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Household Labor and the Routine Production of Gender*

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This paper explores how twenty dual-earner couples with school-aged children talk about sharing child care and housework. In about half of the families, fathers are described as performing many tasks traditionally performed by mothers, but remaining in a helper role. In the other families, fathers are described as assuming equal responsibility for domestic chores. With reference to the parents' accounts of the planning, allocation, and performance of household labor, I investigate the social conditions and interactional processes that facilitate equal sharing. I describe how the routine practice of sharing child care and an ongoing marital conversation socialize the parents and help them to construct an image of the father as a competent care giver. Drawing on West and Zimmerman's (1987) formulation of "doing gender," I suggest that household labor provides the opportunity for expressing, confirming and sometimes transforming the meaning of gender.

Motherhood is often perceived as the quintessence of womanhood. The everyday tasks of mothering are taken to be "natural" expressions of femininity, and the routine care of home and children are seen to provide opportunities for women to express and reaffirm their gendered relation to men and to the world. The traditional tasks of fatherhood, in contrast, are limited to begetting, protecting, and providing for children. While fathers typically derive a gendered sense of self from these activities, their masculinity is even more dependent on *not* doing the things that mothers do. What happens, then, when fathers share with mothers those tasks that we define as expressing the true nature of womanhood?

This paper describes how a sample of twenty dual-earner couples talk about sharing housework and child care. Since marriage is one of the least scripted (Goffman 1959) or most undefined (Blumer 1962) interaction situations, the marital conversation (Berger and Kellner 1964) is particularly important to a couple's shared sense of reality. I investigate these parents' construction of gender by examining their talk about negotiations over who does what around the house; how these divisions of labor influence their perceptions of self and other; how they conceive of gender-appropriate behavior; and how they handle inconsistencies between their own views and those of the people around them. Drawing on the parents' accounts of the planning, allocation, and performance of child care and housework, I illustrate how gender is produced through everyday practices and how adults are socialized by routine activity.

Gender as an Accomplishment

West and Zimmerman (1987:126) suggest that gender is a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment. "Doing gender" involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures." Rather than viewing gender as a property of individuals, West and Zimmerman conceive of it as an emergent feature of social situations that results from and

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legitimizes gender inequality. Similarly, Fenstermaker Berk (1985:204, emphasis in original) suggests that housework and child care

can become the occasion for producing commodities (e.g., clean children, clean laundry, and new light switches) and a reaffirmation of one's *gendered* relation to the work and to the world. In short, the "shoulds" of gender ideals are fused with the "musts" of efficient household production. The result may be something resembling a "gendered" household-production function.

If appropriately doing gender serves to sustain and legitimate existing gender relations, would inappropriate gender activity challenge that legitimacy? Or, as West and Zimmerman (1987:146) suggest, when people fail to do gender appropriately, are their individual characters, motives, and predispositions called into question? If doing gender is unavoidable and people are held accountable for its production, how might people initiate and sustain atypical gender behaviors?

By investigating how couples share child care and housework, I explore (1) the sorts of dyadic and group interactions that facilitate the sharing of household labor; (2) how couples describe the requirements of parenting and how they evaluate men's developing capacities for nurturing; and (3) the impact of sharing domestic labor on conceptions of gender.

The Sample

To find couples who shared child care, I initially contacted schools and day care centers in several suburban California communities. Using snowball sampling techniques (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), I selected twenty moderate to middle-income dual-earner couples with children. To compensate for gaps in the existing literature and to enhance comparisons between sample families, I included couples if they were the biological parents of at least two school-aged children, they were both employed at least half time, and both identified the father as assuming significant responsibility for routine child care. I observed families in their homes and interviewed fathers and mothers separately at least once and as many as five times. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them for coding and constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The parents were primarily in their late thirties and had been living together for an average of ten years. All wives and 17 of 20 husbands attended some college and most couples married later and had children later than others in their birth cohort. The median age at marriage for the mothers was 23; for fathers, 26. Median age at first birth for mothers was 27; for fathers, 30. Fifteen of 20 fathers were at least one year older than their wives. Median gross annual income was \$40,000, with three families under \$25,000 and three over \$65,000. Sixteen of the couples had two children and four had three children. Over two-thirds of the families had both sons and daughters, but four families had two sons and no daughters, and two families had two daughters and no sons. The children's ages ranged from four to fourteen, with 80 percent between the ages of five and eleven and with a median age of seven.

Mothers were more likely than fathers to hold professional or technical jobs, although most were employed in female-dominated occupations with relatively limited upward mobility and moderate pay. Over three-quarters held jobs in the "helping" professions: seven mothers were nurses, five were teachers, and four were social workers or counselors. Other occupations for the mothers were administrator, laboratory technician, film-maker, and book-binder. Sample fathers held both blue-collar and white-collar jobs with concentrations in construction (3), maintenance (2), sales (3), business (3), teaching (3), delivery (4), and computers (2). Like most dual-earner wives, sample mothers earned, on average, less than half of what their husband's did, and worked an average of eight fewer hours per week. Eleven mothers (55%), but only five fathers (25%) were employed less than 40 hours per week. In nine of twenty families mothers were employed at least as many hours as fathers, but in only four

families did the mother's earnings approach or exceed those of her husband. (For a more complete description of the sample, see Coltrane 1988).

Developing Shared Parenting

Two-thirds of the parents indicated that current divisions of labor were accomplished by making minor practical adjustments to what they perceived as an already fairly equal division of labor. A common sentiment was expressed by one father who commented,

Since we've both always been working since we've been married, we've typically shared everything as far as all the working—I mean all the housework responsibilities as well as child care responsibilities. So it's a pattern that was set up before the kids were even thought of.

Nevertheless, a full three-quarters of the couples reported that the mother performed much more of the early infant care. All of the mothers and only about half of the fathers reported that they initially reduced their hours of employment after having children. About a third of the fathers said they increased their employment hours to compensate for the loss of income that resulted from their wives taking time off work before or after the births of their children.

