

## 8. The noneffects of class on the gendered division of labor in the home

The central objective of this chapter is to explore systematically the empirical relationship between *the location of households in the class structure* and *gender inequalities in performance of housework*. Since the middle of the 1970s, class analysts interested in gender, particularly those rooted in the Marxist tradition, have placed domestic labor at the center of analysis. In a variety of different ways, they have argued that the linkage between the system of production, analyzed in class terms, and the domestic division of labor, analyzed in gender terms, was at the heart of understanding the social processes through which gender relations were themselves reproduced (or perhaps even generated) in capitalist societies. Sometimes this argument took a rather reductionist form, particularly when the performance of unpaid domestic labor by women in the home was explained by the functional requirements of capital accumulation.<sup>1</sup> In other cases, the argument was less reductionist, emphasizing the nature of the class-generated constraints imposed on strategies of men and women as they negotiated gender relations within the household rather than the functional fit between capitalism and patriarchy. And, in still other analyses, the possibilities of systematic contradictions between the logics of capitalist class domination and patriarchal male domination were entertained. In all of these analyses, in

<sup>1</sup> The debate over the functional relationship between capitalist exploitation and unpaid domestic labor by housewives came to be known as the "domestic labor debate" in the 1970s. The essential argument of the class-functionalist position was: (1) unpaid domestic labor had the effect of lowering the costs of producing labor power; (2) this increased the rate of capitalist exploitation since capitalists could pay lower wages; (3) in an indirect way, therefore, capitalists exploited housewives; (4) the basic explanation for the subordination of women – or at least, for the reproduction of that subordination – lay in the ways such domestic production served these functions for capitalism. For a review of this debate see Molyneux (1979).

spite of the differences in theoretical argument, the role of domestic labor in the linkage between class relations and gender relations was a central theme.

With this theoretical preoccupation, it might have been expected that there would have developed a substantial body of research exploring the empirical relationship between the domestic division of labor and classes. This has not happened. While there are historical and qualitative case studies which examine the domestic division of labor and a few of these attempt to explore the class variations in such patterns, there is almost no research that tries to map out in a systematic quantitative manner the relationship between class and the gender division of labor in the household.

The basic objective of this chapter, then, is to explore empirically the relationship between class and the gendered domestic division of labor. More specifically, we will examine how the proportionate contribution by husbands to housework in dual-earner families varies across households with different class compositions.

### 8.1 Theoretical expectations

As in chapter 7, because of limitations of available data for spouses' class and because of limitations in sample size, the empirical investigations of this chapter will rely on a stripped-down class concept. In this case we will distinguish three categories: the self-employed (consisting of employers and petty bourgeois), "middle class" (employees who occupy a managerial or supervisory position within authority structures and/or are employed in an professional, managerial or technical occupations) and working class (all other employees). This simple three-category class variable in principle yields nine family-class locations. Unfortunately, again because of the relatively small sample size, there were too few people in family-class locations involving the self-employed to be able to differentiate all five of these categories. As a result, for families involving self-employment we will not distinguish between the husband and wife being self-employed. We will thus analyze family-class composition and housework using the following seven family-class categories: 1. homogeneous self-employed households; 2. one spouse self-employed, one middle class; 3. one spouse self-employed, one working class; 4. homogeneous middle class household; 5. husband middle class, wife working class; 6. husband working class, wife middle class; 7. homogeneous working-class household. Our em-

pirical task, then, is to explore how inequality between husbands and wives in housework varies across the categories of this family-class composition typology.

While neither Marxism nor Feminism has a well-developed body of theory about the *variability* of the domestic division of labor across households with different class compositions, nevertheless there are some general expectations within class analysis and feminism that point towards certain broad hypotheses about this relationship. We will explore four such hypotheses.

