

“To Cook, Sew, to Be a Man”: The Socialization for Competence and Black Men’s Involvement in Housework

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The context in which Black children do housework and its effect on adult behavior have been relatively unexplored. This article presents analyses of the recollections of 45 Black fathers of young children about performing household chores when they were children and its relevance for their involvement in housework as adults. The fathers’ relatively high involvement in housework is traced to the “socialization for competence” that most of them experienced as boys. Four dimensions in the socialization for competence are discussed: the actual household chores done in childhood, the ways of performing them, the rationale for assigning them, and parents’ justifications for making children engage in housework. Although the childhood socialization for competence does not translate uniformly into men’s sharing housework equally, it takes away ineptitude as an excuse for resisting housework as adults.

KEY WORDS: childhood socialization; housework; African-American men.

Thanks to numerous studies over the past two decades, we now know that Black husbands and fathers do significantly more housework than do men of other racial-ethnic groups (e.g., Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; John & Shelton, 1997; Kamo & Cohen, 1998; Landry, 2000; Maret & Finlay, 1994; Rubin, 1994; Willie, 1985). The division of labor among Black couples tends to be less rigid than among White couples, even when researchers control for wife’s employment status, a couple’s relative earning power, and gender role attitudes (Shelton & John, 1993; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990).

What is the root of Black men’s relative gender equality in the home? Scholars have found that sharing a home with full-time employed or career-oriented women, be they wives or mothers, affects men’s contribution to household labor (Benin & Edwards, 1990; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Blair, 1992; Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). If

that is so, then Black women’s earlier, heavier, and more continuous participation in the paid labor force than White women’s (Hochschild, 1995; Landry, 2000), coupled with their espousal of egalitarian attitudes toward family and paid work as early as the late nineteenth century (Landry, 2000), may help explain Black men’s higher involvement in housework. Yet, scholars have left the context in which Black children do housework and its effect on later adult behavior relatively unexplored.

In this article I address those issues by presenting an analysis of the recollections of 45 Black men about performing household chores when they were children and its relevance for their involvement in housework as adults. This analysis is informed by the premise that the role of early socialization is more complex than a “baseline” for a life course (Gerson, 1985, 1993). To say that childhood experiences are important does not mean that adults simply replicate the lives of their role models or that those early experiences determine adult outcomes; it does, however, indicate that those experiences are available as meaningful future references, even if only

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as “distancing and evaluating” tools (Gerson, 1993, p. 46). After all, human beings develop beliefs and feelings about what happened much earlier in their lives, and they continue to evaluate those beliefs and feelings (Gubrium, Holstein, & Buckoldt, 1994; Rosenthal, 1993).

Socialization into Gender Roles and the Division of Household Labor in Black Families

Ever since the separation between the home and the workplace in the nineteenth century, housework has been associated with women and ascribed very low status (Gerstel & Gross, 1987). Housework is often referred to as “invisible work” (De Vault, 1991) and as work that is never finished. Housework is a heavily gendered activity, and not just among adults. In mainstream American society, the assumption is that, if housework is to be performed by children, it will most likely be assigned on the basis of gender, such that girls do what are considered the most feminine tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and boys do the most masculine tasks, such as garbage disposal and yard work. In practice, that corresponds to the gender-typing of children’s household labor (Antil, Goodnow, Russell, & Cotton, 1996; Blair, 1992).

Among African Americans, however, that approach may not be normative. The Afrocentric perspective suggests that a number of cultural traits that Africans brought with them to this country not only survived American slavery, but have remained central to Black families to this day. Two of such traits are role reciprocity and role flexibility (Billingsley, 1992). African-American subculture stresses the importance of finishing a household task and the age of the child rather than the sex of the child who performs the task (Peters, 1988). There is less gender-typing in the socialization of Black children, and more focus on nurture, assertiveness, and independence (Lewis, 1975).

On the other hand, Hill and Sprague (1999, p. 481) have described that perspective as an over-generalization, and argued instead that “the impact of race on gender varies by class”: they found that poor White parents were significantly more likely than poor Black parents to emphasize obedience in their sons but not in their daughters, whereas upper-middle-class Black parents were more likely than their White counterparts to discipline their daughters physically, but not their sons. Still, Hill and Sprague

did not consider parents’ assignments of household tasks to their children. However, in her study of attitudes toward child rearing, Hill (1999) did find a tendency toward gender neutrality among both Black and White parents, “especially those in the middle class” (p. 116), including their purported attitudes about assigning household chores to children. Only among the “less educated, newly middle class, or both” did Hill find some support for gender typing, which she explained as their search for respectability through the adherence to “middle class norms” and their homophobia, i.e., a fear that their boys would grow up to be gay (Hill, 1999, p. 117).

There continues to be a scarcity of evidence about the experiences of Black men in families. Moreover, most of what is available tends to emphasize deficiencies rather than strengths. The present study explores the basis of Black men’s relatively egalitarian involvement in the household division of labor by analyzing the context of their childhood gender socialization.

METHOD

Participants

This study is based on in-depth interviews I conducted with a non-random sample of 45 Black fathers of minor children between 1993 and 1996 in order to explore the question as to how and why Black men participate in family life.² All respondents lived in the New York metropolitan area at interview time. Referral and snowball sampling were the major sampling techniques I used.³ Informal contacts with school officials from Central Harlem and Brooklyn led to seven interviews. My visits to two Brooklyn churches and a community center that offered adult

²The data for this study are not recent. However, because I am addressing men’s socialization process and long standing cultural patterns that endured throughout their upbringing, the age of the data is not crucial.

