Love occurs in context, yet the dominant theories of how couples divide up housework model the interactions between two adults as if they occurred in a social cocoon. For example, bargaining or social exchange theories focused on the power derived from paid work and predicted women’s increasing employment would lead to men performing more domestic tasks.\(^1\) However, an increase in men’s domestic share during the past decades stems primarily from the dramatic decline in women’s housework hours, not substantial increases in men’s.\(^2\) The persistence of the gendered division of housework regardless of a woman’s employment supports the gender perspective that our daily activities reflect and reinforce normative expectations of masculine and feminine behavior (West and Zimmerman 1987). These normative expectations vary across social classes or ethnic groups, as well as across countries, reflecting gender regimes (Connell 1987) or cultures (Pfau-Effinger 1998). Norms also evolve over time, albeit more slowly and less spectacularly than we had first anticipated. In sum, how couples might divide paid and unpaid labor in the household varies across class, ethnic, temporal, and country contexts.

Only recently, however, have researchers begun to explore how couples’ sharing of housework varies within its sociopolitical as well as temporal contexts. This research has yielded somewhat conflicting evidence, in part because theory development linking context with individual behavior lags behind the available international data. Most analyses to date have focused on policy effects on women’s equality in the public spheres such as education, employment, or political representation (Baxter 1997; Fuwa 2004). Equally important and intertwined with equality in the public sphere is whether policies reinforce women’s normative responsibility for the private sphere. In this chapter I outline how a broad range of policies influences women’s access to paid work as well as their continued responsibility for unpaid domestic activities, illustrated with examples from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These three countries are based in

CHAPTER FOUR
The Politics of Housework

Lynn Prince Cooke
British common law and share a liberal political ideology vis-à-vis reliance on the market over state provision of welfare, similarities that would lead us to expect common policy effects on the gendered division of labor across them. When comparing specific policies, however, the countries vary more in the degree to which the state shapes gender equality, so that we might find greater variation in how housework is divided within and across couples.

**Housework in Context**

Researchers frequently model the division of housework using time availability for housework measured with paid work hours and/or relative resources measured with absolute or relative wages of the partners. Both approaches predict that women’s increasing labor force participation should have led to a revolution in women’s and men’s domestic roles, a revolution Hochschild (1989) deemed “stalled.” Regardless of employment or earnings, U.S. women increase their housework hours when they move in with a man, whereas men decrease their hours when they move in with a woman.3 The earliest comparative work reported little cross-country variation in either the gendered division of housework or the effects of relative resources or time availability on altering this division.4 Despite this lack of significant variation, Baxter (1997) concluded any gains in gender equality in the home would result from women’s greater access to individual resources.

Breen and Cooke (2005) elaborate on this bargaining perspective using game theory to highlight the importance of alternatives to a relationship when deriving relative power in household negotiations. Only when women have economic resources sufficient to ensure their well-being outside of the relationship might they credibly threaten to leave households in which men refuse to participate in housework—a threat that increases their relative bargaining power. Under the normative gendered division of labor, Breen and Cooke (2005) argue, most men assume the average woman in their pool of possible partners has neither the inclination nor resources to leave. Consequently, an individual woman’s relative employment hours or earnings predict only minimal increases in men’s housework. What is necessary before observing greater equality is that the proportion of economically autonomous women must be sufficiently high to change men’s beliefs about what a partner would expect in the domestic sphere, and men must be willing to act on those beliefs to maintain the relationship.

Some recent evidence supports the argument by Breen and Cooke (2005). Fuwa (2004) compared couples’ sharing of domestic responsibilities in 22 industrial and transitional economies, controlling for aggregate country equality differences with the United Nations’ gender empowerment measure (GEM). The GEM includes the percentage of parliamentary seats...
held by women; the percentage of women in administrative, managerial, and professional or technical positions; and women’s share of earnings income. Fuwa (2004) found time availability and gender ideology effects stronger or weaker for women in more versus less egalitarian countries, respectively, supporting that greater overall equality enhances the impact of individual resources on the division of housework. Hook (2006), using time diary data from 20 countries over several decades and controlling for the percentage of married women employed, women’s work hours, public child care slots for infants, and weeks of parental leave, found that men over time had increased their total domestic hours (household tasks and child care) by about 6 hours per week. Within this trend, a country’s greater aggregate female employment rate predicted men’s greater time in domestic tasks regardless of his partner’s actual employment. So we are accruing empirical evidence of linkages among policy, women’s employment, and how housework is divided up in the home.

