Who Cares Anyway?

Negotiating Domestic Labour
in Families with Teenage Kids

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about domestic labour and families. It presents findings from a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with the mother, father, and two or three teenage children in ten families. In the thesis each family is represented in the form of stories, in which accounts given by each family member are considered in relation to accounts given by other members of the same family. Although the stories that arise from different families are very different from each other, evident in them are common patterns that illustrate ways in which commonly accepted ideas are called on to explain and legitimize different practices around domestic labour.

Findings from the study exemplify how the methods we use in studying domestic labour influence what we find. I argue that studies asking fixed-choice questions get the ‘cover story’. Studies that ask open-ended questions enable us to get beneath this. Using data from multiple perspectives allows us to see how dominant stories come to be established in a family, and other stories submerged.

Participants’ accounts of domestic labour assumed a hierarchy in the way work is valued. This holds that men and kids are entitled to put their work or schooling or leisure ahead of domestic obligations, while women are not. Women can pursue a career, study, or leisure only to the extent that these activities do not interfere with their obligation to do domestic work. In this sample, families that experience no conflict over domestic labour are those in which the woman does not dispute the hierarchy of work. Families where conflict is simmering under the surface are those in which the woman tries to assert an entitlement to put other priorities ahead of an obligation to do domestic work, and other family members resist. Families with overt conflict over domestic labour are those in which the hierarchy of work is upset.

My findings shed light on several unresolved questions in the literature around domestic labour, including that posed by Uhlmann (2004): who cares anyway? They suggest that for most people living in two-parent families with teenage children, domestic labour is not an issue. In these families, ‘most people’ are men and children. For women who live with men and kids, domestic labour is a problem for those who attempt to dispute the hierarchy of work. Domestic labour becomes a problem for men and kids only when a woman refuses to do it.
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DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed

Dated
Who Cares Anyway?
Negotiating Domestic Labour in Families with Teenage Kids

Introduction: Families and Domestic Labour

1.1 Family stories
1.2 The present study
1.3 Situating the author
1.4 Structure of the thesis

What do we know and how do we know it? Part 1

2.1 Debates and interpretation
2.2 Time use surveys
2.3 Studies that ask fixed-choice questions

What do we know and how do we know it? Part 2

3.1 Qualitative studies
3.2 Pilot study: Kids and Housework
3.3 Aims for the present study

Methods for the Present Study

4.1 Recruiting and interviews
4.2 Analysis
4.2.1 Working with data from multiple perspectives
4.2.2 A theoretical excursion
4.3 What I did

Family Stories: No Conflict

5.1 The Fletcher family
5.2 The Bateman family
5.3 Why no conflict?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>The Bennett family</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>The Sullivan family</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>The Hume family</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Why resigned?</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>The Herrick family</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>The Dryden family</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>The Napier family</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Why simmering?</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>The Middleton family</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>The Edgeworth family</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Why overt conflict?</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Summary of findings</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Limitations of method</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Further research</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Who cares anyway?</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List of publications arising from</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the present study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1</td>
<td>Project flier</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>Information and consent form</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3</td>
<td>Questions and prompt list</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4</td>
<td>Pseudonyms and demographics</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1  Mapping the literature .................................................. 7
Figure 2  Fallding’s typology of families ........................................ 31
Figure 3  Data from multiple perspectives: McCarthy et al. (2003) .......... 70
Figure 4  Data from multiple perspectives: my interpretation .............. 72
Figure 5  Data from the present study ........................................... 80
Figure 6  Defining domestic labour: where I started .......................... 81
Figure 7  Defining domestic labour: what I found ............................. 81
Figure 8  A Hierarchy of work ..................................................... 273

List of Tables

Table 1  Time spent on paid plus unpaid work ................................. 16
CHAPTER ONE  INTRODUCTION: FAMILIES AND DOMESTIC LABOUR

In a recent article in the *British Journal of Sociology* Allon Uhlmann (2004) proposed that the whole debate around domestic labour is really a bit of a beat-up. Uhlmann argued that in seeing domestic labour as a problem, Australian sociologists assume that a mismatch between ideas and practices around domestic labour is a problem for most people, because it is a problem for them. Uhlmann suggested that ordinary Australians think about family differently from the way sociologists do. In family life, women and men ‘gravitate spontaneously toward their socially prescribed roles’, as ‘something in the subjectivities’ of women and men incline them toward different goals. A gendered division of labour persists because it is what people really want.

In a reply to this article Bittman and Pixley (2004) noted that people of all classes subscribe to views about egalitarian gender relations and sharing housework. They suggested that Uhlmann ‘constructs his subjects as “happy natives”, protected by multiple contextual subjectivities, untroubled and unchanging despite changing circumstances all around them’. This is a fair comment, but the central point of Uhlmann’s critique remains. Why should we assume that because people indicate agreement with egalitarian statements in surveys, an inequitable division of domestic labour would be a problem for them? I call this the ‘Who cares anyway?’ question. As my research offers an answer to Uhlmann’s question I take it as a title for this thesis.

1.1 FAMILY STORIES

This thesis is about domestic labour and families. It presents findings from a qualitative study that considers ways in which domestic labour is negotiated in ten two-parent families with teenage kids. In the chapters that follow, each family is represented in the form of stories, in which accounts given by each family member are considered in relation to accounts given by other members of the same family. Although the stories that arise from different families are very different from each other, evident in them are common patterns that illustrate ways in which commonly accepted ideas about women and men, and parents and children, are called on to explain and legitimate different practices around domestic labour.

Findings from the study also illustrate ways in which the methods we use in studying domestic labour will influence what we find. The thesis develops an argument about
research methods that is complementary to its findings around negotiation of domestic labour in families.

As I went about doing this research the transcripts it generated reminded me strongly of the works of a little-known British novelist whose books were popular in the 1930s, the late Ivy Compton-Burnett. These works became a recurring point of reference as I grappled with the challenges posed by my data. To provide context for the discussion that follows, I must introduce their author.¹

Ivy Compton-Burnett was a most insightful and neglected writer whose nineteen novels should be essential reading for anyone interested in families. Written almost entirely in dialogue, the novels focus on the details of family life. In each novel is a tyrant, who exercises power in the family to pursue her or his own interests at the expense of others. The actions of the tyrant are contested, acquiesced to and commented on by others who have less power in the household. The novels read as interweaving threads of dialogue, as individuals voice different perspectives on how the family is and how it should be.

There are no villains or victims in Compton-Burnett’s stories. Characters differ in the sophistication with which they construct accounts of themselves, and in the extent to which they practice self-deception. Compton-Burnett saw people as ‘morally the same and intellectually different’ (Spurling 1984:259). She is one for whom to know all is to forgive all.

The novels offer little or no interpretation of what people say. For Compton-Burnett ‘appearances are all we have’, and in the novels appearances are speech (Hutchinson 1979:184). It is left to the reader to impute motivation or feeling to the characters, and to identify and theorise about the power relations enacted in their families. The novels read like transcripts. They invite sociological analysis just as transcripts do. I have been reading Ivy Compton-Burnett for twenty years and I love her work. In researching

domestic labour and families I find that Compton-Burnett’s novels inform my approach in significant ways.

The way Compton-Burnett sees families resonates with my own experience of families and domestic labour. It makes sense, for me, to think of people as looking for the best deal they can get, in any given situation. We differ in the extent to which we are aware of ourselves doing this. One thing most of us look for is a way of explaining who we are and what we do, that makes us look good in our own eyes and those of our audience. What we do, and how we explain it, makes sense when we see ourselves as situated in the contexts of our everyday lives. These assumptions inform the approach to analysis I bring to the present study.

1.2 THE PRESENT STUDY

This study begins with the question: ‘How is domestic labour negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids?’ I interviewed the mother, father, and teenage children in each of ten families. I defined domestic labour broadly, as including housework tasks, planning and organising, and emotion work (Carter 2003). In interviews I asked each person ‘what gets done and who does what’, ‘does it work well’, ‘is it fair’, and ‘how do you think it should be’. I asked participants what they thought about ‘the mum job’ and ‘the dad job’. I asked adults what they had learned about domestic labour in their families of origin and in share houses. I asked kids how they expected domestic labour to be arranged when they are adults, and what they would have to do to make it happen as they would like.

As I transcribed interviews for each family I felt as if Compton-Burnett novels were appearing through my fingers. Each family was a novel in itself, in which the account given by each family member offered a different perspective, and brought certain aspects into focus while obscuring others. As in Compton-Burnett’s novels, each family story was by turns funny and tragic. The stories asked to be read with compassion, respect and humour. Above all, they read as stories of families. What people said only really made sense in relation to the families in which they lived.

People’s experience of domestic labour is informed by the material setting and the interpersonal interactions of their everyday lives. In my analysis I draw on the idea of
people as situated actors, as proposed by Dorothy Smith (1990a:22). My data are accounts created in interviews, in interaction with me, by people who are situated in time and place: in their families, their homes, their suburbs, their work, their schooling and their personal histories. I am situated too, in all of those ways. For each of us, where we look from determines what we see.

I take the view, suggested by Jordan et al. (1994:26), that in interviews people call on ideas and values they assume the interviewer will share, to create ‘morally adequate accounts’ of their family lives. People create accounts in which what they say they do, matches what they say they think (Hays 1996:132). I draw on the work of McCarthy et al. (2003) in considering people’s accounts in relation to their ‘family culture’. I consider how family members’ accounts fit together, how different ideas are called on to legitimate different practices, and how a dominant story comes to be established in a family, while other stories are submerged. This type of analysis is messy: it does not lend itself to elegant sociological storytelling. In this thesis I offer my interpretation of the accounts participants gave me of their family lives, and invite the reader to make their own.

1.3 SITUATING THE AUTHOR

Like any researcher, my approach is informed by my own situation and history, and the values and assumptions embedded in it. Histories bring with them blinkers the wearer cannot see. I explain my history here so the reader can see things I overlook.

I was born in Melbourne in 1956, the youngest of four children. I grew up in a middle-class suburb, and went to a private girls’ school. After completing a Bachelor of Arts in 1976 I spent several years doing not very much, then worked in the Australian Public Service (APS) for twenty years, mostly with social policy to do with families. I cohabited, married and had two children, a boy in 1987 and a girl in 1988. I stayed at home full-time with babies while my partner worked long hours in restaurants. Then he stayed home full-time with toddlers while I worked long hours in the APS. Then we both stepped off the career path, and both worked part-time. In 2003 I escaped the APS with the support of an Australian Postgraduate Award. While I worked full time on this thesis my partner worked mostly part time, running a school dining room and teaching teenagers to cook.
This history informs my values and assumptions. I think egalitarian relations between women and men are a good thing, and that for many people practices and feelings around domestic labour are an obstacle to these being achieved. I think the unpaid work that goes into supporting and maintaining a family is undervalued. I would like to see it become more visible and accorded more respect.

I don’t recall any housework having been expected of me as a child. I became sensitised to housework while living in share houses. I saw quickly that there were some girls (and a few guys) who did the cleaning and a whole lot of guys (and some girls) who did nothing. I remember in one house in Brisbane in 1977, when the girl who had been doing everything moved out, thinking ‘they’re going to expect me to do it now – well I’m bloody well not’. I didn’t, and the place became progressively filthier until in the end we all left. I lived in share houses for eleven years, and what I see as normal in household arrangements is based on my experiences in those (few of which ever got to be as grotty as the one just mentioned).

When I first decided to research domestic labour and families I felt quite complacent. I was living with my partner and kids and I thought: ‘We have this sorted. I do some, he does some, the kids do some, it’s all fine’. At that time the kids were aged thirteen and fourteen, and their dad and I had lived together as a couple for twenty years. We didn’t do the ‘mum does it all’ thing, and I thought we had no problems.

I was wrong. Part way into my Honours project in 2002 (which looked at children’s understanding of domestic labour, and is discussed in Chapter Three) I thought my marriage would not survive the literature review. I came to see domestic labour as encompassing three aspects: tasks, planning and organising, and emotion work. Regarding our own situation it became clear that things were not ‘sorted’ at all. The division of labour around the tasks aspect was mostly fine, being responsible was more of a problem, and the division of labour around emotion work was pretty much a disaster. Realising this was very confronting.

That was a difficult time, but the marriage survived, and so have the kids. Housework has continued to be negotiated, and the distribution of work across the less visible
aspects of domestic labour has shifted a bit. More importantly, the whole area has become visible. Doing this project has given us language to talk about what we do and how we feel about a whole range of work that goes with being part of a family, that until then we had no names for. Now when one of us feels put upon or given the run-around it is easy to say just what we see to be the problem. We can all recognise and name a comprehensive array of strategies that people, ourselves included, use to get out of doing domestic work. It’s been a long road, but I think doing this project has been good for our family.

There is a feminist objective to this work, but its intent is not confined to women. I hope this work will introduce other people to language and concepts that enable them to name and value the invisible and unpaid work people do in supporting their families, and to understand, and negotiate, their own family dynamics in a generous and imaginative manner.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS
The thesis is presented over nine chapters. Chapters Two and Three ask: What do we know and how do we know it? They set out a framework for thinking about the literature on domestic labour, and offer a critical reading of research to date. Chapter Four sets out the methods used in the study, and the approach I took to analysis. Chapters Five to Eight set out findings from the study, in the form of stories from each family, followed by discussion. Families are grouped according to how much conflict they experience around domestic labour: by which I mean the extent to which one or more family members try to make change in arrangements for domestic labour, and other family members resist.

Chapter Five presents two families in which there is no conflict about domestic labour. Chapter Six presents three families in which there had previously been some conflict, and this has subsided into a state of resignation. Chapter Seven presents three families in which conflict is simmering below the surface, barely contained. Chapter Eight presents two families in which conflict is overt and ongoing. Chapter Nine summarises findings from the study and recaps the arguments developed in the thesis. It discusses some limitations of the methods used, and suggests avenues for further research.
CHAPTER TWO WHAT DO WE KNOW AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT?

PART 1

What do we know about how domestic labour is negotiated in families? In an informal way many of us know a great deal because it is something we do every day. In terms of research about how this happens, we don’t know much at all.

Chapters Two and Three consider what we know so far. This chapter outlines debates around interpretation of research findings and sets out a framework for thinking about them. It then considers findings from quantitative studies, looking first at time-use surveys, then at surveys that asked fixed-choice questions. The following chapter considers findings from studies that used qualitative methods.2

2.1 DEBATES AND INTERPRETATION

Most research into domestic labour has focused on the performance of domestic tasks, by women and men. The literature in this area is extensive, and interpretation is contested. One way to make sense of the literature is to map it against the axes below.

![Figure 1: Mapping the literature](image)

The vertical axis represents ideas about what is good. At the top is the idea that sharing of paid and unpaid labour between women and men in couples is a good thing. Beneath is the idea that a division of labour in which the man earns money and the woman takes care of home and family is a good thing. Following Hochschild (1989:17) I call these views ‘egalitarian’ and ‘traditional’. As Uhlmann (2004) noted, most sociological

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2 In this thesis I use the phrase ‘questionnaire surveys’ to denote studies that ask fixed-choice questions, and are analysed using quantitative methods. I use the phrase ‘qualitative studies’ to refer to studies that ask open-ended questions and use qualitative methods of analysis.
research around domestic labour is informed by an egalitarian view. Arguments in favour of a traditional view have been made by some sociologists, for example Sarantakos (2002) in Australia, Popenoe (1999) in the US, and Hakim (2001) in the UK. Church-affiliated groups such as the Australian Family Association also advocate a traditional view (see Muehlenberg et al. 1996). Although most research in Australia has been informed by an egalitarian view, voices from the ‘traditional’ part of the map have been influential in Federal Government policy over the last decade.

The horizontal axis indicates what we might find interesting about findings from research into domestic labour. On one side are researchers who are interested in what they describe as ‘convergence’ between the time spent on domestic labour by women and men, and who seek to identify factors associated with this. On the other side are researchers who argue that the most striking thing about time spent on domestic labour is the persistence of patterns of inequity by gender. These researchers are interested in identifying the processes by which those patterns are sustained.

We could map most researchers along this axis. On the ‘convergence’ side I would place Australian researchers Jaqueline Goodnow, Jennifer Bowes, and Janeen Baxter; from the UK Oriel Sullivan and Jonathan Gershuny; and from the US Scott Coltrane. On the ‘persistence’ side I would place Australians Anthony McMahon, Ken Dempsey, Michael Bittman, Lyn Craig, JaneMaree Maher and Andrew Singleton; from the US Arlie Hochschild; and from Europe Aafke Komter.

Researchers interested in convergence argue that families are changing from ‘traditional’ arrangements, in which roles are specialised by gender, to ‘symmetrical’ ones in which responsibilities are shared (Young and Wilmott 1973). The slow pace of change reflects a process of ‘lagged adaptation’ (Gershuny 1994). Sociologists interested in convergence refer to theories of ‘rational exchange’ and ideas about ‘doing gender’ to explain the slow pace of change (see for example Berk 1985; Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000; Sullivan 2000, 2004; Baxter 2005b).

Exchange theories propose that as women have more resources in the form of education, earnings, and job status, they will bargain more effectively with men for change in the division of domestic work. Theories of gender propose that performance of domestic
tasks has symbolic meaning. In doing domestic tasks women are enacting femininity, and in not doing tasks that are commonly done by women, men are enacting masculinity (Chodorow 1978; Berk 1985). Theories of gender predict that changes in the division of domestic labour will occur slowly, as expectations around gender change.

Other researchers find the persistence of behaviours around domestic labour more interesting than change. This view holds that ‘the challenge is not to identify the factors that will result in more gender equity, but to explain why the factors have such a minor impact’ (Craig 2004a:19). Persistence has been explained as an indication of male privilege (Delphy and Leonard 1992; McMahon 1999; Singleton and Maher 2004), supported by the exercise of manifest, latent and invisible power (Dempsey 1998; Collis 1999; Komter 2001). Patterns of inequity are said to be sustained by the practice of ‘pseudomutuality’ (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993) in which people present the appearance of egalitarian sharing in the absence of its practice, and discontent is submerged beneath a ‘cover story’, or ‘family myth’ (Hochschild 1989:57).

Research findings vary according to the methods used. The kinds of questions we ask, and the way we do our analysis, will shape our empirical findings. Findings from time-use studies support the idea that patterns of inequality by gender are persisting, as do most qualitative studies. Studies that ask fixed-choice questions offer more support than other methods do for the idea of convergence. Studies that ask open-ended questions find higher levels of dissatisfaction with domestic labour, among women, than studies that ask fixed choice questions (Dempsey 2001:62).

How we define domestic labour is important. Most studies of domestic labour have focused on performance of household tasks, and some have considered the difference between ‘helping’ with tasks and being responsible for them. Some researchers have identified emotion work as an important part of domestic labour.

The concept of emotion work was proposed in 1979 by US sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2001:145), who defined it as: ‘the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling’, in order to make how you do feel, match how you should feel. Hochschild (2001:148) argued that emotion work is associated with ideology, as ideologies are composed of ‘framing rules’ that set out what is permissible to say, and
‘feeling rules’ that set out what is permissible to feel. Such rules generally escape notice, as they are not explicit. Hochschild’s research has considered emotion work in relation to paid employment (1983, 2000, 2002, 2003a), and domestic labour (1989, 2003b).

In Hochschild’s writing, emotion work encompasses the work involved in looking after the feelings of others, and that involved in managing feelings of one’s own. Other researchers interested in emotion work in relation to domestic labour have focused primarily on the work involved in caring for the feelings of others. For example Delphy and Leonard (1992:21) defined emotion work as ‘work which maintains bonds of affection, gives people a sense of belonging, and makes them feel good’. Other definitions include: ‘caring for, and understanding, other family members' emotional needs, [and] monitoring and maintaining the quality of interpersonal interactions within the family’ (Strazdins et al. 1997:223); ‘the effort behind family feeling’ (deVault 1999); and, simply, ‘Wifework’ (Maushart 1997, 2001). Studies adopting these definitions have found that emotion work is performed mostly by women, and women express higher levels of dissatisfaction about this aspect of domestic labour, than about performance of household tasks (McMahon 1999:26).

Most researchers who think of domestic labour as including emotion work have used qualitative methods, and would be mapped on the ‘persistence’ side of the diagram at Figure 1. My own research would be mapped here also. I find the persistence of gendered patterns in the division of labour more interesting than the small changes toward convergence that have occurred. To understand these I use qualitative methods, and adopt a broad definition of domestic labour. These research interests, and the methods I use to advance them, place my work in the upper right quadrant of my diagram.

Debates in the literature around domestic labour concern two key questions. The first is the most hotly contested. It asks: Is the time women and men spend on domestic work converging? The second is asked less often, but it is important. This is Uhlmann’s question: Who cares anyway? I consider both questions in this thesis.
Parents and Kids
Most research into domestic labour has concerned the performance of domestic tasks by women and men. If we want to understand how domestic labour is negotiated in families, we need to consider also the views and behaviour of children.

How we think about children and domestic labour will be informed by how we think about what it is to be a parent. Sociologists have offered a number of ways of doing this. Some propose that how we behave as parents is determined in essential ways by our own experiences as young children, and that what people ‘really want’ for their families will reflect this (Chodorow 1978, 1999). Others argue that people’s experiences of mothering and fathering are shaped by ideologies or ‘cultural scripts’ (Everingham 1994; Hays 1996), or by material circumstances and labour markets (Reiger 1985; Gilding 1991; Pocock 2003; Maher and Lindsay 2005).

American theorist Nancy Chodorow has been an influential proponent of essentialist views about parenting. Chodorow (1978:214) argued that women’s and men’s dispositions in respect of family and domestic life are fundamentally different from each other, because the experience of being nurtured by a woman produces in women the characteristics of nurturance and a desire to mother, while for men it creates ‘a desire for male dominance, and a need to be superior to women’. In her early work as a sociologist Chodorow argued that these dispositions may change, but only when men, as well as women, act as primary carers of babies and small children. Chodorow later became a psychoanalyst, and changed her mind about the possibility of change. Chodorow (1999:xvi) maintains now that motherhood is ‘not just another socially unequal role that can be challenged’.3

The US sociologist Sharon Hays has been widely cited by researchers who see practices of parenting as socially shaped. Hays (1996:8) proposed that an ‘ideology of intensive mothering’ is pervasive in influencing the way people in Western countries think about relations between parents and children. This ideology asserts that caring for children is the responsibility of women, and that a good mother should consistently put her child’s

needs ahead of her own. Childrearing should be emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, financially expensive, and subject to guidance by experts. Hays argued that the ideology of intensive mothering is complementary to the ‘ideology of the rational actor’ that applies in the public sphere, as it locates ideals of selflessness as personal and private, something that market ideology can safely ignore. Women who do paid work as well as mothering must negotiate both sets of ideologies in a way that is not required of men (1996:145).

The ideology of intensive mothering sees children as people for whom parents provide service, not as people who might actually do domestic work themselves. Some researchers have argued that the agency of children has been invisible in most sociological discussions about family life (Chodorow and Contratto 1982; Ambert 2001). This is particularly so in relation to domestic labour (as noted by Morrow 1996:47). The importance of what children learn about domestic labour has had some attention. Susan Moller Okin (1989:135), a political philosopher from New Zealand, argued that growing up with inequitable relations in a family is inimical to the development of a sense of justice. From the example of their parents, boys learn a sense of entitlement to receive domestic service, and girls, one of obligation to provide it (Okin 1996:70).

In her influential book Pricing the Priceless Child, US sociologist Viviana Zelizer (1985) traced the historical emergence of a view of children as significant, in affluent societies, not for their contribution to the family but in their role as consumers, of care and material resources. Zelizer posed the question: As women do more paid work and gender relations become more symmetrical, will the domestically useless teenager become unsustainable? To find out, Zelizer (2002:391-392) proposed an agenda for research that considers how children negotiate with their parents around performance of domestic tasks. To date, few studies have done this.

Building on Zelizer’s work, Australian sociologist Pavla Miller (2005) noted that in Australia, the ideal of the ‘priceless child’ is under pressure in poor families, but is still embraced among the middle classes. Having studious children has come to be seen as a status marker, in the way that having a wife who did no paid work, once was (Miller 2005:25-32). Miller (2005:4-5) proposed that the ‘daily skirmishes’ over housework
that take place in families can be seen as a site where childhood is negotiated, and the obligations and entitlements of children and parents defined. She noted that:

The offspring of highly educated parents do less and less around the home [and] expect prolonged support from their mothers and fathers. Although children tend to be jealous of their own expenditure of time and energy, most have a firm sense of entitlement to the time, resources and unpaid labour of their parents’ (Miller 2005:30).

Miller (2005:34) suggested that the ‘domestic uselessness’ of teenagers will become increasingly problematic as more women take on increasing hours of paid work.

Thinking about how domestic labour is negotiated in families, rather than solely between couples, raises questions have received little attention in research to date around domestic labour. These are: Is the ‘domestically useless teenager’ a problem, and if so, for whom? And: What does the experience of children indicate about future changes in the division of domestic labour between women and men? I consider both questions in this thesis.

The following sections present an overview of findings from studies that have used quantitative methods in researching domestic labour. While quantitative methods tell us little about how domestic labour is negotiated in families, findings from these studies indicate patterns in the ‘who does what’ of domestic work, and tell us how people respond to fixed-choice questions asking how they view their domestic arrangements. This information is essential context for thinking about findings from the qualitative studies discussed in Chapter Three.

2.2 TIME-USE SURVEYS

Time-use surveys ask people to complete diaries that record what they were doing during a specified period. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted a pilot for a national time-use survey in 1987, and national surveys in 1992 and 1997 for which the sample size was in excess of 3,000 ‘diary-days’. Respondents were aged fifteen

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4 While it is outside the scope of this thesis, the idea of children as consumers suggests that ‘daily skirmishes’ over expenditure could be seen as another key site in the negotiation of childhood (see Langer 1994, 1996, 2005).
years and over. Diaries recorded primary and secondary activities at intervals of five minutes, as well as where the activities were performed, and who else was present. Categories included personal care, employment, education, domestic activities, child care, shopping, voluntary work and care, social participation, recreation and leisure. Domestic activities were divided into food and drink preparation and cleanup, laundry and clothes care, general housework (cleaning and tidying), grounds and animal care, home and car maintenance, household management (rosters, bills, budgeting) and associated travel (Bittman 1995:3).


**ABS time-use collections**

ABS time-use collections consistently found that men spent more time than women on paid work, and women spent more time than men on domestic work (Bittman 1991, 1995; ABS 1998). Domestic tasks were highly segregated by gender. Women did indoor tasks, men did car and house maintenance tasks, and both did gardening (Bittman 1991). Laundry was the task most segregated by gender, followed by cleaning, childcare, food preparation and cleanup, and shopping. These tasks were mostly done by women. Outdoor maintenance tasks were highly segregated also, being mostly done by men (Bittman 1995). Men had slightly more free time than women. Women’s free time was more likely than men’s to be interrupted, or to happen concurrently with performance of another task such as child care or laundry (ABS 1998).

Women spent least time on domestic work when they were single or living with their parents, and most when they lived with a partner and children. The time men spent on domestic work varied little according to age, with younger men spending no more time on domestic work than older men. The only men who spent as much time on domestic work as women in the same situation were retired men living alone (Bittman 1995:11). Time available for leisure reflected these patterns (Bittman and Wajcman 2000).
Children aged fifteen and upward spent very little time on domestic work, even less than men. Among this age group boys spent less time than girls, by a ratio of 2:3. Kids whose mothers did paid work spent less time than other kids on indoor tasks, and more time on outdoor tasks (Bittman 1991:24).

Bittman’s (1995) analysis of time-use surveys from 1974, 1987 and 1992 showed that segregation of tasks by gender increased over that period. The time women spent on domestic work decreased by three hours per week between 1987 and 1992, as a result of their spending less time in cooking, laundry and cleaning. The time men spent on cooking and laundry increased slightly between 1974 and 1987, and from 1987 to 1992 the time men spent on domestic work was unchanged. Between 1987 and 1992 the time spent on child care increased for both women and men. Overall, from 1974 and 1992 the proportion done by men of the total time spent on domestic work increased, as a result of women spending less time on domestic work. Bittman (1995:12) concluded that to speak of ‘convergence’ toward a model of symmetrical families made sense from 1974 to 1987, but not since. Analysis of the 1997 collection found there had been little change in patterns of time use by gender since 1992 (ABS 1998:2).

ABS (1998) analysis of the 1997 time-use collection considered time spent on domestic work in relation to hours of ‘total work’, paid plus unpaid (see Table 1, below). This found that overall, women did slightly more total work than men. Of women and men living in couples, comparing women with men in the same situation, for example with kids or not, or with paid work or not, in every situation women spent more time on total work than men.

Patterns are more complex when we consider situations in which partnered women and men had different hours of paid work. ABS analysis suggests that in families where a man does 35 hours paid work per week or more, if his wife spends 35 hours per week or more in paid work she would spend more time on total work than her husband; where she does no paid work she would spend less time on total work than her husband; and where she does part-time paid work she may spend more or less time than her husband on total work, depending what their paid work hours are. A situation of equity in

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5 This article discussed differences in time spent by women and men on various activities. It did not mention (that I could see) the total hours spent per week on domestic work, by women or men.
relation to time spent in total work is most likely to be one in which a woman does part-time paid work and her partner full-time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>men total work (minutes per day)</th>
<th>women total work (minutes per day)</th>
<th>all persons total work (minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>couples with dependent children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed full time</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed part time</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not employed</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>couples with non-dependent children</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed full time</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed part time</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not employed</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>lone parents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed full time</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed part time</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not employed</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>couples without children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed full time</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed part time</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not employed</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>308</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>lone persons</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed full time</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>528</td>
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<td>489</td>
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<tr>
<td>not employed</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>neither parent nor partner</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed full time</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employed part time</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not employed</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>average time</strong></td>
<td>425</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Time spent on paid plus unpaid work. From ABS (1998:33)

Exchange theories predict that as women increase their participation in paid work, men will increase the time they spend in domestic work. This pattern is not evident in ABS data, which shows time spent in paid work as associated with time spent in domestic work for women, but not for men. Men whose wives did paid work spent no more time on domestic work than men whose wives did no paid work. Women who spent less time in paid work spent more time in domestic work. Men who spent less time in paid work had more time as leisure (Bittman 1991:3).
Exchange theories predict that a woman’s capacity to negotiate an equitable division of domestic labour will increase as her income increases. ABS data show this to be so in some situations, and not in others. Women spent more time on domestic work than men did, whatever their relative earnings. As a woman’s share of a couple’s total income increased from 0 to 50%, the time she spent on domestic work decreased. As a woman’s share of a couple’s total income increased from 50% to 100%, the time she spent on domestic work increased (Bittman et al. 2003:204).

The ABS 1997 time-use survey included questions asking about the presence of domestic appliances, specifically a dishwasher and a clothes-dryer. It found the presence of these items was associated with less time spent on domestic tasks, but only for men. In households where these appliances were present, domestic tasks were more segregated by gender than in other households (Bittman et al. 2004).6

Other ABS data suggest that, with the exception of food-preparation, outsourcing of domestic work is not a strategy commonly adopted by families in Australia. The ABS Household Expenditure Survey found that 4% of households outsourced cleaning, 9% outsourced gardening, and 90% outsourced at least some food preparation. Higher income households were more likely to outsource than those with a lower income, but the variable most significantly associated with outsourcing was age. Households comprised of people of retirement age and above were those most likely to outsource cleaning (Bittman 1998).

ABS time-use surveys show marriage and parenthood to be significant predictors of time spent on domestic work. The most important indicator is marriage. This is associated, for men, with less time spent on domestic work, and for women, with more. Lone mothers spent less time on domestic work than women with children who lived with men. In this sense men are a ‘nett drain’ in relation to domestic work, as they do less domestic work than they create (Bittman 1991:3).

For women, the next most important indicator of time spent on domestic work is living with children. Being a parent is associated with a large increase in the time spent doing

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6 See Gershuny (2004) for a critical response to this article.
two things at once. In a detailed analysis of data from the ABS 1997 collection, Lyn Craig (2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) found that, among childless couples, women and men spent similar hours in total work, but this changed dramatically once children arrived. Comparing ABS data with time-use data from the US, Germany and Italy, Craig found that the effect of children on the time women spent on domestic work was greater in Australia than in those countries. Among childless couples, the time women and men spent doing domestic work was less disparate in Australia than elsewhere; but among couples with children aged under five, the disparity between women’s time and men’s was greater in Australia (Craig 2005:12). Craig (2004b:130) concluded that in Australia, ‘gender equity does not survive parenthood’.

**US and UK time-use collections**

Time-use survey studies in the US and UK have delivered findings similar to those from Australia. Analysing data from four US time-use collections conducted in 1965, 1975, 1985, and 1995, Bianchi et al. (2000) found that routine domestic tasks were mostly done by women, and men did tasks that are occasional and discretionary. Marriage was associated with more time spent on domestic work for women, but not for men. The presence of children was associated with more time spent on domestic work for both women and men, but the effect for women was three times that for men. The time women spent on domestic work declined over the 30 year period, from 30 hours per week to eighteen. The time men spent in domestic work increased from five hours per week to ten, between 1965 and 1985, then remained unchanged to 1995.

Sullivan and Gershuny (2001) examined data from three time-use collections conducted in the UK in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. They found an increase in the time men spent on domestic work of eighteen minutes per day over a nineteen year period. The time women spent on domestic work decreased by 60 minutes per day from the 1960s to the 1970s, then increased slightly in the 1980s collection. Sullivan and Gershuny (2001:343) described this as a decrease for women ‘and a corresponding increase for men’. (I think they meant ‘concurrent’.) Sullivan and Gershuny argued that although the change in the time men spent on domestic work was small, the ‘consistency of the trend’ is worth noting. (Apparently the inconsistency of the trend in women’s time was not.) They noted also that working class couples were ‘catching up’ to a state of ‘near equality’, by which they meant equality with middle class couples, not equality between
women and men. This article is striking in its use of language that suggests more change than is indicated by the data.

Findings from time-use survey studies do not support the view that the time spent by women and men on domestic labour is converging. As Bittman (2000:10) observed, they show that while Gerhsuny’s (1994) ‘symmetrical families thesis’ may be a good description of change in cultural norms, it is a poor description of change in behaviour.

Comment on methods
Time-use surveys are a sound method for indicating the time people spend doing domestic work, but they have some important limitations. The categories used show tasks only. They do not show the difference between ‘helping’ and ‘being responsible’ for a task, although we might infer this from time spent. Time-use surveys do not show the work of getting people to do things, apart from what might appear in categories like ‘making rosters’, or ‘reprimanding kids’. Negotiating how domestic labour will happen is work, but it does not appear in time diary collections. In terms of the definition I use in this thesis, time-use surveys collect good quality data about domestic tasks, limited information about the work of ‘planning and organising’, and no information about emotion work.

The most recent ABS time-use survey was conducted in 1997. The collection was intended to recur at intervals of five years, but this has not happened. The interest of funding bodies (in this case the Federal government) has shifted, and research funding is applied to collections such as the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Survey (HILDA), that have a different focus. I discuss these in the next section.

2.3 STUDIES THAT ASK FIXED-CHOICE QUESTIONS
Questionnaire surveys have asked people to estimate the time they spend on domestic tasks, indicate to what extent tasks are shared between themselves and their partner, and answer questions about their attitudes to gender roles in general and domestic work in particular. Like time-use surveys, studies that ask fixed-choice questions tell us little about how domestic labour is negotiated in families, but they provide important context to thinking about how negotiation happens.
In Australia the most significant collection is HILDA. This is a panel study, with responses from all residents aged fifteen and over in over 7,000 households. Wave 1 was conducted in 2001 and subsequent waves have been collected annually to date. Information relating to time spent on domestic work comes from a question that asks ‘how many hours would you spend in a typical week’, in activities specified as household errands, housework, outdoor tasks, activities with kids, caring for disabled or elderly relatives, volunteer work, and travel to and from paid work. Information about gender role attitudes comes from a set of fourteen statements including: ‘If both partners in a couple work, they should share equally in the housework and care of children’, and ‘It is much better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children’. For each statement participants are asked to indicate agreement or otherwise, on a seven-point scale. HILDA also asks questions about how satisfied you are with relationships with your partner, your children and your parents, whether you think you do your fair share of housework and child care, and how you feel about the household division of labour (http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/).

Another collection that considered domestic labour is the Negotiating the Life Course survey (NLC), conducted in 1996-97. This survey collected responses from only one person per household. NLC asked participants to estimate how much time they spent on housework and child care. It identified five areas of housework and two of childcare, and asked participants to rate each on a scale of ‘I do most, I do more, is shared equally, partner does more, partner does most’. Similar measures were contained in the Class Structure of Australia Project (CSA), conducted in 1986 and 1993.

This section outlines findings from these and other fixed-choice survey studies, drawing particularly on the work of Janeen Baxter (1998, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005a, 2005b). It then considers findings from comparable studies in the UK, Canada and the US, and concludes with comments on methods.

**Australian surveys**

Regarding the ‘who does what’ of domestic labour, fixed-choice survey studies report some findings consistent with those from ABS time-use collections. The NLC and CSA surveys found that, between 1986 and 1997, the time men spent on domestic work
remained the same, and the time women spent decreased. Time spent on domestic work was associated most strongly with gender, and then with parenthood. The presence of a child under five was associated with more domestic work for women and less for men. Education was associated with time spent on domestic work for women but not for men: women with more education spent less time than other women on domestic work.

Women who spent more time in paid work spent less time in domestic work. Men’s time in domestic work was not related to their own or their wives’ hours of paid work (Baxter 2002a:419-421).

Other findings are different from those indicated by ABS time-use data. Considering time on paid plus unpaid work, HILDA data show that among couples in which both partners work full time, men reported slightly more hours of total work than women (Headey et al. 2006:35-36). In this situation, ABS time-use data show men’s hours of total work as less than those of women.7

In these surveys younger men reported spending more time in domestic work than older men, a pattern which is not present in ABS data (Baxter 2005b:314). The amount of reported time spent on domestic work was associated with responses to questions about attitudes. Women and men who reported liberal gender role attitudes reported less disparity by gender in the time they spent on domestic work, than those who reported traditional attitudes (Baxter 2003:17).

In common with ABS collections, NLC and HILDA surveys showed that for women it is the presence or absence of a man, and in particular a husband, that has the greatest influence on the time spent in domestic work. When men entered cohabitation or marriage the time they spent on domestic work stayed the same or decreased slightly: when women did this the time they spent on domestic work increased dramatically (Baxter 2001, 2002b, 2005:11-13).

7 In all cases, ABS data show more time spent on total work by women and men, than HILDA data do, suggesting differences in definitions between the two collections. For women and men living in couples where both partners work full-time, HILDA shows men’s total work as 61.5 hours per week, and women’s total work as 60.6 hours per week (Headey et al. 2006:26). In minutes per day, as used in ABS (1998), this translates to 527 minutes per day for men, and 518 minutes per day for women. In comparison, ABS (1998:33) data show for women and men living in couples with dependent children, where both partners work full-time, total work of 589 minutes per day for men, and 605 for women; and in couples where both work full-time without dependent children, 557 minutes per day for men, and 581 for women.
Quantitative survey studies have delivered mixed findings about how much people think domestic work should be shared. For example, the ‘Australian Family Values Survey’, conducted by David deVaus (1997:9-10), found only 6% of men and 4% of women disagreed with the statement: ‘If a wife works full time, husband and wife should share domestic tasks equally’. In the same survey, most participants also expressed support for the view that men should be breadwinner, and women should be responsible for home and family. Initial analysis of Wave 1 of HILDA indicates that 66% of men and 77% of women gave a response of ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ to the statement ‘If both partners in a couple work, they should share domestic work equally’ (Hewitt 2005).

In a review of surveys and opinion polls from 1972 to 1984 Elsie Holmstrom (1985) demonstrated that people will respond differently to questions about traditional or egalitarian attitudes, depending on how the questions are expressed. Most people agreed with egalitarian views only when statements were expressed in general terms. Where statements were more specific, fewer people agreed (Holmstrom 1985:14). Holmstrom’s findings suggest that support for broad statements about gender equality may not tell us much about how people think about domestic work in practice.

In the CSA survey, younger people were more likely than older ones to agree with statements that indicate egalitarian values. Women with more education were more likely than others to support egalitarian views, while for men education was unrelated to views about gender. The number of children was associated with values for men but not for women: men with more children were less likely than other men to express support for egalitarian views (Baxter 1990:57-60). In the NLC survey 86% of men and 59% of women described as fair a situation in which a woman was responsible for most of the domestic work (Baxter 2002a:419). The CSA and NLC surveys showed that the factor most strongly associated with women’s describing a division of domestic labour as fair was not the couple’s relative hours of paid plus unpaid work, but her partner’s performance of at least some indoor tasks. The amount of time the man spent doing

8 In the article cited here the figures 6% and 4% are identified as the proportion of women and men who agreed with the statement. This is an error, as these figures refer to the proportion of women and men who disagreed (deVaus 2006).
these tasks was not important, but his ever having done them was (Baxter and Western 1997; Baxter 1998, 2000).

In Wave 1 of HILDA, 56% of women who lived with men said they did more than their fair share of domestic work, 40% said they did their fair share and 4% said they did less. Of men who lived with women, 17% said they did more than their fair share, 60% said they did their fair share, and 23% said they did less. Men who said they did more than their fair share of domestic work did 1.2 hours per week more than their partner, and women who said they did more than their fair share did 25.7 hours per week more than their partner. Men who said they did their fair share did 13.6 hours per week less than their partner, while women who said this did 10.6 more than their partner (deVaus 2004:287-288). It is difficult to draw conclusions from this analysis, as it did not identify how statements about fairness are related to time spent in total work. Another analysis of HILDA data that considered perceptions of fairness and hours of total work, did not identify how the two were related (Headey et al. 2006:35-38).

Ken Dempsey conducted a series of studies in the 1990s that used a mix of fixed-choice and open-ended questions to study couples’ arrangements for domestic labour. In one study, in which participants reported that women did 80% of indoor domestic tasks and child care, 71% of women said the division of housework between themselves and their partners was unfair, while only ten percent of men said this. Most men said they did not want any change in the division of domestic labour; most women said they did want the division of domestic labour to change (Dempsey 2001:61-62). Compared with other fixed-choice survey studies, this one found a much higher proportion of women describing their current division of domestic labour as unfair. Dempsey (2001:62) observed that this is a most likely a reflection of research design, as this study had asked directly about what changes, if any, participants would like to see in their relationships.

In another study Dempsey (2002) asked: ‘Who gets the better deal from marriage, women or men?’ Of female participants, 16% said women got the better deal, 7% said it was equal, and 78% said men did. Of male participants 25% said women got the better deal, 35% said it was equal, and 40% said men got the better deal from marriage. Where men did less domestic work and had more leisure than their wives (and so did fewer hours of total work than their wives), most said this was fair.
Some Australian survey studies have asked about children’s experience of domestic work. One study considered family life as perceived by children (Amato 1987; Ochiltree and Amato 1985). A measure of participation in housework was created by setting out a list of 20 ‘chores’ such as washing dishes and making beds, and asking ‘do you do this?’ It found looking after bedrooms and making beds were the most commonly performed tasks, and that other tasks were segregated by gender, with girls doing indoor chores and boys, outdoor. Amato (1987:82) described this participation as children having ‘major responsibilities around the house’.

Some studies have distinguished between ‘self care’ tasks (those that benefit themselves only, such as making their own bed) and ‘other care’ tasks (those that benefit others, such as doing the family laundry). From questionnaires completed by mothers, fathers, and children aged nine and fourteen, Grusec et al. (1996) found that, while most children did very little domestic work, children who were routinely expected to do ‘other-care’ tasks such as cooking for the family, or doing the family laundry, scored more highly than other children on measures of 'pro-social behaviour' (see also Goodnow 1988; Bowes 1993, 1997). These studies have considered children’s performance of household tasks as contributing to their personal development, rather than as a practical contribution to the households they live in.

**UK and US fixed-choice surveys**

A 1993 ‘Eurobarometer’ survey found that women were more likely than men to agree with statements that indicated egalitarian values, and that younger people were more likely to agree than older. Women who had more education and higher incomes were more likely to agree with such statements than women with less. Among men, education and income were not related to attitudes (Apparala et al. 2003). These findings are similar to those from Australian fixed-choice survey studies.

Catherine Hakim (2001) conducted research in the UK into women's preferences around paid work and family. Hakim proposed three models for sharing work between partners, and asked participants to indicate which they would prefer. The options were an ‘equal sharing’ model, in which both partners have an 'equally demanding job' and share housework and child care equally; a ‘compromise’ model, in which the wife has less demanding job and does more housework and child care than her husband; and a
‘separate roles’ model, in which the man is the breadwinner and the woman takes care of the home and children. Hakim found that 41% of women chose the first option, 42% chose the second, and 17% chose the third. She concluded that ‘contrary to feminist rhetoric, the egalitarian model is not the majority preference among women' (Hakim 2001:2).

In another UK study Crompton and Lyonette (2005:614) found that ‘traditional’ ideas and arrangements were associated with a higher level of happiness in family life for men, but not for women. For women, liberal gender role attitudes were associated with more happiness and less stress in relation to family life, but only when combined with a less traditional division of labour.

Gershuny et al. (2005) analysed panel survey data from collections conducted in the UK, US and Germany to see how time spent in domestic work changed over time after women entered paid work. In these surveys participants were asked to estimate their time spent on domestic tasks over the past two weeks. Findings indicated that, when women entered full-time paid work, the time they spent on domestic tasks decreased substantially, and continued to decline slowly as time went on. When their wives entered paid work the time men spent in domestic work increased by a small amount, and continued to increase, by small amounts, over time. The effect of their wives’ employment on the time men spent in domestic work was small, but statistically significant. Gershuny et al (2005:664) noted that, ‘women’s adaptation is immediate and much larger than men’s adaptation, which is slower and less reliable’. They concluded that among couples where the woman has paid work ‘relative shares of domestic work are becoming more equal’, and this suggests that further convergence will occur. Similar analysis will be possible in Australia using HILDA as more data become available.

Canadian survey studies have shown higher earnings to be associated with less time spent on domestic work, for women and men. Higher occupational status was associated with less domestic work for men, and more for women. A higher income than their partner was associated with less domestic work for men, and more for women (Gazso-Windle and McMullin 2003:360-361). These findings are similar to those reported for Australian couples, by Bittman et al. (2003).
A US survey study by Allen and Hawkins (1999:200) considered the practice of ‘maternal gatekeeping’, defined as ‘the mother's reluctance to relinquish responsibility for family matters’. Observing that ‘scholars have noted [that] wives as well as husbands resist more collaborative arrangements of family work’, Allen and Hawkins suggested that arrangements in which women retain responsibility for domestic work while men only ‘help’ indicate that women actively prevent men from becoming more involved in domestic work.

Allen and Hawkins conducted a survey of 622 women who lived with their husbands and children, and who worked full-time. Participants were asked to respond to three sets of statements that were taken as a measure of gatekeeping behaviour. The first set included: ‘I frequently redo tasks my husband has done’; ‘It's too hard to teach my husband the skills to do housework tasks, I would rather do it myself’; ‘He doesn't know how to do things’; ‘I have higher standards for housework than my husband does’; and ‘I like being in charge’. The second set consisted of four statements along the lines of: ‘I care about what people think about the standards of housework in my home’. The third set consisted of two statements about men and women's roles regarding domestic work and child care. Participants were also asked to estimate the time they and their husbands spent on domestic tasks (Allen and Hawkins 1999:212).

The authors found that women who reported more positive answers to the ‘gatekeeping’ questions also reported their husbands doing less domestic work, and concluded from this that the idea that women actively prevent men from doing more domestic tasks had ‘received modest empirical support’. They noted that ‘gatekeeping schema could be the result of low paternal involvement, rather than low paternal involvement being the result of maternal gatekeeping’, and suggested that qualitative research might ‘illuminate interactive processes’ to allow us to see this more clearly how this occurs (Allen and Hawkins 1999:209).

Several survey studies in the US have looked at participation in housework of children whose mothers did paid work. All found that kids did little domestic work, and boys did less than girls. Manke et al. (1994) conducted telephone interviews each day for a week with the mother, father and older child in 153 families, asking about time spent on
housework. They found that in families where the mother had full-time paid work, daughters did more, and sons did not. Older children spent less time on housework than younger ones. In other US studies, Henderson (1990) found that children whose mothers had paid work did less housework than others, and Gager et al. (1999) found that the difference between the time girls and boys spent on domestic work increased over teenage years. Reporting on a small quantitative study in the UK, Morrow (1996) noted that while some children regularly ‘help’ with domestic tasks, responsibility for this work remains with the mother.

One large panel study in the US gathered data on kids’ participation in housework. Beginning in 1966, participants were interviewed annually for seven years, then every two years after that, for a total of fifteen years. The 20,000 women and men who took part were of two cohorts: those aged between fourteen and 24 in 1966, and those aged between 30 and 44 in 1966 (Goldscheider and Waite 1991:106). In some ways this survey is similar to HILDA, but its measures around domestic work are quite different. Information regarding domestic work comes from responses to questions about who does what tasks, and who is responsible for them. They do not include estimates of time spent. Tasks were listed, identified as: cooking, cleaning, laundry, child care, dishes, yard, shopping, and paperwork. Men were asked whether they did them. Women were asked who did them, who has responsibility for them (self, children, husband, other family member, or paid help), and to indicate the percentage done by each. In their analysis Goldscheider and Waite (1991) drew mostly on data from the women.

This study found that girls participated in more tasks than boys, at all ages. Teenagers participated in more tasks than younger children. Adult kids living with their parents participated in fewer tasks than teenagers. Adult boys participated less than girls of any age. Children living in mother-only families participated in more domestic tasks than children in families with two parents, and this was particularly so for boys (Goldscheider and Waite 1991:161-171).

Women who were more educated and held egalitarian attitudes had partners who did more domestic tasks, and children who did less. Across the sample, in families where women had paid work women’s share of domestic work remained the same, and either
men did a little more and kids did less, or kids did more and men did less. Goldscheider and Waite (1991:176) proposed that where men participate more in domestic work, they take on tasks that would otherwise have been done by children, a pattern they called ‘substitution’. Further analysis of data from the HILDA and ABS time-use surveys could show whether such a pattern is evident in Australian families with children aged fifteen and over.

**Comment on methods**

Some fixed-choice survey studies have used very limited measures of participation in domestic work. In relation to the definition of domestic labour I use in this thesis, such studies provide information of varying quality about domestic tasks, some information about the work of planning and organising, and no information about emotion work.

US sociologists Press and Townsley (1998:188) argued that when estimating time spent on domestic work, people report times that more closely match their stated views about how such work *should* happen, than they do in time diary collections; and that men, in particular, do this. If this is correct, data from survey studies would be more likely to show evidence of convergence, than data from time-use surveys. This pattern is evident in the studies cited above. In Australian survey studies younger men are more likely than older men to agree with statements supporting an egalitarian division of labour, and young men report spending more time on domestic work than older men (Baxter 2005b:314). In contrast, ABS time-use data show young men spending no more time on domestic work than older men (Bittman 1995:11). Similarly, analysis of survey data by Gershuny et al. (2005) shows a small increase in the time men spent on domestic work that does not appear in time-use studies.

In studies that ask fixed-choice questions, participants are asked to select responses from categories that have been decided in advance by the researcher. These methods limit the opportunity to find things we did not expect. In most surveys a focus on how domestic work is shared between couples has left no room to show participation by kids. For example, in the NLC survey the only place a respondent could record the participation of a child was under the category ‘shared equally’. An unintended consequence of this research design has been to make the participation of children invisible.
Other studies appear to have been set up to find what the researcher expects to hear. For example Hakim’s (2001) study purports to examine women’s preferences, but the options offered cover only a limited range of these. No option gives room for both partners to value and give priority to family life. Hakim may say this is implied within option one, in which both partners have an ‘equally demanding job’ and domestic work is shared equally; but as I read it, the phrase ‘equally demanding’ suggests otherwise. Only options two and three, in which the man pursues his career while the woman gives priority to unpaid work, give any room for valuing the unpaid work involved in supporting a family, equally with or above paid work. All options assume that men will always give priority to paid work. Any possibility that both partners might work less than ‘demanding’ hours (and maybe earn less, and consume less) so they can participate in family life is not on the radar.9

The study by Allen and Hawkins (1999) is another example. These researchers assumed maternal gatekeeping existed because ‘scholars have noted’ it. They operationalised the concept using questions referring to differences in skills between women and men, and took ‘yes’ answers as evidence of maternal gatekeeping. Statements such as those used by Allen and Hawkins are what women say when they explain why their husbands do little domestic work, even though women want them to do more. They represent what Hochschild (1989:19) called an ‘anger-avoiding myth’.

While findings from quantitative studies provide essential context for understanding how domestic labour is negotiated in families, such studies have significant limitations. In limiting the range of permissible responses, studies that use quantitative methods require the researcher to decide in advance what is of interest. Most research around domestic labour has focused on the performance of domestic tasks, and so has overlooked other aspects of domestic labour. A focus on couples has curtailed opportunities to gather information about children. Studies that ask open-ended questions can provide broader and more nuanced information about how domestic labour is negotiated in families. I discuss these in the next chapter.

9 In an Australian qualitative study that tested Hakim’s findings JaneMaree Maher (2005) found no difference in career attachment between women with kids and those without. In their accounts of how they combine work and mothering mothers did not talk about conflict between those two areas, but about ‘fitting all the work in’. See also Maher and Lindsay (2005).
CHAPTER THREE WHAT DO WE KNOW AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT?

PART 2

This chapter outlines findings from qualitative studies in Australia and elsewhere, then discusses a study I conducted in 2002 that asked: ‘What do kids think about domestic labour?’ The chapter concludes by setting out the aims for the present study.

3.1 QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Qualitative studies can tell us what the behaviour and attitudes reported in quantitative survey studies mean to the people who do them. Such studies can tell us a great deal about how domestic labour is negotiated in families.

This section begins with a study conducted in Sydney in the 1950s by Harold Fallding. It then considers research conducted in the 1980s by Arlie Hochschild and Aafke Komter, which developed conceptual tools relevant to the present study. Next it outlines findings from Australian, UK and US studies from the 1990s and 2000s. The section concludes with comments on methods.

Australia in the 1950s: Harold Fallding

Fallding (1957) undertook an in-depth study in Sydney of 38 two-parent families with teenage kids that considered, among other things, participants’ views and practices around domestic labour. Fallding visited each family several times, interviewing family members firstly as a group, then separately. In eighteen families the fathers were tradesmen, and in twenty the men were employed in professional occupations. In all families the father was the main breadwinner, and in some the wife did paid work (Fallding 1957:56-60).

In all the families women took responsibility for domestic work, and did most of it themselves. All the men in the ‘tradesmen’ families and half of those in the ‘professional’ families gave their wives some ‘token help’, such as washing or drying dishes, or making cups of tea. In most families men did outdoor work, except for ‘flower-gardening’, which was done by women. In one third of ‘professional’ families the men excused themselves from outdoor work, on grounds of busyness or incompetence. Some children did regular domestic tasks, but most did tasks occasionally or not at all. In all families adolescents were ‘excused from greater
responsibilities because of the claim made on their time by study or daily occupation’ (Fallding 1957:61). The patterns identified here appear repeatedly in later studies of domestic labour.

Fallding was interested in how authority is exercised in families. He did not explain how he operationalised the concept, beyond describing it as being ‘in effective control’ (Fallding 1957:62). Fallding described 21 families as ‘patriarchal’, four as ‘mother-dominant’ and thirteen as practising ‘partnership’ (Figure 2).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patriarchal</th>
<th>Mother-dominant</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td><strong>4</strong></td>
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<tr>
<th>Rightful</th>
<th>Forced</th>
<th>Incompetent father</th>
<th>Skilled mother</th>
<th>Stable</th>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>50%</td>
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**Figure 2: Fallding’s typology of families, adapted from Fallding (1957:62-69)**

Among patriarchal families Fallding identified two groups. Fourteen families embodied ‘rightful patriarchy’, in which it was taken as natural that men should have authority in the family, while women took responsibility for its day-to-day management. In these families, women were understood to be naturally better at organising family life and nurturing children, to have better intuition, pay more attention to detail, and to be naturally better at adapting themselves to others. Seven families practised what Fallding called ‘forced patriarchy’. In these families, men expected their households to run according to their convenience, and backed up their demands with various forms of coercion. Thirteen families adopted ideas of ‘partnership’, wherein women and men were seen to be equal, and decision-making was shared. Four families were ‘mother-dominant’, resulting from ‘incompetence and evasion of responsibility on the part of the father’ (Fallding 1957: 62-69).

Fallding (1957:69) noted that, while adults in patriarchal families ascribed roles on the basis of ‘supposed natural differences between the sexes’, those in partnership families identified a division of roles arising from differences in ‘actual competence’ [italics in original]. In partnership families, ‘the belief that authority went with competence came
to mean simply that each partner was thought most competent in the area conventionally and traditionally assigned to their sex’.

Although people in the patriarchal and partnership families referred to different ideas when they explained how their family works, in terms of domestic labour their practices were the same. Fallding characterised families as ‘stable’ and ‘unstable’, based on the degree of conflict, or quarrelling over domestic practices, they exhibited. Families in which the women did all or most of the domestic work were ‘stable’, and other families were not. All the families that adopted ‘rightful patriarchy’ were stable. There was a clear division of labour, and this was not questioned. Of the partnership families only half were stable, and in these families the division of labour was the same as in families that practised ‘rightful patriarchy’. Fallding (1957:69) concluded: ‘The only real difference between stable partnership and rightful patriarchy was the dismissal from the former of the idea of authority’ [italic in original].

In this study families that did not experience conflict over domestic labour were those in which the woman did the domestic work. People explained the division of labour in terms of differences in skills between women and men. Most described these differences as ‘natural’, and some said they were individual. Men who were employed in professional occupations were more likely than other men to say they supported ideals of partnership, but were less likely to actually do domestic work. These patterns appear repeatedly in later research.

**Arlie Hochschild: emotion work and the family myth**

In *The Second Shift* (1989) Hochschild reported on a qualitative study based on interviews with 50 couples with young children, in which both partners worked full-time. She identified people as having ideas that were: ‘traditional’, believing that he should do earning and she should do home and family; ‘egalitarian’, believing that both should share earning and family; or ‘transitional’, believing that both partners should share earning, and the wife should have responsibility for family work (Hochschild 1989:17). Hochschild’s label ‘transitional’ implies this pairing of attitudes to be a temporary stage, presumably on the way to ‘egalitarian’.

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10 Half of thirteen families is a tricky concept, and Fallding did not explain it. Neither did he identify the numbers of tradesmen’s or professionals’ families in the rightful / forced and stable / unstable groups.
In common with other studies, Hochschild found that in most families women did most of the domestic work, and where men participated, they did tasks that were occasional and discretionary. In participants’ accounts of their domestic arrangements the most common pattern was one in which the wife’s ideas were ‘egalitarian’ and the husband’s, ‘transitional’. In these couples the wives wanted their husbands to do routine domestic work, and the husbands resisted (Hochschild 1989:7).

Hochschild presented case studies illustrating different ways in which tensions over domestic labour were resolved. In the first of these the wife had tried for years to get her husband to do domestic work, and he had resisted. Tensions were resolved when the wife decided to understand a situation in which she did all the housework and childcare and he took care of the garage, as ‘he does outdoors and I do indoors so we are sharing equally’. Hochschild described this understanding as a ‘cover story’, or a ‘family myth’. These are ‘versions of reality that obscure a core truth in order to manage a family tension’ (Hochschild 1989:19; see also Backett 1982:77).

The cover story adopted by the woman in this case study allowed her to keep her feminist ideals as principles, while not applying them to her marriage. She compared her leisure not with her husband’s but with that of other working mothers; compared her husband not with other men, but with his father or hers; and attributed their different contributions to their having different characters. The cover story held that he is not well organised, while she is. She was socialised to do housework, while he was not. This couple created ‘a modest delusional system concealing an unequal division of labour, [her] indignation over that inequality, and their joint fear of her anger’ (Hochschild 1989:57). For the woman, maintaining this cover story involved significant emotion work, in managing her own feelings of anger and frustration.

Another case study concerned a family in which the wife earned more than her husband, and still did all of the domestic work. The inequity of this situation was masked by a family myth that held that she was ‘lucky’ to have a man who would accept her earning so much (Hochschild 1989:83). A third concerned a family in which the wife did more domestic work than her husband, but the family myth held that he does half. Any discrepancy between myth and practice was accounted for by the notion that she does
more because it is she who notices things that need to be done (Hochschild 1989:100-101). In a fourth case study both partners worked long hours, and managed their domestic work by outsourcing. The wife managed the outsourcing arrangements, and performed any domestic work that remained to be done. The cover story adopted by this couple was that the husband had no choice but to work long hours, so he could not be involved in family work (Hochschild 1989:119).

In this study there were a few families where both partners held ‘traditional’ views. These couples usually had less education than others in the sample, and their paid employment was less prestigious. In these families the men did more domestic work than men in families with ‘egalitarian’ or ‘transitional’ views. In a case study that illustrated this arrangement, the mismatch between the husband’s performance of domestic work and the couple’s ‘traditional’ ideas was managed by an account that minimised his participation. Across this sample men who held ‘traditional’ views played down the extent and significance of their participation in domestic work, while men with ‘transitional’ or ‘egalitarian’ ideas did the reverse (Hochschild 1989:73).

Hochschild identified some couples in which both partners held ‘egalitarian’ views. In most of these families the practice around domestic work did not match the ideals, and again the discrepancy was managed by a family myth that held that domestic work was shared equally, even though it was not (Hochschild 1989:146).

In each of the families in this study, the onus to negotiate domestic labour rested with the woman. Hochschild identified different sets of strategies used by women and men in negotiating arrangements for domestic labour. Women’s strategies were firstly, to seek to get her husband to share responsibility for domestic work. A woman might make an explicit challenge to her partner and win; she may make such a challenge and then back off; or she might avoid direct confrontation over the issue. Some women used indirect means to get their husbands to do more domestic work, like being helpless, or becoming ill.

A second strategy used by women was to adapt to their partner’s refusal to participate in domestic work, and just do it all. A women who did this would identify herself as ‘a good organiser’, or ‘better at seeing those things than he is’ (Hochschild 1989:195).
These strategies were sustained by statements such as those taken by Allen and Hawkins (1999) to denote ‘gatekeeping’ behaviour.

A third strategy women used was to reduce their investment in paid work, usually by working fewer hours. Beyond that, women reduced their expectations about how much housework needed to be done, and put their own needs for sleep and leisure, last. Some women adopted the strategy of employing paid help. Help was rarely sought from children. Hochschild noted that most women in her study did whatever it took to 'cover up' difficulties over domestic labour, in order not to add to the strain on their marriage. (Hochschild 1989:32).

Hochschild identified a set of strategies used by men, most of whom resisted pressure to share in domestic work. The first strategy was limited co-operation, in which some men alternated between co-operating and resisting. A second was resistance by disaffiliation. Men who did this would wait until they were asked to do a task, and then would do it badly. A third was a strategy of needs reduction, in which a man would assert that he does not care about things being clean, or whether there is dinner cooked, or such.