#### *Proletarianization and gender equality*

The most well-known discussion of the gender division of labor in classical Marxism is found in Frederick Engels' study, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Engels 1968 [1884]). Engels argued that male domination within the family was rooted in male control of private property. The pivot of this linkage was the desire by men to insure that their property was inherited by their children. To accomplish this, men needed to control the fertility of women. Given the power and status they had by virtue of controlling property, men were able to translate this desire into practice. The broad institutions of male domination, Engels argued, are built upon this foundation.

On the basis of this reasoning, Engels' argued that male domination would wither away in the households of propertyless proletarians:

Here, there is a complete absence of all property, for the safeguarding and inheritance of which monogamy and male domination were established. Therefore, there is no stimulus whatever here to assert male domination . . . Moreover, since large-scale industry has transferred the woman from house to the labour market and the factory, and makes her, often enough, the breadwinner of the family, the last remnants of male domination in the proletarian home have lost all foundation. (Engels, 1968 [1884]: 508).

Engels' reasoning leads to two basic hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1. Working-class egalitarianism.* The more proletarianized is a household, the more housework will tend to be equally divided between husbands and wives. The homogeneous working-class family, therefore, should have the most egalitarian distribution of housework.

*Hypothesis 2. Petty bourgeois inegalitarianism.* Households within which private ownership of the means of production remains

salient will have a more inegalitarian division of housework. The homogeneous petty bourgeois household should therefore have the least egalitarian distribution of housework.

#### *Sexism and class cultures*

One of the persistent images in popular culture is the contrast between the middle-class husband with an apron helping in the kitchen, and the working-class husband tinkering with the car or drinking in a bar with his friends. There are many possible mechanisms which might underwrite this contrast. The premium placed on physical toughness and male solidarity in manual labor may constitute a material basis for an exaggerated masculine identity in the working class. In line with the arguments of Melvin Kohn (1969) about the relationship between work and values, the greater cognitive complexity of middle-class jobs may encourage a more flexible and open set of attitudes towards gender roles. Regardless of the specific mechanism, this image leads to a specific prediction about class and the gender division of labor:

*Hypothesis 3. Class cultures.* Working-class men will, in general, do proportionately less housework than middle-class men. Homogeneous working-class households should therefore have the most inegalitarian distribution of housework, while homogeneous middle-class households should be the most egalitarian.

#### *Class and power within the family*

An important theme in the sociology of gender is the problem of bargaining power between men and women within households. Particularly in an era in which gender roles are being challenged, the division of labor in the household should not be viewed as simply the result of a script being followed by highly socialized men and women. Rather, the amount of housework done by husbands should be viewed as at least in part an outcome of a process of contestation, conflict and bargaining.

The class location of husbands and wives bears on their respective power in the household in two ways. First, as in any bargaining situation, the resources people bring to household bargaining affects their relative power. In these terms, class inequalities between men and women would be expected to be translated into power differentials

within the household. The more economically dependent a wife is on her husband, the weaker will be her bargaining position within the household and thus the more inequalitarian the gender division of labor is expected to be. This would imply when wives are in more advantaged class locations than their husbands, housework should be more equally divided. Second, quite apart from sheer material resources, status differentials are likely to play a role in bargaining situation (Coverman 1985). To the extent that wives occupy lower status in the labor force than their husbands, they are thus also likely to be in a weaker bargaining position within the household.

Taking these two issues together, leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4. Class bargaining power.* In households in which the wife is in a more privileged class location than her husband she will have greater relative bargaining power and thus her husband is likely to do more housework. Households with middle-class wives and working-class husbands are thus likely to be the most egalitarian.

#### *Autonomy of gender relations*

One of the core feminist theses about gender relations in capitalist society is that they have a certain degree of real autonomy with respect to other causal processes. On the one hand, this means that gender is socially constructed rather than a mere expression of biological processes. On the other hand, it means that in the social processes within which this construction takes place, gender is not reducible to any other social phenomena, particularly class or the economy. While there may be important causal interactions between class and gender, gender relations are not mere functions of class or anything else, and in this sense they have some genuine autonomy.