The role of the state in shaping the gendered division of labor has grown as a subject of theoretical as well as empirical interest, in part following the growth in theories of the welfare state. Mainstream welfare state theories focus on worker–citizens, a definition that excludes women in their roles as dependent wives or mothers (Pateman 1988). Jane Lewis (1992) suggests, instead, examining women’s position in the labor market, social security, and tax systems to classify countries as ranging from “weak” to “strong” male breadwinner states by the extent to which policy relies on women’s responsibility for unpaid care work. Ann Orloff (1993) applies a gender lens to expand dimensions within Esping-Andersen’s (1990) widely cited welfare regime typology to include how the state affects women’s access to paid work, as well as her ability to establish an autonomous household. The approaches by Lewis (1992) and Orloff (1993) suggest that a much broader range of policies affects gender relations inside and outside the home than has been explored in cross-national analyses of housework to date.

Policy Effects on the Gendered Division of Labor

Paid or Unpaid Work?

The three dimensions of policy effects on gender relations—reinforcement of women’s domestic roles, access to paid work, and ability to form autonomous households—overlap and result in competing effects on women’s range of choices. For example, education and training systems can prepare women to pursue careers similar to those of men, with recent evidence revealing women’s educational attainment beginning to equal or exceed men’s (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2004). Yet, the structure of public education often inhibits women’s ability
to participate in the labor force. Compulsory schooling does not start until children reach the age of 6 or 7 years, so without parental leaves, public provision of preprimary care, or child care tax credits, new mothers are more likely to exit employment upon childbirth. At the same time, extensive paid maternity leaves increase the incentive to interrupt employment for longer periods of time, particularly among low-skilled women (Jaumotte 2003). In some public educational systems, school hours vary, students are sent home for lunch, or school schedules include long or frequent vacations. These policies encourage part-time employment to accommodate school schedules that are out of sync with standard employment schedules, with women, not men, historically adjusting their paid work to family demands. Even well-paid part-time employment reduces accrued work experience, increasing the gender wage gap. When conflict between work and family persists, the gender wage gap leads to couples making the “rational” decision that the woman should be the one to exit employment, perpetuating one basis of that gap.

Labor laws directly affect women’s access to paid work and the wages she might earn. In most industrialized countries, the first labor regulations restricted women’s access to employment, often in hopes of improving working conditions for men and the working class more generally. These restrictions resulted in occupational segregation and gender wage differentials increasing late in the 19th century while married female employment rates plummeted among the new, white middle class. Pushed by second-wave feminists during the 1960s and ’70s, industrial societies subsequently passed equal pay, antidiscrimination, or affirmative action policies supporting greater equality in women’s economic roles. This legislation painted over, but did not fundamentally restructure, the gendered foundations, so aggregate levels of gender employment inequality persist in different ways across countries.

Tax provisions also affect women’s access to paid work. High marginal tax rates, where a second earner’s income gets taxed at a higher percentage, discourage female employment among couples—an effect that becomes more acute under progressive tax systems as household earnings increase. Tax credits for dependent spouses also discourage married women’s employment, more markedly among higher earners if calculated as a percentage of income, or among lower income families if a lump-sum amount is sufficiently high to make available female employment a less desirable option. Similarly, family allowances discourage employment among the least-skilled women, particularly in countries where child care is limited or expensive. The employment disincentive becomes more extreme when family allowances or other transfers are means tested and cease abruptly when earnings exceed some modest threshold, leading to a poverty trap and reliance on state transfers.
To achieve gender equality, education, labor, and tax policy must support women’s access to paid work on all dimensions simultaneously; support for only one or two aspects leads to some element of a gendered division of labor being perpetuated. For example, high relative wages but extensive female part-time employment reduces women’s accrued experience relative to men’s. High relative wages coupled with tax policies supporting married male breadwinner families might encourage growth in nonmarital households so that dual-earner couples can reap the gains from the market without incurring government penalties. Good employment prospects but little financial support for child care exacerbates the tension between family and work, and class differences among women as well. Thus, gender equality remains elusive within a patchwork of competing policy effects on women’s choice between paid and unpaid labor.

