Why Study Housework? Cleaning as a Window Into Power in Couples

Given the volume of research on the division of household labor, this article queries the purpose of continuing to study a phenomenon when the empirical results are remarkably consistent. This introductory article to the special issue asking, “Why study housework?” proffers one possible answer: Studying housework provides insight into the power and equity in intimate relationships. We document how power as a characteristic of social relations, rather than an individual characteristic, has been underexamined in the literature. We argue that by ignoring power, researchers studying housework are missing an opportunity to contribute to broader social scientific conversations on inequality.

Researchers around the world have worked to describe, explain, and ultimately critique what has been one of the most consistent findings in social science: Women (especially married women) perform more housework than do men. This finding exists without fail in almost any context it is studied (for further detail, see Treas & Drobnič, 2010).

Why should researchers continue to study this phenomenon when the findings across studies are remarkably similar? What can be gained from continued investigation into the unequal performance of household work?

The purpose of this article is to be part of the conversation providing answers to these questions. We, and the other authors in this special issue, provide a variety of answers to the question of why housework should continue to be studied. We begin our contribution to the conversation by reiterating our guiding question: Why study housework?

One answer is that studying housework is a very fruitful line of inquiry for researchers. Social scientists have been investigating the division of household labor since the 1960s. Beginning with Blood and Wolfe (1960), researchers have been studying married couples and how they run their homes. As families have become more diverse, and as more attention has been paid to diverse families, attention has also been paid to the division of household labor across a variety of households: cohabiting couples, stepfamilies, intergenerational families, families with children, immigrant families, families that differ by race of the adults (Black vs. White families), and so on. Research has become comparative and historical. Scores of researchers have contributed to the ever-evolving theoretical and empirical conversation on the division of household labor. A search of Web of Science for the terms housework, household labor, and household chores shows a dramatic increase in research on this topic over the past quartercentury (see Figure 1). Therefore, one reason to study housework is that it is a fruitful line of inquiry for researchers.
Another, less cynical, reason to study housework is that it is so mundane and familiar. We can all relate to research on housework. The findings resonate with us as well as with the broader public because unlike some other fields of inquiry, everyone has experience with housework. Perhaps we had chores as children, or perhaps we assign chores to our kids. We saw our parents—well, largely our mothers—doing housework when we lived in their homes, and when we moved out, we had to figure out how to get our new living space clean, the laundry done, food prepared, and bills paid. Maybe we were lucky enough and could afford to hire someone to do most of these tasks, and maybe that was the case in our family of origin. But the management of the performance of these tasks is still housework. And when we partnered with a significant other, task allocation had to be negotiated and renegotiated over time. So there is no wonder that we study housework. It is a mundane part of people’s daily lives.

The familiarity of the tasks brings with it a ready-made audience, and that potential audience will want to hear about our findings, which also leads us to study housework. People are interested in housework. For example, if you do the grocery shopping in your household, you may find it hard to avoid the magazines in the checkout aisles. Quite often, those magazines (targeted largely toward women) feature a story on housework—how to get husbands and children to do more, how to save time, basically how to do less yourself. Housework is a constant source of interest for the popular media, as evidenced by the August 2011 cover story in *Time* magazine (Konigsberg, 2011) discussing similarities in women’s and men’s overall work hours (similar to an argument advanced in 2011 in this journal by Paula England). Why do stories like this captivate the public? For one of the other reasons we continue to study housework: Relatively high proportions of individuals believe that overall, housework is not in and of itself enjoyable and thus should be avoided. Indeed, family scholars have generally assumed that “housework is viewed negatively by both women and men and that they are therefore motivated to reduce their share of it’” (Shelton & John, 1996, p. 304). This is not to suggest that some tasks are universally disliked (e.g., cooking, gardening) but that the broad concept of housework is not something that is an enjoyable activity. So if tasks are not enjoyable, why do people do them? What can explain why someone would want to spend time on an unpleasant task? Does the fact that housework tasks are necessary to the maintenance of a household change the reasoning behind why someone would perform work they generally may find unpleasant? What can explain how and by whom the tasks that are deemed largely necessary to the maintenance of a household are completed? These questions, or some variant thereof, are at the core of this article and this special issue.
We argue that by studying housework, something so mundane and familiar, but yet so widely disliked, we can learn something about relationships. More specifically, the negotiation and renegotiation of the division of household labor can provide insight into relationship dynamics more broadly. Blood and Wolfe (1960) began the investigation into the division of household labor by discussing power dynamics and their correlates. We contend that a key reason scholars should study housework, specifically inequality in the performance of housework, is the insight that can be gained regarding power and equity in intimate relationships. We do not argue that insights into power are the only reason scholars should study housework, but it certainly is an important reason. Indeed, the study of housework has illuminated much about other facets of intimate relationships, such as the importance of the concepts of fairness and justice in relationships (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Greenstein, 1996). And while these issues are also relevant to the broader social scientific discourse on relationships, power as a concept has more purchase when staking general theoretical claims.