In talking about becoming parents, most of the fathers stressed the importance of their involvement in conception decisions, the birth process, and early infant care to later assumption of child care duties. Most couples planned the births of their children jointly and intentionally. Eighty percent reported that they mutually decided to have children, with two couples reporting that the wife desired children more than the husband and two reporting that the husband was more eager than the wife to become a parent. For many families, the husband's commitment to participate fully in child rearing was a precondition of the birth decision. One mother described how she and her husband decided to have children:

Shared parenting was sort of part of the decision. When we decided to have children, we realized that we were both going to be involved with our work, so it was part of the plan from the very beginning. As a matter of fact, I thought that we only could have the one and he convinced me that we could handle two and promised to really help (laughs), which he really has, but two children is a lot more work than you realize (laughs).

By promising to assume partial responsibility for child rearing, most husbands influenced their wives' initial decision to have children, the subsequent decision to have another child, and the decision of whether and when to return to work. Almost all of the mothers indicated that they had always assumed that they would have children, and most also assumed that they would return to paid employment before the children were in school. Half of the mothers did return to work within six months of the birth of their first child.

All but one of the fathers were present at the births of their children and most talked about the importance of the birth experience, using terms like "incredible," "magical," "moving," "wonderful," and "exciting." While most claimed that they played an important part in the birth process by providing emotional support to their wives or acting as labor coaches, a few considered their involvement to be inconsequential. Comments included, "I felt a little bit necessary and a lot unnecessary," and "I didn't bug her too much and I might have helped a little." Three-quarters of the fathers reported that they were "very involved" with their newborns, even though the mother provided most of the daily care for the first few months. Over two-thirds of the mothers breastfed their infants. Half of the fathers reported that they got up in the night to soothe their babies, and many described their early infant care experience in terms that mothers typically use to describe "bonding" with newborns. The intensity of father-infant interaction was discussed by fathers as enabling them to experience a new and different level of intimacy and was depicted as "deep emotional trust," "very interior," "drawing me in," and "making it difficult to deal with the outside world."

About half of the fathers referred to the experience of being involved in the delivery and in early infant care as a necessary part of their assuming responsibility for later child care. Many described a process in which the actual performance of caretaking duties provided them with the self confidence and skills to feel that they knew what they were doing. They described their time alone with the baby as especially helpful in building their sense of competence as a shared primary caretaker. One man said:

I felt I needed to start from the beginning. Then I learned how to walk them at night and not be totally p.o'ed at them and not feel that it was an infringement. It was something I *got* to do in some sense, along with changing diapers and all these things. It was certainly not repulsive and in some ways I really liked it a lot. It was not something innate, it was something to be learned. I managed to start at the beginning. If you *don't* start at the beginning, then you're sort of left behind.

This father, like almost all the others, talked about having to learn how to nurture and care for his children. He also stressed how important it was to "start at the beginning." While all fathers intentionally shared routine child care as the children approached school age, only half of the fathers attempted to assume a major share of daily infant care, and only five couples described the father as an equal care giver for children under one year old. These early caregiving fathers described their involvement in infant care as explicitly planned:

She nursed both of them completely, for at least five or six months. So, my role was—we agreed on this—my role was the other direct intervention, like changing, and getting them up and walking them, and putting them back to sleep. For instance, she would nurse them but I would bring them to the bed afterward and change them if necessary, and get them back to sleep. . . . I really initiated those other kinds of care aspects so that I could be involved. I continued that on through infant and toddler and pre-school classes that we would go to, even though I would usually be the only father there.

This man's wife offered a similar account, commenting that "except for breastfeeding, he always provided the same things that I did—the emotional closeness and the attention."

Another early caregiving father described how he and his wife "very consciously" attempted to equalize the amount of time they spent with their children when they were infants: "In both cases we very consciously made the decision that we wanted it to be a mutual process, so that from the start we shared, and all I didn't do was breastfeed. And I really would say that was the only distinction." His wife also described their infant care arrangements as "equal," and commented that other people did not comprehend the extent of his participation:

I think that nobody really understood that Jennifer had two mothers. The burden of proof was always on me that he was literally being a mother. He wasn't nursing, but he was getting up in the night to bring her to me, to change her poop, which is a lot more energy than nursing in the middle of the night. You have to get up and do all that, I mean get awake. So his sleep was interrupted, and yet within a week or two, at his work situation, it was expected that he was back to normal, and he never went back to normal. He was part of the same family that I was.

This was the only couple who talked about instituting, for a limited time, an explicit record keeping system to ensure that they shared child care equally.

[Father]: We were committed to the principle of sharing and we would have schedules, keep hours, so that we had a pretty good sense that we were even, both in terms of the commitment to the principle as well as we wanted to in fact be equal. We would keep records in a log—one might say in a real compulsive way—so that we knew what had happened when the other person was on.
[Mother]: When the second one came we tried to keep to the log of hours and very quickly we threw it out completely. It was too complex.

Practicality and Flexibility

Both early- and later-sharing families identified practical considerations and flexibility as keys to equitable divisions of household labor. Most did not have explicit records or schedules for child care or housework. For example, one early-involved father reported that practical divisions of labor evolved “naturally”:

Whoever cooks doesn't have to do the dishes. If for some reason she cooks and I don't do the dishes, she'll say something about it certainly. Even though we never explicitly agreed that's how we do it, that's how we do it. The person who doesn't cook does the dishes. We don't even know who's going to cook a lot of the time. We just get it that we can do it. We act in good faith.

Couples who did not begin sharing routine child care until after infancy were even more likely to describe their divisions of labor as practical solutions to shortages of time. For example, one mother described sharing household tasks as “the only logical thing to do,” and her husband said “it's the only practical way we could do it.” Other fathers described practical and flexible arrangements based on the constraints of employment scheduling:

Her work schedule is more demanding and takes up a lot of evening time, so I think I do a lot of the everyday routines, and she does a lot of the less frequent things. Like I might do more of the cooking and meal preparation, but she is the one that does the grocery shopping. An awful lot of what gets done gets done because the person is home first. That's been our standing rule for who fixes dinner. Typically, I get home before she does so I fix dinner, but that isn't a fixed rule. She gets home first, then she fixes dinner. Making the beds and doing the laundry just falls on me because I've got more time during the day to do it. And the yardwork and cuttin' all the wood, I do that. And so I'm endin' up doin' more around here than her just because I think I've got more time.

