacher, based on external resources (e.g., job prestige, income) and available time. These models explain why the overall division of labor will be divided unevenly, but they do not explain the decision-making process (i.e., how the couple divides tasks within that uneven distribution) or what they will decide concerning who is responsible for each task. Thus, the model presented in this paper provides insights that are not possible with the relative resources and time availability perspectives.

The gender ideology perspective posits that the husband will be responsible for traditional masculine tasks (e.g., car repairs, lawn maintenance) and the wife will be responsible for traditional feminine tasks (e.g., food preparation, house cleaning). Gender may be inextricably tied to preference and proficiency; perhaps individuals prefer particular chores simply because those preferred chores fulfill their conceptions of what a man or women ought to do, and that alone makes the task satisfying (or less burdensome). Likewise, individuals may be more proficient at certain household tasks because their parents socialized them to those specific, gendered tasks. While the focus on gender is helpful, the gender ideology perspective is only useful to the extent that traditional gender roles hold sway over couples. Several men (Gus, Ray, and Robert) reported enjoying and being primarily responsible for cooking meals (not just “grilling out” occasionally), which the gender ideology perspective does not explain but the

preferences component of the model presented here does explain. Thus, the model proposed in this paper appears to be more robust in explaining the division of household labor, even if gender role socialization plays a role in shaping those preferences.

An unanticipated theoretical connection was the similarity of the emergent theory to rational choice theory, which purports that humans are capable of making choices and that humans seek to maximize utility regardless of circumstances (Lovett, 2006). In choosing either preference or proficiency, couples maximize the utility of the household labor experience by choosing tasks that they enjoy doing (or dislike less than alternative tasks), or they maximize either their time or the final product by dividing tasks according to proficiency. Likewise, couples' attempts to block or reduce the negative impacts of chores they do not prefer or are not particularly proficient at by containing or outsourcing those tasks also can be seen as attempts to maximize their time or experience.

### Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the lack of clarity concerning the extent to which these findings and the emergent theory are transferrable to other populations. The sample was intentionally homogenous on several key factors to make theory development cleaner, and the findings may therefore only be applicable to White, married, lower to middle-class, dual-earner couples with children. Future studies should attempt to replicate this process model for the division of household labor with other subgroups, such as single-earner couples, cohabiting couples, same-sex couples, and racial minority couples.

## Implications

These findings have implications to family researchers, educators, and practitioners. For researchers, the grounded theory that emerged from these data serves as a reminder that simply knowing and explaining the division of household labor at an aggregate level is insufficient for understanding processes that occur at the dyadic level. Educators can use this theory to frame the process of dividing household labor for their audiences; perhaps the most obvious application is in premarital education classes, where many couples will soon be navigating the process of dividing household labor for the first time. Though the sample was not made up of self-proclaimed experts in division of household labor, the proposed model will likely be beneficial to couples entering into marriage as guidelines for establishing an efficient and agreeable division of household labor. Practitioners working with married couples may use this division of labor process to identify problematic patterns in the process or to suggest solutions. For example, one spouse doing only the chores he or she likes and leaving all the undesirable tasks for the spouse may signify an underlying problem for the couple. Alternatively, a practitioner may recognize that a couple in conflict over household labor may not be fully considering containment or outsourcing options. By describing and facilitating the implementation of a new division of household labor, a practitioner may be able to identify whether the division of labor was problematic or merely a symptom of an underlying issue.

## Conclusion

Existing theories have explained aggregate-level trends in the division of household labor by focusing on resources, time, gender, and culture. However, the

process that occurs between spouses as they negotiate household labor has largely gone unexamined. The model proposed in this paper provides a theoretical framework for understanding that process, and in doing so complements existing theories and further extends our ability to understand the division of household labor.

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I will confirm that the couple being interviewed meets the inclusion criteria:

- Married, heterosexual couples
- Sharing a residence in common and with each other and with at least one biological child under the age of 18
- Both employed full-time outside the home in wage-earning jobs

Next, I will explain confidentiality, introduce myself as the main researcher, and explain the purpose of the study. Lastly, I will remind them of the interview format and decide the order.

### Interview Details

Interview #:

Date:

Time:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewees

- Husband:
- Wife:

Interview format

- First Individual Interview:
- Second Individual Interview:
- First Follow-Up Individual Interview:
- Second Follow-Up Individual Interview:

### Individual Interview Questions

1. What does “division of household labor” mean to you?
2. Who does which chores in your house?
3. How did you and your spouse decide who does which chores?
4. How do you and your spouse differ on your views of who should do what around the house?