An implication of relatively strong versions of the gender-autonomy thesis is that the amount of housework men do will be primarily determined by the nature of gender relations and gender struggles, not by such things as class. While this does not mean that class would have no effects at all, these effects should be fairly muted. This suggests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5. Gender autonomy.* The degree of equality in the gender division of labor will not vary very much across households with different class compositions.

## 8.2 Results

As in the previous chapter, we will explore this problem comparatively in Sweden and the United States. Sweden and the United States are almost at opposite poles among developed capitalist countries in terms of economic inequalities in general and the gender dimension of inequality in particular. The Swedish state has poured much greater resources into public childcare, paid parental leaves and other programs which might impact on the gender division of labor within families. A comparison of inequalities in housework in the two countries, therefore, may give some insight into the extent to which this egalitarianism in the public sphere is reflected in greater egalitarianism in the private sphere.

We will present the results in three steps. First, we will examine briefly the overall distributions of housework in the two countries. This is mainly to provide a background context for the rest of our analysis. Second, we will examine the overall patterns of class variation in the husband's performance of housework. Finally, we will examine how these patterns are affected when various other variables are included in the analysis. In particular, we will be concerned to examine the effect of including education in the equation, since it might be thought that what at first looks like class differences in housework performance could in fact be education differences.

#### *Husband's housework contributions: descriptive results*

Our basic measure of husband's contribution to housework is a weighted average of five routine housework tasks (routine housecleaning, cooking, meal cleanup, grocery shopping and laundry) and childcare. We also calculated the measure excluding childcare, but none of the results were substantively affected.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, according to our female respondents, husbands in dual earner households performed on average 20.5% of the housework. According to our male respondents, their contribution was 26.2%. In Sweden the corresponding figures are 25.1% and 28.5%. These figures are very much in line with the estimates from other studies, including those which used sophisticated time budgets to calculate male contributions to housework. Most research indicates that in families within which both husbands and wives are in the paid labor force, men do between 20% and 30% of housework in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> The details for the construction of this variable can be found in Wright (1997: 304-309).

In both countries, therefore, male respondents report slightly higher contributions to housework than their wives, although the difference is not striking.

Overall, Swedish husbands in two-earner households appear to do a somewhat greater proportion of housework than their American counterparts (25% vs. about 20% according to female respondents). If anything, this is an underestimate of the real difference between the two countries in gender inequality in housework, since a much higher proportion of Swedish married women in the labor force than of American married women are part-time employees. The average number of hours worked per week by the wives in our sample is 30.9 in Sweden and 39.9 in the United States. If we adjust for differences in hours of paid labor force participation, then the difference in husbands' contribution to housework between the two countries is even more striking: in two-earner families in which the wife works 40 hours a week, her husband would be expected to do about 20% of the housework in the United States, whereas in a comparable family in Sweden, the husband would be expected to do over 38% of the housework.<sup>3</sup> While the data do indicate that housework remains unevenly divided in both countries, the degree of gender inequality in the household is clearly greater in the United States than in Sweden.

#### *Variations in husband's housework across class location*

Table 8.1 presents the mean amounts of housework performed by husbands within dual-earner families of different class compositions for the United States and Sweden.<sup>4</sup> The most striking feature of these results is how modest are the differences across classes, especially among employee-only households, in both countries. While there are somewhat larger class differences in Sweden than in the United States (although

<sup>3</sup> See Wright (1997: 289) for discussion of the technical details of these estimates.

<sup>4</sup> There are reasons to believe that the reports by wives of their husband's contributions to housework are likely to be more accurate than the reports of the husbands themselves, both because women are generally likely to have a more accurate view of the total amount of housework done in a household and because men may be prone to exaggerate their contributions. I have therefore analyzed all of the results in this chapter separately for women as well as for the combined sample. As it turns out, there are no significant differences between the results of these separate analyses, so I will only report the results for the combined sample of men and women respondents in this chapter. Results for women and men separately can be found in Wright (1997: chapter 11).

