



The tension between gender equality and doing gender Swedish couples' talk about the division of housework

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ABSTRACT

Sweden is considered as one of the most gender equal countries in the world and most Swedes claim to embrace gender equality. Yet, the majority of couples still organize their family lives according to traditional gendered patterns. This article aims to investigate how gender plays a role for how couples in Sweden talk about, articulate and frame their arguments regarding their division of housework. We identify three practices that act to support and reproduce a traditional gender order. These practices are: constructions of (un)suitability, placement of responsibility and comparison. Through these practices the couples' uneven division of housework is made into something other than a question of gender (in)equality, and change of the present order is made into a non-issue. We argue that the tension between striving for gender equality on the one hand and doing gender on the other, characterizes everyday interaction in modern couples. Recognizing this complexity is important for understanding the slow changes in gendered and gendering patterns and for the slow movement towards greater gender equality. The analysis brings the complex, interwoven and contradictory processes of doing gender to the fore.

Introduction

A large body of research has investigated the role of gender for the division of housework in couples. This article aims to contribute to this body of research by taking a look at how gender plays a role for how couples understand and explain their division of housework. In this paper we focus on how heterosexual couples in Sweden draw on gendered understandings (explicitly and implicitly) in how they talk about, articulate and frame their arguments regarding their division of housework. Our hope is that the results here will contribute to a deeper understanding of why couples share housework as they do, and ultimately, of why the move towards greater gender equality in couple relationships is so slow.

Many countries experienced a great increase in women's labor market participation and advances in other areas during the 1970s and 1980s. This development, often referred to as the gender revolution (Hochschild, 1989), affected mainly women who entered into male-dominated areas. However the trend leveled off in about 1990 and has therefore been referred to as stalled (England, 2010). This first half of this revolution was uneven and took place predominantly in the public spheres of politics, education and the labor market (Goldscheider,

Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). Women's entry into traditionally male spheres was not matched (at least to the same degree) by men's increased involvement in the domestic sphere (England, 2010), despite a slight increase in men's unpaid labor in the home (Hook, 2006). The result is that women still do more unpaid housework than men in the United States (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Coltrane, 2000; Coltrane, 2010) and internationally (Sani, 2014; Treas & Drobnic, 2010). This is also true in Sweden (Boye & Evertsson, 2014; Statistics Sweden, 2016), despite Sweden's status as one of the most gender equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2016). Goldscheider et al. (2015) suggest that the gender revolution has entered into a new phase and that we are currently in the middle of the second, familistic, half of the gender revolution, in which men will significantly increase their participation in childcare and unpaid domestic work. Given that research findings show that women still do more housework (and childcare) than their male partner, it is important to understand more about the factors that contribute to, as well as hinder, gender (in)equality in the home.

In order to further our understanding of the mechanisms behind the relatively slow progress towards gender equality in the home, qualitative studies are needed. These can help us better understand “the

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meanings that people attach to their division of labor patterns" (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010, 778). They can also allow a stronger focus on participants' own perspectives, practices, definitions and understandings of gender (Coltrane, 2000; Davis & Greenstein, 2009). This qualitative study, we believe can help to fill in the gaps in our knowledge by focusing on the ways that couples' understand and discuss their division of housework in terms of gender, in a broad sense. In this article, we will try to show how gender, in both explicit and implicit ways, is important for how women and men in couples conceptualize and share housework.

The aim of this article is to analyze why the progress towards a less gender traditional division of labor is so slow. We do this by investigating how couples discuss their division of housework. We are interested in investigating the role that gender plays for the ways that couples understand, talk about and share housework. In the analysis, we identify and discuss three main practices that occur in couples' talk about the division of housework. We also discuss how these practices are connected to the process of doing gender in couples.