While mothers were more likely than fathers to report that talk was an important part of sharing household labor, most couples reported that they spent little time planning or arguing about who was going to do what around the house. Typical procedures for allocating domestic chores were described as “ad hoc,” illustrated by one mother's discussion of cooking:

Things with us have happened pretty easily as far as what gets done by who. It happened without having to have a schedule or deciding—you know—like cooking. We never decided that he would do all the cooking; it just kind of ended up that way. Every once in a while when he doesn't feel like cooking he'll say, “Would you cook tonight?” “Sure, fine.” But normally I don't offer to cook. I say, “What are we having for dinner?”

In general, divisions of labor in sample families were described as flexible and changing. One mother talked about how routine adjustments in task allocation were satisfying to her: “Once you're comfortable in your roles and division of tasks for a few months then it seems like the needs change a little bit and you have to change a little bit and you have to regroup. That's what keeps it interesting. I think that's why it's satisfying.”

Underlying Ideology

While ad hoc divisions of labor were described as being practical solutions to time shortages, there were two major ideological underpinnings to the sharing of housework and child care: child-centeredness and equity ideals. While those who attempted to share infant care tended to have more elaborate vocabularies for talking about these issues, later sharing couples also referred to them. For instance, all couples provided accounts that focused on the sanctity of childhood and most stressed the impossibility of mothers “doing it all.”

Couples were child-centered in that they placed a high value on their children's well-being, defined parenting as an important and serious undertaking, and organized most of

their non-employed hours around their children. For instance, one father described how his social life revolved around his children:

Basically if the other people don't have kids and if they aren't involved with the kids, then we aren't involved with them. It's as simple as that. The guys I know at work that are single or don't have children my age don't come over because then we have nothing in common. They're kind of the central driving force in my life.

While about half of the couples (11 of 20) had paid for ongoing out-of-home child care, and three-quarters had regularly used some form of paid child care, most of the parents said that they spent more time with their children than the other dual-earner parents in their neighborhood. One father commented that he and his wife had structured their lives around personally taking care of their children:

An awful lot of the way we've structured our lives has been based around our reluctance to have someone else raise our children. We just really didn't want the kids to be raised from 7:30 in the morning 'til 4:30 or 5:00 in the afternoon by somebody else. So we've structured the last ten years around that issue.

Many parents also advocated treating children as inexperienced equals or "little people," rather than as inferior beings in need of authoritarian training. For example, an ex-military father employed in computer research stated, "We don't discipline much. Generally the way it works is kind of like bargaining. They know that there are consequences to whatever actions they take, and we try and make sure they know what the consequences are before they have a chance to take the action." Another father described his moral stance concerning children's rights:

I'm not assuming—when I'm talking about parent-child stuff—that there's any inequality. Yes, there are a lot of differences in terms of time spent in this world, but our assumption has been, with both children, that we're peers. And so that's how we are with them. So, if they say something and they're holding fast to some position, we do not say, "You do this because we're the parent and you're the child."

About half of the parents talked directly about such equity ideals as applied to children.

Concerning women's rights, 80 percent of fathers and 90 percent of mothers agreed that women were disadvantaged in our society, but only two mothers and one father mentioned equal rights or the women's movement as motivators for sharing household labor. Most did not identify themselves as feminists, and a few offered derogatory comments about "those women's libbers." Nevertheless, almost all parents indicated that no one should be forced to perform a specific task because they were a man or a woman. This implicit equity ideal was evidenced by mothers and fathers using time availability, rather than gender, to assign most household tasks.

Divisions of Household Labor

Contributions to 64 household tasks were assessed by having fathers and mothers each sort cards on a five-point scale to indicate who most often performed them (see Table 1). Frequently performed tasks, such as meal preparation, laundry, sweeping, or putting children to bed, were judged for the two weeks preceding the interview. Less frequently performed tasks, such as window washing, tax preparation, or car repair, were judged as to who typically performed them.¹ Following Smith and Reid (1986:72-74), I computed a mean score for each

1. Alternate methods of assessing contributions to household labor including time reconstruction methods and activity logs have been found to produce estimates similar to the relative distribution approach used in this study, provided that data are collected from both husbands and wives (Warner 1986).

Table 1 • Household Tasks by Person Most Often Performing Them*

<i>Mother More</i>	<i>Father & Mother Equally</i>	<i>Father More</i>
<i>Cleaning</i>		
Mopping	Vacuuming	Taking out Trash
Sweeping	Cleaning Tub/Shower	Cleaning Porch
Dusting	Making Beds	
Cleaning Bathroom Sink	Picking up Toys	
Cleaning Toilet	Tidying Living Room	
	Hanging up Clothes	
	Washing Windows	
	Spring Cleaning	
<i>Cooking</i>		
Planning Menus	Preparing Lunch	Preparing Breakfast
Grocery Shopping	Cooking Dinner	
Baking	Making Snacks	
	Washing Dishes	
	Putting Dishes Away	
	Wiping Kitchen Counters	
	Putting Food Away	
<i>Clothes</i>		
Laundry	Shoe Care	
Hand Laundry		
Ironing		
Sewing		
Buying Clothes		
<i>Household</i>		
	Running Errands	Household Repairs
	Decorating	Exterior Painting
	Interior Painting	Car Maintenance
	General Yardwork	Car Repair
	Gardening	Washing Car
		Watering Lawn
		Mowing Lawn
		Cleaning Rain Gutters
<i>Finance, Social</i>		
Writing or Phoning Relatives/Friends	Deciding Major Purchases	Investments
	Paying Bills	
	Preparing Taxes	
	Handling Insurance	
	Planning Couple Dates	
<i>Children</i>		
Arranging Babysitters	Waking Children	
	Helping Children Dress	
	Helping Children Bathe	
	Putting Children to Bed	
	Supervising Children	
	Disciplining Children	
	Driving Children	
	Taking Children to Doctor	
	Caring for Sick Children	
	Playing with Children	
	Planning Outings	

Note:

* Tasks were sorted separately by fathers and mothers according to relative frequency of performance: (1) Mother mostly or always, (2) Mother more than father, (3) Father and mother about equal, (4) Father more than mother, (5) Father mostly or always. For each task a mean ranking by couple was computed with 1.00 – 2.49 = Mother, 2.50 – 3.50 = Shared, 3.51 – 5.0 = Father. If over 50 percent of families ranked a task as performed by one spouse more than the other, the task is listed under that spouse, otherwise tasks are listed as shared. N = 20 couples.

couple using the "strict" criteria of 2.5 to 3.5 to represent shared activities.