Another strategy involved making ‘substitute offerings’. These men supported their wives by being a handyman, or offering emotional support, or money. Another strategy was of ‘selective encouragement’. Here a man would praise his wife for being so organised, and doing such a wonderful job with the family work. She noted that 'in the context of other strategies, appreciating the way a wife bears the second shift can be another little way of keeping her doing it' (Hochschild 1989:201).

Reflecting on these findings fourteen years later Hochschild (2003b:128) noted that a pattern in which a woman holds ‘egalitarian’ ideas and her partner ‘transitional’ ones is still common, and that that men in particular may be ‘egalitarian on top but transitional underneath’. A woman who holds egalitarian ideals may be faced with a choice ‘between living up to her gender ideals, or staying married'. Where she chooses to stay, she takes on a private program of anger management. Emotion work is ‘the cost women pay for the absence of change in men and their circumstances' (Hochschild 2003b:135).
Aafke Komter: overt, latent and invisible power

Komter (2001, first published 1989) conducted a study in the Netherlands designed to examine the operation of power in couple relationships. She interviewed 60 couples, asking about domestic labour, child care, sexuality, leisure and finances. Half the women had paid work, and half did not (Komter 2001:364).

Komter drew on ideas about power proposed by Stephen Lukes (1974). She considered negotiation firstly in terms of ‘manifest power’, as demonstrated in visible attempts to achieve change; secondly, as ‘latent power’, in which there is no conflict reported, but one person refrains from seeking change because they anticipate a bad reaction from the other; and thirdly, as ‘hegemonic’ or ‘invisible power’, the exercise of which escapes awareness, but is visible in the ideas people call on to legitimate their accounts (Komter 2001:362).

In this study women wanted men to do more domestic work and child care, while men were more likely to be satisfied with current arrangements. Few couples reported overt conflict. ‘Change toward gender equality was hampered by women’s tendency to anticipate their husbands’ possible negative reactions or to resign themselves to the existing state of affairs’ (Komter 2001:370).

Komter identified five strategies people used when seeking or resisting change: cautiousness, sanctioning, waiting, reasonableness and ignoring. A strategy of cautiousness was used mostly by women. Women sought change in a gradual way, avoiding conflicts. This strategy was usually ineffective. Other strategies were used by women and men, and while they worked for men, for women they did not. For example, as a strategy of ‘sanction’ a woman might leave the kitchen in a mess, but this did not work as he just left it for her to deal with later. A man might ‘sanction’ by threatening to leave his wife for another woman, and this worked. Strategies involving waiting also worked for men but not for women. Where he waited, she did the work; where she waited, he did nothing. A strategy of reasonableness, in which one partner would seek to convince the other of the rightness of their views, was used most successfully by men who had more education and more prestigious employment than their wives. Strategies of reasonableness were not available to women, as they were
unable to express their concerns around domestic work in ways that men recognised as reasonable. A strategy of ignoring what their wives said was used effectively by men. (Komter 2001:373).

Komter found, as had Hochschild and Fallding, that to legitimate their accounts of who does what domestic work, participants referred to ideas about differences in skills and preferences between women and men. Such legitimations were ‘largely taken for granted, [and] contribute forcefully to the perception of daily reality as unchangeable and inevitable’ (Komter 1989:376).

Australia in the 1990s and 2000s
In a study designed to examine how people deal with a mismatch between ideas and practices around domestic labour, Bittman and Lovejoy (1993) interviewed women and men in 65 couples in Sydney (participants’ hours of paid work were not identified in this article). Interviews included a questionnaire that listed a series of tasks and asked whether each one was done by ‘self always, self mostly, both equally, partner mostly, partner always, neither’, as well as statements about gender role attitudes. Participants were asked open-ended questions about how domestic responsibilities came to be allocated, how disputes were resolved, and what would happen if one partner refused to do a task (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:303).

Bittman and Lovejoy found that people with higher levels of education reported higher levels of agreement with egalitarian values, but not a more equal division of domestic labour. Participants managed the contradiction between their professed belief and their reported behaviour by ‘reducing, concealing or denying contradictions’ in their accounts, a practice the authors called ‘pseudomutuality’ (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:319).

Husbands were more likely than wives to claim that the division of domestic labour was equal. Men maximised the size and importance of their participation in domestic work, and minimised that of their wives. Even with these over- and under-estimates, men still described their wives as spending twice as much time on domestic work as themselves. Comparing how women reported the time they spent in domestic work with data from ABS time-use surveys, the authors concluded that women in this study underestimated
the time they spent in domestic work. The combined effect of women’s and men’s
misreporting was to reduce the difference between the time spent on domestic work by
each partner (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:311).

Bittman and Lovejoy identified a range of strategies used by couples in order to
represent their participation in domestic work as equal. The first was to define equality
as mutual participation. This involved inflating the significance of the husband’s
occasional participation, and overlooking the fact that responsibility rested solely with
the wife. The second was to assert different standards, claiming that men have a higher
tolerance for mess. The third was to interpret equality in terms of specialisation
according to the partners’ different skills or preferences. Of couples who adopted this
strategy, few referred to what Hochschild would call a ‘traditional’ model for
legitimation. Most referred to different skills or preferences as a characteristic of
individuals. A final strategy was to dismiss the issue of domestic work as trivial
(Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:315).

When asked how domestic work is negotiated, most participants said it was not talked
about, it just happened. Some couples reported deciding to outsource as a result of
discussion about domestic work, and among those who did this, the tasks most often
outsourced were gardening or house repairs. Some participants reported negotiation
followed by grudging compliance as an effective strategy for avoiding any further
discussion of domestic work (Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:318).

Bittman and Lovejoy noted that women had trouble maintaining an image of ‘harmony
and unity’ when talking in detail about their domestic arrangements. Women expressed
‘powerful feelings of unacknowledged toil, of unequal exchanges, of less than total
resignation’. The researchers concluded that the presence of an interviewer ‘disturbs
the delicate arrangement that prevents the half-concealed conflict from erupting’
(Bittman and Lovejoy 1993:318). In Hochschild’s terms, participating in an interview
had unsettled the family myth.

Goodnow and Bowes (1994) used qualitative methods in a study that set out to examine
the domestic practices of ‘sharing couples’. They recruited through women’s groups,
asking members to refer them to ‘couples who do things differently’. This was loosely
defined as a man taking responsibility for some task or tasks that are traditionally done by women. Goodnow and Bowes interviewed 25 couples, and asked how they had arrived at their arrangements for domestic labour. This study differs from those discussed so far in that both partners were interviewed together, rather than separately. In this sample 90% of men and 72% of women did full-time paid work (Goodnow and Bowes 1994:36-37).

No couple shared all domestic tasks. Goodnow and Bowes identified four styles of sharing. The first was ‘non stereotyped specialties’. These were couples in which the man took responsibility for a particular task. One example given was of a couple in which the man was responsible for cleaning the outdoor toilet because it was only he who used it; another was of a man who made juice at breakfast. Another style was ‘fluid shifts’. In these couples either partner might do a given task, depending on who was there. A third style was ‘off the list’. These were couples who decided that there would be no ironing done, or that some tasks would be outsourced. The fourth style was ‘each their own’. In these couples each took responsibility for cleaning up their own mess, and performing their own ‘self-care’ (Goodnow and Bowes 1994:39-64).

Goodnow and Bowes (1994:77) identified two styles of negotiation that couples used in deciding on their domestic arrangements. The first was one of few words: the woman would ask for a task to be done, and the man would do it. The second was open discussion. Among couples that did this, discussions had been initiated by the woman. The authors noted that ‘far more [effort was] required with a partner who does not “see” what has to be done’ (Goodnow and Bowes 1994:83-4).

The authors identified four areas of tension around negotiating domestic labour. The first was achieving discussion; the second was achieving the right to comment; the third was working out an appropriate way to comment; and the fourth was working out how to describe any disagreement without compromising the representation of the relationship as fair and equitable. Women were interested in avoiding ‘hassle’. In interviews where women said they had been angry about domestic work, they talked about this lightly. They laughed about it, and framed their accounts gently in terms such as ‘you weren’t confident about that stuff’ (Goodnow and Bowes 1994:91).
It is easy to critique this study. Explicitly recruiting for ‘sharing couples’, would encourage participants to represent their arrangements in a positive light. Interviewing partners together rather than separately would amplify this effect. In their analysis Goodnow and Bowes appear to have defined as ‘sharing’ any arrangement in which a woman did not perform all the indoor domestic work. They made no distinction between occasional help with a task, and taking overall responsibility for it. Any participation by a man was taken as evidence of equity.

Reading this work after Hochschild’s, the couples look more interesting as studies of successful resistance, than of successful negotiation of change. Goodnow and Bowes’ data represent the family myth, in which any participation by a man in domestic work represents progress. It is assumed by the participants and the researchers that a woman must package any discussion of the topic so that the man’s feelings are not hurt. Any hurt a woman might feel is not important, and for her to persevere with its expression would be inappropriate. Within this framework, men’s resistance is excused and normalised, as something inevitable, about which women should not get upset. The emotion work involved in this for women passes without comment. Goodnow and Bowes’ analysis takes what Hochschild would call the ‘cover stories’ at face value, and offers no critical examination.

In Melbourne Ken Dempsey (1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999) undertook a series of qualitative studies that looked at how domestic labour is negotiated between couples. Samples included women with and without paid work. One study found that almost half the women interviewed said they wanted their husband to do more domestic work, and a quarter said the present division of domestic labour was not fair. In response to questions about how negotiation happens, most participants said: ‘it wasn’t discussed’. It was only when women tried to make change, and men resisted, that practices around negotiation became visible. Men used tactics such as waiting to be asked to do tasks, which gave the woman the extra task of asking; ignoring requests, so the women ended up doing the task anyway; expressing sympathy but not doing anything; promising to do a task and then not doing it; doing requested tasks, but badly; and claiming to have different standards from their wives. Many men said: ‘well I do more than my dad did’ (Dempsey 1997a:169-193).
Dempsey argued that men were supported by beliefs about men's incompetence and women's competence in relation to domestic work; the heavy demands involved in men's work; and the idea that domestic work is women's responsibility. He noted that because it included only couples who remained together, findings from this study probably underestimate the extent of conflict over domestic labour (Dempsey 1997a:199-214).

In another study Dempsey (1997b) found that men whose wives did full time work were no more likely than other men to share responsibility for domestic labour. Of women with paid work who took overall responsibility for housework, 94% agreed with the statement ‘if both work they should share equally in housework and childcare’. Of these women, 72% said their domestic arrangements were fair. Of women who reported having tried to get their husbands to do more domestic work, half said they had given up because having a ‘harmonious relationship was more important’ than achieving change. In explaining their domestic arrangements women compared themselves with other women, rather than with their husbands. Dempsey proposed that women have a lesser sense of entitlement than men, and this influences the way they think about fairness. Smaller contributions from men were valued more than larger ones from women, because men's time and work is more highly valued. Women saw their egalitarian beliefs as less important than the need to avoid conflict (as noted also by Thompson 1991). Women dealt with the inconsistency of their positions by ‘redefining the unacceptable as acceptable’ (Dempsey 1997b:17-18).

Another study asked women to identify who performed what proportion of specified domestic tasks, the kind of assistance, if any, they had sought from their husband, how he had responded, and whether they wanted further change in the way domestic labour happens (Dempsey 1998, 1999). Women in this sample had part time or full time paid work, and at least one dependent child living at home. Almost all had attempted at least once to get their husbands to do indoor housework. Most had succeeded in getting some help from their husbands, but less than they had wanted. Some said their husbands would help if asked, but the detail of their reports provided no evidence that they did. Some women reduced their expectations, and settled for small gains. One quarter said they were satisfied with the change they had achieved. Some said they had given up seeking change because they felt ‘worn down’ by their husband’s refusal to co-
operate. Some women said they feared that to keep trying would cause conflict, and damage the relationship. Of all the women in the study, two thirds wanted more change.

Dempsey argued that men successfully used latent power in negotiating domestic labour. Men refused to do tasks or argued about them, and women gave up asking because they anticipated negative responses. ‘Wives want to avoid the extra task of asking every time for help, especially if it is unlikely the husband will perform the task or do it satisfactorily’ (Dempsey 1999:13). Women felt there was not much they could do to create further change without jeopardising their relationship. Dempsey concluded that ‘a woman seeking change has not only a resistant husband to deal with but a powerful tradition and a contemporary set of norms that say the tasks belong ultimately to her’ (Dempsey 1999:9-10).

Given the extent of unhappiness about domestic labour among women, it is likely that this will be a contributing factor in the dissolution of marriages. Dempsey (2001:59) noted that while some studies of divorce have identified domestic labour as significant, most have not. He suggested that this is a function of research design, as most studies have not asked about housework as among the factors contributing to marriage breakdown.

In NSW Gurjeet Gill (1998) conducted a study designed to examine parents’ attitudes to children’s housework. Gill interviewed 35 couples who had kids living at home, and where both parents did full-time or part-time paid work. Couples jointly completed a questionnaire about who does what tasks, and were interviewed together. All participants said housework should be shared equally, but their responses indicated that it was not. Similarly, all participants said kids’ chores should not be allocated on basis of gender, but in practice kids’ participation was highly gendered, with girls doing more tasks than boys. To get kids to do housework tasks parents used strategies of appreciation, payment with money, and denial of privileges. None of these strategies was particularly effective (Gill 1998:304-312).

Marian Collis (1999) considered conflict within couples over men’s use of leisure time. She interviewed 45 women and 50 men in a mining town, in which men worked twelve
hour shifts for four consecutive days, with four days off in between. It was the practice of some men to spend their days off away from home drinking with ‘the boys’, while their wives wanted them to spend time with their families and to participate in domestic work (Collis 1999:62). Collis identified six strategies used by women: bargaining; manipulation; supplication; making demands; and sanctioning. No strategy was particularly effective. The last two strategies worked for some women, but in the short term only. The final strategy was that of disengagement, leaving the marriage altogether (Collis 1999:67-70).

Like Dempsey, Collis found that women gave up trying to bargain with their husbands because they anticipated their negative responses and preferred not to face them. For some women, ‘feelings of resentment seemed to be the price [they] paid’ for keeping their marriage together. Other women expressed no resentment of their situations, as they did not question their husbands’ right to spend their time off work in the leisure activities of their choice. Women adapted to their situations and adjusted their expectations accordingly (Collis 1999:74).

Kristin Natalier (2003a, 2003b) conducted a study of domestic labour among people aged 18 to 35 living in share houses in Brisbane. Participants were asked what domestic work they had done in the past seven days, what others had done, and how the work was negotiated. Most participants said housework was not a priority, and that who did what housework had nothing to do with gender. Housework was described as something they ‘opt in’ to, at their discretion (2003a:259).

In most all-male households one man did more than twice as much domestic work as anyone else, but it was not seen as legitimate for him to complain. As domestic labour was seen as something unimportant, caring too much about who does it was inappropriate. While there was no overt conflict over domestic work in these households, tensions manifested in snide remarks. The men whose labour was appropriated felt aggrieved, but they were not permitted to say so. Natalier (2003a:266) concluded that ‘when involvement in housework is constructed as a choice, any disproportionate contributions can be defined as voluntary, the labour of others may not be demanded and attempts to change the behaviour of others cannot be legitimate’.
In all-female and mixed households, women asserted an expectation that all residents should participate in housework. As in all-male households, because housework was seen as unimportant, if one household member did significantly more domestic work than others it was not regarded as legitimate to complain. Natalier (2003a:265) noted that both women and men employed a strategy of ‘opting out’ to avoid doing housework, but while men felt perfectly entitled to do this, women did not.

Natalier’s study is interesting in providing a view about negotiation of domestic labour in households where expectations are not shaped by people’s status as family members. It shows that while participants commonly disavow gender as relevant in determining who does what domestic work, women and men behave and talk about domestic labour in distinctive ways. In same-sex households, domestic work is revealed as being as difficult to negotiate as it is in mixed households. Unspoken rules around domestic work maintain that because the issue is trivial, a person who does more than others is not entitled to complain about it.

JaneMaree Maher and Andrew Singleton (2003, 2004) conducted a study that considered how domestic labour was organised among couples of ‘Gen-X’. This study was based on interviews with 22 couples, in which partners were engaged in different combinations of full-time or part-time paid work, study, and caring for young children. Interviews took place in people’s homes. Women and men were interviewed separately, each by a member of their own sex. Participants were asked about what tasks get done and by whom, how work was assigned, if this has changed over time and how, if there has been any conflict over assignment or performance of tasks, and how they thought about the influence of their family of origin (Singleton and Maher 2004:229).

Findings from this study echo those from earlier research. Maher and Singleton (2003:71) found that in their initial responses participants ‘minimised the significance of household labour in their everyday lives’. In particular, women who worked full time did this, so their greater participation in domestic work did not look so unfair. Men’s accounts of who does what domestic work were less detailed than those given by women, and many men used ‘the “we” pronoun’ to describe how domestic work happens (as noted also by Lareau 2000, discussed below). While women reported doing several domestic tasks concurrently, men did not (Maher and Singleton 2003:65).
In this study all participants described their division of domestic labour as fair. Women were reluctant to criticise their partners, and very ready to praise them, saying things like ‘he really is very good’. Women explained the division of labour in various ways. Where the man had full time paid work, and the woman was engaged full or part time in caring for their children, the organisation of paid work was cited as the factor that determined how they do domestic work. Where both partners did paid work full or part time, they referred to ‘his lesser domestic skill, his lower standards in relation to domestic work, or [to] the female's greater investment in the smooth running of the household’ (Singleton and Maher 2004:233).

When asked how their arrangements for domestic work came about, some participants said there had been no process for assigning work, it had ‘just happened’. The detail of participants’ accounts showed women to be more directive in these areas. Woman did tasks routinely, and took responsibility for them as a matter of course. Men did tasks occasionally, and claimed kudos for each occasion. When asked about conflict, most participants said there had been none, or if any that it had been minimal and brief. The detail of accounts belied this. Maher and Singleton (2003:74) observed that women could ‘only talk about difficulties as minor or in the past’. Women said they were ‘lucky’. In contrast, men did not praise their partner or say they felt lucky to have her.

Most participants said they wanted to be different from their parents. Some said they had started out with ideas about equity, but these had changed in response to the demands of paid work and young children. Different roles were described as according to ‘competency and preference’. The birth of a child was identified as the key point at which the couple’s division of labour became more ‘traditional’. The idea that men have a greater need than women for ‘time out’ and leisure was unquestioned (Maher and Singleton 2003:70-75).

Maher and Singleton argued that discourses of equity acted as obstacle for women in seeking more participation from men. In the face of a cultural expectation that housework should be shared, women carried responsibility for making this happen, and for explaining adequately when it does not (Maher and Singleton 2003:72-75). They concluded:
The belief that Gen-X men are more domestically engaged than men in previous generations has considerable currency among female Gen Xers. Men invariably benefit from generational comparisons, [as] any contribution is interpreted as an improvement, indeed, as quite satisfactory. [For women], to believe that one is partnered with a non-traditional man or to think that he is an improvement mitigates against a reality which, on balance, is little different from earlier household formations (Singleton and Maher 2004:235).

This is Fallding’s model of ‘stable partnership’, alive and well among Generation X.

A small study by Strazdins and Broom (2004) that considered how domestic labour is negotiated among couples with young children, looked particularly at emotion work. Emotion work was defined as ‘caring for, and understanding, other family members' emotional needs, as well as monitoring and maintaining the quality of interpersonal interactions within the family’ (Strazdins et al. 1997:223). Participants completed questionnaires that included closed- and open-ended questions asking about the current division of labour in relation to housework, emotion work, and paid work, and how they would like the division of labour to be in each these areas. Women reported more conflict than men, and more stress. Women and men said they wanted emotion work to be shared equally, and that women did more of this. To explain why this is so, ‘everyone cited personal attributes of themselves or their partners: needs, capacities, personalities, upbringing and gender socialisation’ (Strazdins and Broom 2004:371).

The authors argued that because responsibility for emotion work is carried by women, ‘gender imbalance is embedded into family life and becomes non-negotiable’ (Strazdins and Broom 2004:373). This study shows clearly the work of looking after one’s own and others’ feelings as underpinning the division of domestic labour, and hampering women’s attempts to negotiate change.

One Australian study asked children how they expect domestic labour to happen when they are adults. Barbara Pocock (2004) conducted focus groups with children aged ten to eighteen, around the topic ‘How young people plan to work and care’. Participants said they expected domestic work would be shared, outsourced, or done by women. Kids from areas of higher socio-economic status (SES) were more likely to anticipate
women doing it all, and kids from lower SES areas were more likely to expect domestic work to be shared. Pocock noted that boys ‘hope they can find a wife who will do the housework, that women will not notice unequal sharing, or that their monitoring will weaken over time’. Girls said ‘I don’t want to be like mum’. Girls recognised boys’ evasiveness, and either resigned themselves to doing it all, or hoped the boys would improve as they got older. Pocock concluded that ‘the theory of lagged adaptation is not supported here’ (2004:32-33).

Common patterns in the studies cited above indicate firstly, that taking responsibility for domestic work and negotiating who will do what parts of it is a significant part of domestic labour; and secondly, that the patterns of ideas and practices identified by Fallding in the 1950s are particularly resilient in Australian families today.

**UK and US studies of domestic labour**

Jordan et al. (1994) used qualitative methods to consider work and family choices among ‘upper middle class’ couples in Britain. They proposed that in interviews people draw on ideas and values they expect the interviewer will share, to create ‘morally adequate accounts’ of their family lives, in this instance ‘to achieve the appearance of competent, aware, higher income members of British society’ (Jordan et al. 1994:73). Jordan et al. found the most common pattern to be one in which the man is seen to be responsible for the family’s financial security, and the woman for the home and children. They noted that this strategy pays off for women financially only if the marriage lasts into retirement and beyond. If the marriage ends, the strategy offers advantage to men but not to women (Jordan et al. 1994:110).

In a UK study of couples Duncombe and Marsden (1993, 1995) considered emotion work in relation to domestic labour. They suggested that practices around emotion work are more difficult to change than other aspects of domestic labour, and that couples are more likely to achieve equity in relation to domestic tasks, because these are, at least, visible. Emotion work, in contrast, is ‘undervalued and invisible’ even to the women who do it (Duncombe and Marsden 1995:164). Building on this study, Jamieson (1998:156) proposed that intimacy between couples is undermined by men’s reluctance to participate in everyday domestic work. Jamieson suggested, as
Hochschild had ten years earlier, that this creates resentment in relationships and acts as an obstacle to intimacy (Pocock 2003 argued this also).

Scott Coltrane (1996) described a US study concerning men who share parenting. He presented a case study of a ‘sharing couple’, in which both partners work full-time and share childrearing. This couple had taken a long time to negotiate how housework would happen, and their domestic practices were still uneven and difficult (Coltrane 1996:16). Coltrane’s exemplary case study, like those of Goodnow and Bowes (1994), reads more convincingly as a study of successful resistance than of successful negotiation of change. The parenting style of this ‘sharing father’ is premised on an assumption that the child’s mother will clean up the messes, and deal with the exhaustion, that his distinctively ‘masculine’ style of interaction creates.

John Bartkowski (1999) conducted a study of the division of labour among couples involved with Evangelical churches in the US. Bartkowski conducted in-depth interviews in which participants were asked about their understanding of church discourses around family, and how see they see their own arrangements in relation to those discourses. Participants also completed time diaries that recorded time spent on domestic tasks (Bartkowski 1999:40). Bartkoswki presented his findings as case studies of couples.

In the first of these the wife worked longer hours and earned more than her husband, who did almost no domestic work. In this couple differing contributions to family were explained with reference to different skills. The husband explained that his wife takes care of the finances because she is more ‘detail oriented’. Both said the wife is the ‘task manager’ in the family because she is ‘better organised’. Both partners described the husband’s washing of dishes as a gift to his wife, indicating how much he ‘cares for her’. The wife expressed gratitude for his contribution, saying ‘he is just great’ (Bartkowski 1999:43-45). The accounts given by this couple illustrate what Hochschild (1989:203) called a ‘marital economy of gratitude’, where she feels lucky

11 Coltrane, who completed his PhD under the supervision of Nancy Chodorow, has made an idiosyncratic reading of research around domestic labour. In a comprehensive review of the literature Coltrane (2000) cited several Australian studies, but only those that support an optimistic view of change.
because he does the dishes, and because he is willing to accept her earning more than he
does.

Bartkowski’s second case study concerned a couple in which the man did full-time
work and the wife was at home with infants. The husband described it as natural for a
man to provide leadership in the family, and a woman to do the work of nurturing. The
wife said she wants her husband to do 50% of the child care work when he is at home,
and she has asked him to do this, but he does not. Her husband said he feels
uncomfortable about his wife seeking to ‘organise him’ in this way, and finds her
approach ‘regimented and stifling’ (Bartkowski 1999:47-51). The third case study was
of a couple with teenage children, in which both partners did full-time work. The
husband said it is for men to provide spiritual leadership in marriage, while the wife
said each partner should be submissive to the other. This man did more housework
than other men in the sample, but still much less than his wife. In this study women
expressed feelings of guilt about the balance between paid and unpaid work, while men
did not. Women wanted to see themselves as homemakers, and they achieved this by
doing all the work (Bartkowski 1999:58).

Orly Benjamin (1998) considered the extent to which access to ‘therapeutic discourse’
gives women a lever to change their ‘marital conversations’ around domestic labour.
She argued that while therapeutic discourse prior to the 1970s had positioned women as
pathological and obliged them to suppress their anger and nurture others, since the
1970s such discourses have changed to become potentially empowering to women.
Benjamin found it was only women who had professional jobs and good salaries who
were able to use the language of ‘therapeutic discourses’ effectively in negotiation
around domestic labour. She concluded that effective negotiation has two bases.
Firstly, a shift in ‘feeling rules’ is required, to permit a woman to express her anger
around domestic work. Secondly, a woman’s partner must be willing to co-operate.
Benjamin noted that the ‘characteristic male reluctance to ‘talk’ serves [to protect]

In a later paper Benjamin (2003:10-15) argued that while the dominant cultural idea of
femininity requires that a woman put other family members’ interests before her own,
views about men’s entitlement and women’s obligation appear natural. Challenging
this view requires a woman to ‘say the unsayable’.

In another US study, Lareau (2000:428) noted that men were not reliable informants
about their children’s day-to-day routines, because they were involved in so few of their
activities (in Australia Grusec et al. 1996 found the same). Men said ‘we do that’,
where the detail of their own and their partner’s accounts indicated that they meant ‘my
wife does it’ (as noted also by Maher and Singleton 2003). Lareau concluded that
neither men nor children are aware of the amount work done by mothers. She
suggested it would be useful for researchers to consider the vantage points of different
family members in order to understand dynamics within families, rather than just what
people say about hours spent in household labour (Lareau 2000:429-431).

Comment on methods
Studies that allow room for people to reflect on how domestic labour is organised report
more dissatisfaction around this area, than studies that ask fixed-choice questions, and
show change being sought by women and resisted by men. Findings from these studies
suggest that women who stay married eventually give up trying to make change, and
describe their domestic arrangements in terms of what Hochschild called an ‘anger-
avoiding myth’. These myths minimise the difference between what each partner does,
and attribute the remaining gap to individual or essentialist differences in inclination
and skill. Sustaining this situation comes at a price, as negotiating domestic labour, and
dealing with the outcomes, involves emotion work. If we define domestic labour as
including emotion work, these processes become visible.

The relation between reported levels of conflict over domestic labour and partners’
relative hours of paid plus unpaid work may be significant, although in many studies
this relation is unclear. When people say they think domestic work should be ‘shared
equally’, and at the same time that an arrangement in which a woman does most of this
work is ‘fair’, perhaps participants are thinking about ideas of equality and fairness in
relation to hours of total work, paid plus unpaid. In studies such Hochschild’s, in which
all participants had full-time paid work, the situation is clear: women in those couples
would be likely to be doing more hours of total work than their partners. In studies by
Bittman and Lovejoy (1993), and Dempsey (1997, 1998, 1999), published analysis has
not distinguished between couples with different combinations of hours of paid work. It would be interesting to revisit data from these studies to see how participants’ views about fairness are related to their hours of paid work, and their likely hours of total work compared with those of their partner.

The work of Maher and Singleton (2003, 2004) raises some interesting questions about interviewer effect. While other studies found that women and men explained their arrangements for domestic labour to be equitable, Maher and Singleton found it was mostly women who sought to maintain this story. In their study men who participated were interviewed by a man, and women by a woman. Maybe men are more likely to assert views about gender equity when they are talking to a woman, and less likely to see this as important when talking to a man.

Maher and Singleton noted that what people said in their initial answers to questions about who does what and how they feel about it was not borne out in the detail of their accounts. Initial responses were informed by a ‘prevailing social myth’ that holds that domestic work should be shared. Studies that asked fixed-choice questions would have revealed only the first responses (Maher and Singleton 2003:63). This suggests that we should see quantitative survey data as reflecting how people think domestic labour should be, rather than how it is.

Evidence from qualitative studies suggests that maybe not that much has changed since Harold Fallding interviewed families in Sydney in the 1950s. Families in which there is no conflict are those in which the woman takes responsibility for, and does most of, the domestic work. Some people explain their domestic arrangements with reference to ideas concerning equality and partnership, and others refer to ideas about natural roles for women and men. Either way it is the same division of roles being explained.

3.2 PILOT STUDY: KIDS AND HOUSEWORK
When I first read the research around domestic labour what struck me most forcefully was the omission of children’s voices from the research data. I felt that if we want to understand where change in the division of labour between women and men is going, we need to find out what kids think about domestic labour, and what they want for themselves as adults. In 2002, as part of my Honours year, I undertook a qualitative
study that asked: What do kids think about how domestic labour in their families? Do they expect that arrangements for domestic labour will be different for them when they are adults, compared with how it has been for their parents? If so, how do they think they will make this happen? (Carter 2002). This project serves now as a pilot for the present study.

For this study I conducted separate, confidential interviews with two parents and two teenage kids in each of five families. The families lived in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, and all had children attending Steiner schools. Three couples were married, and two were not; four couples had lived together for over 20 years, and one for twelve years. Most were born in Australia, and most had post-school qualifications. Women and men had part-time, full-time or no paid work. Adults were aged between 36 and 55, and kids between eleven and seventeen. Couples had two, three or four children. I call them here the O’Connell, Webster, Riley, Cassady and Bentley families.

I defined domestic labour as including housework tasks, planning and organising, and emotion work. I explained planning and organising as ‘identifying what needs to be done and making sure it happens’, and emotion work as ‘looking out for people’s feelings and keeping everything running smoothly’. In interviews I ran the same set of questions three times over, once for housework tasks, once for planning and organizing, and once for emotion work. The questions were: what gets done, who does what, do you think it is fair, and how do you think it should be; what do you think it will be like when you are an adult; and how will you make this happen. I asked the same questions of parents and kids, asking kids about ‘your future’ and parents about ‘your kids’ future’.

Findings from this study showed firstly, that to make sense of what people say about domestic labour we need to consider their accounts in the context of the families they live in; and secondly, that the key to understanding negotiation is to think of domestic labour as including emotion work.

12 For an introduction to Steiner education see http://www.steiner-australia.org/other/overview.html; also Stehlik 2001.
13 All names used here are pseudonyms. The numbers that appear after names indicate that person’s age. This discussion draws on a refereed paper I presented at a TASA conference in 2003 (Carter 2003).
What kids said about domestic labour made sense only if it was considered in relation to what goes on in their families. When I asked ‘is this fair?’ and ‘how do you think it should be?’ kids’ opinions reflected those of their parents. When parents agreed that housework should be shared, kids said this too. For example, 55 year-old Michael Bentley said, ‘a family is everybody working together to the same end. It’s not someone sitting there being waited on’. Michael’s thirteen year-old daughter Frances said, ‘mummy and daddy do lots of stuff, so should we’. Where parents disagreed about what was fair, kids gave both views in one breath. Allegra Webster, aged fifteen, whose parents are quoted below, said, ‘no it’s not fair, because it doesn’t get done if mum doesn’t do it. But I suppose it is kind of fair. She is mum’.

All the women thought housework should be shared. Some kids and some men thought it was fair for mum to do everything, because housework is part of the ‘mum job’. For example fourteen year-old Dylan Cassady thought it was fine that his mum did all the housework as well as working full time. He said, ‘mums help you grow up, and look after you all the time, so you sort of get used to it. It’s part of being a mum’.

The ‘who did what’ of housework reflected people’s ideas about how things should be. In the Bentley family housework was well shared. Everyone agreed about what was fair, and everyone did it. In the O’Connell family housework was partly shared: the parents agreed about how things should be, but the dad did not back this up with his behaviour and three of the four children resisted participation in various ways. In the Webster, Riley and Cassady families the fathers saw housework as ‘women’s work’, and most of the housework was done by the mother.

In families where more paid work was done by the mother, less housework was done by the kids. I argued that the link here is emotion work. Jollying people along to get things done takes time and energy, and you have to be there to do it. Where women had long hours in paid work, they said, ‘it gets too hard. It’s not fair, but it’s harder to get co-operation. It’s easier just to do it all myself’ (Carolyn Cassady, 50). Women saw emotion work as being less shared than any other aspect of domestic labour. They wanted their partners to do more, especially the emotion work involved in getting kids to do housework and other tasks.
Men resisted in various ways. Some trivialised the issue of domestic labour and would not talk about it, so the possibility of change was not discussed. The Riley family is an example. When I came to their house to do interviews, Phillip said, ‘why are you doing this? How can housework possibly be an issue?’ In the interviews it emerged that Angela, who worked seven days a week and was studying part-time, did almost all the domestic work. They said:

We don’t argue or disagree but we certainly differ I would think. I can’t be bothered with the hassle [of trying to get the kids to do housework]. I’m happy with it the way it is. She can do it well, and I’m happy for her to do it. We’re not a regimented family, we go with the flow (Phillip Riley, 49).

My voice becomes part of the wall. They don’t hear it any more. It’s easier not to pay any more attention to it, I get too stressed. Sometimes I do think about fairness, and it gets me really angry, so it’s better for me not to think about it. I need to learn anger management. If the children expect me to do something, and they say ‘mum it’s your job’, how do I manage that? It’s a very hard thing (Angela Riley, 49).

There was no overt conflict in this family, but as well as doing all the domestic work, Angela was left with the emotion work of managing her feelings of frustration and anger.

In one family the parents’ conflicting views about how things should be were discussed openly and often. Cathy Webster worked part time, and her kids and her husband did only a little housework. They said:

I’m quite happy to do nothing, and to have it all done for me. There’s this mindset I’ve got that [home] is where you relax, and your needs are taken care of. It’s like on an archetypical, unconscious level, home is women’s work. Women who resist this risk losing their femininity. They become masculinized, competitive and emasculating with their men. [Cathy’s] into power, she’s into control. My mother was controlling, and she bashed. So when Cathy asks me to put the milk away I feel persecuted, and anxious (Richard Webster, 46).
I feel it’s my role and Richard’s to guide the kids and teach the kids. If I want to teach that kind of fairness and that kind of sharing, I don’t have any choice but to take it on myself. I don’t mind doing that with the kids, because that’s part of my role as a parent. It’s with Richard I get pissed off. Richard and I have huge arguments about housework, especially when I’m working a lot. I think the house should be a shared responsibility. I just want Richard to behave like a responsible adult, and not have to treat him like one of the kids (Cathy Webster, 44).

In this family the framing rules around domestic labour were explicitly contested. Richard, who is a mental health professional, saw Cathy’s views about housework as pathological. Cathy thought Richard was being childish, but his standing as a professional made it difficult for her to counter his arguments. (Richard’s account of the way his family happens is one reason I am doubtful about Benjamin’s claim that therapeutic discourse is empowering to women in negotiating their domestic situations.)

In four of five families the work of getting kids to do things was ongoing, stressful, and usually done by women. Penny O’Connell said: ‘I probably do most of it. It’s hard work. That’s part of the unequal distribution of roles within the house. That I’m the ogre’ (Penny O’Connell, 39). Kids noticed the work involved in getting them to do things, and they saw how heavily it fell on their mothers. ‘Mum yells at me to clean up, but I usually don’t do it. She has to ask us over and over, and that really is a pain’ (Allegra Webster, 15). Gracie Cassady saw clearly what it meant for her mother to carry this work. She said:

A lot of fights are between mum and Dylan. And it’s because mum’s the one that pushes it. Dad doesn’t do that. So that’s making mum the evil one, she becomes the witch. Dad, he’s the joker, he’s not the one who [does this], so in Dylan’s eyes he’s the goody. Sometimes mum just breaks down, starts crying into her tea or something. It’s quite horrible. It’s always happening (Gracie Cassady, 16).

In one family both parents did the emotion work of setting expectations and getting the kids involved in housework, and both set an example in their own behaviour. In this family there was a clear ‘bottom line’. Michael Bentley explained:

Kids will always give you the idea, their friends don’t do this or they don’t do that. But that’s totally irrelevant as far as I’m concerned. I don’t care what their
friends do. The whole idea is you’ve got to pull your weight. If it’s negotiable all the time then you’ve got to negotiate. If it’s crystal clear it takes an awful pressure off you (Michael Bentley, 55).

Michael’s partner Allie was the only woman I spoke to who was not unhappy about the way domestic labour happens in her family.

The kids saw their futures as being ‘like this’. Domestic labour would be arranged as it is now, in their families. Boys saw no problem with the prospect. Domestic labour was not something that would need to be discussed or negotiated. They said things like: ‘The system that works now would probably work for me. I think it would be easy’ (Jake Webster, 13); and ‘Because I’ve grown up this way, I see it working the same way’ (Matthew Riley, 15). Most girls did not fancy it being ‘like this’ for them as adults. Girls said things like: ‘Unfortunately the way I see it is pretty much how it is now. How I would like it to be would be different, but …’ (Maeve O’Connell, 15); and ‘I don’t want to be like mum, doing everything’ (Gracie Cassady, 16). These girls had not thought much about how they might make things different for themselves. A common reply was, ‘I’ll just tell them to do it’ (Allegra Webster, 14).

The girls in the Bentley family were different. They expected work to be shared when they are adults, as it is now. Their mother said: ‘I think they’d be kind of astonished, if someone expected them to do that. I can’t imagine them turning around and slaving over someone. I don’t think the relationship would last’ (Allie McKenna14, 46). The Bentley family was the exception in this study (and, as it turned out, in the larger study that followed). Most kids had learned in their families strategies for creating co-operation around domestic labour that don’t work, and strategies for resisting it that do.

There was significant emotion work involved in managing domestic labour. Women were trying to engage participation while looking after other people’s feelings, not jeopardising their relationship with their partner, and keeping the household running well. If they gave up seeking participation they still had to manage their own feelings of frustration and anger. Women’s desire to ‘teach fairness’ conflicted with the ideas of some men and some children about the ‘mum job’. Creating change in these families

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14 The parents in the Bentley family were not married, hence the mother having a surname different to those of her children. In the pilot study, two of the five couples were not married.
involved challenging the framing rules and the feeling rules around what it is to be a mother.

Findings from this study demonstrate that when we define domestic labour as including emotion work we notice things we might otherwise miss. The work of ‘keeping everything running smoothly’, keeping the household work happening and family relationships going well, is a significant part of domestic labour. It is usually done by women, and is not often talked about. Thinking of this as emotion work is one way of making it visible.

This study generated lots of data that I was unable to use in an Honours thesis, particularly in relation to interactions between adults as they negotiated their domestic work. This prompted me to continue with a PhD that would allow me to look more closely at how negotiation happens in families.

### 3.3 AIMS FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

This study starts with the general question: how is domestic labour negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids? Its aim is to look closely at specific situations as a way of elucidating more general patterns in the negotiation of domestic labour in families.

As well as contributing to our understanding of how domestic labour is negotiated in families, findings from this study will shed light on four questions that remain unanswered in the literature around domestic labour. Of these, two concern women and men, two concern children, and all are interconnected. The questions are: Is the division of domestic labour between women and men converging? What does the experience of children suggest for future patterns in the division of domestic labour between women and men? Is the domestically useless teenager a problem, and if so, for whom? And: Who cares anyway?

Other researchers have suggested that to gain a better understanding of patterns of change and stability in the division of labour it is useful to look closely at how domestic labour is negotiated in specific situations (for example Allen and Hawkins 1999:209; Lareau 2000:431; Sullivan 2004:222; Connell 2005:372). I argue that to do this
effectively we need to do three things. The first is to define domestic labour broadly, to encompass the invisible work involved in identifying what needs to be done and making sure it happens, negotiating who will do what, and keeping everyone happy in the process. The second is to use methods that allow people room to reflect on their own experience and explain what practices around domestic labour mean to them. The third is to consider what people say in the context of the situations they live in. In particular, if we are interested in where change is going, we need to find out what kids are experiencing now, what they make of it, and what they want for their future.

The next chapter sets out the methods I used in the present study, and discusses some issues that arose as I considered how to approach analysis.
CHAPTER FOUR METHODS FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

This chapter sets out the methods used in the present study. First, it describes the process of recruiting and data collection, some issues that arose in that stage, and how I dealt with them. Next it identifies some questions arising from analysis and considers ways in which the approach taken in the study was re-shaped in response to these questions. Finally it outlines the approach I adopted in working with my data.

4.1 RECRUITING AND INTERVIEWS

In my Honours project (which I refer to now as the pilot for the present study) I found that framing the study as ‘Kids and Housework’ had the effect of defusing defensiveness that might have arisen if the project had focused on women and men. The division of domestic labour is a touchy topic for couples, and I found that an indirect approach bypassed some of the anxiety associated with the issue, and elicited candid responses. For the present project, although the focus is on negotiation between all family members I framed the study in a way that did not put negotiation between women and men at the centre of concern. I called it ‘Kids and Housework: Negotiating Domestic Labour in Families with Teenage Kids’. The study received approval from the Swinburne Ethics Committee in May 2003.

In recruiting participants I planned to use methods similar to those I had employed in 2002. For the pilot study I made fliers and asked people I knew to give them to people they knew, and to ask if they would mind if I called. Those people’s phone numbers were then passed on to me, and I called them. This method worked well for the pilot study. Anyone I called had already been told about me by someone they knew, and I had no trouble finding participants. Of all the people I called to ask if they would participate, none said no, and more people expressed interest than I was able to accommodate.

This method of recruiting had drawbacks that became clear only later. In the pilot study all the families had kids who attended Steiner schools, either the one my kids went to or others nearby. Interviewing families in their homes, sometimes making several visits, and having candid conversations with all family members, created an emotional connection between participants and interviewer (as noted also by Backett-Milburn 1999:73). The outcome was that I developed friendships with most of the people I
interviewed. This made it difficult to do analysis, because I came to know more about the families as time went on.\footnote{I note that in Maher and Singleton’s study of Gen X couples most participants knew the researchers socially before they participated in interviews (Maher and Singleton 2003:63). I would be curious to hear what effects this may have had on their analysis, and how they dealt with them.}

In 2002 I dealt with the problem of ‘knowing the people’ by thinking of my transcripts as text. I thought of the text as referring to groups of fictional people – like people in Ivy Compton-Burnett novels – not the actual people whom I continued to know. Thinking this way allowed me to separate my analysis of data from my knowledge of the people I had befriended.

For the current project I wanted to avoid this problem. I planned to interview only people who were not connected with my own social circle, and who I would be unlikely to meet afterward. I expected that doing interviews would create empathy, and that I would feel close to people after interviews, but I did not expect to see them again. This has turned out to be the case.

To identify potential participants I made fliers (Appendix 1) and gave them to three people – two women and one man – whom I knew but with whom I did not have social networks in common (these people did not take part in the study). I asked them to give fliers to people they knew who lived in two-parent families with teenage kids, tell them about the project and ask if they (my contacts) could pass on their phone numbers to me. As before, this method worked well. Again, no one I called to ask to participate in the project said no.

The sample also snowballed. Each of the three people I gave fliers to put me in touch with one or two families, each of which, after I had interviewed them, put me in touch with friends of theirs. Those families in turn put me in touch with friends of theirs, and on it went until I had accumulated a list of people who were interested in participating in the study. As I was planning to interview 25 families, this list was precious. After I changed my plan and decided to interview only ten families I was left with more people interested in taking part in the study than I was able to accommodate. I went through the list and called each contact to thank them for their interest and explain that I already
had as many participants as I could use. Throughout 2003 and 2004 there were still new people calling me to ask if they could take part, and I had to knock them back.

In most cases my first contacts were with women. It was women who were most interested in the project, and most eager for their families to take part. After interviews were completed, most women and some men wanted to recommend the project to their friends.

The methods I used for data collection created particular problems regarding confidentiality. These revolve around the question: by whom could participants be identified?

In the pilot study, because participants were all involved with a group of schools embedded in a close-knit community it is possible that other people involved in that community might recognise some of the families who participated. I could de-identify characteristics around occupations and such, but family interactions were the point of my analysis, and to someone who knows them they identify the family. Although in that study the families’ involvement with Steiner schools was an important item for analysis (Carter 2002), in articles and presentations arising from it I have not identified participants as being associated with Steiner schools.

For the present study I was careful to recruit participants who were not closely connected with each other. In the eventual sample some participants were known to others and some were not. There is no community of location or interest that links them all, beyond that of living in suburban Melbourne, in two-parent families with teenage kids.

Another problem around confidentiality applies to both studies, and is more fundamental. Any person who took part in the study could identify his or her own family in my analysis. In interviews adults told me things they had not told their partners, and kids told me things they had not told their parents. Having chosen to present an analysis based on how accounts fit together in each family, I cannot de-identify this.
This issue arises also in studies of couples, although it is rarely identified as a problem (for an exception see Bowman 2005:7-8). Most studies have presented analysis in terms of women and men, mentioning interactions in particular couples as examples in passing (see Bittman and Lovejoy 1993, Maher and Singleton 2003). Even in studies that presented analysis in the form of case studies, the potential for participants to identify each other may not be identified as a problem. For example Bartkowski (1999) presented case studies of couples who were part of a church community from which his entire sample was drawn, a situation comparable to that of my pilot study. In this article Bartkowski did not discuss issues around confidentiality.

An alternative approach is to use composite case studies, as Hochschild (1989) did in *The Second Shift*. These were fictionalised stories, each based on characteristics from several couples, and representative of dynamics across couples in the sample. I have not created composite stories in this thesis. If I write a book based on this material I might have to.

The problem here rests on the question of consent. When people agree to take part in a qualitative study, do they really know what they are consenting to? My impression is that when most people think of research they think of quantitative survey studies, where set questions are asked, boxes ticked, and their response becomes one among many sets of numbers to be crunched. Although this project followed all the usual processes and received approval through the Swinburne Ethics Committee, I feel now that participants’ consent was given without the consequences of the study design having been fully appreciated. For purposes of this thesis this is not a problem, as my examiners and my participants are not the same people. In any book or general publication that comes out of this work I would need to either present composite stories, or seek consent again from participants to their accounts being represented in a public way in a manner they had not anticipated.16

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16 Michael Gilding encountered a similar problem when he published findings from an ARC-funded study called 'Family Wealth in Australia' as a paperback, called *Secrets of the Super Rich* (2002). Prior to publication Gilding sought consent a second time from each participant quoted, to having their words cited in the book.
The families in the present study are demographically very similar to each other. Most families lived in affluent suburbs of Melbourne. Most of the adults were highly educated, and all but one of the men were employed in professional occupations. Of the twenty-four children interviewed, seventeen attended non-government schools, six attended State Secondary Colleges and one was at University. Most participants were born in Australia. Four were born in the UK, and two in New Zealand. I note that to be ‘Australian born’ is not the same as being ‘of Anglo-Australian ethnicity’. I did not ask participants how they identified their ethnicity, or where their parents had been born.

Appendix 4 sets out participants’ demographic and other characteristics, against the pseudonyms used in this analysis. (I have made Appendix 4 the last page of the thesis, so it is easy to refer to while reading.) Families are grouped in the order in which they appear in the chapters that follow.

Although the families I interviewed were similar from the outside, their domestic practices were very different. This may be an outcome of the snowballing process, as people referred me to families whom they knew did domestic work differently from themselves, or whose practices they felt to be unusual. A pattern wherein families that appeared to be similar turned out to be very different in how they did domestic labour was evident in the pilot study also. While other studies have shown that practices around domestic labour do not vary significantly with demographic characteristics (Craig 2004:19), findings from this research demonstrate that ideas and practices around domestic labour may vary significantly among families located within similar demographic groupings.

All interviews took place in participants’ homes, at times of their choosing. This was usually in the evenings, after school or in school holidays. I introduced myself as a student from Swinburne, who is interested in the work that goes into supporting families. I described the project, and gave each participant an information sheet. After reading this, and asking any questions, participants signed consent forms before interviews commenced. Consent forms for children were signed by the child and a parent. These forms are at Appendix 2.
At first I had intended to interview two children in each family, but after the first family I changed my mind. The second family I interviewed had three kids living at home, and their mother asked me to interview all three so they all could participate in the discussions she hoped would happen later. I did as she asked, and after this in every family I offered to interview all the kids who were living at home. I interviewed two children in six families, and in four families I interviewed three. Interviews with children lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews with adults lasted between 60 minutes and three hours.

I told parents my preference was to interview adults first and then children, so the parents would know what questions I would be asking their kids, before I asked them. Wherever possible I did this. In some families it was difficult to find times for interviews because all parties were busy. Where this was the case, and women arranged interviews with kids before interviews with parents, I did what suited them best.

Interviews took place in living rooms, kitchens, or bedrooms, in most cases in a private spot away from others. I sat at tables, in comfy chairs or on the floor, and recorded interviews with a cassette tape or mini-disc recorder. I started interviews by saying: ‘There are no right answers here, I want to find out how it looks to you. What you say to me is confidential. I won’t tell your partner / your mum or dad / your kids what you say to me. If you want to talk about it with your family later that’s great, but that’s not something I will do’. The interview schedule is Appendix 3.

The confidentiality aspect turned out to be especially important in interviews with children. Many said, during their interviews, things like: ‘Mum won’t hear about this will she?’ This happened when kids said they think ‘it’s not fair’ that their mum should do so much work, and really they should do more, or when they described the strategies they used to get out of doing things when she asked them. Some men said things like, ‘I’ve never said this to her, but …’, when reflecting on the fairness of their domestic arrangements. When women talked about things their husbands did not know it was usually to do with her wanting to talk about changing the way domestic work happens, and his having refused to do this.
I asked demographic questions first. I had found in the pilot study that starting off with questions about a participant’s family situation and paid work gave me important context to the questions that followed. It was also an effective way of showing respect for the work people did outside the family. I found that showing respect to men for the work they did as breadwinners, and to kids for their schooling and other commitments, led to their being less defensive in talking about what they did or did not do at home. For women, being shown respect for their paid work and other non-domestic activities was clearly gratifying. In some interviews descriptions of work histories were lengthy, taking 30 minutes or more. In providing context to later discussion of domestic work, and establishing a grounding of confidence in the interviewer, this was time well spent.

I asked adults their year of birth, place of birth, whether they were married and if so for how long, whether they had lived with their partner prior to marriage, and the number and age of their kids. I asked adults about their paid work and other commitments. Where it felt appropriate, I said that I was also long-time married, had teenage kids, and had worked full-time, part-time or not at all when the kids were younger. I asked kids what year they were born and where, and about their schooling and other commitments such as sport or paid work.

Next came the domestic labour questions. I used the same questions I had in the pilot study, plus some extras based on themes that came out of that research. As in the pilot study, I ran the main set of questions three times, first for tasks, then for planning and organizing, then for emotion work. I asked ‘what gets done and who does what’, ‘does it work well’, ‘is it fair’, ‘how do you think it should be’ (if asked, I explained this as ‘what would it look like if it was fair or if it was better’). In the tasks aspect of domestic labour, when asking what gets done and who does what I waited first to see what tasks the participant identified without prompting. Then I asked about other tasks that had not been mentioned, using a prompt list. I also asked whether there was any task they particularly disliked doing, or would hate to do.

For the next round of questions I explained planning and organising as ‘identifying what needs to be done and making sure it happens’. For the next, I explained emotion work as ‘looking out for people’s feelings and keeping everything running smoothly’. As in the pilot study, I deliberately offered a loose definition of emotion work, in order to see
what the concept meant to the people I spoke to. Where participants asked for more information I said this could include setting expectations for kids’ behaviour, and supporting communication and good relationships in the family. Every participant talked about the work involved in getting people to do domestic work. In some families people talked about this as part of planning and organising, and in others as part of emotion work. The concepts used to denote these invisible aspects of domestic labour blended into each other in different ways in different families.

After these questions I asked adults what they had learned about domestic labour in their families of origin, and in share houses if applicable. I had not asked these questions in the pilot study, but many participants had talked about these things and those stories were important in making sense of the way their families happen now. For the present study I wanted to gather this information from all adult participants. Then I asked children and adults whether they think there is a ‘mum job’ and a ‘dad job’, and if they do, what they see these as being.

As in the pilot study, the last questions were about the future. I asked kids ‘how do you see domestic labour being arranged when you are an adult?’ I framed this question in a general way, to see how respondents visualized their future. Where the scenarios described did not involve family commitments I asked, ‘Do you see yourself as having a partner and kids?’ Where participants saw this as a possibility I asked, ‘if you had a partner and kids, how would you see domestic labour happening?’ Finally I asked ‘What do you think you would have to do to make it happen as you would like?’ I asked parents the same set of questions, but framed as, ‘How do you see your kids’ futures?’

Throughout the interviews I listened first to see what the question I asked meant to the person I was talking to, then prompted if need be. People who did domestic work talked in detail about what that work involved, while others talked in more general terms. Generally I felt comfortable interviewing participants. The adults were around my age, and most were of similar background to me, although their present circumstances were more affluent than mine. I found interviews with kids more difficult than those with adults. This was partly because framing the topic as ‘Kids and Housework’ in order to avoid defensiveness from men or women, probably acted to
provoke defensiveness from kids. Some kids seemed embarrassed when they talked to me, while others appeared to feel quite comfortable. In interviews most gave thoughtful and considered responses. Some older boys were dismissive of the topic, and seemed to regard it as a bit of a laugh.

For each family I finished all the interviews and completed transcripts before I started interviewing the next family. This allowed me to immerse myself in each family’s story. It gave me time to sit with each person’s perspective, and feel how the family situation looked from each point of view. I could reflect on the ways in which each person’s perspective was woven in with those of other family members.

For me, spending time with each family’s transcripts felt the way I had when I read and slowly digested a new Compton-Burnett novel. The stories were by turns funny and sad, and each family had a distinctive emotional atmosphere that informed its weaving threads of narrative. The effects of a set of transcripts would dawn on me slowly, as a plausible account from one player would suddenly be shown to appear very differently when the same events were described through the eyes of another family member. Like Compton-Burnett novels, transcripts offered serial shocks of recognition as patterns which at first might be taken to be idiosyncratic to one family were repeated over and over in stories from others.

Kathryn Backett-Milburn (1999:73) noted that qualitative research rests on establishing some sort of emotional connection with the respondents, and that this has consequences for the researcher who takes this emotional content ‘home’ into her or his personal life. I certainly found this to be the case. For a period of about seven months, as I interviewed each family and transcribed their accounts, I felt closely engaged with the stories of each family in turn. Like Hareward Edgerton, the tyrannical author depicted in Compton-Burnett’s novel A God and His Gifts (1963), I would emerge from the transcripts dumb and blind to the world around me, immersed in the atmosphere evoked by participants’ stories. This stage was fun but it was exhausting.

For the most part I felt that the adults I interviewed were working sincerely and courageously to do their best for their families. I felt respect, admiration and empathy for each one. I felt each person was really doing their best, with the resources available
to them. Only one adult (discussed in Chapter Seven) seemed to be deliberately holding back from doing what they saw to be right thing. Kids I saw as making sense of their situations from where they were located in them. Most kids were happy with a situation in which they got a pretty good deal in terms of domestic work, and were not looking to question it too closely. I was left with feelings of respect and goodwill toward each family, and a desire to represent their stories in a way that would not reduce them to caricature (as discussed by Birch and Millar 2000).

When I first envisioned the project I had intended to do follow up interviews with each family six months after the initial interviews. While second interviews with all family members would have been ideal, for reasons of logistics I decided to do follow up interviews only with women. Women were the most knowledgeable informants about the range of work involved in domestic labour, and it was they who were most interested in the topic. At the follow up interviews I asked: ‘What was participating in this study like, for you and your family? Did it generate any discussion in the family about domestic labour? Did anything change?’

After the first five follow-up interviews I stopped. There were two reasons for this. The first was that I felt that in arranging these interviews, I was imposing on the time of people who had already contributed most generously to the research. The second was that each of the five women with whom I did follow-up interviews said the same thing. They said: ‘It was good talking about all that; There was no discussion afterward although I wish there had been; and Nothing has changed’. After hearing these answers five times I felt that asking the questions again would be redundant.

Each transcript began with information about how I had made contact with the family, a description of the physical setting of the household, and some notes about each person. I transcribed verbatim, including my voice as well as those of participants. As I transcribed I made notes in the text, in italic, noting oddities and themes, patterns in common with other families, or just how I felt about what that person was saying.

These messy documents now act as powerful prompts to my memory, evoking for me the place, the smells and the feelings associated with those conversations as well as the words spoken. I loved making the transcripts. As I listened and typed I could see the
threads of each story weaving in with the others, and their humour and pathos brought into relief. With her gifts of insight, compassion and humour Ivy Compton-Burnett could have written any of these families.

4.2 ANALYSIS
After I had completed interviews with ten families I stopped to read over the transcripts and see how the families’ stories looked in relation to each other. I considered themes that emerged in what was said by women and men, and girls and boys: who did what tasks, who did what aspects of planning and organizing, and who did what emotion work; what people said about the mum job and the dad job; how people reflected on the past, and how they saw the future.

From these perspectives what I saw in my data looked familiar, and depressing. Women did most of the domestic work, and most of them wanted their kids and husbands to do more. Most of the men and children were happy with the way things were. In most families the invisible aspects of domestic labour were carried by women. While many accounts were couched in the optimistic language of change, most people said that accepting responsibility for domestic work is something that goes with being a mother.

If I looked at the ways in which people’s accounts fit together with those of their partners, children, parents, or siblings, I saw patterns I had not seen in other research. This felt more like reading fiction than doing sociology. I started to wonder how I might frame an analysis that made use of these perspectives. This led to a long excursion in which I tried to find examples of similar approaches in other people’s work, and revisited the assumptions that informed my approach to this study. In all, this ‘excursion’ phase of analysis took ten months, by the end of which I had decided to frame the study around ten families, not twenty-five as originally planned. I found, as others had before me, that close analysis of a small number of case studies yielded more theoretical insight than thematic analysis across a larger sample might show (see for example Marsden 2004:68; Verschuren 2003:137). In this stage I found most useful the work of McCarthy et al. (2003) and Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1997, 1999).

17 I used NVivo for a while at this stage. I was obliged to stop because the intensive mouse-use involved aggravated an existing overuse injury and threatened to impair my capacity to use a keyboard.
4.2.1 Working with data from multiple perspectives

When I looked to see what other sociologists had done when working with data from multiple perspectives, I found very little discussion of the dilemmas involved in analysis. One exception was an article by UK sociologists Jane McCarthy, Janet Holland and Val Gillies.18

McCarthy et al. (2003:5) observed that while various studies have used data that represent multiple perspectives on one family, few researchers have described the choices involved in approaching their analysis. Most studies have presented analyses based on the standpoints of gender or generation. While some studies have exploited the benefits of multiple perspectives in a limited way, the possibilities for the analysis of such data have rarely been fully realized. McCarthy et al. (2003:20) suggested the reason might be that the stories you see when you look at a family from multiple perspectives are ‘messy’. McCarthy et al. (2003:7) proposed a model that illustrates the different ways we might look at such data (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: Data from Multiple Perspectives: adapted from McCarthy et al. 2003:7](image)

This model has four categories, organized around two axes. The horizontal axis they described as ‘objectivist / interpretivist’: concerned with ‘facts’, on one side, and with people’s interpretations on the other. The vertical axis represents the extent to which accounts the same

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18 Another notable exception was Connell et al. (1982). The discussion that follows draws on my 2004 paper ‘The Ivy Compton-Burnett School of Sociology: Family Culture and Everyday Life’.
accounts in a family are similar to or different from each other. So the four categories are: ‘facts’ are confirmed, ‘facts’ are disputed, themes and concepts are the same, and themes and concepts are different. McCarthy et al. identified an additional category at the centre, which they called ‘same story different versions’: seeing people’s accounts as describing the same events, but from different points of view.

This typology shows different ways we might think about interview data. McCarthy et al. (2003:8) noted that the typology does not identify the role of the researcher in creating, selecting and interpreting the data. It is the researcher who makes comparisons across accounts and makes sense of gaps, silences and contradictions. Even a study concerned with ‘facts’ is a process of interpretation.

Gaps and contradictions become visible when we compare accounts from different family members. McCarthy et al. (2003:16) observed that researchers generally take accounts that are consistent with each other to mean that those accounts are true. Data from multiple perspectives invite the question: how far does an agreed account reflect what happens in the family, and how far is it rooted in a ‘family script’? (Compare Hochschild’s ‘family myth’.) A related question is: when we have pieced together a group of consistent stories from within one family have we identified the presence of a ‘family culture’?

McCarthy et al. (2003:16-18) argued that we can see stories as representing a family culture, or we can see them as being about gender, generation, class or ethnicity. Different ways of looking at data yield different forms of knowledge, as ‘each twisting of the analytic kaleidoscope brings different issues into focus’ (McCarthy et al. 2003:19).

McCarthy et al. (2003:20) discussed the difficulties involved in presenting analysis based on family culture. While seeing accounts in the context of family culture is very revealing, family cultures become visible only after careful and lengthy analysis. There is often not room to present this in a sociological paper. Analysis based on family culture is untidy and may be open to multiple readings. McCarthy et al. (2003:20) argued that there should be scope to present data in a less tidy way to academic audiences in order to make these readings visible.
I was very pleased to find this article. The strength of my data is that they show people’s stories as situated in the context of their family culture. One way I can think about this is by adapting the model proposed by McCarthy et al. My data are stories people told me about what they and others do and what they think. The axis called ‘facts or interpretation’ becomes for me ‘stories about behaviour’ and ‘stories about ideas’. For each family I can unpack the accounts into four categories: where stories about behaviour are consistent; where stories about behaviour differ; where stories about ideas are consistent; and where stories about ideas differ (see Figure 4).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4: Data from Multiple Perspectives: my interpretation**

The middle bit is more interesting. McCarthy et al. described the category in the centre as ‘same story different versions’. I see this differently. This is where the researcher pieces together an overall story based on her interpretation of individuals’ accounts of the family. The researcher creates a story of the ‘family culture’. Family culture is not something inherent in the family, which the researcher objectively observes. It is an interpretation the researcher creates in her reading of the accounts given by family members (Mauthner and Doucet 1998, 2003 made a similar argument).

