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### Chapter 6: Who's Making Dinner Tonight?

Wendy Klein, Carolina Izquierdo, and Thomas N. Bradbury

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After working all day at their respective jobs, how did the couples in the CELF study manage and divide household chores? For some of the couples in our study, negotiating household work was a contentious process and affected the quality of their relationship. These couples bickered about household responsibilities on a routine basis, while others appeared to carry out tasks separately or in collaboration without much discussion. In American society, ambiguity in division of household responsibilities among working couples often results in ongoing negotiations between spouses, creating tension and dissatisfaction. According to a recent Pew Research Poll, sharing household chores was in the top three highest-ranking issues associated with a successful marriage – third only to faithfulness and good sex.<sup>1</sup> Mirroring trends in industrialized nations around the world (Hook 2006), men's participation in housework in U.S. families has close to doubled in the past 40 years and their amount of time spent on childcare has tripled (Bianchi et al. 2000; Fisher et al. 2007; Sullivan and Coltrane 2008). Yet women in the U.S. still perform the majority of household tasks (Bianchi et al. 2006; Lee 2005) and couples report having no clear models for achieving a mutually satisfying arrangement (see Klein et al. 2007a). Studying the manner in which couples divide their many household chores is important on its own terms, as the results of the Pew Poll suggest. More than this, however, careful consideration of how husbands and wives coordinate and fail to coordinate their activities in this important domain provides a lens for examining more encompassing phenomena, like gender roles, issues of power, respect, intimacy, and attempts to broker an equitable or fair partnership. What are couples' perceptions about their roles in the division of labor in the home? How do couples coordinate and enact different patterns of household labor? How do family systems operate to sustain particular distributions of labor? This chapter aims to answer these questions.

The current dual-earner arrangement that typifies the couples we studied certainly reflects a major shift in the roles that women take both inside and outside the home. The traditional 1950's model of marriage -- men as breadwinners, women as bread bakers -- gave way to the social activism and upheaval of the 1960's and 1970's and the dramatic influx of women into the workforce. The traditional model of marriage was questioned and criticized, and while gender roles have since become more egalitarian, many families still struggle to achieve a workable division of household labor (Cherlin 2004). Arlie Hochschild, who has written extensively on gender roles in working families refers to this phenomenon as the "stalled revolution" (1989). Sociologist Andrew Cherlin (2004), in reflecting on the historical development of marriage, notes that while men's participation

in housework has increased, there is no longer a shared set of conventions that couples and families can turn to for running the household. This situation potentially creates opportunities for conflict on the one hand, and more equitable and satisfying arrangements on the other, as couples work out ways of dividing responsibilities. Cherlin attributes this situation in part to new expectations of marriage as a source of personal fulfillment and an arena for self-development in which individual needs are given priority over social obligations.

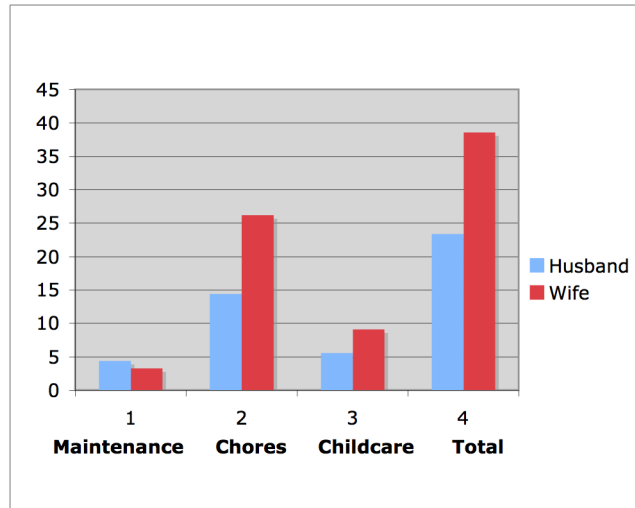
A more positive spin on a contemporary model of marriage is set forth in Pepper Schwartz's (1994) study of 'peer marriage.' Schwartz uses this term to describe a egalitarian relationship in which both spouses share decision-making, household work and child care, with the mutual goals of equality and collaboration. She acknowledges that it may not be possible to consistently divide responsibilities equally and that the actual number of peer marriages may be quite small. Indeed, studies of contemporary couples indicate that while this model is not a dominant practice, sharing domestic responsibilities is one of the keys of success in working family life. According to Cooke (2006), couples with more equitable division of labor are less likely to divorce than couples in which one is the breadwinner and the other manages housework. The distribution of household labor, however, becomes a much more complex issue when both partners work full time outside the home.