Some differences occurred between mothers' and fathers' accounts of household task allocation as discussed below, but there was general agreement on who did what. The majority of rankings on 58 of 64 tasks were at least as high as the spouse's ranking for that task, and over two-thirds of the rankings on 39 tasks were similarly equivalent. When mothers and fathers disagreed on their relative contributions to specific tasks, they tended to rate themselves one point higher than their spouse did (i.e., "mostly or always" as opposed to "more than"). This slight egocentric bias is evident in a mean difference score for the 64 tasks of .20.²

Table 1 shows that in the majority of families, most household tasks were seen as shared. Thirty-seven of 64 tasks (58%), including all direct child care, most household business, meal preparation, kitchen clean-up, and about half of other house cleaning tasks were reported to be shared about equally by fathers and mothers. Nevertheless, almost a quarter (15) of the tasks were performed principally by the mothers, including most clothes care, meal planning, kin-keeping, and some of the more onerous repetitive housecleaning. Just under one-fifth (12) of the tasks were performed principally by the fathers. These included the majority of the occasional outside chores such as home repair, car maintenance, lawn care, and taking out the trash. As a group, sample couples can thus be characterized as sharing an unusually high proportion of housework and child care, but still partially conforming to a traditional division of household labor. The fathers and mothers in this study are pioneers in that they divided household tasks differently than their parents did, differently from most others in their age cohort, and from most families studied in time-use research (e.g., Berk 1985; Coverman and Sheley 1986; Geerken and Gove 1983; Hiller and Philliber 1986; Nickols and Metzen 1982; Walker and Woods 1976).

Managing vs. Helping

Household divisions of labor in these families also can be described in terms of who takes responsibility for planning and initiating various tasks. In every family there were at least six frequently performed household chores over which the mother retained almost exclusive managerial control. That is, mothers noticed when the chore needed doing and made sure that someone adequately performed it. In general, mothers were more likely than fathers to act as managers for cooking, cleaning, and child care, but over half of the couples shared responsibility in these areas. In all households the father was responsible for initiating and managing at least a few chores traditionally performed by mothers.

Based on participants' accounts of strategies for allocating household labor, I classified twelve couples as sharing responsibility for household labor and eight couples as reflecting manager-helper dynamics. Helper husbands often waited to be told what to do, when to do it, and how it should be done. While they invariably expressed a desire to perform their "fair share" of housekeeping and childrearing, they were less likely than the other fathers to assume responsibility for anticipating and planning these activities. Manager-helper couples sometimes referred to the fathers' contributions as "helping" the mother.

When asked what they liked most about their husband's housework, about half of the mothers focused on their husband's self-responsibility: voluntarily doing work without being prodded. They commented, "he does the everyday stuff" and "I don't have to ask him." The other mothers praised their husbands for particular skills with comments such as "I love his

2. Relatively high self-estimates (mean difference scores over .50) were made for vacuuming, making beds, cleaning porches, baking, wiping kitchen counters, putting food away, and running errands. Sample parents tended to rate their spouse higher than their spouse did (negative mean difference scores) on 11 of 64 tasks, including cleaning bathtubs, preparing dinner, ironing, repairing the car, doing yard work, interior and exterior painting, paying bills, handling insurance, corresponding with relatives and friends, and helping children dress.

spaghetti" or "he's great at cleaning the bathroom." In spite of such praise, three-fourths of the mothers said that what bothered them most about their husband's housework was the need to remind him to perform certain tasks, and some complained of having to "train him" to correctly perform the chores. About a third of the fathers complained that their wives either didn't notice when things should be done or that *their* standards were too low. Although the extent of domestic task sharing varied considerably among couples, 90 percent of both mothers and fathers independently reported that their divisions of labor were "fair."

Some mothers found it difficult to share authority for household management. For instance, one mother said "there's a certain control you have when you do the shopping and the cooking and I don't know if I'm ready to relinquish that control." Another mother who shares most child care and housework with her husband admitted that "in general, household organization is something that I think I take over." In discussing how they divide housework, she commented on how she notices more than her husband does:

He does what he sees needs to be done. That would include basic cleaning kinds of things. However, there are some detailed kinds of things that he doesn't see that I feel need to be done, and in those cases I have to ask him to do things. He thinks some of the details are less important and I'm not sure, that might be a difference between men and women.

Like many of the mothers who maintained a managerial position in the household, this mother attributed an observed difference in domestic perceptiveness to an essential difference between women and men. By contrast, mothers who did not act as household managers were unlikely to link housecleaning styles to essential gender differences.

Many mothers talked about adjusting their housecleaning standards over the course of their marriage and trying to feel less responsible for being "the perfect homemaker." By partially relinquishing managerial duties and accepting their husband's housecleaning standards, some mothers reported that they were able to do less daily housework and focus more on occasional thorough cleaning or adding "finishing touches." A mother with two nursing jobs whose husband delivered newspapers commented:

He'll handle the surface things no problem, and I get down and do the nitty gritty. And I do it when it bugs me or when I have the time. It's not anything that we talk about usually. Sometimes if I feel like things are piling up, he'll say "Well, make me a list," and I will. And he'll do it. There are some things that he just doesn't notice and that's fine; he handles the day-to-day stuff. He'll do things, like for me cleaning off the table—for him it's getting everything off it; for me it's putting the table cloth on, putting the flowers on, putting the candles on. That's the kind of stuff I do and I like doing that; it's not that I want him to start.

This list-making mother illustrates that responsibility for managing housework sometimes remained in the mother's domain, even if the father performed more of the actual tasks.