Most people in an interview tell a story of their family as better than most, or at least as doing okay. They create ‘morally adequate accounts’ that present a positive front to the researcher, and are grounded in values they assume the researcher shares (Jordan et al. 1994:73). People refer to various ‘cultural logics’ to create accounts where what they
say about what they think matches what they say about what they do (Hays 1996:133; also Frank 2002:14). In my data I see cultural logics such as essentialist beliefs about the nature and capacities of women and men, and ideas about what it is to be a good parent, or a good child. The same ideas may be invoked to support very different choices (Jordan et al. 1994:146).

Stories about ideas are usually more interesting than stories about behaviour. In the present study patterns that appear around the ‘who does what’ aspects of domestic labour are consistent with those seen in ABS time-use data. Inconsistencies between family members’ accounts of who does what are revealing, and are usefully considered in relation to accounts of ideas about how things are - for example the ‘is it fair’ question - and ideas about how things should be.

What people say they think about how domestic labour happens in their family can be more surprising than what they say about what they do. Where accounts about what people think are consistent, these could be seen to represent what Hochschild (1989) called a ‘family myth’, a shared set of ideas about how the family is and the values it runs on. Areas where accounts are different reflect differing ideas about how the family could be better. These data are often the most interesting of all, representing contested accounts of how things happen or should happen.

It is here that the transcripts most resemble Compton-Burnett novels. None of my families has a tyrant like Ivy’s (except maybe one, discussed in Chapter Eight), but the transcripts tell a story about how power is exercised in families. Different views about how things should be can be seen as being asserted, contested, negotiated and acquiesced to in each family. Considering these accounts in relation to stories about who does what everyday work gives a rich impression of how the family happens.

4.2.2 A theoretical excursion

Thinking this way about analysis led me to reconsider the theoretical underpinnings of my work. As a latecomer to sociology, the theoretical frameworks of this discipline are not my first conceptual language. My undergraduate major was in Psychology, and my thinking is informed by a critique of the positivist assumptions and methods used in that discipline and in other research relevant to social policy.
I am influenced also by the work of the Canadian historian John Ralston Saul (1992, 1997, 2001). Saul proposed that public debate is increasingly conducted in language composed of a multitude of specialist dialects. Each is impenetrable to readers outside its own specialty, and their combined effect is to impede communication and prevent understanding. Saul argued that one of the signs of a healthy civilisation is the existence of a relatively clear language in which everybody can participate in their own way. The sign of a sick civilisation is the growth of an obscure, closed language that seeks to prevent communication (Saul 1997:49-57).

In my work in the public sector specialist dialects were my tools of trade. I have been an expert reader, translator and speaker of dialects used by governments in promoting and obscuring their political and ideological agendas in policy development and program delivery. As forms of words and ways of thinking moved in and out of fashion their structures acted to define the parameters of permissible discussion and to exclude certain ideas, and certain players, from credible participation in policy debate. Saul’s critique fit very well with the reality in which I lived.

Saul argued that the social sciences have played a significant role in creating dialects that impede communication (1997:71). He proposed that in an attempt to claim credibility as science, writing in the social sciences has adopted a formula in which ‘obscurity suggests complexity which suggests importance’ (1997:49).

It is central to Saul’s argument that the capacity of interested groups to set the terms of debate represents a significant exercise of power. ‘In a society of specialists, definition becomes a means of control, a way to replace the search for understanding with an all-absorbing maze of road signs' (Saul 1997:73). A territory comprised of road signs can be managed. Technocratic management proceeds as if these maps are the territory they denote, and generates rational solutions that too often make no sense in the locations and the lives in which they are implemented.

This was the platform from which I approached the study of sociology. As I read, it bothered me that in some sociological texts concepts appeared to be treated as if they were things, and theories were treated as descriptions of reality rather than as metaphors...
to think with. I found it difficult to find a framework in sociology with which I felt comfortable.

I could see my work as symbolic interactionist, but I am interested in the material settings of people’s lives and what people do, as well as in how they understand their situations. I can see my work as feminist, but I am interested in men and children as well as women, and I do not start from the view that women are necessarily exploited by men, as theorists such as Delphy and Leonard (1992) assume. I think exploitation happens along a range of axes, and that by focusing exclusively on gender we overlook other sets of hierarchical power relations in which we participate. I am interested in analysis of text and the value of multiple perspectives, but I do not find the works of poststructuralist theorists particularly useful. My discomfort with poststructuralist theory is reflected in critiques proposed by Roney (2002) and Smith (2003). Like George Orwell (1946) I value clarity, short words and plain English. As Orwell (1946) said:

If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself.

Looking for a theoretical framework with which I felt comfortable I found the best fit for my approach was in the work of Canadian theorist Dorothy Smith. In 1972 Smith (1990) proposed that most sociology is written as if from the point of view of an omniscient disembodied knower, rather than seen as a practice that is done by actual people located in place and time. Writing at a time when positivist approaches were almost universally accepted in sociology, Smith asserted the obvious point that we all live in bodies and are situated in place and time as well as in culture. As sociologists we learn to disregard this, and ‘confine and focus our insights within the conceptual frameworks of the discipline’ (Smith 1990:19). Smith (1990:23) argued:

If sociology cannot avoid being situated, it should take that as its beginning and build it into its methodological and theoretical strategies, by placing sociologists where we are actually situated [and] making our direct embodied experience of the everyday world the primary ground of our knowledge.

19 See Campbell 2003 for background on Smith’s work.
If we regard people as situated actors it is clear that the researcher is a participant in the social world she is discovering, and that who and where we are will influence how and what we see. Instead of writing as if from the perspective of an omniscient, disembodied knower, it establishes as clearly as possible the situation and interests of the researcher (Smith 1990:8; a similar argument was made by Edwards and Ribbens 1998, and Ambery 2003).

Smith described ideology as an organising principle that we use for selecting from and arranging information. When ideology informs our reading and writing we create an ‘ideological circle’ where what we expect to find determines what we can see. There is no way of saying things that do not fit in the framework, and ideas must be ‘latched on to the discipline at some point’ in order to become visible. Smith argued that in the usual practice of sociology the concepts we use in our research are treated as if they are things and are seen to exist independently of what people do. We become ‘caught in a trap created by the constitutive conventions of our discipline’ (Smith 1999:61-63).

Smith argued that in postmodernist writing the subject is located in discourse. Discourse becomes the site of agency, and text refers to nothing outside of itself. For Smith, agency is located in people, not in concepts or texts. Texts are ‘activated’, attributed with meaning, by different readers, each of whom is situated in time and place. A focus on the everyday experience of people situated in time and place provides a method to investigate how certain forms of knowledge come to replace other forms (Smith 1999:98.109).

Smith observed that the way power relations work can usually be seen more clearly from the standpoint of those who provide service, rather from that of those who are served. For this reason beginning research from the standpoint of women – those who in the settings in which Smith was writing provided the domestic, emotional and material services that made possible the ‘real’ work done by men in the public world – provides a powerful methodological tool. Smith’s approach is commonly thought of as feminist epistemology but its application is broader than that (Smith 1999:5). As Hochschild (2003:2-3) noted, the insight that power relations are more clearly seen by
those on the down side applies to all sorts of hierarchical relations, including gender, class, ethnicity, geography, or nation.

It is clear in Smith’s approach that concepts are not things, and theories are not facts. Rather, they are ‘people’s actual practices in the local settings of their everyday lives’ (Smith 1990:7). Further, Smith argued that all concepts are indexical in that they take their meaning from people’s actual practices. The same words have different meanings at different levels and in different settings (Smith 1990b:103). Concepts and theories are tools that are ‘good to think with, at least until we can find something that does better’ (1999:156).

Smith proposed that any sociological account we create is like a map. A map always refers to something outside of itself:

The text of a map never stands alone; it is always waiting for its connection with the local actualities it intends. It is always indexical [and] relies on the actual terrain it can reference in the hands of a map reader (Smith 1999:129).

To illustrate this, Smith used a metaphor of blind scholars who each have hold of one part of an elephant. They talk across each other because each sticks to their own theories and will not see another’s point of view as valid. Smith’s aim is to write in a way that makes ‘discursively explicit the piece of the beast each has hold of’ so we can recognize what each other is seeing and see how the different pieces sit in relation to each other. Our explanations are always partial. We cannot ‘find’ the beast as a whole (1999:228-229).

Smith proposed that we should be explicit about our location and interests as embodied doers of sociology, and put upfront the assumptions and conceptual frameworks we work with. The trouble is that there are more things constraining how and what we see and how we think about it, than we are aware of. As Saul (1997:30) noted, we can never identify all the cultural and conceptual baggage that our language is carrying.

I think the way to deal with this is to hang on to the metaphor of the map. The map is not the territory. What we say has meaning only as it directs the reader back to the actuality that it indicates. We have a hold on part of the elephant, and if we explain as
clearly as we can the juncture of ourselves and that bit we have hold of, we can seek
dialogue with others who have hold of different bits. Aspects of our own ideological
baggage may become visible as part of this process. Given that language is inevitably
encoded with cultural baggage, this is like peeling an onion that we never get to the
centre of, but it is the best that we can do. This approach does not seek certainty.
Instead, it suggests interpretation and embraces doubt (as recommended by Saul
1997:30).

These ideas describe neatly how I think about my research. In the present study the data
I work with are accounts people created in interaction with me. Each of us was situated
in our local and cultural setting, and participants’ accounts are informed by the
characteristics of those settings. I have approached the research with certain concepts in
mind – such as emotion work, or fairness - but I hold these concepts loosely. I want to
see what the concepts mean to the people who use them. In this thesis I wish to locate
myself as a situated observer so my work can be read critically. In the chapters that
follow my aim is to try to elucidate the part of the elephant that I have hold of in a way
that will enable dialogue with people who hold other parts of it.

This stage of analysis and the theoretical excursion it led to was at once a frustrating and
a most fruitful part of the research journey. Encouraged by the work of researchers as
varied as McCarthy et al. (2003), Ribbens and Edwards (1998), Song (1998), Veschuren
(2003), McCormac (2004), and Plummer (2001), I felt confident in attempting to frame
a thesis around the interplay of stories in ten families. The work of Dorothy Smith
offered me a way of ‘latching on to the discipline’ my own particular approach, through
seeing people as situated actors, concepts as indexical, as tools to think with, and
theoretical interpretation as like a map.

In any analysis of qualitative data the voices of participants are mediated ‘through the
researcher who makes choices about how to interpret those voices, and which transcript
extracts to present as evidence’ (Mauthner and Doucet 2003:418). We approach our
analysis wearing blinkers, whether we recognise them or not. In this thesis I have tried
to make my own conceptual blinkers visible as far as possible.
4.3 WHAT I DID

I spiral-bound my transcripts, one for each family, and read them again, this time as I would read novels. I found that as I read this time my interest shifted. I became interested in questions like: ‘In creating accounts of how domestic labour happens in their families, what ideas do people call on to legitimate what practices? How do the stories told by different family members fit together? How do different sets of legitimating ideas act to support the status quo and to obstruct change, or to challenge the status quo and support change?’ and ‘How does a dominant story come to be established in a family, and other stories submerged?’.

In each set of transcripts the family culture was represented by a dominant story that says ‘the way we do things is good’. This is Jordan et al.’s (1994:26) ‘morally adequate account’. Each dominant story implied framing rules that set out what it is permissible to say, and feeling rules that set out what it is permissible to feel. Submerged stories are those in which the framing rules and feeling rules of the dominant story are contested. I was struck also by how differently some of these families would look if they had been studied using different methods. If studied using quantitative survey methods, some of these families would appear to be in the vanguard of change. Studied using qualitative methods the same families appear to be experiencing persistent unhappiness and simmering conflict (I am thinking here of families in Chapters Seven and Eight). These families’ stories allow us to see what small changes in time use around domestic work may mean and feel like in families that do them. As my analysis progressed I found that ideas about research methods that had informed the design of this study led to one of the central arguments arising from its findings.

Singh and Richards (2003:6) noted that when working with qualitative data, as you do more analysis the questions change, and you inevitably find yourself with gaps, questions you had not seen as relevant then but now wish that you had asked. Considering my transcripts, I felt that some areas I had approached only indirectly were often the most interesting. At this point the challenge was to find a way to choose what areas to focus on.

Taken as a whole my data are overwhelming. As I re-read the transcripts I began to see that the accounts people gave encompassed a range of areas, and the focus of the story
was different in each account and in each family. An interpretation that identifies the differences and interplay between people’s accounts of their families, and the nature and influence of the cultural logics that these accounts draw on, could be created in many ways. I found two ideas useful in thinking about how I might do this.

The first is a picture of what the data represent. I imagined this as a series of concentric circles (Figure 5).

![Diagram of concentric circles with labels]

**Figure 5: Data from the Present Study**

Data generated for the present study pertain to different types of things. The outer circle is information about demographic and material setting: people’s age, gender, ethnicity, and family composition; their schooling and work; where they live, their wealth and their income. The next circle is what people say they do in relation to domestic labour, and what they say others in their family do. The next is what people say they think. The circle at the centre is the ideas or cultural logics that people refer to in explaining how things are and why.

In Smith’s terms we could say the data in the middle circles show how cultural logics co-ordinate the way people think about their everyday experience, when talking about their lives in an interview setting. The outer circles, along with the interplay between family members’ accounts, offer context that allows us to see each person’s story as situated. Thinking about the data like this shows how analysis could be focused in different ways, foregrounding some aspects and paying less attention to others. In a study whose interest is negotiation, the middle circles will be foreground, and the outer circles will be context.
The next idea is about the definition of domestic labour and where the problem areas are in different families. I began this project with a definition that looks like Figure 6, below.

![Figure 6: Defining Domestic Labour: where I started](image)

In interviews I offered this model as one way of thinking about domestic labour, then looked to see what the concepts meant to different people. What I found it meant is shown below. The categories are blurry, with the in-between aspects described as being sometimes in one category, sometimes in another.

![Figure 7: Defining Domestic Labour: what I found](image)

In different families, the story about domestic labour was concentrated around different parts of the definition. In some families the focus of negotiation centred around who does what tasks. In others it was taking responsibility for ‘family management’, or

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20 In interviews I defined domestic labour in a sentence, as ‘doing housework tasks, planning and organising, and emotion work’. The idea of representing this as a triangle took shape as interviews progressed, and I found myself drawing the triangle in the air with my hands. It seemed like a useful image so I kept it.
about setting and enforcing expectations with kids. In some families the story was more complex than in others. In some there was clearly a ‘main game’ in negotiation, and the strategies by which that game plays out were quite clear. In others there may be several ‘main games’ in negotiation, or domestic labour may not appear to be negotiated at all. In some families negotiation was played out mostly between the parents; in others the kids were actively involved. The more involvement, the richer the data, and the more complex the analysis.

These ideas made the next steps in analysis clearer. For each family, I wrote an account of how I met them, what our interaction was like, and the demographic and material setting in which the family operates. Next, I made a table that sets out a summary of how each family member responded to my questions about who does what. This shows neatly who said what (or nothing) about each aspect of domestic labour, as well as where the accounts are similar and where they are different. Then I wrote an interpretation of the family culture that considered the similarities and differences between each person’s accounts, identified the cultural logics to which each account referred, and considered the ways in which these ideas were asserted and contested within the family. This rich and detailed interpretive context informs the analysis presented in the following chapters.

Chapters Five to Eight are structured as a series of ‘Family Stories’. In these accounts all participants are referred to by pseudonyms21, and their occupations and other identifying details have been changed. For each family, first I introduce the participants, briefly set out the ‘who does what’ of domestic labour, and identify where family members’ accounts differed from each other around this. I also identify any points of contention around domestic labour. Next I outline what each person said they think about domestic labour. The discussion that follows offers my interpretation of these accounts. I identify the ideas people referred to in creating their accounts of how domestic labour happens, and consider ways in which different views and behaviours

21 All names used to refer to participants are taken from characters in Ivy Compton-Burnett novels. In most cases first names and family names come from different characters. Several participants have the full name of a Compton-Burnett character, whose story in some way resembles theirs. The name I gave to ‘Clara Middleton’ (who appears in Chapter Eight), as well as appearing in Compton-Burnett’s work, is that of a character from George Meredith’s absurd and incisive proto-feminist novel The Egoist (1879).
are asserted, resisted and negotiated in that family. I also suggest what the children’s understanding of their present situations indicates for their future behaviour.

Chapter Five considers two families in which there is no conflict over domestic labour. Chapter Six discusses three families in which the women would like others to participate more in domestic work, but have given up trying to make this happen. Chapter Seven considers three families in which conflict over domestic labour is simmering below the surface. Chapter Eight discusses two families in which conflict over domestic labour is overt, and ongoing.

McCarthy et al. (2003:10) noted that ‘researchers seem to feel an almost overwhelming need to resolve the different versions of reality and to tell one coherent, rounded story or set of findings from the different accounts they may have heard’. Researchers tell coherent stories with good reason. Simple, elegant stories read better and are more persuasive than accounts that are open to a range of interpretations. Real life is more untidy than this, and data that give accounts of one family from multiple perspectives can be very untidy. People’s experiences of families are messier than ‘one coherent, rounded story’ might suggest (Song 1998:117).

Analysis that considers people’s accounts in the context of their family culture is an effective way to realize the potential of data generated by the present study. These are not short or simple stories, but I believe they will be worth the effort. I hope that reading my analyses will be like pondering the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett.
CHAPTER FIVE
FAMILY STORIES: NO CONFLICT

This chapter considers two families in which there is no conflict over domestic labour. Everyone appears to be happy with the way domestic labour happens, and no one wants things to be different. The women in these families do all or most of the domestic work, and they explain that this is what they have chosen. In the first family choices around the division of labour are explained with reference to considerations of efficiency and differences in skills. In the second, these choices do not need explaining: this is just the way things are.

Within each family, people’s accounts of what work is done and by whom, and why domestic labour happens as it does, were inconsistent in small but significant ways. In this chapter we begin to see how complementary accounts can give a richer view of how domestic labour is performed, and understood by family members, than that provided from any single perspective.

5.1 THE FLETCHER FAMILY

Theresa heard about the project from a friend, and called me to say she was interested in taking part. I interviewed Theresa, her husband Edward and their son Adrian at their house on a weekday evening, and returned the following weekend to interview their twin daughters Tamasin and Rachel.

The Fletchers live in a modern and spacious house with their two elderly cats. Theresa and Edward are in their mid 40s and have been married 21 years. Theresa was born in the UK, Edward in New Zealand, and both came to Australia as children. Adrian is fifteen, Tamasin and Rachel are twelve. The children attend non-government schools. Theresa and Edward are both dentists. Edward works irregular hours, an average of 35 hours a week. Theresa does no paid work. Theresa had continued her professional practice after Adrian was born, but when the twins arrived she cut back her hours to part time. Six years ago she stopped paid work altogether.

Interviews took place in the living room, which was private. Theresa is articulate and confident in her speech, and was very forthcoming and easy to talk to. I did not engage

22 Throughout the project, most interviews took place in a private setting. Where interviews were not private this is noted in the discussion in these chapters.
so easily with Edward. Like Theresa he spoke fluently in response to my questions, but
his tone throughout the interview was oddly formal. I felt he was moving uncertainly
between the voice of a professional persona and that of a private one, as if he was not
quite sure which hat he had on in speaking to me. The effect was an impression of his
being authoritative and defensive, all at once. Adrian also seemed to feel rather
uncomfortable in his interview. Rachel appeared to feel relaxed with me, and Tamasin
rather less so.

One curious thing about these interviews was their duration. When we were chatting,
Theresa asked how long interviews usually took. I said it depends on how much you
want to say, and that adults usually talk for about 60 minutes. I realised later that both
Theresa’s and Edward’s interviews went for just this time. Both wrapped up quickly,
with a feeling of that’s it, time’s up. It was as if there was an internal body clock
operating and I was being given a consultation.

Who does what

People’s accounts of who does what were mostly consistent. Everyone said most of the
domestic work is done by Theresa, and very little by anyone else. Theresa does the
cooking, washing up, cleaning, laundry, and shopping. Rachel sets the table and takes
plates to the kitchen after meals, and occasionally helps with cooking. The kids
sometimes make their own breakfast or lunch on weekends, otherwise all meals are
prepared by Theresa. Theresa cleans the kids’ bedrooms regularly, and the children tidy
them sometimes. The kids help with tidying, or bringing in and folding laundry, when
Theresa asks them to. Tamasin feeds the cats, Theresa takes care of the litter trays and
cleans up cat-messes. Edward and Theresa share driving kids around. Theresa gardens,
Adrian mows, and Edward looks after the pool with help from Tamasin and Adrian.
Edward and Theresa share the work of looking after family finances. Taking out bins
and cleaning windows is done by Theresa.

There were some inconsistencies in accounts of who does what. The children suggested
that parts of the house stayed clean without the need for active intervention. They said
‘it doesn’t get dirty’, ‘it hasn’t been done for ages’, or ‘I think mum does it’. Adrian
and Rachel reported themselves as doing more domestic tasks than other family
members said they did.
Theresa does the work of planning and organising anything that needs to happen in the household, and getting people to do things like getting ready to go out. Theresa and Edward share the work of setting expectations for the children’s behaviour. The children said Theresa is the person they talk to about problems. Edward said that Theresa had more to do with nurturing work when the children were small, and that they ‘both have skills’ to deal with teenagers.

There is no aspect of domestic work that is contested. Theresa is happy to do the things she does, and Edward and the children are happy to have her do them.

**How they explained it**

All family members appeared to feel that Theresa providing such a high level of domestic service called for some explanation. They explained it in different ways.

**Theresa: Domestic engineering**

Theresa described the work involved in ‘being a mum’ as skilled, rewarding, and consistently undervalued. She saw the interview as an opportunity to ‘validate’ the work she does in caring for her family. Theresa described herself as a ‘full time housewife’.

I found the struggle between working as a dentist and being a mum just too difficult to juggle. And decided quality of life, my own and the family’s was more important. So to keep my own balance and sanity I now just do the domestic engineering supervisory role. I don’t see myself as unskilled, by any stretch of the imagination, and I find the job requires a broad range of skills. I do think that the range of skills should be acknowledged a bit more.

Theresa asks the children to do only those tasks they are comfortable with. She said, ‘I had Adrian cleaning the toilets at one stage, but he didn’t do it very well so I ended up relieving him of that, just out of my soft heart’. Tamasin used to sweep the kitchen floor, but ‘she said it hurt her back, so we took that one off her’. Theresa regularly collects dirty clothes from the kids’ rooms, although Adrian has ‘got to the point where he can throw his dirty clothes on to the laundry floor’. Theresa makes the kids’ breakfasts because ‘I’d rather take on this job than deal with [their] incapacity to do it.'
I’m in a routine so I just fit it in’. She expects the kids to do things if asked, but is lenient with them if it doesn’t happen.

Theresa sees no benefit for kids in expecting them to do domestic work. ‘I think the kids have a lot on their plates, and it’s good for them to have freedom’. Theresa said her mum had not made her do domestic work, and that was no problem. When she moved to a student house ‘I immediately started organising it and doing it, quite out of the blue. It was intrinsic to me’.

Similarly, Theresa asks Edward to do only those tasks he finds congenial. Looking after the pool is something ‘he is comfortable with, he knows how the machinery works, he knows how to go to the shop and buy the different things you need to put in. He doesn’t find [it] too difficult’. She added ‘there are some [gardening] tasks that I’m trying to negotiate with Edward, and we’re struggling with that just a little bit. Because it’s an added workload for Edward. I don’t think he’s worked out where he feels comfortable with that’. About looking after the finances Theresa said, ‘that’s something I don’t do. I keep a budget, I keep our books, in terms of what we’ve spent. But looking after the bills, the income, the tax and all that sort of stuff, Edward does. He owns that job’.

Theresa described the division of labour between herself and Edward in terms of efficiency. ‘Edward works to the maximum of his capacity, and I do all the other work. It’s a system that works for us, to get the most efficient balance’.

When I asked about fairness, Theresa said, ‘that’s a really hard one to assess. When I look at the work Edward does, and the financial stuff and the car stuff I think his plate’s quite full enough. I don’t think he should be doing more’. She added:

I actually quite enjoy it, it suits me. Sometimes I get stressed, but at the end of the day I feel a sense of achievement in keeping it all together. I feel that on the whole the family works well, and I take some credit for myself, for that.

What Theresa would like to see different is the way her work is valued.

I do feel under-acknowledged a lot of the time. I feel that the work I do has no intrinsic value. Probably it’s a societal thing, but it isn’t valued. The kids make
occasional comments like ‘that’s just your job’. It is a valid job, but I don’t sell it as being a valuable thing, to them. I haven’t really worked out how to do that for myself, other than that it gives me a sense of achievement.

Theresa said mothers don’t expect recognition, especially for the invisible aspects of domestic labour, and that families ‘break down’ when this work is not respected. She attributed the devaluing of mothers’ work to attitudes associated with gender. ‘I am surrounded by men who just expect that women will take it on. It’s probably fairly deeply ingrained. We came from families with fairly traditional role stereotyping, and have probably fostered that [in our children].’

Theresa’s account of the work of planning and organising reflected an assumption of her authority in those aspects of family life. When she organises something, the others go along with it. Theresa said this aspect of domestic labour works well, and the division of responsibilities between herself and Edward is fair. ‘I’m happy. I’ve obviously made it this way because this is how I like it. I think people would call me a control freak. But it seems to work and I can’t see too many negatives’.

Regarding emotion work Theresa said she is ‘the listening ear, and the peacemaker’ with the children, while Edward may be less perceptive in his responses. Physical caregiving and emotional caregiving were closely entwined in Theresa’s account. She said ‘I’m fairly involved in getting the kids to bed’, and described a nightly ritual where she delivers to each child their preferred snack, and sits with them for ‘tuck in time’. When problems arise with the kids ‘I usually find a few extra tuck in times that night [and they’re] fairly easily dissolved’.

When I asked how she sees ‘the mum job’ and ‘the dad job’, Theresa replied:

I do believe that mothers do some things better. Nurturing things they do better. Mothers are able to be more nurturing and fathers are able to control structure. [Women] are better on details and [men] are better on big picture stuff. You know, finances of the overall house, that’s big picture stuff. I’m useless at that, Edward’s good at it. So I do tend to split up the roles. Perish the thought [laugh]. You sort of think oh I don’t want to be so stereotypical, but there we are.
Thinking about her children’s futures, Theresa said ‘Adrian won’t be able to manage all those little details, he’ll need someone to look after him while he does what he does best, whatever that ends up being. That’s how Edward operates, and Edward’s dad, there’s quite a family pattern there’. She said Rachel is like herself, ‘she will want to be in control, like me’; and Tamasin will be messy. Tamasin’s housework standards will be lower, supported by ‘a kind of domestic blindness’.

At the end of the interview Theresa remarked, ‘It’s really hard to get a sense of getting this stuff valued. Not many people are interested. But I do [value it]. I like my little empire’.

**Edward: She is a better domestic manager**

Edward began his account of who does what with a discussion of outdoor work. He mentioned gardening, which ‘Theresa does most of’, and looking after the pool, for which ‘there’s very little to do, [mostly] going down to the shop to buy salt’. Moving on to indoor work, he said ‘Theresa’s the one with the organisational skills. So does most of the work, then the outcome is the way she wants it to be’.

While Edward’s account of who does what was consistent with Theresa’s, the formal manner in which he spoke had the effect of overstating what the children do. He said ‘the kids are responsible for clearing away after meals’, by which he meant that Rachel puts plates on the kitchen bench and Theresa does the rest. Breakfasts are ‘managed as required’, which he explained to mean ‘getting our own’ if it’s cereal or otherwise telling Theresa what you want and she’ll make it. For weekend lunches there is more ‘family contribution’, in that the kids might get items from the fridge and put them on the table. The kids’ bedrooms are ‘their own responsibility’, although Theresa vacuums them. The kids ‘contribute’ to laundry tasks by putting their own (washed dried and folded) clothes away. In Edward’s account anything other than full service provided by Theresa was described as ‘part of the family contribution’.

For the work of managing finances Edward described the same arrangement of tasks that Theresa did, saying that Theresa keeps the records and he sends them off to the accountant at the end of the financial year. He described the work of managing finances as ‘shared’ between them, while Theresa said it is a job Edward ‘owns’.
Edward said Theresa likes things to be done in the way she thinks is best, and that this has discouraged him from doing more.

There are times when I do things that are not part of my normal contribution, where it ends up not being to Theresa’s satisfaction. So I guess over the years I’ve backed off from doing things that I know, if I do them, there’s a scrutiny that may result in a complaint about that not being right. So I leave that for Theresa.

When I asked whether the current arrangements are fair, Edward said ‘I guess you could argue that I could do more. And then what would we do, we’d force her out into the workforce so she can earn some more money’. He described their arrangement as a ‘partnership’, saying:

I’m contributing the majority of the income, but I also hear that that can be an excuse for not contributing at home. I do occasionally feel like I’m contributing less than I should be, but that doesn’t cause any tension. Theresa has better organisational skills than I do, can see things that need to be done where I can’t, so she is a better domestic manager. Whereas I’m single task focused, and that’s fantastic for the sort of work I do. That’s why I’m the primary income generator. So I say yes it’s unfair, but I’m not uncomfortable about that. [It] works well for the whole environment.

Talking about how the work of planning and organising happens, Edward described Theresa as ‘my secretary’. He said it is she who identifies any things that need to be done, and makes sure they happen.

I don’t think it would be functional any other way. If I was expected to have more responsibility in identifying things to be done, I would have to be more multitasking and that’s not my skill. I’d have to be more peripherally aware, and that distracts me from the task I’m doing. If I was expected to do that I think it would be a bit chaotic.

Regarding setting expectations for the kids’ behaviour Edward said he and Theresa have similar ideas, possibly because ‘we both had church backgrounds as teenagers’. While relationships in the family work well, they might do better ‘if our requirement for [paid] work was less demanding, [or] maybe if our expectations of our material needs were
less, perhaps we could commit more time to being together as a family’. Overall ‘the balance we’ve got at the moment’s pretty good’.

Edward explicitly rejected the idea that there is a ‘mum job’ or a ‘dad job’ in relation to domestic labour. He discourages the kids from thinking about domestic work in terms of gender, and explains to them that it is about skill.

The kids sometimes say to Theresa, that’s your job because you’re a mother. I interrupt that thought process, saying Theresa does that because she does it well. I’m not into a concept of these are female gender tasks to be done and I’m not going to touch them because that's not my role. Even though if you look at the way things are in this domestic arrangement it is consistent with a distribution of tasks based on gender, it’s not to say that those tasks cannot be changed between persons. I mean traditionally putting out the rubbish is a man’s job, but Theresa does that just as often as I do. Theresa’s the one with the organisational skills [to say] right tonight’s the rubbish night. I wouldn’t have any idea which night is rubbish night. We’ve been here 3 years, and I still don't know.

Thinking about his kids’ futures, Edward considered that Rachel would be very organised, like her mum, and Tamasin would be less so. ‘Adrian would be very much like me, just go along for the ride. Allow the partnership to have two different people that complement each other, rather than do things in a shared way’.

**Adrian: Mum hasn’t complained or anything**

Adrian’s account of domestic tasks was succinct. He said:

I mow the lawns, I maintain most of the pool, except for the chemicals and stuff, Rachel does that. Setting the table Rachel does, cleaning around the house we all usually do; mum does most of it though. Dishes shared, kind of. Cleaning rooms we do ourselves. Everything else it’s either asked of us or mum does it herself. Pretty much that’s it I guess.

Adrian said he does pegging out and bringing in laundry ‘half the time’. Things like scrubbing the kitchen and mopping floors ‘haven’t happened for ages’. He doesn’t mind being asked to do things ‘unless of course it’s something outrageous that I don’t really want to do’, like cleaning the toilet or cat litter trays. Adrian said domestic labour
works well. ‘Mum does heaps. Dad doesn’t do all that much, he usually just works and stuff’.

Listening to Adrian I had the impression that he felt that doing not much domestic work was a bad thing to admit in this setting, and he wanted to represent his participation as generously as possible. Adrian was uncomfortable with the questions about fairness. He said their arrangements are ‘fairish. I’m kind of feeling like I do much more work than my sisters’. He suggested that to be fairer, he and the girls might ‘do a little extra work to help out mum’.

Adrian said planning and organising works well. ‘Mum hasn’t complained or anything. I’m quite happy. Mum does her job well. It’s her choice. She does it most efficiently’. If Theresa had paid work they would have to be more independent. Adrian said emotion work works well, although ‘emotional wise I’m not really that well bonded’.

While Adrian identified different roles as associated with a mum job and a dad job, he saw them as interchangeable.

Mum will usually do everything around the kitchen, maybe clean up the house. Dad does some. If mum’s not around dad will do it. Dad jobs are usually dealing with the money, taxes and bank payments. Mum might help with that a bit, she likes to organise that so it makes it easy for him. Mum sometimes takes over dad’s jobs, occasionally dad will do mum’s jobs.

When Adrian talked about his future, if he had a partner and kids, he saw domestic labour as being ‘pretty well shared, I guess. Just to our abilities. If someone was better at it [they would] probably do more’. Mostly it would be the same as it is here, because ‘I don’t know any other way for it to be done’. He also said ‘because it’s modern it’s being more shared’.

**Tamasin: I think it is a bit hard on mum**

Like Adrian, Tamasin gave a succinct account of household tasks.

Adrian mows the lawn and takes in the washing a few times, Rachel sets the table and clears the table, and Adrian sometimes cleans out the pool basket. Mum does most of the cooking and the washing and the cleaning round the house and most
of that stuff. And I most of the time am just feeding the cats or testing the pool chemicals or yeah. Dad does a bit of stuff, like washing. And Rachel sometimes helps with cooking. And that’s it.

When I prompted for details Tamasin’s account was consistent with those of other family members, except that she was the only person who mentioned Edward doing laundry. Tamasin said she is not very good at cleaning her room ‘because I don’t like cleaning it’. She would hate to have to do ‘smelly stuff’ like cleaning up cat messes or cleaning toilets, but ‘I haven’t had to do that yet, which is good’. When I asked whether it is fair, she said ‘I think mum’s doing a bit too much. Yeah I think it’s pretty fair’. Tamasin appeared to be uncomfortable with questions about fairness. She said later, ‘I think it is a bit hard on mum’.

About planning and organising Tamasin said ‘mum needs to tell us all what to do, a bit’, especially Adrian who is ‘a bit lazy sometimes. Mum normally gets him to get off his arse to do stuff’. In relation to emotion work Tamasin said Theresa is the one who looks after people, although she and Rachel look after each other as well. ‘Adrian’s never nice to us. It’s hard to support him because I’ve never had any support from him’. Tamasin said it is Edward who sets and enforces the rules about TV and computer use, and ‘mum gives us jobs to do’.

Tamasin said it works ‘all right I suppose’. Things would be better ‘if we could all not be so annoyed with each other. Adrian and Rachel get really annoyed with me, me just being there is annoying them. And Adrian’s hated us since we were born, so it’s going to take a few years to get over that’.

Tamasin identified work associated with a mum job, but was unable to say what a dad job might be. ‘A mum job’s probably just looking after the kids until they get old enough to look after themselves. Dad job, I dunno. I’ve never thought of that much’. Imagining her future, if she had a partner and kids of her own, Tamasin said she did not want to do things the way her mum does. ‘I might share out the jobs a bit rather then do everything myself’. When I asked how she might make that happen, Tamasin said, ‘I don’t know’.
Rachel: *I’m not sure if mum likes doing it*

Rachel’s account of who does what was more detailed than those of Tamasin or Adrian, although like them she emphasised tasks the children do. Rachel said, ‘Mum does the cooking, and I help. [I] probably do half of it as well’. Rachel said she helps with ‘the easy ironing’. The kids help sometimes with weekend lunches, when ‘everyone gets stuff out of the fridge and puts in on the table. Sometimes we put stuff back into the fridge, stuff like that’. Rachel said Theresa vacuums fortnightly, which is all that is needed because rooms ‘don’t really get dirty’.

Rachel said the way tasks work is ‘not really [fair] because mum does most of it. Tamasin just feeds the cats’. If it was more fair ‘we’d all take turns at jobs like sweeping and vacuuming’. Rachel said the work of planning and organising works well, ‘but I’m not sure if mum likes doing it’. Like Tamasin, Rachel said Edward sets the rules around TV viewing, and Theresa looks after people when they are upset.

Rachel identified clear roles associated with a mum job and a dad job. ‘Dad goes to work to get us money, and mum does the taking care of us and the housework and stuff like that’. When she imagined her future, Rachel did not anticipate having a family. ‘I see myself surrounded by cats and dogs and living in a house just by myself’. If she did have kids of her own, Rachel thought she would be like her mum. She said ‘I’d like doing the mum job. I enjoy doing cooking and washing and ironing and sweeping and vacuuming’.

**What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?**

Both Theresa and Edward said the division of domestic labour happens the way it does because they have different skills. In Theresa’s account different skills were associated with essential differences between women and men. In Edward’s account, skills are explicitly not about gender but arise from individual differences. There is a contradiction in the ways Theresa and Edward describe their respective skill sets: both claimed themselves to be better at noticing detail, and the other, to be better at taking care of the ‘overall’.

Edward said he is task focused and not ‘peripherally aware’, and Theresa has better organisational and management skills than he has. The example he gave was that she
knows what night the bins go out, and he does not. Edward appears to be staking a claim to being entitled to notice only those things he finds interesting. Anything else is ‘peripheral’ and has no claim to his attention. Theresa described her domestic work as the noticing of details. She said Edward, being a man, is naturally more skilled than she is with ‘structure’ and ‘the big picture’. Theresa gave the example of managing the family finances, a task Edward ‘owns’, in which he posts off annually to their accountant the package of financial records Theresa has created.

In her account Theresa calls on ideas about gendered skill sets to explain why it is that Edward does only those things that he likes to do, and she does the rest. Adopting this rationale also has the effect of ‘giving face’ to Edward. If her domestic work is represented as ‘secretarial’ support to Edward’s responsibility for ‘the big picture’, Edward is seen to be in a position of respect that is not usurped by Theresa’s authority in the home.

Hays’ (1996) ideas about the way women navigate competing ideologies that apply to the public and the private spheres offer one way of thinking about Theresa’s story. Theresa knows herself as an intelligent, competent professional who possesses skills that are highly valued in the public world. As she sees the work she does as a wife and mother as using all those skills, she can conclude that this work is highly skilled and therefore valuable. It is ‘domestic engineering’. Because Theresa recognises that the work of mothering is not highly valued in the ‘public’ world she welcomes the opportunity to be part of this research as a way of asserting its value and making the work visible.

Theresa said the way she and Edward divide domestic work is fair because he works long hours, and he ‘owns the job’ of looking after the family finances. Theresa asserts this view even though Edward works an average of 35 hours a week, less than any other man in the study. ‘Owning the job of finances’ can be seen as an iconic task that is associated with being male, the undertaking of which fulfils any obligation Edward has in relation to domestic tasks. In this family anything other than total domestic service provided by Theresa is described as ‘sharing’.
Ideas and conflict
At first, I thought of this family as a model example of a situation where there is no conflict and everyone is happy. As there is no contest over who will do domestic work, there are no strategies to identify. Then I noticed that the ideas Theresa and Edward referred to in explaining their domestic arrangements are the same as those employed by couples between whom there is a high level of conflict over domestic labour.

In high conflict couples, the rationale that says ‘it’s not about gender, it’s about individual skills’ is used effectively by men to resist their wives’ attempts to have them share responsibility for domestic work. The complementary rationale of ‘it is about gender really, women and men see these things differently’ is called on by women to explain why arrangements they do not like are really acceptable. Seeing this same pair of rationales called on in this ‘no conflict’ family suggests that a state of no conflict may exist primarily because of the choices Theresa has made. The difference between Theresa Fletcher and the women in Chapter Seven is that Theresa gave up paid work in order to give priority to her domestic obligations.

Komter (2001) proposed that the presence of contradictory ideas represented as common sense indicates the operation of hegemony. We might see the paired stories of ‘it is about gender / it’s not about gender’ as an example of this. This pattern could also be seen as reflecting interviewer effect. Maybe Theresa felt comfortable explaining her story to me with reference to ideas about gender because she felt I might hold similar views, based on our common experience. Perhaps Edward did not assert those ideas to me because I might think him ‘chauvinist’. Grounding his account in ideas about reason and efficiency was a safer option: he could assume that I would accept those logics, because everybody does. I wonder how different the accounts would be if the interviewer was a man, or if I had identified myself as associated with an organisation that promotes ‘traditional’ family values.

Anticipating the future
Like his father, Adrian claims the privilege of being able to focus on only what he is interested in, and leave the rest for someone else. He says domestic work in his family is ‘shared’ and their arrangements are Theresa’s choice. If there is anything unfair
about it, it is that he does more than his sisters do. As his parents suggested, Adrian is likely to be like his dad.

Tamasin also enjoys the privilege of doing very little domestic work, but unlike Adrian she does not articulate a coherent framework to explain her entitlement to do this. I felt sad listening to Tamasin. It is as if she feels like the odd one out in the family, thinking that Rachel finds her annoying and Adrian hates her. Where Adrian and Rachel claim territory that is like that of their parents, Tamasin has no same-sex parental model for her behaviour. Adrian claims the privileges that are enjoyed by his dad, and Rachel is seen as a little version of her mother. In actively avoiding domestic work Tamasin is claiming privileges that in this family go with being male. When she becomes an adult, Tamasin does not want to do as her mother has done. How to make it different? She does not know.

Rachel does not want a partner or kids when she is an adult, preferring to live with cats. Even so, she can readily imagine herself into the role her mother plays in this family, and sees that domestic work can be rewarding and fun. Rachel does not do much domestic work now, but she has full credit for what she does. Apart from Theresa, Rachel is the only one who does domestic tasks regularly, and she is respected for her ‘contribution’. She is in the happy position of doing very little, being praised for it, and seeing domestic labour as skilled, dignified and respected work. As her parents expect, Rachel may be just like her mother.

**Summing up**

The accounts given in this family are framed around two sets of ideas. The first is that domestic labour is arranged as it is for pragmatic reasons, to do with choice, efficiency, and skills. Mostly, family members’ accounts assume that choices are informed by egalitarian values and that gender politics are not an issue. This set of ideas is overt, assumed to be obvious and universal, and assumed to be shared by the interviewer. The other set of ideas is like a subtext, a secret story that maybe everyone knows but that it might not be okay to admit to. This asserts the view that there are natural and essential differences between women and men and that these differences underpin arrangements for domestic labour. In telling their stories Edward constructed his account entirely around the first set of ideas. In her account Theresa called on both.
5.1 THE BATEMAN FAMILY

Judy Bateman heard about the project from a colleague at work, and when I called she invited me to visit. I interviewed Judy and her twin daughters Leah and Polly on a weekday, and returned a week later to interview Judy’s husband Peter. The Batemans live in a modest house with a big back yard, with a bunny and a large and friendly dog.

Judy is 45 years old. She was born in the UK, and came to Australia as a child. Peter is 50, and was born in Australia to parents of European origin. Judy and Peter have been married for 26 years. Both left school after year 10. Leah and Polly are fifteen and attend a local secondary college. Peter is a storeman, and works a 50 hour week over six days. Judy works as a sales assistant. She had worked full-time until the twins were born, then did no paid work until they were in secondary school, when she took up a part time position. She now works a 39 hour week, over five days. Of the total family income Peter brings in approximately 70% and Judy 30%.

We did the interviews sitting at the kitchen table. Judy appeared to be quite comfortable talking to me, and was forthcoming in response to my questions. Leah and Polly were not so talkative in their interviews, which as a result were quite short. Peter was friendly and easy to talk to, but he seemed to be puzzled by some of the things I asked.

This is the only family in the study in which neither parent has post-secondary qualifications. Interviewing Judy and Peter challenged me to think about how class-located my research framework is. In this family more than any other, the principles that underpin arrangements for domestic labour are implicit, or if named they are accepted without question. Compared with other families in the study, people in this one had relatively little to say about why domestic labour works the way it does and how they feel about it.

Who does what
Family members’ accounts of who does what were consistent. Judy does indoor work, Peter does outdoor. Judy dusts and vacuums frequently, and cleans the kitchen and bathrooms thoroughly once a week. Judy does the family laundry, washing, drying, folding and ironing. Peter or the kids sometimes bring in clothes from the line, and the
girls occasionally iron clothes for themselves. Judy cooks dinner most days, and when she works late Peter cooks. After dinner the girls help clear the table, Judy cleans up the kitchen and washes dishes, and Peter dries them. They have a dishwasher but do not use it. Everyone gets their own breakfast and lunch, and Peter cooks sometimes on weekends. Peter does outdoor work, and has completed various renovation projects. Judy and Peter monitor the kids’ homework, and share the work of driving kids around. Judy pays bills and takes care of the family finances. She does a major food shopping on pay week, and shops for other things as needed. The girls tidy and dust their bedrooms, and sometimes vacuum them (Judy vacuums them often). Leah feeds the bunny and cleans its cage, with Judy’s help. Polly feeds the dog. Leah, Judy and Peter all said that Polly does less housework than Leah.

There were few discrepancies in accounts of who does what. Leah said the girls cook dinner occasionally, while Judy, Peter and Polly said they never do. Judy, Peter and Leah said it is Peter who takes the bins out, and Polly said it is ‘whoever’s around, not dad’.

Judy and the girls said the work of identifying things that need to be done and making sure they happen is done by Judy. Peter said Judy organises indoor work, he organises outdoor work, and major events they plan together. Both said they share the work of setting expectations for the kids’ behaviour, and everyone said that when the kids quarrel it is only about little things and does not become a problem.

There is no conflict arising from domestic labour. The adults maintain a clear and unquestioned division of responsibilities, the kids do relatively little, and everyone is happy with the way things work.

**How they explained it**

Judy and Peter created accounts of domestic labour that were framed around a shared set of values. Both said that talking to me had made them think about domestic work in a way they had not done before, but there was no feeling of discomfort associated with this. Leah and Polly seemed to feel uncomfortable about their mother doing so much domestic work, and their doing so little.


**Judy: I just think it’s my job. You just get up, you do it.**

Judy answered my questions in a matter-of-fact way, as if the domestic work she does is a matter of course and does not need to be explained. She said, ‘I don’t mind doing it. I get a lot of pleasure out of [the house] being clean and tidy’. That she is responsible for indoor work and Peter for outdoor is assumed in Judy’s account. For example she said ‘I’ll mow the lawn for him if it needs it and he hasn’t got around to it’, indicating that it is Peter’s lawn and she might help him with it, just as he helps her with cooking when she is at work. Judy said ‘Peter’s always been pretty good, he’ll always help out. There’s no problems there’.

Judy said they don’t expect the girls to do much housework, as she and Peter think schoolwork should be their priority.

Sometimes I moan at the girls that they should do more, but I suppose we started them off on that. There was never much expected of them, apart from keeping their rooms clean and tidy. It never bothered me going around doing what I have to do. If they’re just sitting there watching telly night after night I’m not so placid, then I expect them to get up and do it without being asked. [But] once they got to secondary school, if there’s homework that comes first.

It is important to Judy that the girls take their schoolwork seriously. ‘I get stressed over it, and tend to nag a bit. I think they humour me. They get it done in the end. I don’t know why I stress [laugh]’.

When I asked Judy whether domestic tasks are shared fairly, she said, ‘Probably no, but it’s [okay] because I don’t mind what I’m doing’. As a child Judy did lots of domestic work while her older sister did very little, and she resented it. Judy’s parents both worked full time, and on weekdays Judy would look after her younger brothers after school and prepare dinner before her parents got home from work. She said ‘I never liked it, as I was growing up. But my mum was the type you didn’t question. She was pretty strict’. When I reflected back to Judy my inference from this, that she does not want to impose these kinds of burdens on her kids, she said

I don’t suppose I even think of it that way. I just think it’s my job. You just get up, you do it. The only time I’ve really got a gripe is if I get tired, then
everything’s wrong. [And I think] how come I’m doing all this? But once I’m not tired and I’m feeling fine, I don’t even stop to think about it.

Judy said ‘maybe I haven’t done them any favours’ by not expecting the kids to do housework, but she did not see this as a problem. Increasing her hours of paid work has made things harder for her, but ‘I enjoy what I do, and so you sort of keep going. You get into a routine, you just carry on. Each year you’ve got a bit more work to do, but never mind. You just do it’.

My questions about planning and organising didn’t mean much to Judy. She said, ‘I don’t know. I just do it. I don’t really stop to think about it’. When I asked whether the way this works is fair, she said, ‘Most of the time I don’t mind doing it, it’s only unfair when I decide to crack it [laugh]’.

In relation to emotion work Judy talked mostly about looking after people when they are sick. Talking about feelings is something she does not get involved in. Judy said, ‘My mother used to say I don’t have a sympathetic bone in my body. If the kids come up to me and go, “oh I’ve got a sore finger”, I say well it hasn’t dropped off, so don’t worry about it’. When the kids are genuinely sick and it’s not ‘self-inflicted’, she said, ‘you look without saying too much, and you just sort of know when to react, and when not to’. Judy said when the kids fight it’s hard to mediate without being seen to be taking sides, so ‘I just go away and watch telly or something. [And say] sort it out yourself. Or sometimes I just say go see your father [laugh]. I don’t want a bar of it’.

Judy said she and Peter work well together with the children, because ‘there’s not much we disagree on’. The kids are not expected ‘to be seen and not heard’, as she had been, but she does expect them to be polite and well behaved. She said, ‘The bottom line is, I can trust them to be good’. When I asked how things could be better, she said ‘a bit more give and take maybe, and not just my rules all the time. Listening to them a bit more, and me not being so rigid’. Judy said that while she is far less strict with her kids than her mum was with her: ‘I sort of think well, she did the best she could, or what she thought was best at the time’.
Judy had clear ideas about the mum job and the dad job. She said ‘The mum job is basically looking after the kids and keeping house. [The dad job is] bringing in the money. He’s the one that’s got to go to work, and I’m the one that’s got the choice’.

Judy said she does paid work because she enjoys it, and ‘I didn’t just want to be a mum stuck at home’. Because of this, Judy’s and Peter’s roles overlap more than they did before, but ‘it’s not [as if] we sit down and work things out’. For example, when Judy started working late:

> I used to cook before I went. Now he cooks tea, cleans up, and has my tea waiting for me when [I get home]. He’s very obliging, there’s not much that’s too much of a bother for him. I suppose I put in a fair bit, but I don’t do the hours, and the heavy workload that he’s got. So I don’t expect him to come home and do half of everything here.

When I asked how she sees the girls managing domestic labour when they are adults, Judy said she expects Leah will do things the way she has done, while, ‘Polly I don’t know. She might be the type that expects equal all round’. Judy concluded:

> My mum got married at seventeen. I’m sure they had their ups and downs, but we never saw it. And my mum and dad sort of lasted. So I don’t know what’s right. I was one of the lucky ones. Hopefully my two will be, as well.

**Peter: Finding time, that’s the thing**

Peter’s account of who does what was consistent with Judy’s. As we made our way through the prompt list, identifying the many tasks Judy does, Peter laughed, and said ‘she’s got it pretty tough hasn’t she, when you start asking questions like this’. Peter said it is work hours that determine how much domestic work he does. ‘Really, if I didn’t work the hours that I work, I’d probably do a bit more of that too.’

When I asked whether it all works well, Peter said, ‘I think it does. I think we sort of share the load pretty evenly, with all we’re doing’. He had some hesitation about whether the girls do enough.

> The kids could probably [do more]. Because of school we decided we’d do the washing up and stuff, so they can get on with their homework. I don’t know whether that’s a right thing or a wrong thing to do, but. Maybe they should be
doing more, to teach them. [But] we’d rather they try to do well at school, with their homework and that.

Peter said maybe things would be better if he did more indoors.

I suppose I could do more inside jobs, but I don’t know. I’ve got a fair bit of the other stuff to do. On the day off you need to mow, or tidy up the place a little bit, there’s always something to do. When I’m not here I usually go down to my parents’ [farm], because they’re getting on a bit. There’s always something to do down there, that dad can’t do any more. Finding time, that’s the thing [laugh]. It’s Sunday really.

Fitting it all in is difficult, but: ‘I guess I get organised. I have no choice, it’s just the way it is’. When I asked whether the planning and organising aspects of domestic labour work well, Peter said, ‘it’s worked so far, for 26 years, so I suppose it’s not too bad’.

The questions about emotion work did not make much sense to Peter at first. He said ‘Oh dear me, I don’t know. It’s just something you do. [Pause] I’m sorry I can’t think what to say’. About the work of setting expectations for the kids’ behaviour, Peter said, ‘It just sort of comes natural I think. We were brought up pretty well I think, not to be rude to people, that sort of thing. And we try to instil that in them I guess’. When I asked about being aware of how people are feeling, and looking after people when they are upset, he said, ‘If something’s wrong I think you can pick it pretty easily. You just try to find out what it is and help them along with it. I think we all share that a little bit’. Peter said overall emotion work works well. ‘We haven’t had any major problems. Not that I’m aware of. So far so good’.

When he was a child Peter and his brother worked with their father on the farm, ‘chopping firewood, picking spuds, whatever needed to be done.’ His mum did all the indoor work, and the boys helped with the dishes. Peter’s parents’ roles were clearly delineated by gender.

There was a bit of a European background thing there, I guess. Mum does all the indoor, and dad, well he had a job plus the farm. He worked for the railways, he’d get up in dark and do some work on the farm and then he’d go to work, and
then he’d come home, have a cuppa and go out until it gets dark. So he was out all the time. It wasn’t a severe upbringing, I mean we were not smacked or anything like that, much, but you knew right from wrong. That’s the way it was.

Peter implied that the way his parents did things would be seen now as old-fashioned. When I asked whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job, Peter replied:

I suppose these days there really isn’t [a mum job and a dad job] any more. I mean, indoor work can be done by anybody, and these days it’s shared a bit more I think. [Here] it’s not shared that much. Judy still does most of it. I suppose instead of sitting here watching TV at night I could do some thing, but you have to have some rest somewhere too. It’s not that I’m locked into not doing anything, not changing. It’s more of a time thing. I suppose if I just did an eight hour day job and no weekends I’d probably share a bit more.

Thinking about how his daughters might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Peter said:

I think they’d probably change a little bit. A lot of it depends on who does what as far as employment. Who’s got what sort of spare time. If you’ve got spare time you’ve got time to do a bit more at home.

When I asked what the girls might do to make this happen, it was as if that was a non-question. You make it happen by avoiding long hours of paid work. For Peter it was obvious that if someone has spare time, of course they will do housework if it is there to be done.

**Leah: I reckon I should do more**

In answer to my first question about domestic labour, Leah summed up briefly. She said:

Mum usually does most of the like vacuuming and cooking. Sometimes dad does, but usually he’s at work. Me and Polly do things to help mum, around the house, if she needs them done. Most of the time, if she does need help and we’ve got homework, she doesn’t ask us.
When I prompted for details Leah appeared to be uncomfortable, and her replies were punctuated with a nervous laugh. It was as if she was embarrassed that her mum does so much, or that she and Polly do so little. She was particularly uncomfortable telling me that her mum and dad wash up after dinner, and that Judy scrubs the bathroom. Leah said she and Polly don’t use the washing machine because, ‘We’d probably get something wrong and something would change colour, we don’t know [how to do it properly]’.

When I asked whether everything works well, Leah said, ‘I reckon I should do more, around the house, a bit’. About fairness she said, ‘I think Polly should maybe do a bit more, because when she doesn’t have homework or anything she just watches TV, when she could offer [to help mum]’.

Leah said the work of planning and organising consists mostly in ‘mum ask[ing] us to do it, and we go do it’. This arrangement works well, but it could be better if ‘instead of mum asking us to do it, if we see anything that needs to be done just do it straight away instead of her asking us’. Listening to Leah I had the impression that she is very aware of the work Judy does, and feels acutely that she and Polly are not doing their share. There was no suggestion in Leah’s account that Peter should do any additional tasks.

Leah had little to say about emotion work. She said her mum is not one to talk about things. ‘If mum’s feeling upset we ask her if there’s anything wrong, and we can tell, but she says there’s nothing wrong, so we can’t really do much’. Leah’s answers to these questions were very short. She said she and Polly look after each other ‘sometimes, yeah’. When I asked whether there was work involved in keeping the peace, and supporting relationships in the family, Leah said, ‘Um, I’m not sure’, and gave her nervous laugh. I felt uncomfortable too. It was as if I was asking a non-question. Perhaps these intangible aspects of family relationships are just not talked about, or thought about. When I asked whether emotion work works well, and everyone is noticed and looked after, Leah said ‘yeah’. I don’t know what these questions meant to Leah, or what she meant by her brief responses. Perhaps the questions meant nothing and she just wanted to get the interview over with.
Like her mum, Leah was very clear about the mum job and the dad job. She described them in terms that were totally concrete. ‘Mum’s job is cleaning the house, and dad’s is outside doing all the garden work’. When I asked whether earning money was part of one job or the other, she said, ‘I reckon both’.

Leah had clear ideas about her future. She would ‘make sure everyone has a fair share of doing everything, and not leaving it up to one person’. It would be ‘about the same [as it is here]’. To make this happen, she would ‘sit down and talk to them and say, everyone’s got to do it or it won’t get done. And if they don’t, just keep telling them until they do. Or something like that’.

**Polly: It seems to work well for us**

Polly appeared to feel more comfortable talking with me than her sister had, and her responses to my questions were direct and to the point. Polly said:

Most of the housework inside is mainly done by mum. We help out occasionally when she asks us, but not much. And most of the housework outside the house is done by dad. And that’s pretty much it.

Since Judy has been working longer hours, Polly and Leah ‘help out a bit more than we used to, but probably not as much as we should’. Like Leah, Polly said she doesn’t use the washing machine, because ‘I don’t know what buttons to press. I’m always calling mum for help so that’s why I never normally do it’.

When I asked about fairness, and how it could be better, Polly said, ‘I’m sure mum would like more help than we give her. It seems to work well for us, considering that we’re not doing much. I think we should probably do more’. Things would be more fair, she said, ‘if we were to help without being asked to do something, just do it anyway’. Polly identified mopping floors and cleaning the bathroom as things she and Leah could do. She said the reason they don’t do this is that ‘we just sort of can’t be bothered. [But] mum probably can’t be bothered either’.

Polly said the work of planning and organising consists mostly of Judy organising herself, and telling her and Leah to do things. Polly said Judy often asks her to tidy her room, but ‘I can leave it up to two days before I start cleaning. She likes it kinda done
straight away, that’s kind of how mum normally does everything’. Talking about the work of noticing what needs to be done and making it happen, Polly said, ‘We all notice that it has to be done, but as I said it’s who gets to it first, to do it. And normally that is mum’.

About emotion work, Polly said, ‘I’ve never in my life heard mum and dad fight. Mainly when it’s fighting it’s between me and Leah’. When I asked about the work of noticing and looking after feelings, Polly, like Judy, talked about looking after people when they are sick. Everyone looks after each other, but ‘normally when me and Leah are sick we prefer to go to mum than to dad’.

Polly described a mum job and a dad job in concrete terms, as doing indoor or outdoor work. ‘Most of the jobs we leave for dad would be like doing stuff in the garden. Or when we’re fixing up the house we would leave the painting for him, and like tiling the floor and stuff. And mum, she’ll just keep it clean’. When I asked whether earning money was part of either job, she said, ‘Both, yeah’.

Imagining her future, Polly said she would like to have a partner and kids of her own one day.

When I picture when I’m older, I think about how we’ve got it all now. But I don’t exactly picture me doing any of the jobs that mum does [laugh]. I always say I plan on being rich so I don’t have to do any; I can hire people to do it for me. But if that doesn’t work out, it’s pretty much how we work now.

To make domestic labour run smoothly they would have to ‘just get along, no arguments. You know, don’t always disagree about everything the other person’s got to do, and say’.

**What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?**

The rationale behind Judy’s response to my questions was straightforward: ‘I just think it’s my job’. There is no question here, and no problem. Judy takes responsibility for what has to be done and just gets on with it. Judy brings from her family of origin an expectation of hard work and a practice of stoicism. In contrast, Peter said it is about who’s got time to do domestic work. If he had more time, he would do more
housework so Judy could do less. Like Judy, Peter brings from his childhood an expectation that hard work and long hours are part of the deal, in being an adult and a parent. Both assume that each is responsible for their patch, and they need to help each other out in whatever way they can.

Judy and Peter expect different things for their daughters from what they have had themselves. Kids need time to be kids, and schoolwork takes priority over housework. Leah and Polly experience a degree of leisure and domestic service that neither of their parents had enjoyed when they were children. Neither parent speculated on what this difference between their kids’ upbringing and their own might mean for Leah and Polly. The girls, especially Leah, seemed to feel some discomfort in explaining to me how domestic labour happens. Both gave the example of laundry, which they do not do because they don’t know how, but neither suggested they might be able to learn how to do it. Leah offered no further explanation for how things are. Polly was less apologetic than Leah, and more forthright. She and Leah ‘can’t be bothered’ with domestic work, even though ‘I guess mum can’t be bothered either’. Implicit here is the idea that whoever is least able to avoid domestic work is the one who gets to do it.

**Ideas and conflict**

The ideas implicit in Judy’s and Peter’s accounts support the absence of conflict in their domestic arrangements. Both are clear about what is her responsibility and what is his, neither expects that life will be other than hard work, and neither has an expectation that they should receive service, domestic or otherwise. Each appears to feel happy with their situation. Their ideas about the importance of children’s schooling contribute to avoiding conflict also. Because the kids are not asked to do much, any resistance they might offer in response is not an issue.

**Anticipating the future**

Both girls see the division of labour practiced by their parents as a given, and as a good thing. Both imagine their future families in a contradictory way, as being like this one, but with them not doing all the things that their mum does now. For Leah this is to be achieved by having the kids do regular chores. For Polly the solution is outsourcing. It is likely that, as predicted by their parents, Leah will be more like her mum. Polly may
expect other things, and maybe make life different for herself from the way it has been for her mother.

**Summing up**

Accounts in this family are framed around an assumption that a division of labour in which mum does indoor work and dad does outdoor is just the way it is. Reflecting the cultures and practices of their families of origin, the accounts given by Judy and Peter assume that you expect life to be about hard work, and you just get on with it. These expectations do not extend to their children. Judy and Peter wish their kids to do better in their schooling than their parents have done, and to support this they excuse the kids from doing domestic work. Their kids are encouraged to develop an attitude of entitlement to service, which their parents do not have themselves.

5.3 WHY NO CONFLICT?

What distinguishes these families from others in the study is that the women are happy to take responsibility for domestic work, and they do not ask their husbands or children to do anything they don’t want to. Why are these women happy with a situation that other women are not happy with? I suggest the answer is different for each.

Theresa Fletcher chose to give up her paid work, so she could manage family life without ‘juggling’. Theresa has status in the world of paid work, so she can assert to herself and to me the value and skilled nature of the work she does in a domestic setting. She turns Edward’s non-participation to her advantage, effectively running the house as her ‘little empire’. Judy Bateman is happy with her situation because the division of responsibilities between herself and Peter is not questioned. Each has their patch and each helps out the other as much as they can. Both assume that hard work is just part of life, and you don’t waste time wishing things were different.