### **Working Couples and the Division of Labor at Home**

Among CELF couples, on average, men worked longer hours outside the home (Campos et al. 2009), yet even in families where women worked equivalent or longer hours and earned higher salaries, they still took on more household responsibilities (Klein and Kremer-Sadlik 2009). When we merged our data with the Chicago Study of 500 families, men spent 17.5% of their time doing housework and took on 32.7% of household tasks, whereas women spent 22% of their time on housework and carried out 67% of household tasks (Broege et al. 2007: 141). Women perform over twice the number of tasks as well as carry the burden of what researchers refer to as "mental labor" or "invisible work", that is, planning and coordination of tasks (Lee 2005: 241). The merged data sets also reveal that leisure was most frequent for fathers (29.5%) and children (39%), while mothers had the shortest span of leisure time (22%)(Arnold and Lang 2007; Broege et al. 2007).

In the CELF study, we categorized household work into three activities: 1) household maintenance (e.g. organizing objects and managing storage issues); 2) household chores (e.g. meal preparation, cleaning, outdoor work); and 3) childcare (e.g. bathing, dressing, grooming, feeding, putting to bed). The distribution of these tasks is captured in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of Participant’s Time spent on Household Maintenance, Household Chores, and Childcare



While men spent slightly more of their time on household maintenance tasks (4.4% vs. 3.3%), women spent more time on chores and childcare (26.2% vs. 14.4% and 9.1% vs. 5.6%, respectively). Overall, women spent 38.6% of their time on these activities, while men spent 23.4% of their time on these tasks. Women spent much more of their time on chores such as cooking and cleaning as well as on childcare, as compared to men. Women prepared 91% of weekday and 81% of weekend dinners, even though fathers were present at 80% of weekday and 88% of weekend dinners. These numbers do not include outside household errands such as shopping and driving children to and from after school activities. We did not collect systematic data observations on such activities; however, we do know that the working mothers in our study picked up children in the afternoons on 71% of the days observed (Campos et al. 2009), as mothers were most often home before fathers. In his study of CELF families, Jeffrey Good found that mothers “spent more time in multitasking situations, usually built around combinations of childcare, homework, cleaning, and meal preparation. Much of the time that Mothers were preparing meals, cleaning, or doing homework with a child, they were also involved in some form of childcare” (Good 2009: 108).

While the quantitative findings indicate a disparity in the division of labor, we also found that the nuanced ways couples interact with one another about and during these tasks significantly impacts the couples’ relationship and sense of well-being. More than constituting a series of simple instrumental tasks, household work represents a complex set of interpersonal exchanges that enable family members to achieve solidarity and cohesiveness (Folbre 2001; Klein et al. 2007a; Wilk 1996). The following qualitative analyses will focus on the everyday experiences couples encounter while managing home and family. Direct observation of middle-class, dual-career couples as they engage in their everyday activities is rare. Studies in psychology have yielded quantitatively rigorous descriptions of marital interaction (e.g., Bradbury 1998; Bradbury and Karney 1993) yet most of this work has been conducted in laboratory settings or, in rare

instances, has studied enactments of couples' interactions (Burman et al. 1993). Our discussion of interviews and observations with couples explore their subjective perspectives on their roles at home and examine interactional patterns between spouses that reveal collaboration and conflict. Finally, we provide insights into partnership, respect, and marital well-being.