Contemporary Western marriages specifically, but intimate relationships more broadly, are typically framed as companionate. Spouses and significant others are viewed as friends, partners. Contemporary Western societies tout their egalitarian social structures. So how is it that women consistently do more housework than do men? What are the social contexts, both local and structural, that facilitate greater equality? These questions ask about how individuals are able to work against the status quo and how individuals are able to maintain the status quo. These are questions about power and equity.

STUDYING POWER THROUGH HOUSEWORK

Scholars have been theorizing about the gendered nature of power for decades (Chafetz, 1988; Connell, 1987), but the usefulness of this theorizing has typically been limited to explaining what was (a description of the past) rather than predicting what may be. Kilbourne, Farkas, Beron, Weir, and England (1994) suggested that “cultural processes of valuation are gendered; because women are devalued, social roles (including occupations) and skills that are associated with women are culturally devalued relative to those associated with men” (p. 694). Thus, housework itself is devalued because it traditionally has been associated with women. This article begins to develop an argument about the ways in which housework has become a proxy for understanding the relationship between gender and power in heterosexual couples. We argue that notions of equity not only are intertwined with covert and overt power but also are explicitly gendered. We are not the first scholars to make these types of claims, but we hope that by situating the conversation about housework as part of the conceptual conversation around power, we can encourage a refocusing of theoretical and empirical writing around housework. The hope is that renewed investigations will tell us about inequalities in many kinds of intimate relationships, not just married heterosexual couples, thus infusing the conversation about power and intimate relationships in the broader social science enterprise.

BACKGROUND: WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED ABOUT STUDYING HOUSEWORK?

Journals have been publishing review articles (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Coltrane, 2000; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Shelton & John, 1996; Thompson & Walker, 1989) since the 1980s documenting the current state of understanding of the division of household labor. The structure of those review articles is quite consistent. The main theoretical approaches to understanding the division of household labor are defined, empirical evidence provided for each approach, new lines of inquiry since the previous review article are discussed, and directions for future research are presented. Given all of this reviewing, what do we know about the division of household labor? Here we describe the theoretical frameworks most often used to examine the division of household labor, to clarify how power has and has not been invoked in these prominent explanations.

The main theoretical frameworks utilized fall into two main categories: resource based and social psychological symbolic. Resource-based perspectives include those that investigate the effects of time availability and income (both absolute and relative), largely focusing on women to determine which factors in women’s lived experiences lead them to perform less housework. Sometimes the research also asks
what leads men to perform more housework. But
the goal of these studies is to understand how
structural and material resources can be and are
utilized as mechanisms through which women
(and men) negotiate the amount of dreaded
household tasks they perform. Resource-based
perspectives have found large support within
the empirical literature, although recently much
debate has ensued regarding the changing
efficacy of these theoretical perspectives over
time (England, 2011; Killewald & Gough, 2010;
One empirical point, however, is unquestionably
clear: “Women cannot easily buy their way to
equality with men when it comes to household
labor responsibilities” (Killewald & Gough,

