

## **Undoing gender: how does it work for domestic chores?**

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The objective of this paper is to study undoing gender, a relatively uncommon aim in previous qualitative research (Risman 2009). What enables some women to push their partners towards equal sharing of domestic chores, while other women express a sense of unfairness but do not manage to attain a significant change? What role do negotiation and conflict play in undoing the gender division in housework? We try to answer these questions using Spanish data. The Spanish context is a very appropriate setting to analyze change towards equality in the distribution of domestic work for at least four reasons. First, Spain has witnessed an extraordinary rapid change in gender values and family patterns, leading to a current situation where cohabitation is a wide-spread phenomenon and an functional equivalent to marriage (like in Scandinavia) (Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro 2013), where couples in fertile ages are frequently formed by twofull-time earners, divorce rates are over the EU average and where gender attitudes are comparatively egalitarian (Naldini and Jurado-Guerrero 2013). Second, the field work was conducted in 2011, when unemployment rates in Spain among men aged 25 to 39 years had attained 23% and women were increasing their activity rate. This allows us to study if and how unemployed men do change their housework contribution in a recession context. The effect of male unemployment on men's share of domestic chores is not clear and needs further research (Risman 2011). Third, Spanish dual-earner couples were ever more outsourcing an important part of housework. Around 18% of middle-aged dual-earner couples paid for domestic service in 2003 (González and Jurado-Guerrero 2009). This may be facilitating a more equal sharing among such couples. Fourth, previous analysis on Spain show that that absolute female income seems more important than her relative income for explaining domestic chores proportions (González and Jurado 2009). This is in line with most recent research in other countries (Sullivan 2011).

Research on reproductive work has pointed out at resources –absolute or relative- as one of the key explanatory variables. Resources are often understood as (potential) earnings (Becker 1981, Gupta 2007), but in this paper we will consider resources in a broader

sense. Some research has shown that other resources may enter couple's negotiations and influence power configurations; these can be material –ownership of the dwelling - as well as immaterial –access to a social network or personality traits- (Botia 2010, Coria 1996). These resources are not easily observable in quantitative surveys but they are likely to play a role in decision making processes.

Resources and bargaining power gather meaning through interaction. Couples often do not discuss or negotiate explicitly every issue, but reach certain outcomes through a process where the acknowledgement of power is implicit (Kauffman, 1999). However, some research has found that couples with egalitarian divisions of work discuss housework more explicitly than couples with a more traditional arrangement (Wiessman, 2008). Couples' dialogue and interaction are especially relevant when there is dissatisfaction about the existing arrangements. Thus, we expect more egalitarian couples to discuss more openly and explicitly the domestic division of work.

But couple's communication and bargaining does not take place on an empty space. There are gender norms that frame the interactions within the couple and also with the public sphere. Men and women have been socialized to play and enact different roles, to do gender. Hochschild's work (1989) has shown that even if couples agree on some egalitarian values, the interiorization of gender roles may create conflicts.

Finally, time availability is often mentioned as an additional explanatory factor for domestic work (Coltrane, 2000). However, time availability is related both to individual resources and to gender attitudes and roles. In addition to that, time availability often depends on structural factors, such as the characteristics of the labor market and the working culture. Hence, time availability can be the result of either choice or constraint, and will be analyzed taking into account its complexity.

Our sample was drawn from the Spanish Transparent study. The Transparent study is an international project that analyses the transition to first childbirth by interviewing couples in two different moments in time: when they are expecting their first child and again 18-24 months after childbirth. In this paper we will use only the interviews from the first wave of this study. The interviews took place in 2011, in four Spanish urban areas: Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and Pamplona. Couples were mostly contacted through birth preparation courses and some couples by social contacts. The interviews were semi-structured and took place in the respondents' home. Both members of the

couple were interviewed separately first and then together, which means that we have 3 interviews per couple, varying in length from a total of 90 to 180 minutes. In total, 68 couples were interviewed, the only selection criteria being that couples must be dual earner couples (with members either working or unemployed), but we also tried to have couples from different socio-economic backgrounds. The sample is not meant to be representative of the Spanish society, and there are several biases: for instance our couples are older than the average first time parents, and also more educated.