### Couple Interview Questions

1. If no one wants to do \_\_\_\_\_ (example chore), how do you both come to an agreement on who does \_\_\_\_\_?
2. Tell me a story of when you two had an argument or discussion about household chores or continue an argument or discussion about household chores that never was resolved.
3. When discussing household chores, do you two have an ultimate goal in mind? In other words, that are you working towards?
4. You’ve already told me that both you and your spouse have wage-earning jobs. How do you balance your jobs with the household chores?
5. I’m going to give you a new household chore and you both have to decide right now how it will get done (possible ideas: taking care of new pet, assembling items for a yard sale, etc.). Feel free to take as long as you want to discuss this.

### Follow-Up Individual Interview Questions

1. What came up in this interview that surprised you or was new information to you?
2. Looking back at what we’ve all talked about, please describe the “story” of how you and your spouse generally decide who does what around the house.

### Probes

Please explain that further.

And how did that impact you?

What else would you like to add?

What do you mean by that?

## Addition Questions Added For Theoretical Saturation

### Individual Interview Questions

- Tell me little bit how you think the ideal couple negotiates/divides up household chores.
- What makes household chores so easy/hard/in-the-middle for you two?
- If you and your spouse were to have a disagreement about something related to household chores, how would you resolve it?
- When you think about the work you get paid to do and the work you do around the house, what keeps you going? What drives you?
- Why do you think you like to do chore X but not chore Y?
- Pros/cons about the way things are?

### Couple Interview Questions

- When you started living together, how did you divide up the chores? What was the process like?
- Do your children have any chores? (If so...) Can you tell me about that?
- How much time do you both spend talking about the chores around the house? What do you typically talk about? If you were watching yourself talking about it, what would you see?

## Appendix B: Coding

### Coding Memo #1

After reading transcripts 1-5

These are my potential codes, some of them placed into tentative categories.

Childhood Experiences  
Personal Preference  
It Simply Must Get Done  
Previous Mistakes

#### Doing Chores

Chores Piling Up  
Saturday Overhaul  
Importance of Communication  
Working Together  
Flexibility  
Bartering  
Standards  
Specialization  
Argument

#### Gender

I'm a Dad, So...

Creating Tension  
Altering Expectations  
Personality Differences  
Unspoken Chore Acquisition  
Transition to Living Together

#### Childcare

Age of Children

#### Categorical Division of Household Labor

Outside vs. Inside Chores  
Traditional Gender Divide  
Organizer vs. Implementer

## Coding Memo #2

These are my open codes after coding the first five interviews.

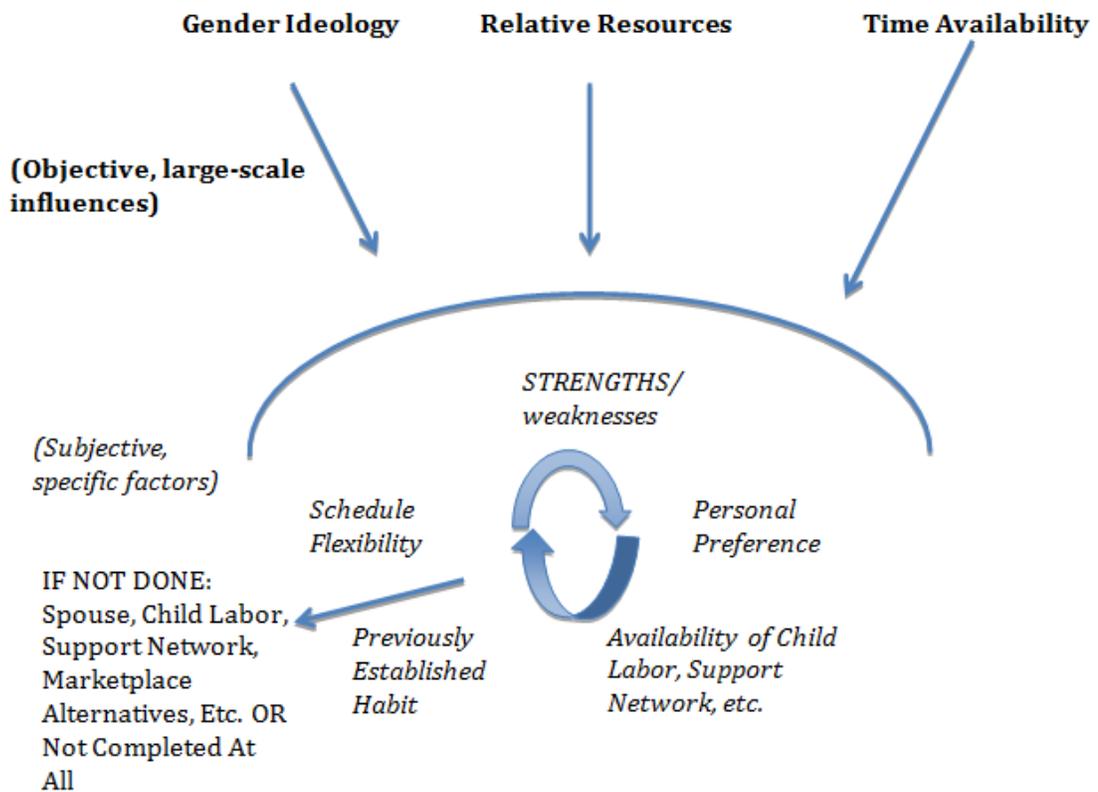
Balance  
Boundaries  
Establishing Identity  
Generation  
Ideals  
New Experience  
Organizer and Doer  
Purpose  
Relationship Dynamics  
Argument  
Bartering  
Compromise  
Taking Responsibility  
Flexible Work Schedule  
Flexible Work Environment  
Teamwork  
Just Do It  
Support Network  
Not Finishing  
Weekend Overhaul  
Communication  
High Efficiency  
Just in Time  
Planning  
How Kids Change Chores  
Developed Flow  
Unspoken Chore Acquisition  
Shared Chores  
Specialization  
Personal Preference  
Strengths and Weaknesses  
Gender Dynamics  
Childcare  
Maintaining Standards  
Habits  
Buying Marketplace Alternatives  
Roles  
Child Labor  
Previous Mistakes  
Previous Living Experiences  
Parents as Role Models