### **Couples' Perceptions of Their Roles at Home: Meaning Matters**

As Susannah and John Slovenski watch television on a Saturday morning, John kicks back in a lounge chair as Susannah sits on the couch folding laundry and talking on the phone, arranging a play date for her 8 year-old son. At one point her one year-old daughter cries for her attention and she puts down the clothes to pick her up. After she gets off the phone, she goes into the kitchen to start preparing a meal. Susannah has previously noted that while she holds down a full-time job, she also handles most of the household work and childcare of their two children, even when her husband is home. In an interview she tells us:

- 1        Personally I don't have a life.
- 2        My life is my family because whatever their needs are
- 3        they always come first before mine and I can honestly
- 4        say that. He- and I think it's great- he does his
- 5        golfing, he does his bike riding, and it doesn't take
- 6        a long time and he needs that I don't get that yet.
- 7        I don't have that yet. I don't have the time or the
- 8        luxury. That for me is like a huge luxury that I
- 9        don't see happening in any time in the near future.

According to Susannah, while her husband has time to pursue his own interests, she positions herself as the only member of the family who must continually sacrifice her own well-being for the needs of others. Having time for oneself is equated with 'having a life', and not only does this mother feel that she has neither, she does not foresee any changes occurring. The burden that Susannah feels was not unusual among the women in our study.

Although working women's feelings of being overwhelmed is well documented in the literature (Hochschild 1997; Schmidt 2002) and part of the everyday reality of women worldwide, in some cases, men are also often highly stressed by managing everyday household decisions and the needs of family members. Travis, the father of two boys ages 3 and 5, laments the constant demand of "managing someone else's needs", specifically being unable to fulfill the "demands" of his wife, which often comes at the expense of his own health. He talks about his family life as he spontaneously interviews himself in front of the video camera during his home-tour:

- 1        Umm, anyway, you'll notice when I'm walking around
- 2        the house that, umm, there's basically very little

3       respite for me. It's all about, umm, managing  
4       someone else's needs most of the time, and then (xxx)  
5       I'm not as strong and caring of my own needs, but I see  
6       that my own physical health is being compromised by not  
7       doing that, so, umm, I'm starting to do more of that,  
8       which of course leads to aggravation from my demanding  
9       wife, umm, by not paying attention to her and not  
10      fulfilling her needs. So I think my house kind of  
11      represents, umm, work. And my work place kind of  
12      represents rest in a certain way.

Travis' home is a source of stress, a setting in which there is "little respite" for him. Travis uses the video camera to interview himself, to take a moment and reflect on his life as a kind of catharsis. He feels the need to attend to his own needs rather than to be constantly oriented towards others, and finds solace in his workplace. This perspective on the differing domains of home and work has been noted by Hochschild (1997) in her study in which she finds that for many participants, the workplace has become more rewarding and less stressful than life at home.

An interview with Travis and his wife, Alice, offers insight into Alice's perspective on the problems that arise regarding their domestic lives. Alice links their personalities to the way they handle daily household tasks. She recognizes that she is an "accomplisher" and that she is "domineering" and less "easy going" than Travis. Alice then explains the consequences of these differences:

1       I have to, like, I manage the household, and like,  
2       I delegate what needs to be done, cause basically,  
3       I'm the one in charge of seeing that - everything  
4       needs to get done. That's how I look at it. Anyway,  
5       so that's a really source of tension between both of  
6       us, I think. It's not like the trust thing. It's just  
7       that - that umm, it wouldn't be like Travis would walk  
8       into the room and go, gee, my underwear's on the  
9       floor. I guess I'd better pick it up. It'll be, like,  
10      Travis, pick up your underwear off the floor. I mean,  
11      it's like, basically for me, it's like having three  
12      kids in the house. Sorry, no offense. I love you  
13      very much.

From Alice's perspective, the need to "push" Travis stems from her belief that it is the only way to make sure that tasks and chores will get done. Alice and Travis expressed having divergent needs and expectations of what is necessary for running a household, how it should be accomplished, as well as the requirements for living a better life together. They articulate their views throughout the interview.