Table 8.1 Mean levels of husband's percentage contribution to total housework<sup>a</sup> by family-class composition<sup>b</sup> (dual-earner households only)

		United States (N = 537)		
		Husband's job class		
		Self-employed	Middle class	Working class
Wife's job class	Self-employed	17.1	22.8	16.1
	Middle class	22.8	23.9	25.5
	Working class	16.1	22.3	27.1
		Sweden (N = 641)		
		Husband's job-class		
		Self-employed	Middle class	Working class
Wife's job class	Self-employed	16.0	25.1	19.6
	Middle class	25.1	32.4	27.8
	Working class	19.6	25.1	28.1

a. "Total Housework" is a weighted average of five household tasks (routine cleaning, cooking, cleaning up after meals, groceries and laundry) and childcare (for families with children under 16 living in the household), and simply of the five housework tasks for families without children in the home. The weights are determined by the average amount of time per week these tasks take according to time-budget studies. For details see Wright (1997: 304-307).

b. Because of sample size limitations for those family-class compositions involving self-employed people, there were not enough cases to generate accurate measures of all of the five cells in which there was one self-employed spouse and one wage-earner spouse. For these cells, therefore, it was necessary to ignore the gender issue. We therefore distinguish such families from families in which there are no self-employed members, but we ignore whether the self-employed spouse is the husband or the wife.

these differences across countries are themselves not statistically significant), in both countries the class variations are very muted. In regression equations predicting husband's housework, the seven categories distinguishing family-class types only explain about 3% of the variance in housework in the United States and 6% in Sweden. Very little of the overall variation in husband's housework, therefore, is accounted for by variation in household class composition.<sup>5</sup>

If we look a little more closely at the results, there are some moderate differences between countries that are worth noting. First, among the four employee-only family-class categories, in Sweden husbands in the pure middle-class household perform significantly more housework than husbands in the other three employee-only class categories (32.4% compared to 25–28% in the other households), whereas in the United States they do not (23.9% compared to 22–27%). Swedish middle-class husbands in pure middle-class households do 8.5 percentage points more housework than their American counterparts (32.4% compared to 23.9%), whereas the differences between the United States and Sweden in the three other employee family-class locations is only one or two percentage points.

Turning to the self-employed family-class categories, we find that there are significant class differences between these households and some employee households within both countries, although again we find that in Sweden the class differences are somewhat larger than in the US. In the United States, husbands in families consisting of two self-employed persons or one self-employed member and one working-class member do less housework than in any other family-class location (only about 16–17% of total housework compared to around 22–27% in other locations). In Sweden, in both of these family-class locations (households with both spouses self-employed and households with one self-employed and one worker) husbands also perform less housework than husbands in any other class location (16–20% in these two types of self-employed households compared to 25–32% in other households). The contrast between the pure self-employed household and the pure middle-class household in Sweden is especially striking. In the former men perform only half as much housework as in the latter. In both

<sup>5</sup> This low explained variance could be the result of severe measurement problems in the dependent variable, husband's contribution to housework. However, when we add other variables besides class to the equation, the explained variation increases to 28% for the sample of Swedish women and 18% for US women, which suggests that this is not the case.

countries, therefore, it appears that in what might be thought of as traditional petty bourgeois households a more traditional form of patriarchy exists.

The results for class differences in Table 8.1 do not control for any other attributes of households. It is always possible that, if such controls were added to the equation, class differences might be strengthened. Suppose, for example, that age affects the housework contributions by men (for example, younger men might perform more housework because of historical changes in expectations) and that age also affects class location (younger men are more likely to be working class). This could have the effect of suppressing class differences if, all other things being equal, working-class men do less housework than men in other class locations. If this were the case, then class differences would appear greater in an analysis in which age was controlled.