Theoretical Memo #1

The large scale, quantitatively inclined theories (i.e., time availability, relative resources, and gender ideology) seem to appear in the data that I have collected thus far. Individuals make choices based on who has the time (*I did more around the house when he was working overtime*) and gender ideology (*well, I'm the man so I do the yard work*), though relative resources has not made its presence known to me as of yet – perhaps it is too subconscious of a process to appear in direct dialogue or it is simply not relevant for dual-earner couples.

Here is a model of how I see the process of dividing up household labor thus far.

Figure B.1, Theoretical Memo #1



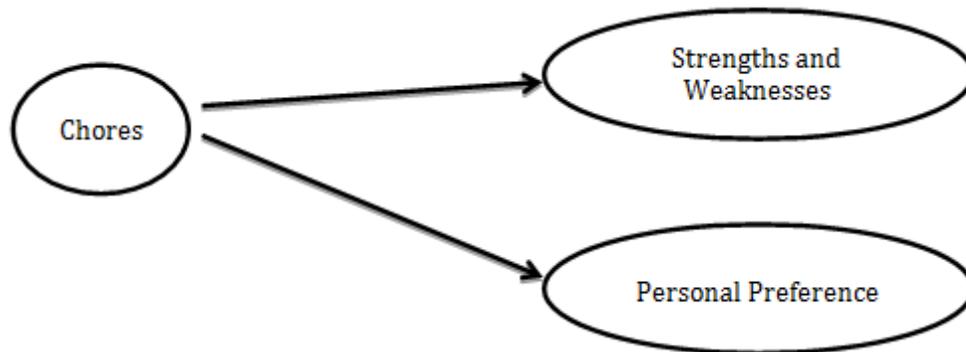
## Theoretical Memo #2

The three big theories of division of labor explain how the *hours* or *percentage* of labor is divided, but they don't explain how the individual chores are divvied up. That is where *personal preference, strengths and weaknesses* and other concepts come into play. These fit within the bigger picture of division of labor.

### Theoretical Memo #3

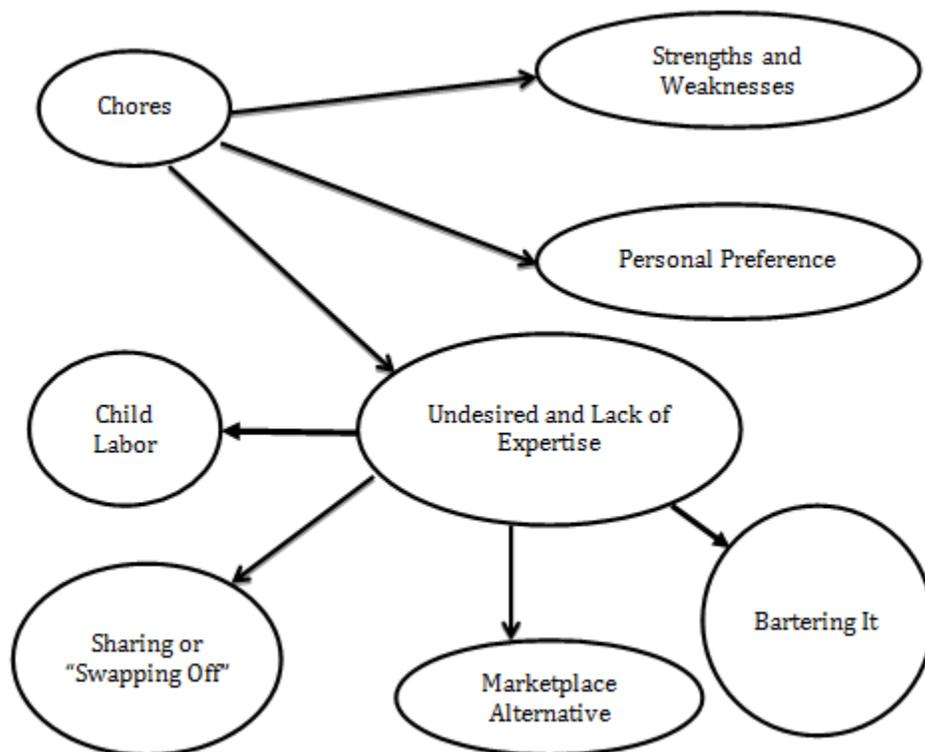
After some axial coding, I'm taking it for granted that the following diagram is correct.