**Economic Alternatives to a Relationship**

The better partnered women’s options in lieu of a coresidential relationship, the greater her bargaining power within a relationship when negotiating housework with her partner. Across industrialized countries, however, female-headed households are worse off than male-headed households, and are at greater risk of poverty in large part because of women’s inferior access to paid work. However, transfers from the state can close the gender earnings gap across different household types. These include tax credits for lower income earners, child care credits, family allowances, housing benefits, or social transfers not tied to employment. Such provisions enhance women’s—or at least mothers’—economic alternatives; but, as noted earlier, they discourage employment when they provide income unrelated to paid work. The availability of transfers, however, minimizes class differences among women and strengthens lower income women’s relative resources within the family, because they provide access to income that otherwise might not be available. This enhances a woman’s bargaining power when couples negotiate housework.

Rules for entitlement to work-related contributory benefits such as unemployment or pensions also influence women’s access to resources. In some countries, a woman’s entitlement is linked to her husband’s contributions rather than her own, with women losing access to these benefits upon divorce. A more common problem is that employed women pay insurance contributions as individuals, but the household is used as the basis for benefit entitlement. As a result, a woman who loses her job might not have access to her unemployment benefits when her partner’s earnings maintain the household income above the required threshold. In keeping current with changing family demographics, many countries apply the household test to
cohabiting as well as legally married couples, although in some countries, such as Australia, only heterosexual couples fall under these rules.

Laws governing the division of marital assets and private postmarital payments also shape women’s ability to establish their own households. Divorce law changes during the 1960s and ’70s were heralded as an advance for women’s right to leave unhappy marriages. Yet these laws also limited women’s right to spousal support, frequently expecting a woman to be economically independent, regardless of whether she had been employed during the marriage. Child support payments can ease financial pressures when mothers establish their own households, but the amount of support and/or the likelihood a mother receives it remain low even in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, where central government took control over award levels or collection. Because these laws and provisions affect women’s postrelationship economic situation, they alter her relative power within the relationship and influence the negotiated division of housework.

Detailing the myriad of policy effects on gender relations highlights a key problem when comparing the division of housework across countries: Statistically, it is impossible to control for all of these effects. We quickly run out of country degrees of freedom in the hierarchical linear models increasingly favored for conducting such multinational comparisons. An alternative approach used here is to combine comparative and quantitative analytic methods. The comparative method is used to select countries that are similar on key dimensions, and to detail their historical and current policy differences, with quantitative individual-level analyses subsequently used to explore whether the pattern of aggregate variation yields differences observed at the individual level. Together, the different approaches advance our understanding of how context shapes couples’ private lives.

CONTRASTING CASES: AUSTRALIA, UNITED KINGDOM, AND THE UNITED STATES

Esping-Andersen (1990) categorizes liberal regimes as those countries of British political heritage where an ideology of market capitalism dominates over state welfare provision. Consequently, the welfare state in these countries is less developed than in other regime types, with a greater expectation of individual responsibility for one’s well-being across the life course. Modest, means-tested cash transfers are more common than government provision of services. Given the presumed minimal state reinforcement of hierarchies, women should have greater equality in these countries compared with the corporatist–conservative regimes found on the European continent that
reinforce gender hierarchies, but perhaps less than in social–democratic or former socialist countries actively encouraging education and employment equality, and assuming greater state responsibility for child care. A broad categorization of liberalism, however, overlooks the influence other institutional actors have in setting and reshaping the state foundation of equality.