As it turns out, the inclusion of a fairly wide range of control variables in the analysis – education, hours of paid work, wife's income contribution to the household, total family income, attitudes towards gender, age, the presence of children under 16 in the household – did not significantly affect the magnitude of the class differences observed in the simple analysis in Table 8.1. If anything, the class differences were reduced when some of these controls were included in the analysis (see Wright 1997: 293–300 for details).

### 8.3 Implications

Overall, the basic implication of these results is that location within the class structure is not a very powerful or systematic determinant of variations in the gender division of labor across households. This is most consistent with Hypothesis 5, the gender autonomy hypothesis. This is decidedly not what I had expected when I began the analysis. Indeed, as part of my general agenda of class analysis, I was initially quite bent on demonstrating that class was a significant part of the explanation of variations in gender practices. When I initially encountered such marginal class effects, I therefore tried many alternative ways of operationalizing the details of the class variable and aggregating the class distinctions. I examined the separate effects of husband's and wife's class rather than simply family-class composition. I changed the boundaries of the sample, restricting it to two-earner families with two full-time workers, or two-earner families with and without children. I even explored the possibility that class was linked to the tails of the distribu-

tion of housework – to the contrast between highly egalitarian and inegalitarian households – rather than to the distribution as a whole. None of these manipulations of the data changed the essential contours of the results: class location is simply not a powerful determinant of the amount of housework husbands perform.

This does not mean that class has no relevance whatsoever for the analysis. In Sweden, at least, husbands in property-owning households (especially the purely self-employed households) seem to do significantly less housework than husbands in employee households (even after controlling for the range of variables in the more complex multivariate analysis). These results therefore provide some modest support for part of Engels' classic argument about property ownership and male domination. Still, while this specific class effect does seem robust, it nevertheless is not at the center stage of the process by which variations in gender relations are produced and negotiated within families. And, in any case, there are no consistent, significant class effects on housework in the United States data. On balance, therefore, there is no support in the data at all for the hypotheses 1, 3 and 4 – the working-class egalitarianism hypothesis, the class culture hypothesis and the class bargaining power hypothesis – and at best very limited support in Sweden for Hypothesis 2, the petty bourgeois inegalitarianism hypothesis.

There are possible responses to these results that a staunch defender of class analysis might propose. First of all, we have restricted the analysis to two-earner families. It could certainly be the case that class plays an important role in determining the basic decisions within households concerning wives' labor force participation in the first place, and as all research on the topic indicates, this certainly affects the relative (but not necessarily absolute) amount of housework done by husbands. There is, however, little empirical support for this response in our data. The labor force participation rates of wives do not vary dramatically across husbands' class location either in the United States or in Sweden (Wright 1997: 302). Also, while husbands in all classes do a higher proportion of housework when their wives are in the labor force, the pattern of variation across classes does not itself differ very much between two-earner and single-earner households in either Sweden or the US.

A more promising defense of class analysis shifts the focus from the problem of variations across households to the more institutional issue of the relationship between the political mobilization of classes on the one hand and gender relations on the other. One might argue that the

degree of housework egalitarianism in the society as a whole depends, in part, on processes of class politics which reduce or increase overall economic inequality. The greater egalitarianism of the gender division of labor within Swedish households is plausibly linked to the greater societal egalitarianism produced by the combined effects of Swedish social democracy and the labor movement.