Social psychological and symbolic or inter-
pretive perspectives take into consideration
the ways in which attitudes, values, beliefs,
and expectations influence the performance of
housework. Given that the division of house-
work is gendered, these perspectives tend to
focus either on gender as a performance or
on the beliefs about gendered relationships
(and perceptions of fairness thereof) as the
key explanatory factors for the performance of
housework. Other research has looked for other
social psychological mechanisms that may or not
be correlated with gender as explanations for the
division of housework. For example, Kluwer’s
work on challenging the status quo provided
powerful evidence for how and why the division
of household labor remains gendered, although
the theoretical mechanisms tested in the research
are not about gender per se. Hence, theorizing
about housework does not necessarily have to
intertwine gender and housework performance,
although previously explanations have generally
done so. What we want to bring to the fore is the
implicit invocation of power when talking about
gendered explanations for inequalities in the
division of household labor, and to do so, more
needs to be said about power in relationships.

PREVIOUS DISCUSSIONS OF POWER IN
RELATIONSHIPS

Outlining the process of change in families with
a focus on the gendered division of household
labor, Sullivan (2006) provided a good syn-
opsis of research on marital power as well as
about housework overall. She highlighted the
importance of embedded interactions as the
nexus of change in gendered relationships, espe-
cially those around the division of housework.
Embedded interactions are the “interaction and
negotiation that takes place in specific con-
texts of gender consciousness,” relational and
material resources, and the wider discursive
to the dynamic processes of the daily interac-
tion between partners, embedded within their
social and discursive context” (Sullivan, 2006,
pp. 109–110). In Sullivan’s (2006) framework,
these interactions have a recursive relationship
with different types of resources that can
be called on to use in the daily interaction:
structural or material resources (usually mea-
sured as [women’s] employment status, absolute
and relative income, and educational resources)
and relational resources (influences promot-
ing reflexivity and self-awareness in intimate
relationships, usually measured as exposure to
therapeutic culture or self-help discourse) (Ben-

Revisiting Emerson’s (1962, 1972a, 1972b)
theory on power-dependence relations in this
context of understanding marital power is a
useful endeavor. One of the key points in
his work is that there was a need at the
time to clarify conceptual ambiguity around
the notions of power, authority, legitimacy,
and influence, among others. Emerson (1962)
argued that “power resides implicitly in the
other’s dependency” (p. 32): In other words,
the power that a person holds over another
person resides in the control over the things
that the alter values. This set of relations is in
a relationship where the actors are mutually
dependent on each other—and an intimate
relationship like a marriage certainly fits this
description. Emerson (1962) defined power as
“The amount of resistance on the part of [actor]
B which can be potentially overcome by [actor]
A” (p. 32). This only works as a definition if A
makes a demand and if that demand is something
that B is not likely to do willingly.

Forty years after Emerson’s original work,
Tichenor (2005) wrote about conceptualizing
power within marriage. Her perspective on
power was considerably more nuanced than
Emerson’s, introducing the concepts of overt
and latent power. Overt power, or how much say
a person has, is the ability to control or influence
decision making. Tichenor argued that the actual
outcome of the decision making is less important to understanding overt power in a relationship than is the actual process of negotiation (or lack thereof). Latent power is the ability to suppress issues through the successful resolution of issues in the past to prevent their being brought up again.