Gender and gender equality in a Swedish context

Since 1970s Sweden has had explicit policies aimed at increasing gender equality in the labor market as well as in the home and as a result, egalitarian attitudes towards gender are widespread and stable in Sweden (Bernhardt, Noack, & Lyngstad, 2008; Kaufman, Bernhardt, & Goldscheider, 2017; Lundqvist, 2011). Broad political consensus regarding the importance of gender equality, as well as a strong **public discourse** about gender equality in Sweden has existed for decades. A long-standing policy goal in Sweden has been that "women and men must have the same responsibility for housework and have the same opportunity to give and receive care on equal terms" (Swedish Government, 2017). Gender equality in the home is seen as important in and of itself, but also because it is interconnected with gender equality in the labor market. The concept of gender neutrality is a central component of Swedish policies aimed at promoting gender equality (Lundqvist, 2011). Policies and benefits have been designed to encourage women's participation in the labor market as well as men's involvement in the family and household, through e.g. individualized income taxation, the expansion of generously subsidized public childcare, cash benefits for children and the right to paid, gender neutral parental leave (including three earmarked 'daddy months') (Lundqvist, 2011; Nyberg, 2012), all of which support the dual-earner, dual-carer family model (Neilson & Stanfors, 2014). Gender equality as a goal is integrated into almost all areas of Swedish society, from labor market laws, workplace policies, parents' use of parental leave, sports and culture, to official youth policies and Swedish school curriculum. This has served to spread awareness about gender equality, and establish it as a norm among the Swedish general public, including youths (Evertsson, 2013). The Swedish government, via campaigns to influence attitudes, policies and advocacy aimed at encouraging gender equality, provides relatively conducive conditions for the equal sharing of housework and care. This has contributed to the emergence of new norms for masculinity in Sweden. Measures aimed at establishing new ideals for masculinity have been important in efforts to increase gender equality in Sweden (Johansson, 2011). An example of measures that impacts behavior in the direction of greater gender equality as well as masculinity norms is the introduction of 'daddy months'; these months of parental leave are reserved for fathers (the equivalent number of months are reserved for mothers). The first daddy month was introduced in 1995 in order to encourage men to take out parental leave and today, four months of parental leave are reserved for fathers (Statistics Sweden, 2016). One aim with the introduction of daddy months was to contribute to a masculinity norm that includes fatherhood and care of children. The daddy months then, serve to provide men with greater concrete possibilities to be involved in childcare and the domestic sphere more generally, but also serve to influence

attitudes regarding masculinity. Gender norms then, are an important aspect of Sweden's efforts to increase gender equality through increasing men's participation in housework and childcare (Swedish Government, 2017).

The wide array of policies and measures aimed at facilitating gender equality are however not always transformed into gender equal solutions in couples' everyday lives (Ahlberg, Roman, & Duncan, 2008; Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Björnberg & Kollind, 2005; Evertsson & Nermo, 2007; Evertsson & Nyman, 2009; Nyman & Reinikainen, 2007; Statistics Sweden, 2016). This can be seen in e.g. the highly gender-segregated labor market, unequal pay for women and men and men's violence against women (SOU, 2005; Statistics Sweden, 2016), as well as in the fact that women and men (still) organize their family lives in quite gender-traditional (and gender-unequal) ways (Grönlund & Halleröd, 2008; Magnusson, 2008).

Research on the division of housework

In this section we discuss research that tries to understand how heterosexual couples share housework, with a focus on the role of gender. Most studies on the division of housework discuss factors influencing this in terms of micro and macro level factors. Studies with a macro level perspective take as a point of departure the importance of the national and cultural context for people's behavior. Structural arrangements are seen as influencing individuals' values and expectations in life, including their gender ideology (Öun, 2013). The focus in these studies is on how social policy, welfare state regimes and family policies affect the division of housework. The assumption here is that structural and cultural factors shape the ways that individuals organize their everyday lives. Norms and values regarding the family, personal autonomy and gender are transferred from the system to the individuals in the couples (Öun, 2013). Gendered roles and gender ideology on a societal level therefore play an active role in shaping how family life is organized, e.g. how housework is shared (Geist, 2005; Greenstein, 2009; Nyman, Reinikainen, & Stocks, 2013). Research has for instance found that in countries with conservative welfare regimes that actively support a traditional gender ideology and gender traditional ways of organizing family life, less equal sharing of housework is found (Geist, 2005; Nordenmark, 2013; Ruppanner, 2010). In Social Democratic welfare regimes that have policies that support gender equality, more equal sharing is found (Geist, 2005). The way a welfare state is organized both reflects (Ciccia & Bleijenbergh, 2014) and creates (Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Greenstein, 2009; Knudsen & Waerness, 2008; Öun, 2013; Tamilina & Tamilina, 2014) norms and cultural perceptions of gender relations and individuals' perceptions of their social world and their expectations and values, which in turn influences how housework is shared in couples.

On the micro level three prominent theoretical perspectives are often used to explain the gender gap regarding women's and men's involvement in household work (Coltrane, 2000; Davis & Wills, 2014; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). These perspectives focus more on what happens within couples. *Relative resource* theories state that the partner with greater external resources, e.g. higher levels of income and/or education, regardless of whether this is the woman or the man, can 'opt out' of housework, which is assumed to be a disutility. The basic assumption for the *time availability* perspective is that there exists a negative relationship between partners' share of housework and the time each partner spends in paid work in the labor market. Research finds empirical support for both of these theoretical perspectives, however, both of these theoretical perspectives have been found to be insufficient to explain the slow changes in achieving a more equal division of housework between partners. These two perspectives are gender neutral in contrast to the third theoretical perspective on the micro-level, which is the *gender ideology perspective*. This perspective includes the gender construction perspective and takes into account the importance of gender attitudes and posits that more egalitarian gender

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