1 Travis I mean, she's no - she's not a saint in terms of keeping the  
2 place clean and uhh, fixing stuff or- she doesn't fix anything.  
3 Alice No, but I cook meals. I just can't do it all.  
4 I don't. But I made you dinner tonight.  
5 Travis It's good.  
6 Alice There you go. I'm no saint, but I just can't do everything.  
7 I can't buy all the groceries, cook the dinner –  
8 Travis I know but, just for the - don't you think that there's - you know  
9 that little board we have on the refrigerator?  
10 Alice Mm hmm.  
11 Travis Why don't you use that and like, say like, umm, write me notes?  
12 Alice [I don't want to.  
13 Travis [Number one, dishwasher. Number two, rain gutter.  
14 Alice To be honest with you, I don't want to have to tell you  
15 to do stuff. I want you to figure out that the – that the  
16 dishwasher needs to be – that you need to figure it out that  
17 the dishwasher needs to be –  
18 Travis I did. Did you ask me to fix the dishwasher or did I?  
19 Alice No, you ordered a part, and then six months went by and  
20 we don't know what happened to it. I don't want to be, like,  
21 micro-managing you. Anyway, that's a whole other story.  
22

Alice's frustration is evident not only in what she tells her husband but also in her demeanor during the interview. During this exchange it becomes clear that Alice does not wish to be in the position to have to constantly tell Travis what to do and when to do household tasks. He suggests that she post notes on the refrigerator, outlining appliances in need of repair, for example. She responds that she would prefer that he "figure it out," indicating once again her desire for him to take initiative without her constant input. This point echoes what Saxbe and Repetti discussed in Chapter 4 of this book which found that women who described their homes as more cluttered and more in need of repair were likely to show more adverse patterns of physiological stress (cortisol) and more increases in depressed mood at the end of the day, and therefore researchers stress the importance of affect and respect during high stress time period. However, this pattern did not emerge for men. Women may place more emphasis on their home environment and may feel more responsibility for maintaining their homes than men do.

Another important feature of this interaction highlights the different spouses' expertise as an inherent aspect of the division of labor that determines their unique roles. Travis points out that Alice may cook but she "doesn't fix things." According to Travis, Alice's micro-managing is problematic beyond simply being told what to do at the moment something needs to be done, but expresses that his wife's "demands" permeate almost every moment of his waking life. He comments on his wife's continual negative appraisals and states that there is a great deal of "punitive language coming my direction."

Research on marriage has examined the significance of the division of labor in the home and its link to relationship well-being, especially in regard to the issue of intimacy and marital satisfaction. Coltrane (2000) found that when chores are shared more equitably, women's marital satisfaction rises, less marital conflict ensues, and women are less depressed. Gottman's (1994) study indicates that women's interest in sex is greater when their husbands do more housework. In an interview on health and well-being, Karita discusses the consequences of what she perceives to be her husband's lack of involvement in household work:

- 1 Karita            Sometimes I feel I don't get any help from Derrick –  
2                      with, you know, dinner or cleaning up or things like that,  
3                      and I think that that's such a typical female reaction,  
4                      you know, you don't get help, you get nothing.  
5 IR                 Hm[:::  
6 Karita            [You know? No sex -- I didn't get any help,  
7                      you know?  
8 IR                 Hm[:::  
9 Karita            [And the men they don't get that part so,  
10 IR                You mean they don't get?  
11 Karita           That they need to kind of do something, you know?  
                      (*Derrick remains silent*).

Here Karita connects household work to sexual intimacy and generalizes about what she sees as her own gendered response (“typical female reaction”) as well as her husband’s failure to understand her perspective (“And the men they don’t get that part”). She frames household work as an arena in which issues such as mutual care and fair exchange surface and shape spousal attitudes toward the marriage. Karita’s analysis of the situation is presented as a causal equation (“No sex – I didn’t get any help”) or what Capps and Ochs call a ‘breach of expectations’ (2001), in which her lack of physical closeness to her husband is the consequence of his inaction. Her husband’s silence displays his unwillingness to engage in this discussion. At the same time, Karita has referred to him in the third person (“I don’t get any help from Derrick”), and does not include him as an interlocutor since she addresses her statements to the interviewer rather than to him. This analysis indicates that intimacy is linked to spouses’ awareness and engagement in caring for home and family, which is often displayed through everyday tasks.