Tichenor also reminds us of Lukes’s (2005) concept of hidden power, which is the ability to keep particular issues from entering the arena of conflict. Further, institutional arrangements and prevailing ideological constructions may make any individual or group’s domination seem natural, thus the ability of one person to influence another, or the use of power, is hidden. As Tichenor noted, hidden power is “exercised through individual decisions, institutional procedures, and dominant values that shape interaction. . . .” [T]he concept of hidden power is useful as it allows us to assess how cultural expectations regarding gender at the institutional level affect both the interactions between spouses and their attempts to construct meaningful identities. Attention to hidden power can sensitize us to the subtle ways in which gender expectations shape the power dynamics within marriage” (p. 26). For example, Zipp, Prohaska, and Bemiller’s (2004) research on the extent to which spouses’ knowledge of their partner’s survey response led to increased similarity in the survey answers provides evidence of men’s hidden power in marriages. Zipp et al. found that, contrary to expectations from structural equivalence theory (in which husbands’ responses would be more similar to their wives’ in areas in which women typically have expertise (household-related issues) and wives’ responses would be more similar to their husbands’ in areas in which men typically have expertise (political issues)), women were more affected by their husbands’ responses on political issues than men were when they heard their wives’ responses overall. Zipp et al. examined whether these patterns held when men held less traditional power in their relationship than their wives held, and found that those men were not significantly more likely to have survey responses similar to their wives’ than were men who occupied the traditional head of household role. Thus, Zipp et al. found evidence of men’s hidden power to influence their wives’ reported attitudes.

If we combine Emerson’s (1962) definition of power with the concepts of overt, latent, and hidden power, we can frame housework as something that people are unwilling to do, which is under the purview of one actor who then has to figure out, perhaps through the use of power, how to get another actor to participate. Culturally, housework (including the mental work of making sure all household tasks are performed; Daly, 2002) is women’s work, so research has traditionally tried to understand how women in heterosexual relationships (typically marriages, so the frame of mutual dependency is maintained) get men to do work that they would not willingly do. Blood and Wolfe’s (1960) work connects to the resources that each partner has and may make available to the other partner in order to help him or her. Again, they focus on power as evidenced in decision making (e.g., financial decisions, career prioritization and timing). They argued that power is “a mutual recognition of individual skills in particular areas of competence and of the partner’s dual stake in areas of joint concerns” (Blood & Wolfe, p. 45). Blood and Wolfe also noted that housework does not have to be done by women, but it largely was at the time of their writing as a function of time availability, and although men have a moral obligation to help when needed, couples largely specialize. Their book was written at a specific point in American history (1960), but we can try to connect their specific ideas of power and housework in marriage with Emerson’s (1962) discussion of power broadly to think through how we have and have not been assessing marital power in our research on housework in ways consonant with these classic treatises.

One of Emerson’s most important theoretical contributions was his argument that power is a property of social relations, not of social actors. Consequently, a key issue in thinking about the operationalization of power in the literature on the division of household labor is the identification of the location of the power and where it resides. If power is an attribute of relationships rather than of specific actors in the relationship, then the ways we have typically operationalized power in our quantitative research need to be reexamined if we believe that housework as a contested site can be a mechanism through which power may be illuminated. By measuring power as largely a tangible possession, like we do with resources like income, education, and
knowledge, we have attributed power to social actors and removed it from being a property of the relationship itself. However there is nothing in Emerson’s perspective on power (nor, indeed, in most exchange-based formulations) that limits us to analyses of exchanges involving tangible commodities. Indeed, the most interesting cases arise over the study of the most fundamental nontangible or symbolic commodities: love, affection, and respect. By expanding our analyses of power and exchange to include symbolic commodities, we are better able to take the context of the social relationship into consideration.

