

When is housework not a chore? Exploring variation in happiness during housework activities

Cadhla McDonnell, The Pennsylvania State University
Nancy K. Luke, The Pennsylvania State University

Short Abstract

The assumption that housework is a uniformly disliked activity underpins the academic literature on domestic labor. This assumption ignores the possibilities that (1) some housework activities, such as cooking or gardening, may actually be enjoyable, and (2) there may be systematic variation among individuals in how they experience doing housework. We test the assumption that housework is uniformly disliked by examining men's and women's reports of happiness during housework. We test how happiness varies depending on the activity undertaken and by gender and other socio-demographic characteristics. Preliminary results indicate that there is substantial variation in happiness across activities and by gender. Respondents report most happiness during yard work and cooking and least happiness during laundry. Women report significantly more happiness than men in most housework activities. The findings of this study will facilitate a better understanding of how housework is allocated in families and why housework remains persistently gendered.

Introduction

Family researchers often assume that housework is an undesirable activity that individuals in couples and families negotiate to reduce. However, this may not always be the case: many men and women list activities such as cooking and gardening among their hobbies, suggesting that at least some housework activities can be enjoyable and desired experiences. Understanding variation in how individuals experience housework activities will allow for a more complete picture of how couples and families allocate housework. This is particularly important for understanding persistent gender differences in the amount and types of housework individuals undertake.

In this study we examine men's and women's happiness during housework activities. Affect is a core component of subjective wellbeing that measures how people evaluate their own lives (Busseri, 2011; Diener, 2000). Affect is related to emotions, moods, and feelings and is distinct from cognitive dimensions of subjective wellbeing, such as life satisfaction. We use data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), which collects information on affect during specific activities for a large, nationally representative sample of women and men.

Background

Despite changes in both men's and women's housework time, women in the U.S. still do substantially more housework than men. In 2010, women aged between 25 and 64 spent around 16 hours on housework each week compared to just 10 hours for men the same age (Bianchi et al. 2012). There are also important differences in the types of housework that women and men do. Women spend three times as many hours in time-inflexible, core housework activities, such as cooking and cleaning, and men spend longer in other housework activities, such as repairs, yard work, and financial management (Bianchi et al 2012; Bianchi et al 2000).

One theory used to explain how housework is divided in couples and families is bargaining or exchange theory. According to this perspective, each partner in a couple uses their own economic resources to negotiate, or bargain, out of undesirable activities, such as housework. Thus the partner who earns more contributes less housework, and the partner who earns less contributes more housework to balance out their income deficit. Several studies of housework among opposite-sex couples have found evidence in support of the

bargaining perspective. This research shows that as women's share of the household income increases, men's share of the domestic labor also increases. A fundamental assumption of the bargaining perspective is that housework is a uniformly undesirable activity that individuals will try to avoid or minimize. But lumping all housework activities together and viewing them all as unwelcome obligations ignores two important realities. First, not all housework activities are the same and individuals may wish to avoid some activities more than others. Second, some activities classified as housework, such as cooking or gardening, may be undertaken not out of obligation but for pleasure.

Research on gender differences in childcare time also suggests that it is important to consider not only how much time men and women spend in an activity but the type of activity. Although the amount of time that fathers spend in childcare has increased dramatically, men tend to focus their childcare time in the most enjoyable activities, such as play and sports, and have been slower to take on less enjoyable aspects of childrearing (Musick, Meyer & Flood 2016).

To date, there is only very limited research on how individuals experience doing housework and how this varies by activity. One study of affect among a convenience sample of 900 working women in Texas found that, out of 16 daily activities, preparing food was the 9th most enjoyable and doing housework was 14th (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). A study using nationally-representative ATUS data from 2010 examined affect among parents with young children and found that levels of happiness during housework vary substantially by activity type and by gender (Connolly & Kimmel 2015). Our study will provide a more in-depth consideration of this topic among all adults with the goal of answering the following research questions:

- (1) Are some types of housework more enjoyable than others?
- (2) How does happiness during housework vary by gender and other socio-demographic characteristics?