**Australia**

The powerful Australian trade union movement achieved men’s preferential employment access with the 1907 Harvester Judgement of the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Court. This ruling established a family wage supporting a man, his dependent wife, and three children, regardless of an employer’s capacity to pay. Women’s access to employment was restricted with the 1912 court ruling distinguishing between men’s and women’s work, leading to greater occupational segregation. The gender wage gap became law with a 1919 ruling setting the female wage to approximately half the male wage. During the 1920s, feminists lobbied for equal pay and motherhood endowments to remove the pretext of a family wage, given that 60 percent of working men were single with no dependents. Payment of the family wage was defended, however, on the grounds that single men had to purchase services provided to married men gratuitously, including housework (Lake 1993).

Beginning in the late 1960s, Australia passed a series of equal pay and comparable worth statutes that narrowed the gender wage gap compared with other countries, although these statutes did not rectify the occupational segregation. Australian government support for gender equality increased a bit further during the 1970s and ‘80s, with the introduction of commonwealth funding for long-day child care places, 52 weeks of unpaid maternity leave, and equal rights in child custody and property settlements after divorce. Affirmative action became law in 1986, but penalties for non-compliance remain negligible and the law applies only to private sector businesses with 100 or more employees, or less than 10 percent of Australian employers. Single mothers’ high reliance on government transfers led to the 1988 Child Support Registration and Collection Act, which established a new agency that would calculate child support awards and collect support payments. For similar reasons, the United States, in 1974, and the UK, in 1990, passed similar laws. Despite these efforts, less than three quarters of the Australian child support due is actually collected (Baker 2001), with similar lackluster results in the United Kingdom and the United States. As of the mid 1990s, about half of Australian single mothers lived in poverty, comparable with the proportion in the United Kingdom, but much less than in the United States. These high poverty rates are driven in large part by
single parents who are outside the labor force. Among nonemployed single parents, 42% in Australia, 65% in the United Kingdom, and more than 93% in the United States live in poverty (Forster and Pearson 2000).

A conservative coalition took control of the Commonwealth government during the 1990s, implementing more liberal market policies eroding the male wage while simultaneously reinforcing women’s domestic responsibility. The 1996 Workplace Relations Act introduced family caregiver leave and increased incentives for women to work part-time to balance employment and family demands better. The Family Support Reform of 2000 introduced Child Care Benefit to provide cash assistance to families rather than continued expansion of public child care, along with a two-part means-tested allowance comprised of a general allowance and an additional allowance for households with a single breadwinner. In perhaps one of the more stark modern examples of reinforcing women’s place in the home, a Baby Bonus was introduced in 2002 that offers a refundable tax offset of up to $2500 annually for up to 5 years if one parent reduces or exits employment upon the birth of the first child.

So despite the gender wage gains from the 1970s resulting in one of the narrowest current gender wage gaps for full-time workers at 89 percent (although much larger when including part-time workers), most Australian policies reinforce a gendered division of labor. In addition, more young Australian women than men go on to university, but more women than men also fail to complete secondary schooling. The employment gap between women and men is 20 percentage points, and among Australian women who are employed, one third work part-time with lower wages and less access to benefits.\(^\text{18}\)

United Kingdom

British policy reinforces separate spheres through continued reliance on women’s unpaid work in the home. William Beveridge (1942), architect of the modern British welfare state, premised a gendered system, because “. . . the great majority of married women must be regarded as occupied on work which is vital though unpaid, without which their husbands could not do their paid work and without which the nation could not continue” (p. 50). This premise led to a series of restrictions on married women’s independent access to work-related contributory benefits such as unemployment or pensions, leading many women to opt out of making any contributions. After the insurance system changed in 1977 to require full contributions, the low-paid, part-time work in which women dominate often fell below the Lower Earnings Limit, so that many women still remained uncovered by contributory insurance.\(^\text{19}\)