³I first attempted to select a random sample by obtaining permission from the New York City Board of Education to visit elementary schools in predominantly Black working- and middle-class areas. After introducing myself to students in second- and third-grade classrooms, I left a briefing of my study with the children and a consent form, together with a self-addressed stamped envelope, so that I could be contacted either by their fathers or by an adult in their households. I received no replies. Searching further for a random sample, I was able to telephone over 30 recent graduates of a predominantly Black college in New Jersey. Unfortunately, fewer than 5 either qualified for the study or agreed to participate.

GED classes produced 8 respondents in total. Contacts with students at a predominantly Black 4-year college in Brooklyn led to seven interviews, and access to a list of recent graduates of such a college in New Jersey resulted in another four. Seven interviews resulted from referrals from persons who were aware of my study and had ties to the New York Black community; the remainder of the sample were recruited from snowball sampling out of the previous interviewees.⁴

Selection bias led the sample to differ from the national population of Black men in that two-thirds were either married or cohabiting with women, and most lived with children. As for their socioeconomic status, about two-fifths were employed in white-collar occupations; slightly over one-half of those were in professional/managerial positions. One-fifth of the sample, most of whom were students (GED, college, or graduate students), were not employed. The remaining one-third of the sample held working-class jobs, mostly in service occupations such as custodians, security guards, and skilled crafts. The median age of middle-class respondents, most of whom were married, was 38 years. Non-employed respondents were slightly older, with a median age of 39.5 years; like working-class respondents, they were more likely to be cohabiters. Working-class respondents, with a median age of 36 years, were the youngest subgroup.

Compared to the national average for Black men, the fathers were more educated, as two-fifths of them were college graduates. They were also much better off financially, with a median family income in the \$40,000–60,000 range, which reflects their multiple-earner households. Still, about one-fifth of them had family incomes below \$25,000 per year. Table I summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

⁴This study revealed to me the mistrust that many Black men have of their social representations. I contacted about 100 men, both in person and by telephone, but many refused to speak to me once I explained to them the nature of my study, even though I always assured prospective participants that I was a doctoral student and was in no way connected to any “social services” agency, as some suspected. Fear of governmental scrutiny and of negative comparisons also may have led half a dozen young fathers to select themselves out. This study also taught me to be more aware of the role a researcher’s race plays in establishing fruitful contacts with potential respondents: in the final stages of interviewing, during a telephone screening, one father asked me what my “background” was. When I told him I was Black from Brazil, he responded, “Oh, ok! I thought you was White. You don’t sound Black, and I’m not talking to no White about being a father.” I may have lost a number of potential participants who thought likewise.

Table I. Demographic Profile of Participants (*N* = 45)

Socioeconomic status	
Occupation	
Middle class	44%
Working class	36%
Not employed	20%
Education	
Less than high school	36%
High school graduates	24%
College graduates	40%
Medium family income	\$40,000–59,999
Marital status	
Participants with partners	67%
Cohabiters	27%
Married	40%
Participants without partners	33%
Never married	4%
Separated	16%
Divorced	11%
Widowed	2%
Current living arrangements	
Single-person households	7%
Single-parent households	16%
Conjugal households	9%
Nuclear households	33%
Extended households	35%
Age range	
19–24 years	13%
25–30 years	9%
31–36 years	24%
37–42 years	24%
43–49 years	29%
Number of children living with participants	
0	22%
1	42%
2	18%
3	16%
4	0%
5	2%
Region where participants grew up	
Northeast	66%
South	34%

Procedure

All interviews were based on a detailed interview schedule, structured with closed- and open-ended questions, which followed the fathers’ life course through their childhood, work history, and intimate relationships. I also asked them detailed questions about child care arrangements, division of housework, their attitudes toward fatherhood, and their social networks. The interviews, which concluded with attitudinal questions about gender equity, lasted an average of 3 h.

Coltrane (1996) has argued that, in order to understand men’s participation in family life, it is

necessary to study couples. Although there is merit in studying the attitudes toward the division of labor and the actual behaviors of contemporary couples (e.g., Hertz, 1986; Hochschild, 1989; Rubin, 1994), I do not agree that when researchers exclude women from the unit of analysis, “[they] fail to give us a complete picture of men’s family roles” (Coltrane, 1996, p. 7). There is a lot more work on women. The scarcity of comparative sociological work on men—especially Black men—warrants a particular focus on them as social actors, even if partners often hold contradictory perceptions of each other’s attitudes and contributions (Hiller & Philliber, 1988; Pleck, 1997). The purpose of this study is not to verify the accuracy of Black male contribution to family life, but to learn about how a cross-section of Black men socially construct and interpret their contribution (Gubrium et al., 1994).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fathers’ View of their Involvement in Housework

Data on involvement in housework came from responses to the question “How do you divide the following activities on a weekly basis?”, which I asked of the fathers who lived with partners (64% of the sample). There were 13 relevant household activities. The categories of high, medium, and low involvement emerged from my count of the responses that reflected men’s reported participation, i.e., “Respondent mainly” and “Shared equally.” Based on the fathers’ accounts of their current division of housework, I distinguished among three types: “sharers,” “helpers,” and “shirkers.”

Sharers (one-third of those who lived with partners) were highly involved, in that they either shared equally or were primarily responsible for at least one-half of the housework. Helpers (25%) had a medium involvement; they did at least one-third, but fewer than one-half, of the tasks. Finally, shirkers, or non-involved fathers (10%), were those who contributed to fewer than one-third of the tasks.

Besides variations in housework involvement, there were other differences among the three types. One was age: sharers, who averaged about 30 years, were much younger than helpers and shirkers, who were in their 40s. Another was time availability: sharers spent the lowest number of hours at work. They were also less likely ever to have been unemployed, to have middle-class occupations, and to have

finished college. Helpers were equally distributed in the middle and working classes and were more likely to be primary breadwinners. Most shirkers had only a high-school education, and they were the most likely to have experienced frequent bouts of unemployment.