Several findings stand out from the interview excerpts. First, the burden spouses experience in managing household responsibilities interferes with individual well-being and expressions of intimacy. In addition, spouses spontaneously mention the struggles they experience in their relationship over the allocation and completion of chores, and when they reflect on the division of labor in their family, they sometimes couch their arrangement in terms of trust (e.g., ‘Does my partner trust me to do what I am expected to do?’) and authority and subordination (e.g., ‘I want my partner to recognize what to do and do it,’ versus ‘I want my partner to prompt me when tasks need attention’). Thus, housework appears to be far more than the mere completion of tasks needed to keep the family running smoothly; it also colors individuals’ daily experiences and contributes to

how individuals identify themselves in relation to the partner and how couples characterize their partnership. How partners feel about their respective roles and how they treat one another when household work issues arise is crucial to our understanding of how the actual sharing of household work takes place in real time.

### **Interactional Patterns between Couples: Collaboration and Conflict**

Several of the spouses in our sample express frustration regarding household division of labor, whereas some couples seem to be particularly skilled at smoothly accomplishing the task of preparing dinner as well as other household tasks. Videotaped observation of couples undertaking these tasks revealed a variety of interactional styles among couples, including: 1) silent collaboration, in which both partners work in the same space and go about the task at hand; 2) one partner is constructed as expert or authority in a particular task, either humorously or with genuine respect; 3) coordinating together, in which partners verbally organize the activity in concert; and 4) collaborating apart, in which partners are doing their share of the labor in separate locations (Klein et al. 2005). The third pattern, coordinating together, provided the setting for the highest degree of positive interaction as well as the most potential for conflict.

‘Silent collaboration’ is the smooth coordination of tasks in which both partners contribute to the household activity of meal preparation and clean-up, without needing to clarify information or monitor one another’s tasks. We expect that these couples have worked this way for a while, both know their way around the kitchen, and feel at ease with their responsibilities. In the second category, one partner routinely takes on a particular task and is considered “the expert.” This arrangement usually involves a shared understanding that one spouse is not only highly competent to carry out the task but is also willing to do so with or without assistance. The third category involves spouses coordinating tasks together, which involves both collaborative and conflictual interactions. For example, on some occasions spouses may be collaborating harmoniously and anticipating each other’s needs, while on other occasions one partner might interfere and monitor the way the other partner carries out the task. In the final category, spouses collaborate apart, meaning that they each attend to a task individually (e.g. father barbeques outside while mother makes a salad in the kitchen).

Our analysis here will focus on the third category, which reveals how couples relate to and treat one another while communicating in the midst of carrying out domestic tasks. In the following example, one couple attempts to cultivate a context of positive affect and work collaboratively. As the dinner preparation begins one evening, Adam has just put on a jazz CD and offers his wife, Cheryl, something to drink (he uses her nickname, “Sweeps”).

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| 1 Adam   | Sweeps, you want any wine?                    |
| 2 Cheryl | Sure.   |
| 3 Adam   | I bought you zinfandel that you <i>love</i> . |



This couple often makes dinner together, with one spouse taking the lead on meal preparation. At one point while Adam is out on the patio barbequing the chicken on their grill, Cheryl comes out to offer to help.

- 1 Cheryl Adam, what do you want me to do? Rice? Salad?  
2 Adam I'm doing rice already.  
3 Cheryl Okay, You got (.) broccoli?  
4 Adam I have mixed vegetables steamed.  
5 Cheryl You want that paper out here or can I bring it in?  
7 Adam Yeah, that's all done, I'm done with all that.  
8 Cheryl Okay.

In these exchanges, we see that each spouse is trying to anticipate each other's needs, regarding the task at hand as well as other features of the setting and concurrent activities. Adam pours his wife a glass of one of her favorite wines and turns on music they enjoy; Cheryl asks about helping with the food preparation and checks with her husband on where he would prefer her to put the newspaper he had been reading.

When couples coordinate together, however, they also may engage in counter-collaborative communication, which may lead to tension and conflict. In the following example, David is preparing dinner, which is particularly challenging for him because he only recently began to participate in cooking activities. While he is primarily responsible for dinner, his wife, Julie, often helps or offers advice. In the interaction below, we find David busy preparing dinner as Julie enters the kitchen and inquires about the status of the potatoes. David attempts to appease Julie's numerous queries, demands, and requests, which target him repeatedly throughout the dinner-making activity.