Britain’s affiliation with the European Union (EU) advanced gender equality further than would have likely occurred otherwise. In anticipation of
joining the EU, Britain passed the Equal Pay Act of 1970 to be compliant with provisions under the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The 1975 Sex Discrimination Act established the Equal Opportunities Commission, which subsequently took cases to the European Court to put pressure on the national government to comply with gender equality directives. For example, the 1975 Employment Protection Act granted maternity leave before and after birth, some of which was paid at 90 percent of prior wages, and some of which was paid at the flat sickness benefit rate. These maternity leave provisions are the most generous among the three countries discussed here, but until the 1990s, qualification parameters meant that only a fraction of British women were eligible. EU pressure led to improvements in these provisions to cover more women, including rulings on Parental Leave (1984), Pregnancy (1990), and Working Time and Part-time Work (2000) (Walby 2001).

New Labour came into power in 1997 and introduced a series of New Deals emphasizing labor activation, although not necessarily away from a male breadwinner model. Some argue the Working Families Tax Credit discourages employment of second earners, thus reinforcing a male breadwinner model (Bennett 2002; Walby 2001). New Labour introduced a child care tax credit for working families for up to 70 percent of actual expenses and has expanded public preprimary child care, but only with part-time slots of limited help to mothers desiring full-time work. This reflects New Labour’s focus on women’s part-time employment as the key work–family reconciliation strategy. Consequently, the gender employment gap at 14 percentage points is somewhat smaller in Britain than in Australia, but a similar proportion of employed women work part-time. Lacking Australia’s comparable worth policies, however, the British gender wage gap is among the largest across industrialized countries, with British women who work full-time earning on average just 75 percent of what British men earn (OECD 2002).

The United States

Ideological adherence to liberal tenets delayed and blunted development of a U.S. welfare state; decentralized trade unionism coupled with the nip and tuck of litigation reduced the degree to which gender inequalities became embedded within the state. U.S. employers effectively exploited the separation of powers of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government to overturn early trade union legislative gains in the courts. So in contrast to Australian and British trade union movements, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) severed itself from what it considered a paternalist state, choosing instead to fight for employee benefits via traditional market-based actions. This decision led to the development of corporate rather than state welfare programs. The AFL also opposed lobbying for family wages on grounds that it would undercut union power, and it took
the formal stance of gender equality in employment at the national level while turning a blind eye to local-level discrimination. Among the three countries, the United States was the last to pass protective legislation that limited women’s access to employment opportunities.

After World War II, U.S. women’s equal access to paid work arose as a civil rights issue, with passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making discrimination on the basis of, inter alia, sex unlawful in all aspects of employment and training in firms of 25 or more employees. The Act also established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce antidiscrimination laws, although the Commission was deemed a “toothless tiger” until 1972, when Congress gave it litigation enforcement authority. With this authority, the EEOC could file lawsuits not just on specific complaints against employers, unions, and employment agencies, but also on what the Commission viewed as patterns of discrimination. EEOC efforts through the courts and political lobbying led to the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, requiring employers with disability policies to include pregnancy, and the 1980 Guidelines on Sexual Harassment ruling that employment decisions conditional upon sexual favors or hostile employment environments created by unwelcome sexual conduct were prohibited under Title VII. Successful litigation of complaints brings award of damages. For example, in a recently settled case, a 17-year-old female kitchen helper charged she had been subjected to sexual harassment for 3 months despite complaints to managers. She received $12,000 in back pay and another $168,000 in compensatory damages.

U.S. policy support within the home remains the least generous of all industrialized countries. At no point did the United States introduce universal family allowances as in other countries. Instead, working persons receive tax deductions based on number of children, a policy expanded in the mid 1970s to include additional tax credits for low-earning families, and a child care tax credit for 20% to 35% of actual expenses up to a set maximum, compared with the 70% now covered under British provisions. Although some U.S. women had access to maternity leave as part of a corporate disability program, parental leave only became a right with the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows up to 12 weeks unpaid parental leave, the least generous program among the OECD countries (Jaumotte 2003).