Responsibility for managing child care, on the other hand, was more likely to be shared. Planning and initiating "direct" child care, including supervision, discipline and play, was typically an equal enterprise. Sharing responsibility for "indirect" child care, including clothing, cleaning, and feeding, was less common, but was still shared in over half of the families. When they cooked, cleaned or tended to the children, fathers in these families did not talk of "helping" the mother; they spoke of fulfilling their responsibilities as equal partners and parents. For example, one father described how he and his wife divided both direct and indirect child care:

My philosophy is that they are my children and everything is my responsibility, and I think she approaches it the same way too. So when something needs to be done it's whoever is close does it. Whoever it is convenient for. And we do keep a sense of what the other's recent efforts are, and try to provide some balance, but without actually counting how many times you've done this and I've done that.

In spite of reported efforts to relinquish total control over managing home and children,

mothers were more likely than fathers to report that they would be embarrassed if unexpected company came over and the house was a mess (80% vs. 60%). When asked to compare themselves directly to their spouse, almost two-thirds of both mothers and fathers reported that the mother would be more embarrassed than the father. Some mothers reported emotional reactions to the house being a mess that were similar to those they experienced when their husbands “dressed the kids funny.” The women were more likely to focus on the children “looking nice,” particularly when they were going to be seen in public. Mothers’ greater embarrassment over the kemptness of home or children might reflect their sense of mothering as part of women’s essential nature.

Some of the mothers reported that relinquishing control over the management of home and children made them uncomfortable because it entailed accepting their husbands’ “looser” standards. Since other people continued to assume that the home was the woman’s responsibility, these mothers feared negative judgments and reported feeling guilty if the house was “too messy.” Those who relinquished full control over household management, in contrast, often reported that their husbands had similar housekeeping standards. Alternately, mothers reported that through negotiations with their husbands, one or both of them adjusted their standards.

Adult Socialization through Child Rearing

Parents shared in creating and sustaining a world view through the performance and evaluation of child rearing. Most reported that parenting was their primary topic of conversation, exemplified by one father’s comment: “that’s what we mostly discuss when we’re not with our kids—either when we’re going to sleep or when we have time alone—is how we feel about how we’re taking care of them.” Others commented that their spouse helped them to recognize unwanted patterns of interaction by focusing on parenting practices. For instance, one father remarked:

I’m not sure I could do it as a one-parent family, ‘cause I wouldn’t have the person, the other person saying “Hey, look at that, that’s so much like what you do with your own family.” In a one parent family, you don’t have that, you don’t have the other person putting out that stuff, you have to find it all out on your own, and I’m not sure you can.

Usually the father was described as being transformed by the parenting experience and developing increased sensitivity. This was especially true of discourse between parents who were trying to convert a more traditional division of family labor into a more egalitarian one. A self-employed construction worker said his level of concern for child safety was heightened after he rearranged his work schedule to do half of the parenting:

There’s a difference in being at the park with the kids since we went on this schedule. Before it was, like, “sure, jump off the jungle bars.” But when you’re totally responsible for them, and you know that if they sprained an ankle or something you have to pick up the slack, it’s like you have more investment in the kid and you don’t want to see them hurt and you don’t want to see them crying. I find myself being a lot more cautious.

Mothers also reported that their husbands began to notice subtle cues from the children as a result of being with them on a regular basis. The wife of the construction worker quoted above commented that she had not anticipated many of the changes that emerged from sharing routine child care:

I used to worry about the kids a lot more. I would say in the last year it’s evened itself out quite a bit. That was an interesting kind of thing in sharing that started to happen that I hadn’t anticipated. I suppose when you go into this your expectations about what will happen—that you won’t take your kids to day care, that they’ll be with their dad, and they’ll get certain things from their dad and

won't that be nice, and he won't have to worry about his hours—but then when it starts creeping into other areas that you didn't have any way of knowing it was going to have an impact. When he began to raise issues about the kids or check in on them at school when they were sick, I thought, 'Well, that's my job, what are you talking about that for?' or, 'Oh my god, I didn't notice that!' Where did he get the intuitive sense to know what needed to be done? It wasn't there before. A whole lot of visible things happened.

Increased sensitivity on the part of the fathers, and their enhanced competence as parents, was typically evaluated by adopting a vocabulary of motives and feelings similar to the mothers', created and sustained through an ongoing dialogue about the children; a dialogue that grew out of the routine child care practices. One father recounted how when he spent little time with his children, he wasn't "tuned in":

I don't always hear the kids calling right away. It'll maybe take one or two times—two or three times—before I actually notice what's going on. But more and more, I think that that's changed. It used to be I never heard, or I might not notice what they were doing or I may not understand what the broader implication of whatever they were doing was, you know, at the time it was happening, didn't even notice that. And now I've become more in tune with what they're actually—you know how we should feel about it or how we should react to it. Before I tended to not put together certain things and now I try to focus more on what's going on.

This father's substitution of "how we should feel" and "how we should react" for "what they're actually [doing]" reveals that his growing competence as a parent is dependent on his wife's definition of the situation. Another mother described how her husband had "the right temperament" for parenting, but had to learn how to notice the little things that she felt her daughters needed:

When it comes to the two of us as parents, I feel that my husband's parenting skills are probably superior to mine, just because of his calm rationale. But maybe that's not what little girls need all the time. He doesn't tend to be the one that tells them how gorgeous they look when they dress up, which they really like, and I see these things, I see when they're putting in a little extra effort. He's getting better as we grow in our relationship, as the kids grow in their relationship with him.

Like many fathers in this study, this one was characterized as developing sensitivity to the children by relying on interactions with his wife. She "sees things" which he has to learn to recognize. Thus, while he may have "superior" parenting skills, he must learn something subtle from her. His reliance on her expertise suggests that his "calm rationale" is insufficient to make him "maternal" in the way that she is. Her ability to notice things, and his inattention to them, serves to render them both accountable: parenting remains an essential part of her nature, but is a learned capacity for him. Couples talked about fathers being socialized, as adults, to become nurturing parents. This talking with their wives about child care helped husbands construct and sustain images of themselves as competent fathers.

Greater paternal competence was also reported to enhance marital interaction. Fathers were often characterized as paying increased attention to emotional cues from their wives and engaging in more reciprocal communication. Taking responsibility for routine household labor offered some men the opportunity to better understand their mothers' lives as well. For instance, one involved father who did most of the housework suggested that he could sometimes derive pleasure from cleaning the bathroom or picking up a sock if he looked at it as an act of caring for his family:

It makes it a different job, to place it in a context of being an expression of caring about a collective life together. It's at that moment that I'm maybe closest to understanding what my mother and other women of my mother's generation, and other women now, have felt about being housewives and being at home, being homemakers. I think I emotionally understand the satisfaction and the gratification of being a homemaker.