In Fallding’s terms these families represent stable partnership or rightful patriarchy. As in Fallding’s study, the families are ‘stable’ because the mother accepts responsibility for domestic work, and children are excused from domestic work on the basis of priority accorded to schooling. In Hochschild’s terms these are ‘transitional’ families. In both families, domestic arrangements imply a hierarchy of work in which women’s paid
work and other activities can be pursued only to the extent that they do not interfere with their domestic obligations.

Stories in this chapter suggest that the need to explain how domestic labour works, and why a gendered division of labour is not sexist or exploitative, is more keenly felt the more education a person has. We see how these explanations take shape in the next chapter, which looks at three families in which the mothers would like other family members to do more domestic work, but have given up actively trying to make it happen.
CHAPTER SIX     FAMILY STORIES: RESIGNED

This chapter considers three families in which the mother would like other family members to do more domestic work, but is no longer trying to make this happen. While the women said domestic labour had at times been a problem in the family, men and kids maintained that domestic labour had never really been an issue. In this chapter we see instances of negotiation or contest around domestic labour being identified and described in significantly different ways by different family members.

The dominant stories in these families say that arrangements for domestic labour reflect people’s choices. The hierarchy of work that was implied in Chapter Five becomes explicit as people explain why their current arrangements are okay even though they are not ideal.

6.1 THE BENNETT FAMILY

This family was the first I interviewed for the current study. I was given Alexander Bennett’s phone number by a friend. When I called I spoke to Alexander’s wife Maddy, who invited me to come over one afternoon. The Bennetts live in a comfortable and spacious house with a lovely garden.

Maddy and Alexander have three children and one large cat. On my first visit I interviewed Maddy and Daniel, the younger son, and a few days later I returned to interview Alexander and daughter Jessica. I regret, now, that I did not interview the older son, Oscar. At the time I thought that I wanted to interview only two kids in each family, and that at twenty he was outside the age range I was interested in. After this I changed my approach and decided to interview any kids who lived at home and were willing to talk to me.

We did interviews in the living room. In this family it was the women whom I found difficult to engage, while the men talked easily. Alexander and Daniel both appeared very comfortable in the interviews, and were forthcoming and free with their opinions. Maddy was reticent. She speaks quietly, and has a dry sense of humour. Maddy described herself as a woman of few words, and I found this to be so. Jessica was similarly reserved in her interview. There are gaps in these interviews because I was
nervous, and did not use my prompt list for housework tasks in a systematic way. I learned from this, and used the prompt list consistently in later interviews.

Maddy is 50, Alexander is 49, and they have been married for 25 years. Alexander works approximately 55 hours a week, as a medical doctor in general practice. He is involved with various community groups, which take up two or three evenings each week. Maddy left school after year twelve, and works as a teacher’s aide. Maddy said she works two full days a week, Alexander said she works three. Their sons Oscar, who is twenty, and Daniel, who is eighteen, are at university. Jessica is twelve, and attends a private girls’ school.

Who does what
Accounts of who does what were mostly consistent. Everyone said Maddy cooks dinner most nights. Maddy said Oscar and Daniel cook occasionally, and Alexander said he cooks ‘ten percent of the time’. Clearing away after meals is done by Maddy, assisted by Alexander if he is there. Maddy washes dishes and stacks the dishwasher. The kids are expected to put their dishes in the dishwasher, or at least in the sink for Maddy to wash later. Daniel and Jessica said that Daniel sometimes unstacks the dishwasher. Maddy does food shopping. Daniel and Alexander said Oscar is supposed to take out the bins, but rarely does. A cleaner, who comes for one afternoon each week, cleans bathrooms and toilets, mops and vacuums floors. Maddy said the cleaner has been coming for ten years, Alexander said he has been coming for twenty. The cleaner vacuums the kids’ bedrooms if they are tidy.

There are gaps in this part of the story, a result of my not using the prompt list. No one identified any other tidying or cleaning that happens, or who might do it. Maddy and Alexander both said that floors, bathrooms and toilets often need cleaning in addition to what the cleaner does. Alexander said this is because the cleaner does not clean very well, while Maddy said the cleaner cleans thoroughly. Neither identified who does the additional cleaning. No one mentioned who cleans the kitchen. For Daniel and Jessica ‘we have a guy who comes’ was the comprehensive answer to all questions about cleaning.
Accounts of how laundry happens were inconsistent. Maddy said Oscar does his own laundry, and she does the rest. Alexander and Jessica said Oscar and Daniel both do their own laundry. Daniel said, ‘I’m pretty sure [mum] does it’.

A ‘mowing man’ comes fortnightly to do the lawn, and Maddy does other gardening. Other family members garden sometimes if Maddy organises this. Alexander looks after the pool. Alexander would like Daniel to share this work, but Daniel resists. Maddy and Alexander share the work of driving the kids around. They also share the work of looking after finances; Maddy does the ‘day to day banking’, they make decisions together and Alexander deals with the bank for major projects.

No one had much to say about the work of planning and organising, describing this as minimal, or as done by Maddy. People’s accounts of emotion work varied. Maddy said looking after people is ‘the mother role’, and she does it. Alexander said this work is shared between them. Daniel said, ‘I’m male, I don’t have emotions’, and Jessica said, ‘I don’t know, I haven’t thought about it’.

There are several points of contention in relation to domestic labour. One is Maddy’s wish that ‘other people’ should do more domestic tasks, without her having to ask. Maddy said this could be achieved by her establishing ‘more organised participation’. Alexander, Daniel and Jessica all said that the division of work would be fairer if this was to happen. Another point of contention is that Maddy would like Alexander to be at home more often in the evenings, and to be ‘more organised’ about letting her know when he will be out. Alexander identified this as a ‘matter for discussion’ between them. The other problem area is the pool. Alexander persists in asking Daniel to clean it and Daniel persists in resisting. These dissatisfactions were described by all parties as fairly minor. Domestic labour happens with ‘a minimum of stress’.

**How they explained it**

The idea that domestic labour is something that is not worth ‘stressing over’ is a dominant theme in this family. For Maddy, that she does more than her share is okay because that is her choice. For Alexander, being a bit disorganised is part of being ‘laid back’. For Daniel and Jessica, the whole thing is no issue.
Maddy: *I choose to do it, rather than putting it on other people*

In response to my first question about housework tasks Maddy asked, ‘Is now a good time to introduce the topic of the cleaner who comes once a week?’ She said things often need cleaning in-between times but it’s ‘good to know they’re done thoroughly once a week’. In her responses to my questions about domestic tasks, it was as if having a cleaner means cleaning is not an issue. Maddy did not volunteer any detail about domestic tasks. When I asked about specifics she said, ‘I do most of that’. Maddy noted that Alexander will ‘help clear up after a meal. He doesn’t tend to be home very much though’.

I felt that Maddy was feeling a bit defensive about my questions, and wanted to present an image of everything being just fine. When we moved on to questions about fairness and how things might be better, Maddy seemed quite uncomfortable. Her responses to these questions were brief, and I did not push her to elaborate. When I asked if the way domestic tasks happen works well, she said:

> It seems to work okay. Sometimes I would like to see other people take a bit more initiative, without waiting to be asked, to do things. It’s not entirely fair, I probably do more than my share. That’s probably up to me. I choose to do it, rather than putting it on other people.

When I asked how this might work better, Maddy said, ‘It might be just a question of me being more organised, and establishing routines and tasks that people have to do on certain days’. Maddy returned to this theme when I asked about how the work of planning and organising could be better, saying ‘one night a week one of the boys [might] cook a meal’. It would also be better if Alexander would let her know in advance if he planned to go out in the evening.

Maddy described her ideas about the mum job and the dad job in fairly polarised terms, and noted that things are changing, for the better.

> Mothers tend to have their fingers on the pulse of what’s happening. I’m not sure whether that’s something that you learn as you go along, or whether it’s innate, [but] traditionally that’s the role that mothers have taken. Things are certainly changing. I know young couples now where the husband works three days a
week and stays home the other days with the children. I think that’s a good development.

Reflecting on how she feels about domestic labour, Maddy said, ‘I don’t stress much about it, and if it’s not perfect it doesn’t worry me too much. I’d rather be sitting on the floor playing a game with the kids than making sure there’s no dust on anything’.

Although Maddy did not identify the church as an influence, the way she described Alexander’s role in the family reflected its ethos. She said, ‘I look to Alexander to bring a stronger [presence], when discipline is needed. I don’t feel I have always got the authority, in the eyes of the kids’. Maddy identified managing finances as something associated with the father role, in particular:

Helping make decisions with regard to finances and big things that go on. We would talk about something and agree how to go about it, then he would do the arrangements with the bank or whatever. Although I do all the day-to-day banking and that sort of thing.

Maddy said in her family of origin domestic labour was organised in a similar way to how it is now, in her family. When I asked how she sees her kids arranging domestic labour when they are adults, she said, ‘I find that very hard to imagine. They might experiment and do things a bit differently, at least to begin with. Whether it ends up in the long run being similar to what they’ve grown up with, I’m not sure’.

Alexander: We made a decision that we don’t want to be tied to household tasks

Alexander’s first response when I asked about domestic labour was to talk about food. He said ‘Maddy would look after 90% of meal preparation; I might look after 10%. And then after the meal I would like to think we are about 50/50 on that’. Alexander said, ‘People take their own responsibility [for breakfast], and the expectation is that you put your dishes in the dishwasher or the sink at the end of that. The reality is [the kids] tend to leave stuff out’. Like Edward Fletcher in Chapter Five, Alexander used general terms and rather formal language. He said for food shopping, Maddy takes ‘primary responsibility’ and he may do ‘20%’, the kids’ areas of the house are ‘part of their organisation’, and ‘the older teenagers look after their own laundry’.
Alexander noted that the cleaner comes on a day that Maddy is not at work. ‘We’re not convinced that [he] does a lot of cleaning, but the very existence of that person creates a catalyst for the cleaning afternoon. We laugh together about the fact that [a catalyst] is probably all it is’. Alexander did not say who does the other cleaning. Presumably it is done by Maddy, as she is at home that day and the others are not.

Alexander talked in more detail about the pool. Daniel and his friends use it regularly, and Alexander would like Daniel to clean it.

One of my frustrations is that I’d like the boys to do more around the pool area. But I end up vacuuming it, and then today it’s gone green, because they haven’t kept it up. You just get to saying if you want a job done you’ve got to do it yourself.

When I asked whether domestic tasks work well, Alexander said, ‘I think Maddy and I are reasonably happy with the balance that we have between us. I probably get away with less at home, but I think the contract is something [like], I’ll probably add more out of the home’. About the kids, he said:

I think we’ve been very laissez-faire about duties. We have this theory that [kids] have to find their own passion for things, and their own reason for things. I think it’s gone reasonably well, but we’ve had to be a bit laid back and laissez-faire. Living with perhaps the frustration of things that were not done in the time frame that you might have wanted them done.

Reflecting on these arrangements, Alexander said, ‘In theory we might be tidier, neater, more organised people, but in practice our lifestyle has not allowed that to happen. But we live with that’. Giving a low priority to domestic work is something they have chosen. ‘We have a philosophy of life that doesn’t tie yourself to the garden. My memories of childhood were every Saturday there would be two parents in the garden. That has probably discouraged me from [doing that]’.

Alexander said planning and organising works well, although ‘bins are interesting. [Oscar] is responsible for bins on Sunday night, and the tension is, how many weeks do you let it go by without the bins going out?’ In practice they do not let it go by at all. ‘We just trundle them out’.
When I asked how things might be better, Alexander said domestic arrangements are shaped by the choices you make, and you pay the price for those choices. The basic choice they have made is about his work.

I see the whole household thing as a bit of a social contract. You make deals, and you work out the costs, the lifestyle costs, the emotional costs. My involvement at work brings me home less than jumping out of my skin to do stuff. I wouldn’t come home full of beans to do the next task.

Alexander was thoughtful in his response to my questions about emotion work. He said emotion work with the kids is ‘a shared responsibility’, and he takes care to spend time with the children when he can. Alexander reflected on how emotion work happens between himself and Maddy, noting that when working long hours ‘you have to be aware that you’re not absent in spirit and present in body when you’re at home’. He added, ‘In terms of emotional looking out for each other, it’s almost part of the lifestyle rather than a task. I don’t think “I’ve got to go home and emotionally encourage my partner”. Perhaps I should’. This aspect of domestic labour works well, because ‘we take enough time to nurture family life and each other. The reality of life is it’s not ideal, it’s a matter of finding the balance, constantly adjusting’.

Thinking about his family of origin, Alexander reflected on how things have changed, and why. During his childhood it was a matter of principle that since mum made dinner, the kids should tidy up; but this is no longer the case.

I suspect my childhood was a bit more disciplined, and a bit more ordered. Of course I was pre-television at mealtimes, so you didn’t leave the meal-table and run to the television, so there was probably a roster for washing dishes in the household. And because you normally shared a room with someone else, there was more discipline in keeping your room tidy. Living conditions wouldn’t allow too much slackness in that area.

Another thing that has changed since Alexander’s childhood is that kids’ involvement in activities outside school. ‘There’s so many more choices out there, and parents are happy for them to pursue those choices. I wouldn’t keep kids at home at their chores, at the expense of those things’.
When I asked Alexander what he thought about the mum job and the dad job, he described their practices in terms of choice. ‘We’ve adopted a fairly traditional way of doing things because Maddy decided to cease full-time work when the kids came along, so that was a choice or agreement that domestic things would be more her task than mine’. Alexander said the dad job is ‘the garden, the gutters, the carwashes and things. Pool; I do that. Outdoor jobs’. The work of nurturing with the kids is part of both jobs, and is ‘equally shared’.

Overall, domestic work happens ‘with a minimum of stress’, because they have ‘made a decision that we don’t want to be tied to household tasks’. When I suggested that material resources are an important basis for this, Alexander disagreed. Outsourcing is ‘a choice that’s not necessarily related to income. Those things [do not cost much and] I think they are well worth budgeting for’.

Thinking about how his kids might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Alexander said:

They will be able to say I will work, and somebody else will do my domestic tasks, and they will be minimal. If they look back and say where did we let them down, they might say that they didn’t learn the detail of lots of household tasks. I’m not sure if Oscar or Daniel could go through a house and [clean it]. They’ve almost made the assumption that the home will be reasonably clean and tidy and that just comes with the territory.

Daniel: *It happens by magic I think*

Daniel began his response to my question about domestic tasks by talking about gardening, and the pool. He said:

Dad hassles me about cleaning the pool, probably on a constant basis. I’m not a fan of cleaning the pool, I think it’s kind of stupid. It would be a lot easier in my opinion to just put a pool cover on the pool so the leaves don’t fall in in the first place, rather than fish them out.

Daniel said the pool gets cleaned about once a week, ‘usually [by] dad, or he’ll hassle me until I do it. I do it on occasion’. He noted that they do not own a lawn mower, as
the ‘mowing man’ has been coming for ages. Describing indoor tasks Daniel said ‘we actually have a guy’ who does various things, and ‘I think he probably dusts’.

Emptying bins, ‘I think Oscar is supposed to do, but I don’t think he’s ever done it. [It happens] by magic I think’.

When I asked if things work well, Daniel said, ‘The pool’s a constant problem. I’ve been on at dad for years to just get a cover to stop leaves going in, and he’s been on at me for years to clean it out every day’. About fairness he said, ‘Probably not, since mum does almost everything. I don’t think Oscar and Jessica do anything in the realm of housework’. Daniel said things could be better if:

- Washing-type things would be divided up a bit more, clothes and ironing and that kind of thing. I reckon Jessica could take on a bit of that.

*Is that all done by your mum?*

I think so, yeah. I don’t follow the clothes process very closely.

*You put them in the laundry basket and get them back clean and folded?*

Yeah, that’s the magic.

Daniel said the work of planning and organising could be better if it was ‘a bit more regimented, rather than free flowing’.

At the moment mum will just go ‘Oh Daniel can you unload the dishwasher’, or dad will say ‘Oh Daniel can you clean out the pool’. We might have procedures for that sort of thing. Like if it’s bin night Oscar would always take the bin out, it would just happen.

When I asked how emotion work happens, Daniel’s response was flippant. He said, ‘See I’m male, and I don’t actually have emotions’. There is a bit of teasing between the kids but it is no big deal. When I asked whether people are aware of how each other is feeling, he said ‘I don’t know actually. I live in my own little world. Probably not. I don’t know’. About the work involved in keeping relationships running smoothly in the family, Daniel said, ‘Really I’m not sure. I do my thing and don’t particularly bother anyone else, and they don’t particularly bother me’. Later he added, ‘I don’t think there is a lot of stress and drama. It’s kind of laid back’.
Daniel described the mum job and the dad job in polarised terms. He said the mum job ‘naturally’ involves planning and organising, and emotion work.

Because she’s the mum she’s had to be there and know what’s going on and have an understanding of that. If she didn’t do it, it probably wouldn’t get done, because it just would not occur to anyone. And in the emotional aspect I think that’s probably naturally how things are, being a mother and having the emotional connection and knowing what’s going on.

When I asked whether domestic tasks were also part of the mum job, Daniel said, ‘I think it helps a lot’. Running a household is like running a company, and doing it herself is more efficient than outsourcing because ‘there’s no middle man, and it’s done to her satisfaction’.

Daniel described the dad job in ways that were dismissive of his father.

I suppose he likes to think of himself as educated, he went to university and all that sort of thing, he likes to help with homework, do a bit of that. And [he] keeps the pool running and things. The dad job in our family, I suppose he makes money and gives it to us. Which is quite good. That would probably be his main function. [And he] helps out mum.

I was puzzled by Daniel’s responses. It was as if he wanted to be funny, or maybe he was just taking the whole topic as a bit of a joke. The tenor of his responses was this is all pretty trivial, housework is something the cleaner does or mum does, maybe my sister should do more, and I wish dad would stop asking me to do the pool. It was as if the whole area of domestic work rightly had nothing at all to do with him. The job of parents is to provide money and service, and these things should happen invisibly. The mechanics of it are someone else’s problem. I can call it magic.

Thinking about how he might organise domestic labour in his future, Daniel said:

My philosophy is to minimise the things you need to do to keep things running. Like I said with the pool, instead of cleaning it every day, have a cover. And rather than go through a thousand dishes every day, don’t have that lifestyle where you are going through eight different soup spoons. If you’re eating in the
kitchen you don’t have to eat something that you have to put on a plate or a cup or whatever, to eat it. Fresh fruit, go through it, chuck it.

Having kids would not change the way this works: he and his partner would ‘minimise it, and just sort of spread the minimal workload that is left so it becomes even more minimal’. Daniel said they could adopt the kind of ‘mum and dad’ roles his parents have, and still practice ‘possibly even sharing’ of household work.

**Jessica: Mum does pretty much everything**

Jessica started by talking about what the kids do, and why they have no chores roster. She said:

We don’t really have a roster for who does what. Just anybody sets the table and stuff like that, and if mum or dad asks we’ll clean the pool and wash the dishes. But nobody really has set tasks. We’ve tried [a roster] but it doesn’t really work, because not everyone’s around at the right time.

Jessica was the only family member who mentioned a chores roster. She said Maddy does the shopping because ‘if dad does it the wrong things get bought’. When I asked if it works well she said yes, it is ‘kind of’ fair. It might be more fair if ‘mum would do less, she does pretty much everything’.

Jessica had not much to say about the work of planning and organising, beyond ‘sometimes mum or dad make lists’. When I asked about the work of looking out for how people are feeling, Jessica said, ‘I don’t know, I haven’t thought about it before’. Jessica described the mum job and the dad job in concrete terms. The mum job is washing clothes and shopping. The dad job is ‘looking after the lawns and the pool, outside type of stuff’.

Jessica seemed a little bewildered by my questions. It was as if her interest in domestic work was limited to the presence or absence of a chores roster, and anything else was not her concern. When I asked how she imagines organising domestic labour when she is an adult, Jessica said, ‘I have no idea. I’d try and do a chores roster thing, but it could be a bit the same as when we try and it doesn’t really work that well. So I’m not sure’.
What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?

Maddy and Alexander explained their domestic arrangements in terms of choice. Both said their choices were about being ‘laid back’ or ‘not stressed’. Both downplayed what was involved in domestic work. Maddy said there is a cleaner so cleaning is not an issue. Alexander was vague about the specifics of domestic work (except in relation to the pool, which he does), and used formal language that had the effect of sounding authoritative while obscuring detail.

Both adults mentioned ideas about kids. Maddy said she would like the kids to do more domestic tasks, but she does not pursue it. Alexander said it is better for kids to have opportunities to do other things that are more important than domestic chores. Both parents adopt the view that it is better to do tasks themselves than make a fuss about kids doing them. Alexander reflected on changes from his own childhood, but did not draw any conclusions about whether these changes were for the better.

Maddy’s and Alexander’s accounts imply a hierarchy in the way different kinds of work are valued. That Alexander’s paid work, his community work and his leisure are more important than domestic work is assumed, and requires no explanation. Alexander explained that the kids’ other activities are more important than domestic work, and he would not keep them at their chores at the expense of those activities. Maddy represented domestic tasks as unimportant, and the work involved in planning and organising as minimal. She asserted the value of time spent sitting on the floor playing with the kids as more important than caring whether anything is dusty.

Maddy referred to ideas about gender. Being a mother means doing the nurturing, and whether this is innate or learned, she does not know. Daniel also referred to ideas about gender: he said that for women to take responsibility for all aspects of domestic work is natural, and efficient. Alexander did not mention gender, and in his account the work of nurturing was ‘shared equally’ between them. The focus of his account was on choice.

Daniel and Jessica’s experience is that domestic work just happens, and how it happens does not really concern them. Service is provided because that is what parents are for. Both seemed to feel it might not be quite okay to say this to someone doing research on kids and housework. They suggested that it might be more fair if less was left to their
mum, but this idea is not elaborated in their accounts. For Jessica, that the roster did not work is the end of the story. Daniel says it would be more fair if they had ‘procedures’ in place so these things ‘just happened’, but he did not say how this might come about. At the same time, Daniel said quite clearly that the job of parents is to provide service to kids. For a mother to do nurturing work is natural, and for her to do domestic tasks is efficient; while a father’s role is to provide money, and to do whatever mum does not. In Daniel’s account indoor work is clearly the concern of women and outdoor work that of men, but a person’s status as parent or child is a more important indicator of obligation or entitlement than is their gender.

**Ideas and conflict**

In this family the luxury of being laid back and not stressed rests on Maddy being willing to do whatever work is needed, without making an issue of it. We could look at this in two ways. We could say Maddy is happy to do whatever needs doing, in order that family life can run smoothly and feel relaxed. Or we could say that the dominant story that applies in the family, of being laid back and having no stress, disallows the possibility that Maddy might persist in trying to get the kids or Alexander to do more. In Hochschild’s (2001) terms, the framing rules associated with this story would see any action toward creating change as being not laid back at all, and so not something that we in this family would do. The feeling rules associated with the story would characterise unhappiness about this as not a legitimate thing to feel. The account of the family’s being ‘laid back’, and not stressed about trivial things, functions here as an ‘anger avoidant myth’. 23

I think Maddy would say the first explanation is the one that fits. Even so, the appearance of these ideas in accounts from high-conflict families suggests that if Maddy did decide to seek change, these ways of thinking about domestic labour would support and legitimate strategies by which Alexander and the kids could effectively resist her attempts. So perhaps both explanations capture some part of what is going on. We might see Maddy’s strategy as pre-emptive.

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23 The dynamic in this family is like that in the ‘Riley’ family, whom I interviewed for the pilot study (Carter 2002, 2003).
The central motif in this family is being ‘laid back’, and ‘not tied to house’. This is supported by the idea that it is this way because we choose it, and any shortcomings are just the price you pay. The corollary is that because it is your choice, if you don’t like it that is your fault. While the choice is ‘ours’, the problem is Maddy’s. Any idea that domestic labour might be problematic for Maddy is obscured by the language Alexander uses to describe this work. The use of percentages, ratios and official-sounding phrases implies objective or authoritative assessment of what happens, while omitting or obscuring details about who does what. The usage ‘we do it’ allows Alexander to appropriate Maddy’s work as his own, without indicating the extent to which he does this. A tendency to make invisible the work involved in domestic labour is reflected also in Maddy’s account, where, until I pressed for details, it was as if because there is a cleaner, no other work exists.

No one in the family challenges the idea that kids’ schooling and other activities should have priority over domestic work. The kids expect service from their parents as a matter of course, and it is easy for them to deflect any expectation that they should contribute to domestic work.

Daniel finds evading Alexander’s requests that he clean the pool takes a little more effort. He legitimises his refusal by asserting that the work is avoidable and so should not be asked of him, but he takes no steps to obtain a pool-cover and use it. In his account to me he belittles his father, suggesting by implication that his requests are foolish and need not be taken seriously.

Implicit in these accounts is the idea that people who have more important things to do should not be expected to do domestic work. Domestic work is done primarily by paid help, and residually by the mother, whose other activities, by implication, are less important than other people’s. The ongoing dispute between Daniel and his father over pool-cleaning indicates that the arrangements that operate in this family give obligations toward children that go with being a parent, primacy over any privileges associated with gender. These apply even when the children have left school and are eighteen or twenty years old.
Anticipating the future
Thinking of their children’s future, the parents saw domestic labour as presenting no problem. Jessica had no idea, except that maybe a roster won’t work because it has not worked for them. Daniel anticipates that if he has kids, keeping the role division of dad earns money while mum does domestics and having an ‘even sharing’ of domestic tasks, will not be difficult.

Summing up
The dominant story in this family is about being laid back, and not tied down by housework. This is articulated most fully by Alexander, and reflected by Maddy. Within the terms of this story, for Maddy to persevere in trying to get kids to do domestic work would be petty, and to feel upset about how domestic work happens would be unreasonable. The kids’ stories reflect those of their parents. What this translates to in practice is that the children accept as normal the idea that parents should provide service to kids, and work done by their mother becomes invisible.

6.2 THE SULLIVAN FAMILY
I was introduced to Ruth Sullivan by a woman I interviewed. When I called, Ruth said her family would like to take part in the study. All family members were very busy, and the interviews took place over four visits, spaced over several weeks. I interviewed Ruth first, then Isabel (her fourth daughter) then Amy (her third) and finally Ruth’s husband Neville.

The Sullivans live in a large, beautiful 1920s-era house set in a landscaped garden. Interviews took place at a long table adjacent to the kitchen. Ruth was initially reserved with me, but as we spoke she relaxed and talked easily, even where it was clear that we were touching on issues that were sensitive for her. At times Ruth was constrained by the presence of Isabel and Amy, who came home from school while we were talking and hovered in the kitchen. The girls appeared to be quite comfortable talking to me. When I interviewed Isabel, Amy stayed for a while in the kitchen until Isabel asked her to go away. Amy’s interview was private.

It was difficult to find a time to interview Neville, and Ruth made and cancelled several appointments before we found a time Neville could do. I did not engage easily with
Neville. He seemed to regard the topic as trivial, and at the same time to feel slightly uncomfortable as if perhaps I might be judging him. I did not respond skilfully to Neville, and this was perhaps the most inept of all the interviews I did.

Ruth is 52, Neville is 53 and they have been married for 32 years. They have four daughters and a rabbit. Their older daughters Juliet and Frances have left home. Amy and Isabel, who are seventeen and fifteen, attend a private girls’ school. Neville is a barrister, and works up to 70 hours a week. Ruth also has tertiary and post-graduate qualifications. She stopped working as a nurse when the kids were small, then after her youngest daughter Isabel started school she returned to study and qualified to pursue a new career, in fine arts. Ruth gave up this work not long ago, and is active in a number of community groups which involve significant hours of unpaid work. Ruth also manages the family’s various property investments.

Who does what
Family members’ accounts of who does what were broadly consistent. A cleaner, who comes for one full day each week, irons, cleans bathrooms, vacuums and mops. A gardener comes fortnightly, and other help is engaged as needed. Cleaning the kitchen, and any other cleaning not done by the cleaner, is done by Ruth. Ruth or Neville cook dinner most days. Stacking the dishwasher is done by Neville or Ruth. The girls get their own breakfast and lunches. Ruth does most of the shopping, and Ruth or Neville load the washing machine. Taking out bins, and pegging out, bringing in and sorting laundry are done by ‘anyone’, as asked by Ruth. Ruth and Neville share driving the kids around. The girls are good students and their parents have little input into their study. Isabel looks after the rabbit, and Neville mows the small patch of lawn. Neville looks after family finances and bookkeeping. He also changes light globes. Ruth looks after her aged parents, and Neville’s.

Accounts from different family members differed in detail and emphasis. In response to my first question Ruth’s first words were ‘we engage lots of help’; Neville said ‘most of it we do’. Both emphasised Neville’s participation in a general way, but qualified or retracted this when asked for specifics. Neville and the kids attributed to the cleaner some things Ruth says she does herself, such as dusting, and tidying the kids’ rooms so
the cleaner can vacuum. Amy and Isabel did not know how some things were done. They said ‘I guess mum does it’ or ‘it doesn’t need cleaning’.

Everyone said that the work of planning and organising is done by Ruth. Ruth said she has tried unsuccessfully to get the girls involved in doing tasks on a regular basis. No one had much to say about emotion work, and no family member identified emotion work as a problem.

Neville and Ruth each identified one aspect of domestic labour as a problem for them. Neville said he would like Ruth to take on the work of banking and bill-paying associated with his professional practice and with the family investments. Ruth used to do this, but she passed the task to him some years ago. Ruth knows Neville wants her to take this on again now she is doing no regular paid work, but she does not do it. Ruth said a problem area for her is dealing with the amount of ‘stuff’ the family has accumulated. Ruth tries hard to achieve tidiness and order, and periodically enlists the girls in helping her with clearing-up projects in different parts of the house.

The outcome is that the house is clean, and rather cluttered. All family members are busy with their various activities, and domestic labour is seen to be a trivial matter, not worth devoting time or thought to.

**How they explained it**

All family members talked about busy-ness as a significant factor in how domestic labour works. In their accounts Ruth, Amy and Isabel focused on why the kids do not do more domestic work. Neville talked about why he does as much as he does, and not less.

**Ruth:** *I used to rant and rave and it didn’t get anyone anywhere. It just made me feel angry all the time.*

Ruth said she gave up her paid work because ‘I felt I needed to be more available to the family. I didn’t have enough time to give them, to be on tap, to be the mum’. It is more important to Ruth that the girls are able to take part in school activities than that they do domestic chores. She had tried to establish a cooking roster, but ‘that didn’t work, because the kids have lots of things they do after school’. Ruth continued:
Over the years I’ve become more untidy than I used to be, because I’ve found it frustrating living with people who are not as tidy as I would wish. I used to rant and rave and it didn’t get anyone anywhere. It just made me feel angry all the time, and it seemed to be an ineffective means of dealing with the situation.

Although her daughters are good students, supporting the kids’ schoolwork was an area of sensitivity for Ruth. She explained that as a child she had missed out on opportunities she might have had, and was unable to undertake study that would lead to a profession of her choice. Listening to Ruth I could see that she still feels hurt by these experiences, and is determined that her own kids should have all the opportunities she has missed.

When she described how she and Neville share the work of driving the kids around, Ruth said, ‘He’s very good about doing at least his share of that sort of thing. [Because he’s often on call] it’s a pain that you can’t rely on him, but he’s been very good about being involved’.

Discussing the work of managing finances for the family and for Neville’s practice, Ruth said ‘He really doesn’t have time to do it. I really should take on doing that again. I keep thinking I’m going to drop off some of the things I’ve been doing but [it doesn’t happen]’. She continued:

The kids probably don't do as much as they should, and probably we make excuses for them, to give them time so that they can devote it to studying, and to just being teenagers. Because we’re in the financial position where we can have people come in to do things that we can’t pack into the week, then it’s not an issue that we have to get people to help out more.

In some ways Ruth does not like outsourcing in this way, but ‘I rationalise it by saying that I do a lot of things in the community which I wouldn’t have the time to do [otherwise]’. Their arrangements work well ‘given that Neville works very long hours, and his work is unpredictable’.

This is a very busy house. Mostly it works. There are times when it doesn’t work, and where it feels like the fabric of the family is really stretched. But you get over the hump. It’s not worth getting stressed about things, because then you
cope less well. If you try to stay relaxed, somehow things do pan out. And is it fair? Life’s never completely fair. I think that’s an important thing for everyone to know, that there are times when things are not fair and where more is asked of you than of other people. That’s just one of life’s lessons.

About the work of planning and organising, Ruth said, ‘We’ve tried rosters, for washing, bins, cooking. They don’t work’. Her most recent attempt was a couple of months ago, and ‘there was no enthusiasm for that at all’. Ruth is content to resign herself to the kids having ‘ad hoc’ involvement in everyday tasks. The work of planning and organising would work better ‘if it was more democratic. If everyone would identify things that needed to be done, and everyone would put their hand up for what they would take on’. This does not happen, because ‘it’s unfair for me to criticise their untidiness when so much of the untidiness around the house is mine’. More importantly:

I don’t think it’s realistic. I don’t think any family actually sits down and gets that kind of discussion going. It would be almost impossible for us. Apart from it being a boring task, and them thinking ‘oh mum’s on the warpath again about getting things tidy’, I don’t think we’d ever all be here together to do it. Because we lead a very fractured lifestyle; it’s more important that the time we’re together be spent on more important things.

When I asked about emotion work Ruth’s response was slow and thoughtful. She said:

I think this is really tricky. It’s much less obvious than who does what in the physical sense. I think I twig better to the girls’ moods than Neville does. He’s a very relaxed person, but by the time he comes home he’s also a very tired person, and he’s been all day listening to people’s emotional needs and picking up on their cues. This might be a bit hard of me, [but] I think he probably does not do it so well with his family.

Ruth said in some ways, Neville is more supportive of the girls than she is, ‘much more unquestioningly positive with them’. When I asked what could be different to make this aspect of domestic labour work better, Ruth said, ‘It would be better if I wasn’t as critical. If the girls were not able academically, my approach would be very different. I just don’t want them to miss opportunities’.
The kids say I’m too critical, but it’s because I don’t want them to miss out. It’s so much harder now than when I was going through school and getting into university. They have to achieve higher, and there’s so many choices. [It’s] much harder than it used to be.

Ruth said in her family of origin domestic labour was ‘very traditional’. Her mother was a teacher and her father an academic, and her mum gave up work when the kids were born and never went back. ‘Our domestic life was much simpler, because we didn’t do nearly as many extra-curricular activities as my children do’. Ruth’s father ‘always boasted that he could cook’, although he couldn’t, ‘so that’s very different, because Neville can cook quite adequately’. Ruth said Neville ‘does often cook’.

When I asked how often, she said:

- It really fluctuates. I can’t remember when he last cooked. But he does all sorts of things. We’ve sent him on various cooking courses. But a lot of these things have run their course. The thing that takes over is the busy-ness.

When I asked whether there is a mum job and a dad job, Ruth said, ‘Yes and no. I tend to ask Neville to do things like change light globes. Neville will often say “Is that because it needs a Y chromosome?”’ Domestic roles are ‘fluid’, and ‘Neville does lots of things that would traditionally be seen as female’. Ruth explained:

- It’s worked out that he’s the breadwinner because it’s much more efficient. He can’t be a part-time barrister. Because of his hours he can’t do a whole lot of the organisational thinking around the house, so it’s more efficient for me to do that. I get my intellectual stimulation from places other than working around the house.

For Ruth, it is Neville’s choice of career that ultimately determines the way their domestic arrangements work.

- It has a huge impact on your life, and you can’t change that impact. Neville spends a lot more time with his family, and does a lot more around the house, than most men in that position would. There are a lot of things that perhaps intellectually you would like to do differently, but you can’t operate outside the constraints of something as basic as the job that he does.
It is important to Ruth that her daughters do better in balancing their work and family lives than she has done. Ruth’s account of what she hopes for her girls was enmeshed with the regrets and aspirations she has around her own life.

I hope they would have partners who would see that it was important for them as women to be intellectually stimulated and to have their own economic independence. I hate the idea of being economically dependent. I hate being classified as just a wife and mother. I hope that they would be able to come to a more satisfactory balance [than I have].

When I asked how they might make this happen, Ruth said, ‘I don’t know. In a way it goes against the tide of what’s happening in our society, where people are being expected to work longer and longer and longer hours. Personal time becomes increasingly squeezed’.

When I asked whether she thought her kids would see having a cleaner as part of their future lives, Ruth replied, ‘I don’t know’. She added:

Before we had a cleaner, Neville shared a lot of the housework. He’ll still vacuum or whatever when it’s needed. He’s not the sort of person who would ever say he wouldn’t do it. I don’t think he’s ever cleaned the toilets though.

**Neville: I do at least my share. Probably more, really.**

Neville said who does things like cooking dinner, shopping, or laundry depends on ‘who’s around and who’s available’. For clearing away after meals, ‘we don’t have a system [but] it kind of works. I do at least my share. Probably more than my share really. It works itself out’. For other cleaning, ‘if it happens it’s either the cleaner or Ruth. Occasionally, under pressure I’ve done the vacuuming and stuff, but that’s not common’.

When I asked who does the work of fixing things that are broken, Neville said, ‘That would be me’. I asked, do you mean tap washers and doors and things like that? Neville said, ‘I don’t know about those sorts of things, but changing light bulbs, me. Simple things, that would be me. [Otherwise we’d] get someone to do it’. Talking about the work of managing finances, Neville said ‘Ruth used to do it all. She decided
that she didn’t want to do it any more, and that I should do it for a while. For a while has been going on for a long time now, so I do it’.

Neville said the way things are now ‘works okay’. About fairness he said, ‘I don't know what’s fair. Probably as the kids get older they need to do a bit more. And if I had my druthers24 I’d rather that someone else did all the finances and stuff’. When I asked what would it look like if it was fair, Neville said:

I don't know. I don't know what’s fair and what’s not fair. I mean if I could get out of doing the finances and stuff, then I would see that as being a better arrangement. Ruth has the view that she did it for a fair while, and that I should do it for a while. But I would think that since I bring in most of the income that maybe she should do it.

Neville appeared to be uncomfortable with the questions about fairness, and a feeling of awkwardness persisted for the remainder of the interview. Neville said Ruth does most of the work of planning and organising, including setting expectations about the kids’ participation in domestic work. He added:

Probably it’s a personality thing as well. She’s more likely to have a strong view about things, and I’m more likely to be flexible. If she thinks that the kids should do something, and I think maybe they shouldn’t, she’s more strong minded about it so I just buckle under. It’s easier really.

Neville said this aspect of domestic labour works ‘Okay. You keep on adjusting and working these things out as you go along’. When I asked if there is any way it could work better, he replied:

There’s no easy answer to that. It would be like saying you want the other people to have different personalities. And they don’t. If they had different personalities you might not have got here anyway. [In a marriage] you’re always adjusting, and things change as you go along. You keep adjusting and working things out, domestic workloads as well as everything else. And I think the situation we’re in now is the current compromise. I suppose the amount that I do is a compromise from [what I would like], to make things work better.

24 ‘If I had my druthers’ is a colloquial expression meaning ‘if I had my preference.’ See The Mavens’ Word of the Day http://www.release2-0.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=19960809
I put my foot in it at this point. I said, ‘Do you mean it would be nice to do nothing but you do a bit because this is what she wants?’ Neville was piqued, and said:

I think I actually do more than a bit. When we were first married I probably did nothing. I went from the model of my parents, when the dad did nothing in terms of domestic work. Well I certainly don't do nothing. The balance of income earning work hasn’t changed, from what my parents did, to a large extent. Both of my parents worked, and my mother did all the housework still. So whilst Ruth has worked, and still does a lot of work outside of the house, none of which she gets paid for, yet the balance of [domestic] work is closer to even than it ever was in my own parents’ case. Ideally if you’re going to be sharing all the domestic work then you should be sharing all the income work I suppose. In order to make things work I do much more of the domestic work than I would have otherwise done. I don't know whether that’s fair or not fair. But [it’s] what you have to do to make it work.

Neville was very prickly here. It was as if the overly bald and tactless way in which I reflected back to him how I heard his reasoning around domestic work provoked him to explain himself more fully than he would otherwise have done. This was not a comfortable experience for me (or probably for Neville either), but it generated great transcript.

Neville had little to say about emotion work. ‘I don’t think we get upset that much. It seems to kind of work, I don’t see it as a problem area’. When I asked about his family of origin Neville expanded on his earlier reflections.

My mother wasn't very good at housework, by her own admission. My parents were both doctors, and we had a full time housekeeper [who] came every day. She did all the housework, while my mother went out and worked. So my parents were a bit more modern I suppose. My mother was not really into equality, in the sense that she did what housework was done. My father did no housework. What housework was done in the house by either of them was done by her.

Reflecting on how this had seemed to him as a child, Neville said, ‘I didn’t do very much [housework]. I was never taught to do very much, and so I didn’t. [But] I didn’t
see my mother’s role as being the person that did all the housework. Because she didn’t’.

Neville was ambivalent about whether there is a mum job and a dad job.

We came to this [marriage] with a philosophy that there weren’t such things as men jobs and women jobs. But in truth there are, in our arrangements. If there’s a light bulb to be changed they get me to change the light bulb. How hard is it to change a light bulb? Piece of cake. All that kind of stuff I get to do. I don't really put out the bins, but anyway, putting out bins, that's not hard. So there are male jobs and female jobs a bit, still. But from a philosophical point of view I think there ought not to be.

Like Ruth, Neville identified his choice of career as the thing that has ultimately decided how their responsibilities are shared.

The career that I’ve chosen involves long hours and a relatively high income, and what Ruth’s done doesn’t pay as well. So for us to live off her income would be much more difficult than for us to live off my income. If I stayed home and did all the housework, we wouldn’t have such a high standard of living.

When I asked Neville how he imagined his daughters organising domestic labour when they are adults, he said he thought they would have careers rather than ‘wanting to stay at home and be a housewife’. He added, ‘I don’t know what will happen when they have children. I haven’t thought that all through really. I guess they’ll work it out’.

Amy: *I'm probably getting away with doing too little, but I don't mind.*

In her account Amy focused on the tasks she and Isabel might be asked to help with. Amy appeared to be unaware of some routine cleaning tasks. When I asked who cleans the kitchen she said ‘I don’t know. I guess mum does it’. Amy said her tolerance for mess is higher than her mother’s. She dusts her bedroom ‘once every blue moon, when mum can’t stand it any more. I can always stand it’.

Amy said ‘I would hate to have to have to cook every day. It takes up so much time, and I just think I could be doing something better’. Overall, Amy said:
I’m happy. I don’t have to do too much. I just do what I’m told when I’m told but I don’t really have to do stuff all the time. I probably getting away with doing too little, but I don’t mind.

*Is this a year twelve thing?*

I didn’t do much last year either. I think Isabel does more than me.

Talking about planning and organising, Amy said, ‘Mum’s the head honcho with planning everything and saying what needs to be done. She pretty much bosses everyone around to get things done. [Dad] gets told what to do too’. Things would be better, Amy said, if ‘everyone [was] less busy and had more time to do things’.

When I asked about emotion work, Amy said, ‘Isabel gets stressed quite easily. She comes wailing to me and I just tell her not to stress, because I never get stressed. I complain a lot, but I don’t really get stressed’. Sometimes Ruth ‘has a stress attack’ about how messy the house is, but this does not happen often.

For Amy there was no clear distinction between a mum job and a dad job. She said, ‘dad never does the ironing or anything like that, he doesn’t really help out with the cleaning side of things, [but] apart from that there’s not really a division between them’. Amy did not mention earning money as part of either job.

When Amy imagined her future she said, ‘I wouldn’t want to do it all myself. I guess it would be similar to how it is now, but sharing stuff like the vacuuming too, which doesn’t get shared in this house by dad’. She would like to see responsibilities for earning and for domestic work shared. ‘I don’t want to be a housewife. I guess you do have to have someone who is the organiser to kind of control it, and make sure everyone’s chipping in and things are working out. [But] that doesn’t mean that they actually do everything’. When I asked what would she do to make this happen, Amy said, ‘I don’t know’.

**Isabel:** *Mum’s not too fussed. She used to be, but she’s gotten over it a bit.*

Isabel found it difficult to identify domestic tasks, and did not know how several routine tasks happened. After talking about dinners and laundry, she asked, ‘What else is there?’ As we worked through my prompt list she said: ‘It doesn’t get done that often’
(dusting), ‘I think [the cleaner] does it’ (cleaning the bathroom), and ‘I don’t know, I think mum does it’ (cleaning the kitchen). Talking about the kids’ bedrooms Isabel said ‘[mum] doesn’t really care that much if it’s messy. Mum’s not too fussed. She used to be, but I think she’s gotten over it a bit’.

Isabel said the way things happen now works ‘quite well’. She added, ‘It’s not really fair, I reckon. Maybe you can’t really have it fair, or you’d have to have a roster or something and that’s getting petty’. Later, Isabel said, ‘Amy doesn’t do as much as everyone else. She tries to get out of work sometimes. It’s more so now she’s in year twelve but it’s always been like that’. The work of planning and organising works well, because ‘I don’t really notice [it]’. It might be better if they were to ‘do less things’.

Isabel’s comments about emotion work were thoughtful. ‘You’ve got to assess how everyone is coping that day, because it changes. You sort of tread lightly when someone’s in a bad mood’. Isabel said family members are aware of how each other is feeling, except ‘it’s a bit hard to judge with dad, because you can’t really tell what he’s feeling by just looking at him’. Problems between people are usually resolved by taking time out, rather than by talking about them. ‘It works well for us but we don’t do that much of trying to discuss [things]’.

Isabel identified one thing that could be different to make this area of domestic labour work better: not being asked to help with domestic tasks at times that are not convenient. She explained:

> Sometimes if everyone’s out and you’re not having a good day, and there’s a thing you’ve got to do, then mum will call you and say can you get this ready for me and you say well I can’t really, I’ve got all this stuff to do. But you don’t really have a choice.

When I asked whether she thought there is a mum job and a dad job, Isabel said, ‘Mowing, that’s sort of a dad job. [And] the light bulbs. Putting things away is sort of a mum job, getting everyone clearing up’. When I asked how earning money fitted in, Isabel said ‘I think of dad earning the money. It feels like mum works though, because even if she doesn’t she’s out, and doing things’.
Imagining her future, Isabel said, ‘I wouldn’t want to have a family straight away, because I want to get a career, and once you [have] a family it takes up quite a lot of time’. She would like to see domestic labour arranged so that ‘everyone does a bit of everything, which works here mostly. Hopefully it wouldn’t get messy and you wouldn’t have to clean it so much’. In order for this to work, ‘we’d have to talk about it a lot together, [and] you’d have to have the time to do it’. This means setting your priorities differently so everyone is less busy than they are now, ‘which probably isn’t going to work very well in reality’.

**What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?**

Ruth and Neville both identified Neville’s work hours as the key factor affecting their arrangements for domestic labour. For Ruth, these hours establish the constraints they must work with. For Neville, the bottom line is that if Ruth worked and he did not they would have less money. In neither account is the possibility that Neville might reduce the number of clients he takes on, so that he works fewer hours, identified as an option.

Ruth referred to ideas about being a mother, and what she wants for her children. Ruth’s ideas about mothering were ambivalent. She quit paid work because she wanted to be ‘on tap’ for the kids, but said she would ‘hate to be classified as just a wife and mother’. While Ruth said the work of supporting her kids is important, she appears to feel this work is not valued because it generates no income and is not seen to require much in the way of intellectual capacity. The kids’ schooling is important because navigating university, jobs and housing is ‘so much harder now’ than it was when she was young. Ruth does not want her kids to miss opportunities to find a fulfilling career: she wants better for them than she has had for herself.

Ruth called on a number of ideas to support a theme of ‘it’s not worth getting stressed’ about getting other people to do more housework. She said, ‘Because we outsource it’s not an issue’, and anyway, having a roster doesn’t work. The way she explained this is telling. She said the family rarely has time to be together and talk, and when they are together they have more important things to talk about than housework. To insist on talking would be seen as ‘mum [being] on the warpath’. In adopting this reasoning Ruth accepts a view that domestic work is a trivial matter, not worth the allocation of
valuable time. For her to demand attention because it is important to her, is not legitimate.

A group of ideas about Neville appear in Ruth’s account, along the lines of ‘he’s very good, but …’. Neville receives credit for doing things without having to actually do them. He often cooks but Ruth cannot remember when. He is ‘not the kind of person’ who would ever refuse to do a task, but he has never scrubbed a toilet. It is as if any domestic work Neville does is construed as a gift, and taken as emblematic of his being ‘very good’ in those ways. As in the Fletcher family, there is an iconic task that Neville does because he is a man. Here it is changing light globes.

In Neville’s and Ruth’s accounts the idea that ‘life’s not always fair, that’s just how it is’ is a central point in their reasoning around domestic labour. For Ruth this refers to her view than she does more, and others less, than she would see as fair. For Neville it explains why he accepts a situation where he does more than he thinks is fair. If things were fair, sharing domestic work would go with sharing earning work. As he does all the earning work he should not have to do domestic work as well.

Neville’s experiences in his family of origin provide the key to understanding how he sees domestic work. His recollection of childhood positions domestic work as menial and unimportant, something that is done by paid workers and coordinated invisibly by the mother. People who have more important things to think about need not be concerned with it. For Neville, given that he earns all of the family income and they outsource substantially, for him to do the tasks he does is more than generous. To be fair, Ruth should co-ordinate domestic work so that it is not his concern. Neville sees himself as a progressive man, who does domestic tasks that his father would never have done.

In their accounts Amy and Isabel also adopted the view that domestic labour is trivial. Amy is unaware of some tasks that are done, but she seems to be deliberately so: she says she has a higher tolerance for mess than her mum has, she gets away with doing less than others do, and she is happy with this. Both girls acknowledge that Ruth is happier when the house is tidy, but as Isabel said, mostly ‘she’s gotten over it’. Isabel echoed an idea implicit in Ruth’s account when she said that although it would be fair if
everyone did some tasks regularly, creating a roster for this would be ‘petty’. To insist on making arrangements for domestic labour is not a legitimate thing for Ruth to do.

**Ideas and conflict**

The idea that domestic work is trivial is a common thread in all family members’ accounts. Each of us has more important things to do and more important things to think about. Neville and the children assert this view without effort. There is no question that Neville’s work, and the girls’ schooling and other activities, should take priority over domestic work. Ruth’s position in relation to domestic work is less clear. By introducing her account of domestic labour with ‘we engage a lot of help’, Ruth establishes that the mundane and menial work of domestic labour is not her concern. It is not so easy for Ruth to assert the value of her other activities within the family. Her community work is unpaid (as Neville noted), and her interest in pursuing a career has taken second place to the demands of running the household and ‘being mum’. Unlike Theresa Fletcher in the previous chapter, Ruth did not represent this work as highly skilled and deserving of respect in itself.

In this context Ruth’s refusal to take on the work of managing finances is a defiant act. Ruth is asserting that her activities are just as important as Neville’s, and should have priority over domestic work just as his do. She is asserting her entitlement to do work outside the home that is meaningful and important just like his, even if it is unpaid. In this small but persistent act of defiance Ruth is refusing to be cast as the primary manager of domestic services, in the model of Neville’s mother.

In this family everyone adopts the idea that domestic labour is trivial. This makes it unthinkable for Ruth to insist that family members talk about domestic work and find ways in which the aspects that burden her might be shared more evenly. Anything like that would be petty.

**Anticipating the future**

The parents’ views about the kids’ future were very different from each other. Ruth wishes passionately that her children should have every opportunity to pursue a career of their choosing, and that they will achieve a better balance between family and career than she has done. Given that Ruth identified Neville’s hours of work as the key factor
that has determined the way domestic labour works for them, it is curious that she did not draw the logical conclusion and suggest that her daughters should avoid partnering with someone whose career will be as demanding as Neville’s has been.

Neville, like Ruth, assumes that the girls will have careers, but how they will manage work and family is something he had not thought about. Amy and Isabel are quite clear in their ideas. Both know they will have a career. About how family will fit with this, Amy is direct; she does not want to do domestic work. Isabel is more optimistic: maybe if things do not get messy they will not need cleaning.

**Summing up**
In accounts from family members it is implicit that domestic tasks are menial work, to be done ideally by hired staff and if necessary, by the mother. A good mother makes her domestic work invisible, to maintain the fiction that the hired help do it all. The ideas that appear here as subtext to people’s stories, that domestic labour should not be the concern of people who have more important things to do, are effective in discouraging Ruth from seeking more involvement from other family members.

**6.3 THE HUME FAMILY**
I met Emily Hume at the home of a woman I interviewed. Emily was very interested in the research, and invited me to call her. I did, and we arranged for me to visit on a weekday evening.

The Hume family and their dog live in a lovely Edwardian house with a small garden. The first time I visited I interviewed the three older children, first Cassie, then Isadora, then Alfred. On the next visit I interviewed Emily’s husband William, and finally I interviewed Emily. Interviews with the kids and William took place in the kids’ study. I interviewed Emily in the family room, with her young son Toby lying on her lap.

I felt uncomfortable interviewing the kids when I had not yet interviewed the parents and knew nothing about the family. Where possible I avoid doing this, but I understood that the family was very busy and Emily was juggling to fit me in, so I went with what suited her best. I discovered while talking to Cassie that the older kids’ mum had died when Cassie was ten. Emily is their stepmother.
Everyone appeared to be quite comfortable in their interviews, and each person talked easily in response to my questions. It was not until I spoke to Emily that I gained any impression that domestic labour was an area of sensitivity in the family.

Emily and William have been married for six years and have one son, Toby, who is three. William is 50. William has been married twice before: eight years ago he was left a widower, with three kids. William is an orthodontist, and works 60 hours each week. Emily is 40, and is qualified as a social worker. Emily had been working part time until recently, but has now given up paid work so she can focus on caring for Toby and managing the family. The three older kids attend private schools. Cassie is eighteen. She is active in many groups at school, plays sport outside of school hours, and has a part-time job. Alfred is sixteen, and had had recently quit his part-time job and was looking for another. Isadora is fifteen. She plays sport outside of school hours, and has two-part time jobs. All family members were born in Australia.

Who does what
People’s accounts of who does what were fairly consistent. Everyone said Emily does most of the domestic work during the day while the others are out. Emily cooks most dinners, and William and Isadora cook occasionally. Emily does dusting and vacuuming in all areas except the kids’ rooms. Emily cleans the kitchen, mops the kitchen and both bathrooms, cleans one bathroom and both toilets, does all the laundry and most of the ironing. William ‘helps out’ when he is at home, with vacuuming, ironing or folding clothes. Emily does most of the food shopping, and William shops sometimes after work. Emily and William take care of Toby, and the older kids occasionally mind him for short periods.

The older kids put their dirty clothes in the laundry and get them back clean, folded, and ironed. They tidy and vacuum their own rooms when they feel they need it, and have a roster for cleaning their bathroom, in which each of them cleans one part. They walk and feed the dog each day. After dinner the older kids take their own dishes to the dishwasher and Emily and William clear up the kitchen. Emily and William stack and unstack the dishwasher. The older kids get their own breakfasts and lunches. They are good students, and supervising homework is no problem. Emily and William do
gardening, which is minimal. They share the work of driving kids around, although as William is often at work the bulk of this falls to Emily.

Emily does some things for Alfred that she does not do for his sisters. She changes the sheets on his bed but not on the girls’ beds, and irons his school shirts but does not iron the girls’ school dresses. While everyone else said the kids all vacuum their own rooms, Alfred said Emily will vacuum his bedroom ‘if it’s not too messy’.

William explained that for many years they had a cleaner who came every week, but after he and Emily married ‘we just took over and did it’. Early in their marriage Emily established routines wherein the kids took part in doing laundry and sometimes cooking. As the kids became busier with school and other activities, their participation in these activities lapsed. Until recently there was a roster that covered taking out bins, picking up dog poo in the garden, and setting the table before dinner. Emily found trying to enforce this roster very stressful, and eventually stopped asking.

There were differing accounts of how planning and organising happen. Emily said she does all the menu planning, and she and William said they often discuss and plan things together. Cassie said planning and organising is a ‘family thing’. Alfred said planning and organising is done by Emily, and mostly she is organising herself. Regarding emotion work, Emily and William said they are both very aware of how the kids are feeling, and work together to deal with any problems that arise. Both parents and Cassie said the older kids are very close, and look after each other well. Emily and William both said it is Emily who has initiated the kids’ being involved with domestic work, and that she feels more strongly about this than William does.

There is a clear point of contention about domestic labour. Emily wants the older kids to do more tasks, and to do them in a timely manner without having to be asked by her. For the most part conflict over domestic labour is between Emily and Cassie. William is happy for the kids to have less participation in domestic work than Emily would like, but he has supported Emily’s efforts to get the kids involved, because it is important to her. Alfred and Isadora said they should really return to doing their rostered tasks. Cassie said she is ‘more than happy’ to do these tasks or any others, but she is busy and has other things on her mind, so she often forgets. The atmosphere between Cassie and
Emily is very prickly. In her interview Cassie represented herself and her siblings as being quite self-sufficient in relation to all aspects of domestic work, and minimised the extent of what Emily does for them. In her interview Emily expressed irritation about what she sees as Cassie’s resistance to participating in domestic work.

**How they explained it**

William and the kids said domestic work is not a problem, as everyone is ‘more than happy’ to chip in and do their share. Emily’s account disputed this. All family members said the household is more relaxed now that the kids are no longer expected to do daily chores.

**Emily: It’s more work for me, but I’m happier doing it, I really am**

Emily said she decided to quit work because with all the demands of family: ‘I don’t need to work at this point. It’s the least important thing in my life’. About domestic tasks Emily said, ‘All the cleaning is pretty much done be me’. Although the kids have a bathroom roster she mops the floor and cleans the toilet, and ‘they’ve got no idea I do it. Wouldn’t have a clue’. If the kids don’t put their clothes in the laundry they don’t get washed, because ‘I refuse to go round and baby them in that respect’. Emily puts clean clothes in their rooms and often they ‘just get dumped on the floor’. She stopped ironing the girls’ school dresses for this reason. ‘It used to drive me crazy, so I don’t do it any more’.

Emily said she and William don’t worry too much about the kids’ messy rooms. ‘I figure that’s their room, and if they want it like that, if they’re comfortable like that, that’s up to them’. The kids are supposed to tidy up their own dishes and put things away after meals, but it’s ‘a bit ad hoc’. Often Emily does it herself, because ‘by the time I realise they’re gone it’s sort of petty to bring them back’. Getting the kids to tidy up after their breakfast has been difficult, but they do it quite well now. This has been achieved by perseverance, and ‘the odd spit of the dummy myself’. Emily added, ‘Because I’m the stepmother [it’s] probably a bit different. Sometimes I’ll say, “William look that’s got to come from you”. I feel I do enough grumping’.
Emily described the kids’ roster.

They all used to have chores, but I found, especially when Cassie was on, that I
would just do it anyway. She might do two out of seven nights. She’d be on the
telephone or watching television, she’d never find time to do [it]. I got sick of
asking. The other two would be good, I would ask them and they would do it, but
Cassie would do whatever time suited her. So a couple of months ago I decided
that’s it, I’m not asking any more. I just started doing it myself, but stopped
giving them pocket money. And not one of them asked, what chore am I on now,
not one of them said where’s my pocket money. They just let it float away. And
I have to say, it’s more work for me, but I’m happier doing it. I really am.

Now the roster has been abandoned, Emily feels a sense of relief. ‘I said [to William] I
feel like all I do is nag nag nag. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want them looking back
and thinking all she ever did was nag’. Emily anticipates that things will change when
Cassie finishes school.

Cassie doesn’t know it yet, but when she finishes year twelve her life’s going to
change. I’m going to expect her to chip in more with the family. If they want to
be treated like adults, well they can start living like adults. You know it’s not all
about us doing for them all the time; it’s a two way street.

Emily said the idea that kids should participate in domestic work is important, and not
just in relation to Cassie.

Children, as soon as they’re old enough, should have some [responsibility] even if
it’s just putting out their cereal bowl or something, so that they feel they’re part of
the family. I feel very strongly about that, probably more than William does. He
agrees with me, he just doesn’t tend to follow through unless I nag him to do it.

Emily identified unstacking the dishwasher as a task she dislikes. She said in a way
using a dishwasher is more tedious than washing dishes by hand, because ‘if there’s two
of you and you are chattering at the same time, you’re actually communicating with
your partner’. Using the dishwasher is ‘a more solitary thing’. It bothers Emily that the
kids watch TV after dinner while she and William clear up.

I certainly think the kids should do more, given the amount of television they
watch. If they were in their rooms practising musical instruments or doing their
homework I wouldn’t mind. They spend quite a bit of time watching telly, which I think are dead hours. And I think, it would take them five minutes to unstack the dishwasher.

Sometimes Emily asks the kids to unstack the dishwasher, especially on evenings when William is out and ‘I think nup I’m not doing it all, I’m too tired’. Usually the kids respond well, ‘except Cassie. The other two will jump up and do it’. I asked Emily why the kids avoid doing housework tasks. She replied, ‘It’s probably boredom. They feel [like] pretty menial and boring tasks’. The tasks being boring and menial is an issue for kids but not for mothers. ‘When you’re a mother you’re getting things organised whether you like it or not. Washing clothes is pretty boring and meaningless too, but we like clean clothes so you do it’.

When I asked whether it works well, Emily said, ‘I suppose so. We’re a well-oiled machine, but it requires a lot of effort’. The critical factor is William’s hours of paid work. ‘I do find it hard work, but I mean [his occupation] gives us the lifestyle and everything. That’s what he does, so you work around it’.

When I asked about fairness, Emily answered without hesitation, ‘No I don’t think it’s fair. Nup.’ When she and William first married she had the children do one load of washing each week ‘just so they knew how to do that’, and one night each week one of the kids would cook dinner. The kids had ‘quite enjoyed that’, but as time went on these routines lapsed. ‘They got so involved in so many commitments, then it was just all too much. It was too difficult to slot in’. To persevere ‘would have required more energy and more commitment than I had’.

If things were fair, the kids would return to this kind of participation.

To make it fairer, I think William and I should be able to sit back one or two nights a week and have a meal cooked for us. I think they should contribute more to cleaning, maybe even just unstacking the dishwasher, or stacking it. That shouldn’t always be left to William and me. [Or] bringing the clothes in and sorting them out, that sort of thing.
Emily said she and William do the work of planning and organising ‘very much on the run’, to fit around his unpredictable work commitments. With regard to organising the kids’ participation in domestic work, she explained:

I’m the one who makes suggestions. William nearly always agrees with me. He’s very accommodating and easy going, but [he’s] not so good at the well tomorrow night let’s sit down and discuss it. I’ll be saying okay when are we going to talk to the kids about this. I feel like I’m push push push. I’m probably too pushy, but I feel like if I don’t it doesn’t happen. When he does [talk to the kids] he’s very good at it, very rational, and he makes light work of it. He doesn’t make it into a big drama, doesn’t come down the heavy. He says, ‘Well come on we do lots of things for you guys, we expect this in return’. I don’t find that tends to work, a lot of the time.

The work of planning and organising works as well as it can, given how busy they are. If I wasn’t as organised I don’t think [the children] could do all the things they do. They have a lot of privileges; we are in a position to be able to give them a lot of things, and I don't just mean material things, I mean [music] lessons and that sort of thing. That couldn’t happen if we weren’t prepared to be more organised to allow for that to happen.