- 1 Julie Are the potatoes ready?  
2 Oh, [I was just going to do that.  
3 David [Almost.  
4 David I'm making such a mess.  
5 Julie You always make a mess, David.  
6 David I know.  
7 Julie It's like (you don't know how to cook).  
8 Julie (This is going)-look at what you've done!  
9 David (*Laughs, glances over at camera*)

When David acknowledges that he is "making such a mess," Julie confirms and generalizes his assessment to all the occasions in which he takes on meal preparation. Her next comment, "It's like you don't know how to cook" is a further critique of his poor performance. David calmly accepts her condemnation and even finds his performance humorous. Instead of joining her husband in laughing about the situation, Julie continues to take on a supervisory role:

(continues from above)

- 10 Julie First of all, you don't do this  $\sqrt$ on the stove.  
11 You do it over on the counter. Ugh. You're going  
12 to have to clean up, too. So sorry to inform  
13 you.  
14 David I know that. I'll clean it up.

Julie's imperative directives sound parental and position her as the observer and evaluator of his actions. She refuses to shift her orientation to respond to David's humor, and instead maintains a monitoring role in the interaction. This pattern of participation also surfaces on a subsequent evening in the couple's kitchen.

- 1 Julie (Did you put) these in there?  
2 David What?  
3 Julie (Here).  
4 David Yeah, they're in there.  
5 Julie Why didn't you put them in?  
6 David Oh, because there were like more than twice as  
7 many as that.  
8 Julie Oh.  
9 David There's a good ten, twelve in there. I think.  
10 Julie I thought you were changing (xxx)?  
11 David (*laughing*) I changed my shirt and my shoes.  
12 Julie This is probably just about done.  
13 David Yes, I was just checking it and it wasn't  
14 quite- it was a little al dente.  
15 Julie Stir it though.  
16 David I have been.

*((A few moments later))*.

- 17 David The sauce is- no, the sauce is controlling  $\sqrt$ me  
18 as opposed to me controlling the sauce. Yeah,  
19 feta's great.  
20 Julie Why are you using this lime?  
21 David I squeezed a little on that salad.

David fields Julie's series of questions and comments without hesitation and appears to be doing his best to meet her expectations of how the meal should be prepared. He attempts to inject humor into the situation on more than one occasion. In line 10 when Julie critiques his clothes, as she wonders why he has not changed, David laughs as he responds that he has changed certain articles of clothing. While he chooses here to handle

his wife's close scrutiny of his behavior and appearance with humor, Julie refuses to engage or respond with any playfulness. David again takes on a humorous stance in lines 17 - 18, when he comments that the pasta sauce is controlling him when it should be the other way around. Julie does not acknowledge this comment at all, continues to micro-manage the activity, and notes that researchers are videotaping his missteps. She then refers to a news story about police videotaping interviews with suspected criminals. David's tone then shifts; he makes no more attempts at humor and self-deprecation, and instead, his tone becomes less friendly and more adversarial.

- 1 Julie        You know what, I heard this morning on NPR that police departments  
2                are going to start taping their interviews with um (pause)  
3                you know, suspects.  
4 David        You don't say.  
5 Julie        Well they haven't been doing it before.  
6 David        Genius idea. Yeah.  
7 Julie        You know what? I don't need your sarcasm.  
8 David        Yeah you do.

Unlike his previous attempts to be playful, David's response to Julie's comment is received as antagonistic. David criticizes the idea behind the news story she is relaying, rather than anything about Julie personally, yet she chooses to defend the idea and appears to be slighted personally by his comment. Her annoyance is apparent in her hostile response in line 7. In the case of this father who has taken on new responsibilities for cooking, a non-defensive response to requests by the mother appears to invite her additional comments. We can only speculate about the longer-term implications that these exchanges have for future conversations between spouses, yet social-learning analyses of family interaction would suggest that, e.g., David might respond more negatively to Julie's incursions into his domain of expertise (by avoiding her more, or criticizing her), perhaps leading her to escalate her requests even further. For David, who does not seem to claim ownership over the task of cooking dinner, we might expect Julie to continue in her supervisory role until David articulates a positive explanation for how he can manage this task without threatening her investment in it. Understanding how exchanges at one point in a family constrain or enable different kinds of exchanges at a later point thus emerges as an important topic for future study.