More frequently, however, sharing child care and housework helped fathers understand

its drudgery. One father who is employed as a carpenter explained how assuming more responsibility for housework motivated him to encourage his wife to buy whatever she needs to make housework easier.

It was real interesting when I started doing more housework. Being in construction, when I needed a tool, I bought the tool. And when I vacuum floors, I look at this piece of shit, I mean I can't vacuum the floor with this and feel good about it, It's not doing a good job. So I get a *good* vacuum system. So I have more appreciation for house cleaning. When I clean the tubs, I want something that is going to clean the tubs; I don't want to work extra hard. You know I have a kind of sponge to use for cleaning the tubs. So I have more of an appreciation for what she had to do. I tell her "If you know of something that's going to make it easier, let's get it."

Most sample fathers reported that performance of child care, in and of itself, increased their commitment to both parenting and housework. All of the fathers had been involved in some housework before the birth of their children, but many indicated that their awareness and performance of housework increased in conjunction with their involvement in parenting. They reported that as they spent more time in the house alone with their children, they assumed more responsibility for cooking and cleaning. Fathers also noted that as they became more involved in the daily aspects of parenting, and in the face of their wives' absence and relinquishment of total responsibility for housekeeping, they became more aware that certain tasks needed doing and they were more likely to perform them. This was conditioned by the amount of time fathers spent on the job, but more than half reported that they increased their contributions to household labor when their children were under ten years old. This did not always mean that fathers' relative proportion of household tasks increased, because mothers were also doing more in response to an expanding total household workload.

Gender Attributions

Approximately half of both mothers and fathers volunteered that men and women brought something unique to child care and many stressed that they did not consider their own parenting skills to be identical to those of their spouse. One mother whose husband had recently increased the amount of time he spent with their school-aged children commented: "Anybody can slap together a cream cheese and cucumber sandwich and a glass of milk and a few chips and call it lunch, but the ability to see that your child is troubled about something, or to be able to help them work through a conflict with a friend, that is really much different." A list-making mother who provided less child care and did less housework than her husband described herself as "more intimate and gentle," and her husband as "rough and out there." Like many others, she emphasized that mothers and fathers provide "a balance" for their children. She described how she had to come to terms with her expectations that her husband would "mother" the way that she did:

One of the things that I found I was expecting from him when he started doing so much here and I was gone so much, I was expecting him to mother the kids. And you know, I had to get over that one pretty quick and really accept him doing the things the way he did them as his way, and that being just fine with me. He wasn't mothering the kids, he was fathering the kids. It was just that he was the role of the mother as far as the chores and all that stuff.

A mother who managed and performed most of the housework and child care used different reasoning to make similar claims about essential differences between women and men. In contrast to the mothers above, this mother suggested that men could nurture, but not perform daily child care:

Nurturance is one thing, actual care is another thing. I think if a father had to, like all of a sudden the wife was gone, he could nurture it with the love that it needed. But he might not change the

diapers often enough, or he might not give 'em a bath often enough and he might not think of the perfect food to feed. But as far as nurturing, I think he's capable of caring. . . . If the situation is the mother is there and he didn't have to, then he would trust the woman to.

This mother concluded that "the woman has it more in her genes to be more equipped for nurturing." Thus, many of the manager-helper couples legitimated their divisions of labor and reaffirmed the "naturalness" of essential gender differences.

Parents who equally shared the responsibility for direct and indirect child care, on the other hand, were more likely see similarities in their relationships with their children. They all reported that their children were emotionally "close" to both parents. When asked who his children went to when they were hurt or upset, one early- and equal-sharing father commented: "They'll go to either of us, that is pretty indistinguishable." Mothers and fathers who equally shared most direct child care reported that their children typically called for the parent with whom they had most recently spent time, and frequently called the mother "daddy" or the father "mommy," using the gendered form to signify "parent." Most often, parents indicated that their children would turn to "whoever 's closest" or "whoever they've been with," thus linking physical closeness with emotional closeness. In-home observations of family interactions confirmed such reports.

The central feature of these and other parental accounts is that shared activities formed an emotional connection between parent and child. Shared activities were also instrumental in constructing images of fathers as competent nurturing care givers. Two-thirds of both mothers and fathers expressed the belief that men could care for children's emotional needs as well as women. When asked whether men, in general, could nurture like women, mothers used their husbands as examples. One said: "I don't necessarily think that that skill comes with a sex-type. Some women nurture better than others, some men nurture better than other men. I think that those skills can come when either person is willing to have the confidence and commitment to prioritize them."

However, the parents who were the most successful at sharing child care were the most likely to claim that men could nurture like women. Those who sustained manager-helper dynamics in child care tended to invoke images of "maternal instincts" and alluded to natural differences between men and women. In contrast, more equal divisions of household labor were typically accompanied by an ideology of gender *similarity* rather than gender difference. The direction of causality is twofold: (1) those who believed that men could nurture like women seriously attempted to share all aspects of child care, and (2) the successful practice of sharing child care facilitated the development of beliefs that men could nurture like women.

Normalizing Atypical Behavior

Mothers and fathers reported that women friends, most of whom were in more traditional marriages or were single, idealized their shared parenting arrangements. About two-thirds of sample mothers reported that their women friends told them that they were extremely fortunate, and labeled their husbands "wonderful," "fantastic," "incredible," or otherwise out of the ordinary. Some mothers said that women friends were "jealous," "envious," or "amazed," and that they "admired" and "supported" their efforts at sharing domestic chores.

Both mothers and fathers said that the father received more credit for his family involvement than the mother did, because it was expected that she would perform child care and housework. Since parenting is assumed to be "only natural" for women, fathers were frequently praised for performing a task that would go unnoticed if a mother had performed it:

I think I get less praise because people automatically assume that, you know, the mother's *supposed* to do the child care. And he get's a lot of praise because he's the visible one." Oh, I think that he gets far more praise. I can bust my butt at that school and all he has to do is show up in the parking lot

and everybody's all *gah gah* over him. I don't get resentful about that—I think it's funny and I think it's sad.

