



Sex or sexuality? Analyzing the division of labor and travel in gay, lesbian, and straight households



Michael J. Smart^{a,*}, Anne Brown^b, Brian D. Taylor^b

^a Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 33 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, United States

^b Institute of Transportation Studies, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, 3250 Public Affairs Building, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656, United States

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ABSTRACT

People make tradeoffs between paid and unpaid labor, and in straight households women typically do the lion's share of unpaid labor, including household-serving travel. Nearly all of the previous research on this topic is limited to married heterosexual households with children, a surprisingly small and shrinking portion of the population. Using pooled data from the 2003–12 American Time Use Surveys, we explore how household-serving labor and travel vary across household types in the U.S. We examine the paid and unpaid labor tradeoffs made by partnered same-sex couples with and without children, and find that their division of paid and unpaid labor, as well as household-serving travel such as chauffeuring children, occupies a statistical middle ground between straight men and women. This suggests that the gendered nature of paid and unpaid work and travel is muted in the absence of a two-sex household structure, though some gendered differences persist.

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1. Introduction

We have witnessed dramatic changes in attitudes towards women's roles in paid labor and the home over the past half century. Since the Women's Liberation movement in Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s, women have entered the paid labor market in record numbers. Women's labor force participation increased from 43% in 1970 to about 60% since the late 1990s, about six percentage points below men's long-term rate (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Over the intervening years, women's "cult of domesticity" (Kraditor, 1968) has given way to more paid daycare, single-parenthood, and men's increasing participation in housework and active parenting.

Despite women's increased participation in the paid labor force, studies continue to show that in nearly every household type, women typically perform the lion's share of household-serving activities, including household-serving travel such as chauffeuring children (Taylor et al., 2015). And while paid work by women is up dramatically since the 1960s, women tend to work much closer to home than men do (Crane and Takahashi, 2009). Many scholars have connected these two phenomena, suggesting that the disproportionate burden women face in maintaining the household (including child care, chauffeuring, cooking, and cleaning) limits

the amount of time available to commute to and work at a job, which may contribute to women's lower average wages overall.

The established literature on this topic has focused primarily on heterosexual couples and so-called nuclear families, both of which constitute a shrinking share of all households (Wilkes and Laverie, 2007). Most have examined—either implicitly or explicitly—the tradeoffs between men's and women's paid and unpaid labor. One lone exception is Rapino and Cooke (2011), who use same-sex couples as a control group to explore how gender roles restrict women's commute times and participation in the labor force.

In this paper, we expand on the current literature by broadening the kinds of households studied. We compare heterosexual couples to same-sex partnered households, which are a growing share of the U.S. population with rapid changes in public attitudes and laws regarding gay relationships, marriage, and adoption (Gates, 2006). Examining gay and lesbian households vis-à-vis straight households offers us a unique natural experiment on whether these gendered differences in paid and unpaid labor (including household-serving travel) exist "on their own," or mostly in the context of two-sex (heterosexual) couples.

To understand how gender roles and household-serving travel vary across household types in the U.S., we examine the paid and unpaid labor tradeoffs made by couples in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian households. In particular, we explore whether the gendered differences in patterns of household-serving labor and travel observed among heterosexual couples are present among same-sex couples as well. We explore how trends in employment,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mike.smart@rutgers.edu (M.J. Smart), aebrown0316@ucla.edu (A. Brown), btaylor@g.ucla.edu (B.D. Taylor).

household labor, and travel vary in gay, lesbian, and straight households with and without children present. We focus our research on household-serving travel, which comprises a much larger share of overall personal travel compared to commuting. According to the 2009 National Household Travel Survey, household-related travel (such as grocery shopping, running errands, and transporting children to school and activities) accounted for 42% of all household trips in the United States, while only 16% of trips were to or from work (Santos et al., 2011). How the members of households organize their time and responsibilities, including household-serving travel, is key to understanding the evolving nature of family life.

In a nutshell, we find that gay and lesbian households occupy a statistical “middle ground” between the activity patterns of partnered straight men and women. Lesbians tend to structure their days similarly to straight women, but appear to share household and child-rearing burdens more equally than straight couples do. Gay men’s days tend to be more similar to those of straight men, though again we find evidence of more egalitarian responsibility-sharing. Further, children consistently affect women’s (straight and lesbian) activities and travel more strongly than they do for either straight or gay men. In sum, the gendered nature of daily activity patterns is more muted among gay and lesbian couples compared to straight couples.