Under this corporate-driven welfare system, the U.S. gender gap in employment is just 15%, similar to that in the UK. Unlike the UK, however, U.S. women’s part-time employment as a share of women’s total employment has been steadily declining since the mid 1960s and is just 12% of all U.S. female employment. The freer rein of market mechanisms also yields greater income inequality more generally in the United States compared with Australia, being more similar to the UK’s along with a similar gender wage ratio of 78%.
So with their divergent policy profiles, the three countries have different equality structures than a simple liberal regime label suggests. Australia codified men’s privileged access to high-wage work, whereas the UK reinforced women’s domestic responsibility. Under greater adherence to liberal principles, U.S. policy intervened less to restrict women’s access to paid work, and a woman’s normative responsibility for the domestic sphere is neither reinforced nor alleviated.

**Liberal Divisions of Household Work**

I use data from the 2002 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) to explore whether the more subtle policy differences across the three liberal regimes yield divergent divisions of housework as found by Fuwa (2004) and Hook (2006) across widely differing societies. The 2002 ISSP module is the third on family and changing gender roles, but the first to include respondents’ estimates of each partner’s weekly housework hours (excluding childcare). From the 2002 ISSP, I select cohabiting or married couples where the respondent is younger than 60 years of age to look at differences in the household division of labor across countries and income brackets.

Table 4.1 displays partnered women’s employment participation. More U.S. partnered women are employed full-time than in the other two countries, whereas more Australian women are out of the labor force. Among partnered women who are employed, 34% in the United States, 44% in Britain, and more than half in Australia work part-time.24

Men’s and women’s average housework hours at different levels of women’s employment are displayed in Figure 4.1. Men and women in the UK and the United States spend about the same amount of time on housework, whereas Australian women and men each spend appreciably more than their counterparts in the other countries. Apart from these differences, trends across the countries are similar. Men’s average housework hours do not vary significantly with women’s employment, although women across the countries reduce their housework hours to a similar degree as their employment hours increase.25 A British or U.S. woman working full-time spends,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Full-time, %</th>
<th>Part-time, %</th>
<th>Out of Labor Force, %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>39</td>
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**Table 4.1** Women’s employment in Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States

Source: Calculated from 2002 ISSP data on married or cohabiting couples, where respondent is younger than 60 years of age.
on average, 10 fewer hours per week on housework than a housewife. An Australian woman working full-time spends about 12 fewer hours, but still devotes 5 more weekly hours to housework compared with her British and U.S. employed counterparts.

If men do not increase housework hours to compensate for the reduction in women’s housework as they increase their employment hours, this suggests dual-earner couples either forgo some domestic production (i.e., tolerate dirtier homes) and/or purchase more services on the market for it. Market provision includes hiring domestic personnel, or purchasing time-saving appliances, laundry services, restaurant or pre-packaged meals, and so on. If this is the case, greater equality in men’s relative share (but not hours of housework) is made possible with the household’s reliance on outside labor to produce domestic goods historically fashioned with women’s hourly input. This depicts a shift between hours in paid and unpaid labor occurring at macro as well as micro levels, which together form what Glucksman (1995) has referred to as the “total social organisation of labour.”

Any macrosocial organization of labor necessarily reflects the labor regulations and policies affecting not only women’s, but men’s, access to paid work. For example, the strength of the Australian working class movement that led to the Harvester Judgement and to greater gender employment inequality also resulted in skilled workers winning an 8-hour workday during a time when British and U.S. workers were attempting to win a 10-hour

Figure 4.1. Women’s and men’s housework hours at different levels of women’s employment for couples in Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States for 2002.
The greater time Australian men and women spend in housework might thus reflect fewer hours spent in paid work. With the higher Australian wages, however, services would be more expensive. As a result, the poorest Australian households might not be able to afford market-produced domesticity, whereas higher income households might require more time in paid work to purchase services compared with similar families in the UK and the United States. So although men’s housework hours vary little across partners’ employment status, how the household organizes the total of its paid and unpaid labor should vary substantially across the countries and across social classes within the countries.