While the fathers admitted that they enjoyed such praise, many indicated that they did not take these direct or implied compliments very seriously:

I get more credit than she does, because it's so unusual that the father's at home and involved in the family. I realize what it is: it's prejudice. The strokes feel real nice, but I don't take them too seriously. I'm sort of proud of it in a way that I don't really like. It's nothing to be proud of, except that I'm glad to be doing it and I think it's kind of neat because it hasn't been the style traditionally. I kind of like that, but I know that it means nothing.

These comments reveal that fathers appreciated praise, but actively discounted compliments received from those in dissimilar situations. The fathers' everyday parenting experiences led them to view parenthood as drudgery as well as fulfillment. They described their sense of parental responsibility as taken-for-granted and did not consider it to be out of the ordinary or something worthy of special praise. Fathers sometimes reported being puzzled by compliments from their wives' acquaintances and judged them to be inappropriate. When I asked one what kinds of reactions he received when his children were infants, he said:

They all thought it was really wonderful. They thought she'd really appreciate how wonderful it was and how different that was from her father. They'd say, "You ought to know how lucky you are, he's doing so much." I just felt like I'm doing what any person should do. Just like, shouldn't anybody be this interested in their child? No big deal.

Another father said he resented all the special attention he received when he was out with his infant son:

Constant going shopping and having women stop me and say "Oh it's so good to see you fathers." I was no longer an individual; I was this generic father who was now a liberated father who could take care of his child. I actually didn't like it. I felt after a while that I wanted the time and the quality of my relationship with my child at that point, what was visible in public, to simply be accepted as what you do. It didn't strike me as worthy of recognition, and it pissed me off a lot that women in particular would show this sort of appreciation which I think is well-intentioned, but which also tended to put a frame around the whole thing as though somehow this was an experience that could be extracted from one's regular life. It wasn't. It was going shopping with my son in a snugly or on the backpack was what I was doing. It wasn't somehow this event that always had to be called attention to.

Thus fathers discounted and normalized extreme reactions to their divisions of labor and interpreted them in a way that supported the "natural" character of what they were doing.

One mother commented on a pattern that was typically mentioned by both parents: domestic divisions of labor were "normal" to those who were attempting something similar, and "amazing" to those who were not: "All the local friends here think it's amazing. They call him "Mr. Mom" and tell me how lucky I am. I'm waiting for someone to tell him how lucky *he* is. I have several friends at work who have very similar arrangements and they just feel that it's normal."

Because fathers assumed traditional mothering functions, they often had more social contact with mothers than with other fathers. They talked about being the only fathers at children's lessons, parent classes and meetings, at the laundromat, or in the market. One father said it took mothers there a while before they believed he really shared a range of household tasks.

At first they ask me, "Is this your day off?" And I say, "If it's the day off for me, why isn't it the day off for you?" "Well, I work 24 hours a day!" And I say, "Yeah, right, I got my wash done and hung out and the beds made." It takes the mother a couple of times to realize that I really do that stuff.

In general, fathers resisted attempts by other people to compare them to traditional fathers, and often compared themselves directly to their wives, or to other mothers.

Fathers tended to be employed in occupations predominantly composed of men, and in those settings were often discouraged from talking about family or children. Several fathers reported that people at their place of employment could not understand why they did “women’s work” and a few mentioned that co-workers would be disappointed when they would repeatedly turn down invitations to go out “with the boys” for a drink. One of three self-employed carpenters in the study said that he would sometimes conceal that he was leaving work to do something with his children because he worried about negative reactions from employers or co-workers:

I would say reactions that we’ve got—in business, like if I leave a job somewhere that I’m on and mention that I’m going to coach soccer, my son’s soccer game, yeah, I have felt people kind of stiffen, like, I was more shirking my job, you know, such a small thing to leave work for, getting home, racing home for. I got to the point with some people where I didn’t necessarily mention what I was leaving for, just because I didn’t need for them to think that I was being irresponsible about their work, I mean, I just decided it wasn’t their business. If I didn’t know them well enough to feel that they were supportive. I would just say, “I have to leave early today”—never lie, if they asked me a question, I’d tell them the answer—but not volunteer it. And, maybe in some cases, I feel like, you know, you really have to be a little careful about being too *groovy* too, that what it is that you’re doing is just so wonderful, “I’m a father, I’m going to go be with my children.” It isn’t like that, you know, I don’t do it for what people think of me, I do it because I enjoy it.

Another father also described how he made choices to reveal or withhold information about his family life. With some of his business clients, he felt like he was “in the closet” about spending so much time with his kids:

It is true that in my work only some people knew. I mean I may be playing with my kids and they want a job done and some people understand that—no—most people don’t know, of course, but some people know who are very supportive. Other people would say, “I’m concerned about you getting the job done, I don’t care about this stuff.” And in that way I’m a little bit in the closet. Part of me would like to come out of the closet and say, “Listen, folks, this is who you been dealing with all these years.”

Some fathers said their talk of spending time with their children was perceived by co-workers as indicating they were not “serious” about their work. They reported receiving indirect messages that *providing for* the family was primary and *being with* family was secondary. Fathers avoided negative work place sanctions by selectively revealing the extent of their family involvement.

Many fathers selected their current jobs because the work schedule was flexible, or so they could take time off to care for their children. For instance, even though most fathers worked full-time, two-thirds had some daytime hours off, as exemplified by teachers, mail carriers, and self-employed carpenters. Similarly, most fathers avoided extra, work-related tasks or overtime hours in order to maximize time spent with their children. One computer technician said he was prepared to accept possible imputations of nonseriousness:

I kind of tend to choose my jobs. When I go to a job interview, I explain to people that I have a family and the family’s very important to me. Some companies expect you to work a lot of overtime or work weekends and I told them that I don’t have to accept that sort of thing. I may not have gotten all the jobs I ever might have had because of it, but it’s something that I bring up at the job interview and let them know that my family comes first.