Figure B.2, Theoretical Memo #3 – Axial Coding



But what if the chore is undesired by both and neither is more efficient at it than the other? My intuition leads me to believe that the following diagram is the explanation.

Figure B.3, Theoretical Memo #3 - Explanation



## Theoretical Memo #4

I think there is some equivocation that I'm going to have to deal with. Division of household labor can first be seen as referring to A) time spent and B) chores completed. Next, the process of division of labor can be seen as referring to A) what chores do I complete or B) what is my role in the home and is intimately linked in the active and passive decision-making processes of the couple.

--

### Possible Central Category Titles

Division of Household Labor: "Finding the (process?)"

"Doing what you like and playing it to strengths"

"It's what we like or what we can do better"

"Playing Tetris"

"The things that don't bother you as bad"

"I am more of the cook, but I enjoy that."

"It goes back to strengths and weaknesses."

Puzzle-piece metaphor – finding the best way to arrange the puzzle.

## Theoretical Memo #5

Though I like the central category of *Creating Paths Through Benefits*, I think that a more fitting one is *Minimizing the Impact*. Minimizing the Impact includes things such as Marketplace Alternatives and Outsourcing to Children – thus, it would explain more of the data without an “exceptions” category.

Some of the distinction between the two options of a central category appears to be a matter of perspective (e.g., is the glass half empty or full?). Thus, is household labor a negative or positive thing? I would think that it is neither.

--

Perhaps we should incorporate both – *Maximizing benefits and minimizing impacts*. Couples divide up labor because they can get something positive from a specific arrangement or because they can avoid a negative consequence. This appears to account for all of the data.

## Appendix C: Clarification of Researcher Bias

The main factor that influences my view of household labor is gender role. In my household growing up, my father went to work and my mother was a housewife – though she had part-time jobs from time to time. In my youth, I internalized this traditional view of gender roles until my years in undergraduate college study, when many views were challenged. I began to view the division of paid and unpaid labor as a method of oppressing women and femininity. I became influenced by second-wave feminism, which purports that women deserve the right to an equal workplace and freedom from unpaid labor.

However, as my education continued, my ideas kept developing. Conversations with women making real-life choices about career and family showed me that the paid/unpaid labor dynamic was more complex than second-wave feminism had purported. If a woman valued housekeeping and raising a family, then why should she be refused the feminist dignity that was being given to women to were entering the marketplace? I found it hard to believe that someone would choose that lifestyle over a career, though through reading more about third-wave feminism (which emphasizes the value of intentional motherhood more so than second-wave) my conception of division of labor and gender roles adapted to these views. I began to see that second-wave feminism had disenfranchised a significant amount of women that genuinely wanted to be housewives and mothers, and had rewarded women that were pursuing traditionally masculine goals.

Thus, my conception of gender roles has fluctuated largely over the past few years, starting from traditional and moving to anti-traditional and then resting somewhere

in egalitarianism. My view now is that men and women have the right and the faculties to create their conception of gender through gender roles, and I think feminism (both second- and third-wave) has played a significant part in making that possible.

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### PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

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Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, 2011-2013  
Clinic Coordinator, 2011-2012

University of Kentucky, Department of Family Sciences  
Graduate Assistant, 2012

Shelby County High School  
Psychology Guest Lecturer, 2012

Cornerstone Campus Ministries  
Bible Study Instructor, 2008-2012

LightForce International Ministries, Inc.  
Internship Abroad – San Jose, Costa Rica, 2011

### SCHOLASTIC AND PROFESSIONAL HONORS

Student Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, President, 2012  
Family Science Undergraduate Student Excellence Award, 2011  
Cornerstone Campus Ministries, President, 2010-2012  
Governor's Scholars Program and Full-Tuition Scholarship, 2007-2011

### PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS

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