Great Expectations? Cohabitors Preferred and Actual Divisions of Labor

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Abstract

Cohabitors often express preferences for relatively egalitarian divisions of household labor. Nonetheless, despite their preferences, many couples find themselves replicating traditionally gendered labor arrangements even within these less institutionalized unions. Here, we attempt to illuminate this disconnect by examining how working and middle class cohabitors discuss their expectations for dividing their household responsibilities as well as how they feel about their actual divisions of labor. We find that, while both men and women expect that she will do most of the housework or they will share it equally, working class men, in particular, often have no clear expectations for dividing the domestic work. Further, while working class expectations of equality are rarely met, when at least one middle class partner expects to share the household chores equally, the couple most often participates in an egalitarian exchange. Working class women were the least satisfied with their actual housework arrangements.

Relationship formation among American young adults has changed dramatically over the last few decades. One of the most salient changes is the rise in non-marital cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu, 1999; Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008). Nearly 60% of young women have lived cohabited with a romantic partner (Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007). While many of these individuals will later marry (though perhaps not to the same partners they cohabited with), at least some cohabiting women prefer these less formalized arrangements because of their perceived fears of the gendered bonds of marriage (Elizabeth, 2001; Miller and Sassler 2010; Miller, Sassler, and Kusi-Appouh 2011).

Cohabitation is often discussed as a less-institutionalized relationship form that allows couples more freedom to create domestic arrangements with fewer gendered social constraints than those experienced by their married peers (Cherlin, 2004). In fact, cohabitors often express preferences for relatively egalitarian exchanges (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite 1995; Denmark, Shaw, and Ciali 1985; Kaufman 2000; Sassler and Goldscheider 2004). Nonetheless, despite their preferences, many cohabiting couples find themselves in traditionally gendered housework arrangements with women responsible for the majority of the household chores (Miller and Sassler, forthcoming; Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitze 1994). These unequal household arrangements may be especially salient for working class women as compared to their middle class counterparts, given the more gender-traditional attitudes of working class men, in particular (Deutsch 1999; Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Rubin 1994; Sassler and Miller 2011b).

A growing body of literature has examined this disconnect between expectations for housework arrangements and couples' housework realities from a quantitative perspective., finding that disconnects have significant negative effects on relationship quality (Frisco and Williams 2003; Greenstein 1996; Wilcox and Nock 2006), relationship stability (Frisco and

Williams 2003), and psychological well-being (Glass and Fujimoto 1994; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; Pina and Bengtson 1993). Nonetheless, most of these studies focus only on married individuals, and primarily for women at that. Further, much of the information we have about housework preferences and outcomes comes from responses to self-administered questionnaires administered in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which are not able to tell us in any great detail about why partners anticipated specific housework arrangements or how they feel about disconnects between expectations and outcomes when they exist. Here, we examine the ways that working- and middle-class cohabiting individuals discuss their initial expectations for household arrangements as well as their reactions to the difference between their expectations and their actual domestic divisions of labor. We find that, overall, working class women, in particular, experience the greatest disconnect between their expected and actual shares of household work, and, consequently, the greatest dissatisfaction related to the divisions of labor within their unions. Their discontent, more generally, may provide one explanation for the diverging family outcomes between those young adults with and without a college degree (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Martin 2006).

Method

There is currently a sizable body of research on the difference between feelings about how household labor should be divided and how it is actually divided, based primarily on nationally representative survey data collected in the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, while quantitative studies using such data can illuminate large scale social trends, they cannot reveal the complex ways in which couples construct gender within their relationships or provide an in-depth accounting of individuals' feelings about the ways in which their unions are gendered. Therefore, we use information from in-depth qualitative interviews to illuminate these processes

(Charmaz 1983). The data for this project are part of a larger-scale examination of working class and middle class cohabiting couples, focusing on relationship progression, domestic arrangements, and fertility decisions. For this study, we limit our sample to those who were 18-36 (the prime family formation years) and who have been living together for at least three months in order to ensure that the least stable couples are not a part of the analysis (Bracher and Santow 1998) as well as give couples some time to establish their domestic patterns after moving in together.

Research on alternative family forms and differential family experiences has traditionally focused either on the most privileged (e.g., Blair-Loy 2003; Hewlett 2002; Mason and Goulden 2004) or the most economically "fragile" couples and families (e.g., Anderson 1999; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Reed 2006). Few contemporary studies have examined those families who are not in the margins- those in working and middle class unions (See Gans 1962, and Rubin 1976; 1994 for classic examples of studies on working class families). While cohabitation is still most common among the less educated, the more educated- particularly those who have some college education – are increasingly likely to cohabit (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Not only are the reasons that working class and middle class couples choose to live together often different (cf. Sassler and Miller 2011a), but, in many instances, the outcomes of their cohabitations (e.g., breaking up, remaining cohabiting, or marrying) and how they feel about relationships differ as well (Licher, Sassler, and Turner 2011; Miller, Sassler, and Kusi-Appouh 2011). Despite the fact that both working and middle class couples lie in the median socioeconomic strata of the United States, the differences between the two are large enough to result in discrepant outcomes for those within relationships. In fact, these differences may help illuminate the diverging family

outcomes of those with and without a college degree (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Martin 2006). As such, we choose to compare and contrast their experiences.

