

## **Uncovering the Cover Story: Research Methods and Domestic Labour**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper outlines findings from a qualitative project based on interviews with parents and children in ten families, and discusses their significance for the study of domestic labour. In interviews, participants' initial answers explained that the way they do domestic labour is not about gender; it is about choice, efficiency, and differences in skills, and it's all good. This account formed the 'dominant story' in most families. Some participants went on to express dissatisfaction with their domestic arrangements. Dissatisfaction was related to the actual performance of housework tasks, and to the work involved in taking responsibility for domestic labour, and organizing who will do what. In most families these 'submerged' stories were told by women. If the families I interviewed had been studied using fixed-choice questions, we would hear only the account that says domestic work is shared and everything is fine: what Hochschild (1989) called the 'cover story'. My research demonstrates the importance of supplementing quantitative data with findings from qualitative studies. If this does not happen, government responses around work and family will be based on data that present an optimistic view of egalitarian domestic practice that does not reflect people's experience of the families they live in.

While completing a qualitative study that looks at how domestic labour is negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids, I was struck by how differently the families I interviewed would look if they had been studied using different methods. This paper introduces my research and outlines its findings, then discusses their significance for the study of domestic labour.

### **Background to the study**

In the literature around domestic labour there is debate over how much change has occurred in the division of labour between women and men, where such change is going, and whether the slow pace of change is a problem (Bittman 2000). While researchers such as Coltraine (2000) and Sullivan (2004) argue that the time women

and men spend doing domestic work is converging and will continue to do so, others such as McMahon (1999) and Craig (2004) argue that the persistence of gendered patterns in the division of labour is more striking than the small changes that have occurred, and that further convergence is unlikely.

Different views are supported by findings from studies that use different methods. Surveys that ask fixed-choice questions offer more support for a 'convergence' view than do time-diary surveys or qualitative studies. For example, fixed-choice survey studies show younger men as spending more time on domestic work than older men, while time-use surveys do not (Baxter 2005:314, Bittman 1995:11). Similarly, qualitative studies report higher levels of conflict over domestic labour, than studies that ask fixed-choice questions (Dempsey 1997:227).

Although quantitative studies indicate that most people regard sharing of domestic work as a good thing (deVaus 1997:9-10), some researchers argue that a gendered division of labour persists because it reflects what people really want (Uhlmann 2004:95). The present study looks closely at people's accounts of their domestic arrangements in order to see how domestic labour is negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids, and to contribute to the debates in the literature outlined above.

## **Methods**

I defined domestic labour as including household tasks, planning and organising, and emotion work. In a previous study I had found this definition to be effective in capturing the work involved in taking responsibility for domestic tasks as well as doing them, as well as in negotiating who does what, while keeping everybody happy in the process (Carter 2003). I conducted in-depth interviews with two parents and two or three children in each of ten families. Adults were aged between 40 and 52, and children between eleven and eighteen. Participants lived in eastern suburbs of Melbourne, and most adults were tertiary educated.

I interviewed each person separately. I asked: 'What gets done? Who does what? Does it work well? Is it fair? And, How do you think it should be?' I asked adults how they learned about domestic labour in their families of origin and in share houses, and I asked kids how they see domestic labour happening when they are adults.

In analyzing the data I focused on the way people explained their arrangements for domestic labour, and how accounts from different family members fit together (see Carter 2004). A similar approach to analysis, using accounts from couples, was employed by Maher and Singleton (2003).

## **Findings**

Findings around the 'who does what' of domestic work were consistent with those that appear in ABS data. In most families women did most of the domestic work, and men and kids did a little (Bittman 1995, 2000: Craig 2004).

In five families there was conflict around domestic labour, and in five there was not. In two families the woman did not want her husband or kids to participate in domestic work, and there was no conflict over domestic labour. In three families there had previously been conflict, as the woman had wanted her husband and kids to do domestic work, but she has now given up trying to make this happen. In three families the woman persisted in trying to get her husband and kids to do domestic work, and conflict was simmering just below the surface. In two families conflict over domestic labour was overt, and ongoing.

In the families in which there was no conflict over domestic labour, women had reduced their hours of paid work or given up paid work altogether in order to give priority to domestic obligations. In families where women had increased their hours of paid work, there was conflict over domestic labour. In families where domestic labour was problematic for women, it was usually not a problem for the men and kids who lived with them.