Another reason for the variation in involvement was the men’s self-conception of masculinity, work, and family. Sharers were not only the most likely to see themselves as both breadwinners and caretakers, but also to believe they were very involved in family life. They were also the least likely to abide by traditional gender scripts, in that, more than their counterparts, they believed that men who do not contribute to housework as much as their wives do fall short of the true meaning of masculinity. Helpers, on the other hand, tended to take advantage of their breadwinning status to justify their lower share of the housework. Finally, even more than helpers, shirkers tended to de-emphasize subcultural messages that family work is expected of men, and, in turn, to embrace the more traditional cultural message that effective breadwinning is the most salient aspect of masculinity. Therefore, they either were altogether less successful as providers or they expended the most energy on paid work, thus neglecting housework.

Regarding their involvement in housework, it is well known that men tend to help out with, on the one hand, the relatively more sporadic tasks of garbage disposal and repairs and, on the other hand, the authority-related task of preparing tax returns and paying bills; I thus labeled those activities “masculine.” Virtually all the sharers, as opposed to close to three-fourths of the helpers, and even one-third of the shirkers participated in at least two of those activities. Sharers were also more likely to take out the garbage, but they were slightly less responsible than helpers for paying bills. According to the men’s accounts, their behavior did not necessarily reflect their preferences, but their partners’ insistence that they contribute to masculine activities.

What is remarkable about this sample was its relatively high participation in cleaning tasks, which include dusting, vacuuming, and washing or waxing the floor, and which, like most indoors tasks, usually fall under the responsibility of women (Hochschild, 1989; Landry, 2000). Over four-fifths of helpers and 79% of sharers reported primary responsibility for cleaning the floors, which is regarded as a “most unpleasant task” by a sample of White and Mexican

American husbands (Coltrane, 1996, p. 54). Marked differences were found regarding laundering, ironing, and repairing clothes: almost all sharers, as opposed to one-third of shirkers and even fewer helpers, cited primary responsibility for at least one of those activities. Although the behavior of sharers was quite innovative, helpers and shirkers were very similar to American husbands in general, because “men doing laundry is still relatively rare” (Coltrane, 1996, p. 54). In fact, an analysis of data from the second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH2, 1991–1994) shows that “laundry was the chore most avoided by husbands: 62.7% of whites and 42.9% of blacks” (Landry, 2000, p. 156). It also shows that Black husbands were significantly more involved in housework than were their White counterparts, even though husbands—regardless of race—did a minority of feminine tasks (Landry, 2000). Finally, except for grocery shopping and dish washing, men’s participation in feeding-related activities was not as high as in other activities. Few cooked on a regular basis, thus avoiding the everyday, repetitive character of producing meals, which “requires coordination and interpersonal work as well as the concrete activities of preparation” (De Vault, 1991, p. 182). Not-employed men and men who earned less than their wives were the most likely to contribute to food preparation routinely; in other words, those men felt the need or the pressure to cook when their work status was discrepant from their wives’. In that regard, the men differ from nationally representative samples, because cooking was the most common feminine chore taken on by both White husbands (3.7 h per week) and by Black husbands (5.1 h per week) in the NSFH2 (Landry, 2000, p. 157).

According to my definition, the sample as a whole had an average involvement. According to Hochschild’s (1989) definition and compared to nationally representative samples of Black and White husbands from the early 1990s (Landry, 2000), however, the present sample was highly involved, taking on close to 55% of the household tasks; the overall contribution of White husbands in the NSFH2, who devoted about one-third of the total hours White couples spent in housework per week, pales in comparison (Landry, 2000).⁵ I argue that this high in-

⁵In the NSFH2, working-class White husbands contributed 32.3% of the total hours, slightly less than the 35.7% of the hours contributed by middle-class White husbands. Black husbands contributed significantly more: 36.4% (working class) and 42.5% (middle class) (Landry, 2000).

volvement in housework can be traced back to a childhood phenomenon that I call “socialization for competence.” Socialization for competence means training both boys and girls to do domestic tasks well, regardless of whether the tasks typically are seen as “feminine” or “masculine.” Behind that training is the idea that even children must contribute to the functioning of the household. The respondents’ recollections indicate that, though they might not have recognized it as boys, most eventually realized that having done housework early on better prepared them for adult life.

After an analysis of the respondents’ narratives, I identified four dimensions in the socialization for competence: the actual household chores done in childhood, the ways of performing them, the rationale for assigning them, and parents’ justifications for making children engage in housework.

Household Chores Done in Childhood

The men took on increased responsibility with age. Most started doing housework as early as 6 years of age, when they were expected at least to keep their rooms tidy. By the time they were 10 or 11, however, they were taking on larger duties. That was the case regardless of the employment status of their mothers. For instance, William, a helper, was a 41-year-old college student who had a live-in relationship with his girlfriend at the time of the interviews. The youngest of eight children, raised with the help of relatives after his widowed mother had a stroke, William remembered tasks in which even young children had to participate:

... my mother didn’t become sick until I was 9, 10, something like that. So I have to go from there. I was already pretty much in tune with taking a bath, cleaning, mopping up, we started that young. I think that at 6 years old, I—you were able to wash dishes or dry them. Sure, we was drying them plates, that’s right. You had to do something.