Housework has historically been defined as women’s work, with the exception of a few discretionary activities like lawn care and maintenance activities that are largely the responsibility of men (for a discussion of the gendered nature of core and noncore tasks, see Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). When a woman and a man form a union (marital or otherwise), regardless of what types of labor they performed in their previous households, the path of least resistance, the status quo (to use Kluwer’s language), is for women to do the majority of tasks and to spend more time than do men on housework. Power is then evidenced when women are able to do less than would be expected in those circumstances. Resources that are usually seen as representing the possibility of giving the partner something are specific to the cultural and historical times—namely, money and, to a lesser extent, education and occupational prestige. Theoretical perspectives focus on women’s relative resources and economic dependency as measures of their power relative to their husbands. What is interesting, then, is the new debate over the influence of women’s absolute income on housework time, as it requires us to take into consideration that couples in which women are relatively more powerful as captured by the education, income, and occupation measures tend to be unique or shortlived (e.g., Gupta, 2006, 2007; Gupta & Ash, 2008). Thus the power-dependence models that focus on these structural and material resources explain only men’s behavior. Power is gendered, at least in the context of intimate and married relationships.

As noted earlier, Blood and Wolfe (1960) proposed the resource-exchange model: Resources such as income and status represent the potential for exercising power. Men had more power because they had more resources, not because of patriarchal ideology. Later research found that when women have these resources, they are not able to activate power to the same extent that men are; this has to mean that power is also about gender. For example, Tichenor’s (2005) research highlights the empirical reality that resources do not equal power. She wrote, ‘‘Women’s incomes have bought them little in their marriage because the gender structure assures men certain privileges within the marital relationship. . . . [C]ouples with higher earning wives present a more serious challenge to the gender structure,’’ and ‘‘couple’s efforts to preserve men’s authority and interpersonal dominance . . . highlight[] the difficulty of rewriting conventional gender scripts and demonstrate the resilience of the gender structure’’ (p. 23).

Housework, as with other behaviors, produces gender (Berk, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987). That is, the performance of household tasks produces and reproduces culturally expected relationships between individuals that are tied to masculinity and femininity and tied to the power inherent in the relationship between masculine and feminine. The performance (or lack of performance) of housework can be seen as reaffirming an individual’s sense of self as a masculine or feminine person (Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000; Killewald, 2011; Sullivan, 2011; Tichenor, 2005), and in particular, as a husband or a wife. Previous research has demonstrated the ways housework is used and is believed to be used to produce gender (DeVault, 1990; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). While husbands and wives may choose to perform certain tasks, such as cooking or yard maintenance, because they enjoy them, as individuals they are held morally accountable to standards associated with their presumed sex category. Further, the tasks themselves are gendered, so when there is praise or scrutiny applied to the performance of a task, it will likely automatically be given to the person who was expected to have performed the task.

Many authors have documented the difficulty in changing gendered expectations, some querying whether we can ‘‘undo’’ gender as we know it (Lorber, 2005; Risman, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 2009). Indeed, the primacy of gender as a set of relationships within a culture becomes clearer once changes in other markers of power in the performance of work in a culture (e.g., income) have led to minimal changes in the division of housework (see, e.g., Brines, 1994;
Greenstein, 2000; Tichenor, 2005). Although Sullivan (2011) argued that the evidence for gender-deviance neutralization (in which individuals performing tasks inappropriate for their gender compensate in other ways, like unemployed men performing less housework than employed men so as not to be seen as feminine) is relatively weak, we cannot ignore inequality in the division of household labor when both spouses are equal participants in the market or hold similar markers of power like education and income. Inequality in housework in this circumstance can be seen as evidence of the primacy of cultural gender norms in marriages.

So how can we use this discussion to help us understand power more generally? Emerson (1962) also argued that social scientists should look at the interaction process to locate factors leading to perceived power and dependency as well as the conditions under which power in its potential form would actually be employed. For example, Pesquera (1993) documented some of the conditions under which change in household labor can occur. One condition, beyond structural and conventional issues of marital power, is women’s level of comfort in negotiation around the division of housework with their husbands. The combination of direct and indirect approaches was tied to women’s willingness to engage in what Pesquera terms a political struggle over the performance of housework. Women who not only wanted to do less housework but also believed that their husbands should do more were more likely to directly request their husbands’ participation and to use “underground” tactics to get their husbands to do more. This political struggle was the result of women’s beliefs regarding housework and was evidence of their own marital power (Pesquera, 1993). Consequently, one immediate pathway forward for social scientists would be to follow Pesquera’s lead and investigate interactions in other types of intimate relationships, including dating relationships, parent-child relationships, and close friendships, for factors leading to perceived power and dependency as well as the conditions under which power in its potential form is employed.