Emily said the work of supporting the kids’ commitments is shared fairly between herself and William. ‘William could go off golfing every weekend if he wanted to. But he doesn’t. He takes that sort of responsibility very seriously’. Being so busy is a strain, but it is the price you pay for the kids’ opportunities.

Let’s face it, they go to a private school, and what private schools encourage is to get involved. You want them to experience as much as they can. Sometimes I think it would be great if there was less on, but it really only is for a short time in our lives.

Talking about emotion work, Emily said she and William are ‘very supportive of each other’, and they communicate well. ‘William is very supportive of the children. If there’s any sort of problem he will get himself involved in it, he won’t let that slide’.
Of everything we had discussed so far in the interview, Emily said emotion work is ‘the area I feel least satisfied with’.

Housework and all that stuff, it bothers me, but in the whole scheme of life it isn’t that important. It just makes my life more difficult. But emotional stuff, particularly with what they’ve been through, is [where] you’re building children into people. And you don’t want to make errors, you want to be doing as much right as you can. I wish I could do better, [but] I’m tired, and I find I need emotional support too, as well as being able to give it.

When I asked what she would like to happen differently, Emily replied ‘I’d like see more communication’. What constrains this is busyness.

I’d like to see us sit down at dinner and be able to sit there for an hour and chat. [But] by the time you get dishes done, and deal with [Toby], the conversation is just basic necessities. Conversation isn’t one of those sit down easy flow things like you have with friends where you can just natter about anything. The lifestyle that [we] have chosen does not allow for that to happen.

Next I asked about how she had learned about domestic labour in her family of origin. Emily described growing up on a farm. Her mother had a ‘very busy hard life, she did farm work, she did housework, she did [paid] work as well. She was incredibly organised, very efficient’. The kids all had set chores, from a young age. ‘I was changing my own bed and making it every day from the age of seven. It’s possible, it’s not hard. It’s all very learnable’.

Emily feels it was valuable for her to have learned to do domestic work when she was a child, and she would like the same for her kids.

William said look they’ll learn to do housework when they leave home. But I said I think they should learn when they’re young. I don’t care if they don’t do it, but they need to learn. I feel fairly strongly that it’s important to know the pragmatics of doing things. Because when you go and live with other people, if you are inconsiderate of other people it makes for very difficult living relations. And I think life’s difficult enough.
Thinking about whether there is a mum job and a dad job, Emily said ‘I don’t see it as male female gender. There’s chores that need to be done and we split them’. She added, William is ‘very good, he perceives what I do, he doesn’t think that because I’m home all day I’m doing nothing. He perceives that’s a job too’.

When I asked how she imagines the kids organising domestic work when they are adults, Emily’s response was immediate and heartfelt.

I can’t wait for Cassie to have a daughter like herself. That will give me the greatest amount of satisfaction and pleasure I’ve ever had in my life. Cassie doesn’t think much about [domestic work] but her day will come. She is organised and quite sensible, particularly with her schoolwork, and I know she can transfer those skills to being domestic should she choose to. Whether it will ever be interesting enough for her I don't know. I suspect she [will] employ a housekeeper to clean her house and not have to worry about it herself. I see that it would never be interesting enough for her. She would never get [a] sense of satisfaction from it.

Alfred will be like his dad, and ‘just jump in and do things’, and Isadora is ‘very capable and [will] handle the home situation extremely well’. Emily concluded:

I think all three of them could probably do it, but it will be a bigger wake up call for Cassie than the other two. Of the three she will find it most difficult, but will probably be the one to find the solution quickest too. [One] that doesn’t involve her having to do it.

William: **Since [the roster’s] not been an issue things have been a lot more peaceful**

William started his account of domestic tasks by saying ‘Emily does the bulk of it’. Like Edward Fletcher and Alexander Bennett, William talked in percentages. He said of cooking, that Emily would do ‘90% or 95% of it, I would do the occasional meal’; that ‘Emily does 99% of the washing’; and taking care of Toby at night they share ‘60/40’. William’s account was detailed, and showed considerable awareness of the work Emily does.
About the kids’ rooms William said, ‘We don’t get too fussed about that sort of thing. You can’t beat yourself over the head worrying about dirty rooms, it’s a losing battle. If they want to live in a pigsty they can’. He continued:

We used to have a roster system, covering walking the dog, doing a poo round, bins, setting the table. That’s gone by the wayside. We got sick of prompting them the whole time and reminding them, so we’ve done away with that. That’s reduced the levels of stress because Emily and I no longer have to remind them all the time, and it gets done more efficiently.

William suggested growing up having a cleaner who came every week may have influenced the kids’ expectations, because ‘they [would] go out in the morning and come home and it’s all beautiful and sparkling’. Making the transition was not easy for them. ‘They do their bathroom begrudgingly. It’s not something they enjoy doing, we have to ask them several times to get it done. I think they’d be more than happy to expect someone else to do it’.

William said the kids are rarely asked to help with things like pegging out laundry. ‘If they are moping about doing nothing they get asked to do it, but that would be rare’. Often the kids do not put their clean clothes away, ‘and their floor’s so messy they can’t tell what’s dirty and what’s clean and so it comes back. That’s a pet hate of Emily’s. She stopped ironing some of their clothes [because of it]’.

When I asked William if he had a pet hate among domestic tasks, at first he identified emptying the dishwasher. Then he said:

I guess getting on the kids’ backs all the time’s a pet hate. I don’t enjoy doing that very much. Emily takes on a lot, and I think the attitude of the kids gets her down. It would be great if they volunteered to do more, but you get sick of rabbiting on all the time. [The kids] probably do more than kids of friends of ours do, but I must admit I don’t like to see her stress over the fact that you see the kids lying there watching TV when there’s a dishwasher to be emptied or dirty plates in their rooms and all that sort of stuff. I know that gets up her nose a bit.
William said Emily is very well organised, and ‘from my point of view I think it does work very well’. When I asked about fairness he said, ‘It’s probably not really [fair]’. William was ambivalent about this.

Cassie’s doing year twelve so she’s got a pretty heavy workload, and she works and Isadora works and Alfred is looking around for work. But the kids probably could do more. I think it’s roughly fair, although Emily shoulders more than she really should have to. I would like to see the older kids doing a bit more. That would take some of the pressure of Emily.

William said when Emily had paid work it was difficult to juggle all the family demands, especially as his job has no flexibility, but ‘[Emily] not working solved all those problems’. Planning and organising is something they do together, although ‘I feel as though she doesn’t ask me to do things as often as she perhaps should’. With asking the kids to do things, William said, ‘I probably have more authority in terms of getting them to do stuff’. Between Emily and Cassie there is a ‘personality clash’, so that if there’s anything Emily wants Cassie to do, ‘she’ll tell me to go and tell her. But it’s fine. I’m happy with that’.

William said it is Emily who has been the instigator of rosters for the kids’ participation in domestic work. This happened after the cleaner left:

We thought, ‘Let’s get the kids involved in cleaning their own bathroom because they’re the ones who use it’. And so we instigated this roster where they would share it around. We would have said, ‘Right listen, you kids are going to take care of your bathroom now’. And they said, ‘Oh okay’. I don’t recall there being any objections.

William said the work of organising what needs to happen falls mostly on himself and Emily, but that is okay. ‘It would be nice if they spontaneously got up and emptied the dishwasher and wiped the bench, but that’s probably expecting too much from adolescent kids. But certainly once asked, they’re more than happy to do whatever we ask them’. Overall planning and organizing works well, because ‘Emily has her finger on the pulse and she knows what needs to be done’.
Talking about emotion work, William said he and Emily are aware of the kids’ moods, and the kids are aware of each other, so ‘that works pretty well. That’s not an issue here’. He talked in more detail about the emotional dynamics around housework.

When they had their regular chores we would often talk around dinner time and try and induce them to be a bit more co-operative. That’s been less of an issue now, because our expectation of what we want them to do has lessened to a certain extent. It would get [Emily] more agitated than me because she’s the one working in the kitchen, having to stuff things into overflowing bins, it would get up her nose more than mine. Since that’s not been an issue things have been a lot more peaceful.

William added, ‘Emily’s personality is such that she will fly off the handle a bit more readily than I would. I would often come home and it would be up to me to sort of pacify the situation’. He noted that when they decided to abandon the roster and stop paying the kids pocket money, nothing was said.

It’s interesting, we didn’t sort of sit down and say right we’re going to change things, we just stopped asking them to do things and stopped paying the pocket money. They didn’t say anything and everybody sort of carried on regardless.

No one said, hey what happened to that roster that used to be on the fridge.

Apart from housework issues, emotion work with the kids is not a problem. ‘My philosophy is if they’re fighting I tend to walk away. That’s the way I always used to handle kids, unless they’re about to kill each other. I let them sort it out themselves’. William said Alfred is similar in temperament to himself, ‘pretty easy going and cruising along’, while the girls are ‘a bit more up and down’. Overall, ‘there’s not too much drama’.

Reflecting on his family of origin, William said, ‘My memory of growing up is that mum used to do most of [the domestic work]. We had a very traditional family’. In his marriages domestic work has been more shared than it was in his childhood. When I asked how he sees the mum job and the dad job, William replied that for him and Emily ‘jobs have just evolved over time, basically’. Skill and availability are the key factors, and being a man or a woman ‘doesn’t come into it’.
Some of the jobs Emily does because she’s a better chef than I am, and she’s home more often and she has an idea of what needs to be bought and cooked. Clearing out the gutters, I know where the ladders are kept and I’m the person who gets up there and cleans the gutters out. So there is still a rough demarcation between indoor and outdoor jobs.

Thinking about how the kids might arrange domestic work when they are adults, William said ‘I think they’ll do pretty well. They all know what’s expected [in] running a household. They all know how to clean a bathroom or cook simple meals’. When I asked whether they might adopt the division of roles that their parents had, he replied:

Not necessarily. I think Cassie particularly is fairly forthright, and I don’t think she would necessarily [do that]. I don’t think she’ll put up with doing all the womanly, mother type jobs. Isadora I’m not too sure about. Alfred I think would pull his weight whatever situation he’s in.

**Cassie: I can’t be bothered making a problem of something that I don’t think is a big deal**

Cassie described herself as a very busy person with many commitments, and said, ‘When I am here I’m usually doing homework’. Her first response to my question about housework tasks was, ‘I suppose Emily does most of it because she’s home during the day’. Cassie represented herself and her siblings as looking after their own areas and cleaning up after themselves as a matter of course. She said, ‘Generally we look after ourselves, and Emily does the shared-space work. Most of it goes on while I’m at school so I don’t see a lot of it’. About cooking she said, ‘Dad’s usually at work until five-thirty or six so obviously he can’t cook, doesn’t have time. And for a few days a week a lot of us aren’t home until four-thirty or five. So Emily does most of the cooking’.

When I asked about other cleaning tasks Cassie said:

I suppose Emily does it. Obviously I don’t see them. We used to have a roster, but that sort of went to pieces because either we weren’t home to do it, or we were out and it just didn’t get done and Emily wanted it done right then, and the person wasn’t home and we were all busy, so she just does it as she cooks I think.
Cassie said, ‘I think it works well. If anything needs to be done, if someone asks me, I’m more than happy to do it. I suppose it is fair because we are actually looking after ourselves’. When I asked if there is anything that could be different to make it work better she replied:

It’s not something I really think about, to be honest. It doesn’t bother me that much. I’m more than happy to do more if that’s what’s required but otherwise I don’t have a problem with anything.

Cassie said the work of planning and organising is ‘sort of a family thing. If there’s jobs needing to be done then we’ll all sit down and sort it out, figure out a way to do it and just stick to that’. When I asked what is the process for deciding who will do specific tasks, she said ‘I’m away for most of them, so I don’t really know’. Cassie sounded defensive here. She said doing this sort of planning is not hard work.

Sometimes you forget or you’ve got too many things on so it’s difficult to do it, especially with a lot of commitments. Everyone’s willing to do it, just sometimes you need a reminder. Oh yes it’s Wednesday I forgot, and you’ve got ten thousand other things on your mind.

Regarding emotion work, Cassie said she, Alfred and Isadora are ‘pretty self-regulating. We’re fairly close because our mum died when we were ten. We’re fairly aware of how each other is feeling’. Alfred and Isadora have fights but these ‘fizzle out quickly, never grudges, can’t be bothered’. Cassie said Alfred is ‘really placid’, like his dad. ‘Dad doesn’t seem as affected by stupid little things, emotional things, as much as everybody else’. Cassie said housework is not something that generates much in the way of feelings. ‘I suppose it would get frustrating if jobs aren’t done, but usually there’s a good reason. It’s not that people are refusing to do it, it’s oh I forgot I’m sorry’. She identified nothing that she would like to see different. ‘I don’t get all emotional about stupid little things’.

When I asked how she sees the mum job and the dad job, Cassie asked, ‘Is that a working mum or a non-working mum?’ She continued, ‘I don’t think there is a woman’s job or a man’s job, it’s whoever is home during the day. In a lot of cases it is the mum, because she’s had the baby. So to me there s no mum or dad job, it’s just whoever’s there’.
In her future Cassie sees herself as ‘definitely’ having a career. She said, ‘I work now, and I like the fact that I’m earning my own money. I don’t want to be dependent on anyone else, I want to be dependent on myself’. When I asked how she would arrange domestic work she said:

I haven’t thought about it. I suppose the older generations have more the mentality that the woman cooks and cleans. But these days people my age think that’s fairly equal, so I think that would be assumed. And if some thing really bothers me I’d just do it myself, rather than make an issue of it. I can’t be bothered making a problem of something that I don’t think is a big deal.

Alfred: They just got sick of asking us to do everything. So they gave up.
Alfred said he quit his job as a ‘checkout chick’ because it was ‘really boring and bad’. William or Emily were cross with him for doing this without telling them, so ‘I did vacuuming the last two weeks, that was my punishment’.

Alfred gave a fairly detailed account of what domestic tasks happen, and who does what, beginning with the abandoned roster.

We used to have little tasks. There was picking up the dog poo, setting the dinner table, and bins, like recycling and rubbish. I think they sort of stopped one day because they were sick of asking us to do it. We never sort of did it ourselves, we’d forget, or be watching TV or something. So they gave up.

Alfred said that it all works well, and is ‘pretty fair’. When I asked if there is anything that should be different, he said, ‘We three kids should probably do more. [We could do] our old chores again, because that was a pretty good system that worked’.

About the work of planning and organising, Alfred said it is Emily who has made rosters and who tells the kids when she wants them to do something. This aspect of domestic labour works well, as mostly it involves Emily organising herself. Alfred said emotion work is not a problem. ‘If me and Isadora are fighting over something, then Cassie will come in and give her opinion and usually the person who sees they are in the wrong goes off in a bad mood and slams the door or something’. Alfred said emotion
work works well ‘because if someone’s in a bad mood we just leave them alone, let them sort themselves out. We’re a pretty happy household I think’.

Alfred described the mum and dad jobs as Emily at home looking after Toby, and William working long hours and helping out with Toby when he is at home. In theory, these roles are becoming interchangeable, although ‘usually there’s one working and one is at home’. If both parents are working, the division of labour at home should be ‘probably pretty even’.

Nowadays heaps of women are becoming more educated and more fairer rights and stuff, so if the wife’s got a degree I think she should go out and be the breadwinner and the husband stay at home. I’m not really fussed about that.

Imagining his future, Alfred said, ‘I would want to work, but if I had kids and [my] wife worked, I would help her out as much as I could, and always try to be there’. When the kids are young it would be ‘probably much like it is now, with her caring for the children at home while I’m at work, then I come home and she can put her feet up’.

**Isadora:** *We could go back to how we all had our set chores. It didn’t hurt us.*

Isadora began her account with ‘Emily does all the cooking and the cleaning and the washing of clothes and stuff’. She added, ‘We used to have these set chores but that’s kind of gone now. We did it for a couple of years, but lately it’s just kind of gone because everyone’s not always there, everyone’s really busy’. Isadora was unsure about whether the present arrangements are fair. She said:

Oh not really, kind of, I suppose. Cassie’s really busy with schoolwork and stuff, and then she’s always out. She does what she can when she’s at home I guess, but Emily does the majority of it. It’s kind of not really fair. Because I could like do the cooking and stuff, and I don’t know, I just don’t. All the kids have got homework so I guess it’s fair in that sense. We could go back to the way we used to do it, how we all had our set chores that we got pocket money for. Because it didn’t hurt us.

About the work of planning and organising, Isadora said, ‘Emily and dad tell us what to do. If we need reminding [Emily] will tell us what to do and we will just go and do it’. When I asked about emotion work, Isadora said, ‘It doesn’t happen much that someone
gets upset. Me and Albert might have a bit of a fight but it’s a ten minute thing then it’s over’. Housework is rarely a source of upset, although ‘sometimes Cassie or even me might get a bit angry because we have to do something. But you just do it’.

Isadora had clear ideas about the mum job and the dad job.

I think there is [a mum job and a dad job], but not as much as there used to be 100 years ago or whatever. Because usually the mum does the cooking and cleaning and stuff. This is in my friends’ families and my family, this is just the way I know it. I see a dad role as usually working, and the mum can work or not, both seem normal to me. But I’d have to say that women probably would do more of the housework and stuff. I don’t really see it any other way.

Imagining her future, Isadora said, ‘I see myself having a partner and kids, and working as well. I don’t want to be just a housewife. I don’t want a full-on job, like twenty-four seven, but I do want a job’. Isadora said she would get her kids to do ‘little things’. She would probably do more housework than her partner.

I would expect him to have a job. Every now and then I’d ask him if he could cook, or do some cleaning or whatever. I wouldn’t sort out a roster or anything with him, but I’d make him cook a meal once or twice a week or something.

What ideas did they refer to and what did they all mean?

Emily and William both called on the idea that avoiding stress and keeping the peace in the family is more important than having kids participate in housework. William was unequivocal in holding this view. He knows Emily feels it is important that kids should participate in domestic work, but more than this he hates to see Emily stress about it. William’s account suggests that he sees domestic tasks as menial and unimportant. Such ‘mother type tasks’ are things Cassie would not ‘put up with’ doing when she is an adult.

Emily referred also to ideas that challenged the view that peace is more important than participation. Just as parents do things for kids, so should kids do things for parents. William agreed with this in principle, but in practice he would rather have peace in the family than push it. Emily asserted a view that the relation of entitlement and
obligation that pertains between kids and parents changes when the kids leave school and ‘want to live like adults’. William did not mention this.

A hierarchy in the way work is valued is visible in Emily’s account. At the top is William’s paid work. Although the hours involved are inconvenient for family life, his work ‘gives us the lifestyle’ so they work around it. Next is the kids’ schooling, and the opportunities their schools offer for them to ‘get involved and experience as much as they can’. Then comes domestic work, and last, Emily’s paid work. Domestic work becomes your priority when you are a mother. The kids see domestic labour as boring and menial, but as a mother you do it ‘whether you like it or not’.

The emotional aspects of domestic work occupy an ambiguous place in the hierarchy implied in Emily’s account. Emily said that being able to nurture the children and cultivate communication is more important to her than the kids’ participating in domestic tasks. She also said that what constrains communication in the family is busyness. There are two pairs of contradictions here, and in each pair a different idea wins. Where Emily’s view that the kids should participate in domestic work is in conflict with ideas about the importance of nurturing and supporting relationships, the ideas around nurturing win. Where the contest is between having time for family chat, and the kids taking part in their many activities, the kids’ ‘opportunities’ win. The high value placed on the emotional aspects of domestic labour acts to prevent Emily’s getting her preferred outcome, but it does not prevent the kids getting theirs. Ideas about emotion and nurturing prescribe that mothers are obliged to put the nurturing of others ahead of their own interests, and men and kids are entitled to receive this care.

This suggests the hierarchy by which work is valued is not as simple as it seems. Different aspects of domestic labour are valued in different ways. Domestic tasks are most often seen as menial and boring, and their performance may be invisible. The work of planning and organizing may be invisible too, to children and men. Sometimes this work is named by women and claimed as worthy of respect, as by Theresa Fletcher when she called her work domestic engineering. Emotion work may also be invisible, but some aspects of emotion work become visible easily, and are accorded respect. The

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25 Or by ‘Penny O’Connell’, a woman in the pilot study, who described herself as ‘Director of Household Affairs’ (Carter 2002)
emotion work of nurturing is highly valued when it involves women putting other people’s feelings and interests ahead of their own. Men and kids refer in a matter-of-fact way to the fact that women do this, as something that just is. Women talk about the value of women’s emotion work when they are explaining why they accept a situation that is different from what they would like.

Emily called on the idea that peace is more important than participation to explain why she has chosen to stop trying to get the kids to do more domestic tasks. Early in the interview Emily said she is ‘much happier’ now she has stopped asking the kids to do their regular tasks. Later she said the emotional aspects of domestic labour are more important than how housework tasks happen. The kids’ avoidance of housework tasks ‘isn’t that important’ compared to this: it just makes her life more difficult. Maintaining relationships and avoiding stress for everyone is more important than how she feels about the way domestic tasks happen.

Emily and William both said that the way family work happens has nothing to do with gender. Where Emily was pragmatic and said there is just work and we split it, William said the division of labour is determined by who has the skills and who has the time.

The idea that domestic work is unimportant, and not worth stressing over, appears also in the children’s accounts. It is articulated most clearly by Cassie. Cassie is very busy, and ‘obviously’ does not see much of the domestic work that happens in the family. Similarly she said William is not home before five-thirty so he ‘obviously’ can’t cook dinners. Cassie is ‘more than happy’ to do tasks if asked to, but having so many other things on her mind she sometimes forgets. In describing herself Cassie echoes her account of her father. Like William she is ‘more than happy’ to do whatever is needed rather than make a fuss over a ‘stupid little thing’. On its own, Cassie’s account sounds so very reasonable. Read alongside William’s and Emily’s accounts, Cassie’s reasoning implies that for Emily to make an issue of Cassie’s not doing domestic tasks would be misguided and petty. To fuss over a matter so trivial is not something people like Cassie or her dad would do.

Alfred and Isadora did not draw the inference that because they are busy with other important things they should not be expected to do domestic work. Both said they
should return to doing the tasks on the roster. Alfred and Isadora appear to be more receptive to Emily’s view that domestic work is a ‘two way street’.

Like the adults, Cassie and Alfred both said that who does what domestic work has nothing to do with gender. They explained that equal sharing is assumed, nowadays. Isabel said differently. Based on what she has seen in her family and in the families of her friends, she said domestic work is mostly done by women. Although the idea that domestic labour is ‘not about gender’ is not in accordance with the reality they live with, it is as if children, like their fathers, learn that in some circumstances it is the correct thing to say.

**Ideas and conflict**

Emily said the kids’ participation in domestic tasks was achieved by her perseverance, and that she has had to push William to support her in this. Emily noted that when William does talk to the kids he takes a soft and reasonable approach, a style that does not work when she uses it. When she perseveres, Emily appears to be pestering the kids about things that are really trivial. William is the voice of reason, whose presence promotes calm and restores a proper perspective to family disputes.

When conflict arises around domestic work William is cast as the peacemaker. His approach to resolving conflict is to seek to prevent it. He hates ‘getting on the kids’ backs’ about domestic tasks. Where Emily is upset by the sight of the kids watching TV while the adults clear up their mess, William is upset by the sight of Emily stressing about it. As Cassie said of herself, William would rather just do whatever needs to be done than deal with any fuss. Their accounts suggest that William’s peacemaking message to Cassie would support the view that the whole matter is trivial. Emily’s account suggests that Cassie practices avoidance behaviour mostly when William is not present. Cassie’s resistance is supported by a rationale grounded in William’s view of domestic labour as a trivial matter.

In the face of all this Emily concludes that she does not want to nag all the time, and it is better to just stop pushing because to do otherwise would be petty. Emily comforts herself with the idea that next year things will change, and Cassie will be expected to contribute more around the house. This hope might be well grounded if William’s view
about keeping the peace was based in ideas around the particular demands of schooling: but they are not. Next year also there will be peace to keep, and William is unlikely, I think, to support Emily in putting pressure to bear on Cassie to take on significant responsibility for domestic work when she is living at home as a tertiary student.

Cassie said the roster lapsed because everyone was too busy. Alfred said it lapsed because ‘they got sick of badgering us’. Isadora said busy-ness was the reason, but not a good one. Even with all their busy-ness, the kids are able to maintain a roster for dog-walking, and another for cleaning their bathroom. Timing for these tasks can be more elastic. In contrast, when the tasks on the abandoned roster were not done in a timely way this put immediate pressure on Emily. Tardiness in doing these tasks caused her so much inconvenience that doing the tasks herself became an appealing option in comparison.

The idea that domestic labour is a trivial matter, and peace is more important than participation, is instrumental in defusing conflict in the family. It supports Emily’s retreat from her view that domestic work should be a ‘two-way street’. Coupled with the view that William in particular and we in the family generally are calm people who don’t get fussed over silly little things, these ideas represent the dominant theme of the family story. They gloss over and obscure the opposing views asserted by Emily. In the context of the dominant story, the idea that kids’ participation in domestic work is important is inadmissible, and to be unhappy about what kids do or do not do is unreasonable and petty.

In Cassie’s articulation of the family story, being calm or being angry becomes an emblem for insider / outsider status. We ‘cool people’ are calm. Lesser people and interlopers are angry. Maybe the dynamic around conflict arises from Emily’s status as stepmother. Maybe Cassie would defy Emily wherever the line was drawn.

**Anticipating the future**

Cassie, Alfred and Isadora accept without question the idea that everyone should help out with domestic work, and that how it happens is not something to stress over. When they imagine their future, Alfred and Isadora see no problem: it will be pretty much like it is here, and that will be fine. Their views of their futures are consistent with those
that William and Emily hold for them. Alfred will be happy to ‘help out’, and Isadora will be happy to take responsibility for most of the domestic tasks.

William said Cassie will not accept doing ‘the womanly, mother-type jobs’. Emily suggested that Cassie will find a solution quickly, that involves her not having to do them. Cassie’s account suggests likewise. Cassie said she assumes domestic work would be shared, but she would do whatever is necessary herself rather than make a fuss over something so trivial. Cassie has learned set of strategies that have been effective in supporting her resisting doing domestic work. Her chances of building on this skills base in her future relationships are good.

**Summing up**

The organization of domestic labour in this family is supported by a family story that holds that for people like us, domestic work is not worth getting stressed over. The implication is that for Emily to persist in trying to get the kids to do more would be unreasonable and silly. If she feels stressed about how domestic work happens, it just shows that she is not so cool a person as the others. In her account, Emily explicitly contested the idea that kids should receive service from adults, but her challenge was submerged beneath the dominant view that keeping the peace is more important than encouraging kids’ participation in domestic work. William’s view that domestic work is not worth fussing over sets the tone for Cassie’s resistance to Emily’s attempts to get her to do more tasks. Cassie’s claim to be too busy to do domestic tasks is legitimated with reference to ideas about the value of domestic work compared with other activities. As in William’s and Emily’s accounts, this has nothing to do with gender.

### 6.4 WHY RESIGNED?

The women in these families accept the idea that to persist in trying to get their kids to do household tasks would be petty. They adopt the view that domestic work is a trivial matter that is not worthy of much attention. If possible it should be outsourced, otherwise it should be managed invisibly by themselves. The women are encouraged in accepting these ideas by their families’ enjoying a comfortable style of living based on their husband’s income, and their account of their husbands as being ‘very good about that sort of thing’. The men think they are virtuous because they do more domestic tasks than their dads did. The children reflect their parents’ views about domestic work
as a service that is provided as a matter of course to people who have more valuable things to do with their time.

Families in this chapter represent the ‘model breadwinner’ design for family life: the men work long hours in high status occupations, the women accept responsibility for home and family, there is plenty of money and life is good. The women would like more participation in and respect for their domestic work, but it is not worth upsetting the applecart in order to achieve this. In Fallding’s terms these families represent the model of stable partnership. In Hochschild’s terms they are transitional families. It is fine for a woman to work outside the family, as long as this does not interfere with her domestic obligations. In these families a hierarchy of work is visible, but it is not actively disputed.

The following chapter considers three families in which women attempt to dispute the established hierarchy of work, by asserting an entitlement to put their paid work, rest and leisure ahead of an obligation to provide service to their families.
CHAPTER SEVEN    FAMILY STORIES: SIMMERING

The families in this chapter are similar in some ways to the families discussed in Chapter Six. In each, the woman would like other family members to participate more in domestic labour, and they have tried in various ways to make it happen. Like the women in Chapter Six, these women explained why they see their current arrangements for domestic labour as being really okay, even though they would like them to be different. In other ways the families in this chapter differ from those discussed earlier. The women in this chapter experience the existing arrangements around domestic labour as stressful, and this is a significant cause of unhappiness for them. Listening to these women I had the impression that their anger is barely contained, simmering just below the surface of their day-to-day lives.

As in Chapter Six, accounts from men and children represented domestic labour as less of an issue than it appears to be in women’s accounts, and instances of negotiation or contest were described differently by different family members. In these families, accounts from different family members were so different in their emotional flavour that they barely seemed to be describing the same situations. This chapter illustrates clearly how complementary accounts can provide a different and far richer view of the way domestic labour is performed and understood in families than that provided from a single perspective.

The women in these families are asserting the value of their paid work. In doing this they are disputing established hierarchies in how work is valued, and implied relations of entitlement and obligation. As in Chapters Five and Six, people in this chapter refer to ideas about choice when explaining why domestic labour happens the way it does. Ideas and practices that we saw in families where there is little or no conflict operate here as effective strategies for resisting change.

7.1 THE HERRICK FAMILY

The Herricks and their little dog live in a spacious house with a tidy garden. Miranda heard about the study from a woman I interviewed, and when I called she invited me to visit one afternoon to interview the family.
Miranda is 50 and her husband Julian is 52. They have been married for 28 years, and have four children. Their older daughter Catherine is nineteen and has left home to live near the university where she is studying. The younger children attend non-government schools. Miranda left school after year eleven. She works 30 hours a week over four days, as a personal assistant to the CEO of an expanding company. Julian was retrenched several years ago from his job as Human Resources Manager in a public sector organization. Following an unsuccessful business venture, is now in partnership in a small business, where he works around 60 hours per week. Of the total family income Miranda earns approximately 30% and Julian 70%.

Miranda asked me to interview all three of the children who live at home, so I did. I interviewed Miranda first, then Oliver, Ralph, and Sophie. All interviews took place sitting at a table near the kitchen. Miranda’s interview was mostly private. During the kids’ interviews Miranda was cooking tea, and even with the TV in the background she could overhear some of what was said. I felt the kids were very aware of her presence, and constrained by it.

I came back later that evening to interview Julian. During Julian’s interview the kids were in another part of the house, but Miranda stayed nearby, sitting by the heater and knitting. She interjected at times, commenting on what Julian had said and sometimes contradicting him. Because of this I found it difficult to establish rapport with Julian. I could not draw him out, or get to see things from his point of view, and especially I could not get him to say what he really thought about how things should be. At times he and Miranda quarrelled and there was some smiling through gritted teeth. I found this interview very difficult.

I did not think it was my place to ask Miranda to go away. I was in her house, at her invitation, and she was clearly interested in the topics we were discussing. While I was able to establish a good rapport with Miranda during her interview, her presence made it impossible for me to create rapport with Julian.

**Who does what**

Everyone said Miranda does nearly all the housework, and that she is ‘fastidious’ in doing so. Miranda does all the cooking, and bakes regularly. She clears away after
meals, washes dishes and stacks and unstacks the dishwasher. The kids get their own
breakfasts, and Miranda makes lunches for everyone. Julian does weekly food
shopping and Miranda shops for extra things as needed. Cleaning and laundry is all
done by Miranda. Miranda and Julian share driving. Gardening is shared by Miranda
and Julian. Julian mows the lawn and takes care of the pool, and the boys help
sometimes. Miranda puts out the bins. Julian pays bills and looks after the family
finances. The kids are good students, and their parents help with homework sometimes.

People’s accounts differed in the amount of detail they gave about what gets done and
who does what. In her account Miranda spoke in detail about what she does. In his,
Julian emphasised what he does. Like men in previous chapters he talked in
percentages, saying that Miranda cooks ‘99.9% of the time’, and does ‘95%’ of the
cleaning. The kids’ accounts were sketchy, and they were not aware of some of the
tasks Miranda does. The kids said they make their own beds, take their dishes to the
kitchen after meals, and other work is done by ‘mum I think’. Miranda said she asks the
kids to tidy their rooms, although they rarely do. She has recently started asking the
children to put their own dishes in the dishwasher, and to help sometimes with other
activities.

Everyone identified Miranda as the person who organizes what goes on in the family.
Miranda talked about organising herself, to get everything done in the time available;
others talked about her organising all aspects of the family routine. Family members
talked about emotion work in different ways. Miranda said she tries to set an
expectation that the kids should help with domestic work. Julian said Miranda is more
strict about expectations around the kids’ behaviour than he is.

On the surface, domestic work in this family happens very smoothly: Miranda does it
all, and to a high standard. Any contention around domestic work centres on Miranda’s
wish that other family members should participate more, so she can have time for
recreation and leisure. For the most part, this is a problem for Miranda and not for the
others. The children say they will do tasks if she asks them, but in practice they do very
little. Julian says the household is Miranda’s responsibility. Miranda is endlessly busy,
highly stressed, and increasingly angry.
How they explained it

For the most part family members’ accounts focused on reasons why it is okay that domestic labour happens as it does. Miranda’s account elaborated this in more detail than others’. Her account also set out an opposite view, that the way things happen is not okay, and should change. In Julian’s account and in those of the children, domestic labour is not seen to be a big issue. In Miranda’s account it is.

Miranda: [I’m] like a mouse in a wheel, it doesn’t stop.

Miranda started her account of domestic work by saying ‘predominantly I do everything’. She added, ‘I often think it’s my fault that I’m left to do the majority of the housework because I haven’t really delegated, I just find it easier to do it myself’.

Miranda said Julian is ‘always happy to help when he’s here, but sometimes I’m sure he thinks it’s the fairies [who do housework]; he doesn’t really understand’.

Miranda said lately she has been ‘slowly changing and getting [the kids] to do more’. She attributed this in part to the influence of a friend who expects her teenage children to clear up after themselves. A more urgent motivation comes from her paid work.

I’m becoming more and more tired from my working days. Some evenings I’m so tired I could drop, and I get irritated that they just expect me to do it. Partly that’s my fault because I’ve allowed that to happen, but they all just have to help, because I’m running out of steam.

Miranda said working four days a week requires a tight routine. ‘I have to keep on top of things, or [it’s] an avalanche. I’m always [thinking] I’ll quickly go down to the washing line, I’ll quickly put the dinner in. And that’s every day. Like a mouse in a wheel, it doesn’t stop’.

The present arrangements work well ‘as long as my health holds up’. When I asked if the way it works is fair, Miranda answered indirectly, in two ways. First, she said, ‘Occasionally when I’m tired and everyone’s sitting around watching telly, I’ve just downed tools, [to] try and make a point’. Then she said, ‘But I don’t pay any bills, so sometimes if I get cross I think well Julian does [all that]’. Miranda’s first response suggested a principle that if everyone works, everyone should share cleaning up as well;
her second deflected this by suggesting that because Julian handles the bills maybe that principle should not apply to him.

Miranda went on to talk about the kids. On afternoons when the kids are home from school before she is home from work, Miranda would like them to do tasks like opening the curtains, bringing in the laundry, or unstacking the dishwasher. ‘They say we’d have done it if you’d left a note. So now I’ve got to remember in the morning, write a note’. Otherwise, Miranda explained:

When I come home I don’t know where to start! Do I close the curtain do I feed the dog, do I bring in the washing do I start the dinner, do I do tomorrow’s lunches, do I unstack the dishwasher? [In] that first half-hour I feel overwhelmed. Absolutely overwhelmed. It’s basically left up to me, and I’ve been trying to make them more aware of that.

Miranda said she finds the planning and organising aspects of domestic labour difficult. ‘It takes me all my time just to get to work and keep the house clean and shopping and washing and [all that]’, and this leaves no time for leisure or social activities. Part of being a parent is that ‘a parent has to give 110%’. Miranda finds it hard to set aside enough time for sleep.

I don’t cope with a late night, that just throws me out for the week. Because four days a week I’ve got to be at that desk, with my make-up on, and the washing on the line, by nine. Then when I get home, my day starts again.

Miranda said her family of origin was ‘old fashioned, in terms of mum was in the kitchen, dad went to work; that was all I knew’. When she had children of her own, she explained:

I tended to start off that way, but the big difference was, I had to go to work. And it’s taken me a long time to recognise, I was trying to be superwoman. I couldn’t possibly be there with the home-baking and the smile and listening to their stories, because I had this huge burden of having to work. And when I am here I’m busy, [and] exhausted.

Miranda feels the kids’ attitudes are her fault, as ‘I’ve been a slow learner in that way’. Making change is her responsibility. ‘They’re not interested in what I’ve got to do
before I get to bed of a night. They couldn’t care less, as long as their stomachs are full’. Miranda was ambivalent about whether it is legitimate to even try to get kids to do housework.

It was my choice, to have four children, not theirs, they didn’t ask to be [born], so it really is my responsibility to try and make things as pleasant and as nice and as clean and tasty as I can, because all of that really was my choice. I don’t think you’re doing them a favour by protecting them from chores, but by the same token they’ve got to get their study done, and I am the mother and I did choose to have [them]. It depends. If I’m not too tired I think poor little things, and if I am over-tired they get it in the neck.

Overall, Miranda said, the kids are well looked after emotionally. ‘I’m not sort of gooey with them, I don’t kiss and cuddle, but I nevertheless fret, and want them to be happy’. As they get older, they start to understand that she needs support and help too, ‘but it’s a very slow process’. Miranda said Julian helps by taking the boys out, but this means that the kids have their fun times with Julian while she stays at home cleaning. ‘It’s like sugar daddy and the old witch at home. So now I try and join in with the fun times, and then when we all come home, we all do a job, husband included’.

Miranda said while her family of origin was very traditional, Julian’s was even more so. ‘He came from a farm, and his mother was absolutely home with the apron on, doing the bottling, and the father was out doing the farm work’. Miranda said Julian is ‘a bit more modern in his thinking, he’s not afraid of helping with the household chores’. When I asked whether she thinks there is a mum job and a dad job, Miranda said ‘I just see that as my role. That’s what I do. But I have this added thing, that I also have to go to work’.

Miranda said while hers is not a ‘professional job’ it is highly responsible and demanding. She had realised only recently how skilled her job is, when she trained a new person to fill the position in her absence.

I’ve always had a terrible inferiority complex, because I have never graduated from anything. [Training this person] I was really surprised how clever I was. And I realised my worth a bit more. I thought, I’m not just a nothing. And it
actually flowed back here, where I’ve had more confidence to make the others realise, well look, I have an important job, and I deserve some help.

This experience led to Miranda seeing the relative priority of her domestic and her paid work differently. ‘If the vacuuming isn’t done perfectly or isn’t done at all so be it. But [at work] I have to do the end-of-the-month accounts, I have to do the balance sheets, I have to get the patient records out. So the other job, which is sort of secondary to [the] mum [job], actually is the primary one’. Miranda said this experience is changing her idea of the mum job. ‘I’m trying to point out to the children, if you want a nice house to live in then we’ve all got to help, it’s not just mine. But it’s slow’.

When I asked about the dad job. Miranda said it is ‘not just bringing in the money’. She relies on Julian to intervene in the boys’ physical fights, and manage the family finances. Miranda said her views about financial management are shifting. Recently I’ve thought I should have a bit of input into that too. Because I’ve realised I’m not stupid. For years I thought I was stupid, and I’m not. We nearly went bankrupt because of some decisions Julian had made. I think had I been in on [them] perhaps they might not have turned out [that way]. So I guess in a way we’re starting to encroach on each other’s roles a bit. [It’s] never too late.

Thinking about her kids’ future, Miranda said her children will have opportunities she did not. Miranda said her parents had constantly ‘put me down’, and her early life was ‘incredibly sheltered and closeted’. She continued:

I want my children to have broader [opportunities], but then I’m fiercely jealous that they have. I would kill to have my VCE, and all I ever wanted to do was nursing. But the longer I leave it the older I’m getting, and financially I have to work. So I feel jealous about all that. And yet I certainly don’t want the girls to have the unhappiness that I’ve had.

Miranda reflected that her life is really not so bad. ‘I do resent the children thinking oh mum just loves [housework] that’s all she’s good for. But I’m stuck here and there’s just no point whipping the cat. I can make tiny changes but at the end of the day, I can’t

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26 VCE is the Victorian Certificate of Education.
Miranda framed her experience in terms of progress. She said, ‘You always want more for your children. And I guess I had more than my mother had’.

When I asked how she imagined her kids arranging domestic labour when they are adults, Miranda said she sees Catherine as wanting domestic work shared ‘half and half, definitely’, while Sophie will be ‘more along the lines of me’. About the boys she said ‘I think they’ll do more than my brothers did, because I’m making them do a little bit now, so they’re a bit more aware that there is a kitchen. They will do more, but probably not as much as some’.

After we finished, and I thanked her for the interview, Miranda said, ‘I know it was hopeless’. I assured her it was not.

**Julian:** *Miranda sets very high standards, and to achieve them she does most of it.*

Julian described domestic work as Miranda doing indoor tasks, him doing weekly shopping and outdoor tasks, and the kids helping occasionally. He said, ‘We’re sort of trying to educate them. Their cleaning up is mostly limited to bringing their plates across to the sink’. Of general cleaning he said, ‘I clean up after myself a fair bit, but that’s probably where it stops’. About the kids’ bedrooms, Julian said, ‘We’re slowly getting them to [vacuum them], but sometimes it’s just easier to do it yourself’.

When I asked whether this works well, Julian said:

- It’s probably a bit one-sided but yes it works well. Miranda sets very high standards, and to achieve them she does most of it. That’s probably what it boils down to. I’m sure if things were left in a worse state, somebody else might see that they need doing. Like me.

In response to my question about fairness, Julian said, ‘It’s probably not fair at all, really’. Reflecting on what it would look like if it was fair, he said: ‘Probably Miranda would take more time out from domestic jobs. She doesn’t allow herself time to read newspapers or books or things like that, which many of us do, including me’. I asked whether he and Miranda had different standards in relation to domestic work. Julian said no, it’s a ‘difference in emphasis’, to do with how they set priorities around their
time. He said, ‘Miranda is very single-minded about getting things done, and organised and tidy and prepared and on time, and to a high standard as well’.

Miranda interjected at this point. She said:

Julian’s always played a lot of sport, and while he’s been doing that I’ve been at home working. And it occurred to me one day that he could only do it because I was here doing everything else. That became a real bone of contention, and I just put my foot down. I mean I didn’t ever do anything other than work around here! And he dobbed himself in by saying that his life was to be led outside the house. But he could only do that, come home and be fed and change into a clean shirt, if someone was here doing it all! And that’s why recently I said: ‘No, I’ll come [out] too’. I’m trying to make things a bit more equal.

I tried to be diplomatic here, and give face to Julian. I said, ‘The picture I’m seeing is a division of responsibilities that has worked well, and is now being negotiated around the edges. Is that how you see it?’ Julian said it is. When I asked how he thinks things should be, Julian said ‘I’m pretty happy with the way it is, but that’s perhaps not how it ought to be. It is extremely demanding on Miranda, and you know, I’m prepared to try’. Julian said this is about priorities, as he tries to juggle work and leisure. He said in some ways, they might be better off if he had continued to work with large corporations, but ‘there wouldn’t have been anywhere near the satisfaction or the challenge. I’ve worked for bosses all my life’.

Julian said the work of planning and organising happens ‘pretty much to clockwork. We’re extremely routine’. He tries to help in any way he can, but ‘Miranda often sets the agenda and I’m quite happy with that’.

Considering the work of setting expectations for the kids’ behaviour, Julian said: ‘Often Miranda will take a fairly hard line, and either be the enforcer or ask me to be the enforcer. It’s unrewarding. It really is not that easy to get a good outcome’. Regarding other aspects of emotion work Julian said, ‘Miranda is more sensitive by far than I am’, and it is she who will comfort the kids if they are feeling unhappy or unwell. Miranda interjected again here, saying:
But then sometimes I’ll yell at Julian, you should discipline Oliver, he’s so rude, so sometimes Julian does his block and he’ll smack him. Julian smacked him so hard the other night, then they had a physical [fight and] it was horrible. I thought I was going to be sick. Then of course I’m thinking what if he takes to drugs, don’t smack him again.

Julian said the boys ‘get overtired, and they misbehave for the sake of misbehaving’, but overall there are not ‘too many problems around the place’. When I asked what might be different to make it better, Julian replied ‘on a couple level perhaps we could show each other a bit more affection. That’s probably the major thing’. He added ‘I would like it if Miranda worked less’.

Julian said his attitudes around domestic labour are ‘pretty much a product of the way I was brought up’. He explained:

My father worked hard on the farm from daylight to dark and he enjoyed his sport. My mother was always at home, cooking and cleaning and gardening and so forth, she didn’t have many outside interests. It was a pretty chauvinistic sort of house really.

Miranda jumped in again at this point. She said, ‘That’s why you just toddled off and played cricket and expected me to do everything here, because your mother had. You saw me as an extension of your mother’. From here the discussion escalated uncomfortably.

Julian: No I don’t see you as an extension of my mother.
Miranda: And in addition to that I’ve had to go out to work.
Julian: Yes that’s right, you’ve got to.
Miranda: And it’s taken me all this time, to put two and two together and realise.
Julian: Yeah, probably you’re right, but you’re not an extension of my mother though.
Miranda: But that’s as you saw me. I just had to do everything here and go to work, while you pursued your sporting life apart.
Julian: No, look, you can decide how much work you wish to do, it may impinge on what we as a family are able to do, or make it more
difficult, but you can still decide if you [want to work less], and I’d accept that. Okay?

*Miranda:* So we just cut our lifestyle; I’d love to know what we’d have to give up.

*Julian:* I’m sure we’d find something.

I tried to hose this down by being bland, saying to Julian ‘so the childhood pattern is a strong one’, with which he agreed. Next I asked whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job. Julian said, ‘Yes I do think there is’. Julian regards outdoor work like mowing, or car maintenance, as his responsibility. ‘I’d neither expect her to or want to [do that], and I enjoy those sorts of things, so that’s fine’. On the other hand, ‘I don’t think that I should be a super cook’. I asked about earning, and Julian said ‘I expect to try and earn as much as I can. It hasn’t proved to be really enough for the sort of choices we’ve made’. He added, ‘Miranda would probably be a good business person if she put her mind to it. Probably much better than I would.’

Julian said the roles he and Miranda adopted earlier in their marriage are blurring, and ‘I should try and do more around here, and Miranda should try and show more interest in things outside the house’. Scope to make change is limited, because ‘with the choices we’ve made there isn’t a lot of money to spare’.

Thinking about how his children might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Julian said he thinks Catharine will have a ‘very hard choice’ in balancing family with her chosen career: ‘I don’t know what two doctors would do together. It would be pretty tricky’. Julian hopes Sophie will choose a less demanding career, ‘something she can pick up and put down on occasion’. The boys, he imagines, will pursue careers, and they will have partners who will do the housework.

*Sophie:* I suppose now I think about it, it’s probably a bit unfair.

Sophie started her account of domestic tasks with ‘mum does the majority of it, [because she is] quick and efficient’. There were some tasks Sophie was not sure about. When I asked if Miranda does all the laundry she said ‘yeah I think so’. When I asked who does the bins she said, ‘I don’t even know. Mum I suppose. That’s made me feel really guilty’.
Considering whether the current arrangements work well, Sophie said ‘I suppose now I think about it it’s probably a bit unfair. But it has been working well’. She reflected on this, saying, ‘I think next year I’ll help out more, but it has been really busy at the moment. And the time that I do have, I don’t want to be cleaning something’. Sophie added, ‘I think the boys could probably do a bit more, but they don’t really care about anything. They’re a bit selfish really’. About Julian she said:

I suppose dad could do a bit more. But he is at work all day so he’s pretty tired himself. Mum works too, but it’s a different kind of job, dad’s [is] more physical. But I think maybe dad could do a bit more, and probably I could too. And the boys. We should all, probably.

Sophie said planning and organising is hard work because the boys are very disorganised and ‘mum still has to run it’. She elaborated:

I think she gets very tired of saying, ‘No, come on, stop being silly, go and do your homework’. And it’s boring to listen to, for dad and I. The boys don’t seem to care. It’s hard work. Dad could help, but he’s not that kind of person, he’s more gentle, not as much on your back. I think if dad [did the organising] we would be living in the pigsty, it just wouldn’t get done.

About emotion work Sophie said, ‘if people are stressed I just prefer to go to my room, I don’t like to be around. That’s how I deal with it’. She said family members don’t talk about how they are feeling, and everyone would experience the emotional dynamic in the family differently. ‘Mum’s probably the most stressed. The boys are just silly and dad’s very laid back’. Things would be better if ‘everyone [was] a little more relaxed’.

When I asked whether she thinks there is a mum job and a dad job Sophie said, ‘I don’t think there should be, but there is’. She continued, saying ‘mum’s more cooking and cleaning, and dad’s more physical but slightly different jobs. I think they should be shared more but I don’t think that would happen’. The reason the jobs are not shared is less to do with paid work than skills, for example because ‘dad has no idea how to cook’. I asked whether earning money was part of one job or the other. Sophie replied:
In our family, no. I think dad’s supposed to be earning the majority of the money but it’s really important that mum has her job. I know we couldn’t be at private schools if mum didn’t work, so no, earning the money is equal. Both jobs.

Thinking about how domestic labour would happen when she is an adult, Sophie said, ‘I’d like it to be equal. I’d like us to do things together sometimes, it sounds silly, [but maybe] vacuum the house together and talk, make it more of an enjoyable thing than a chore’. If she had kids, ‘I’d want them to help out more than we [do]’.

Sophie said she would want her kids not to grow up with the expectation that everything will be done for them. Her brothers ‘assume just because they’re guys, oh why can’t Sophie do it, she’s a girl’. I asked whether this was to do with their age, and Sophie said no. ‘I think Elton my boyfriend just assumes that I’ll cook or whatever. I don’t think that’s right’. If Sophie had kids, ‘I’d want to be the best mum I could, but I wouldn’t just want to be their maid. I’d want them to help me too’.

**Oliver: She could make us do it. I don’t know why she doesn’t**

Oliver started his account of domestic tasks with ‘mum will do most of it’. He said he helps his dad with outdoor tasks because Julian is ‘not here that much on weekends’. Oliver explained that Miranda makes their lunches because ‘we’d make too much mess, and mum can do it much quicker than us’. On the days she works late Miranda leaves notes: ‘Can you unstack the dishwasher, can you bring in the washing. So yeah we do that occasionally’.

Oliver said all this works well. When I asked if it’s fair, he said, ‘We should probably do a bit more, the kids that is, we don’t do much’. I asked what this might look like. Oliver replied ‘We would probably have certain jobs. Like I might do the washing, dad might unstack the dishwasher’. If Miranda asked, ‘we’d have to do it, pretty much. She could make us do it. I don’t know why she doesn’t’.

I was piqued by this response, and asked for details. Oliver elaborated:

I should probably clean the pool, or mow the lawns or even both, because I know how to do that, because dad’s taught me and stuff. Ralph could do kind of the easier stuff like bring in the washing or unstack the dishwasher. Mum would
have to do the cooking because no one knows how to cook. And Sophie could probably do some cleaning or vacuuming or ironing or something.

Oliver said it is Miranda who does the work of planning and organising, and this works well because ‘she’s really organised in her life, so she can just do it’. About emotion work Oliver said, ‘Well me and Ralph fight a bit, because we’re like boys and stuff’. ‘Dad is a bit more lenient, he’s a bit calmer than mum’. Problems arise when Miranda asks them to do things and they don’t. I asked how this works out, and Oliver said, ‘She normally kind of threatens us with “won’t go to your next party” or something like that. And you know, we’ll always lose. We can’t win, it’s impossible’. Overall, everyone is happy and well looked after, and ‘if something bad did happen, we’d all be there for everyone’. Oliver described the mum job as ‘cooking and cleaning. And the dad job’s bringing in the money I suppose’.

Imagining his future, if he had a partner, Oliver said at first, ‘We’d kind of do everything equal’. If they had kids, that would change: ‘My wife would do more, because they’re kind of her kids’. I asked Oliver whether he would expect his kids to do work around the house. He replied:

As I am now I wouldn’t expect them to, because I find it pretty annoying [to be asked], and we didn’t ask to be born or anything. But if I’m older I wouldn’t want to do the jobs. I wouldn’t want to clean up after someone, so I probably would want them to do some jobs.

**Ralph: Dad does like taking us out places, and mum does a lot of the hard stuff.**

Ralph started his account of how domestic tasks happen by saying, ‘Mum does it all basically. Occasionally I take the washing off the line’. When I asked for details he said, ‘She’s always cleaning the bathrooms, taking the towels off the floor in the bathroom, doing the washing, ironing, dishwashing, drying, cleaning like all the rooms, stuff like that. Gardening, cooking. She does all of it’.

Ralph said these arrangements work well, and they are fair because ‘dad’s not really here to do much’. He identified nothing that should be different. About the work of planning and organising Ralph said it is Miranda who organises appointments, and Julian who takes him to sport and ‘buys me stuff’. When I asked about emotion work,
Ralph described how Sophie behaves when she is stressed about her schoolwork, and an occasion when his mum and Sophie and Oliver looked after him when he was sick.

When I asked how he sees the mum job and the dad job, Ralph replied:

Mum does most of the weekday stuff, and dad does a lot of Saturday and Sunday stuff. Dad does more of like taking us out places, and mum like does a lot of the hard stuff. But dad still does vacuuming on Saturday morning and shopping and stuff like that.

Ralph found it difficult to imagine how domestic labour would happen when he is an adult. The future is ‘ages away so I don’t really think about it’. If he was married, his wife ‘wouldn’t do all of it but she’d do 60% of it’. If they had children, ‘when they’re like under twelve they wouldn’t do that much, but when they’re teenagers they would do a lot more because they’d be more responsible’.

**What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?**

Julian and Miranda both referred to ideas about choice. These are articulated more fully in Miranda’s account than in Julian’s. For Miranda, the fact that the present situation is a consequence of choices she has made means that any problems that arise in it are her fault, and her responsibility to fix. Miranda also articulates another theme, which asserts that because her paid work is skilled and demanding she should be entitled to rest and leisure just as others are. In Miranda’s account these two themes sit in tension with each other. In Julian’s account the theme about choice is dominant, and he acknowledges Miranda’s argument that things should be different to only a limited extent.

The kids’ accounts assume that the way things are is just how it is: mum is quick and efficient, dad cannot cook, and anyway ‘we didn’t ask to be born’. The kids report that dad is a gentle and relaxed person, while mum is very stressed: these are taken to be entirely personal characteristics, not associated with relative burdens of work.

In this family we see the established hierarchy of work under pressure. While Julian earned good money, the deal was that he earned and Miranda looked after domestic matters. As Julian’s income decreased, Miranda took on longer hours of paid work, and
her earnings are essential in supporting the kids’ attendance at private schools. At the same time, Julian and the kids expect that Miranda will continue to give priority to domestic work. Julian and the kids are entitled to give their leisure priority over domestic work, because their paid work and schooling is understood to be important.

Miranda asserts that because her paid work is demanding and skilled and urgent, she should be able to take leisure after a day’s work just as others can. For this to happen would require some trade-offs around who does domestic tasks. In interviews Julian and the kids give qualified assent to this idea, saying ‘I should try to do more’, and ‘we’d do it if she asked us’, but in practice Miranda has to work hard to engage their assistance. In a pressured situation where if tasks accumulate they become ‘an avalanche’, it is easier and more efficient for Miranda to do it all herself.

Miranda calls on ideas about choice to explain why she accepts this. Because she chose to have kids, and she and Julian chose to send them to private schools, any fallout from this is her problem and it is her responsibility to deal with it. It is for her to teach the kids that co-operation is two-way. She cannot make demands: she must chip away at it, she must be slow and gentle. Asking Julian to do more at home is the limit of Miranda’s ambition. The suggestion that on weekends they could all go out together to sporting events, then come home and do housework together, is daring and extreme.

By asserting that the demands of her paid work necessitate some changes to the way they do domestic labour, Miranda disputes the established hierarchy by which work is valued. Her doing this is a sensitive matter, because the need for her to earn more is the result of Julian having failed in business. Miranda’s account expressed an emerging sense of entitlement, punctuated with and bracketed in put-downs of herself, and submerged, in the end, in the dominant idea that domestic work is her responsibility because having children was her choice.

**Ideas and conflict**

The dominant story in this family has two themes. One is that things are this way because of our choices, we are dealing with it and it is fine. Intertwined with this is a secondary theme that serves to explain Miranda’s distress with this situation. This asserts that Julian is a gentle and laid back person while Miranda is by nature more
stressed. This dominant story effectively submerges Miranda’s claim that the current arrangements are not sustainable and things need to change. Miranda accepts the authority of ideas about choice and personal responsibility as legitimately countering her claims to be entitled to a better deal in the family. There is such a high level of tension in her account, as ‘it’s my fault’, and ‘I’m hopeless’, is pitched against ‘I’ve always put myself down’, and ‘I’ve always thought I’m stupid and now I’m realising I’m not’. Miranda speaks like a woman on the cusp of a feminist epiphany, and she feels like an explosion waiting to happen. If Miranda tries to create change and her family do not co-operate, she must choose either to enter into overt conflict or back off. Adopting the idea that she is hopeless and it is all her fault allows her to accept a situation that she cannot change, without engaging in a game that has very high stakes. The family stays afloat, as long as her health holds up. Miranda’s poor health and high levels of stress manifest as the emotional consequences of this choice27.

**The future**

Sophie said that if she has kids she would want to be a good mum but not be their maid. In her family now she is learning an example of unhappiness and barely suppressed anger around the distribution of domestic labour, and she sees that her boyfriend expects that in any future relationship she would cook and clean, just as her mum does. Oliver sees his future as being pretty much like this: if he had children his wife would do most of the work, because after all ‘they’re her kids’.

**Summing up**

In this family we see the ‘model breadwinner’ arrangement of family life breaking down, and the hierarchy of work implicit in that arrangement disputed. Any difficulties that arise from the current division of domestic labour are still seen to be the woman’s problems only. A ‘family fiction’ that says ‘everything is okay because these are the consequences of our choices and so we deal with them’, is called on to contain Miranda’s anger.

27 The dynamic identified here is similar to that in the ‘Cassady’ family in the pilot study (Carter 2002, 2003).
7.2 THE DRYDEN FAMILY

I was given George Dryden’s number by a man I interviewed. When I called, George was very interested in the topic of the research and invited me to interview his family. We arranged a time for me to visit, one weekday evening.

The Drydens and their dog live in a large well-lived-in house with a small garden. George is 42 and Ellie is 41. Both have tertiary qualifications. They have been married for nineteen years, and have three sons. George is CEO of a substantial charitable organisation, for which he works approximately 55 hours per week. Ellie works in a management position with the same organisation. Ellie’s hours notionally average three school-hour days per week, but at the time of the interviews she had been working six or seven days a week for the past month. Their sons Angus, who is eighteen, and Jasper, who is twelve, are scholarship students at a private boys’ school. Their middle son Hugo, who is sixteen, has an acquired brain injury. He attends a small school nearby.

I visited the family three times. On the first visit I interviewed Jasper and Ellie, on the second I interviewed George, and on the third visit I interviewed Angus and Hugo. All interviews took place in the living room. Angus and Jasper appeared to feel quite comfortable talking to me, and Angus in particular was very forthcoming with his opinions. I felt apprehensive about interviewing Hugo, as George and Ellie had talked at length about the difficulties he has with everyday activities as a result of his injury. As it turned out Hugo’s interview was fine, and he answered my questions with no difficulty. Ellie appeared at first to feel rather rushed in her interview, but she relaxed as we spoke and offered candid and thoughtful reflections in response to my questions. George spoke like someone accustomed to talking in a public way about his personal life.

Who does what

Accounts of who does what were fairly consistent. Ellie cooks most dinners, Angus and Hugo cook occasionally. Everyone gets their own breakfast, and Ellie makes school lunches. Ellie does the food shopping, laundry and ironing. George or the boys help with folding laundry or ironing, if Ellie asks. The boys do regular tasks, following a roster. Hugo sets the table before dinner, clears away after, and sweeps the floor; Angus
washes the dishes and wipes down the benches; and Jasper dries dishes. Like the Bateman family, the Drydens have a dishwasher but do not use it. Weekly tasks rotate among the boys on a monthly basis. One is cleaning the boys’ bathroom (excluding the floor and the toilet), another is vacuuming the shared areas, and the third is sweeping the outdoor paths. Ellie cleans both toilets, and the bathroom she and George share. All mopping is done by Ellie.

The boys are expected to keep their rooms tidy and vacuumed, and complete any allocated chores or homework before watching TV. Angus bathes the dog, and Hugo walks him after school. Ellie and George share the work of driving the kids around, gardening, and paying bills and managing finances. Ellie helps Hugo with his homework, assisted sometimes by Angus and George.

Differences in accounts of who does what appeared mostly in George and the boys being unaware of things Ellie does, and George saying he does things that others did not mention him doing. Ellie, George and the older boys said Ellie cleans the kitchen, while Jasper said because it is wiped every day it does not need cleaning. Ellie said she dusts, George said he and she do it, and the boys did not mention dusting at all. Ellie and the boys said it is she who cleans the toilet in the boys’ bathroom, while George said confidently that the boys do this as part of their roster. Angus said he did not know how their bathroom floor is cleaned, but that it does not need mopping because it doesn’t get dirty. George said he cleans his and Ellie’s bathroom ‘20% of the time’, while Ellie said she always does it. George said it is he who does heavy labour in the garden, and Ellie said they ask Angus to do this as she and George have bad backs. George said mowing, looking after the cars and cleaning them are his jobs. Ellie said George or the boys mow, and Jasper said mowing has not been needed because of the drought. Ellie, Jasper and Hugo said the boys clean the cars.

Everyone identified Ellie as the one who does planning and organising for the family. When George or the boys participate in domestic chores it is at Ellie’s initiative. All family members said the work of looking after people’s feelings is pretty well shared, although different accounts had different emphases. The family puts a high value on communication, and George and Ellie take care to find regular time together, and with
the boys, for talking and mutual support. Disputes are dealt with openly, and family members are clearly affectionate with each other.

In the account of domestic labour given by George and the boys there is no point of contention apparent. The family is very busy and sometimes resources are stretched, but the boys do some domestic work and generally it all goes well. Ellie’s account gives a different picture. Managing the family and the household in addition to the increasing demands of her paid work has left her exhausted. She wishes dearly that George and the boys would notice tasks that need to be done, and do them, rather than leaving them to her or waiting for her to ask for help. George is aware of how Ellie would like things to be different, and acknowledges the justice of her views. The family appears to be balanced in a status quo that rests on Ellie’s continuing to put in many more hours of work than the others.

How they explained it
For the most part, George and the boys explained why the way things work is okay. Ellie talked about why it is not, and how it should be different.