While working women often complain that men engage less in accomplishing multiple and simultaneous family related tasks, men express dissatisfaction due to consistently being "nagged" by their wives, giving rise to the "henpecked" husband. Several studies have identified a pattern called *demand-withdraw* as a reliable marker of maladaptive communication and future relationship distress. In this pattern, "one member (the demander) criticizes, nags, and makes a demand on the other, while the partner (the withdrawer) avoids confrontation, withdraws, and becomes defensive" (Eldridge and Christensen 2002: 295). Withdrawing responses can take many forms and can serve specific functions, including avoiding intimacy, avoiding conflict, and angry withdrawal (Roberts 2000). We found evidence of all of these forms of disengagement among some couples in our study.

The tension that arises in everyday interactions concerning household management can influence the quality and nature of communication between couples as they broach other domains of discussion. As some psychological studies note (Johnson et al. 2005; Roberts 2000), humor and positive affect in marital interactions foreshadows marital success and can neutralize the effects of poor communication skills. Interactional patterns of conflict in marriage are complex and are often the symptom of underlying tension concerning other issues related to professional work status and differing rights, obligations, and expectations. For example, the husband in this couple is temporarily unemployed and is seeking work, which may contribute to the wife adopting more of a dominant position and the husband's acceptance of her micromanagement of his cooking. Our impression was that spouses tended to resent having their partner monitor their ongoing activities.

### **Partnership and Shared Understandings**

Among the families in our study, couples who lack clarity of *what, when* and *how* household tasks and responsibilities should be carried out, feel drained, rushed, and are unable to coordinate and communicate their dissatisfaction in their lives. Strategies for accomplishing tasks and assigning responsibility vary greatly. For example in one family, spouses emphasize the importance of establishing a firm understanding regarding the division of household chores. Below, note how the spouses emphasize the importance of establishing a firm and mutual understanding regarding the division of household chores:

- 1 IR            How do you divide the chores between you two?  
2 Priya        He does outside chores and I do inside chores,  
3                that's very clear.  
4 IR            That's how it works?  
5 Priya        Yeah, very clear distinction. We both have professions,  
6                we both are strong minded so we make it clear  
7                this is what you do, this is what I do, and I don't go out  
8                and do, you know, his outside chores and he doesn't do  
9                the inside chores.  
10 Sam        Like, like, you know, grocery most of the times I do it.  
11                If things like we need to get for the house I do it;  
12                things of that nature, but the thing- the way that we do it is  
13                if she does it, I don't interfere; if I do it, she doesn't interfere,  
14                so you know one person (pause)  
15 IR            Like for example for cooking.  
16 Sam        Then she does it.  
17 IR            And you know that.  
18 Sam        I know that it's clear, it's very clear.

Above, Priya explains the need for clarity, "We both have professions, we both are strong minded." Sam adds, "If she does it, I don't interfere; if I do it, she doesn't interfere."

These statements display the respect that each spouse has for one another's household work domain as well as their need for clear boundaries. The frequent use of the second person plural 'we' by both parties indicates the management of the household as a joint project. While Priya emphasizes their dual-career status and their shared characteristic of being "strong minded," Sam points out the importance of not interfering in each other's tasks. Interference, which is tantamount to the demanding behaviors psychologists have studied previously in laboratory settings, is a problem for several couples in our study. The fact that Sam realizes that interference is a potential problem -- one that can be avoided by a clear and consensual division of labor -- is a critical insight.

Couples that established a clear understanding of their respective responsibilities were less likely to interfere in each other's spheres of work. These findings upend conventional wisdom about the value of communication between working partners: the *absence* of communication in certain domains may be an indicator of a healthy and efficient family system in which members display mutual respect, whereas the presence of negotiations in domains that should have well-established rules and conventions may exacerbate work-family tensions.