“You have to do something” was the message these boys received repeatedly. Even as they expected less from younger children, parents conveyed the idea of cooperation from all children. For example, having a retired father, a homemaking mother when he was a preteen, and eight older siblings who looked after him did not grant Curtis, another helper, the luxury of being a mere bystander. As a 31-year-old married security officer with a 6-year-old young daughter, Curtis admired his equally involved

parents for turning him into a productive person through the practice of housework:

... that's the way that they would raise you. You always had a little chore to do, because when you're being brought up they always teach you how to do something That's how mostly I learned how to do little nicks and things around the house, make sure the house stayed clean. To this day I can cook, I can clean, I can go to work, it doesn't bother me, and that's what I so much respect about my mother and father. They had this old tradition where it fed down to you, you wouldn't be so lazy, so helpless, and that's what I loved so much.

Explaining his parents' decisions about adjusting chores to the ages of their children, Carl, a sharer who was a 22-year-old married computer technician with a 3-year-old son, compared his part to that of his older brother: "Chores were mainly designated by what we were doing. My brother got stuck with a lot when I was 5 because he was the oldest, and I couldn't go outside and throw out the garbage late at night, but as I got older, they started to balance out more, even them out between the two of us." On the other hand, Otis, a helper who was a 45-year-old married minister of music at a church and the father of two adolescent sons, illustrated the perspective of older children. As the brother of four younger siblings, he took on more responsibility, even though his mother was a homemaker: "Yeah, well, of course when I was younger, it was primarily myself and my sister because the rest of my brothers were very young, so the bulk of the responsibility was on she and I, and then most of that on me."

The most common tasks were housecleaning (including taking out the garbage), followed by meal clean-up, laundry, and cooking; in addition, a minority of the sample even learned to iron and to sew. Although adults—usually mothers—were mostly responsible for cooking meals, it was not uncommon for boys to learn how to cook, sometimes when they were no older than 7 years of age. The acquisition of that skill came first from watching meals being prepared and then from trial and error. Most boys learned to cook from their mothers. Such was the case with Ray, a 44-year-old college security officer who lived with the mother of his youngest daughter. A helper, he reminisced:

I started cooking when I was 7. I'll never forget it. The first meal, neck bones and rice, and a pot of beans. Biscuits didn't come out so good: I forgot to put the oil in the biscuits, they were a little hard; 'hammer-tough,' my brother called them I had

to wait an extra year before I could go to school. All my playmates were in school. I had nothing to do, so I learned how to cook, just by watching [my mother]. I was around the house.

Spending time at relatives' homes was another opportunity to acquire cooking skills. The socialization for competence, much like other aspects of African-American family life, transcended the confines of the nuclear household. Earvin illustrated this point. A 30-year-old city investigator who shared housework equally with his live-in girlfriend, he had lived with his maternal grandparents for 3 years as a teenager. As he recalled,

I learned how to cook from my grandparents and somewhat from my mother Three months into living with my grandparents I could make stuff like steak, hamburger, spaghetti, things like this, just by watching my grandmother My grandmother's a great cook, and when I used to come to visit her, before I lived with her, I learned. She used to sort of [say], 'There's going to be a time when you need to know how to do this,' so she taught me that.

Unlike Ray and Earvin, however, the majority of the boys did housework because they had no choice. Over and over again, they indicated that they complied with the specifications for fear of the consequences, because failure to complete a task might have been met with strong disciplinary actions: at best, they might have had to redo the task; at worst, they might have been physically punished. Only three men hated housework so much that they preferred to "take a beating for [not doing] it." The majority tended to accept their fate, even if grudgingly.

However, it makes no difference whether boys liked doing housework or did it because they had no choice: most of those who recalled disliking housework as boys became sharers; none shirked housework. For instance, Aaron, a 38-year-old married community leader, admitted he "hated it" as an 8-year-old but later found housework "refreshing." He recalled his mother's high standard of tidiness, which must be met regardless of the time of day—or night:

I mean, hey! I wanted to go out and play. Let somebody else do this. Why do I have to do it? There were some times I woke up and I felt like, 'Hey, I want to straighten up, clean up,' but then there were times late at night when my mother would come in from church and she would find that things had not been done properly and, 'Get up, out of the bed, get it right.'

Do you mean like at midnight?

Yeah! I mean, if she had given the word that she wanted certain things done and she would find out they had been very very—I'm not talking about being picky, but very very half-heartedly done—then, yeah. 'Get up, do it right.'

Perceiving my shock from my facial expression, Aaron, a sharer with two pre-adolescent sons, asked whether his mother's requirements sounded strange to me. Upon my confirmation, he replied, "I would demand it of my children."

In the rare cases when fathers were the primary parents (i.e., the person who, according to the respondents' recollections, predominantly took care of them) and also primarily responsible for housework, they were no less strict. Steve, a 28-year-old married office associate, illustrated this point by remembering the actions of his mother's third husband, who assumed primary responsibility for Steve's and his siblings' upbringing: he fed them, ironed their clothes, enforced a curfew, and stressed the importance of education by showing them his worker's hands. As Steve remembered, his mother, who had had a history of reliance on public assistance, was completely dependent not only on his stepfather's paycheck, but also on his household labor. Because, according to Steve, his mother "had nothing to do; she didn't cook, she didn't do anything," it was only fitting that his stepfather would be the one to impose rules of household cleanliness on the children:

Mother didn't have anything to say . . . [W]e said 'We think it's clean enough.' He would come in the room with a white glove and he would go over the dresser, 'It's still not clean enough. I'll be back in an hour.' And we had to clean another hour! And we knew that the room was cleaned up, that nothing on the floor, we did the dresser, and we still had another hour. That used to make me so mad. I used to hate him so much! I said, 'That's crazy.'

