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Housework over the course of relationships: Gender ideology, resources, and the division of housework from a growth curve perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the division of housework remains gendered, with women on average still spending more time doing chores than their male partners. While research has studied why this phenomenon is so persistent, few studies have yet been able to assess the effect of gender ideology and socio-economic resources at the same time, usually due to data restrictions. We use data from the *pairfam*, a new and innovative German panel study, in order to test the effect of absolute and relative resources as well as his and her gender ideology on the division of housework. We employ a life course perspective and analyze trajectories of couples' housework division over time, using multi-level random effects growth curve models. We find that an egalitarian gender ideology of both him and her significantly predicts more egalitarian division-trajectories, while neither absolute nor relative resources appear to have an effect on the division of housework over time. Furthermore, our results expand the literature by investigating how these processes differ among childless couples and couples who experience the first birth.

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1. Introduction

The way in which gender structures the life course has undergone pronounced changes in the late 20th and early 21st century (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Huinink & Mayer, 1995). Educational expansion and the influx of women into the labor market have led to both a marked rise of dual-earner couples and an increase in educational homogamy (Blossfeld & Timm, 2003). Today, younger cohorts of women are on par with their partners with respect to earning college degrees, and have caught up in terms of labor force participation (Domański & Przybylski, 2007; Kollmeyer, 2012). Yet, the need for chores done around the house and the care of children and the elderly remains largely unchanged, leading to tensions in the compatibility of gainful employment and the family (McGinnity, 2014; Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2012). Hand in hand with these changes, traditional gender roles in the family are being challenged. Gender role changes are occurring across various domains such as the realm of domestic work, paid work, or child care (Bühlmann, Elcheroth, & Tettamanti, 2009; Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Nonetheless, the majority of housework

and childcare is still carried out by women today (Treas & Lui, 2013). How couples split the housework has great implications for the time and energy each of the partners can invest in paid employment, sleep, and leisure activities. Consequently, unequal divisions of housework have been tied to various aspects of gender and class stratification (Cooke, 2011; Moen, 1992). Scholars interested in the interplay between the gendered division of housework and gender stratification have been trying to understand which factors drive the gendered division of domestic work in couples, and why the traditional division of labor is so persistent, despite women's entry into tertiary education and paid work in large numbers (Treas & Drobnic, 2010). The current paper seeks to contribute to this literature by employing a life course perspective and conceptualizing the division of housework in couples as a trajectory over time. Specifically, we are interested in understanding how this trajectory unfolds over the course of a relationship, and how changes in the division of housework relate to major life course events, or 'turning points' (Clausen, 1995; Elder, 1998; Rönkä, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003), such as the transition to parenthood. In addition, we assess the impact of stable and changing characteristics of the couple or each partner.

Analytically, we separate couples who experience the transition to parenthood and couples who remain childless during the period of observation. We use data from the German Family Panel

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(*pairfam*) and a growth curve modeling approach, based on multi-level models to examine how the main factors, which have been shown to affect the division of housework in previous studies, relate to the division of housework among young couples in Germany. In particular, we are interested in understanding how and why change occurs in the division of housework as a function of both partners' socio-economic resources and gender ideology in the course of the relationship, and how the experience of parenthood as a turning point interacts with these processes. We hence have two main research questions: (1) How do gender ideology and partners' relative economic resources affect housework trajectories in Germany? Do we find different effects for couples who experience the transition to parenthood and for those who remain childless? (2) Does the empirical focus on trajectories rather than single transitions lead to similar results, compared to earlier studies?