In the individual interviews, respondents were asked about their educational background, their employment situation, daily routines, and about how they imagined their life with a child. In the couple interviews we discussed their division of domestic work and their plans to take care of the baby. During the couple interview, respondents were asked about the performance of domestic work, and to agree as to which percentage each of them did. In many cases reaching an agreement took some negotiation, and we have used these self-reported percentages to choose the cases where the division of work was non-traditional. The final sample that we analyze consists of 33 couples. These couples have been together for between 2 to 15 years; most of them are between 30 and 40 years of age; most of them are highly educated (secondary education or more); and their income levels vary. There are couples where both have a similar income level, others with her earning more and also with her earning less than him. Some are married, following a religious or a civil ceremony, and others are cohabiting couples.

Interviews were read and analyzed by focusing on the factors that made these couples have an egalitarian division of work. Those factors were then listed and researchers identified relationships between them, leading to a provisional categorization. Interviews were then analyzed once more by the researchers in order to check the relationships among factors. We have analyzed those dual-earner couples, who self-stated to have a quasi-symmetric or egalitarian division of housework and whose detailed description of routine domestic tasks – cleaning, cooking, doing the dishes, doing the laundry, hanging up, ironing and shopping for groceries – confirmed their overall perception. Some people, in particular women, tried to convince the interviewer to live in a couple with an egalitarian distribution of household tasks, while the detailed accounts of the particular domestic tasks proved that this perception was more a wish than a reality. These self-defined egalitarian couples, whose discourses where

contradictory, where excluded from our analysis. Thus we have couples where it is credible that the man is doing at least 40% of routine housework and sometimes even 70%, at the time she is pregnant with her first child. Pregnancy influences housework in two ways: sometimes she does some more housework, because at the time of the interview she is already on sickness or pregnancy leave (12), but she feels fine to do domestic tasks, or the man does more than usually, because he does not want her to do certain “heavy” tasks. Some couples were egalitarian by doing the total routine housework themselves (23) and others had a quasi-symmetric division of the portion of housework not done by their paid domestic service (10). Thus the total amount of housework to be done by couples varies according to the extension of outsourced tasks, and also depends on other reduction practices and on cleaning and order standards.

How do these egalitarian couples organize their housework? First, we have the couples who externalize cleaning, washing, hanging up and/or ironing and thus share only cooking and shopping for groceries (high-income couples) or share the less feminized tasks, because they outsource only the ironing or core-cleaning work. Not-outsourcing couples do housework mixing two organization principles: specialization and co-performance. Interestingly rotation is an unusual practice. In our sample only in one couple we found a rotation following a task calendar. Others reported previous periods of trying out housework in rotation, but finishing up with specialization according to preferences and competences. Thus, task specialization and co-performance are mixed in various ways. Cleaning and shopping were the tasks more commonly performed by both partners together at the same time and most often on a fixed day, for instance on week-ends, when both have the same time availability. Cooking, cleaning dishes, washing and hanging up or ironing were more commonly assigned permanently to one partner on grounds of preference and capacity or according to time availability. In many of these couples ironing has been reduced or totally eliminated, which indicates another important organization principle of these non-traditional couples, which is the lowering of order and cleaning standards away from the traditional housewife standard of past generations.

With respect to the invisible task of organizing and thinking about housework women tend to keep the main responsibility of organizing common tasks, while men incorporate this task only when they specialize in some chores. Within these quasi-symmetric couples we find a continuum going from couples where she does around 60% of routine

task and performs the most feminine tasks (ironing and bath cleaning) through couples sharing housework on a 50:50 base (both cooking, cleaning and shopping) to couples where she does around 30%, while he does nearly all the cooking, shopping and cleaning. In these latter couples (7), we find sometimes unemployed men, others with domestic service and one couple where she has very long working hours.

How can we explain that these couples have managed to undo the traditional gender division of housework in Spain? This paper shows three new results compared to previous studies. First, there is no need that people undertake an explicit negotiation about how to distribute domestic chores. There are couples who negotiated, but others who only agreed upon the need to share housework equally. Second, if we accept the wider definition of relative resources, as stated in the theoretical framework and look at relative income, relative education level, relative orientation towards paid work and the relative importance given to the family/social networks and leisure time, then we find that resources in these couples are combined in a non-hegemonic way. We find many couples where she has an equal or higher education level than him, where she has a strong work orientation and he is rather strongly oriented towards the family, friends and holds non-work related values. Many women show also a strong personality and do not fear conflict in their work and social life. Third, the mix of attitudes and how they interact within the couple is crucial to understand why these couples differ from others who reproduce a traditional gender division of work, despite having similar socio-economic resources. We find two different types of women and three different types of men with respect to their attitudes towards how they should share housework in their daily life. The way in which they mix and interact helps to understand their outcome in the continuum of a non-traditional division of housework.