Like most of the men profiled here, Steve, a sharer, saw those experiences as useful. For him, doing housework "builds character" and "makes you independent." He confessed that housework had been so ingrained in him that he would do it even if he was tired: "Even now, . . . I work and go to school. Sometimes you're tired, [but] I just can't see things to be messy because I wasn't raised that way. When you're not raised that way, you're not accustomed to it."

Of course, it is possible to learn to do housework later in life. But if a man was not used to doing housework as a child, he may not have the dis-

cipline to execute it well as an adult. For example, consider Duke, a twice-divorced 43-year-old police detective who lived alone. As a boy, Duke was constantly beaten for his refusal to do what he considered women's work; as an adult, he admitted, "Well, I think if I had done the chores and not complained about it, I'd probably be a better housekeeper today. I think so."

On the other hand, a boy may have grown up hating housework only to start to appreciate his own abilities as an adult. George, a sharer whose grandmother, mother, and aunts made him endure the discipline of housework even though he did not think it was "the macho thing to do," saw it differently as a 33-year-old reclamation technician with a live-in partner and pre-school-age daughter: "It paid off because I like to clean my house now. I wash dishes. I used to think that wasn't the thing for men to do—wash dishes, sweep the floor . . . You've got to share in everything. Living in the house, you've got to participate."

Such responses suggest that the socialization for competence continues to influence these men's lives. Many not only still feel compelled to tackle housework, but they expect no less from the next generation, an attitude that has been documented in other samples of African-American men (e.g., Haynes, 2000). As we have seen, Aaron had no qualms about waking up his children to perfect what he regarded as a poorly executed task; Ben, a never-married 36-year-old bouncer, believed that "Everybody needs chores these days"; Curtis complained that "Some of the kids these days does not know how to clean a bathroom up, wash dishes"; and Kendrick was equally unimpressed. As a divorced 38-year-old delivery man who was raising his adolescent children mostly on his own, he criticized the way children perform housework today: "Back then [my mother] used to get up and put us on our knees and scrub stuff; that's what they were doing back then . . . If I tell my son now to wash something, I don't even like the way they clean compared to the way we was cleaning in the '60s."

Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the socialization for competence is the association the fathers make between housework and masculinity, which illustrates the idea that "[m]en are not born; they are made. And men make themselves, actively constructing their masculinities within a social and historical context" (Kimmel & Messner, 1992, p. 8). Sam, a 46-year-old divorced engineer, disclosed that he assigned his 17-year-old son, of whom he had sole

custody, the tasks of doing the laundry and the dishes, and cleaning the apartment. That is because, going against the stereotype, Sam considered a “sissy” to be a man who is not well versed in housework. Even more telling is the comment made by Ronald, a 45-year-old truck driver who was separated at interview time. Raised by a widowed mother, Ronald and his siblings tackled housework that, according to him, was characteristic of country life: he and his brother started cutting wood at age 12, their sisters did the laundry, and their mother was responsible for all other chores. Lest we think that the division of housework among the children was based on gender, Ronald let me know that he started cooking and sewing when he was 15 years old. It is clear that, like Sam, Ronald regards competence in those areas as the very core of his masculinity when he revealed, “My mother taught me how to cook, sew, to be a man.” Ronald’s interpretation contrasts deeply with the well-known thesis of the Moynihan Report (1965), i.e., that being raised mainly by single mothers leads to the “emasculatation” of Black men and, ultimately, to the demise of the group as a whole.

Not all boys who were forced to participate in housework grew up to be model housekeepers or voluntarily to share housework equally with their partners. For example, Lionel, a 40-year-old radio technician, left all housework to his girlfriend, who was a full-time student; Nickolas, a 36-year-old custodian with five children, proclaimed, almost proudly, “My wife does everything. That’s right, and I don’t mind telling you. I don’t want to have to do nothing!” Both justified their refusal to do housework as a reflection of their status as sole breadwinners; before a disability prevented Nickolas’ wife from working for pay, he used to help her with the dishes, the laundry, and mopping the floors. But Nickolas and Lionel are clearly in the minority, for two-thirds of the men with partners were at least moderately involved in housework. This suggests that, among African-American men, routine housework duty as children seems to take away incompetence as an excuse for resistance to housework as adults, unlike what has been found among European Americans and Hispanics.⁶

⁶In his study of sharing couples, Coltrane (1996) gave the example of a wife who “[l]ike most women in America today, . . . reported that she had to frequently instruct and remind [her husband] before he began to notice and take care of the basics of running a home” (p. 15). Like the “mothers’ helpers” in Gerson’s study (1993), some husbands in Coltrane’s sample were more likely to wait for wives to tell them what to do even when they were willing to help with chores.

Growing up doing housework without much gender differentiation may also provide a space for change in gender attitudes to flourish. In fact, most of my interviewees held clearly egalitarian attitudes toward the division of household labor (including the division of child care), the raising of children, and the responsibility for paid work. Eighty percent of them agreed that men and women should share housework equally; 87% agreed that mothers and fathers should share child care equally, and 80% believed that there should be more parental leave so that more mothers and fathers could raise their children; 40 of the 45 fathers agreed that a child should be close to both parents, and close to two-thirds believed that sons and daughters should be treated equally.

As for the roles of men and women in the family and in paid work, most of the men rejected the breadwinner-homemaker dichotomy: only seven of them agreed that it is best if the husband is the achiever outside the home and the wife concentrates on taking care of the home; close to 90% disagreed that a married man’s first responsibility is his job; rather, three-quarters (but all working-class and single fathers) believed that a man’s priority is his family. In addition, 69% agreed that a working mother can be just as good a mother as the one who does not work for pay (the proportion increased for those whose own mothers worked when they were preschoolers), and almost all believed that it is fine if wives earn more than husbands, pointing to their acceptance of the historical necessity of women’s paid employment for the survival of Black families. This level of egalitarianism was higher than that of the larger male population in the early 1990s (Landry, 2000). It is quite possible that the socialization for competence, which in itself emerges partly out of the structural conditions of Black family life, has the enduring effect of attenuating among Blacks the impact of the ideology of “separate spheres” for men and women, which is common in the larger society.