The same father admitted that it is sometimes a “blessing” that his wife works evenings at a local hospital, because it allows him to justify leaving his job on time:

At five o’clock or five thirty at night, when there are a lot of people that are still going to be at work for an hour or two more, I go “Adios!” (laughs). I mean, I *can’t* stay, I’ve gotta pick up the kids. And

there are times when I feel real guilty about leaving my fellow workers behind when I know they're gonna be there for another hour or so. About a block away from work I go "God, this is great!" (laughs).

Over half of the study participants also indicated that their own mothers or fathers reacted negatively to their divisions of labor. Parents were described as "confused," "bemused," and "befuddled," and it was said that they "lack understanding" or "think it's a little strange." One mother reported that her parents and in-laws wouldn't "dare to criticize" their situation because "times have changed," but she sensed their underlying worry and concern:

I think both sides of the family think it's fine because it's popular now. They don't dare—I mean if we were doing this 30 years ago, they would dare to criticize. In a way, now they don't. I think both sides feel it's a little strange. I thought my mom was totally sympathetic and no problem, but when I was going to go away for a week and my husband was going to take care of the kids, she said something to my sister about how she didn't think I should do it. There's a little underlying tension about it I think.

Other study participants reported that disagreements with parents were common, particularly if they revolved around trying to change childrearing practices their own parents had used.

Many couples reported that initial negative reactions from parents turned more positive over time as they saw that the children were "turning out all right," that the couple was still together after an average of ten years, and that the men were still employed. This last point, that parents were primarily concerned with their son's or son-in-law's provider responsibilities, highlights how observers typically evaluated the couples' task sharing. A number of study participants mentioned that they thought their parents wanted the wife to quit work and stay home with the children and that the husband should "make up the difference." Most mentioned, however, that parents were more concerned that the husband continue to be the provider than they were that the wife made "extra money" or that the husband "helped out" at home.

In the beginning there was a real strong sense that I was in the space of my husband's duty. That came from his parents pretty strongly. The only way that they have been able to come to grips with this in any fashion is because he has also been financially successful. If he had decided, you know, "Outside work is not for me, I'm going to stay home with the kids and she's going to work," I think there would have been a whole lot more flak than there was. I think it's because he did both and was successful that it was okay.

Another mother noted that parental acceptance of shared parenting did not necessarily entail acceptance of the woman as provider:

There is a funny dynamic that happens. It's not really about child care, where I don't think in our families—with our parents—I don't get enough credit for being the breadwinner. Well they're still critical of him for not earning as much money as I do. In a way they've accepted him as being an active parenting father more than they've accepted me being a breadwinner.

Here again, the "essential nature" of men is taken to be that of provider. If the men remain providers, they are still accountable as men, even if they take an active part in child care.

Discussion

This brief exploration into the social construction of shared parenting in twenty dual-earner families illustrates how more equal domestic gender relations arise and under what conditions they flourish. Previous studies of shared parenting sampled families with infants and toddlers, and found that even when fathers participated in routine child care they did not assume full responsibility for planning and initiating the tasks (Ehrensaft 1987; Radin 1982;

Russell 1983). In contrast, my sample included families with school-aged children, and over half of the fathers were reported to assume major responsibility for planning and initiating both housework and child care. Still, almost half of the fathers remained in a "helper" role, even though they performed more domestic tasks than traditional husbands and fathers.

All couples described flexible and practical task allocation procedures that were responses to shortages of time. All families were child-centered in that they placed a high value on their children's well-being, defined parenting as an important and serious undertaking, and organized most of their non-employed time around their children. Besides being well-educated and delaying childbearing until their late twenties or early thirties, couples who shared most of the responsibility for household labor tended to involve the father in routine child care from early infancy. Those who shared the most were also the most likely to talk about men and women as essentially similar. Those who shared less, in contrast, tended to attribute special skills and intuitions to women and mothers.

Regardless of the extent of sharing or the timing of the fathers' assumption of domestic duties, both fathers and mothers reported that the practice of child care, in itself, transformed the men. Through interaction with their children, and in concert with an ongoing marital conversation, parents constructed images of fathers as sensitive and nurturing care givers. Fathers normalized their atypical parenting behavior by comparing themselves to mothers, discounting "excessive" praise, and selectively revealing the extent of their parenting involvement to male co-workers. Friends, co-workers and relatives normalized the parents' behaviors with reference to "appropriate" gender activities. Men were seen as exceptional, but accountable, because they were still breadwinners. Women's employment was called into question if they earned more money than their husbands, but their child care was taken for granted and presumed to reflect their essential nature.

I have focused this paper on parents "doing gender" through direct and indirect child care in order to critically examine the widespread belief that mothering is "natural" for women and difficult, if not impossible, for men. As Ruddick (1982) has noted, the everyday aspects of child care and housework help shape ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that become associated with what it means to be a mother. My findings suggest that when domestic activities are equally shared, "maternal thinking" develops in fathers too, and the social meaning of gender begins to change. This de-emphasizes notions of gender as personality and locates it in social interaction.

Given the select nature of the sample, it is impossible to estimate how widespread the observed practices are. More research is needed on the incidence of domestic labor sharing and on the factors that encourage or discourage such sharing. One fruitful area for future research suggested by this study is the potential impact of fathers' motivations to raise their children on the performance of routine housework. More data are also needed on the processes through which the kinship and gender composition of social networks influence divisions of household labor and the ways in which parents transform social relations in order to maintain consistency in their subjective reality.

According to most recent research, the sexual division of household labor changed little in response to women's entry into the paid labor force (Berheide 1984; Berk 1985; Corman and Sheley 1986; Hiller and Philliber 1986; Walker and Woods 1976). While that research was invaluable in documenting gender inequality, it led some researchers to view the sexual division of labor as omnipresent and to characterize the study of changes in men's contributions to housework as "much ado about nothing" (Miller and Garrison 1982). Depicting rigid gender-based divisions of household labor as normative and invariant poses a danger. Focusing on gender as the universal primary determinant of household labor allocation masks diversity and disregards exceptions to normative patterns. Treating gender or "sex" as an "independent variable" predisposes researchers to underestimate the importance of the meaning of the situation for social actors and to neglect the influence of specific situational constraints. To treat

gender as the "cause" of household division of labor overlooks its emergent character and fails to acknowledge how it is in fact implicated in precisely such routine practices.

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