Data & Methods

Sample

This study uses pooled activity-level and person-level data from the 2010, 2012, and 2013 rounds of the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), collected by the Census Bureau on behalf of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. ATUS respondents are aged 15 years and older and are drawn from households that have completed eight rounds of the Current Population Survey (CPS). Respondents are representative of the civilian, non-institutionalized, U.S. population living in households. ATUS is a telephone-based survey. Respondents are asked to report on each activity they engaged in during a 24-hour window that lasted from 4 a.m. the previous day until 4 a.m. on the day they are questioned. For most activities the respondent also reports who else was present and where the activity took place. Because ATUS is linked to CPS records, high-quality data on household and individual characteristics, such as income and education, are also available.

During various ATUS rounds, topic-specific modules were added at the end of ATUS interview. The Well-Being Module was fielded as part of ATUS in 2010, 2012, and 2013. As part of the well-being module respondents report on their subjective experience of three randomly-selected activities from the previous day. For this analysis, we use data on reported experiences during housework activities. ATUS includes 29 different sub-categories of housework. We restrict our sample to activities that have over 1,000 cases included in the Well-Being Module. We do this to ensure we have sufficient sample size to investigate variation by gender and socio-demographic variables. Where possible, similar activities with fewer than 1,000 cases are grouped together to achieve sufficient sample size (for example, exterior cleaning and exterior repairs). Following other research on housework (e.g. Carlson, Miller, & Sassler 2018), we also include grocery shopping as a housework activity.

Dependent Variables

For each activity that was included in the well-being module, respondents were asked to report on their subjective experience of that activity. In this study we focus on how much happiness respondents felt during the activity. Respondents reported how much happiness

they experienced on a seven-point scale (0 – 6) where higher values indicate feeling more happiness.

Independent Variables

Gender is coded 1 for women and 0 for men. Respondents' age is measured using a continuous variable. Race/ethnicity is coded into four categories: non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and other. Work status is measured using a dichotomous variable coded 1 for employed and 0 for not employed. Education is coded into four categories: less than high school, high school, some college, four-year degree or more. Partnership status is coded into four categories: married, cohabiting, divorced/separated/widowed, and single. Parental status is coded 1 for respondents with resident minor children and 0 for respondents with no resident children.

Additional variables are included to account for timing of the activity, including the time of day, the year of the survey, whether the survey was done on a weekday or a weekend day, and whether the survey took place in the summer.

Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the activity. We use OLS regression to examine variation in happiness by gender and across activity types.

Preliminary Results

Table 1 shows mean levels of happiness by gender during various housework activities.

Activity type

Preliminary results suggest that some types of housework are more enjoyable than others. Male and female respondents report the highest levels of happiness during cooking and yard work, and the lowest levels of happiness during laundry and food clean-up (which includes doing dishes). Other activities are in between.

Gender

There are significant differences in men's and women's reports of happiness. Women consistently report more happiness during housework and this difference is significant for five out of seven housework types examined.

Preliminary multivariate OLS regression models indicate that differences by activity and gender persist after accounting for socio-demographic characteristics and the timing of the activity.

Next steps

- We will undertake additional analyses to rule out person-level variation as the source of differences between men and women by (1) controlling for life satisfaction and (2) using fixed effects to compare affect during housework to affect during other activities such as leisure.
- We will conduct an intersectional analysis of happiness during housework by employing interactions between gender and other socio-demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity.
- We will conduct sensitivity analyses to test the robustness of our findings to modeling strategy (e.g. using multinomial regression).

| Table 1: Mean happiness (scale 0–6) during various housework activities by gender | Men | Women |
|---|------|---------|
| All housework activities (n=18,923) | 4.12 | 4.23*** |
| Cooking (food & drink prep.) (n=6,035) | 4.32 | 4.48*** |
| Interior cleaning (n=2,369) | 3.83 | 4.06** |
| Kitchen & food clean up (n=1,744) | 3.72 | 4.02** |
| Laundry (n=1,508) | 3.52 | 3.87** |
| Household & personal organization and planning (n=1,219) | 4.16 | 4.10 |
| Grocery shopping (n=1,033) | 3.94 | 4.02 |
| Yard work (lawn, garden & plant care) (n=1,013) | 4.31 | 4.53* |

Note: Asterisks signify significant differences between men and women.
 *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.