Ellie: The fact that it isn’t fair is probably my fault.
Ellie began her account of domestic tasks by describing the boys’ roster, noting that ‘they can’t sit down and watch TV or play computer games until [those chores are] done’. Ellie said she cleans the toilet in the boys’ bathroom because ‘I don’t know if their standard would be [what] I want for the toilets. It’s a yukky job so I just do it’. On occasion everyone will ‘chip in’ to clean up the house, but any ‘really thorough clean I’ll always do’. Ellie noted that although she does most of the family cooking, ‘When I’m really tired George will take over’.

Ellie talked at length about the work involved in supporting Hugo’s schooling. This involves regular liaison with teachers, and many hours work with him at home. Ellie home-schooled Hugo for several years, because school ‘made him feel like a failure’. Ellie said, ‘Now I guess I feel really burnt out. I’ve reached that place where I don’t have anything more to give’. George and Angus now do some of the evening homework with Hugo, and Ellie maintains contact with his school.
When I asked whether the way domestic tasks happen works well, Ellie said, ‘I don’t really think so, because I get too tired. I think I do too much’. This is partly to do with her work, and partly ‘because of the stress of Hugo’. Ellie said, ‘I’m feeling like I need to pull back from [paid] work to get that balance’. The division of labour is not fair, but this is her fault.

Often I’ll look at things and think this needs doing, and I can do this in this much time, and if the kids were to do it, it would probably take me all this time to teach them. So it’s a really poor decision, but often I say forget it, I’ll just do it. I think I take on too much but I don’t think I delegate enough either. So the fact that it isn’t fair is probably my fault.

Ellie would like to see ‘the other people in the family’ take more initiative in doing domestic tasks. She explained:

For example, often the ironing board is set up and there’s clothes sitting next to it but nobody would ever think, gosh mum’s tired, I could iron those clothes. If I asked them to do it they wouldn’t complain, but they never take the initiative.

Domestic tasks are more shared now the roster is operating. Ellie said, ‘We’d tried lots of things over the years, [but they] just sort of fizzle out because I’m too worn out to enforce anything’. Getting the kids to do chores can be difficult, and ‘when they have this whole “I did the dishes yesterday it’s not my turn” sort of thing, I just feel like saying “Forget it, I’ll do them, just go away”’. The boys are mostly co-operative, although Hugo is the least so, ‘because he lives with a lot of frustration anyway’.

I asked Ellie whether she thinks it is just the boys who should do more, or whether George should also. First she said no, then yes.

Probably just the kids. Because while I work, I also understand that he’s the primary worker and I’m the primary caregiver, and that’s just how it is. But even in that I would like to see a bit more ownership anyway. I am working a lot at the moment and it would be nice to see [George] take the initiative, rather than me asking, hey there’s a pile of ironing there, can you do the ironing?

In response to my questions about emotion work, Ellie said the boys are very aware of how each other is feeling. Angus in particular is very sensitive, and is actively
protective of Hugo, and very supportive of her. Getting the kids involved in domestic tasks has not taken a lot of work. ‘I would initiate things like that, but George would be happy to be supportive and go along with them’. Overall, emotion work works well, ‘except when I’m really stressed out at work’.

Ellie said until the past year or so her duties at work had mostly involved ‘licking stamps’, and she had ‘really wanted to take on something a bit more challenging’. When she explained this to the boys:

They were like rah rah mum that’s fantastic. But when I’ve had busy times I haven’t felt they’ve all thought, ‘We’re going to do [extra] work to help her through it’. I guess I just expected it and was disappointed when it didn’t happen.

Ellie and George go for walks together most evenings after the kids are in bed, and ‘we talk through a lot of stuff, and if I’m exhausted or overloaded it all comes out’. When I asked what she would like to be different in relation to emotion work, Ellie talked about her relationship with George’s parents.

They’ve never accepted me. I just know in their eyes I’m not good enough and I never will be. I guess I find that another emotionally draining thing. I just know I’m never good enough, the house is never clean enough. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but they just won’t ever speak a word to me. They are very helpful, but on the day to day level it’s just awful.

There were tears in Ellie’s voice as she said this. I felt uncomfortable, because this was so personal, and so raw and painful for Ellie. She added ‘George is really supportive of me and I appreciate that’.

Next I asked Ellie about how she learned about domestic labour in her family of origin. She replied:

My dad did a lot of the housework and he was always really angry about it. My mum wasn’t a very good housekeeper at all. The house was always dirty. I was always ashamed, when friends came round and there was stuff everywhere. There was always rotten food in the fridge and yuk. She had had a really hard life. I can see all this stuff now, but when I was growing up I couldn’t see it at all.
Ellie and her brothers were expected to do chores, but ‘the boys did all the outside stuff with dad, and I was inside doing all the ironing and so on. I’d always think it’s not fair’. Ellie feels it’s important that kids know how to do domestic work, otherwise ‘it’s not fair on their future partner’. Besides, ‘I don’t want them running home to me every fortnight with a bag of dirty washing’.

When I asked how she sees the mum job and the dad job, Ellie was thoughtful. She said that after finishing university she married and became pregnant and ‘all of a sudden it was like, [this] doesn’t fit into anything I’ve been brought up to expect, what do we do here?’ Ellie explained:

I felt quite ripped off actually. Not by marriage, but by the false expectations. If I chose to [pursue a career] then I had to make some serious decisions about my kids. Who was actually going to bring them up? I wasn’t the sort of person who had always said I wanted to get married and have babies. But having children I felt that my responsibility was to them.

I asked Ellie whether she sees this caring work as particularly the province of women. She replied ‘I see it as parent work. But the reality is that somebody has to be the primary breadwinner, and usually that will be the man’. A father’s job involves ‘taking the same responsibility and ownership and partnership, and taking time with the kids [so they] feel valued. The mother’s just as responsible for that, but often it’s the dad that can impart that into kids’. Ellie said she ‘wouldn’t have a problem’ with a father’s and mother’s roles being reversed, ‘I just have a problem with kids being in child care from a very young age’.

Thinking about how her boys might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Ellie said, ‘I’d like to think that it was split, and that [they] would have some ownership, some responsibility’. To make this happen:

They’d need to have good communication. And talk about stuff before it happens. Be quick to forgive, but then talk through whatever happened, and what needs to happen to change it. But I think communication is the key.
George: I just think my wife’s a Trojan

When describing domestic tasks, George talked in percentages. He said Ellie cooks ‘90%’ of the meals, and does ‘90%’ of the shopping. Cleaning is ‘certainly directed by Ellie’. George said, ‘Our lifestyle’s pretty busy, so we’re not cleanliness freaks’. When there is work to be done, ‘our kids understand it shouldn’t just fall to mum and dad, and in particular it shouldn’t just fall to mum, we should all help’. When I asked who cleans the bathroom he and Ellie share, George said, ‘If I was a true sensitive new age guy I could tell you that we share it, but probably 80 / 20 Ellie does it’. When he described the boys’ cleaning, George said that part of the rostered bathroom task is cleaning the toilet. Recalling that Ellie had said differently, I queried this. George said, ‘The boys they’d always do their toilet, their shower, the bath if it needs it, and the sink and the mirror etcetera’.

George described strategies he and Ellie use for getting the kids to tidy their rooms. He said, ‘One great way would be to say, “Right it’s ten past seven, Friends is on in twenty minutes, it’s not going on until everyone’s room is right”’. This works, ‘because they know I won’t turn it on’.

When I asked how cleaning the kitchen happens, George first described dishwashing, then said:

But just keeping it tidy, Ellie. Deciding, well for instance, if I think the saucepans should go in the second drawer and Ellie thinks they should stay in the top drawer, they’re staying in the top drawer, because it’s not negotiable. It’s Ellie’s kitchen.

George described a division of responsibilities in which Ellie is responsible for deciding how household work will happen ‘and I go okay darling, that’s fine’. Of laundry he said, ‘It’s one of those things where Ellie would just rather do it, because she can do it simply, and it’s just better that we leave it that way. It’s not an oppression thing’.

George continued:

When my wife goes away I appreciate her so much, and you just go, women are the most amazing creatures on the planet. Because if I’ve got the kids and going to work, by ten thirty at night I’m just a corpse. In terms of hours in the day she works more hours than I do. I’m happy to say that. We’ve never done any
studies on it, I just think my wife’s a Trojan. I know I work hard, but I think Ellie works hard, and she’s very efficient.

George described supporting Hugo with his schoolwork as ‘one of the more stressful aspects of our life I guess. It’s stressful for us, it’s stressful for Hugo’. School is very difficult for Hugo, because ‘he sees himself as a moron. Let’s face it, kids are cruel’. Doing homework with Hugo is the most unpleasant of domestic tasks, ‘because his attitude is so foul’. Ellie does ‘the lion’s share’ of this work.

When I asked about outdoor tasks George exclaimed, ‘Finally something where I have the ascendancy!’ He said lawn mowing is ‘my job, it’s my lawnmower, I love it, it’s fine’. Washing the cars is ‘90% me’, gardening is ‘70% [me], Ellie 30%’. George said the work of making decisions about finances is shared ‘50 / 50’. To do otherwise would be ‘insulting and a betrayal of my wife’.

Reflecting on how domestic tasks happen, George said:

I think too much of it falls to Ellie. I think our kids don’t appreciate how much it takes to run a household. But I also realise that with almost any other children I know we would be far worse off and tearing our hair out. Our kids chip in and help a lot, more than any other kids I know. Does it work well? It could work better and probably should work better, but some of those things are decisions Ellie and I make, or maybe I make, that put us under too much pressure.

When I asked whether the way it works is fair there was a long pause, then George said, ‘No I don’t’. I asked what it would look like if it was fair. George replied, ‘Ellie would do less, and all of the males in the family would do a little bit more. If it was really fair we’d have the money and I’d get a cleaner in. I’d love to do that for her’. George described what fair would look like.

If we were hanging around the TV, and we saw the ironing there, and the ironing board and the iron, we’d turn the iron on and iron half a dozen shirts. If you were out the back [and] you see all the clothes on the line, you’d un-peg the clothes and bring them in. If you were last out for breakfast you’d fill the sink up and in four minutes you could do the whole lot. And it would be done.
This behaviour would arise from a principle of ‘putting others ahead of yourself, realising you’re part of a family, a community, and for that to work we’ve all got to work together’. George explained that these ideas are grounded in their Christian faith. The scriptures would say try to outdo each other in showing brotherly love for each other. So we would encourage that in our kids. We have standards in our family, and they’re measured by what we see in the scriptures, and a number of them are not negotiable at all. How you behave to each other, how you speak in this house. Showing respect for one another, submitting to your father and your mother. While it’s up to us not to be cruel to [the kids], and to respect them, while they live in this house mum and dad are in charge.

George said it is Ellie who establishes and manages the domestic routine, and ‘I’m kind of a useful 2IC28 when it comes to those things’. While Ellie gets the school lunches made quickly in the morning, ‘when Ellie’s away and I make the sandwiches I get up an extra twenty minutes early, and by the time I take the cling-wrap off the thing I’ve got no skin left on my knuckles’.

Responding to the questions about emotion work, George talked about differences between women and men.

Women are more sensitive than guys. Just get a group of women and a group of men and compare, there’s a thousand studies on it. Ellie’s excellent with this, she’s intuitive she’s insightful and she can give good answers, and then she can just hug and hold and all that sort of stuff. I will be much more ‘You’re being a wuss, just get [on with it]’.

George said he and Ellie have tried to ensure that their kids feel they can talk to them about anything. The family regularly takes time out together, away from any distractions, just to talk. Doing this, ‘you [get to] know what triggers their emotional responses, so you can have a chat and just stay connected with them’. The kids are all very aware of how each other is feeling, and if any one had a problem the others would know, because ‘our family is tight’.

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28 ‘2IC’ is an acronym for ‘second in charge’.
Listening to George talk about his sons, I remarked that he appears to be extremely sensitive himself. George replied, ‘I know I am’. He said people tend to see him ‘more as the high flier, the business guy who makes all the hard decisions’, but he feels strongly that ‘if I can’t manage this team, I’m a joke out there. In fact I’m a fraud’.

When I asked George whether there is any way in which emotion work could be better, he talked about Hugo. ‘Sure, we have issues with Hugo, absolutely. Is it his fault? No. So I’m not mad at Hugo. I get mad when he has a filthy attitude, but I also understand where that comes from’.

George identified his experience in his family of origin as having a significant effect on how he thinks about parenting.

I grew up in a great family, a loving family. I have high self-esteem, and I put it down to the way my mum and dad raised me. Ellie would feel like she lives in mum’s shadow. You could never live up to the expectations of my mum. Mum’s entire salary for eleven years went straight to the school fees. My mum could get up at five o’clock in the morning, everyone’s got a great lunch made, mum goes off to work, works as a teacher all day, comes home, does all these things with us, and every night there’s a hot cooked meal, and a hot dessert on the table, the house is always perfect. I just look and I think how did you do it mum, because it was incredible.

George said this pattern was partly ‘a generational thing’, related to the idea that ‘you’re a woman, your place is in the home. That was very strongly felt back then. Things are different now’. In expecting their kids to do housework ‘because of our Christian faith it’s something that we have more strongly than mum and dad. We’re much tougher on our kids than my mum and dad were on us’.

When I asked whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job, George replied, ‘It depends on the couple. If the husband wants to go to work and the wife wants to stay at home, that’s cool’. Theoretically this is OK, but ‘whether or not it’s ideal, I don’t know’. George continued:

I certainly don't subscribe to the fact that males and females are the same, that except for penises and vaginas they are identical, I think that’s just crap. There
are certainly things women do far better than men, and vice versa. Ellie can never
lift as many rocks in a day as I can. And I can’t comfort Jasper the way she can.
When we work together, it’s great. I think that’s the way it was meant to be. In
the practical ways of living, there needs to be division of labour. In our family
[it] probably does fall down along traditional lines, but it’s not for any
misogynous reason. With the role I have it’s more practical for Ellie to cook
meals in the evening rather than for me to walk in at six o’clock and go right, I’ll
just defrost the mince, and in two hours we’ll have tacos.

Thinking about his kids’ futures, George said, ‘I reckon they’ll make great husbands
actually. They’ll respect their wives, they’ll love them, they’ll be fun, they’ll be
caring’. To create a situation where domestic labour is shared in their families:
They’ll have to have a basis to operate from, that says this is the standard we’re
running this house by. Because if you don’t have that, everything’s negotiable.
We teach them what we teach them and then it’s up to them, [but] we’d hope
those values would be based on the scriptures, because, well in my opinion, the
bible is a recipe to run a society correctly. And happily and efficiently.

At the end of the interview I asked George an extra question: whether, in believing that
kids should submit to their parents, he believed also that wives should submit to their
husbands. He said, ‘The answer is yes, with a huge you need to let me finish the
sentence’. George explained:
It says wives submit to your husbands and after that it says, husbands love your
wives as Christ loved the church. How did Christ love the church? He laid his
life down for the church. So who is the weaker vessel? The woman is the weaker
vessel. Women can be more emotional than men. [And] guys are stronger than
women. It’s a complementary relationship. I look out for my wife to protect her.
In terms of darling are you doing okay, this is enough, put it down, I’m getting
pizza for the kids, we’re going out for dinner, you go and get your hair done or
just go to bed, I’ve got the kids. I see that as my role, to protect her in that way.
Does it mean that the woman is inferior? No way. Does Ellie feel inferior to me?
No I don’t believe so. But would she say that I’m the head of the household
ultimately? Yes I would.
Angus: Before, none of us would do anything. This way no one’s got an excuse.

Angus started his account of domestic tasks with the garden, saying, ‘Dad’s pretty into the grass, mum’s into the plants’. He then described boys’ roster.

I guess they’re not as harsh on me, making me clean my room now that I’m eighteen. I generally try to keep it tidy. [It’s tidy] where I can see, like under the bed’s pretty shocking and the wardrobe’s pretty shocking. This is confidential, they’re not going to hear this, are they?

Angus said generally ‘they expect us to clean up our own mess sort of thing’, and otherwise ‘if it’s not done mum’ll do it’. When I asked about mopping the bathroom floor Angus said, ‘Now I think about it I don’t know. I’ve never noticed it’s dirty or anything. I don’t think it gets walked on that much, so it probably doesn’t really get dirty’. About ironing, Angus said, ‘Sometimes if we’re watching TV mum’ll just pull up the ironing board and say well you can iron this, while you’re watching. That happens every now and then, but mainly it’s mum’.

Angus said the way domestic tasks happen works well, and added:

No one enjoys it, but that’s not the point, it’s got to be done. I’m sort of surprised, I thought [the roster] was just doing to be another of mum and dad’s great ideas that last for two weeks, so I’m surprised that it’s worked. Because it does work. Like before, none of us would do anything. [Mum would] just go okay you’re on dishes tonight, you’re on this, and everyone would be oh I did this last night. Whereas this way no one’s got an excuse.

Angus described domestic tasks as distributed fairly, as ‘mum does 70% of the total housework, dad probably does 10% and the remaining 20% is done by us three’. With the roster in place there is not a lot of planning, although Ellie still plans carefully for food shopping. ‘It’s a good system we’ve got, not that I really enjoy it but it works’.

About emotion work Angus said fights between the boys are ‘usually put out by mum and dad if they’re here’, and fights rarely escalate. Regarding housework, he said, ‘there’s clear expectations, but sometimes it requires [mum and dad] to get in and make them do it’. George and Ellie do this by saying, ‘You’re not going out to this party or
playing computer or watching TV or anything until it’s done. So generally there’ll be like half an hour of sulking and [then] it will happen’.

Angus said the work of supporting relationships is done by ‘mum mainly but dad as well’. He added, ‘I’m probably the worst at that, in regards to getting people annoyed, [and] teasing. People get upset about things you don’t realise they’re going to get upset about’. This is ‘something [I’ve] just got to learn’. Angus concluded that overall emotion work works well, and that ‘me setting them up is probably the main thing that should change’.

Next I asked Angus whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job. He replied, ‘I guess it’s pretty different in today’s society where everyone’s supposed to be equal and so on, but [it’s] probably where the father works more than the mother’. In their family, although Ellie works at the same place as George, she does fewer hours than he does ‘so it’s almost like she’s working at home’. Angus said, ‘I guess washing, ironing and general tidiness falls to her. Walking round the house picking up glasses we’ve left there, picking up plates etcetera, putting the videos away. That’s a pretty big job’. The dad job is ‘primarily working [and] outside stuff. Mum does the flowers and so on, and dad’ll be like rocks have to be moved. Labour intensive things’. Angus described earning as part of both jobs. He noted that ‘when we started doing [the roster] was about the time mum started working at the office, so she had less time on her hands, and had to divide up the work a bit’.

Thinking about how domestic labour might happen when he is an adult, Angus said ‘[I’m] not so keen on the kids thing now, but that will probably change because that’s apparently what happens to all teenagers’. If he did have a partner and kids, Angus said ‘I’d like to have a cleaner’. Otherwise:

I’d rather marry someone who’s got skills like that, [who had] learned to be a cleaner. Not share totally equally. I don’t think this would be one of the big issues. It’s not like if I had a choice of two girls I was going out with seriously, oh well she’s the better cleaner. It’s not like that.
**Hugo:** *If the lawn needs mowing mum’s not going to mow the lawn. That’s what dad does.*

Hugo described the tasks on the boys’ roster, noting that on weekends he is often busy, so finds it difficult to find time to do his weekly task. Cleaning the kitchen is something ‘mum generally does’, and the toilet ‘I guess mum would do it a bit’. Hugo said the way domestic tasks happen works well, and is fair ‘I suppose’. Tasks could work better if he was more organised, maybe doing his weekly task during the week instead of on the weekend.

When I asked about the work of planning and organising Hugo said, ‘I don’t know, I guess mum does that’. About emotion work, Hugo said it bothers him that ‘sometimes I might be angry or something, mum just thinks I’m angry because [I have] nothing else to do. Sometimes what annoys me is when my parents take it all personal and stuff, when I’m angry’. Mostly people notice if someone is upset, and everyone does the work of looking after people, he said, ‘Except me’.

I asked Hugo whether he sees there is a mum job and a dad job, and Hugo replied ‘yeah I guess’.

> If the lawn needs mowing mum’s not going to mow the lawn. That’s what dad does. If I’m having my shower and the wall tiles suddenly fall off the wall, mum’s not going to stick them on. I assume she doesn’t know how, or what to do. [The mum job is] gardening, getting the garden set up. Dad’s like, mowing the lawns and trying to fix things.

Hugo said looking after feelings is ‘more mum job’, and earning money does not belong particularly to either.

Thinking about how domestic labour might happen when he is an adult, Hugo said ‘I guess you’d just organise it in a way you thought was fair then ask the kids if they thought it was fair, and sort of compromise’.

**Jasper:** *We don’t clean the house that often; it’s not that dirty.*

Jasper’s account of domestic tasks focused on what the kids do. He started by describing the chores roster, explaining that before school ‘you’ve got to make your
bed, put dirty clothes in the bathroom, brush your teeth, clean your room, that sort of stuff’, and after school ‘there’s do your homework before computer or TV’. When I asked what else gets done he said, ‘Oh, cleaning up the house, [or] garden work, during the holidays’. Jasper minimised, or did not notice, some tasks that Ellie does. He said, ‘Usually we don’t clean the house that often, it’s not that dirty. We just do our weekly jobs’. The kitchen does not need to be cleaned because it is wiped down when the evening dishes are washed. Ellie cleans the toilets ‘once in a while, it’s not done every week, or [anything]’. About laundry he said, ‘mum usually does that, because it’s just chuck stuff in, then put powder on it and push the button’. He and his brothers do tasks readily, when asked. Jasper said the way tasks happen works well, and is fair.

When I asked about planning and organising Jasper explained how the roster came about. ‘Mum just went on the computer one day and she came out and handed us a sheet, and said this is what you’re doing this month’. Jasper said this aspect of domestic labour works well. ‘Everybody’s usually pretty good about doing their jobs, because we know they have to be done’.

Jasper said emotion work in the family is not a problem. Sometimes some teasing happens, but only ‘as a joke, we don’t take it seriously’. If he and his brothers quarrel, ‘we are just told to go to our rooms until we cool down. We just cool down, [then we] come out and say sorry’. Jasper said everyone is aware of how each other is feeling.

Next I asked Jasper whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job. He replied: Yeah probably. The mum job is probably just cooking, making sure the whole house is clean. If it’s dirty we usually need mum telling us to fix it up, or if we haven’t cleaned our rooms properly before we play computers mum tells us. The dad job is probably just, like for gardening if we need to take branches off a tree or something it’s always dad who does it. Jasper identified earning as part of both jobs.

When I asked how he imagines domestic labour happening when he is an adult, Jasper said, ‘The same as this I reckon’. He would make this happen by ‘discipline, I guess’. Jasper explained, ‘If somebody’s arguing about it you just tell them they have to do it, like you said if you don’t do this you don’t get your pocket money, or you can’t go out
to the movies’. Establishing these arrangements in a family would take ‘maybe a little bit of working out, but probably [they’d] mainly just happen’.

What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?
Both George and Ellie referred to ideas about choice. Ellie said she chose to stay home with the kids rather than pursue a career. Their present arrangements are less than ideal as a result of her ‘poor decision’ not to delegate more, and not to take time to teach the boys to do domestic tasks. George said he and Ellie sometimes feel stressed because of ‘decisions we make, or that I make’ about taking on too many commitments.

George talked about his religious beliefs. He referred to ‘the scriptures [that] say we should try to outdo each other in showing brotherly love’, and set out the proper relations of children to parents, and women to men. George described a division of responsibilities where Ellie is granted authority in the home, and he ‘protects’ her. George is aware of how Ellie would like things to be different. He described what ‘fair’ would look like in almost same words that Ellie used in her interview. However, George seems to be happy with the present situation and to feel that it is in accordance with how things should be, in a way that Ellie is not.

While George elaborates a coherent set of ideas about how things should be and why, his account is missing or mistaken in relation to details about who does what, and he glosses over some aspects of domestic labour that are critically important in Ellie’s account. For example George said because they have clear standards about behaviour in the family, ‘there has never really been a problem’ with getting the kids to do ‘the basic housework things’. Ellie said that until she initiated the roster her attempts to get the boys to do things ‘would just fizzle out because I was too worn out to enforce anything’. Where George’s reflection on how hard Ellie works was ‘women are the most amazing creatures on the planet’, and ‘my wife is a Trojan’, Ellie’s was that she is feeling ‘burnt out’. After having asked for more support, ‘I expected it [to be there] and was disappointed when it didn’t happen’. Now she feels ‘too exhausted’ to protest any further.

The kids’ accounts reflected the view articulated by their dad. They seemed to be unaware of Ellie’s concerns, and to be happy with things as they are. They were
unaware of many of the tasks Ellie does. The boys did not mention religious ideas, but their stories assumed the views about women and men and parents and kids that were explicit in George’s account.

**Ideas and conflict**

Now that Ellie wants to take on more responsibility in her paid work, the division of labour that had been established in the family needs to be rearranged. On face value there is support for this (‘rah rah mum that’s fantastic’), but for Ellie to assert that her commitment to paid work should take priority over her obligations in relation to domestic labour does not fit with the views, articulated by George, about the roles and capacities of women and men. In nature as in the scriptures it is true that the primary responsibility of a woman is her home and family. In this view Ellie should be at liberty to pursue outside interests only to the extent that they do not impair her capacity to manage her obligations in the home.

George noted that scriptural statements that assert husbands’ authority over wives are open to cultural interpretation. In this setting they are interpreted as the woman’s having authority in home (for example to decide where the saucepans should go) and receiving some assistance from the children. Any authority or support a woman has is conferred by her husband, at his discretion. It is a function of his benevolence.

The family of origin stories recounted by George and Ellie suggest that their respective histories play a significant part in restricting Ellie’s capacity to seek change. Ellie’s story is ‘my mum was not a good housewife, our house was always filthy and I was ashamed’. George’s is ‘my mum was amazing’, she was up at five each morning, did paid work all day and then came home to make a hot dessert. Ellie is trapped in this. George’s mum was perfect, so she must be perfect also, or she – just like her mother – is not good enough, as she feels his parents have believed all along. Ellie finds George’s parents’ attitude very hurtful, and said he knows this and is ‘supportive’ of her.

The pattern of their stories suggests that George’s support for Ellie would take the form of affirming that she really is the perfect wife, she is a Trojan (just like his mother was), and that women are indeed ‘fantastic’ because they do this huge amount of work that
men just cannot manage. There is no room here for Ellie to be anything less than heroic (unless in a crisis, when George will ‘step in’ and ‘protect’ her by buying pizza), or to persistently seek change. This is the dynamic identified by Hochschild (1989:201), wherein a man’s praising his wife for being so organised is an effective way of keeping her doing it.

Ellie is left with a substantial task of anger management. She manages by backing off from what she wants, saying ‘I’ll have to pull back from work, to find the balance’, and by comparing her situation with that of her parents, not her peers.

In this family, while the kids’ schoolwork is valued highly, the parents articulate a view that children’s obligation to do housework chores comes before their entitlement to leisure. In practice the kids accept this view only when their dad supports it. George provides support more in principle than in practice: while the idea that children should submit to their parents is part of his understanding of Christian families, it is still necessary for Ellie to devise a strategy that will undercut the kids’ evasive tactics, before the boys actually submit to doing tasks without resistance.

**Anticipating the future**

The boys in this family have learned that, while in theory children have an obligation to help their mother with domestic work, in practice the work of maintaining home and family is the primary responsibility of women. It is natural and proper that family life should operate under the authority of the father. When they become fathers they will assume this authority themselves.

**Summing up**

The Dryden family routine rests on Ellie carrying a very high burden of work. The image of the exemplary Christian family operates here as the ‘family myth’, that effectively overshadows Ellie’s story about carrying more work than she can cope with, and wanting change. Sustaining the dominant story calls for significant emotion work on Ellie’s part, in suppressing her anger and unhappiness. George is aware of Ellie’s feelings and wishes. He maintains that his wife, like his mother, is a ‘Trojan’. 
7.3 THE NAPIER FAMILY

Josephine Napier heard about the research from a woman I interviewed, and called to invite me to interview her family.

The Napier family and their pets live in a sprawling house with a large garden. Josephine is 49, Henry is 45. They have been married for eighteen years and lived together for two years before that. Both have postgraduate qualifications. Josephine works 55 hours per week as a call-centre manager. Henry works 45 hours per week as a senior manager in a bank. Of the total family income Josephine earns 40% and Henry 60%. Their sons Simon and Dominic are aged fifteen and fourteen, and attend a private school. Josephine returned to paid work part time when the boys started school, and has increased her work hours steadily since then. She has worked full-time for the past two years.

The first time I visited the family I interviewed Josephine and Henry. On the second visit I interviewed Simon and Dominic. All interviews took place in the kitchen. Josephine started her interview laughing a lot, but by the end of it she was in tears. Henry came into the room at the end of Josephine’s interview, and Josephine immediately started making small talk. Henry did not acknowledge her distress, and quickly established in a jokey sort of way that ‘we won’t talk about how she’s feeling or stuff’. The boys were clear and matter of fact in their responses, and their interviews generated none of the emotional charge that their parents’ interviews had done.

Who does what

A roster applies from Monday to Thursday, in which each family member cooks on one evening and clears up and washes pots on another. Simon and Dominic stack and unstack the dishwasher most days. Josephine plans all and does most of the food-shopping, and cooks and clears away after dinners on weekends. A cleaner, who comes for two hours each week, cleans floors and bathrooms. Josephine said she does other cleaning, such as dusting, scrubbing the kitchen, and cleaning outdoors. The boys did not notice this; they said their bedrooms do not get dusty, and the kitchen ‘just stays clean’. Henry said he tidies, and Josephine sometimes does other cleaning ‘she feels like doing’ on weekends. Simon takes out the bins, Dominic looks after the animals, and the boys occasionally put out and bring in laundry. Josephine does most of the
gardening, including heavy labour, and Henry does some. The kids sometimes mow. The adults do laundry, Josephine more often than Henry. Henry does ironing, a task Josephine ‘loathes’. They share the work of managing finances, and driving the boys around. Josephine is responsible for noticing what needs to be done and making sure it happens. The kids did not notice this activity as work, while Henry did. Josephine does the work of setting expectations for the kids’ contribution to domestic labour, and of supporting relationships in the family.

The point of contention in this family is partly about doing tasks, and more particularly about taking responsibility for making things happen. It is Josephine who wants things to be different: Henry and the boys think things are fine as they are.

Josephine said she does more than her share of domestic tasks, while Henry and the boys said this work is shared fairly. Josephine said she carries total responsibility for seeing what needs to be done and making sure it happens, and would like Henry to share responsibility for this. Henry noted this also, and said to me that it is not fair on Josephine; but he does not acknowledge this to her and will not share this work. The current situation is a state of acute tension between the adults. The boys attributed Josephine’s unhappiness to stress arising from her paid work. Henry refuses to talk about feelings, effectively keeping any discussion of Josephine’s unhappiness off the agenda.

**How they explained it**
All family members’ accounts focused on explaining why the way domestic labour happens is okay. A second thread running through Josephine’s account articulated how unhappy she is with the way things are, and how she deals with her inability to effect change.

**Josephine: I hate nagging. I hate it with a vengeance.**
Josephine started by talking about the roster, noting that while the kids clean up on their rostered evenings, at other times it is left to her. She explained:

I’m the sort of person that doesn’t fuss much. I tend to do. I hate nagging. I hate it with a vengeance. I discuss it and say it would be a good idea, but sometimes it falls on deaf ears. So rather than create a crisis or a drama I go ahead and do it.
Josephine said before she started working full time, ‘I did the lot. I was the person at home, I was the person doing little paid work, so I did that role’. Getting the boys to do things is difficult, but ‘it’s worth persevering’. Josephine identified ‘whether one gets support from the husband’ as the key factor determining the kids’ responses.

I think at this age their role model should be their father. In the early childhood, mum was it, but now the role’s changing. I suppose I’m disappointed that Henry doesn’t [do that]. With all the suggestions I can make, I can’t make him do it. I try [to get the boys to do things] but it’s mum, you know.

Josephine said she and Henry often disagree about domestic tasks. There are things she would like him to do, that he does not, and she does not persist in asking because to do so would be ‘nagging’. Sometimes ‘we have a discussion and he says yeah yeah, that can be done, and eighteen months down the track [it’s still not done]’. She might remind him, but ‘I’m not a nag’.

A bigger problem for Josephine is Henry’s refusal to take responsibility.

One of his common comments is ‘remind me to do this’. So I carry this burden on my shoulders, [that] if I don’t remember, it doesn’t happen. I have mentioned it, and said I find that burden too much to bear, because I’ve got everything else to think about as well, and he just sort of … [laugh].

When I asked if the way domestic tasks happen works well, Josephine said, ‘It works, because I accept to do it. I think it could be done more equitably’. Her taking up full-time work has changed things.

When I was asked to apply for this job, I remember having a sit down discussion with the family and I said I will not be able to do the things that I had done in the past, to the standard you are used to. And they said, ‘Not a problem. Don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it’. In the past two years it’s had a major impact. Things have not been up to standard.

Of the current arrangements Josephine said, ‘The balance is very much out of skew. If one accepted that it should be fair’. She added: ‘I think it’s a very difficult notion, what is fair. And I suspect that fair, in the male mind, is different to what it is in the female
mind’. If it was fair, Josephine said, ‘It might look like me not having to cook on the
Saturday and Sunday nights. Or “Can I do the shopping this week?” Or can someone
else offer to sweep the patio once in three months’. The ‘someone’ here is not named,
but the examples Josephine gave are things she had mentioned earlier in connection
with Henry. She added, ‘What I’m having to come to grips with, [and am] maybe
making excuses for, is the fact that these are male eyes’.

The work of identifying what needs to be done and making it happen, Josephine said, is
‘left to me’. For example, the kids will bring in the washing if she calls from work to
ask them, but otherwise they do not think of it.

We probably haven’t had a proper discussion about [these] things. When we sit
and talk about housekeeping type of things you sort of see the male eyes glaze
over. It’s sort of oh, here she goes again. And I try not to be a nag. I feel entitled
to talk about these things, but they all go augh. There are things I would love to
be able to talk about and say, ‘Hey, can someone share the burden?’

Josephine said if she suggests that something needs cleaning, Henry says, ‘It doesn’t
look dirty to me’. If she asks him to do something, ‘Henry’s comment has typically
been, “Oh I suppose you want me to clean the gutters too?” He sees that as a joke’.
Josephine finds such comments hurtful, and so ‘I don’t ask. I have said, “Look I don’t
like that response”; but it’s been used again and again, so I do it myself. It’s easier’.

While engaging a cleaner was Henry’s idea, Josephine organised it. ‘That’s the typical
thing. I’m the one that makes things happen, whatever it is’. Josephine reflected, ‘It’s
probably me that’s allowed [it to happen]. In the past I have said, “How about someone
else managing that?”’ And typically it’s all too hard [laugh]’. At this stage of the
interview Josephine was still laughing, but her laugh had no humour.

The work of planning and organising does not work well, because she is ‘on the run all
the time, just fitting things in’. When I asked is it fair, Josephine’s response was
ambivalent.

Fairness is difficult. If the family decides they want to do something, and if the
family has agreed that they want me to plan and organise it, then that has to be
fair because that’s what the family has decided. [But] maybe that’s not fair for
me. And that’s my feeling. That it’s not fair. But I’m putting my feelings in front of what someone else has or hasn’t recognised.

Josephine suggested that these difficulties may be her fault. ‘One could say well maybe I could have discussed it. I have in the past broached the subject, but [Henry has] not been very forthcoming’. Henry has deflected her attempts at discussion with ‘humorous’ responses that Josephine finds hurtful, such as ‘asking [me] to put my log of claims on the table. I didn’t find that particularly welcoming. And I said look, if that’s the way it’s seen, sorry [laugh]’. By this time Josephine’s laugh expressed only hurt.

Leaving tasks undone is not an option, in Josephine’s view, because ‘who’s going to try to pedal hard to catch up? The next week starts and the laundry basket’s still full’. Henry irons only on Sunday nights, so ‘if I don’t do the washing and get it dry ... [shrug, laugh]’. Here the laugh stood in for ‘he doesn’t do it’. Josephine added, ‘I don’t let it get me down, I just do it. Rather than let it eat away at me’.

Josephine described a recent time when Henry and the boys were at home on holiday, and she was working. She would come home late, to find nothing had been done. ‘I said I’m the working person, it would be really nice to come home for a meal. Nup. But I just sort of accept it’. Josephine suggested that maybe their not cooking was her fault. ‘I did broach the subject, but it just didn’t happen. Maybe it’s the way I broached the subject. [Maybe] it’s seen as confrontational. I don’t mean it to come across that way’. Josephine was upset at the time, but now ‘in the general scheme of things it’s just a sadness’.

Josephine said the work of looking after people’s feelings is done by her, because ‘being female I can commiserate’. When the boys are upset, ‘my role as I see it is to say “I’m here if you want to talk to me, I care”’. You know, the real female side of, of female if you like’. In contrast, ‘Henry by nature is not a nurturing person. You’re a male, get over it, is probably [what he would say]’. Josephine identified trying to get Henry to talk about domestic labour as a problem, for her. ‘Part of negotiation is [that] you’ve got to accept that the other person may not see that as important. So it’s never progressed beyond that. It wasn’t seen as important, so how can you extend the conversation?’ Although she finds this upsetting, ‘I just deal with it. You listen to
other people and you think okay, it’s probably not as bad as it could be [laugh]. I just get on and do it. It’s probably a female thing again. A survival tactic’.

Josephine described her family of origin as ‘very traditional’, with her parents having clearly delineated roles. Her father was ‘role model’ for the boys, and her mum for the girls. When I asked whether she thinks there is a mum job and a dad job, Josephine said yes: ‘A mum is the nurturer, mum is the organiser’, and a dad is the ‘disciplinarian in the first instance, [and] a friend of the boys’.

Thinking about her kids’ future, Josephine said she hopes they will be able to recognise, and perform, domestic tasks. She sees the boys, ‘sadly’, as likely to assume the same roles as their parents have done.

What I’ve tried to instil in them is sensitivity. I’ve always wanted to get them in touch with their feminine sides, so they can have a bit more sensitivity than their father. I don’t know if I can nurture that now, as teenagers. When you raise boys you’ve got to give them in touch with that side of themselves. I really hope in their early years I have nurtured that side of them.

Josephine said she hopes the boys, unlike their father, will be able to talk when they have problems. Henry’s way is ‘you go into your cave and you deal with it and you come out again. You don’t have to confront it; you don’t have to discuss it’. This is ‘a very male thing to do’. Josephine said, ‘I have met males who have that ability, to talk. It’s okay to be you know, a male, and still have that sensitivity’.

As she said this, the humourless laugh that had punctuated Josephine’s sentences turned to tears. I said, ‘I’m sorry that I’ve touched a sore spot’, and offered to turn off the recorder. Josephine replied, ‘No that’s all right. I’m a very emotional person. It’s fine’.

**Henry:** *We won’t talk about how she’s feeling or stuff*

Henry’s interview took place straight after Josephine’s. I was still trying to deal with the feelings elicited by Josephine’s tears, which Henry must have noticed, but refused to recognise. Henry’s interview began (as all did) with talk about his paid work, and this gave some breathing space before we got onto sensitive topics.
Henry started his account of domestic tasks with ‘I’ve always been independent, I’ve always participated, shared the washing, and I’ve always done the ironing’. Over time, they have gone from ‘Josephine working and doing most of the housework’ before they had children, to her ‘not working and doing everything’ after the kids were born. This has changed now that Josephine has a responsible job and works more hours than he does.

Henry said it was he who started the boys cooking. ‘I thought it would be a good idea if the boys cooked a meal. So I told Simon, “Oh, when you’re twelve everyone cooks a meal once a week”’. He said, “Oh do they? What am I going to cook?” It was as easy as that’. Henry said Josephine taught the boys how to cook, as she is ‘more the mentor’ with the boys, while he is ‘more the task master, if you like’. He would check that tasks were done, rather than ask the boys how they felt about them. ‘I would never say how do you feel about it. No, I’m a man [laugh]’. Henry said since Josephine has had her present job her ‘capacity and interest for doing tasks has dropped markedly. We won’t talk about how she’s feeling or stuff”.

As he described what the boys do, Henry mentioned Dominic creating the roster. He said ‘at first I thought, what’s Dominic doing organising me? But it’s actually worked quite well, we’ve all been pretty comfy. So for four years I’ve been saying what night do I wash up?’

Henry remarked, ‘I like things tidy, so I’ll often tidy up. Whereas I don’t clean, I’m not a good cleaner’. When he does domestic tasks he ‘gets into trouble’. For example ‘I’ll get in trouble for tidying things’, and ‘I sometimes get in trouble if I wash the wrong things, you know like the whites thing, which I’m not very good at’. He continued:

Often women are difficult to please, aren’t they? It must be terrible for cleaners. I think women in the household have an expectation not only of what they’d like done but of how they’d like it done. I think it’s sometimes difficult for women, that the work is not done the way you’d like. Whereas for me, I’m a big one at work as well for not telling people how I want them to do stuff, just to what standard I want it done. You know here’s the tender, I need [whatever], and they’ll come up with a technical solution.
Henry explained, ‘It was my idea to get a cleaner, when Josephine went to work. Recently we’ve toyed with the idea of getting a gardener, but we haven’t moved on it’. Suitability for this work is related to gender. ‘I’d prefer a woman to a man, because men just want to mow stuff and chainsaw it mostly, whereas we’re talking about working with the flowers and the weeding. Without generalising, it’s often not a man’s thing’. He added, ‘I weed. I quite like weeding, it’s more like tidying again’.

Explaining how cooking happens, Henry said:

Josephine is so much better at cooking than me. I quite enjoy cooking, I can actually cook quite well, but I use every pot in the house. It takes me about two hours to do a really simple meal that you’d probably throw together in about twenty minutes while doing the washing and the kids’ homework. Josephine does dinner in twenty minutes and I think how does she do that? The boys hate it when I cook, because there’s the huge cleanup job. So I get a bit frustrated [and] think oh look, other people can do it quickly.

Food shopping is another task that women do differently from men. ‘We men just basically run out of stuff and keep using what’s left’. Henry said that if he shops he gets into trouble. ‘Occasionally I’ll shop by myself, but I always come back with the wrong things. Like I’ll go off with the shopping list and I come back with seven roast chickens’.

Henry said who does what tasks is determined by ‘the things that catch your eye, the things that stretch your boundaries. The triggers for doing stuff are based on I reckon your comfort zone’. Taking food as an example, he said ‘We [men] probably wouldn’t go shopping until we’d run out of stuff to eat. Whereas Josephine’s probably thinking of the week ahead, thinking about green food for us, vegetables and stuff. And for us, if it’s not made of chocolate it’s not worth buying’.

When I asked if there was work involved in helping kids with homework, Henry said Josephine does that. ‘Josephine is ‘the bedrock in the family. Even when she’s busy she’s thinking about you know the schools and the uniforms and the books’. While this is Henry’s preferred arrangement, it could be different. He said:
I could do that. If Josephine died tomorrow I’d just change my priorities a bit. We could manage. It’s just that when there’s someone who’s already thinking about it, we all withdraw a little from our personal responsibility.

Henry said Josephine does most of the work of planning and organising family activities. ‘Because I plan and organise and meet all day [at work], when I come home I don’t even want to answer the phone. [So] a lot of the planning, and I’m sure to her disgruntlement, falls to her’. He said this ‘sometimes could be unfair’, but it works for him.

Every day I’m organising stuff, sanctioning staff, and shutting down [branches]. Obviously running a house is nothing compared to that, but it’s just being emotionally committed to doing it. Josephine is probably in the same position as me. I think she’s got 60 to 80 staff. Josephine could argue that she wouldn’t mind someone else doing the planning. I opt into the work. When Josephine is there and doing it, [I don’t].

Describing the work of managing finances, Henry said, ‘I’m good with finance, like I understand about international trade, but I can’t be bothered, you know, fiddling with it. So Josephine administers that’. He concluded, ‘I only do the tasks I don’t dislike. If I had to do the cleaning that our cleaner does, I would hate that. I don’t really like doing any sort of housekeeping’

When I asked if it all works well, Henry replied, ‘I think there’s tensions. I think the boys sometimes resent having to do as much as they do, and we think they don’t do enough’. There are also tensions between himself and Josephine.

With the demands of her new job, [we] are constantly shuffling and trying to work out the equitable distribution of duties. I find that her ability to do things I’d like, in the old traditional [way], has decreased. I’d like her to cook every night. She’s such a good cook. But she can’t. I don’t expect her to do it, because her job’s so demanding. Maybe I should put on a cook. But those are the things that Josephine and I are working on right now, as each of our jobs changes.

Thinking about fairness, Henry said, ‘Look, what’s fair? If it means we’re all doing a bit, I think in this family we’re all doing a bit’. Overall ‘it’s a pity that Josephine and I
[don’t] have more time to do the jobs. But we choose to be in the positions we’re in. It’s our choice’. If it was better, he said, ‘One of us would work less. Or both of us would work less. And there would be more time’. Henry reflected that maybe the real issue is not about domestic tasks but about paid work. Whatever you choose to do with your time, you lose time for something else: ‘It’s all trades’.

When I asked about planning and organizing Henry said that, with few exceptions, this work is done by Josephine, and ‘I think that can probably be draining’.

I come home and turn off management and don’t want to answer the phone, and I guess if I don’t do it, someone else has to. And Josephine comes home and flips straight into home management. I can do that, but I guess I’m not stepping up to that plate, just at the moment.

Henry said this works well, but unlike the tasks aspect, the arrangement is not fair. ‘Fifty-fifty would be fairer’. If one partner is not working it would be fair that they do all the domestic work. As it is, ‘Josephine has equal responsibility in the tasks, [and as well as that] she’s thinking about all the different layers’. To change this, they would need to ‘do a little list’ and divide up responsibility for different aspects. ‘But then Josephine would need to accept responsibility for letting someone else do it their own way. And not say why did you buy seven roast chickens?’ Ideally, he said, ‘we should share planning and organizing. That would make it better for Josephine and probably less better for me’.

Emotion work is the aspect that ‘probably that gets the least attention’. Henry said he and Josephine give priority to everyday survival, and ‘we probably neglect ourselves and each other to an extent. The kids get more attention than the adults, and this work is mostly done by Josephine. ‘Josephine is the emotional, as well as the planning one. Josephine would be doing the empathy and feeling thing. The monitoring feeds into the planning which feeds into the tasks’. Henry said he could do this, but he would do it differently from Josephine.

If Josephine died of leukaemia for example I’d pick that up. I probably wouldn’t be doing all the empathy things. We kiss and hug and all that stuff, but I’d be more about have you done your homework, have you done the animals. Josephine would be more saying have some of that broccoli, it’s good for you.
And would listen. Men, if you want to generalise, talk about things. I don’t think I’d ever ask the boys, how are you feeling? But then I’d never ask anyone.

Henry said the model for his way of doing emotion work is his family of origin. ‘Dad would never have asked me how I was feeling. Or mum. Ever. But I never would have been hugged or kissed either, [and] the boys get that’. He said emotion work in the family works well for the kids, and less so for the adults. It would be better if he and Josephine had more time for each other, but ‘I don’t think Josephine and I work because we have to, it’s because we enjoy it. We’re choosing to do stuff’.

I asked whether the way things are now is what he would choose, or whether their choices have had unintended consequences. Henry replied, ‘I think what I would choose is if we did a bit more of that self-care, and probably, if I was honest with myself, probably if I shared a bit of the planning. It would probably be fairer. More work for me, but it would be fairer’.

Henry said he did not recall his father ever having done any domestic tasks. His parents had an acrimonious divorce when he was young, after which his mum worked full time. She ‘did all the housework’, but there was ‘not a lot of what you’d call nurturing or anything. Probably we [kids] raised ourselves. There was food on the table at dinner time, and we didn’t get yelled at too much’.

When I asked whether he thinks there is a mum job and dad job, Henry returned to thinking about how things could be better in their family. He reflected:

I don't think I’m gender chauvinist or anything, because I’m quite comfy with people working, but I do miss, on just the pure selfish level, having your lunch made, or coming home to nice meals, not having to say whose turn is it? I miss that. It’s not about gender. If I had a male housemate I’d be quite happy to chip the money in [so] that person didn’t have to work as much. I don’t mind sharing the washing up and stuff, it’s more about the food. It’s not about mum and dad [jobs]. I wouldn’t mind if I was gay and someone looked after it. Or if it was me. To make breakfast for everyone is just one of those nurturing things. That might lead to a stereotype that says mums do the washing and ironing, but in fact I’m
very comfortable with ironing, very comfy with tidying, and very comfy with washing. I think that just having someone in the family that nurtures, is nice.

Henry explained that differences between women and men arise from ‘natural comfort zones’, as well as individual differences.

Despite the gender neutral politically correct things, men and women are focused sometimes to certain things. I think there’s a natural comfort zone. But what’s a mum job and a dad job? I think if you’re both working, it’s probably more about [individual] nature. Remember I’m a tidy person. If I’m always tidying up, is that a mum job? And who irons? Is that a mum job? I think it’s more about comfort zones and areas of discomfort. Josephine and I probably allocate the duties more about our areas of comfort.

Henry suggested that his sons will be ‘an iteration, from my parents to me to them. In relation to housework tasks they will be slightly further along the chain of evolution, than me’. Where ‘my dad didn’t do anything, to my memory’, his kids will have ‘realised that sharing of duties is an expectation’. With regard to planning and organizing, ‘they’ll probably rely on their partners’. For emotion work it’s ‘hard to say’.

**Simon: We have a cleaner, does that. Thursdays.**

Simon started his account of domestic tasks by describing what he and Dominic do. When prompted, he identified additional work related to laundry, and to shopping. Josephine does food shopping ‘because dad’s an impulse buyer’, who buys ‘everything on the list, and some other stuff that he liked’. When I asked what other tasks there are, Simon said ‘I don’t think there’s much else. I might be missing something’. I suggested cleaning, and Simon said, ‘We have a cleaner, does that. Thursdays’. Simon was not sure about what the cleaner actually does, apart from vacuuming. Other cleaning must happen ‘I guess’. The kitchen does not need cleaning because ‘we just keep it clean’. Simon said before they had a cleaner, Josephine did everything, then when she took her current job ‘she didn’t have time for it’. The way tasks happen works well, and is fair. ‘Mum and dad might like us to do a bit more work ironing or stuff like that, but it’s pretty good at the moment’.
When I asked about the work involved in planning and organising, Simon explained how the boys’ participation in domestic tasks had come about.

In the beginning mum and dad just said we need you to do things around the house, because we’ve got stuff to do. We started with the dishwasher thing. Later on mum said I don’t want to cook every night. So Dominic said I’ll make a roster. It happened pretty well, there was no argument or stuff like that. We got the jobs divided up and we did them.

Simon said there is ‘not really’ any other work involved in planning and organising. ‘When something needs to be done, mum or dad will just say can you do this, and we’ll say yeah okay we’ll just watch this show, then do it in the ad breaks’. This works ‘pretty well’. Simon identified no way in which it could be better.

Thinking about emotion work, Simon said establishing expectations for behaviour is ‘where we’ve had a lot of trouble’, especially in negotiating rules for homework, computer use and TV viewing. He added:

There’s no lack of communication. It may just be me, but [people being] upset doesn’t seem to happen too much in my world. Sometimes mum gets home and she’s really tired and she’s just had enough, [and] she goes to bed with a headache sort of thing. Mum and dad have had a couple of fights over the years, [over] washing and things like that. Dominic and I just stay out of the way.

Simon said he and Dominic don’t physically fight, but ‘Dominic gets very angry’ with him. ‘There’s a lot of verbal sparring, [but] not mean things like “You’re an arsehole”’. When I asked whether emotion work works well, Simon said ‘I guess so. I don’t know. People don’t confide in me their feelings and that kind of thing. I can only assume that since we’re not yelling at each other, that we’re pretty OK’.

Thinking about mum job and dad job, Simon reflected:

I used to think when I was younger that there was a definite mum job and dad job. Dad was away a lot, and mum would take care of all the things like feeding us, cook and clean and take care of the laundry. Dad would come home and he’d play with us and take us out to kick the footy. These days there’s no defined lines I don’t think. Mum does all kinds of things that dad used to do, and dad cooks,
dad cleans, dad irons. His job doesn’t require as much of him these days, so he’s at home a lot more. He pitches in and does everything as well.

When he imagined how domestic labour might happen when he is an adult, Simon said, ‘the same way that it happens here, probably. Our system works fairly well. We all pitch in and do stuff, and it seems to work from my point of view’. To make this happen, you would need to ‘just make sure there’s plenty of communication’. If both adults worked, ‘a cleaner would be a good way to go’. Otherwise, ‘I’d be happy to fill in for the partner or whatever’.

Dominic: I don’t know the full extent of it. Mum and dad do.

Dominic identified tasks he and Simon do, followed by ‘dad does the ironing’, ‘everyone has their own night to cook’, and cleaning is ‘mainly done by the cleaner’. Even after I prompted for detail, many tasks done by Josephine did not appear in Dominic’s account. Dominic said on the nights not covered by the roster ‘someone will say “who’s cooking tonight?” and someone else will say “I will”; food shopping is not done regularly; and there is no other cleaning to be done because ‘we usually keep things relatively clean’. The cleaner does all the necessary cleaning ‘I presume. I don’t know the full extent of it. Mum and dad do’. Dominic thinks the cleaner dusts his bedroom ‘but I’m not sure. It never seems to collect much dust’. When I asked about laundry he said ‘we just put dirty clothes in the basket and something happens and it gets from A to B’.

Dominic concluded, ‘I think it works relatively well. There haven’t been many complaints’. When I asked about fairness, Dominic gave more detail.

Mum and dad usually do a bit more than Simon and I. And I think I do slightly less than all of them. And maybe I would be prepared to do a bit more. But otherwise, if they’re fine with that I’m fine with that. [Between mum and dad] I’d say mum usually does more. Because she notices stuff that’s dirty, and the cobwebs that are there, and cleans them up. The rest of us, occasionally we find something, but we don’t pay much attention otherwise.
It might be more fair, Dominic said, ‘if Simon and I helped out in the garden a bit more, or if we occasionally did ironing that might ease up on dad a bit. Otherwise I think it’s pretty good’.

About the work of planning and organising Dominic said, ‘Mum and dad will usually tell us to do something. Simon and I don’t usually notice things need to be done. We’re teenagers, prone to forget’. Sometimes they do things when asked, and sometimes they don’t. ‘There is a little fight here and there, but most of the time we do it’. The person who notices things that need doing is Josephine, and it is she who asks them to do things ‘70% of the time’. Dominic said this aspect of domestic labour works well. ‘We can be difficult sometimes, which is probably annoying to them, but it works pretty well’. It could work better if ‘Simon and I actually notice stuff, and do it, instead of having to be told’. As they get older, this might change. ‘We could become more lazy and do less, or we could pick up more and just do it, without having to be told. I’m not sure if that’s going to happen or not’.

When I asked about emotion work, Dominic replied ‘nothing much really happens’, but ‘usually one of us is ready to comfort someone else if something’s gone wrong’. Dominic said overall emotion work works well, but could be better if Henry and Josephine were less stressed. ‘Because mum and dad work full time they are usually stressed about stuff. More flexible jobs might help them’.

Dominic’s ideas about the mum job and the dad job were concrete. He said, ‘Dad we usually see him ironing. And mum, just shopping mainly, and gardening’. When I asked him to think in more general terms Dominic added, ‘I usually see dad just mowing and stuff, you know manual labour. But mum mainly housework. Just dusting, cleaning or something’.

Thinking about how domestic labour might happen when he is an adult, Dominic said there would be ‘set jobs. Having your own jobs to do, and doing them. And occasionally helping’. To make this happen, he would ‘just sit down and talk to them, make sure they know’. It is important to ‘make sure people do tasks they enjoy, because if you don’t like doing something there’s not much chance of it getting done’.
What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?

Henry and Josephine referred to ideas about choice, and personal responsibility. Henry said, ‘We choose to [work] in the positions we’re in’, and the trade-off from that is time pressure at home. Josephine said, ‘It works, because I accept to do it’, ‘It’s me that’s allowed it to happen’, and ‘I don’t let it get me down, I just do it’. Both said ‘fair’ is a tricky concept. For Josephine, something is fair if it is ‘what the family has decided’, and for her to put her own feelings ahead of what ‘someone else has or hasn’t recognised’ is not legitimate.

Ideas about gender were prominent in the accounts of both adults. Josephine referred repeatedly to these ideas, saying ‘the male mind’ sees fairness differently from ‘the female mind’, ‘male eyes’ see domestic work in a particular manner, and the ‘survival tactic’ of ‘just get on and do it because it has to be done’ is a ‘female thing’. The ability to empathise and listen is ‘female’, and not talking about feelings is ‘a male thing’. Sensitivity is something that may be ‘instilled in’ boys by a woman, and its absence in men is, by inference, a woman’s fault.

Henry said he does not talk about feelings because ‘I’m a man’. Women are difficult to please and are overly directive about housework. Men shop according to impulse while women consider nutrition and plan ahead. Men think about *things*, and women, by implication, think about feelings. Men can do family management and nurturing tasks if they have to, but women and men have naturally different ‘comfort zones’.

In explaining their arrangements for domestic labour Henry at once asserted and disavowed the influence of natural differences between women and men. He identified the value to a family of having someone to do the ‘nurturing’ work, which to Henry appeared to mean mostly the provision of food. Henry said men can do this, it is just that Josephine is such a good cook and he misses it. If he was gay his partner could do this nurturing work, or he could. Henry said ‘if Josephine died tomorrow’ or if she ‘died of leukaemia’, he could nurture the boys, but he would do this differently from Josephine, in a manly way.

Henry and Josephine both said they differ from each other in how they regard domestic work, in particular in noticing whether something needs to be done. In Josephine’s
account these differences are clearly attributed to gender. Henry’s account attributed this variously to gender and to individual differences. Both types of difference are to do with ‘nature’, and by inference are not amenable to change.

Simon and Dominic told a story of their family as one where domestic work is shared and everything is fine. Any work not done by them is done by ‘mum and dad’. Simon and Dominic took as given that this work is shared fairly between the adults. Intangible aspects of domestic labour were invisible in their accounts.

**Ideas and conflict**

Henry has accommodated Josephine’s request for more participation in domestic work to some extent, but he does so in a manner that enacts considerable resistance. Henry does domestic tasks in a chaotic manner that takes no responsibility for quality or consequences. He does ironing at a time of his choosing, and if clothes are not washed and ready in time, someone else must iron them. Although laundry is something Henry has ‘always done’, he still cannot do ‘the whites thing’. Henry cooks ‘quite well’ but he takes hours and makes a huge mess, which someone else has to clear up. Henry’s incompetence at domestic tasks (with the exception of ironing) is represented in a humorous manner. Henry’s attempts at food-shopping are characterised as humorously incompetent, even though as well as making impulse purchases he actually buys all the items on the list. There is no suggestion in anyone’s account that Henry should learn to perform any of these tasks more skilfully. Henry also employs strategies of outright refusal. He refuses to share responsibility for the work of planning and organizing, and although he told me this is unfair to Josephine, he has not said this to her. Henry refuses to talk to Josephine about domestic work in particular, or about her feelings in general. All the things Henry does in resisting Josephine’s attempts to make change are legitimated in his account, and in hers, by ideas about gender.

There is very little room here for Josephine to move. If she asks Henry to do something he does not want to, he evades or is sarcastic, or does it badly and she has to deal with the fallout. If she tries to encourage him to learn to do things better, he says she is being over-directive and ‘difficult to please’. If she perseveres in asking she sees ‘the male eyes glaze over’. To further persist is to be confrontational, or ‘naggy’.
The strategy that makes this work for Henry is refusing to talk. This is supported by a jokey assertion about what it is to be a man, backed up by his practice of sarcasm and avoidance when Josephine tries to make herself heard. What prevents Josephine from exposing the flaws in Henry’s version of events is her accepting certain ideas about women and men. Josephine is constrained by ideas about what it is to be a good woman. Women are emotional and easily upset, but a good woman does not nag and does not make a fuss. She just gets on with it.

Henry asserts, and Josephine accepts, that Henry’s maleness legitimates his strategies as acceptable behaviour. Josephine’s distress about the domestic situation signifies only that she is female, not that anything is wrong. She is just ‘a very emotional person’. As a male, Henry is entitled to regard her distress as unimportant, and need not talk about it or change his behaviour. Josephine is not entitled to assert her views, or her feelings, as important.

The family maintains an uneasy status quo in which the division of domestic labour is seen as egalitarian, and any discontent around this is Josephine’s personal problem. This can be sustained as long as everyone buys into the dominant story, and all parties perform the emotion work involved in its maintenance. For Josephine this means explaining away her anger; and for Henry and the boys it means disregarding Josephine’s unhappiness, and maintaining Josephine’s feelings as inadmissible for discussion.

We could read Josephine’s comments about gender in two ways. We could say that acceptance of these ideas prevents her from persisting with behaviour that will challenge Henry and seek further change. Or we could say that Josephine calls on ideas about gender in order to explain why she chooses to accept a situation she finds hurtful. Maybe the latter interpretation is more acute. Trying to make change is a game with high stakes, and Josephine has decided it is not worth the cost. Telling her story to me, she can say, ‘He behaves like this because he does not want to change’ and ‘I am being exploited’; or she can say, ‘He behaves like this because he is a man’, and ‘I am behaving like a good woman’. Josephine calls on ideas about the essential natures of women and men in order to create a ‘morally adequate’ account of her family life.
Espousing these ideas is a strategy that enables Josephine to persevere with an agenda of making the relationship, and the family, work. These ideas make it acceptable for her to pursue what she sees as the ‘female survival tactic’ of ‘I don’t let it eat away at me’ and ‘I just get on with it’.

Conflict between Henry and Josephine over domestic work appears only in passing in the boys’ accounts. The boys see their father ironing and cooking, and everyone participates in the cooking roster. The invisibility in the boys’ accounts of the non-material aspects of domestic work, and their view of feelings as something not to be talked about, maintains the dominant story that says everything is fine and any problems are Josephine’s alone.

The future
Simon and Dominic have learned that sharing of domestic tasks, or at least the ones that they notice, is a good thing. They have learned also that responsibility for managing the family rests with the mother and is not something to be negotiated, and that refusal to notice someone’s distress is normal. Whether Dominic and Simon as adults will practice the ‘sensitivity’ that their father lacks, remains to be seen.

Summing up
Josephine is attempting to dispute an established hierarchy in which her obligations in relation to domestic labour come before her paid work. Unlike other women in this chapter, Josephine works longer hours than her husband, in a job whose status is equal to his own. Josephine has leverage the other women lack. Henry Napier does more domestic tasks than the other men in this chapter, and a cleaner comes each week. A time-diary study would show this as an ‘egalitarian’ family, in which tasks are well shared.