Styles of Performance

Preparation for competence in adulthood was reinforced by styles of performance. Parents demanded that their children help with housework, but they were more flexible regarding how their children should complete the work. The two styles of housework performance were cooperation among the children and rotation.

By performing their tasks together, children avoided punishment and also pleased their parents. The son of a single mother, Kendrick fondly recalled how he and his seven siblings divided the housework: “Yes, sometimes we did it together. Sometimes my mother would go out and she would come home, the house would be spick and span; we would be ‘Mr. Clean.’ She would be so proud of us, you know.” That is not to say that all his memories are so agreeable. Kendrick finally succeeded in avoiding housework when, as a 14-year-old, he became strong enough to make beating him too tiresome and confrontational for his mother.

Cooperation gave the children more control over how to schedule time spent in housework, for, on occasion, they would procrastinate until close to the time of their parents’ arrival home, then rush to get everything done. Accomplishing the tasks at the last minute turned the process into “fun” rather than a “chore.” Of course, this strategy worked only if the number of siblings was relatively high. As Gerald, one of five children, explained, “Well, basically, my mother just said that the house would have to be cleaned before she came back, you know, and everybody . . . took part of that. So we would decide among ourselves . . . who was gonna do which room or whatever.” I asked Gerald, 39 years old, a helper who was a married civil servant with five pre-adolescent children, whether, in retrospect, he wished he had grown up not doing housework. He replied:

No, we had fun growing up. We used to cheat a lot, doing the work, because there was so many others, and we knew at what time she’d be back. So, instead of cleaning up all day, we might wait till the last hour before she’d come home, and then all of us would do one room together, and run and do the next room, and run and do the next room, and it wouldn’t take no time at all to do it.

Most children rotated chores among themselves, regardless of the type of household in which they lived. Rudolph, for example, a 45-year-old retired police officer who was separated, was helping his father with all chores by age 12: “Yes, I was the cook at age 12, I started cooking then. My father give me chores to do and I would help, maintain the rooming house. I would be his assistant, really whatever he do from then on in.” William, who “could cook family dinners at the age of 12 without a problem,” described rotation as if it were an assembly line:

[Rotation] was like, yeah, see, I can’t say, it was just like a tradition. If, say, for instance, you wash the

dishes this week, I had to wash them next week. You’d probably clean the bathroom, so . . . it went around. You did it one week, I’m taking out the garbage, . . . sweep the kitchen floor, my other sister’s washing the dishes. The other one is wiping them clean and putting them away, the other one—so you know, everybody had to do chores. I don’t know where it came from, to be honest with you . . . All I know is that I had—everyone had—to participate.

Rotation ensured that all children were at least familiar with most aspects of housework. Rotation, then, is an important component of the socialization for competence; it reinforces a child’s preparation for adult life. Holman, a 29-year-old data entry operator who lived with his wife and two boys, and whose own father left when he was 5 years old, recounted how his mother trained him and his brothers to perform all household chores. That way, she explained, they would be able to fend for themselves, and might never depend on women as adults. Notice how, like Ronald, Holman, a sharer, listed sewing as one of the tasks his mother had taught him:

Believe it or not, we were taught to shop and to keep house, to cook, to sew, and to clean, because she always said, and I’m talking about ages 7, 8, 9, 10, she said that anything can happen, and Mommy may leave you, it could be through death, accident, so be prepared, and even though we grumbled about it, being boys of course, she also used the scenario that ‘one day you may get married and your wife may not want to do these things, so be prepared to do them.’

And I’m sure that your wife is so grateful to her.

[laughs] Oh indeed! Indeed.

Assigning Chores to Children

Because most of the men were raised primarily by their mothers, most of whom were responsible for the bulk of the housework, it is not surprising that 84% of those who could recall how parents negotiated the division of labor named their mothers as the parent who assigned chores to them. As Grover, a 28-year-old married store clerk who was a sharer, put it, “. . . my mother basically said who was going to do what that day or she’ll call on the phone and she’ll tell my brother, ‘Hey look, I want this, this, this done before I come home.’”

Because mothers were more likely than fathers to be “the architect of who did what in the household,” they, more than fathers, also socialized

their sons into a diminished “sexual territoriality” (Bernard, 1989, p. 146). Mothers’ guidance of sons’ participation in housework was an extension of their other household duties, because few parents divided housework and child care equally. Overall, fathers were most likely to take responsibility for repairs and grocery shopping; as for indoors activities, fathers favored cooking the most, but that tended to be a weekend activity. The tendency of most fathers to focus on masculine-typed household tasks suggests that mothers recruited their sons to compensate for their husbands’ modest involvement in housework (Shelton, 1992). If that was so, then mothers acted as socialization agents on more than one level: as assigners of behavior, as holders of innovative gender attitudes, and as models for their sons despite the behavior of their partners. In turn, fathers also showed their sons different ways of “doing gender.” Finally, their sons at times resisted and rebelled against the dictates of housework assignment. Therefore, as both observers and agents, sons were more than mere receptacles of impositions.