IF NOT HOUSEWORK, THEN WHAT?

What other things might we study that give us evidence of exercise of power? Tichenor’s (2005) study looked at the division of housework in an attempt to look at power but also examined the ability to prevail in conflict, the relative level of control over finances and family decisions, and numerous other descriptions of how the relationship had developed (e.g., whose work defined the family, the importance of one job or the other, decisions about work). She also engaged 30 couples via data collection strategies that were most conducive to investigating processes. We believe that other observable outcomes that are proxies for power as a concept, specifically the concept of hidden power, should also be studied and that other research techniques can be used in these investigations. Childcare tasks are quite similar to housework in that most people agree raising children is an important task, but the day-to-day aspects of making that happen, especially when children are very young, are not in and of themselves rewarding. Most research looking at the division of child-care tasks does not approach child care using the same theoretical frames used in studying housework. In fact, the two types of tasks are often considered empirically distinct. It would be an important step forward to connect housework and child care both theoretically and in empirical analyses to develop a more complex understanding of hidden power in intimate relationships.

One final point: Research on housework has been remiss in not consistently framing the process being investigated as one that is about power. In the rush to document the inequality in specific households or any change over time, we researchers do not always highlight that the processes leading to inequality are reflections of power dynamics. While that may make our research more palatable to the press and the general public, we are doing a disservice to everyone by underemphasizing the ways in which intimate relationships are negotiations of power just like other relationships. Yes, this is a feminist claim that highlights the systemic ways in which U.S. culture privileges men. As sociologists, we talk about structural relationships, not just interpersonal or individual differences. Dialing back the rhetoric of power to make research palatable to the general public is counterproductive if one of our goals in studying housework is not only to document inequality but also to work toward reducing it. As Treas and Drobnič (2010) argued, we study housework (cross-nationally) because “by identifying the critical conditions that promote
or impede gender parity in the family, cross-national comparisons of household labor can also inform policies to advance equality between women and men in society” (p. 8).

CONCLUSION
We believe that a major reason researchers study housework is the desire to understand the factors that lead to power differentials—either exercised or perceived—which in turn lead to inequalities in intimate relationships. Continued investigations of the distribution of household tasks should, then, be recast and reconnected to larger social science discussions of power.

The rest of the articles in this special issue discuss other reasons we study housework. The overarching theme of these articles is that housework reflects the context and content of a household but that it also can yield insight into larger social processes at work. Studying housework, therefore, can teach us about social life at both the micro and the macro levels. We have organized the articles in this issue with this organization in mind; that is, we begin with articles focusing more on microlevel insights to be gained from studying housework and conclude with those presenting macrolevel insights.

Sullivan makes the case for studying housework as an activity distinct from child care, noting that by performing separate analyses, we can investigate similarities and differences in the performance of these two kinds of reproductive labor. Goldberg examines why we should study housework in same-sex couples, arguing that the performance of housework in same-sex households creates, re-creates, and undermines contemporary understandings of gender. Perry-Jenkins, Newkirk, and Ghunney make the case for studying the division of housework through an ecological lens, noting that this particular lens incorporates important concepts of space and time, as well as power, in understanding family life. Noonan posits that a structural perspective can provide key insights into the macro–micro interactions that play out in households through the division of household labor. And finally, Treas queries the purpose of studying housework cross-nationally, offering a reflection on how characteristics of nations provide important insight into broader social processes.

Across the differing social and demographic contexts discussed in these seven articles, we ask that readers keep in mind these overarching questions: Why do we study housework? And why should we continue to do so?

NOTE
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REFERENCES