In interviews most people began by saying that domestic labour is not a problem for their family, and the way they do things is good. There was a common set of ideas people called on when explaining this.

The first ideas were about choice. Women and men said that the way they do domestic labour is a consequence of the choices they have made. Choices most commonly referred to were those to have children; to pursue a particular career, or careers; and to send the kids to private schools. Some women said also that if their partners and kids did less domestic work than the woman would like, that is 'my fault really, because I haven't trained them'.

Next, domestic arrangements were explained with reference to ideas about efficiency, and differences in skills and preferences. In some accounts differences in skills and preferences were attributed to differences between individuals, and in others, differences were explained as associated with gender.

Women referred to ideas about gender earlier, and more often, than men did. When men mentioned gender it was usually to say that their division of labour 'is not about gender or anything', although some men went on to explain, later, that it really is. Older kids said that who does what domestic work has nothing to do with gender, while younger kids did not. Younger kids said, 'Mum does it because she's mum'.

Underneath these dominant stories were other stories, told mostly by women. These said that the way domestic labour happens is not good really, and the woman should be able to have some leisure and pursue other priorities just as others do. In most families these themes appeared in women's accounts, and were acknowledged to a limited degree or not at all in accounts from other family members.

The next section presents the example of one family, to illustrate the patterns described above. The Napier family is one in which conflict is 'simmering'. In this example we can see also how different this family would look, if studied using different research methods. All names used here are pseudonyms.

### **The Napier family**

Josephine and Henry Napier are in their late 40s and have been married for 20 years. Both work full-time in management positions in large organisations. Henry's job is more senior and more highly paid than Josephine's, but she works more hours than Henry and is directly responsible for many more staff. Their sons Simon and Dominic are aged fourteen and fifteen.

All family members do some domestic tasks, on a regular basis. From Monday to Thursday there is a cooking roster; the kids stack and un-stack the dishwasher most days; and Henry does some of the laundry and most of the ironing. A cleaner, who comes once a week, cleans floors and bathrooms. Other tasks are done by Josephine.

When I asked family members what they think about how this works, the first cut answers explained that domestic work is all shared, and it's all fine. At the start of their interviews, the adults told the familiar story about choice. They said, 'we do

these jobs because we choose to', and feeling a bit pressured at home is a consequence of those choices.

As the stories continue, we start to see that it's not all fine. Josephine explained that she feels she is still left with more than her share of tasks, and she finds this burdensome. Josephine's account, and those from Henry and the boys, described Henry resisting doing additional tasks, using a range of strategies that are familiar from other studies (for example Hochschild 1989; Komter 2001). Henry does domestic tasks in a chaotic manner that creates more work than it saves. By Henry and the boys this incompetence is taken as a joke, and seen to be part of Henry's character as a man, rather than these being tasks he could learn to do better if he chose to. Henry claims not to notice or not to believe that some domestic tasks need doing. When Josephine tries to discuss this, Henry deflects discussion in a jokey but derisive way. Josephine finds these responses hurtful, and avoids asking Henry to do things.

More than who does what tasks, the sticking point around domestic labour in this family is about responsibility. All responsibility for identifying what needs to be done, and making sure it happens - in my terms, the work of 'planning and organising' - rests with Josephine. Josephine wants Henry to share in this work, and Henry resists. As his interview progressed, Henry talked about this. He said it is not fair that he does not take on any of this work, but he just does not want to. Henry explained:

I plan and organise all day [at work] and when I come home I want to turn off. I guess Josephine could say she does too and so I should share that work, but I'm not stepping up to that plate at the moment.

Henry said several times 'If Josephine died tomorrow' he could do the work of planning and organising, as well as the emotion work involved in looking after the boys, but, 'When someone else is there and is doing that work, we tend to step away from our responsibilities a bit'. Although he was candid and thoughtful in talking to me, Henry had not said any of these things to Josephine. Henry said initially that their domestic arrangements are fair, and later on, that they are not. He reflected that if their arrangements were fair, that would be 'better for Josephine, but less better for me'.