We could read the Napier family story as a cautionary tale that shows that some sharing of tasks, even accompanied by having a cleaner, is not the same as equity. Even with these advantages Josephine feels she is left with more than her share of domestic tasks, and more importantly she is left with responsibility for intangible aspects of domestic labour. It is the burden of carrying total responsibility for organising, remembering, reminding and making sure things happen, that Josephine finds intolerable. Of the
women in the families we have considered so far, Josephine has been the most successful in her attempts at getting other family members to do domestic tasks. A corollary of her success is that we can see in her partner’s behaviour, strategies of resistance most fully developed and clearly enacted.

7.4 WHY SIMMERING?
Unlike the women in previous chapters, women in these families seek to put their entitlement to engage in paid work and other activities ahead of their obligation to perform domestic tasks. The hierarchy of work we saw in previous chapters is explicit here because it is disputed by the women. Relations of entitlement and obligation become visible as the women do not want to provide the same level of service to their families that they did in the past, and they want their partners and kids to share responsibility for domestic work.

In these families the surface stories about domestic labour are similar to those we saw in previous chapters. These ‘cover stories’ explain domestic arrangements as reflecting the adults’ choices, informed by differences in skills and preferences between individuals and between women and men. For women in this chapter, maintaining the cover story involves a great deal of emotion work.

In Fallding’s terms these families represent unstable partnership. In Hochschild’s terms they are transitional families. The families in this chapter are like those in Hochschild’s study, in which both partners work full time, and like the families considered by Gershuny et al. (2005), of men whose wives had recently returned to full-time paid work. These families have achieved some sharing of domestic tasks. Their stories show what incremental change toward egalitarian practice feels like to the people who do it.
CHAPTER EIGHT FAMILY STORIES: OVERT CONFLICT

In some ways this chapter is a mirror-image of Chapter Five. It discusses two families that are unusual, and are also very different from each other. The families have in common that each lives in a state of overt conflict about domestic labour. Unlike the families discussed so far, in the families in this chapter men as well as women want domestic labour to happen differently from the way it does now. Some of the kids want things to be different also. In this chapter we see explicitly contrasting accounts from different family members, as women and men articulate divergent views about how domestic labour should happen. Children identify and comment on the different views held by their parents, while explaining their own perspectives.

The stories presented in previous chapters have shown how arrangements for domestic labour can be seen to embody relations of entitlement and obligation that apply between parents and children, and women and men. In each family in this chapter one axis of that pattern is explicitly disputed. In one, the mother does not accept that, as a woman, she has an obligation to be responsible for domestic work. In the other, the parents do not accept the idea that children have an entitlement to receive service from their parents. The families in this chapter are unusual because their domestic practice disputes relations of entitlement and obligation that are widely observed. The second family appears the more extreme, because the expectation that parents have an obligation to provide service to kids, and kids have an entitlement to receive it, is so rarely questioned.

8.1 THE MIDDLETON FAMILY

I was given Clara’s number by a mutual friend, and when I called, Clara invited me to visit. The Middletons live with their growly old dog in a rambling house in a street of beautiful houses. Their house is eccentric in this setting, being tatty and in need of paint, and the garden a chaos of works in progress. Clara’s family has lived in this house for four generations. Clara’s mother was born here, as was Clara, and her children. The house has been added to with each generation, and each room was a treasure of history, its scars and pictures and artefacts telling generations of family story.

29 I discussed this family in a refereed paper I presented at a TASA conference in 2005 (Carter 2005).
The most striking thing in this house was the amount of junk. In every room there were piles and piles of stuff, with pathways snaking around them. I saw no clear flat surface anywhere. We did interviews in a small living room, once the centre of the house and now a kind of pathway between different sections. On the walls were portraits, photos, and exotic fabrics. Two beautiful old cabinets contained crystal and china. Piles of stuff were arranged on the floor, on chairs and on a carved chaise-lounge, and all over and under a round table. There were boxes, papers, sound recording equipment, a leadlight window, a computer and lots of unidentified things. Leaning against the table was a car door. For me this was a most exciting environment. That evening I interviewed Clara, her children Hamish and Tilly, and her husband Gavin, one after the other.

Clara and Gavin are both aged 50 and have been married for seventeen years. Both have post-graduate qualifications. Their children Hamish and Tilly are sixteen and fourteen. When the kids were small Clara stopped working, as a music teacher. She took up part-time paid and voluntary work as the children got older. Clara is now a full-time student, and continues to teach music part-time. Gavin is an environmental consultant. Several years ago he left his job with a large corporation and established his own business. Gavin works irregular hours, averaging 60 hours per week. Of the family’s total income Gavin earns 95%. The children attend non-government schools, and both do casual work on weekends and in school holidays.

Clara is an engaging storyteller. She created a colourful story about the history and culture of her family of origin, and sitting in the room full of junk and dusty treasures I was susceptible to its glamour. Gavin is analytical and precise in his speech, and his story, like Clara’s, captured my imagination and engaged my sympathy. Hamish was forthright about what he sees to be the shortcomings of their present arrangements. Tilly talked easily, but compared with the others she had less to say.

**Who does what**

Family members told a fairly consistent story about who does what domestic tasks. Clara cooks dinners most evenings, and when she is not at home, Gavin or occasionally Hamish cooks. Breakfast and lunch are get-your-own. Gavin stacks the dishwasher
most evenings, and Clara washes pots and odd dishes in the sink when they pile up; not every day. Clara does most of the food shopping. Clara and Gavin do laundry and ironing, and Clara feeds the dog. Gavin vacuums his office and the room next to it, and other cleaning is done by Clara. Clara cleans bathrooms, toilets and kitchen, vacuums, and mops floors. No one mentioned the kids doing any cleaning, apart from Tilly cleaning her bathroom sometimes. Everyone said routine housework is done to a fairly minimal level, and that cleaning and other ‘projects’ are often started and left unfinished. Driving is shared between Clara and Gavin. Hamish mows, and Clara gardens.

Clara described housework tasks in more detail than the others. She said meals are usually eaten on laps as there is no room on the table, and after meals everyone goes to their own part of the house and no one clears away. Clearing space in the kitchen happens before cooking, so there is space to cook. Clara said her and Gavin’s bedroom ‘hardly gets touched because there’s so much stuff stacked in there’. Tilly’s room is ‘chaotic’. Clara said Hamish’s room full of piles of stuff too, but unlike Tilly, he knows what is in them.

Everyone said Clara tries to get the kids involved in a cleaning routine, without success. Gavin said planning and organizing is hard to discuss, because ‘it doesn’t really happen very much’. Gavin described his input to planning and organising as being mostly about getting the kids, especially Tilly, to do ‘basic things like homework and sleep’.

In their accounts of emotion work, family members emphasised different aspects of how things happen. Clara and Gavin identified dealing with the children as a significant workload, which they share. Clara noted that the kids’ roles in the family are quite polarised, in relation to their emotional behaviour: where Tilly is high need, Hamish is self-sufficient. Hamish said Gavin does lots of emotion work in the family, especially with Tilly. Tilly said Clara is the one to turn to as a shoulder to cry on, ‘unless you are having a fight with her’, and Gavin is the one who helps with working out problems.

There are two areas of contention around domestic labour. The first concerns housework tasks, and the second concerns planning and organising, and emotion work.
All family members resist doing domestic tasks. Clara refuses to accept that she should be responsible for the house being clean and tidy. Clara does the bare minimum of cleaning required to keep the house functioning, and she resents the others assuming she will do this. Gavin does some cleaning and laundry regularly, and Hamish and Tilly do a minimal amount. The outcome is that routine domestic work still happens: cooking and cleaning need to be done, and Clara does them, but her work maintains the house in a state of precarious hygiene and acute messiness. Everyone ‘works around’ the piles of stuff.

Clara tries to get Gavin and the kids to do domestic tasks, by telling them to. They resist by not noticing things that need to be done, having other priorities, starting tasks but not finishing them, and living with chaos as a normal thing. Gavin and the children try to get Clara to do more, by leaving things undone and persisting with an expectation that domestic tasks should be her responsibility. Clara resists by doing the bare minimum, asserting other priorities, asserting incompetence, and starting tasks and not finishing them.

In this family everyone has something to do that is a higher priority than housework. Gavin has his paid work, Hamish and Tilly have their school and social life, and Clara has her work and study. As in the families in Chapter Six, domestic tasks are regarded as work to be done by someone who has nothing better to do. The hierarchy of work is clearly visible here, as it is actively disputed by Clara.

The second area of contention is around planning and organising, and emotion work. Gavin takes an active role in planning and organising, and it is he who does most of the routine emotion work with Tilly, getting her to bed, making sure she gets to school, implementing routines, and averting and dealing with crises. Although Gavin and Clara have worked deliberately to develop skills and share these aspects of parenting, Clara said she sometimes feels ‘usurped’ by Gavin’s participation. Gavin feels overwhelmed. He feels that the division of total (paid and unpaid) work between himself and Clara is ‘65:35’. His life, he said, is ‘nothing like the life a lot of blokes have’.

Clara is unique in this sample in refusing to take responsibility for domestic work. The critical differences between her and the other women are that she persistently asserts her
other activities as being more important than housework, and backs this up with her behaviour; she derives strong support for this from the culture of her family of origin, which is strongly manifest in the material setting of their house; she interprets the family dynamic in an explicit framework of feminist values; and she is willing to live in a mess. Gavin is unique in the sample in feeling that he has less time for leisure and personal space than his wife. The differences between him and other men in the study are that he clearly espouses feminist views and behaves in ways that support them, and that his wife does not accept responsibility for domestic work.

How they explained it
In explaining why domestic labour happens as it does the adults called on ideas that were explicitly feminist. The children’s accounts reflected ideas about the entitlement of children to receive service from their parents.

Clara:  
*A lot of things don’t get done, because people think it’s other people’s responsibility to do them.*

Clara started her account of domestic tasks by saying, ‘A lot of things don’t get done, because people think it’s other people’s responsibility to do them. We’re a family that tend to go “Other things are more important than housework”. Housework’s bottom of the list’. She went on to describe who does what:

Gavin and I share a lot of housework. Gavin’s very good at it, [but] there’s some things he just doesn’t see, like toilets. He would certainly say he would do as much housework as me, and he probably does, but we tend to see slightly different things. [For example] I’m the only person who ever cleans the shower.

Clara said she initiates doing domestic tasks, although Gavin is interested in how they are done. ‘One of Gavin’s roles in life is to follow people around and help them do what they do. He’s got what he calls a high perfect. Which means sometimes if I pack the dishwasher he’ll come along and pack it again afterward’. Clara said getting the kids to pick up after themselves or put things away ‘needs constant reminding’, although if Hamish decides he wants to cook he will clean up the kitchen first ‘so he’s got room to do it’. ‘They live in a house like this [so] they tend to work around things’. The issues are different with the two kids, because ‘Tilly sees cleaning as a control issue, and Hamish sees cleaning as so utterly trivial that there’s always other things that
you’re putting in front of it’. Hamish will often tell Clara when things need doing. She described one occasion:

   He happened to be home for the morning, and he came in and said, ‘Kitchen stinks, should put the rubbish out’. I said, ‘I’m in the middle of laundry, you put it out’. He said, ‘I’m in the middle of homework’ [laugh]. You know it’s all sort of ‘I can tell you what needs doing round here, but I won’t do it myself’.

Clara said Hamish often runs this kind of line as a joke. ‘You can never tell what’s actual provocation and what’s his wacky sense of humour’.

When I asked about cleaning bedrooms, Clara replied:

   Ours hardly gets touched because there’s so much stuff stacked in there. Sorting-out projects that just sort of ended up in our bedroom. Every now and then I take the top layer of dirt and dust mites off, and [say] ‘Gavin shouldn’t we change the sheets, they’re like boards’ [laugh]. If you prompt him he’ll rush in and do it, but I’m just trying to think whether he’s initiated actually changing the sheets. He probably has, [but] we’re talking seventeen years.

Clara said Tilly’s room is ‘utterly out of control’, and Tilly will not allow her to do anything with it. Gavin can intervene with Tilly more effectively than Clara can.

   ‘Gavin does a lot of what’s traditionally [called] mothering, in a way. He’ll put away [Tilly’s] clothes when he’s putting her to bed. He doesn’t clash with her [as] I tend to’.

To distinguish between the disorder Tilly lives in and that of the rest of the family Clara identified a taxonomy of messes. ‘Tilly’s mess is an out of control mess. Hamish’s mess is a piles mess. Hamish knows what’s in his piles. He’s like Gavin and me. We have piles everywhere but we know what’s there. They’re workable piles’. Clara said, Tilly ‘vacillates between saying “don’t touch it at all, I’m grown up I can deal with it”, and “why haven’t you cleaned my room up?” It can be in the same sentence’.

On Saturdays Clara does a ‘maintenance whip around’, of basic cleaning. The kids do not participate in this. ‘It tends to me be yelling and complaining that no one else is doing it. That’s the way I see it anyway. They probably see themselves as helping. Or
being yelled at, or something’. Clara said she does not mind cleaning: for her tidying is the problem.

Maintenance activities I can cope with, whereas tidying means making a whole string of decisions, and after five minutes I get decided out. Where do I put this? We don’t have enough room. What I’m trying to do, what I work at is rolling back the big mess very gently, so that the maintenance activities expand and the big ones shrink.

Clara said Gavin enjoys doing laundry, and he does it in a more systematic way than she does. ‘Gavin is a laundry man. Gavin likes the science of stains, I think’. When he does laundry ‘he turns it into this kind of art form. And it slightly drives me bonkers because he’ll come and fix the way I do it’.

When I asked whether she thinks the way domestic tasks happen works well, Clara said no.

I think it’s got huge holes in it. Some of it is my own sense of inadequacy about housework. I don’t feel I can really tell other people what to do until I’ve got myself under control. I’ve never had a sense of control over housework. I’ve always felt slightly overwhelmed by it. A bit like having a new baby, someone gives you this technical thing to master and you go, ‘But nobody’s told me how to do this yet!’

Clara attributed these feelings to the example of her mother, who ‘never really took to housework’. She explained ‘my mum felt that housework was kind of bottom of the rung, there’s just kind of more interesting things to do with the brain than housework’. Her mother had ‘spent her twenties travelling by ship from one exotic setting to another’, then after marrying at the age of 31 ‘became parked with three kids under four going “oh my god I don’t know how to do this”’. And feeling the contrast hugely, that it just wasn’t what she was born to do. I think I caught some of that from her’.

When I asked whether the division of domestic work is fair, Clara did not answer directly. She said, ‘I think Gavin does far more than the average bloke, and he does it with far less pushing. He has his blind spots, but obviously I have blind spots too’. Clara elaborated:
I get frustrated that the house is messy, but I try not to make that anyone else’s problem. Because I contribute to that too. Visually, I get frustrated with the lack of order. Functionally, I think we keep most things functioning. Every now and then we make jokes about we need to buy a new kitchen table, this one’s full. It teeters on the borderlines of disorder, but manages to stay working.

For things to be better, Clara said she would like the kids to do more, but ‘I blame myself, because I think if I don’t model order, how on earth can they pick it up?’ At the same time, ‘I get frustrated because when I do stuff [they] don’t see it’. Everyone is inclined, she said, ‘to announce [when] they’ve done something, or wait until something’s really messy before you clean up so that at least you can tell’.

Regarding the work of planning and organising, Clara said Gavin will regularly call and check to see if everything is happening as it should. ‘To a certain extent he’ll come and just take over a bit. Every now and then I feel a little bit usurped, from my role [in the family]. In the sense of feeling slightly displaced’. She said this aspect of domestic labour works well, but ‘sometimes I see his tendency to perfectionism nudging me away a bit’. When the kids were young Clara had ‘really actively worked on getting him into the [family management] process. It’s sort of evolved over time’.

Clara explained that when the kids were young, she was the expert and Gavin learned from her. Having learned, he is now very competent at emotion work with both the children: ‘We try to do the two-parent tango’. Emotion work works ‘as well as it can’. Tilly has abundant ‘social and emotional sensitivity’ and skill, but ‘she doesn’t see adults as human, so [she thinks] you don’t need to look after their feelings’. For Hamish, ‘people don’t matter that much. It’s emotional laziness as much as anything. I’m sure he’s perfectly capable of [noticing people’s feelings] but it’s just that he can’t be bothered. Because other people will do it’.

Thinking about her family of origin, Clara reflected her mother had ‘not want[ed] to be one of the pack of suburban women. She always saw herself as a little apart from that’. She continued:

My father was brought up in an England that no longer existed, that was replicated in [a colonial country]. His father was a hugely autocratic career
diplomat, with a mouse wife, and he was number four in a family of five. His father never spoke to him directly, he always spoke to him through his mother. He was brought up by black servants. They lived a very comfortable life. They had this huge train set that went all the way around the back yard. I guess his father must have built it, but it was not something you played with, it was kind of a gesture toward childhood from a father who didn’t relate. They were allowed to play with it from time to time, in the way Victorian children were allowed to play with china-faced dolls.

Clara said her father’s attitude to kitchens was, ‘Is there one in this house?’ As children, she and her sisters ‘were allowed to make huge messes. We trailed child mess all over the house in a very creative kind of way’. Her parents were very different in this respect. ‘There was this creative messiness created by mum, and dad was a lining-things-up person. I mean no wonder I married Gavin. [Dad] would create this little pocket of order around himself and not really allow the rest of it to touch him’.

Next I asked Clara whether she thinks there is a mum job and a dad job. Clara said when she grew up, the dad job was to put out the rubbish and to carve the roast. Gavin had made a ‘very deliberate decision to be different from his dad’, who was ‘a background presence’ in the family. ‘If you said what’s my job in this family, it would be the emotional propping up. Partly of the kids, and often of Gavin so he can [do that], with the kids. I associate it more with caring than with cleaning’.

Imagining how her children might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Clara replied, ‘I think Hamish will live at home until he’s 30’, and then move out with a woman ‘who’ll look after him, [and] who he’ll probably drive bananas’. Tilly ‘will have a cleaning epiphany. She has a strong sense of style and she likes to arrange her visual world. If things go right for her, she’ll work out how to tidy up and create those environments around her’. Clara said of Tilly that ‘emotional caring she’ll take to like a duck to water’, although ‘coming from this environment she’ll always feel a bit conflicted about what her role is with housework’.

At the end of the interview I asked Clara if there was anything she wished to add. She replied, ‘I think with tasks, everyone always thinks they do more than their share. It’s
easy to see what you do, and difficult to see what other people do. I think I am lucky with Gavin. He is a person who volunteers to do things’.

When I spoke to Clara in a follow-up interview, she noted the family had not talked about their interviews, after they had happened. Clara reflected:

In most respects I was stating stuff I already knew. From early on in our marriage it was a feminist issue, so we did actually discuss it. Even if it hadn’t worked out the way we’d anticipated, it wasn’t unexamined. I’ve always recognised Gavin’s earning capacity is much greater than mine, and felt duty bound to replace some of that with housework. It’s just that I’m terrible at doing it.

Clara described ongoing issues with the kids. ‘This year Hamish is floating around going “Well I can watch the Simpsons because I’m having a break but I can’t pick up that wet towel because I’m doing VCE”’. She gave an example:

Last night we had an argument about who should be ironing his pants and shirt. He came out late and said, ‘Why haven’t you ironed my pants and shirt ready for school?’ I said, ‘Well you could have got organised a bit earlier and done it yourself’. And he said, ‘Are you giving up all parental responsibility?’ I said ‘No, I’m taking a parental decision that you can be responsible for that yourself’. [So] he did it himself, but he threw a few things around to make a point first. When he came in it was ‘Why haven’t you done your duty and looked after me?’ and by the end of it I had made the point that if I iron it now you’ll just expect me to keep doing it. [Later he said] ‘I was asking you as if it was your duty as a joke’. But he always does that. All his pushy things are jokey things as well. That’s how he covers up.

I asked if anything had changed in the family as a result of doing the interviews. Clara said ‘nope, absolutely nothing’.

**Gavin: I do feel constantly, pretty much constantly under pressure**

Gavin gave a brief but detailed account of who does what, and concluded ‘my priorities are, number one to keep the family together, and in particular to spend time with the kids; number two to try and earn enough money to keep the place afloat; then after that, try and get a minimum of sleep’. He added, ‘I do feel constantly, pretty much
constantly under pressure. In the last fifteen years I feel I’ve not been able to get on top of things at all’.

Gavin attributed his feelings of pressure partly to his paid work. He decided to leave his job with a large corporation because ‘I wasn’t prepared to compromise my values and commitment to family, to take on that stuff’. Gavin elaborated:

Some of the companies have fairly questionable values, and the corporate ladder stuff interferes with family life too much. I’m glad I made that choice, because I think [the family’s] outcomes would have been so much worse if I hadn’t. [But] financially we’d be better off if I’d done that.

Gavin attributed his clarity about choices to his parents, especially his mother; and to having been at university ‘in the 70s, [when] equal opportunity and feminism were hot topics. I think that influenced me a fair bit’.

When I asked whether the way domestic tasks happen works well, Gavin replied, ‘From my point of view it’s okay. I wouldn’t say it works well. There’s a fairly constant amount of stress around housework’.

Clara feels that she’s taken for granted, that everyone just assumes that she will do whatever needs doing. I feel that I’m constantly being asked to compromise time with the kids, or time at work, in order to make a fair contribution.

Gavin noted that Clara has been involved in various types of unpaid and community work, as well as her studies, and ‘that was her choice, [but] they were taking up lots of time, that she wasn’t spending on housework’. Even so, ‘those things were very important to Clara’. The real problem is ‘that we don’t have a basic division of responsibilities. What I would like is a system where this is primarily my responsibility and that’s primarily your responsibility. We don’t have that’. Gavin explained:

Clara doesn’t want to feel that she’s a servant and that she’s locked into doing menial work. That is important to her. Frankly it doesn’t bother me at all. I would be absolutely delighted if someone would say to me you’re responsible for keeping the floors clean. Then I’ll do that and forget about everything else. But it doesn’t work that way. [Everything is] negotiated all the time, which I find a
bit wearing. Now that Clara’s studying and working, nothing’s really her primary responsibility. But it’s not mine and it’s not the kids’ either.

When I asked if the work is shared fairly, Gavin said, ‘I think the kids could do more. [But] they need time to just to be kids, to muck around and go out and socialise’. On the other hand, ‘I feel they lose a lot of time on things that are of very little value, such as watching garbage on TV. They busy themselves with things that aren’t productive. I think they could contribute more’. Clara also has more discretionary time than he does, for things like ‘just watching TV and reading the paper’. Gavin said, ‘I watch TV while I eat dinner, and other than that I’m either working or trying to encourage the kids to do something, or cleaning up. I don’t have much discretion over my time’. He continued:

Other than eating and sleeping, I really only have maybe three or four hours a week where I’m doing something just because I want to do it. All the rest of my time is accounted for. If I had to put a number on it I feel that the work split between Clara and me has typically been about 65:35. I don’t feel bitter about it, but in a way I cope because I don’t have any choice. It’s nothing like the life a lot of blokes have, where they play golf once a week and go to the football.

Things would be better if the work was more ‘balanced’. Ideally, ‘I’d like to work 40 hours a week or less in paid work, and do more of the house things and have some time to myself, and have a partner doing the same kind of thing’. The obstacle to this is their respective capacities to earn. The work he does is highly paid, and the work Clara does is not. While this is so, Gavin said, ‘I don’t see how it can be much different’.

Next I asked about the work of planning and organising. Gavin replied, ‘It’s almost not something I can discuss because it doesn’t really happen very much’. Organising things happens ‘on a tasks basis’. Gavin said it is Clara who organises anything to do with cleaning, and things to do with the kids they organise together. ‘The main focus [with the kids] is getting them to do the things we see as the essentials for their own future, which is homework and sleep’. He continued:

Over the last twelve months [my] major contribution to running the house has been with Tilly. Our priorities are to keep things on an even keel, and do what’s important for the kids’ future, and [only] then worry about second order things
like keeping the house under control. Getting the kids involved in housework is probably a distant second.

Thinking about emotion work, Gavin said he and Clara ‘both try to be sensitive to where the kids are at emotionally, but it tends to be a pretty reactive approach. When the kids seem to be going all right you grab that time to relax, then some crisis breaks out and you think, “Oh hell I should have seen that coming”’. Emotion work would work better ‘if Clara and I had more time and energy to tune into the kids. The less we were under pressure, time and money pressure, the more we would be able to deal effectively in the emotional side of things’. Gavin said this aspect of domestic labour is shared fairly between himself and Clara.

When I asked how he had learned about domestic labour when he was young, Gavin talked about his experiences in share houses and a previous relationship.

I wonder if my relationship with Clara could have survived if I hadn’t had that prior experience. I think at twenty-something you can be thoughtless and arrogant, or ignorant. Living in share houses is an opportunity to knock off those rough corners. You realise you’ve got to adapt to people, and contribute a bit. You probably have to feel that you’re doing more than everyone else, otherwise you’re probably not pulling your weight.

I asked Gavin whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job. He replied:

I don’t think there is. I think there’s a big range of personalities in women, there’s a big range of personalities in men, and they overlap enormously. So whilst the means might be a bit different, if you look at individual differences they’re way wider than that difference of averages. In statistical terms you’ve got two overlapping bell curves, and the overlap is much greater than the difference between the means. I don’t think there is mum’s work and dad’s work, and I think most of the paradigms around that are actually pretty shallow. The biggest issue is the design of work, really.

Gavin described the work of caring for children as ‘parent work’, and said this is ‘probably the hardest thing we ever do’. Balancing this commitment with paid work is ‘the most difficult compromise’. He suggested that many people are unaware of the
invisible work involved in organising and managing family life. ‘I think anyone in a full time job, unless they’re a single parent, is largely unaware of that’.

Thinking about how his children might organise domestic work when they are adults, Gavin said ‘Hamish will continue to live at home as long as possible, until he gets dragged off by some enterprising woman who wants to marry him’. After that, Hamish will ‘probably contribute periodically to the housework as he does now’. Gavin said Tilly will ‘move into a student house with a bunch of friends’, and will probably figure out how to participate in housework in that setting. Tilly also wants to have a career, which might be difficult: her best option would be to ‘marry someone with lots of money who’s a very good housekeeper’.

After the interview ended I asked Gavin if there was anything he wanted to add. He said:

Neither of us particularly like [housework]. It bothers Clara more than me because she feels that people walk into the house and blame her for the way it is, because that’s the woman’s job. It reflects on her more than it does on me. If Clara goes away I’m likely to get offers of help from the neighbours. If I’m away no one would think of offering Clara a hand. Which is a bit weird really, when you think about it. That’s just the way our society thinks.30

**Hamish: It gets to the stage where somebody or all of us needs to do more tidying up of things**

Hamish gave a haphazard account of domestic tasks. He said, ‘Tilly and I do a little bit when we’re asked to, [and] mum does a similar amount to dad. I don’t think Tilly does that much’. After I prompted for specifics Hamish’s account was consistent with those from Gavin and Clara, although Hamish described himself as occasionally doing tasks such as clothes-washing, that no one else had mentioned him doing. When I asked whether the way domestic tasks happen works well, Hamish said:

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30 Part way through Gavin’s interview the dog came past. His dinner had consisted of three plates of different types of cat food, and another of raw chops. Now he was dragging a chop from room to room on the Persian rugs, growling and looking for a fight. In a way the dog is emblematic of the family culture: he is eccentric and impractical, and allowed to drag his creative messes all through the house regardless of aesthetics, inconvenience or hygiene.
It’s not bad. But as you can see it gets to the stage where somebody or all of us needs to do more tidying up of things, putting things away. Things like, there’s a car door right next to you, which we bought a month ago because the other car door’s got a huge dint in it, and that’s just been sitting there for a month.

Hamish said, ‘Considering the time we have I reckon it’s kind of fair’. He explained this in terms of work and schooling. ‘Dad and mum have study and work, and I’ve got lots of schoolwork, and if I’m not doing that I’ll be doing something [else]. I reckon Tilly’s not doing much at all; she could be doing more’. I asked Hamish what would be different if it worked better, and he gave two answers. First, he said ‘I’d be more easily motivated to start doing things’. Then he said, ‘If it was different then mum wouldn’t be doing as much work for her study and other things, and she’d be able to spend time just looking after things that need to be done. I reckon that’s what would change’.

In response to the questions about planning and organising, Hamish said Gavin sometimes does laundry of his own accord, but otherwise ‘organising other people to do things is really mum. Although she tries to get people interested it doesn’t [work] because of the way she handles it’. He elaborated:

The way she tells us about it doesn’t make us want to do it. There’s something about the tone of her voice or the words that she uses, that creates a sense of it being a huge task and a chore to do. [Often she] sounds tired and kind of snappy, and even when she asks nicely can you clean your room today, it’s at the start of the day and you’re planning other things to do. A lot of the time when mum badgers it’s something really huge, like, ‘can you clean your room’. The other extreme is if she goes ‘can you pick up that piece of paper’. That can be really annoying.

I asked what Clara might do to make this work better. Hamish suggested:

If we had it set out in a way that wasn’t sounding like a chore, and we just knew that okay for a few hours on Saturday we’d walk around and do these things. If we are always being reminded, then it becomes something you don’t want to do. If you’re left to do it on your own accord I reckon it becomes a bit more [acceptable]. If you’re badgered about it you don’t want to do it.
I said this sounds as if having a routine is the answer. Hamish said, ‘Yeah, but it’s sort of very difficult to start a routine? But once you’ve got a routine, it would be fine’.

Thinking about how the planning and organising aspect of domestic labour could work better, Hamish suggested, ‘If there was a way of avoiding the badgering, that’s how it should be’.

Hamish continued this theme when talking about emotion work. ‘If the badgering is making me or Tilly annoyed we’ll snap back’. Gavin tries to co-operate even if Clara’s request is unreasonable. ‘If mum badgers dad about something, he’ll say okay and try his best to do it, even though I’m sure he would prefer to finish something in his office. It would be quite difficult at times to do whatever task it is that mum wants’.

Thinking about the work of looking after feelings, Hamish said he would notice if Clara was tired, and would ‘maybe make a cup of tea or something, [but] we don’t generally get into the more, next level of emotions’. He added:

From my point of view I notice most people’s feelings, but I often feel that my feelings aren’t getting recognised. Like I’m absolutely exhausted today, and mum might still ask me can you take out the garbage bins, [or] something like that. She’ll still ask me to do things around the place as normal. A lot of the time I’ll still be able to do it, but most of the time I’ll explain to mum, look I’m really really tired [so I can’t].

Hamish said ‘dad does a lot of the emotional work, for other people’. Clara ‘does a little bit’ of emotion work, but ‘a lot of the time she’s like how are you feeling, [and] what she notices is oh you’re so tired, early to bed with you, that kind of thing. I’m sure it’s well intentioned, but it’s like ahh!! I don’t want any!’. This aspect of domestic labour would work better if ‘everyone [was] a little bit more alert to how other people are. Just notice and do subtle things. Not make a fuss’.

When I asked whether he thinks there is a mum job and a dad job, Hamish’s response was immediate and clear.

I think that a use for having a mum job would be that a lot more things, like cleaning stuff off that table, would be done. I think traditionally the dad job is to earn money. If the dad job was to clean off the table that would work just as well.
But I think someone needs to take on the role of looking after the housework. Someone needs to be actively doing it most of the time, whether it be the mum or the dad. Delegating it in the current situation doesn’t work. There needs to be some delegation, but I think most of the actual activity has to be doing it. I see that as a parent job.

When I asked how he imagines domestic labour being organised when he is an adult, Hamish said he plans to live in a share house. Working out who will do what domestic tasks would not be a problem.

Part of the thing around here is that once you are renowned for not doing work, in a way it’s hard to suddenly start doing it. Because, I don’t know, I’m too tired to explain that more. But in a share house, like you move in and it’s already set out, okay we have a kitchen cleaning roster and everyone keeps their own room tidy or something like that. I could easily manage that. Because I see in the future having more time to do things.

Hamish said if he had a partner, working out domestic arrangements would be easy because ‘you already know what their expectations are. You’d just talk about what we’d do and we’d get on with it together’. He would see himself and his partner doing the same amount of housework, although ‘there’d be an understanding that if I’d been working all week then I wouldn’t have as much time to do much housework. But if she’s been working all the time, then I’d be doing more’.

At the end of the interview I asked Hamish if there was anything he would like to add. He suggested I might ‘take this research one step further by talking to each family member again individually and giving them some tips about what they can do differently’. Hamish said this might be difficult, and possibly create conflict in some families, but if people ‘were mature enough to take it on without discussing it with each other, then that could work really well’.

**Tilly:**  *Everything’s a bit chaotic around here*

Tilly started her account of domestic tasks by saying ‘nothing much gets done around here’. She identified a few tasks: ‘I mean we do washing and gardening and things like that’, and when prompted talked about cooking and dishes. When I asked about
cleaning, Tilly said ‘if we don’t do it and it looks dirty then mum’ll do it’. Thinking about whether it all works well, Tilly said ‘everything’s pretty all right. I think mum would probably want us to do more housework’. I asked if she thinks the way it works is fair. Tilly replied, ‘It depends in whose eyes sort of. It’s fine for me because I do like nothing. For Hamish and me we’re just like, well it just happens, so we don’t really notice’.

When I asked how she thinks it should be, Tilly reflected:

My room’s kind of messy, and I know when it gets really down to it I should probably be the one to tidy it up. But everything’s a bit chaotic around here, so it takes a while for things to get done. The problem with our family is we haven’t that much time, and in our spare time we do other things, like being on the phone, watching TV, stuff like that. I kind of figure that in ten or twenty years time I don’t want to think back to my childhood and think oh I remember cleaning the house, type of thing. But yeah, I probably should do more.

In response to the questions about planning and organising, Tilly talked more about cleaning. She explained, ‘Whenever we can be bothered we do it, if it looks dirty. If we’re having guests round we might clean up, but otherwise if it’s not in our way it’s all right’. I asked if there is a cleaning day, and Tilly replied ‘Sometimes we try and make it like that but it never ends up working. Most of the time Hamish and me find a way to wriggle out of it [laugh]’. This is a problem, because ‘everyone gets annoyed because they don’t want to be doing [it]. Mum doesn’t want to be cleaning; she thinks we should be helping more, and we don’t want to be helping’. This aspect of domestic labour ‘probably could work better, but there’s no problems with it. No serious problems. I wouldn’t say it worked well, but it works’.

Tilly said feelings about housework give rise to arguments. ‘In our family they won’t really care about how the other one feels, they’ll care more about how much they want someone else to do it’. In this sentence ‘they’ refers to Clara, ‘the other one’ to Tilly or Hamish, and ‘it’ is a housework task. Tilly identified two pairs of players in the family’s emotional dynamic. ‘Dad and Hamish are both pretty good at calming things down, and me and mum are always rubbing things up the wrong way’. The peacemaker in the family is ‘mainly dad. Unless dad gets angry, then there’s no peacemaker’.
Tilly’s ideas about the mum job and the dad job were less forcefully expressed than her brother’s, but their gist was the same. There is a mum job and a dad job ‘kind of’.

Mum does end up being like mum have you done my washing yet. It will be like you are someone who does those [things]. Mum’s job is cleaning and stuff, whether or not she’d want that to be her job. Dad’s job is kind of, if mum hasn’t done it you ask dad. Dad’s job is to work and if mum hasn’t done something to do it for us.

Tilly identified organising as part of the mum job, although Clara is ‘actually not that good at organising’. Regarding emotion work, Tilly said, ‘If you need a shoulder to cry on you would go to mum. Unless you’d had a fight with her or something. If it’s work-wise then it’s dad, and if it’s feeling wise then it’s mum’.

Thinking about how domestic labour might be organised when she is an adult, Tilly explained:

I’ve got two lives planned for me. I want to be the boss of some really good business, like a millionaire sort of person, but I can also imagine myself as having a family and a house and cooking dinner type thing. And I wouldn’t mind that because to me it kind of shows that you’re grown up. Once you have a family and you’ve got kids and you’re cooking dinner for them it shows that you’re a mum and you’re grown up and you’re the way your mum was. So I dunno. Because I can’t be both, really.

**What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?**

Clara and Gavin both said the way they do family is based on feminist principles. These establish that Clara is entitled to pursue her own work and other activities, and not be a ‘servant’ to the family.

Clara called upon a colourful and eccentric family history to explain her attitude to housework, in a way that makes her disengagement seem an inevitable part of her participation in an idiosyncratic family culture. My imagination was captured by Clara’s story of her family, with generations of women manifesting glorious creative chaos, and men representing the forces of order and repression. In valuing the lives and
experiences of women, Clara’s story can be seen as feminist. It is also about class, in
the desire to not be ‘one of the pack of suburban women’ for whom presumably,
domesticity is the only life. The luxury of chaos makes sense in a cultural setting where
families have servants who do domestic work. It came to the crunch in the experience
of Clara’s mother, and is being actively navigated in Clara’s own.

In contrast to Clara’s romantic take on family is Gavin’s view of parenting as a shared
endeavour, to be managed according to a negotiated division of responsibilities that
covers all aspects of paid work, housework, organising kids and emotion work. Gavin
explicitly avoided attributing any aspects of this work according to gender, and
expressed no essentialist views about different roles and capacities that might apply to
women and men.

Gavin’s story is like the stories I am used to hearing from women. He says he feels
constantly under pressure, that his partner has more leisure than he does, that he gave up
a well paid job so he could spend more time at home, and that he finds emotion work
with the children to be enormously draining. He said, ‘I cope because I don’t have any
choice’. Gavin stated his priorities as being first, the family, then earning, and finally
self-care and sleep. In other ways Gavin’s experience is different from the stories I
heard from women. Gavin stated that anyone who works full-time would be unaware of
the amount of work that goes into running a household. A woman who worked full-
time as well as carrying responsibility for domestic labour would be unlikely to assert
this view.

Gavin referred to ideas about kids. He said kids need ‘time just to be kids’, and to
socialise, but he feels that Hamish and Tilly spend too much time on activities that are
not productive, such as watching trash TV or talking on the phone. Clara did not refer
to ideas about children in general. She described Tilly as being like herself, and Hamish
as like his dad. Throughout her account, Clara described people’s temperaments and
practices as associated with their nature, or the culture of their family of origin, rather
than to their status as parent or child, or to their gender.

Both parents’ accounts construct parenting as emotionally and labour intensive. This
work is a priority for both parents, and two parents are needed to do it. Even so, Clara
feels a little ‘pushed out’ by the extent of Gavin’s involvement. Clara’s view reflects the ambiguity in the way domestic labour is valued, identified in Chapters Six and Seven. Clara rejects the idea that women should be obliged to place domestic work ahead of their other priorities, but still holds the view that the emotional aspects of domestic labour are the province of a mother.

The kids’ accounts run parallel with those of their parents. Tilly appears to be quite comfortable with the ‘creative messes’ aspects of Clara’s family story. She happily avoids doing housework, and sees activities such as watching TV and being on the phone as legitimate priorities. Hamish reflects his dad’s view that keeping the house in order should be someone’s responsibility, and Hamish is explicit as to who this someone should be. It is part of the mum job. Both kids see household work as something that really, mum should do, and if she does not do it dad should. That kids should be provided with a level of domestic service that allows them to pursue their other priorities without being distracted by housework is not questioned.

**Ideas and conflict**

The adults’ acceptance of feminist ideas establishes the principle that Clara is entitled to refuse to do housework if she chooses. Gavin’s account of household management as fundamentally a matter of ‘design of work’ is effectively submerged. Similarly, Hamish’s idea that kids should be entitled to receive service from their parents, and particularly that he should receive service from his mother, does not win because Clara explicitly rejects it. It is Clara’s account that establishes the dominant story in this family. In this household of articulate people Clara is the most fluent and the most persuasive. The house that is the setting of their lives embodies the culture of indifference to mundane, material concerns that Clara calls on to explain why the mess they live with is not really her responsibility to fix.

This family differs from others in the study in several respects. Clara claims entitlement to put her other priorities ahead of domestic labour, and she calls on the culture of her family of origin to support her in this. Clara claims incompetence as an excuse. She ‘manages piles better than [she] used to’, but she claims an entitlement to go very slowly in improving these skills, that is usually accorded only to children and men. When she talks about how Gavin does domestic work, Clara compares him to herself,
not her father. The benchmark for equity or progress is between spouses, not between generations. As a father Gavin is unusual in carrying a significant load of emotion work related to the family. Gavin puts his own feelings and preferences aside in order to deal with family demands, in a way that women often do in other families and men rarely. Gavin puts his own leisure time last. Clara does not.

Hamish is acutely aware that he receives a lesser quality of service than his peers. He explained clearly to me what his mother should really be doing, and why. Tilly is more comfortable than Hamish with the way domestic labour happens in her family, but like Hamish she is very clear about the role of parents. As she put it, ‘Dad’s job is to work, and if mum hasn’t done something, to do it for us’.

The way domestic labour happens in the Middleton family illustrates a dynamic that acts against women who choose to adopt a strategy of avoiding doing domestic tasks. Keeping the house in a functional state in the midst of extreme messiness still involves a lot of work, and routine basic cleaning is still mostly done by Clara. The difference is that this ‘maintenance cleaning’ is done among piles of stuff, not in a setting that is free of clutter and easy to clean. In refusing to take responsibility for the house being clean and tidy Clara makes a point, but perhaps she saves herself little work. The parents’ example of normalising messiness is reflected in the children’s showing a stubborn resistance to doing basic tasks that may be taken for granted in other families, such as tidying up after meals, or putting away clothes.

The visible contest in this family is about who will do the minimal housework that gets done. It is enacted by Clara complaining about the work she does, and the others pursuing their other priorities as unquestionably more important and leaving no time for doing mundane tasks. Tilly seems to be quite happy with how things are, Clara and Hamish are mildly resentful, and Gavin feels pressured and overworked.

**Anticipating the future**

Both kids in this family have learned an indifference to housework as part of a grand and colourful family heritage. It is likely that they will carry this indifference into their adult lives.
Summing up
In this family no one thinks it is their business to tidy up and put things away, so no one does it and it becomes a big job. The family culture holds that ‘housework is not the kind of thing that people like us do’. In this family women - including mothers - claim that ‘people like us’ status, as well as children and men.

8.2 THE EDGEWORTH FAMILY
I was given the Edgeworths’ number by a couple I had interviewed. I called and was invited to come over one afternoon. The Edgeworth family house is welcoming and well lived-in, with various renovations in progress. Uniquely in this sample, the house has only one bathroom, and the kitchen has a single sink.

Ellen is 45, Duncan is 48, and they have been married for twenty years. Both are tertiary teachers. Ellen has worked throughout the children’s lives, taking time off only when they were babies. Ellen’s job is more prestigious than Duncan’s and her salary is higher. Duncan manages the family’s shares and investments, and both adults described his income as greater than hers because of this. Marcus and Harry are sixteen and fifteen, and attend a local state secondary college. They do paid work on weekends, and have other commitments several evenings each week. Both children were born at home. For many years the boys slept with their parents in the ‘family bed’, and it is only in the past year or so that the boys have had their own bedroom.31

I spoke first to Ellen and then to Duncan, sitting at a long table in the sunroom. I returned later that evening and interviewed Harry and then Marcus, in the bedroom they share downstairs. Everyone talked at length about how they do family, and why. All family members said the way they do domestic labour is different from other people they know, and talked about how and why this is. Ellen welcomed the opportunity to talk about family, and explained herself very clearly. Duncan appeared to be rather wary of me, but took trouble to explain his views. Marcus and Harry were very articulate and clear in their interviews, and talked perceptively about the ideas and feelings associated with domestic work in their family.

31 The ‘family bed’ is a practice that was favoured in hippie circles in the 1970s and 1980s. See Tine Thevenin The Family Bed (1987). Also Ina May Gaskin, Spiritual Midwifery (1976).
When I came out from interviewing Marcus I found the other three sitting around the table talking about what each of them had said, and comparing comments. They noted that each person had identified the same grouping of ideas: that Harry and Ellen think alike, Marcus and Duncan think alike, and each pair disagrees with the other. This family is unusual in that dissenting views are voiced and argued about frequently, so that how domestic work should happen is an ongoing subject for dispute and negotiation.

**Who does what**

Accounts of who does what were fairly consistent. All family members said Ellen cooks, everyone clears up after meals, and Ellen or Duncan stack and unstack the dishwasher. Ellen and Duncan do food shopping. Everyone does laundry, and Ellen irons. Cleaning the bathroom and kitchen is usually done by Ellen. The boys’ regular tasks are cleaning the toilet, vacuuming, and taking out rubbish. They also clean their bedroom and do other tasks when asked. Arguments arise when the boys procrastinate or do not do tasks to a standard their parents find acceptable. The boys are good students and both parents help with homework. The boys use public transport or ride their bikes wherever possible, and are rarely driven places. All do gardening and outdoor work. Duncan looks after the family’s shares and investments. All family members emphasised the stressful nature of this work as providing a balance to his lesser participation in other household tasks.

All agreed that the work of noticing what needs to be done and getting people to do things is done by Duncan. Everyone talked about the emotional cost for Duncan in taking on this work. All family members said that the work of looking after feelings, and comforting people, is done by Ellen.

There were few differences in accounts of tasks. Ellen and Duncan described breakfast and lunch as ‘get your own’, while Harry said Ellen prepares fruit for everyone’s weekday breakfasts, and Marcus said Ellen ‘makes all meals for dad’. Harry said ‘the bathroom doesn’t usually get done’, and Ellen and the others said she cleans it. Duncan identified shopping, vacuuming and laundry as ‘my job’, while other family members said that Ellen shops, and the boys vacuum, more often than Duncan does.
The most visible area of dispute around domestic labour concerns the extent to which Ellen and the boys should do as Duncan wishes. Duncan believes the boys should do whatever domestic tasks they are asked to, immediately and to a standard he finds acceptable; and that Ellen should enforce these expectations on his behalf. Disputes are enacted through frequent discussion and argument, and by Duncan and Ellen persistently asking the boys to do things, and imposing punishments for disobedience.

Another area of dispute concerns cooking. Ellen cooks most evenings and she would like Duncan to share this work, instead of reading or watching TV while she works. Duncan resists Ellen’s attempts in various ways, and trivialises her concerns. Ellen described her resentment of Duncan’s relaxing, while she is obliged to cook, as ‘petty’.

**How they explained it**

All family members described their family as different from others they know. Duncan and Marcus described these differences as positive, Harry said their practices around domestic labour are too extreme, and Ellen was ambivalent.

**Ellen: Duncan’s very strict, the boys know they can’t win with him**

Ellen began her account of domestic tasks by describing dishwashing. She said they had acquired a dishwasher only recently, and before this the boys did the dishes. This was no trouble, because ‘Duncan’s very strict, and the boys know they can’t win with him’. Ellen described the rules around the kids’ activities, how they came to be established, and how they are enforced.

She said ‘on the weekends, if they get up early and want to play computer games, the rule is they have to do some kind of housework first’. The boys are expected to do various domestic tasks, when they are asked. Ellen elaborated:

> We all got together and wrote down a list of all the possible chores to be done. Then they chose what they would prefer to do. Marcus is in charge of cleaning the toilet once a week and vacuuming once a week. Harry is responsible for the rubbish, compost, recycling and normal rubbish. They swap every two months or so.
The issue with the boys is not so much what they do, but the timing of it. This is especially the case with Harry. Ellen said, ‘Harry believes that for him to learn responsibility we have to give him a large time frame, and if it doesn’t get done, remind him. [But] we’ve had to remind him so many times, we’re sick of it. We expect him to do it almost straight away’. Harry is inclined to do tasks to a standard that he thinks is appropriate, rather than to the standard his parents expect. When this happens Harry is expected to go back and finish the task.

Ellen has found it difficult to judge what is the right thing to do, especially as the boys got older. She explained:

We all agree that I was a great mother for when they were babies. [But] teenage boys, I’m too soft on them. And I’ve been training [myself], Duncan’s helping me too, because he’s a lot stronger than I am, I’m training myself to get stronger, to stick by principles, and not go ‘oh okay it’s all right, you don't have to [do it]’. And it’s really painful. Very painful for me. I felt like a tyrant, when I would stick to these principles.

I would stand by [Harry’s] bed and say, ‘Get out, it’s not going to take you long, you should have done it before you went to bed’. I even pulled the doona off him once, and it was cold. I said, ‘You have a choice. You can lie there, and shiver and get cold all night, and eventually you’re going to have to do it anyway, or you can get up and do it straight away’. And he said, ‘You haven’t given me any choice! No choice at all.’ And I said ‘That’s right. As a parent, I could just let you run free. But I can see this road, that I believe strongly that you should follow, and I’m going to make sure you follow that road. Otherwise what’s my job as a parent? I’m 90% sure I’m right, because I’m never 100% sure I’m right, that’s the scary thing about parenting. But I’m confident that what I’m doing is right, so I’m going to make sure you do it’.

Last night Harry apologised to me, after I made him get out of bed three times [because] he didn’t do something right. In the light of the morning he knew, they were only little jobs, and he could have done them so easily anyway in the first place. But at the time it’s a real struggle. And I know that if I back down, it’s going to be harder next time, to get them to do something.
Ellen said Duncan is clearer in his views about these things than she is.

Our major arguments are about bringing up the children. I’m always undermining Duncan. I feel like he’s the bad fairy, with this curse, and I’m softening the curse. I’m the good fairy that says, well do it within the hour, you don’t have to do it straight away. I didn’t understand where Duncan was coming from, for years. Now I do, but unfortunately the boys, especially Harry, has my old way of thinking and my old bad habits. I’m hoping that he’ll learn and he’ll be able to change when he sees I’ve changed.

Ellen said because Duncan has been stressed from work ‘there has been a problem between Duncan and Harry, [as] Harry appears to be so insolent and stubborn’. On one occasion an argument between Duncan and Harry escalated almost to the point of physical violence, and because of this, ‘now Duncan is getting me to do all the disciplining. He tries to get me to be the bad guy. Because it’s not fair on him, it’s very stressful’. Ellen said this has been ‘very hard’ for her, especially because their approach to parenting is so different from that of other people they know. ‘I think we’re on the one extreme when it comes to our friends, and their children’. The children have mixed feelings about this.

Partly [the kids] think we’re too hard on them, and partly they think it’s good, what we do. They see their friends lazy, insolent, get fat, and not really happy. We try to get them involved. They love the family getting involved idea. They see their friends being left alone, because their parents haven’t got the energy to fight to get their own way. There’s no connection, or they spend hours on the computer. The boys can see there are good things in what we do, but it’s a constant battle, trying to learn how to do it right. Because there’s no one, no where we have a role model that we’re happy with.

After this digression we returned to tasks around cleaning. Ellen summed up the arrangements as, ‘I clean anything I feel like cleaning, and whatever I can’t do, the boys do’. Often she and Duncan will leave the boys a list of chores, if they are home and the parents are not, ‘but we’re trying to teach them that ideally we want you to see what needs to be done and do it yourself”.
Ellen said getting the boys to learn this is difficult because ‘they’re very egocentric’, and with school and other commitments they are very busy. For example:

The other day Marcus was arguing. He didn’t like the idea of washing, vacuuming and doing the toilet once a week. I was trying to explain to him that that is not much, even for a year twelve student. And he could see that it wasn’t too much. But they just like to keep arguing, especially when they’re tired. It’s like it’s their job [laugh]. Their role.

Driving kids around is ‘another issue we’re really strict about. We hate seeing parents become taxi drivers’. Ellen and Duncan prefer that the boys use public transport or ride their bikes. The boys rode their bikes to work when they had early morning paper rounds, from the age of nine or ten, and now Marcus rides his bike home from his weekend job at one or two in the morning. ‘If he’s got some injury we’ll drive him, but if there’s no real excuse, then [we won’t]’.

When I asked if she thinks the way domestic labour happens works well, Ellen said people have commented on ‘how wonderful the boys are, how polite and obedient’. At the same time, it has been difficult.

Duncan is a really present father. In fact I think he’s too present sometimes. He’s always seeing what our next move is going to be. I think that’s very good for teenage boys, it comes across as care. The kids know that he would kill himself, to try and make us go the right way. He would be prepared to lose his health, his principles are so strong. He’d force himself to nag us, just to make sure we’re going the right way, that he sees is correct. Like a bullterrier, he won’t let go.

Ellen said this has been hard for her, because ‘I come from a totally different background. I’ve been trying to understand, and have come around to his way of thinking. But sometimes, I think his consequences are really shocking’. Ellen described one such occasion. Harry was running late for his paper round, and wanted Ellen to drive him. ‘As I was getting dressed, Duncan was in bed, and he said “You tell him if you drive him he won’t be allowed to go to grandma’s”. And I really didn’t believe [he would do] that’. The visit to grandma’s was a much anticipated holiday that involved staying at the beach with friends. Ellen continued:
When we came back Duncan said no. And we bawled our eyes out. We had to tell my mother, and she was livid. Really really angry, saying how cruel Duncan was. All the relatives were against us. And I said, ‘Look we have to do it. He said we would’.

When I asked whether the way domestic tasks happen is fair, Ellen replied, ‘I think it is’. Harry complains that housework distracts him from study, but ‘the only time we distract them is if he hasn’t done the job properly in the first place’. The boys ‘waste their time doing other things’. I say, “Well if you want a break you can wash the dishes”. They say, “That’s not a break mum”. I say, “Just relax while you’re doing it”’. The bottom line is, Ellen said, ‘you’re part of the family. While you’re living here, you’ve got to do it to our satisfaction’.

Thinking about what would be different if this aspect of domestic labour worked better, Ellen said, ‘I don’t like the battle that’s going on still. Duncan gets really angry, and Harry gets really stubborn. It’s not ideal, [but] I think where we’ve drawn the line is where it should be’.

In response to the questions about planning and organising, Ellen said she would like not to have to cook every day.

I really want Duncan to help me cook sometimes. He says, ‘Get the boys to help you’. It’s like I’ve got to seduce them into it. I can make the boys do it but I have to seduce Duncan into doing it. A few times I’ve said to myself, ‘I’m not going to work when he’s not working’. He sits there and watches TV, he reads books! And I’ve got to do all this cooking and housework. I’m going to stop work when he stops work. But then that’s being petty. He makes big decisions in terms of money, he worries and thinks about the future.

When I have complained, I’d say, ‘I’m not going to cook tonight’. He knows I’m serious, he starts to panic [laugh]. He says, ‘I’ll come and help you then’, when I’m really absolutely exhausted. But they all come in and help, and they all run away. They don't say, ‘Is there anything else I can do?’ You’ve got to catch them. Because you’re busy chopping up or whatever you’re doing, happy in this
working environment, and then they’re gone. What happened? They disappeared.

Ellen said it is she or Duncan who identify things that need to be done, and ask the boys to do them. When I asked whether the way the work of planning and organising happens is fair, she replied ‘I’m 90% sure it’s fair. The boys keep arguing, but when you look at what exactly they do, it’s not that much’. Here Ellen appeared to be talking about the distribution of domestic tasks. She considered fairness only in relation to the children, and did not comment further on the distribution of work between Duncan and herself.

When I asked about emotion work, Ellen said that living in a small house is a positive thing, ‘because everyone can hear [each other]. There’s no end of the house that the kids stay in’. She added, ‘Duncan has a habit of connecting with everyone almost every half hour. Like a sheepdog. Because we keep in contact with each other a lot we’re aware when something’s wrong, quickly’. Ellen said Duncan is now ‘teaching me’ to do that checking on the boys, because ‘we’ve agreed that Duncan can’t do it very well, because he’s very stressed [from work]’.

Ellen said the boys had some hard times in the past, being very unhappy at school and experiencing overwhelming emotions. ‘I tried to explain that feelings are just like wild horses. You’re bigger than your feelings. Just hold them in and hold it tight and you can control them’. The fear of punishment was an important factor for the kids, in learning to deal with their feelings.

Their feelings overwhelmed them for a while, but then we introduced the fear of punishment. [We said] if you don’t go to school, I’m going to punish you so bad that you will really wish you had gone to school. And they would go to school. I got the idea from Duncan. They were afraid of him, they would jump when he came into the room. And that made them do the right thing, but to my mind not for good reasons. The fear of punishment was more real to them than their imaginary fears. They’ve got friends now, who are breaking their own arms, slashing their wrists, because of the pain they’re feeling, the emotional pain, they’re hurting themselves physically. Because they can’t control it. And I
wonder whether it would have helped them if their parents had [done what we did].

Ellen feels that the hard times they have been through together have made the family closer. Now, she said, ‘what I really admire and value in these boys is that they are articulate about emotional things’.

I asked whether Duncan sets the example for the boys in being articulate about emotions. Ellen replied, ‘No. Anger is all Duncan tends to know, emotionally’. Ellen said she has learned to interpret Duncan’s anger. ‘He’ll be angry with me, but after a while I would realise that it is fear that he’s really expressing, or depression that he’s really expressing’. Ellen suggested that the boys had developed their skills in emotional literacy by listening to their parents talk and disagree. ‘We’ve always talked about everything, and with the boys there. We didn’t censor what we said. So maybe they are just used to people talking’.

Ellen said she sees their practice of openness as another way in which she and Duncan differ from their friends. ‘Sometimes we shock people with what we talk about. We don’t have hush hush issues’. This openness extends also to behaviour around sex, and to sharing of physical space. Ellen continued, ‘We even had sex in front of the kids. We had them in the same bedroom for so long, and they used to be in the same bed with us, and it’s just very natural for them. We wouldn’t be graphic about it, but they would know that something’s going on’.

When I asked if emotion work works well, Ellen said, ‘Duncan has a real problem in that area’. Duncan is ‘totally burnt out’, after having been unhappy in his paid work for many years, so that now, ‘emotionally I don’t think he’s stable’. Ellen explained that Duncan’s problems also result from her resistance to his ideas, and she is only now learning ‘what I am doing wrong’.

He’s damaged because of me, and he’s often said that. I’m just starting to realise that in our relationship I’ve been asleep. Things haven’t been clear in my mind about what principles we should be sticking to in bringing up the boys. Because I was brought up with wrong principles, or no principles. My dad told me anger is a sin. You don’t express anger, you don’t feel anger. Duncan expresses his
anger, and I haven’t handled it very well. It’s taken me a lot of soul searching, reading books, therapy and that, to learn what I’m doing wrong in terms of facing his anger.

We’ve been married twenty years, and it’s taken me this long to realise what I’ve been doing wrong. I do something that triggers off his anger, and his pain comes out. He expresses his pain in anger. As soon as he yells at me I shut down. So my fault, my problem is my pain is more important to protect than the relationship. He’s prepared to be the bad guy, to hurt himself emotionally, to yell at me, to do whatever it takes to force me to open up and keep the relationship going. I hated him for it, I saw that as horrible. Now I’m realising that for twenty years he’s been living with this woman who doesn’t want a relationship with him. He’s been totally short changed.

I’m just learning now that it’s okay to feel pain when he hurts me. I see it as abuse, but I need to realise that he’s expressing his pain, and he’s angry because there’s no relationship. Now it takes just one little thing that I do, or Harry especially because I’ve been too kind or too soft, and not understanding Duncan and where his principles are coming from, it just takes a little thing to set him off and get him angry. So in a way I’m paying for it.

Ellen said although these have been ‘hard lessons’ for her to learn, ‘it has been good too in a way, for the boys to see it’s okay to yell and be angry with each other, as long as you’re resolving something’.

Next I asked Ellen about her childhood. Ellen was an only child, and had grown up assuming that ‘it’s part of my job as family to do work around the house’. When I asked whether she thinks there is a mum job and a dad job, Ellen said, ‘There’s jobs we’re better at. I’m better at cooking, Duncan’s better at chopping wood. Or he’s better at buying and selling shares’. This is also about efficiency. ‘Because we’ve been working full time for so long you just slot into what you’re good at. It’s efficiency and survival. You end up being good at one thing and stick to it. It’s a formula that works’.
Thinking about how her kids might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Ellen said, ‘I think they’ll be good at it because there’s always been a lot of discussion in our family about different ways of doing things’. She would see the boys expecting to share domestic work with their partners, ‘definitely. They’re not going to sit around like couch potatoes’.

At the end of the interview when I asked if there was anything she would like to add, Ellen said, ‘Marcus said [to me] once, “It’s actually good, that you’re really soft mum, and dad’s really hard. Because then you argue about whether it’s right or wrong. If both had the same view you could both be totally wrong and go the wrong way”’.

**Duncan: I would like the boys to do more**

In his account of domestic tasks Duncan emphasised those he described as ‘my job’. He identified vacuuming and laundry as tasks that he used to do, and now ‘we’re trying to shunt on to the boys’. Duncan spoke in percentages, saying for example that emptying the dishwasher is ‘60% me and 40% Ellen’, and that he does food-shopping ‘90% of the time’.

When I asked whether he thinks the way domestic tasks happen works well, Duncan said, ‘I think so. I think Ellen is a little bit unhappy with the amount of cooking’. He said this is partly because the kitchen is isolated from the living areas, and he hopes to address this soon by taking out a wall. ‘She doesn’t take the initiative to ask people to help much, either. Or doesn’t persevere if she does’. Next I asked whether the way it happens is fair. Duncan replied:

I would like the boys to do more. Mainly for training, because at some stage they’re going to leave home, and having lived in student houses I know how frustrating it is when you get someone in there who’s useless or deliberately avoids doing work. And I think that’s directly related to what they were encouraged, forced to do when they were at home. I think our boys are probably above average, but I would still like to see them doing more.

Duncan described the division of tasks as ‘basically’ fair, saying ‘I sometimes feel a little bit guilty about housework’, particularly ‘being a male and I don’t cook’. He explained:
When there’s discussions of who does what, cooking seems to be the key one. If the male doesn’t do the cooking he’s not much of a helper. Which I object to, on the grounds of discrimination, and also because I think it’s unfair to think that cooking’s much of a task. So sometimes with that social pressure I feel like I’m not doing enough in the house. But I do a lot of other things as well. It just doesn’t seem to carry as much weight with people.

If domestic tasks worked better, Duncan said, ‘There’d be less need to direct or notice things that need doing, especially as far as the boys are concerned. They should be able to recognise [when] things need doing, and spontaneously do it. That’s the ideal I would aim for’. Duncan said it is he who does most of the noticing and directing, around domestic tasks. He added, ‘I guess, socially I should occasionally cook, just for my own practice’. I asked, ‘Do you think that really, or do you feel obliged to think it?’ Duncan replied, ‘No I don’t. I feel obliged to think it. I’m a bit sensitive to those things, so I feel obliged that way’.

Talking about the work of planning and organising, Duncan said the boys need to be reminded repeatedly, to do their tasks. Otherwise, ‘with Ellen and I it’s usually pretty automatic. Casual things like sometimes “Oh it’s getting a bit late, better start the dinner”. That’s all, that’s not a problem’.

Considering whether the way the work of planning and organising happens is fair, and how it could be better, Duncan said this has to do with how people feel.

I think the boys should be more motivated and self-disciplined about doing their tasks and helping out with other ones. If they were observant they would see when we were [feeling] overworked, and get a bit involved, but it doesn’t seem to happen. When they’re in a good mood they will help when asked, but they’re pretty good at using excuses. I’m tired, I’ve got work to do, things like that. So on average, it’s fair. It could be fairer. Fair’s a relative term because it relates to how people feel, [and] what the tasks are.

Duncan described the way emotion work happens in the family as ‘pretty haphazard’. He said ‘I deal mainly with Marcus on these things’, because he and Marcus are similar in temperament and talk together easily. ‘I find Harry quite problematic. I call him
passive aggressive, the more I push the more he resists. So I often leave that up to Ellen’.

