FAMILIES AS ACTIVE CRUCIBLES OF CHANGE[1]: A HUMANISTIC SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DIVISION OF UNPAID WORK IN FAMILY HOUSEHOLDS

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ABSTRACT

Among changes in Australian social life over the past several decades, has been a dramatic increase in workforce participation rates of married women and an associated decline in the traditional male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model of family life. Of social and research interest has been the consistent finding that, while people's attitudes have become more egalitarian, the changed patterns in paid work have not been accompanied by marked changes in unpaid work performance. Most employed women have retained primary responsibility for domestic and child care tasks, irrespective of the amount of time they or their male partner spend in the workforce.

In the present study, data were collected by means of a questionnaire completed by 55 mature-age tertiary students, the majority of whom were employed, as were their partners. Information sought included details of personal background; frequency of involvement by respondents in a range of domestic and child care tasks, relative to partner; and their feelings and perceptions concerning this involvement. Major aims of the study were:

- to identify the division of unpaid work in the family households of respondents and their attitudes towards this;

- to ascertain how respondents accounted for, or 'made sense' of, any apparent discrepancy between their attitudes concerning the performance of domestic and child care work and the reality of the division of this work in their households;

- to identify factors which may have facilitated, or be inhibiting, the development of greater equity in the performance of household work by men and women.

The thesis is strongly theoretical, drawing substantially from the humanistic sociological perspective developed by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927), with contemporary developments by Smolicz and Secombe (1981). This approach provides a theoretical framework for analysis at both cultural and individual levels, as well as incorporating a related theory of social change. The latter was used to examine, in theoretical terms, Australian society's institutional response to married women's greater workforce participation. It proved useful for examining contemporary social change processes. A major thrust of the study, however, was the analysis of attitudinal data in the form of respondents' feelings, perceptions and evaluations concerning the division of work in their households, and the relationship of these to prevailing ideological values.

The theory of culture which Thomas and Znaniecki put forward, conceptualizes culture as residing in human consciousness: in the common meanings (termed 'values') which exist in the thinking and actions of a group's members. These shared meanings have evolved over time, and have come to form systems which represent the various domains of culture - ideology, education, economy, family and so on. The system of ideological values is accorded particular significance. It is seen to co-ordinate all other value systems, as well as

being an evaluating agent for other items of culture. Values in this system frequently are linked to group (and individual) identity; they include a culture's rules, or norms of conduct. Of particular interest to the present study was the female homemaking and male breadwinning norm.

Under the influence of the ideological system, individuals participating in a culture select from the range of values available to them, in constructing personal systems of (corresponding) attitudes; and these are seen to guide their everyday thinking and actions. A concern of the study, then, was to identify those values pertaining to household work performance which had influenced respondents constructions of their personal systems, and how each felt and behaved with respect to these, including their evaluation of and/or justification for the division of work in their households.

The analysis of personal systems revealed evidence for the influence of both traditional ideological values associated with gender division of labour, and new equity values in this area. However, respondents differed regarding the extent of influence these competing value types exerted over their household work performance and their thoughts and perceptions concerning this and their partner's involvement. Traditional work arrangements were being maintained by just over one-third of respondents, and slightly fewer shared some tasks with partners while engaging in traditional divisions in other tasks. Some respondents claimed to feel content, while others expressed dissatisfaction, concerning their traditional work arrangements. Another group held mixed feelings. Comments whereby respondents accounted for inconsistencies between an acknowledged equity attitude and their or their partner's actual work performance, served to highlight the powerful influence of traditional ideological values on their lives. One-third of respondents reported equitable work arrangements. They tended to be younger; and hence may be seen to have been influenced from an earlier age, by the social and institutional changes which had been emerging over the previous several decades, These respondents also were more likely to be childless. Their comments revealed that they had consciously worked at achieving equity in household work performance, and with the co-operation of partners, had attained this. They reported feeling very positively about such an outcome.

Findings from the study provide insight into social and individual change processes, as well as the circumstances in which ideological values may be successfully challenged by individuals. Comments from respondents reveal that there are identifiable stages in the complex cognitive and emotional processes engaged in by individuals and couples as they participate in the 'work' (Walden, 1979) of constructing new and acceptable meanings for everyday activities and experiences in times of rapid social change.