The strategy that enables Henry to resist further change is refusing to talk. Henry refuses to talk to Josephine particularly about housework, and generally about anything to do with feelings. The outcome is that Josephine is left with the work of doing more housework tasks than the others do, plus all the household management, as well as the task of explaining to herself and to me that this state of affairs is okay.

Henry and Josephine both explained their division of labour with reference to ideas about differences in skills and preferences. Early in Henry's account he said emphatically that these differences were not to do with gender. Later on he said they were, and that women and men have different 'natural comfort zones'. In Josephine's account differences in skills and preferences were explained as entirely to do with gender.

Ideas about gender were central to Josephine's account. Calling on these ideas enabled Josephine to create an account that explained why their current situation is okay really, even though she doesn't like it. Josephine explained that when she tries to talk about domestic labour 'the male eyes glaze over'. The concept of fairness looks different to 'the male mind'. If Henry won't talk about her issues with domestic work, this must be her fault, because she has not approached it properly. Maybe she was 'confrontational'. When Henry refuses to talk, she can't persist because to do so would be 'naggy'. Josephine explained, 'I hate nagging, I hate it with a vengeance. So rather than let it eat away at me, I just do it'. She called this 'a female thing again, a survival tactic'. Josephine said she is upset about the way things are not because the situation is unfair, but because she is 'a very emotional person, that's all'. Her emotions are not important: they are just part of being a woman.

So when Henry talked to me he said that the way domestic labour happens is all fine and 'it's not about gender', or maybe it is really. Josephine said the present situation is not what she would like, but it's all fine really because it *is* about gender. Simon and Dominic described their domestic arrangements as having nothing to do with gender, because dad does the ironing and everyone cooks. They noted that Josephine often goes to bed with a headache, and that she cries a lot, but this is because she is 'stressed from work'.

The pattern of stories we see in this family appeared also in families with little or no conflict over domestic labour. Women and men said we do it this way because is

what we choose, and women said if I don't like it that's my problem. If pressed, women said it's okay really because women and men see these things differently, or because women are naturally better at nurturing and domestic work. These accounts call on values participants assume the interviewer will share. They represent what Hochschild (1989:57) called a 'cover story', or an 'anger-avoiding myth': stories that explain why a situation in which women take responsibility for domestic work, even if they would prefer not to, is okay really.

### **Uncovering the cover story**

Stories from the Napier family illustrate two points about research methods. The first concerns definitions, and the second, the kinds of questions we ask.

The way we define domestic labour is important. In the Napier family, while performance of domestic tasks was shared to some degree, responsibility for identifying what needs to be done and making sure it happens was not. Responsibility for the work of planning and organising was the major point of contention in this family. This aspect of domestic labour is not visible in studies that operationalise the concept as performance of household tasks (noted also by Dempsey 1997:34). The emotion work involved in negotiating arrangements for domestic labour, while avoiding conflict and maintaining family harmony, is similarly invisible in most studies (Hochschild 1989; Carter 2003).

The second point concerns the questions we ask. If we studied the Napier family using fixed-choice questions, we would hear only the account that says domestic work is shared and everything is fine. Studies that ask open-ended questions allow us to get beneath this.

If we studied the Napier family using time-use or fixed-choice survey methods, they would look like the vanguard of egalitarian optimism. In my study they appear as a family that survives because the woman is willing to stay with a situation she finds exhausting, and that she sees to be unfair. To make this work, Josephine must persist in creating an account of her domestic situation that minimises its inequity, discounts her unhappiness, and excuses Henry's refusal to talk about her concerns. Henry and the children also created accounts of domestic equity that were undermined, later, by the detail of their responses. In a study that asked fixed-choice questions, only the 'cover story' would be reported.

Findings from my research show that in relation to domestic labour, the 'cover story' represents only one strand in a more complex picture. They suggest that studies based on fixed-choice questions generate an unrealistically optimistic picture of change toward egalitarian practice in the division of domestic labour.

These conclusions about research methods have implications for policy. In Australia qualitative research has relatively little influence on policy, as funding bodies favour studies that use quantitative methods (see for example FaCSIA 2006). My research demonstrates the importance of supplementing quantitative data with findings from qualitative studies. If this does not happen, government responses around work and family will be based on data that present an optimistic view of egalitarian domestic practice that does not reflect people's experience of the families they live in.

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