Screening and Interviews

Couples were recruited in the greater Columbus, Ohio, metropolitan area between 2004 and 2006. Participants must have met a minimum income standard to be included in the sample (couples had to earn at least $15,000 from sources other than public assistance or familial assistance as one partner may have been staying home with children). Since the majority of the sample is relatively young, education was used as the primary determinant of social class. Those couples in which each partner had at least a bachelor's degree classified as "middle class" while those in which both partners had some college education or less were classified as "working class." Eight couples were educationally heterogamous- one partner had a bachelor's degree while the other had completed some college or less. These couples were delineated by their occupations. None of the working class individuals who have college degrees, for example, are working in professions that require those credentials, while the middle class individuals without college degrees are often successful small business owners.

Couples were interviewed separately, but simultaneously, in order to ensure complete confidentiality. The open-ended, semi-structured interviews were completed by the first author and two additional researchers. For purposes of this analysis, participants were asked to recall their expectations for how they would divide the housework prior to moving in together and to discuss their current divisions of household labor. Further, interviewees were asked to talk about the changes that have occurred in terms of their divisions of labor over time and the ways that they felt about those changes. Finally, individuals were asked about how they believe their divisions of labor might be different were they still dating but living separately or if they were to

marry. Interviews lasted between one and 2.5 hours, for which couples were paid a joint sum of $50.00.

Sample Information

Table 1 provides descriptive information about both the working class and the middle

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

class samples. On average, middle class individuals were somewhat older than their working class counterparts (by 1.9 years for men and .8 years for women). Given their greater educational achievement, it is not surprising that middle class individuals also outearned more their working class counterparts. The differences between groups in occupation also helped clarify their income differences; working class individuals frequently worked as telemarketers, as wait staff, or in computer support while middle class individuals were employed in professions such as architecture, education, and master's-level allied health. Whereas middle class couples were more homogenous in terms of race compared to working class couples, working class couples were more often closer in age than middle class couples. Finally, middle class individuals appeared to be following a more traditional family formation pathway in that few had children and over one-third were engaged at the time of their interviews. Comparatively working class individuals were more likely to have children (though not necessarily with their current partners) and less likely to be engaged. Of those working class couples who were engaged, most had been engaged for years but none had yet set a wedding date.

Analytic Strategy

All interviews were transcribed verbatim from digital recordings with all identifying information changed to protect respondents' privacy. We used a modified version of Burawoy's (1998) extended case method as the overall strategy for analysis. In the extended case method, coding schemes are derived both from past research (deductively) and emerge from repeated readings of the transcripts (inductively). All transcripts were first open coded line by line in order to generate broad themes such as overall domestic expectations or changes over time (Strauss and Corbin 1988). Next, the data was coded axially in order to look at linkages between topics as well as the variability within codes (e.g., the range of reasons why individuals may be satisfied with their current domestic arrangements.) Here, we also examined the specific characteristics of individuals who responded in particular ways with an emphasis on sex and social class. For example, we investigated whether those who found their domestic arrangements to be worse than expected were female, working class, or, more specifically, working class women. Finally, we used selective coding to refine categories and relate them to other concepts- for example, we looked at whether those who were satisfied with their domestic arrangements also felt that whichever partner worked fewer hours should be doing most of the household labor.

Preliminary Results

One of our initial findings was that couple level-concurrence was very low in terms of expectations for the division of household labor. Fewer than one-third of couples agreed on their expectations for how housework would be divided prior to moving in together. This is perhaps not surprising as only 12 couples appear to have discussed the issue prior to moving in. Of those who did have a conversation about the division of labor, the conversations of the middle class were more specific than those of their working class counterparts. For example, those middle class couples who discussed their expectations for housework before moving in together often

detailed particular chores that each partner would be responsible for. In contrast, their working class counterparts' strategies were generally that each partner would clean his or her rather amorphous "fair share." Because of this low concurrence and the fact that men and women often have different views of domestic divisions (Lee and Waite 2005; Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001), we therefore examined most of our data at the individual level (cf. of Miller, Sassler, and Kusi-Appouh 2011).