Comparison of dinner preparation in the CELF families and families in Rome<sup>ii</sup> revealed a marked difference in the quality of affect and collaborative features of interactions, which appear to reflect couples' differing strategies on how to manage household tasks in working family life (Klein et al. 2005). Rather than constructing a comparative cross-cultural schema, we identified certain similarities and differences related to accomplishing everyday household activities. Couples in Rome did not express any overt complaints or communicate a sense of burden regarding household chores. They communicated a sense of togetherness, of positive affect and humor in the organization of their lives. Compared to American families, Italian families spend more time at home with each other and in closer physical proximity, in part due to their smaller and more compact living spaces and by arriving home together at the end of the working day; most families own one car for the family. American families tend to be more tense and individually-oriented in exchanges whereas Italian families appear to be more relaxed and communal in their approach to household management. The more important point is that data from both locations provide important glimpses into the patterns of collaboration that *can* occur in families, and that family members actively create the settings – to their benefit or to their detriment. The interactive features of collaboration, such as the specific use of language, positive affect, and humor, shape the successful coordination of tasks between couples in Los Angeles and Rome.

## **Conclusion**

Families are comprised of individuals who coordinate their behaviors in relation to one another. In working families -- where both adults work outside the home and raise school-aged children -- the challenge of coordinating behaviors to meet family needs is especially great. A central premise of this chapter is that the emotional tone of family life pivots to a significant degree on the extent to which family members negotiate and enact

effective strategies for contending with the numerous tasks that daily life presents and, more generally, that observing family members as they go about their everyday routines and activities in managing the home can reveal important insights into the organization and dynamics of families. Our impression, for example, is that satisfying domestic routines for working couples have yet to be established. Expectations and roles are not yet clear, and subsequent interactions may turn on how partners interpret or assign meaning to one another's actions. Management of the household, from this perspective, requires an understanding of couples' models of household duties and responsibilities, the observable interactions that these models entail, and the shifting contexts and circumstances within which parents strive to nurture themselves and their family.

Clear and equitable models appear to minimize the need for partners to evaluate and manage one another's task-related behaviors, allowing partners to fulfill their household duties with the knowledge that the partner will not in fact overstep established boundaries. Demands are few, disengagement in the face of demands is unnecessary, and partners are more likely to feel respected for the contributions they are making. Conflict was more prevalent when couples had not worked out a clear division of labor in the home and had to renegotiate responsibilities one day to the next. Ambiguous and unfair models, on the other hand, appear to provide ample opportunity for partners to express displeasure toward one another as they complete their chores, such that various attempts at controlling these exchanges – e.g., through requests and avoidance of these requests – reveal the ongoing and occasionally tense negotiation of power and influence between partners. Although parents desperately need help around the house, children are usually not socialized into doing chores on a consistent basis, which reflects the fact that parents themselves do not have a systematic organization of managing responsibilities (see Klein et al. 2007b, 2009 and Chapter 7 this volume).

Interactions around everyday chores are tinged with strong and often unacknowledged emotional reactions: partners feel unappreciated because other family members fail to contribute to meal preparation, express dissatisfaction at how family members go about their chores, or convey frustration at the seemingly endless list of tasks that must be completed by a certain time. Conversely, in some of the families the management of tasks presented opportunities for genuine humor, irony, and warmth. On balance, families appear most successful in contending with the routine tasks of everyday life when (a) family members are active contributors rather than passive or entitled recipients of others' contributions, (b) family members acknowledge the contributions that others make, if only by overlooking their missteps, (c) there is limited interference or "micro-managing" of one another while carrying out household work; (d) a consensually established arrangement precludes the need to renegotiate the allocation of tasks anew each day, and (e) there is flexibility rather than rigidity in the arrangement so that one family member can 'pick up the slack' if another is unable to fulfill their usual responsibilities. These conditions seem most likely to promote positive engagement in families, and to encourage the view that everyday chores are a vehicle for connection rather than a threat to individual well-being. Though household work and family responsibilities can be a burden and a source of tension for working parents, they are also a crucial domain in which partners can express solidarity, respect, and intimacy.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 62% of adults say sharing household chores is very important to marital success. There was no difference of opinion reported between men and women; or between older adults and younger adults; or between married people and singles. Survey conducted in February – March, 2007 (2,027 adults - representative of population).

<sup>1</sup> I-CELF Study.



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