I map these simultaneous dynamics in Figure 4.2, which displays partnered women’s and men’s average employment and housework hours across income quartiles within each country. The ISSP only surveys a single respondent within a household, so these are not couple reports, but estimates as reported by individual women and men for themselves and their partner. See Chapter 11 (Geist, this volume) on international differences in what he says versus what she says are the hours each spend in housework. Notably, the nature of poverty appears different in Australia, because women’s and men’s employment hours among couples in the lowest income quartile are miniscule compared with the UK or the United States. This suggests that the poorest Australian families rely more heavily on state transfers, whereas the poorest British and U.S. families are the working poor, with U.S. wives’ greater employment hours not necessarily ensuring the couple escapes

Figure 4.2. His and hers average weekly employment and housework hours by income quartile; ISSP 2002; and Australian, British (United Kingdom), and U.S. (United States) couples
relative poverty. Among the poorest first quartile of Australian households, men and women devote appreciably more hours to housework, but their combined household time in employment and housework is significantly less than the poorest British or U.S. households. Not surprisingly, the moderately poor (second quartile) in all three countries achieve this greater economic security when women and men spend more hours in paid work and, perhaps, slightly less time in housework.

The relative time in paid and unpaid work across the countries reverses among upper income households. Some couples in the UK and the United States work smarter, but not harder; the total household time in employment and housework among British couples in the third income quartile and U.S. couples in the fourth is not appreciably greater than for second-quartile income couples in those countries. In contrast, Australian women and men spend more hours in paid work as well as housework as their household income increases. Consequently, those policies proclaimed a boon for working class Australian men during the 19th century might prove to be a bust for dual-earner couples in the 21st.

CONCLUSION

As this book attests, there is increasing interest in how couples in different countries negotiate the division of housework when women are employed. Comparisons across socialist, former socialist, and more advanced industrial economies have revealed variation in men’s hours or share of housework, and some variation in the effects of women’s relative resources on shifting this division further (Fuwa 2004; Hook 2006), but comparisons across more similar countries have found no significant differences (Baxter 1997; Kalleberg and Rosenfeld 1990). Here I detailed how a broad range of policies affects the household division of labor, comparing the similar country cases of Australia, Great Britain, and the United States. These three countries share a common political heritage and ideological adherence to minimal state interference in citizens’ private lives, but vary more markedly in how policy has reinforced men’s preferential access to employment (Australia), promoted women’s responsibility for unpaid work of the domestic sphere (United Kingdom), or adhered to liberal tenets of minimal state interference in either (United States).

I found very little variation in men’s housework hours across the countries regardless of their partners’ employment, but greater variation in the total household organization of labor, which highlights further equality dilemmas. In all three countries, more equitable housework divisions among upper income couples derive in part from a reduction in total housework hours, undoubtedly in part by purchasing domestic services in the market. Service sector jobs producing domesticity tend to be more poorly paid and/or
part-time such that gender equity among the upper classes is made possible by class and wage inequality. The hierarchical relations remain gendered as well, as women dominate part-time and lower wage work. In Australia, early class gains leveraged against female employment, and subsequent comparable worth policies that kept average wages higher extracted costs at each end of the income continuum. Lower income couples cannot afford to purchase domestic services and spend a greater number of hours performing the tasks themselves, likely leading to greater work–family conflict among the working poor. Australian couples in the higher income brackets spend more total hours in paid employment and housework than couples in the other two countries, suggesting greater time poverty at the upper end of the income range. The data used here do not include time spent in child care, which we can assume only increases the time or financial pressures on families.

In weighing the relative equality effects of different policy approaches to the household division of labor, restricting access to paid employment in a market-based economy yields the most extreme penalties within and across households. In contrast, policy reinforcement of women’s responsibility for the domestic sphere as in the United Kingdom still allows women the agency to reduce their domestic commitments.27 Today, governments express little concern over untidy houses, but a great deal of concern over declining birth rates, because this affects future economic growth. Together, results indicate that policy planning needs to be more holistic than has been the case to date, with greater awareness of policy linkages among gender equality, financial poverty, time poverty, and family outcomes.