2. Previous research

Consistent findings over the past three decades reveal that women in heterosexual partnerships do the bulk of household work, even when controlling for variables such as household type, employment status, income, race, the timing of childbearing, and ideology (Coltrane and Ishii-Kuntz, 1992; Demo and Acock, 1993; Coltrane, 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010; Sayer and Fine, 2011). While some previous work has examined unmarried straight and single-parent households (Demo and Acock, 1993; Batalova and Cohen, 2002; Davis et al., 2007), very little previous work has considered gay or lesbian households, despite both their growing numbers and the obvious insights they offer on sex and gender roles.

2.1. Gender, paid labor, and housework

Women have entered the labor market at a rapid pace in recent decades, but most researchers have found that increasing time spent at work does not mean less unpaid labor at home for women. Indeed, studies of paid work and the household division of labor have generally found that gendered differences in paid labor have been converging much faster than those of unpaid household work, resulting in what some have called the “second shift” of household-serving work awaiting most women when they arrive home from a paid job (Hochschild and Machung, 1990).

Scholars have long debated why women tend to do more household labor than their male partners, in spite of rising female paid labor force participation (Lorber, 1994; Lindsey, 1997). Some have proffered economic arguments for gendered housework disparities – such as the partner with lower earnings potential (who is more often female) will tend to do more housework and devote less time to work for pay. Others, meanwhile, argue that gender socialization plays a dominant role, wherein women and men are socialized into particular *gender roles* – such as women bearing the primary responsibility for housework and child-rearing, roles that persist regardless of economic circumstances (Taylor et al., 2015).

Studying heterosexual households, Presser (1994) finds that women in two-earner households spend significantly more time than their male partners on the most intensive household labor

tasks. This time (and energy) burden has consequences for paid employment, as well. Hersch and Stratton (1997) find a strong negative correlation between the amount of housework done by women and their wages in paid labor.

Although the division of household labor has changed somewhat in recent decades, women still perform the lion’s share of it. Bianchi et al. (2012) find that while men’s share of housework roughly doubled between 1965 and 1989, it has since dropped by more than an hour per week, and women still do 1.6–1.7 times as much household labor as their male partners.

While heterosexual couples have been the focus of much of this literature, scholars examining same-sex couples generally find a more equal division of labor between partners (Kurdek, 2007). Kurdek (1993) finds that lesbian couples divide labor more equally than either heterosexual couples or gay male couples, leading some scholars to suggest a ‘lesbian egalitarian ethic’ (Carrington, 1998; Kurdek, 1993, 2007; Biblarz and Savci, 2010). Gender socialization likely plays a strong role (Kurdek, 1993), and Solomon et al. (2005) at least partially control for gender socialization variables by studying heterosexual couples alongside their coupled gay and lesbian siblings. Their findings confirm a more egalitarian division of labor in lesbian households. Downing and Goldberg (2011) speculate that, as gender roles may be fluid, same-sex couples may re-gender their division of labor at various life stages such as parenthood. As parents, for example, each partner may adopt a traditionally “masculine” or “feminine” role. One study suggests an economic rationale, finding that gay and lesbian individuals’ income strongly correlates to household labor such that those who earn more do less housework (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983).

2.2. Gender & household-serving travel

The gendered division of labor extends to travel, as well. Research has consistently shown that in heterosexual households, women make more household-serving trips than men (Rosenbloom, 2006; Hanson and Johnston, 1985; Niemeier and Morita, 1996). Prevedouros and Schofer (1991) find that women make twice as many trips as men for errands, transporting others, and shopping. Taylor et al. (2015) find that women consistently make more child-serving and grocery shopping trips than men, almost regardless of circumstances: women who live alone make substantially more child-serving and grocery shopping trips than similarly situated men, and women who work more and earn more than their male partners still make substantially more household-serving trips. Men’s travel patterns are characterized by more work-related and recreational travel, while women’s trips are more likely to be for shopping, personal business, or escorting others (Hamilton and Jenkins, 1989; Wachs, 1987). These studies reveal clear gendered divisions in household-serving travel.

Despite extensive research on how heterosexual households divide household-serving travel, very little research has explicitly compared these divisions in same-sex households. One exception is Smart and Klein (2013), who examine non-work travel, and find that gay male couples living in gay neighborhoods make considerably shorter trips than their straight neighbors do, though this analysis does not examine trip frequency or the within-household division of trips.

2.3. Gender & the commute

Research on gender and travel has long found that women make shorter commute (journey-to-work) trips in both distance and time compared to men (Crane and Takahashi, 2009; Crane, 2007; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Hanson and Johnston, 1985; Madden, 1981). Scholars disagree on the factors causing these travel patterns, with arguments including the lower wages typically paid

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