Most men who remembered their fathers’ cooking abilities spoke of elaborate desserts and exotic dishes, rather than more mundane, day-to-day meals. Curtis, whose father stayed home due to a war disability, remembered his father’s cooking of game with affection:

Yes, my father’s a good cook. Wow, I think all of us used to love when he’d cook because he’d put so much on your plate. He would pile your food up, you wouldn’t even go for seconds, he’d put enough on there to last—to this day we always like his wild food: racoon, rabbits. He cooks them, the different things.

A few of the men saw their fathers as role models of family involvement as well. One-quarter of the sharers, over one-half of the helpers, and two of the three shirkers routinely saw their fathers help out with housework. Lou, for instance, a 40-year-old businessman who shared housework evenly with his girlfriend, remembered his father saying that “a man and a woman are supposed to work together. He did the cooking when Mother was pregnant, changed diapers With us boys, he did laundry—first by hand, then at the Laundromat. Mother cooked and left food on the stove, sewed our clothes, shopped.” Rudolph, whose preacher father did most of the family work while his wife worked for pay, saw himself as his father’s assistant; Steve and Lionel both learned everyday cooking from their heavily involved stepfa-

thers. Steve’s stepfather, who died when Steve was 14, trained him not only in housecleaning but also in cooking. In Steve’s words, “. . . when we got older [about 11], he started us cooking, we’d come up and as we got older we’d cook. I did my first French toast, cinnamon toast. I cooked eggs, I learned that just growing up—a kid doing breakfast. We didn’t go further; if he had stayed with us, we would have gone farther.” During his marriage, Teddy, a 39-year-old janitor who was separated from the mother of his two children, patterned his housework performance after his own father’s: “I did a lot. At that time, when [my daughter] and [my son] were around 3 and 9 years old, [my wife] was going to school. I started working part-time to fit in the hours she had to go to school so it was like I watched my father, how he was, and I kind of patterned off of that.”

Even when fathers were not as involved in family work, they might instruct their sons as a way of disciplining them. Marvin, a divorced 35-year-old teacher’s aide who felt that neither parent gave him enough quality time, nevertheless recalled having learned how to run a house from his father, who had served in the Korean War: “He was real discipline, he was like a sergeant He showed me how to cook, the proper way to wash dishes, how to clean a house. Manly, you know, stuff like that.” Marvin’s father used the times he prepared “big family dinners” to teach his son how to cook a soul-food meal:

He’d say, ‘Junior, this is what you have to do.’ He said, ‘This is the season, you’ve got to wash the greens, you got to soak these greens overnight, they might have maggots, all that stuff on them. Chitlins, put them in vinegar, water,’ stuff like that. He used to tell me. I never did like no chitlins anyway.

It left a big impression.

Yes, yes How to do rice, cook hominy grits, fried tomatoes. When times were like really hard, then we ate fried grits. Hominy grits. You leave them in, you put them in the refrigerator the next day, and then you mash them down good.

By framing housework into a series of army-like activities, Marvin’s father took away from it any “feminine” associations, turning it into a “manly” task. In that way, these boys learned that men support their families more than by earning an income. The few examples of men who saw their fathers as role models of family involvement suggest that some men in the 1950s and 1960s were already concerned with conveying to their sons more than the image of “man the provider.”

Justifications for Making Children Perform Housework

According to the respondents' recollections, as children they saw doing housework as "a way of discipline, a means of control," because they were only allowed to go out to play after they had completed their chores successfully. As adults, they also saw housework as a means of "keeping us out of trouble," for the time they spent doing dishes, cleaning, or cooking was time spent away from the lure of the streets. Their parents, especially their mothers, usually justified the assignment of housework as training for their children, both as a way for them to achieve self-sufficiency and as preparation for adult life. In so doing, parents also exposed their sons to an alternative gender ideology that broke the link between femininity and family work.

Most of the men believed their experiences had "paid off." They were proud of their ability to be "independent" in the household. For example, Abdul, a 19-year-old security guard who shared housework and child care equally with his live-in girlfriend, was glad his mother made him do housework when he was a boy. Otherwise, "Oh no, no, man, please. Can you imagine, if you living in your house and your mom doesn't teach you how to wash dishes? or wash clothes? You'd be a bum." In Abdul's thinking, the inability to perform basic household tasks turns one into a delinquent human being.

Although parents framed children's work as beneficial to their sons, it was also advantageous to the parents themselves. After all, research (Bergen, 1991; Rexroat & Shehan, 1987; Sharp & Ciscle, 2004; South & Spitze, 1994) has shown that the presence of children in the household increases the amount of housework; that, together with the fact that Black households tend to have more children than White households, may help explain why Black men tend to spend more time in housework than White men do (John & Shelton, 1997). Indeed, my interviewees grew up in homes with, on average, more than five children. Therefore, having children feed and clean up after themselves eased the burden on adults, especially on mothers, who often managed both family and paid work.

As boys, the men noticed that their mothers needed help running the house. As a consequence, a few even took responsibility for family work voluntarily. Older children with several siblings "made it easy on mothers" by assigning chores to their siblings, by taking a larger share of the housework,

or by caring for the younger ones, especially in post-separation households. Melvin, a 38-year-old divorced real estate investor whose parents separated when he was 11, understood as an adolescent the requirements of a single-mother household:

Well, [having us do housework] was instilling responsibility. The bottom line was, she had to work. Things had to be done. I had younger brothers, they had to eat, so the thing was, you know, at the time they needed to eat, she wasn't going to be there, so we had to feed them . . . Between [my sister] and I, you know, it was a routine. Sometimes my mother cooked the night before, . . . other times we cooked, it all depends, you know.

