



# Money isn't everything: Wives' earnings and housework time

Alexandra Killewald\*, Margaret Gough

Population Studies Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 426 Thompson St., No. 2050, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 April 2010

Available online 19 August 2010

### Keywords:

Household labor

Autonomy

Gender display

PSID

## ABSTRACT

The autonomy perspective of housework time predicts that wives' housework time falls steadily as their earnings rise, because wives use additional financial resources to outsource or forego time in housework. We argue, however, that wives' ability to reduce their housework varies by household task. That is, we expect that increases in wives' earnings will allow them to forego or outsource some tasks, but not others. As a result, we hypothesize more rapid declines in wives' housework time for low-earning wives as their earnings increase than for high-earning wives who have already stopped performing household tasks that are the easiest and cheapest to outsource or forego. Using fixed-effects models and data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, we find considerable support for our hypothesis. We further conclude that past evidence that wives who out-earn their husbands spend additional time in housework to compensate for their gender-deviant success in the labor market is due to the failure to account for the non-linear relationship between wives' absolute earnings and their housework time.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Among married couples, wives perform the majority of household labor even when both spouses work full-time (Kamo, 1988) and when wives earn as much as their husbands (Evertsson and Nermo, 2007). This inequality in the division of household labor contributes to a gender gap in leisure time between fully-employed husbands and wives and may also contribute to the gender gap in wages, if wives' more extensive housework responsibilities reduce the intensity of their labor market work (Hersch and Stratton, 1997; Noonan, 2001).

Brines (1994) proposed a provocative explanation for this phenomenon: that couples with "gender-deviant" relative earnings – that is, where the wife earns more than the husband – will compensate by adopting a gender-traditional division of household labor. Under this theory, wives' housework hours will fall as they contribute a larger share of the couple's income, up to the point that they contribute half of the couple's income. However, as wives' income share increases beyond this point, their housework hours will rise. Brines terms this pattern "gender display". To avoid confusion with the broader use of this term (West and Zimmerman, 1987), we refer to Brines' model as "compensatory gender display", emphasizing that this is a behavior enacted by breadwinner wives to compensate for their gender-deviant labor force outcomes.

The key empirical prediction of compensatory gender display is that breadwinner wives – wives who out-earn their husbands – will perform more housework than wives who have earnings parity with their husbands, and that, among breadwinner wives, housework hours will continue to rise as the wife's share of the couple's income continues to increase.

In contrast, the autonomy perspective hypothesizes that wives' own earnings are a better predictor of their time in household labor. Although the causal mechanism has not been directly tested, one possibility is that wives' increased

\* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 734 763 1428.

E-mail address: [akillewa@umich.edu](mailto:akillewa@umich.edu) (A. Killewald).

earnings provide increased financial resources to purchase market substitutes for their housework time. The autonomy perspective predicts consistent declines in wives' housework time as their earnings rise.

This paper challenges the predictions of compensatory gender display, but also argues that the autonomy perspective has insufficiently considered the constraints that lead even wives with high earnings to spend substantial time in housework. We hypothesize that limits in wives' ability to outsource or forego time in household labor will lead to small additional reductions in housework time for wives at the high end of the earnings distribution. We further hypothesize that evidence previously interpreted as indicative of compensatory gender display behavior is instead an artifact of failing to account for the non-linear relationship between wives' absolute earnings and their housework time. By appropriately controlling for this non-linear relationship, as well as using fixed-effects models to control for time-invariant attitudes and behaviors, we provide a rigorous evaluation of the theory of compensatory gender display. If no evidence is found for compensatory gender display, the supposition that wives are disadvantaged in terms of household labor time when they out-earn their husbands must be overturned.

Thus, the first goal of this paper is to test the validity of the assumption that the relationship between wives' earnings and their time in housework is linear. If a non-linear relationship is found, the second goal is to assess whether the evidence for compensatory gender display is robust to models that allow a more flexible relationship between wives' own earnings and their housework time. We begin by reviewing the existing literature on time in household labor, focusing on several resource- and gender-based theories. Next, we summarize our research questions and propose several reasons that the relationship between wives' earnings and their time in housework may be non-linear. We then describe our data and analytic strategy. We follow with the presentation of our results and discussion of their robustness to alternative specifications. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Resource-based theories of household labor

Wives' financial resources are acknowledged to affect their household labor time, although the form of this relationship is contested. A core question is whether wives' household labor time responds more strongly to their absolute earnings or their earnings relative to their husbands' earnings. We label these the autonomy perspective and the relative resources perspective, respectively. In both perspectives, spouses' financial resources are presumed to influence time in household labor net of time in the labor market. In other words, spouses with higher earnings are assumed to do less housework not simply because they spend, on average, more time in the labor market and therefore have less time available for household labor, but because they are advantaged by controlling greater financial resources. As a result, both perspectives imply that spouses' resources should influence household labor time even after controlling for labor market hours.

The relative resources perspective (referred to sometimes as the bargaining perspective or dependency perspective), assumes that the spouse who controls more resources will have a more powerful bargaining position and, thus, can better achieve his or her desired outcome (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). If housework is assumed to be an undesirable activity for both spouses, then, other things equal, the spouse with greater resources is expected to perform less housework than his or her partner (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Evertsson and Nermo, 2004). Under the relative resources perspective, wives' housework hours should fall *whenever* their financial resources rise relative to those of their husbands, as greater resources give them greater power to bargain out of undesirable household chores.

Spouses' relative financial resources may affect the balance of power within the relationship in two ways. First, spouses with higher wage-earning *potential* will have greater ability to support themselves in the event of a divorce. The spouse who is less dependent on the marriage for well-being will have a better bargaining position (Lundberg and Pollak, 1996; McElroy and Horney, 1981). Under this framework, spouses' relative financial resources are best operationalized by spouses' potential wages in the event of divorce (Pollak, 2005).

Alternatively, spouses' *current* financial contributions to the marriage may influence spouses' bargaining positions, as they influence what is perceived as a fair exchange between spouses. Thus, if both spouses spend the same amount of time in the labor market, but one spouse earns more, it may seem "fair" or "appropriate" to both spouses that the breadwinner spouse performs less household labor. As a result, spouses' relative financial resources can be measured by the share of the spouses' current earnings that are provided by the wife (or the husband). Our work follows this second operationalization, as relative earnings have been the dominant operationalization of spouses' relative financial resources in the empirical sociological literature on housework (see, Baxter et al., 2008; Bianchi et al., 2000; Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Evertsson and Nermo, 2004, 2007; Greenstein, 2000; Gupta, 2006, 2007; Presser, 1994).

Empirical evidence has tended to support the predictions of the relative resources perspective, finding that wives' time spent on housework is negatively associated with their earnings relative to their husbands' (Baxter et al., 2008; Bianchi et al., 2000; Bittman et al., 2003; Presser, 1994).

In contrast, the autonomy perspective emphasizes the role of the absolute level of wives' earnings in determining their household labor time. The causal mechanism for this relationship has not been directly tested, but the outsourcing of household labor has been suggested as a likely cause (Gupta, 2006, 2007). Under this perspective, it is economically rational for wives to reduce their time in housework as their earnings rise, as their greater financial resources allow them to purchase

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/956170>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/956170>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)