NOTES


2. Detailing these dynamics requires that each partner’s actual housework hours are compared over time, not just the relative share. The articles by Bianchi et al. (2000) and Sayer (2005) detail this for the U.S. case, whereas Hook (2006) looks at changes in men’s hours across time and countries. In all cases, there has been a modest increase in men’s housework hours, but a larger decrease in women’s. Across time, child care hours have increased for both women and men, but the gender gap is even larger.

3. There is ample U.S. cross-sectional evidence of the persistent gendered division of housework, summarized by Shelton and John (1996). Gupta (1999) and South and Spitze (1994) used U.S. longitudinal data to illustrate how each gender’s share changes with their partnering status.

5. Hook (2006), however, concludes this evidence does not support bargaining dynamics as suggested by Breen and Cooke (2005), although her data precluded assessing them because they are collected on individuals but not their partners. I discuss these competing conclusions in more detail (Cooke 2007a).

6. In *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Esping-Andersen (1990) contrasts welfare states along three dimensions. The first is state–market relations, reflecting the welfare mix of private and state provision; the second is the degree to which the state grants social rights equal status with property rights; and the third dimension is the degree to which the state reinforces existing hierarchies. From this classification, he argues there are three regime types: liberal regimes that rely on the market for individual welfare, corporatist–conservative ones that provide more universal provisions but maintain status hierarchies (including gendered ones), and social–democratic regimes that share a policy goal of greater equality and solidarity through more universal provisions.

7. I first discuss and diagram some of these proposed effects in Cooke (2007b) and expand upon them in Cooke (2007a), but since writing those articles, I have increased my emphasis on how policy and other institutional effects reinforce women’s domestic responsibility, regardless of the support for public equality.

8. This is an old debate—how much a gendered division of labor reflects women’s individual choice, a perspective in the fore in the work of Becker (1981) or Hakim (2000), versus the degree to which her choices are socially constructed in part by state policies, the argument applied here and also assessed more directly in Cooke (2006).


11. Daly and Rake (2003) use Luxembourg Income Study data to illustrate that transfers in Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany result in the income in female-headed households being 90% of male-headed household income compared with just more than 70% in the United Kingdom and the United States.

12. Using the National Survey of Families and Households, I found U.S. women’s transfer income and employment earnings each predict husbands’ share of housework (Cooke 2007b).

13. See Phipps and Burton (1995) on the relative levels in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States as of the mid 1980s.

14. Canada is also classified among the liberal regimes, but the analyses here are part of a larger research project that excludes Canada, because that country’s panel dataset excludes questions on domestic labor.


17. In Cooke (2007b), I discuss the progression of child support enforcement in the United States, as well as the effects of more effective enforcement on the division of housework.


19. Dex and Shaw (1986) argued that Britain’s employer tax policies also encouraged the growth in employer’s preference for offering part-time jobs compared with the United States, where two part-time employees are more costly than a single full-time one.

20. See Sklar (1993) and Skocpol (1992) for an overview of the dynamics among gender and class during this period, and Mink (1986) for discussions of gender, class, and race.


23. For income inequality at different points in time, see the Luxembourg Income Study website (www.lisproject.org/keyfigures/ineqtable.htm).

24. These percentages are calculated as follows: percent part-time ÷ (percent full-time + percent part-time). They contrast somewhat with the OECD statistics for all women age 15 to 64 years, because the ISSP sample is comprised of only partnered women younger than 60.

25. The visual differences were confirmed statistically regressing men’s and women’s housework hours on the respondent’s age, number of children, religion, education, and household income. After including an indicator variable for the United Kingdom and one for Australia (referent = United States), the Australian indicator variable was positive and significant for both genders, but women’s employment intensity did not predict any significant shift in men’s housework hours, only women’s. Interaction terms for country × wife’s employment were also not significant, so effects are consistent across countries.


27. Lundberg and Pollak (1994) suggest a similar solution at the couple level in their noncooperative bargaining models (i.e., when left with the entire domestic burden, women reduce it to a level that is manageable on their own).

REFERENCES

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