Percy, a sharer who has six younger siblings, remembered doing housework once his stepfather left: "We were mature kids. We weren't your average 10-, 9-, 8-, 7-, 6-year-olds, so myself and my sister really kind of understood what was going on and knew that we had a responsibility, so we did chores and stuff and we helped my mother." After his mother suffered a nervous breakdown, he assumed an even greater share of the work: "At that time, it was myself and my mother, and I understood what needed to be done, and really, I took charge of kind of saying this is what we've gotta do and we should make sure it's done." At interview time, Percy was a young man with considerable responsibilities: in addition to having a newborn daughter and a live-in girlfriend, going to graduate school, and working as a voting coordinator, he was the legal guardian of two of his siblings.

Abdul volunteered to do more housework out of sheer frustration from having his mother yell at him and his siblings to do their chores, as she attempted to replicate their father's authority:

After my father left, we had to think a lot for ourselves, know what I'm saying?, 'cause my father, . . . if my mother had problems with us, he'd come in and [loud voice] 'Hey, You All,' and we'd jump in and do it. But after Pop left it was like Mom'd come in every day and she's bitchin' 'cause the place is not clean. What are we gonna do about this? And it got to a point where we got together and we started saying, 'Well, hey, we're gonna have to do this and we have to split it up by days.' And my mother had a lot to do with it as far as setting it up and putting the schedule into effect. But as a whole, we just felt we had to make it easier for her and easier for us, 'cause it isn't good, living in a house where every time Mom do comes in, in the morning to get you all ready for school, she's cursing you out. Like 'Hey, I've got to do something about this doggone house. I'm tired and it's like I'm working an eight-hour shift

and then I've gotta come home and clean up after you all too?'

In sum, Percy and Abdul ended up going through what so many of the mothers had warned their children about: that life circumstances might require them to fend for themselves. In their cases, they incorporated and practiced the ideology of self-sufficiency even before they formed their own households, thus attesting to the usefulness of the socialization for competence.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of the men in the present study support the gender-neutrality argument. As boys, regardless of their living arrangements, mothers' employment status, and the presence of sisters, all but four were assigned both "feminine" and "masculine" household tasks on a regular basis. By assigning household chores according to their age, these men's parents showed that they recognized the different stages of their children's development. The socialization for competence, then, is neither static nor amorphous, but adjustable to the life cycles of households and their occupants. Patterns adapt to the changes in households, which can go from nuclear to single-parent and sometimes back to nuclear, to changes in the employment status of family members, to the increasing number of children, and to the different stages in children's lives.

Individuals organize the interpretation of their life experiences into narratives about their life courses (Widdershoven, 1993). According to these men's narratives, they grew up in a context where children were expected to contribute their share regardless of their sex, as has been reported by previous researchers (Billingsley, 1992; McDade, 1995; Peters, 1988). To offset cultural images of housework as women's work or as a labor of love (De Vault, 1991), their parents framed it either as a genderless or—even more innovative—as a manly activity. Moreover, the fathers who were heavily involved in housework further emphasized those points by acting as role models. If "a great deal of learning about gender takes place at young ages" (Cunningham, 2001, p. 3), then the men in the present study formed ideas about housework as a matter of competence, self-sufficiency, and masculinity, rather than the exclusive domain of femininity, early in their childhoods, and continued to have these ideas reinforced as they grew

older. In this sense, Black families use housework as a locus for producing both gender and race (John & Shelton, 1997). In comparison to White and Latino men (Coltrane, 1996), the men in the present study reported higher engagement in housework as children and adults, even though, as other researchers have shown, adult Black women still tend to do more than adult Black men do (Coltrane, 2000; Hossain & Roopnarine, 1993; Landry, 2000).

Even three decades ago, "housework [was] a gendered activity for both Black and White women, but [was] significantly more gendered for White men than for Black men" (John & Shelton, 1997, p. 188). As Goldscheider and Waite (1991) argued, most American children are not trained in housework, but when they are, they are more likely to take on household tasks as adults (Gager, 1998). Also, there is statistically representative evidence that the more fathers engage in housework, the more their children will tend to approve of men's doing so-called feminine household tasks (Cunningham, 2001). In Black families, involvement by both boys and men seems to be a cultural norm, and thus, it was an expectation among most of the men in the present study. Thus, if men's involvement in family life varies by race, that is partly because some Black men have had fathers who participated actively in housework and provided their sons with references for such family activities. More important, Black mothers, possibly because of necessity, had instilled in their sons an alternative view of masculinity way before a more androgynous division of family labor became an expectation in U.S. society.

Many of the men who as boys resented the rigors of family work later came to reinterpret it not as a burden but as part of their masculine identity. Regardless of the type of household in which they grew up or their social class position, their personal outlook on their socialization for competence tends to match their position in the life cycle. Most did not fully incorporate their parents' image of housework as training for children until they became parents themselves and wished to replicate that training with their own children. In addition, they took into account their partners' relative income contribution; unlike shirkers, no sharers were sole breadwinners, and, relative to helpers, few were primary breadwinners. It is quite possible, then, that more helpers and shirkers would increase their participation were their wives' employment statuses to change.

As I have shown, even if the childhood socialization for competence does not translate into men

uniformly sharing housework equally, it prevents them from justifying their behavior as the result of not having been “‘brought up’ to do housework,” as men in other samples have claimed (Hochschild, 1989, p. 201). As a consequence, they stand as witnesses to pioneering practices that only now are becoming a reality for many American families, regardless of their race. Childhood experiences have an additional impact on adult lives through respondents’ recollections of the involvement of their primary parents in their own upbringing: as adults, many pattern their family behavior on their socially constructed memories, by either compensating for or emulating the involvement that they experienced as children. In sum, the socialization for competence helps explain why African-American men with partners tend to participate more heavily in housework than their White counterparts and casts serious doubt on the presumed inability of Black men to be effective family members.

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