While I would not want to minimize the importance of class politics in the formation of the Swedish welfare state, nevertheless it is problematic to attribute Swedish gender politics entirely to the logic of political class formation. Swedish social democracy has not merely produced an amorphous economic egalitarianism driven by working-class progressive politics; it has also supported a specific agenda of gender egalitarianism rooted in political involvement of women. As Moen (1989) indicates, particularly in the 1970s, the Social Democratic government enacted a series of reforms specifically designed to transform the relationship between work, gender and family life: in 1971, separate income-tax assessments were made mandatory for husbands and wives (which established the principle that each partner should be economically independent); in 1974, parental leave was established giving both mothers and fathers the right to share paid leaves after the birth of a child; in 1978 paid leave was extended to 270 days and in 1980 to 360 days; in 1989, parents of infants became legally entitled to six-hour days, thus encouraging the expansion of opportunities for shorter work weeks. Furthermore, as reported by Haas (1981: 958), a specific objective of cultural policy in Swedish education is to encourage gender equality in childcare and, to a lesser extent, domestic chores. It seems likely that the greater egalitarianism within Swedish households has as much to do with these specific family-work policies and educational practices as it does with the more general class-based egalitarianism of Swedish society. To be sure, the class politics of social democracy helped to sustain a set of political and social values favorable to the enactment of such policies; but it seems unlikely that such policies can themselves be primarily explained in class terms.

One final line of response of class theorists to this research could be to shift the problem from the relationship between family-class location and gender to the relationship between class structure as such and gender. Instead of asking how the gender division of labor within families varies across locations within a class structure, the focus of analysis would be on how the gender division of labor varies across different kinds of class structures. Such an investigation could either be

posed at the mode of production level of analysis, involving comparisons of capitalist class structures with different kinds of noncapitalist class structures, or at a more concrete level of analysis, involving comparisons across capitalist class structures at different stages of development. It is certainly possible that the central dynamics of capitalism as a specific kind of class system of production provide the most important explanations for the changing forms and degrees of labor force participation of women over the past century in Western capitalist countries, and these changing forms of labor force participation in turn provide the central structural basis for transformations of gender relations within families, reflected in changes in husbands' participation in housework. The trajectory of development of the class structure of capitalism, therefore, might explain much of the trajectory of changes in gender relations even if gender relations do not vary systematically across different locations within a given class structure. For the moment, however, such arguments must remain speculative hypotheses. Much additional research is needed to validate or modify such claims.

Where does this leave us? Feminists have long argued for the autonomy of gender mechanisms in explaining the production and reproduction of male domination. While Marxist class analysis has generally come to acknowledge this autonomy, nevertheless there has remained a tendency for Marxists to see class as imposing systematic limits within which such autonomous gender mechanisms operate. The data analysis in this chapter indicate that, at least in terms of the micro-analysis of variations in gender relations within housework across households, there is basically no support for the view that class plays a pervasive role. The class effects are robustly weak – virtually nonexistent in the United States, and largely confined to the effects of self-employment in Sweden. While *economic* factors do seem quite relevant – the number of hours worked by wives in the labor force is a relatively strong determinant of variations in housework as is the wife's contribution to household income (at least in Sweden) – the relevance of these economic factors is not closely linked to class as such.

## 9. The gender gap in workplace authority

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In this chapter we will explore the intersection of gender inequality and one specific dimension of class relations – the authority structure within workplaces. No one, of course, would be surprised by the general fact that workplace authority is unequally distributed between men and women in all of the countries we examine. What might be surprising to most people, as we shall see, is the specific pattern of cross-national variation in the gender gap in authority. To cite just one example, in the United States the probability of a man in the labor force occupying an “upper” or “top” management position is 1.8 times greater than the probability of a woman occupying such a position, whereas in Sweden, the probability for men is 4.2 times greater than for women. The objective of this chapter is to document and to attempt to explain these kinds of cross-national variations in gender inequality in workplace authority in seven developed, capitalist countries – the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, Norway and Japan. In doing so we are particularly interested in revealing the extent to which these patterns reflect variations in gender discrimination in various forms.

### 9.1 Analytical strategy for studying the “gender gap”

The ideal data for analyzing gender discrimination in access to authority would include direct observations of the discriminatory acts that cumulatively shape the outcomes. Since such data are never available in systematic, quantifiable form, research on gender inequalities in labor market outcomes typically relies on indirect methods of assessing discrimination. We will adopt a strategy which can be called the “net gender gap” approach. The basic idea is this. We begin by measuring the “gross gender gap” in authority in a country. This is simply a measure of