Next I asked about the work of setting expectations for the kids’ behaviour. Duncan sighed, and said:

I’m usually the one who has to tell the kids that they haven’t quite done the job properly and they’ve got to keep at it until they do get it right. And consequently cop a lot of flack from that. Marcus can get aggravated and aggressive, but he’ll usually end up doing it, and later he’ll realise that it’s better to do it properly than half heartedly. Harry on the other hand has his own standards and refuses to acknowledge that my standards have any relevance to it whatsoever. So it’s often up to Ellen to do that.

Duncan said he has had ‘huge arguments with Ellen’ about what they should expect from the kids. One persistent problem is that when the boys want to do something ‘Ellen tends to just say yes without thinking about it. I always either say no, or insist they do something else first’. Duncan said he is more sensitive to what the boys do or do not do, than Ellen is, and he finds this kind of emotion work exhausting. ‘I tend to be more actively involved in trying to achieve better outcomes for the boys. Ellen’s more casual, accepting, spontaneous, she can have fun with them. I often don’t seem to have that much fun with them’. Duncan believes persevering with the boys in this way is important, because ‘I see so many atrociously socially maladjusted kids at school, and I don’t want that to happen to my kids’.

When I asked about the work of looking after feelings and supporting relationships in the family, Duncan said, ‘I’m pretty needy that way. I often get quite aggressive in trying to get Ellen to help me out, and sometimes jealous when she’s spending time with the boys’. This is particularly so now that the kids are older. ‘I could understand when they were kids, and I accepted that. Ellen had more time for them, she was the mother’. Even then, ‘I had to be involved in a bit of the “you need to tidy up your toys”’. Now, Duncan said, he will notice how Marcus is feeling, ‘and sometimes confront him, if I’m convinced there’s something there. He takes it well actually’. 
Duncan said he and Ellen have tried to behave with their boys differently from the ways their parents did with them, so ‘we’ve raised them without a whole load of strictures, conditioning, that we had’. In particular, ‘I’ve tried not to be as distant as my father was. I tried to be more emotionally involved than my father, although that often ends up just being anger [laugh]’. He added: ‘That’s another one of my gripes. Men, we’re allowed anger, and the feminists are taking that away from us now. What have we got left?’

Duncan said he finds it difficult to focus on how good the boys are, rather than on how he thinks they should change. ‘I have people tell me they’re great kids. And I’m thinking oh they could be better’. The boys ‘feel pretty bad’ when he and Ellen argue, but a feeling of ‘ingrained guilt’ can have the positive outcome of encouraging the boys to think more carefully about how they behave.

When I asked whether the way emotion work is shared is fair, Duncan replied:

No I don’t. I don’t think it’s fair. I’m much more the front person, and consequently cop a lot because of that. I’m primarily involved in the nasty stuff, the discipline and the telling off, where Ellen gets to do the comforting and the casual friendly things. I’ve made her aware of this, and she says she’s trying to work at it, but I’m not at all happy with progress there.

Duncan said he and Ellen argue about what expectations should be set for the kids, and how they should be enforced.

I believe that when dealing with the kids on these things it should be pretty much immediate. Whenever something is noticed, it should be dealt with then. So the excuse of ‘I’m just doing this’ or ‘I’m watching my television show’ doesn’t wash. I tend to be the one who notices these things, so I tend to be the one who actually deals with them. If there was two of us actively and verbally enforcing that, [it would be better]. I’d like Ellen when she sees them, she should see them, to deal with them straight away, rather than not noticing, or saying ‘oh later’.

Duncan observed ‘the idea of different temperaments’ is sometimes used to argue against this view, but this is misguided. ‘I think everybody should notice these things,
and when people don’t notice them that indicates some level of avoidance. Unobservant people get that way’.

Thinking about how he had learned about domestic labour in his family of origin, Duncan said his parents had been ‘traditional’, with his mother doing the cooking and his father ‘the disciplining’. The kids took turns doing dishes, otherwise the girls did indoor chores and the boys did outdoor. Duncan did not mention what expectations were set for the kids, about standards and immediacy, or what ‘disciplining’ involved.

Duncan explained that the way domestic labour happens now is different, because circumstances are different. ‘If we’re both working there has to be a much more equal division of labour. If one person’s working and one’s at home, I would consider work to be one job and the home, to be another’. When I asked whether he sees there is a mum job and a dad job, Duncan replied, ‘I guess Ellen does most of the cooking, and deals with clothes repairs and clothes shopping. Whereas I tend to be involved with labouring type things’. In relation to the emotional aspects of parenting, Duncan said, ‘Unfortunately it seems to be me being the disciplinarian and Ellen being the comforter. I’m not happy with that at all, but that’s the way it’s worked out’. He added, ‘I guess it is changing but very slowly. But then I’m never comfortable with the pace of change, the way things are’.

Thinking about how his kids might arrange domestic labour when they are adults, Duncan said:

I would hope they would go through a similar process of accepting some of my values and adopting other ones. Hopefully as each generation goes on they have a better chance of getting it right.

Regarding the division of emotion work into ‘mum the comforter’ and ‘dad the disciplinarian’, Duncan said ‘I really hope they don’t get sucked into that one. I don’t think it’s particularly healthy’.
Marcus: *You kind of have to get on with it. You either do it straight away or whinge and then do it.*

Marcus began his account of domestic tasks by saying, ‘Dad does general labour, [like] chopping wood. He never cooks’. Marcus said it is he who cooks on the evenings that Ellen does not, and that ‘mum cooks pretty much all meals for dad, as well’. Regarding cleaning, Marcus said, ‘Harry and I share the rest, like cleaning the toilet, vacuuming, and things like shaking out the rugs’. When I asked about the bathroom he said, ‘The bathroom doesn’t get done often. When it does get done it will be whoever’s there’. Cleaning the kitchen is another thing that ‘doesn’t usually happen’. For tasks like this, ‘Dad will notice that it hasn’t been cleaned, and mum’s out, so it’s like Marcus get to work in the kitchen, Harry clean the microwave. [Or] mum will say when you have a shower give it a good scrub, that kind of thing’. Marcus said he and Harry do these tasks ‘usually with a bit of whingeing and complaining. But there’s not much room for that, you kind of have to get on with it. You either do it straight away or whinge and then do it [laugh]’.

Marcus said the way domestic tasks happen ‘works better than expected’. He explained by comparing his family with those of his friends.

*I talk to my friends, and you know they get paid 50 bucks a week for doing jack all. I mean they all have maids, their parents do all the work, all they have to do is sit around, eat, watch TV and do homework, and that’s it. I wouldn’t want to be like them.*

Marcus identified two sets of reasons why the way his family works is ‘a good thing, for me’. The first was ‘because I’ve discovered that girls like a guy who can work a fair bit, can actually cook dinners and that sort of thing’. The other had to do with communication within the family.

*I know some people who don’t talk to their parents at all. They just have a really bad relationship with them. And I find that problems outside the family become inside the family when housework’s involved. Because you’ll be not in a mood to do housework, and they’ll say look do it. And you’ll say no I’m not in the mood, and you end up talking about it. And by the end of it, you’ve done the job and you’ve talked about it, and you’re like how did that happen?*
A lot of people say they don’t really know their parents that well, they can’t communicate with them, can’t tell them certain things. I can tell my parents anything, like how drunk I got that night, and what happened, and waking up next morning next to some girl who you don’t even remember, and all that kind of thing. My friends look at me and say shock horror, because I’ve told them something like that.

Marcus said his parents are ‘very open’, and will discuss anything with the kids. He said the family is also comfortable about nudity and sex, in ways that his friends find shocking. Marcus said, ‘I know people who wouldn’t dream of seeing their parents naked, or walking in on them when they are in bed together’. On some occasions, ‘I would be going in and asking questions and [my friends] would ask me what they were doing and I’m like oh they’re having sex. What! [laugh] The shock on their faces’.

Marcus said the way domestic tasks happen is ‘quite fair’, although ‘I’ve been slacking off a bit, because of schoolwork’. He added, ‘I think cooking could be shared around a bit more, because mum does it every single night. I wouldn’t mind dad getting involved with cooking, a bit’. When I asked in what other ways things might be different, Marcus said ‘I have a bad habit of trying to get my jobs onto somebody else, like I’ll try to ask Harry to do something for me’. He added, ‘I find Harry’s really slack in doing things that are asked of him. Or he’ll start doing it but won’t finish the job properly’.

When I asked about the work of planning and organising, Marcus’s response was immediate: he said, ‘Dad does it’.

If there’s something that needs to be organised, dad’s the one who says you do this blah blah. He’s the one who takes control over what gets done when. Dad likes to be organised, and he gets quite depressed [because] it’s hard to be organised with two teenage sons, and mum who’s quite happy to leave things and do it when she feels like it. Quite a few arguments arise with people not doing things straight away, [when] dad asks them to, or when mum doesn’t ask someone to do the job. She’d rather do it herself than go through the process of getting one of us to do it. And dad disagrees with that.
Marcus said the way this happens is ‘not fair. I think the responsibility should be spread around the family’. When I asked what this would look like, Marcus said, ‘I think mum should take more responsibility for things that need to be done and actually getting us to do it’. For this to happen would involve Ellen changing her approach. At the moment, Marcus explained:

If mum wants us to do something, mum will ask us. Dad will say Marcus go clean that up, while mum will say would you please clean this up. I find dad’s tone more direct. And somewhat harsh, but it’s saying do it. Not if you feel like it. Whereas mum’s more nice about it. I prefer dad’s way, because it actually sounds like it needs to be done. Whereas mum will say can you please do this, there doesn’t seem to be as much strength, in like authority. It doesn’t motivate me as much.

At the same time, Marcus said, ‘Dad needs to probably be nicer about it’. His parents’ roles are polarised, with ‘dad being kind of the bad person and mum being the goody. I’d like it if they were a bit closer, like a bit more even’.

When I asked about emotion work, Marcus described a pattern he sees in the emotional dynamics of the family.

I have this theory that mum and Harry are very similar. While dad and myself are very similar. And the arguments mum and dad get into are very similar to the arguments I have with Harry. And mum will agree with Harry and all his ideas, while I’ll strongly disagree. But I agree with dad’s theories. When dad gets upset I’m the one who comforts him and actually understands him, while mum can’t.

I’m a bit of a go-between, between dad and mum a lot of the time. Because dad’ll be angry with her, and she doesn’t know why, and she’ll ask him and it makes him even more angry. Sometimes I go up to her and put my points forward and say well I think he’s angry because of this. A lot of the time I feel like him, I get quite angry with [mum]. Dad can’t communicate very well with mum, the way he’s feeling. I’m a lot better at communicating. The two pairs don’t really support each other at all. They just coexist.
Marcus said, ‘I don’t like [mum and dad] arguing, because they both just end up getting more hurt. I try and sort it out’. The ‘real’ work of parenting, ‘what I think is parenting, which is the work ethic, being able to do things, that side of thing, is taken on by dad’. In contrast, ‘the emotional side, feeling good, all that sort of thing, is taken on by mum’. Marcus said he is not sure that the emotional nurturing work done by his mother is a good thing, as it encourages feelings ‘that should not be endorsed’.

Marcus noted that ‘Dad often feels neglected because mum takes a lot of notice [of] her children rather than her husband’. This is related to the ‘two pairs’ idea, where one pair is happy alone, the other is only happy in company. ‘Mum and my brother could sit down by themselves for hours, while dad and myself get quite depressed about it’. When I asked how emotion work might be better, Marcus replied, ‘I think there’d be more attention given to each other across the pairs’. I asked Marcus what would have to happen, for that change to come about. He said, ‘I have no idea. If it could, and if I knew how, I’d try and work towards it’.

Marcus said, ‘I don’t believe there should be a mum job and a dad job’, but in their family there is.

Mum cooks, and she does all the emotion work. While dad’s the one who works on the heavy labour, and also making us do things straight away, making us ride our bikes early in the morning when we have to do paper rounds, making me ride to work, get to school on time, do my homework.

Thinking about how domestic labour might be arranged when he is an adult, Marcus said:

I can see it being somewhat like this family, with me being the father figure definitely by telling them, getting them to do jobs, and that kind of thing. I also think things would be done more together. That would definitely be one of the main differences. [And] probably a lot more communication. Instead of dad just sitting down reading books and mum cooking dinner.

Marcus said he would like an arrangement where his wife took on the work of comforting, and emotional support with the children, and he did more of what he called ‘the actual parenting’. ‘I’d like there to be just as much of a polarised situation [as there
is here], but more communication between the two, more of a balance’. Most importantly, he would aim to achieve an openness of communication in the family, in the same way there is here.

I’d like to be able to sit down with my kids and talk about their emotions and feelings and that kind of thing. Mum and dad are very open, and I find [that] incredibly helpful. I think that’s one thing that’s actually made this family work quite well. It’s also made it stay together. I’m quite happy to be in a family that’s incredibly open, in every single situation on the planet.

Harry: Mum goes out of her way a bit more than dad does. Dad’s a bit more fixed in his ways.

Harry began his account of domestic tasks with ‘mum does most of the cooking, and dad does the finance stuff, shares and things like that. And he does labour jobs, like chopping wood. A lot of the small jobs me and my brother do’. Harry said when they are asked to do things, ‘sometimes it might seem inconvenient, you might say maybe later’. When he and Marcus don’t do tasks, Ellen does them. Harry said when they drew up a list of tasks to allocate, ‘we filled up like a whole page. I was shocked at the amount of stuff that really needed to be done’. About the work of driving kids around, Harry said they mostly use public transport. Otherwise, ‘usually mum does it. Mum probably goes out of her way a bit more than dad does. Dad’s a bit more fixed in his ways’.

Harry said domestic tasks work well ‘usually’, although ‘a problem for me is sometimes I forget to do a job, or forget to do a job fully. And then I have to stop what I’m doing, and fix it up’. The problem here is his parents’ standards. ‘Sometimes mum and dad expect me to do a job straight away, when they ask. And it could be really inconvenient then. I can’t really tell them, because they just think I’m trying to get out of it or something. That’s caused a few problems’.

While the way domestic tasks are distributed is ‘mostly’ fair, Harry said:

Sometimes I feel like dad doesn’t do much work himself, he just keeps on getting all the crappy jobs, handing them off to the kids to do. But he does all the finance stuff, and he does like shares, [and they] are really quite stressful for him. [Dad]
feels like he’s doing more than he should. And whenever he sees me, or Marcus or mum just sitting around relaxing he’s usually getting us up working.

Part of the problem is that ‘mum and dad’s standards are bit high. If they lowered their standards about ten, twenty percent it would be twice as easy. I think [they] should just back off a bit and relax’. I remarked that he would get a chance to do it his way when he leaves home, and Harry replied under his breath (I did not hear this until I listened to the recording), ‘can’t wait’.

About planning and organising, Harry said ‘dad is the main person who does all of those things. As you read them out, I was thinking dad dad dad for all of them’. Harry said Duncan wants people to do things at the time and to the standard that he thinks is right, and is not prepared to compromise on this. ‘I reckon it would balance out if he backed off a bit. But he wants it the other way: [he says] if we took it up, he’d back off’.

When I asked if this aspect of domestic labour works well, Harry replied, ‘Not really, no. Dad’s the main voice about what really gets done’. Thinking about whether this is fair, Harry reflected:

I reckon it’s not fair on him. He’s taken on the big job and he’s not really coping with it. I think he’s got to learn to let go. But I think he’s afraid to. [If he] let go he’d be happier. He wouldn’t be so stressed. The house would be a bit messy to start off with, but eventually we would get the hang of it.

I think dad’s taken on an amazing amount of responsibility, that he can’t handle. He’s always saying, you know, to get rights you need to have responsibilities. Responsibilities come before rights. You don’t have the right to go on the internet until you’ve done your responsibility of homework or schoolwork. He’s a big person on that. If we were to get our rights before our responsibilities he wouldn’t be happy.

When I asked about how emotion work happens, Harry said, ‘That’s all mum. Mum’s very soft and gentle and loving and kind, and dad’s very you know, strong, tough, like
the opposite. Sometimes it doesn’t work out very well’. I asked Harry what it would look like if it worked better. He reflected:

Dad feels like he’s responsible for everyone else and what they get done. And mum seems to be responsible for comforting, and keeping it together basically. What mum and dad need to do is share that a bit. But dad’s too afraid to change, and expects mum to change first. So dad expects mum to get stuck into us about working, and get stuck into herself about working and getting things done, and then maybe he’d back off, and become a more loving person or something like that.

Harry said Ellen and Duncan are ‘like the two ends of the scale. Maybe it has to do with opposites attract. I think they fill each other’s gaps. Maybe that’s why they got married and had kids’.

When he is an adult, Harry said, ‘I’m not going to be like my parents’. To avoid this, ‘I’m trying to study what I think is wrong in my parents, my dad, what I don’t like about what he does. And I’m thinking about how I’d make it different when I’ve got kids’. There are some things his mum and dad do well, that he would like to keep. ‘They don’t spoil us. They don't get us every little thing we want. But they do get us big things, like the computer, or school trips. If we got every little thing we wanted there wouldn’t be money for the big things’.

Harry said if he had kids, ‘I wouldn’t rely on [them] to keep up the standard I expect. I’d keep the standard I could keep it at, with my wife, and then if my kids can do it higher, that’s great’. He continued:

I reckon we’d have to discuss it for sure. Who needs to do what, and how we are going to do it. What I sometimes feel with mum and dad is they haven’t really agreed on things, before they came to us. So dad might want us to do something, and tell us to do it, and then mum might not be happy with the decision but she wouldn’t say much. But if mum made a decision, and dad didn’t like it, then he’d say things like you’re undermining me.

Harry said his parents have aired their differences around domestic labour in a very public way. ‘It is a bit unfortunate that we have to be involved with that’
What ideas did they refer to and what does it all mean?

All family members referred to ideas about parents and kids. An expectation that children should do domestic tasks is not disputed in this family. People differed in their views as to how this expectation should be interpreted. Duncan stated his view most clearly, saying that when asked to do something, kids’ responses should be ‘pretty much immediate’. Marcus agreed with his dad’s ideas, while Ellen was ambivalent. Ellen said she has found it difficult in to enforce Duncan’s expectations, but now sees that he is right. Ellen has accepted the idea that when Duncan is angry this is her fault, and it is up to her to interpret and defuse his anger. Harry persists in asserting the view that Duncan’s expectations are unreasonable. In Harry’s opinion that family would work better if his father’s expectations were moderated.

To explain why Ellen does all the cooking even though she would like Duncan to share in this work, Duncan and Ellen referred to ideas about skills and efficiency. Ellen is better at cooking, and Duncan is better at trading shares. As in the Hume and Napier families, the work of managing finances appears here as an iconic task that absolves a man of any requirement to participate in routine domestic work. As in those families, the idea that a skills deficit might be addressed by a man learning to do certain tasks better is not considered.

Ideas and conflict

In this family there are two pairs of stories about domestic labour. One says that the way we do domestic labour here is good: children should be expected to do whatever is asked of them, to do it immediately and to the standard set by their parents. The other says these expectations are too extreme, and the family would work better if the kids were allowed more slack. The two stories are effectively ‘bridged’ in Ellen’s account of domestic labour.

Ellen said she agrees with Duncan’s ideas now, although for a long time she did not. In practice she continues to resist his ideas, in the sense that where Duncan is ‘the bad fairy, with this curse’, Ellen is ‘softening the curse’. In taking on the role of enforcing Duncan’s ideas Ellen moderates them to some extent, as her approach to enforcement is less harsh than his would be.
The older son Marcus agrees with his dad’s ideas, and is similar to him in temperament. Marcus states clearly that he thinks the way his family does domestic labour is good, because involving kids in housework is an effective way of promoting communication in the family. For Marcus the family culture of ‘openness’ is unequivocally a good thing. Harry, the younger son, gives voice to what Ellen described as her ‘old, bad way of thinking’. He says everyone would be less stressed if his parents lowered their standards a little, and allowed the kids more latitude. Unlike Marcus, he described his parents’ explicitness in argument as something that it is ‘unfortunate that [the boys] had to be involved in’.

Overall the dominant story is ‘the way we do things here is good’. The alternative story, that asserts that the way Duncan wants things to be is too extreme, is not recognised as legitimate within the terms of the dominant story. In practice it is alive and well, as embodied in Ellen’s softening of Duncan’s expectations, and Harry’s continued resistance.

In this family, the expectation that kids do domestic work is understood to promote communication between parents and children. The way that Marcus and Harry are so articulate and perceptive in discussing the way their family happens is evidence that the communication fostered by practices in the family has some positive outcomes. The bite is that these expectations are set, and practices played out, within a framework of the father seeking to exert control over other family members. Duncan is unable to tolerate divergence from his views. He wants immediate, unquestioning and total obedience, from the boys and from Ellen. What Duncan does, and how Ellen and the boys respond to him, reads like a textbook example of domestic violence.

A fundamental characteristic of this is Ellen’s adopting the view that she is responsible for Duncan’s anger. As she put it, ‘He is damaged because of me’. Ellen believes she is responsible for what Duncan feels, and how he behaves. She must figure out what it is ‘that I do to trigger his anger’, and then stop doing it. Marcus also accepts that it is Ellen’s responsibility to do this. In nobody’s account is it suggested that Duncan should be responsible for managing his own feelings. Only Harry suggested that Duncan should have to compromise. Everyone else must adjust to accommodate Duncan, and
he need not adjust to anyone else. As Harry said, ‘dad’s too afraid to change, and expects mum to change first’.

In Duncan’s, Ellen’s and Marcus’ accounts it is implied or assumed that no family member is entitled to maintain boundaries, whether to do with personal space, or with bodily or emotional privacy. In these accounts also it is understood that there is a ‘right way’ of doing things, and that a person who knows what is the ‘right way’ is entitled, as Ellen put it, to ‘force me to open up’ and participate in a relationship on his terms. In Duncan’s account, and in Marcus’s, it appears that neither has any idea of compromise as an option, unless it is done by someone else.

These dynamics operate within the setting of a family culture that is insular. All family members recognise that the way they do things is different from other families they know. This contributes to a strong sense of family identity: this is our way, and our way is good. A corollary is that values that are accepted outside the family – as Duncan put it, ‘all the standard practices’ of parenting – are taken not to apply. Taken together, these characteristics describe a family in which the emotional dynamics are those of abuse (compare Scutt 1983; DVIRC 1998, 2006).

The ongoing discussion and airing of disagreements in the Edgeworth family is a powerful strategy of resistance to Duncan’s attempts to exert control. Duncan’s authority must be fought for. It is subject to negotiation and must be achieved in the end by consent.

We can see the way Ellen tells her story as a strategy she adopts to allow her to make sense of her situation and maintain her family life. By telling her story as ‘I used not to understand his views but now I think he is right’, Ellen is able to keep the family together, and to support Duncan while at the same time moderating his excesses. If we consider the rationale Ellen uses to explain her approach in relation to the literature on family violence, the family dynamic can be seen to be clearly abusive. Considering Ellen’s rationale in context of this study gives another view. Ellen created in her interview an account of her family life that acts as ‘cover story’, that is different in degree, but not in kind, from the stories told by other women. Like the women in previous chapters, Ellen is doing whatever it takes to make her family work.
Anticipating the future
The account Marcus gave suggests that he looks forward to assuming the authority he sees as being associated with being a father, when he is an adult. Marcus intends to participate more in domestic work, particularly with cooking, but that the model of paternal authority adopted in his family is a good thing, is unquestioned. Harry is more critical of his father, and would like to manage domestic labour differently from the way his parents have done.

Summing up
Family members’ accounts combine to tell a story of Duncan as someone who is seeking control. The family seems to be constructed with reference to Duncan’s need to have things his own way, with no recognition of personal boundaries, personal views or personal space. Duncan’s way of operating is resisted by Harry and moderated by Ellen. A corollary of the absence of boundaries is the openness of communication in the family, which appears to be the basis for the unusual fluency of the boys in talking about emotional matters and family dynamics. The whole edifice rests on Ellen being willing to maintain the story that ‘Duncan is right and his anger is my responsibility’, while still seeking to ‘soften the curse’ in everyday practice.

8.3 WHY OVERT CONFLICT?
In these families relations of entitlement and obligation that commonly apply between women and men, and parents and children, are explicitly repudiated. Clara and Gavin Middleton reject the idea that women should be obliged to provide service to men. Duncan and Ellen Edgeworth reject the idea that parents should be obliged to provide service to children. In both families the usual hierarchy of work is disputed, as Clara Middleton asserts an entitlement to give her paid work, study and leisure ahead of an obligation to provide domestic service, and Duncan Edgeworth asserts that children should not be entitled to put their study, paid work or leisure ahead of an obligation to perform domestic work. In Fallding’s terms the Middleton family represents unstable partnership, and the Edgeworth family, forced patriarchy. In Hochschild’s terms the Middleton family represents an egalitarian arrangement. The Edgeworth family has no place in Hochschild’s schema, embodying as it does a practice of patriarchal ideology alongside the woman’s equal participation in paid work.
CHAPTER NINE  CONCLUSION: WHO CARES ANYWAY?

This chapter presents a summary of findings from the present study, and reflects on some limitations of the methods used. It concludes with suggestions for further research.

9.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study began with the question: How is domestic labour negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids? It aimed to look closely at interactions between people in specific situations in order to identify general patterns in negotiation, and shed light on questions that are debated in the literature around domestic labour.

This section begins by outlining findings in relation to: the distribution of domestic labour in families in the study; the extent of unhappiness or conflict about domestic labour; the strategies people used to create change, and those used to resist change; and how people explained their domestic arrangements. It then summarises the theoretical argument developed in the thesis, and draws on this to answer the question: How is domestic labour negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids? The section concludes by considering what these findings indicate for some unresolved questions in the literature. These are: Is the division of domestic labour between women and men converging? What does the experience of children suggest for future patterns in the division of domestic labour between women and men? Is the domestically useless teenager a problem, and if so, for whom? And: Who cares anyway?

Who did what?

The distribution of domestic labour in families in this study is consistent with patterns seen in other research. Most domestic tasks were done by women. Women did routine tasks that must be completed regularly and on time, and men and children did tasks that were occasional, and discretionary. These patterns have been seen in other studies (for example Bittman 1995, 2000, Baxter 2002a). Tasks like mopping, or cleaning the toilet, were never done by men (as noted also by Grbich 1995). In some families men were ascribed ‘iconic tasks’, such as dealing with finances, mowing, taking out bins, or changing light globes, that excused them from other domestic duties (noted by Hochschild 1989, and Dempsey 1999). Men were sometimes credited with performance of these or other domestic tasks, without actually having to do them (as
found also by Lareau 2000; Maher and Singleton 2003). As in the families studied by Fallding (1957), in most families children were excused from responsibility for domestic work.

In households that did not have a dishwasher, evening dishes were washed by children, or by both parents together. In households that used a dishwasher, this work was more likely to be done by women. This is consistent with Bittman et al.’s (2005) finding, that the presence of this appliance does not reduce the time women spend on domestic work. Of the ten families, three employed a cleaner and two outsourced gardening, a higher proportion than in the general population. This reflects the higher than average incomes of families in this sample (see Bittman 1998a).

In nine of the ten families, women took responsibility for the work of identifying what needs to be done, and making sure it happens, as well as organising who would do what. For women, this meant that if a necessary task was not done by someone else, she had to do it herself. The work of supporting relationships in the family, and managing conflict, was done primarily by women. These patterns have been noted in other studies (for example Hochschild 1989, Duncombe and Marsden 1995; McMahon 1999; Carter 2002; Strazdins and Broom 2004).

**Who wanted arrangements to be different from the way they were?**

In most families, men and children were happy with their domestic arrangements and did not want change. Where there was unhappiness over domestic labour, this was experienced by women. That women express more discontent than men over domestic labour has been observed repeatedly in other studies (see, for example, Dempsey 2002).

In five of the ten families, women were happy with things as they were. Of these women, some would have liked their partners and kids to do more domestic work, but they did not persist in trying to make this happen. With one exception, the women who were happy with their current domestic arrangements, or who had decided to stop trying to make change, had partners who earned high incomes, and the women themselves did little or no paid work. Some of these women had given up paid work in order to manage domestic work without ‘juggling’ other commitments. These families represent the ‘model breadwinner’ approach to family life. As Jordan et al. (1994) observed, for
women in such families a strategy of putting aside their own careers and devoting their time to family work pays off, as long as the marriage survives. These women might prefer if some things were different, but overall, for them, the deal is good.

In the other five families, women were not happy with their current arrangements around domestic labour, and persisted in trying to make change. In these families the women either worked full time, or had recently increased their hours of paid work. For these women the issue was more than just wanting others to do domestic tasks: they wanted others to notice things that need to be done, and to do them, without being asked by her. Achieving change in relation to these aspects of domestic work was even more difficult than achieving change in the division of tasks.

In some families, men and children as well as women were not happy with their domestic arrangements, and wanted things to be different. In most such families the woman did less domestic work than the children or the man would have liked. These men and children were aware that they received a lesser standard of domestic service than their peers, or than had been the case before their wife or mother returned to full-time work. They wanted the woman to do more domestic work, so that there would be less pressure on them to do domestic work themselves. 32

There was an association between conflict over domestic labour, and partners’ relative hours of total work. In most families in which there was no conflict over domestic labour, women did no paid work, or worked part-time. (The exception was the Bateman family, discussed below). In these families the woman’s hours of total were likely, according to ABS (1998) time-use data, to be less than those of her husband. In families in which there was conflict over domestic labour, women worked full-time or nearly full-time. In these families the woman’s hours of total work were likely to be more than those of her husband. These findings suggest that people’s views about the fairness or otherwise of their domestic arrangements should be considered in relation to

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32 The Edgeworth family was the exception here. Duncan Edgeworth was unhappy not because his wife did too little domestic work, but because he thought his children should do more. Duncan wanted immediate and unquestioning obedience from his children and his wife. This family is unusual, in the literature around domestic labour, in the father’s asserting this expectation so explicitly. The Edgeworth family is a thesis in itself: I regret I cannot do it justice here.
their hours of total work relative to those of their partner, rather than just the time each spends on domestic work.  

**What strategies did people use to create change, and to resist change?**

Participants in this study used strategies for creating change in the division of domestic labour, and strategies for resisting change, that have been seen before in other studies.

When women asked their husbands to do domestic tasks, they did so using what Komter (2001) called a strategy of ‘cautiousness’. They asked in a manner that was gentle, slow, and careful to avoid conflict (this was noted also by Hochschild 1989; Bittman and Lovejoy 1993; Goodnow and Bowes 1994; Dempsey 1998; Komter 2001, and Strazdins and Broom 2004). Women adopted this strategy with children also, although their interactions with children were more forceful than those with their partners, sometimes encompassing ‘bribery and corruption’, and ‘yelling’. To encourage their husbands and children to do domestic tasks, women offered lavish appreciation and praise for those tasks they did perform (as noted also by Dempsey 1997a).

Some women made rosters for domestic tasks, although in most families these were not implemented, or if they were, did not last long. Some women adopted a strategy of leaving tasks for later in the hope that someone else would do them, although as noted by Komter (2001), while this strategy worked for men (and in this study, for children), for women it did not. Most women were discouraged from asking other family members to do domestic tasks, because they anticipated negative responses and did not want to deal with them (see also Dempsey 1998; Komter 2001). These women accepted that to persist in asking would be ‘naggy’, ‘petty’, or ‘mum [being] on the warpath again’.

Where women wanted other family members to do domestic work, and others did not do this, most women reduced their expectations of what others should do, and settled for small gains (as observed by Dempsey 1998). Some women adopted a strategy of

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33 As I did not collect information about the time participants spent doing domestic work or other activities, I have no direct information about participants’ hours of total work. As discussed in Chapter Two, ABS (1998:33) data show that, among people living with a partner and dependent children, women who work full-time do more total work than men who work full-time, and women who do no paid work do less total work than men who work full-time. I infer that women and men would be most likely to do equal time in total work where a man works full-time and a woman, part-time.
becoming super-efficient, and doing it all themselves; and to facilitate this, some women reduced their hours of paid work, or abandoned their careers altogether. These strategies were identified also by Hochschild (1989). Women contained their discontent around domestic labour by recourse to cover stories, as discussed below.

Men in this study also employed strategies that have been identified in other research. Some men responded to their wives’ requests by performing tasks grudgingly, and incompetently (as noted also by Hochschild 1989; Bittman and Lovejoy 1993; Dempsey 1979a). Rather than representing domestic tasks as skilled activities that could be learned, men explained their incompetence as related essentially to their being male. Some men maintained they did not notice tasks that their wives said needed doing. Hochschild (1989) and Dempsey (1997a) noted this also. Some men ignored their wives’ requests, or said they would do a task, and then did not do it. Some suggested that their wives should reduce their hours of paid work in order to have more time for their domestic responsibilities.

Some men trivialised the importance of domestic work, and many did not appear to notice much of the domestic work that their wives did (as noted by Lareau 2000, and Singleton and Maher 2004). Men, like women, explained their domestic situation with reference to cover stories.

Where a woman persisted in trying to make change in arrangements for domestic labour, the strategy that worked most effectively for men in resisting her attempts was refusing to talk; firstly about anything to do with domestic labour, and especially about the woman’s feelings of anger, unhappiness, frustration, and exhaustion, arising from it. In this way, domestic labour became something that was ‘not discussed’: it ‘just happened’ (compare Bittman and Lovejoy 1993; Dempsey 1997a; Maher and Singleton 2003).

To resist their mothers’ attempts to get them to do domestic tasks, kids employed strategies similar to those used effectively by their fathers. Kids waited to be asked to do tasks, then did them grudgingly, incompetently, or not at all. Kids claimed not know how to do certain tasks, but did not consider the possibility of learning how to do them. Even more than men, children did not notice much of the work their mothers did. Some
kids represented domestic labour as trivial, and said they were too busy with other activities to have time for such tasks. Most said the division of labour in their household was fine, and that ‘mum does [domestic work] because she’s mum’. Kids’ accounts reflected the cover stories maintained by their parents.

In this study, women’s attempts to get their kids to do housework were successful only where the expectation that kids should do domestic work was explicitly supported by the children’s father. If the father saw it as not important that kids should do housework, or if he supported the woman’s attempts in only a half-hearted way, children could easily evade their mothers’ attempts to get them to do domestic tasks. This finding appeared also in the pilot study (Carter 2002, 2003).

**How did people explain their domestic arrangements?**

Across the sample, common patterns appeared as people explained why domestic labour happens as it does. The ideas people referred to have been noted in other studies, for example those of Hochschild (1989), Bartkowski (1999), Komter (2001) and Maher and Singleton (2003).

In interviews, participants began with a story that says the way domestic labour happens in our family is good. This is the ‘morally adequate account’ identified by Jordan et al. (1994). Some people, usually women, went on to explain that their domestic arrangements were not okay, and should be different. If you studied these families using methods that asked fixed-choice questions, or questions that allowed only for short answers, you would hear only the first set of stories. As Maher and Singleton (2003) noted, giving people room to talk and reflect allows room for other stories to emerge. The present study demonstrates also that using data from multiple perspectives, and considering the way family members’ stories fit together, allows us to see how a dominant story operates in a family to keep stories about discontent submerged (Carter 2004).

When explaining why their arrangements for domestic labour were good, participants called on ideas to do with choice, efficiency and skills. The first idea referred to was choice. Adults said, ‘the way we do domestic labour is a consequence of the choices we have made: we chose to have kids, or to have this career, or these careers, we chose to
send the kids to private schools, we chose this lifestyle’. Adults and children referred to the man’s occupation as the ‘bottom line’ in determining domestic arrangements, particularly where this occupation involved long hours and a high income. A corollary to ideas about choice appeared in women’s accounts. Women said, ‘If I don’t like it, it’s my fault’. Note the language here: women and men said, ‘It was our choice’; women said, ‘It’s my problem’. Gender-neutral language about ‘parenting’ constructs the work of childrearing in terms of personal, discretionary choices, involving work that can be opted into or out of, at will. As Craig (2004b) noted, such language has the effect of making the differences between the experiences of women and men invisible.

Next, domestic arrangements were explained with reference to ideas about efficiency, associated with 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 being to do with gender. As Fallding (1957) observed 50 years ago, in either case it was the same set of skills being explained.

Women called on ideas about gender particularly when they wanted to explain why their arrangements were acceptable, even if they were not ideal. When men mentioned gender it was usually to disavow its relevance. Men said the division of labour ‘is not about gender’; although some went on to explain, later, that really it is. Older kids said that who does what domestic work has nothing to do with gender, but younger kids did not. It was as if older kids had learned that this was the correct thing to say, and younger kids had not learned that yet.

Accounts that called on ideas about choice, efficiency and skill formed the dominant story in most families. Underneath these dominant stories were others, told mostly by women. These said that the way domestic labour happens is not okay, and I should be able to enjoy leisure and pursue other priorities, just as others are. Women’s stories called on ideas about fairness, but did so tentatively. Fairness is a ‘difficult’ concept, that might look different to ‘male eyes’. In most families, these themes appeared in women’s accounts, and were acknowledged to some degree, or not at all, in accounts from other family members. The submerged stories were reconciled with the cover story by recourse to ideas about individual and essential differences between women and men, and ideas about parents and kids.
A hierarchy of work

The way people explained their arrangements for domestic labour assumed a hierarchy in the way work is valued (see Figure 8, below). This hierarchy holds that men and kids are entitled to put their work or schooling or leisure ahead of domestic obligations, while women are not. Women can pursue a career, study, or leisure only to the extent that these activities do not interfere with their obligation to do domestic work.

![Diagram of hierarchy of work](image)

**Figure 8: Hierarchy of work**

In my sample, families with no conflict over domestic labour were those in which this hierarchy was not disputed. Where a woman wanted to put other priorities ahead of her domestic obligations, there was conflict. This hierarchy is implicit in accounts from all families in the present study. In families that experience conflict over domestic labour the hierarchy becomes more visible as it is more actively disputed.

In this hierarchy there is an anomaly in the way domestic labour is valued. It is implied in most accounts, and explicit in several, that domestic tasks are menial, to be done by someone who has nothing more important to do with their time. Ideally these tasks should be outsourced, and the work of coordination managed invisibly by the mother (as noted also by Hochschild 2003b). At the same time, the work of nurturing is sacred, and properly done by mothers. When domestic tasks are seen as an expression of
nurturing, these tasks also become sacred, and properly done by mothers. The sacredness of nurturing is the bottom-line idea called on to explain why the hierarchy of work is acceptable even if women do not really like it.

The hierarchy of work implies relations of entitlement and obligation that apply between women and men, and parents and kids. The idea that men have an entitlement to receive service from women and women have an obligation to provide it is usually repudiated in theory. People say, ‘It’s not about gender’. In practice, women provide domestic service to men. The idea that kids have an entitlement to receive service from parents and parents have an obligation to provide it is rarely disputed.

Most people in this study take for granted the idea that parents should do things for kids. This idea is most explicit in accounts from children. They say mum does the domestic work, and dad’s job is to do whatever mum does not. Again the language is interesting. In theory the category ‘parents’ is gender neutral, but in practice an obligation to provide service rests with mothers. Where Okin (1996) proposed that boys learn, in their families, a sense of entitlement and girls one of obligation, my findings show that, in families like these, children of both sexes learn a sense of entitlement. In families in this study an obligation to provide domestic service comes, not with being female, but with being a mother.

These theoretical statements sound confronting when stated baldly, but they are well supported in the data. Families in which there is no conflict over domestic labour are those in which the woman does not dispute the hierarchy of work. Families in which conflict is simmering under the surface are those in which the woman tries to assert an entitlement to put other priorities ahead of an obligation to do domestic work, and other family members resist this. Families with overt conflict over domestic labour are those in which the hierarchy of work is upset. In these families the relations of entitlement and obligation that are implied in the hierarchy are explicitly and actively disputed.

The hierarchy of work is visible in families across the spectrum. The hierarchy implies relations of entitlement and obligation. And those relations are clearly visible in the families where there is a high level of conflict over domestic labour.
How is domestic labour negotiated in two-parent families with teenage kids?

Women have a greater interest in negotiation of domestic labour than do men or children, as in most families if a necessary task is not done by someone else, it is done by the woman. It is not surprising then that in most families, negotiating domestic labour is women’s work.

In two-parent families with teenage kids, domestic labour is negotiated with reference to the hierarchy of work described above. This hierarchy operates in Komter’s (2001) terms as ‘invisible power’, because while its influence is pervasive, as it is usually not explicit it is difficult to dispute. Where women do dispute the hierarchy of work, as noted by Hochschild (1989), the struggle over what she is entitled to feel can be more important than the struggle over what she or others should be expected to do. The feeling rules around domestic labour maintain that to feel anger or upset over such a trivial matter is not legitimate. Claiming an entitlement to feel unhappy about the current division of labour involves for women, as Benjamin (2003:15) put it, ‘saying the unsayable’.

The framing rules around domestic labour hold concurrently that domestic labour is not about gender, and at the same time, that it is. The ‘discourses of equity’ identified by Singleton and Maher (2004) operate alongside the idea that the work of nurturing, of which performance of domestic tasks in families may be seen as an expression, is naturally the province of women. This is a characteristic proposed by Komter (2001:278) to indicate the operation of hegemony, in which contradictory claims are taken to indicate common sense, and their inconsistency is not identified as a problem.

We might also understand negotiation in terms of hierarchy more generally. Most kids learn, in their families, that there are some people who are entitled to have domestic work done for them, and there are others - usually mothers - who have an obligation to do it. My data suggest an association between a person’s ideas about entitlement and obligation in relation to domestic labour and the class situation of their family of origin.

This can be seen in the account created by Neville Sullivan, who explained that both his parents worked in professional occupations, and they had a housekeeper who came every day and did all the domestic work. For Neville, it is obvious and natural that
domestic work should be outsourced, managed by his wife, and be no concern of his. It appears also in the account created by Clara Middleton, whose parents had been accustomed to living with servants, and who had adjusted with difficulty to life without them. Clara contemplates the domestic chaos in which her family lives with a bewildered puzzlement, but does not feel that it has anything, really, to do with her. It is clear in these accounts that both Neville and Clara feel that domestic service is something that is rightly provided by people of lesser, or at least different, status than themselves. Clara’s account demonstrates that this situation of privilege can be claimed irrespective of gender.

My findings suggest that the more affluent the family, the more likely it will be that domestic labour is understood in a hierarchy based on relations of class rather than those of gender. In most families, children as well as men claim an entitlement to be someone who has domestic work done for them, rather than someone who must do such work for others. In families that can afford it, women claim this status also.

These attitudes fit well with the increasing incidence of affluent families employing live-in nannies and maids, documented in the US by Hochschild (2000:131, 2002:15-20). While such outsourcing of domestic service is not new in Australia (see Gilding 1991), it operates in Hochschild’s analysis to support the functioning of families that aspire to an ‘egalitarian’ arrangement in which women participate in public life on the same terms as men. While the practice of extensive outsourcing may allow some women to ‘buy out’ of their obligations under the hierarchy of work, responsibility for establishing and maintaining such arrangements continues to rest with women.

So while the hierarchy of work discussed above establishes relations of obligation and entitlement that are associated with gender and parenting, these relations can be seen as referring also to status more generally. An entitlement to place one’s interests and activities ahead of an obligation to do domestic work may be aspired to by anyone. The extent to which a person can achieve this is determined in part by their gender, in part by their status as parent or child, and in part by their economic circumstances.
While the primary concern of this thesis is how domestic labour is negotiated in families with teenage kids, findings from this study suggest answers to some other unresolved questions in the literature around domestic labour. I discuss these below.

**Is the division of domestic labour between women and men converging?**

My findings suggest that the division of domestic labour between women and men has converged less than some studies would indicate, and that further convergence is unlikely.

I argue that optimistic views about the extent and direction of change in the division of domestic labour are supported by misinformation. Findings from this study show that in initial answers to questions about who does what, women, men and kids overstate the amount of domestic work done by men. As respondents give more detail the initial statements about what men do are shown to be misleading, as ‘we do it’, or ‘mum and dad do it’ is explained to mean ‘she does it’. In addition, men and children appear to be unaware of much of the domestic work done by women.

This pattern has been noted by also Hochschild (1989), Lareau (2000), and Maher and Singleton (2003). It indicates that studies that ask fixed-choice questions report the ‘cover story’. Such studies will overstate the participation of men, and understate the extent of conflict over domestic labour. It follows that the division of domestic labour between women and men has converged less than some ‘optimistic accounts’ (McMahon 1999:5) would suggest.

Patterns of ideas and practices evident in the present study are similar to those identified by Fallding (1957). Compared with Fallding’s study there has been a change in ideas, as more people refer to ideas about partnership and egalitarian practice as a basis for family life, and fewer refer to ideas about rightful patriarchy; and an increase in the proportion of families that experience conflict over domestic labour. There has been no change in the association between ‘stability’, or absence of conflict, and domestic practice. Stable families are those in which the mother does the domestic work.

Findings from this study show that Hochschild’s (1989:7) ‘transitional’ family is misnamed. The transitional family is a holding pattern, not a stage on the way to
egalitarianism. This family model maintains that women can do paid work as long as the established hierarchy is not disputed. Where women assert an entitlement to place their engagement in paid work or other activities ahead of an obligation to perform domestic labour, there is conflict. In families with children, stakes are high. In two-parent families with children (or at least, in those that stay together), most women do whatever it takes to make the family work. In interviews they call on cover stories, to maintain an image of harmony and egalitarian practice.

What does the experience of children suggest for future patterns in the division of domestic labour between women and men?

These findings suggest that the performance of domestic work will remain highly segregated by gender as the current generation of teenagers reaches adulthood. As Miller (2005) would predict, most kids in this study accepted without question the idea that children have an entitlement to receive service, and parents have an obligation to provide it. Some took up the idea that domestic labour is women’s business, while others said that domestic labour should be ‘equal’ between the mother and father.

These young people will enter relationships as adults with little understanding of the work involved in running a household. Boys will expect that their partners will manage all that, with some ‘help’ from them, for which they will be praised. Girls may feel that they do not want to be stuck with all the work that their mothers did, but, as suggested by Pocock (2004) and Craig (2004), they will see that the expectation to provide service just comes with being a mother. As indicated in Natalier’s (2003) study, young people of both sexes will see domestic labour as a trivial matter, not legitimate to complain about.

Is the domestically useless teenager a problem, and if so, for whom?

This study shows that in middle class, two-parent families the domestic uselessness of teenagers is resilient in the face of their mothers’ attempts to make change. It is supported by commonly held views about the entitlement of children to receive service from their parents, particularly domestic service from mothers. While the hierarchy of work that holds that children are entitled to put their other activities ahead of domestic work is seen as common sense, the associated framing rules prevent children’s
entitlement to service being named as a problem, and feeling rules prohibit women from persisting in complaining about it.

The domestic uselessness of teenagers is not a problem for the teenagers themselves. Occasionally it is a problem for their fathers. The domestically useless teenager is a problem for women who want to dispute the hierarchy of work outlined above.

**Who cares anyway?**
Uhlmann (2004) suggested that the distribution of domestic labour is not a problem for most people. My study offers some support for this view. My findings indicate that for most people living in two-parent families with teenage kids, domestic labour is not an issue. Most people living in these family settings are men and kids. Domestic labour is a problem for women, if they want to dispute the expectation that they should take responsibility for it. Of these women, some choose to make domestic labour not a problem by giving up and just doing it, or at least managing the whole thing. Some persist in trying to make change, and domestic labour becomes a problem in those families. But even in families where domestic labour is a cause of unhappiness for the women, it is usually not a problem for the men and kids who live with them.

So who cares? For women who live with men and kids, domestic labour is a problem for those who attempt to dispute the hierarchy of work that says men and kids are entitled to put their other priorities and interests ahead of an obligation to perform domestic work, while women are not. Domestic labour becomes a problem for men and kids only when a woman refuses to do it.

**9.2 LIMITATIONS OF METHOD**
The strengths of the methods used in this study are also their weakness. The present study has limitations in relation to sampling, interviewer effect, and presentation of analysis.

The use of intensive methods means the sample is small, so findings are indicative, rather than representative of the Australian population as a whole. The fact that findings in relation to who does what domestic work are consistent with those from other studies suggests the sample is not atypical.
The sample is drawn mostly from a single demographic: people who are have more education than average, living in two-parent families with higher than average incomes. The Bateman family is different from others in the sample, in several ways. The parents have less education; the family has a lower income; and the woman is happy with her domestic arrangements, even though she spends 39 hours per week in paid work. Also, adults in the Bateman family do not see the division of domestic labour as something to be questioned - it just is. Maybe, as Uhlmann (2004) suggested, a concern with the division of domestic labour is an indulgence of the educated classes. This possibility could be tested by studies that use the present methods to examine a broader range of families.

The way participants perceive the interviewer will shape what people say in interviews. In interviews with me, most men took pains to explain that the division of labour in their family was egalitarian, while in Maher and Singleton’s (2003) study men interviewed by a male interviewer did not do this. Participants in my study may have created different accounts of their families if they had been interviewed by a man, or by someone who identified herself as associated with a conservative organization. This question could be examined by further studies using multiple interviewers.

Other challenges associated with these methods are more difficult to avoid. Firstly, in presenting analysis based on multiple perspectives from each family, maintaining confidentiality is difficult. In particular, without recourse to composite stories it is not possible to keep family members’ responses unidentifiable to each other. If I write a book based on this thesis I would need to either create composite stories, or approach participants again to seek their consent to publication.

Secondly, to open my analysis to scrutiny I must present sufficient data to allow each person’s voice to be heard. As Song (1998) noted, analyses like these are lengthy to read, and risk boring the reader. They do not form a ‘coherent, rounded story’ (McCarthy et al. 2003:10). For each general statement I have made in summarising my findings, the reader may identify exceptions from the data presented.
Thirdly, it is inevitable that, because participants’ accounts were created in interviews with me and sections for analysis were selected by me, data presented are informed by where I come from. To balance this, the best I can do is to make my own situation and interests explicit. I offer my interpretation of participants’ stories as something ‘good to think with, at least until we can find something better’ (Smith 1999:156).

9.3 FURTHER RESEARCH

Findings from the present study indicate some useful directions for research. These include: further analysis of existing quantitative data sets; using findings from this study to inform the design of survey studies that ask fixed-choice questions; and further qualitative studies using the methods employed here.

Further examination of existing quantitative data sets, particularly the ABS time-use series and successive waves of HILDA, could consider the division of domestic labour by household, to see to what extent the pattern of ‘substitution’ identified by Goldscheider and Waite (1991) is evident in Australian families. Also, analysis of hours of paid, unpaid and total work by household could give a clearer idea of the extent to which the division of domestic labour is associated with women’s and men’s hours of total work, and with the presence and contribution of children. Using HILDA data, such analysis would allow us to see how people’s reported views about fairness in relation to domestic labour are related to their relative hours of total work.

Analysis of ABS and HILDA data could pay more attention to responses by age, in the context of households. As more children live with their parents for longer, what it means to be a child or an adult is continually being reinvented, and as Miller (2005) pointed out, arrangements around domestic labour are one arena in which this occurs. Analysis by household of time spent on paid work, unpaid work, and schooling, considering variables of age as well as gender, would be fruitful in shedding light on what the ongoing renegotiation of childhood and adulthood looks like, for parents and kids. A qualitative project based on the methods used here would be an illuminating complement to such analysis.

Findings from the present study could inform design of future survey studies that ask fixed-choice questions. To generate richer information about the division of labour in
families, such studies might use a broad definition of domestic labour, and ask questions about its invisible aspects as well as about housework tasks. Large-scale surveys could yield a better understanding of the ways people think about domestic labour by including open-ended questions, such as ‘What would it look like if it was fair?’ or ‘How do you think it should be?’ to supplement responses to sets of statements that are generally taken to indicate gender-role attitudes. Responses to open-ended questions would require qualitative analysis, but the quality of the data would reward the investment.

To better understand how domestic labour is negotiated in families and what this indicates for the future, further qualitative studies using methods similar to those in the present study would be useful. These could interview people living in different family and household types, engaged in different occupations, and coming from different material, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Such studies could find out whether the hierarchy of work identified here operates also in families with different demographic characteristics.

The present study has demonstrated the usefulness of methods that adopt a broad definition of domestic labour, ask open-ended questions, and consider people’s accounts in context of the situations they live in, including the views of children as well as those of adults. In particular, the study demonstrates the richness of insight offered by data that offer multiple perspectives on each family. Like reading the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, these methods call for some commitment. I believe they reward the effort.
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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THE PRESENT STUDY


APPENDIX 1  PROJECT FLIER

KIDS AND HOUSEWORK:
NEGOTIATING DOMESTIC LABOUR IN FAMILIES

Many studies have asked about the nature and distribution of domestic labour in families. Most have looked at the distribution of tasks - who does what, and how often. Some studies have asked what people think about the fairness or otherwise of these arrangements. A few have looked more broadly at domestic labour as including the 'emotion work' involved in keeping family relationships running smoothly. Most studies have focused on couples. What kids think about domestic labour has received little attention.

This project aims to find out more about what children think about the way domestic labour works in their families, and what they expect for themselves for the future. It will look at how we learn about domestic labour, and how we negotiate 'who does what', in our every day lives.

I am looking for families - parents and children (aged 12 +) - who are willing to talk to me about this. I hope that this will be useful to you as well as to me, and that reflecting on the way domestic labour happens in your home will promote better communication in your family, and in the other families that take part in this study.

WHAT’S INVOLVED?

. Interviews with 4 family members: 2 parents and 2 kids over 12 years of age.
. Questions are very general - I am interested in hearing about what you think.
. Each interview would last 30 minutes to 1 hour - timing is flexible.
. Interviews will be tape recorded so I can transcribe them later.
. Interviews will take place at a place and time of your choosing. They do not need to all happen at once.
. Children may participate only with parents’ consent.
. All information provided by participants is confidential.
. In any report or publication arising from the project all names and identifying details of participants will be changed so that confidentiality is protected.

INTERESTED?

I am a PhD candidate with the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology. This project is supervised by Associate Professor Michael Gilding, Director of the Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies and Society at Swinburne. Dr Gilding can be contacted on 9214 8102. If you are interested in taking part in this project, or just curious about the questions I am looking at, please call me.

thanks

meg carter
ph 9870 8101
mcarter@swin.edu.au

302
APPENDIX 2  INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

KIDS AND HOUSEWORK:
NEGOTIATING DOMESTIC LABOUR IN FAMILIES

INFORMATION STATEMENT

THE PROJECT
The interview to be conducted today is part of student research project being undertaken by Ms Meg Carter, who is a PhD candidate with the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology. The project is conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Michael Gilding, Director, Australian Centre for Emerging Technologies and Society. Any questions regarding the project can be directed to Ms Carter on 9870 8101, or to Dr Gilding on 9214 8102.

Many studies have looked at the nature and distribution of domestic labour in households. Most have been concerned with the views and experiences of adults: children's understanding of domestic labour has received little attention. This project aims to find out more about what children think about domestic labour in their homes, and what they expect for themselves for the future. It will consider how we learn about domestic labour, and how we negotiate 'who does what' in our everyday lives.

The topic of domestic labour is sometimes contentious between couples, and participation in the project may carry some risk of opening up confronting issues. The researchers believe that any such risk is clearly outweighed by the opportunity the project offers to promote improved communication among members of the participating families.

THE INTERVIEW
The interview will take half to one hour of your time - more or less, is up to you. Each participant in the study will be interviewed separately. Interviews will be tape recorded. All information provided by participants is confidential and will be available only to the investigators. In any reports or publications arising from the project all names and relevant identifying details will be changed so that no individual can be identified.

CONSENT
You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time. Children may participate in this project only with parents' consent.

COMPLAINT PROCEDURE
If you have any queries or concerns which Dr Gilding was unable to satisfy, please contact: the Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee, Mail H24, Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218 Hawthorn 3122.
KIDS AND HOUSEWORK:
NEGOTIATING DOMESTIC LABOUR IN FAMILIES

AGREEMENT

I .............................................................. have read and understood the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

I agree that the interview may be recorded on audio tape on the condition that no part of it is included in any presentation or public display.

I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or provided to other researchers on the condition that anonymity is preserved and that I cannot be identified.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT .................................................................

SIGNATURE ................................................................. date ............................

where participant is aged under 18 years

NAME OF PARENT .................................................................

SIGNATURE ................................................................. date ............................

NAME OF INVESTIGATOR meg carter

SIGNATURE ................................................................. date ............................
INTERVIEW GUIDE
Questions for new families

For adults
. what gets done
. who does what
. does it work well?
. do you think it’s fair?
. how do you think it should be?
*** run this set 3 times, once for tasks, once for organising and negotiating and making it happen, and once for emotion work. First is for context, second and third are where my interest is

prompt for the following:
. how or what did you learn about dl as a child?
. in share houses?
. how does this influence what you do and how you see things now?
. do you think there is such a thing as a ‘mum job’?
. what is the mum job?
. how do different family members see it?
. how does that influence what people think and do?
. is there a dad job?
. what is it?
. how do different family members see it?
. how does that influence what people think and do?

The future:
. do you think your kids will have a partner when they are adults?
. do you think they will have kids?
. if they do, how do you see domestic labour as being arranged in their family then?
. does what you think about dl influence how you think about becoming a mum yourself?

For kids
. what gets done
. who does what
. does it work well?
. do you think it’s fair?
. how do you think it should be?
*** run 3 times, as above

APPENDIX 3 QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

prompt for:
. do you think there is such a thing as a ‘mum job’?
. what is the mum job?
. how do different family members see it?
. how does that influence what people think and do?
. is there a dad job?
. what is it?
. how do different family members see it?
. how does that influence what people think and do?

The future:
. do you think you will have a partner when you are an adult?
. do you think you will have kids?
. if you do, how do you see domestic labour as being arranged in your family then?
. does what you think about dl influence how you think about becoming a mum yourself?

Questions for revisiting families – interview women only
. what was it like for you, taking part in this project?
. what was it like, reflecting on how dl works in your family and how you feel about it?
. what was it like having you partner and kids doing this too?
. did it lead to any discussion happening in the family? Between whom? Along what lines?
. has there been any change in the way things happen, since then?
. do you see the issues differently now, from the way you did before?
. can you suggest anything I can do to make this interviews better? Or the process more useful for the families I talk to?
PROMPT LIST

TASKS

food:
- cook
  - dinner
  - breakfast
  - lunch
  - weekends
- clear up after cooking and eating
- wash dishes
- shop for food
- other food things

cleaning:
- bedrooms (tidy dust vacuum)
- living rooms (tidy dust vacuum)
- kitchen (wipe scrub mop)
  - clean stove and oven
  - clean fridge
- bathroom (tidy scrub mop)
- toilet (scrub and mop)
- other
** if cleaner, for how long? what before that? what does this mean for family?

laundry:
- clothes (wash dry iron fold p/a)
- sheets (initiate cleaning of, wash, dry, remake beds)
- other

fixing things:
- like what?

pets:
- feeding
- bathing
- mucking out
- other

outdoor:
- mow
- cultivate
- other garden work
- wash car
- other car work
- building
- other outdoor work

driving:
- school
- sport
- social

other:
- looking after finances
- other tasks? (what?)

PLANNING AND ORGANISING
- identify what needs to be done
- planning how it will happen
- getting people to do things
- taking responsibility for things being done

EMOTION WORK
- being aware of how people are feeling
- looking after people when upset or with special needs
- supporting good relationships in the family
- establishing expectations and getting them followed
### APPENDIX 4  
PSEUDONYMS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

#### CHAPTER FIVE  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Name</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Born In</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Paid work Hours</th>
<th>Highest Qualification</th>
<th>% Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fletcher</td>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>No paid work</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dentist</td>
<td>35hpw</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bateman</td>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>26 years</td>
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<td>Year 10</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Storeman</td>
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<td>70%</td>
</tr>
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#### CHAPTER SIX  
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<th>Occupation</th>
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<th>Highest Qualification</th>
<th>% Income</th>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>University student</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Juliet*</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Neville</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Amy</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Isabel</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hume</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>William</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cassie</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Toby*</td>
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#### CHAPTER SEVEN  
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<th>Age</th>
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<th>Married</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Paid work Hours</th>
<th>Highest Qualification</th>
<th>% Income</th>
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<td>Herrick</td>
<td>Miranda</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>30 hpw</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personal Assistant</td>
<td>60 hpw</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Small business owner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dryden</td>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td></td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>various</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
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<td></td>
<td>George</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Admin / management</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angus</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>CEO charitable agency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hugo</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napier</td>
<td>Josephine</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Manager call centre</td>
<td>55 hpw</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Manager financial sector</td>
<td>45 hpw</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominic</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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#### CHAPTER EIGHT  
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<th>Born In</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Paid work Hours</th>
<th>Highest Qualification</th>
<th>% Income</th>
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<td>Middleton</td>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>15 hpw</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gavin</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Student, music teacher</td>
<td>60 hpw</td>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hamish</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental consultant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tilly</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-government School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgeworth</td>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>40 hpw</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duncan</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary teacher</td>
<td>40 hpw</td>
<td>Post-Graduate</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tertiary teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harry</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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<td>State Secondary College</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| State Secondary College | State Secondary College | State Secondary College | State Secondary College | State Secondary College |

---

APPENDIX 4   
PSEUDONYMS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

**Family Name** | **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **Born In** | **Married** | **Occupation** | **Paid work Hours** | **Highest Qualification** | **% Income** |
---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
Fletcher | Theresa | 46 | UK | 21 years | No paid work | n/a | Post-Graduate | 0 |
| Edward | 45 | New Zealand | | Dentist | 35hpw | Post-Graduate | 100% |
| Adrian | 15 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| | 12 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| | 12 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
Bateman | Judy | 43 | UK | 26 years | Sales assistant | 39 hpw | Year 10 | 30% |
| Peter | 50 | Australia | | Storeman | 50 hpw | Year 10 | 70% |
| Leah | 15 | Australia | | State Secondary College | | | |
| Polly | 15 | Australia | | State Secondary College | | | |
Hume | Emily | 40 | Australia | | 6 years | No paid work | n/a | Post-graduate | 0% |
| William | 50 | Australia | | Orthodontist | 60 hpw | Post-graduate | 100% |
| Cassie | 18 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| Alfred | 16 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| Isadora | 15 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| Toby* | 3 | Australia | | At home with mum | | | |
Herrick | Miranda | 50 | Australia | | 28 years | 30 hpw | Diploma | 30% |
| Julian | 52 | New Zealand | | Personal Assistant | 60 hpw | Tertiary | 70% |
| Catherine* | 19 | Australia | | University student | | | |
| | 18 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| | 13 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| Dryden | Ellie | 41 | Australia | | 19 years | various | Tertiary | 30% |
| George | 42 | Australia | | CEO charitable agency | | Tertiary | 70% |
| Angus | 18 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| | 16 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| | 12 | Australia | | Non-government School | | | |
| Napier | Josephine | 49 | UK | 18 years | Manager call centre | 55 hpw | Tertiary | 45% |
| Henry | 45 | Australia | | Manager financial sector | 45 hpw | Post-Graduate | 55% |
| Simon | 15 | Australia | | | | | |
| Dominic | 14 | Australia | | | | | |