The first question is motivated by ongoing theory-driven debates on the main reasons for persistence of gender separate spheres. The dominant theoretical strands can be divided into two main groups: economic resources and social psychological aspects of gender ideology (Davis & Greenstein, 2013; Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Braun, 2006). Until the mid-2000s, this debate was dominated by economic reasoning, and arguing that couples divide housework unequally on the basis of the male partner's higher earnings (for a summary see Gupta, 2006). However, more recently studies drawing on longitudinal earnings information and housework data find little support for this view (Dechant, Rost, & Schulz, 2014; Kühhirt, 2012). These latter studies conclude that norms and gender ideology may influence the meaning of gendered economic resources. However, direct measures of these aspects are rarely provided due to a lack of data on gender attitudes of both partners in most panel studies. In addition, a growing body of research has provided evidence that both gender ideology and gendered assessments of economic resources are context dependent (Bühlmann et al., 2009; Gupta, Evertsson, Grunow, Nermo, & Sayer, 2010). Context dependence implies that focusing on micro-level mechanisms alone neglects the direct and indirect effects of welfare states and family policies in framing gendered housework trajectories and individual agency (Elder, 1998). While there is one study which focuses on examining housework division trajectories over several measurements in time among US couples (Lam, McHale, & Crouter, 2012), and a few recent studies which investigate the effect of relative resources versus gender ideology on the gendered division of housework (Schober, 2013; Evertsson, 2014) both approaches have not yet been tested using data on Germany. Our analysis thus investigates these micro-level theoretical mechanisms, which are supposedly at work in all developed market economies (e.g. Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008; Gupta et al., 2010) in the German context, thereby providing a test of external validity.

The second question draws on the same debate but is motivated, in addition, by concerns of life course theory and methodology. Elder (1998: 1) considered life trajectories "as modes of behavioral continuity and change" in the domains of family, work and education. He considered individual life transitions in these domains as parts of larger social trajectories, providing them with distinctive meaning and form. As both relative resources and normative frames appear to change over the course of couple-relationships, we argue it matters crucially how both processes unfold over time. Furthermore, following Elder (1998), both processes potentially influence – or are influenced by – subjective experiences of turning points over the life course, which potentially disrupt established developmental paths. Previous research found mothers to be more likely considering the transition to parenthood as a turning point in their life course, as compared to fathers. Men, in contrast, considered occupational

events as turning points more often than women did (Rönkä et al., 2003). We argue that previous studies fall short in disentangling the complex causal relationships existing between economic resources, gender ideology, family formation and housework. In order to overcome this problem we assess housework trajectories rather than single changes towards more or less egalitarian divisions and apply time-varying covariates. The findings of our study point at an empirical validation of earlier findings on the (in-)significance of relative resources and the potential impact of gender norms.

Our focus on housework trajectories is innovative and adds to the literature in various ways. First, we know that the division of housework changes frequently over the course of relationships (Grunow, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2012). Hence, we apply longitudinal multi-wave panel data from the *pairfam* data to capture these changes over time. Second, it is not clear what drives these changes as few data sets exist which allow for (a) testing various competing forces of change or (b) investigating how these forces come into play over the life course. Our data enable us to assess these processes over extended courses of couple relationships. Going beyond earlier studies, we are able to include time-varying measures of family formation and changes in partners' absolute and relative resources, while controlling for gender ideology. Third, our assessment of the interplay between gender ideology, economic resources and housework takes up Mayer's (2009: 426) assessment that "the interaction of psychological dispositions and processes and socially constructed life courses still awaits a systematic investigation with adequate data and research designs". Our study seeks to contribute novel insights on this interaction. We argue that our analytic strategy may be closer to the life course paradigm as compared to previous research because we are able to assess multiple changes over a longer stretch of couple-life time (Mayer, 2009: 414).

2. Life course perspective on studies of housework

Across the world, women still carry out the majority of routine housework and childcare in most families (Treas & Drobnic, 2010; Treas & Lui, 2013). In line with other scholars, we argue that applying a life course perspective to the phenomenon of largely persistent gendered housework patterns is illuminating and indispensable, if we want to investigate the mechanisms that contribute to the gendering of housework over time (Baxter, Haynes, Western, & Hewitt, 2013). We apply a life course perspective on the study of housework by, first, considering the social context in which couples divide paid and unpaid work in the German welfare state setting. Second, we highlight the interrelatedness of these divisions by conceptualizing the gendering interplay between the family as the realm of unpaid work and employment as the realm of paid work, employing the concept of linked lives. Third, drawing on the concepts of life course trajectories and turning points, we argue that individual and coupled pathways in these life domains are likely path-dependent, unless disrupted by major life course events. Drawing on previous research, we highlight the transition to parenthood as a phase in which individuals are especially susceptible to change.

2.1. Social context

"Historical forces shape the social trajectories of family, education, and work, and they in turn influence behavior and particular lines of development" (Elder 1998: 2). Individuals' trajectories across these various domains of life and their implications for further development have been considered basic elements of life course theory and research (Elder, 1998). While some individuals may be able to choose the trajectories they

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