The 61 men and 61 women in this sample were all asked to describe what they had expected their divisions of labor to be like before they moved in with their partners. Participants gave one of four responses, ranging from the assumption that the female partner (or, rarely, the male partner) would do the majority of the housework to expecting to share the chores relatively equally. Still others admitted that they moved in together without ever stopping to consider how the housework would be divided.

Here, we did notice a number of differences by both social class and sex. Middle class individuals, for example, most often expected either to share the household tasks equally or anticipated that the female partner would do most of the housework. They often relied upon either past observations of their partners' level cleanliness or their personal beliefs in egalitarianism when formulating their opinions. We attribute the expectations for equal sharing and egalitarian belief systems to the liberalizing effect of higher education (Myers and Booth 2002). However, we find it somewhat curious that middle class women, in particular, most often assume that the female partner will be responsible for the bulk of the household chores. This seems to run counter to past research which finds that women with higher levels of income or education do less actual housework than their lower earning, less educated peers (cf. Hochschild 1989; Shelton and John 1993).

In contrast, working class individuals more often assumed that the male partner would do most of the housework (based primarily on his stated proclivities for cleaning) or admitted that they had not thought about how to divide the housework prior to moving in together. Fifteen working class individuals (most of whom were men) and 7 middle class individuals (all of whom were men) noted that they never considered which partner would do most of the domestic labor prior to moving in together. Given that individuals often revert to hegemonic patterns in the face of uncertainty (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) it is not surprising that couples most frequently agreed that the female partner does greater than 60% of the housework, though just over one-third of the middle class couples agreed that it was shared equally.

On the whole, the majority of individuals (over 80%) were generally satisfied with their divisions of labor. A few working class women were thrilled with the fact that their male partners shared the housework equally since they had initially expected to do most of the household chores. However, working class women, on the whole, expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with their domestic arrangements. A little over 20% of the entire sample noted that they were unhappy with the way they divided domestic labor; most of these individuals were female and generally had less than a college education. In all, 40% of working class women noted that they were frustrated or angry with their divisions of labor for a variety of reasons, including feeling "tricked" by what they saw as their partners' reduction in cleanliness since moving in together. Further, many of these women held strongly to the belief that whichever partner had more time should do most of the housework. A number found themselves working and/or attending school more hours per week than their partners, but did not view the men as taking on a correspondingly larger (or even equal) share of the household work.

Next Steps

In our subsequent work, we will examine the ways in which individuals' feelings about the disconnect between expectations and actual household divisions of labor are related to a variety of factors, including their expectations for the future of their current unions. Our goal is to use these cohabitors' own views to help explain the bifurcation of family outcomes among working class and middle class young adults.

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics by Social Class

	Whole Sample	Working Class	Middle Class
Number	122	60	62
Age			
Mean age men (years)	27.4	26.4	28.3
Mean age women (years)	24.8	24.4	25.2
Education			
HS/GED or less	7.4%	15.0%	0.0%
Some College or Associate's Degree	41.8%	78.3%	6.5%
Bachelor's Degree	37.7%	6.7%	67.7%
Master's Degree or higher	13.1%	0.0%	25.8%
Race			
White	76.2%	68.3%	83.9%
Latino	6.6%	10.0%	3.2%
Black	11.5%	16.7%	6.5%
Multiracial/Other	5.7%	5.0%	6.5%
EMPLOYMENT			
Full time worker	67.2%	51.7%	83.9%
Part time worker, not a student	8.2%	8.3%	8.1%
Part time worker and student	18.9%	31.7%	6.5%
Not working for pay	4.9%	8.3%	1.6%
INCOME			
Mean income	$26,838	$20,206	$33,257
No reported income	5.7%	6.7%	9.4%
$0,001-$19,999	33.6%	46.7%	21.0%
$20,000-$39,999	41.8%	38.3%	45.2%
$40,000-$59,999	11.5%	8.3%	14.5%
$60,000+	7.4%	0.0%	14.5%
PARENTHOOD VARIABLES			
Have children	21.3%	33.3%	9.7%
Do not have children	78.7%	66.7%	90.3%
RELATIONSHIP HISTORY			
Never married	91.0%	90.0%	91.9%
Previously married	9.0%	10.0%	8.1%
Never cohabited before	69.7%	66.7%	72.6%
Previously cohabitated	30.3%	33.3%	27.4%
MARRIAGE PLANS			
Engaged to current partner	28.7%	21.7%	35.5%
Hope to marry current partner, no firm plans	36.9%	31.7%	41.9%
Do not plan to marry current partner/unsure	23.8%	28.3%	19.4%
Plan to stay with current partner, but never want to marry	10.7%	13.3%	8.1%
Length of time dating partner (in months)	36.3	37.3	35.3