

**Time Availability: The Effects of Employment Status and Work Shift Schedules on  
Husbands' Housework Sharing**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how spousal employment status, and work shift schedules affect the share that husbands contribute to the domestic labor. Previous studies have either examined households where both spouses were employed (Presser, 1994), or more traditional households where only husbands were employed (Oakley, 1974). Much neglected in the literature on housework inequality is the examination of households where wives worked outside the homes for pay, while their husbands were unemployed, and households where both spouses were out of work. Thus, I examine the effect of these different types of employment statuses and work shift schedules on the amount of housework that husbands shared with their wives. The time availability thesis suggests that the spouse with the least amount of paid labor force hours will spend the most time on housework. However, some scholars dispute this claim based on research evidence suggesting that some spouses with more time away from paid labor shared less of the domestic labor (Shelton and John, 1993; Brines, 1994). This paper, evaluates the competing claims about the time availability thesis by assessing the impact of spouses' differential available work hours, and how such impact may affect husbands' housework contribution.

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### *Time Availability and the Division of Household Labor*

The main premise of the time availability perspective is that husbands and wives divide household duties based on rational calculation of the limited time they have available to them. Their solutions to domestic sharing evolve, not from ideological concerns or power differentials but, rather, from practical assessments of available time for domestic work given external constraints. The rational behavior implied by the theory is that wives or husbands pick up the slack at home for the spouse who works longer hours in her/his paid employment.

According to the proponents of the time availability perspective, paid labor force attachment accounts for the gender gap in housework sharing. This theory suggests that since dual-income married couples face time pressure in both the public and private domain, spouses who spend fewer hours in the paid labor force will spend more time on housework (Coverman, 1985). Accordingly, the spouse who works the most hours in the paid labor force will contribute the least amount of time toward the household labor. Conceptualized this way, time availability theory seems to be gender neutral, in that the spouse, whether male or female, who works the least number of hours in the paid labor force will be more responsible for housework. As cultural norms change to allow women more influence in both public and private life, this perspective anticipates a negative relationship between participation in the paid labor market and in housework sharing. Relatedly, some scholars predict that as women increase their participation in the paid labor force, their spouses will more likely share in the household labor (Hersch and Stratton, 1994; Pittman et al. 1996; Waite and Goldscheider, 1992). These scholars suggest that husbands respond to their wives' employment by attempting to increase their share of household labor. A few studies have corroborated these predictions to a certain extent (Starrels, 1994; Bianchi et al., 2000). In particular, Bianchi et al., (2000) found that the household work gap

narrows as wives spend more time in the paid labor force. But, the gap did not close as Bianchi et al. (2000) also found that the more hours husbands spent in the paid labor force, the less time they spent doing the household labor.

Research by Presser (1994; 2005) adds a new dimension to the time availability perspective by considering the impact of shift work on a couple's behavior. Her examination of differential housework sharing takes into account the work schedule of each spouse. In her research, Presser (1994; 2005) differentiated standard work hours from non-standard work hours. Presser defines standard work hours as employment between 9:00 am to 5:00 pm (or some close variation). Non-standard work hours, refers to work hours that start after 4:00 pm and end eight hours later (or some close variation).

Using standard versus non-standard work hours, Presser (1994; 2005) was able to show a variation in husbands' housework participation in the households where spouses' worked different employment schedules; more precisely, as spouses work different shifts, husbands' housework participation increased. Presser (1994) found a significant increase in husbands' housework share when wives worked the day shift and husbands worked the non-day shift. Finally, Presser also examined how spouses' overlapping work schedules influenced husbands' housework share. More specifically, Presser found a significant increase in husbands' housework share when employed husbands were at home while their wives were at work. Presser's work sensitizes us to the changes in employment patterns, particularly to alternative work schedules (or shift work) and to the effect of overlapping work schedules. Thus, Presser's work raises questions about gender distribution of housework, particularly when spouses work different shifts, and are at home together for fewer hours. According to Speakman and

Marchington (1999), “shiftwork provides different opportunities for involvement in housework given the mix of schedules and arrangements” (p. 88).

One limitation of Presser’s work is the exclusion of unemployed spouses from her comparisons. Yet, it is plausible to consider that even unemployed wives may be contributing more total hours to domestic hours than the total contribution of their husbands to both outside employment plus domestic help. In this study, I take a more comprehensive approach that includes a wider range of couple situations relative to employment status and shift of work. Nonetheless, despite some of the inconsistencies of the findings about the impact of time availability on housework sharing, the perspective alerts us to the need to build in considerations of how available time, as well as shift work and overlapping work schedules, impacts husbands’ housework sharing.

Researchers who adopt a time availability perspective often paint a rational (even rosy) picture of wives’ and husbands’ negotiations around domestic tasks, as an expression of the most practical way to use spouses’ available time (Hersch and Stratton, 1994; Pittman et al. 1996; Waite and Goldscheider, 1992). The assumption that as wives increase their time in the paid labor force, husbands will accordingly (or over time) increase their contributions to housework is supported in qualified ways in some studies but meets little support in others. On the one hand, research by Robinson and Godbey (1997) supports, to a certain extent, the time availability perspective; they found an increase in husbands’ overall household contribution, even as their overall work hours also increased. Yet, other researchers dispute the equalitarian interpretation of this observed pattern; several researchers argue, for example, that the increase in husbands’ housework participation is a relative one and may actually be due to wives’ cutting back their household labor contribution rather than to an absolute increase in men’s contributions

(Bianchi et. al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000). The amount of housework may remain constant even though wives cut back their share; thus, unless husbands increase their share of the domestic labor or unless spouses hire outside help, these homes may become either dirtier or a sustained site for conflict.

Relatedly, Hochschild found that even when wives work longer hours than their husbands, the wives end up with the bulk of the responsibility for the household labor. Moreover, she found that husbands who work longer hours in the paid labor force spend fewer hours than their wives on the household labor. Scholars who use time availability to explain housework sharing between spouses apply it exclusively to dual earner homes. They rarely consider traditional married couples, as those households conform almost perfectly to an imagined fair exchange of housework and non-employment implicit in the time availability perspective. Even rarer is the application of the time availability perspective to non-traditional married couples where only wives are employed.

In conclusion, though there is conflicting evidence on the applicability of the time availability perspective, many of the positive findings about shifts toward more domestic sharing, especially as they relate to shift work and other practical constraints of time, alert us to the need to include such considerations in our analysis of the relative weight of factors influencing domestic negotiations around housework. In addition, we also need to consider applying the time availability perspective to non-traditional married couples where for example, only wives are employed.

The analyses I present below find significant evidence to support the basic assertions made by time availability scholars. In the series of analyses that follow, I first present the results for the percentage husbands share overall (Housework Sharing in All Domestic Tasks). I then

disaggregate the overall share husbands contribute to the domestic labor into three different dependent variables: (1) Housework Sharing in Traditional Female Tasks; (2) Housework Sharing in Traditional Male Tasks; and (3) Housework Sharing in Neutral Task.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *The Data*

I use data from the second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to examine how race, net of cultural and structural factors, affects the balance of housework between wives and their husbands. The NSFH Wave II is a national, probability, longitudinal survey, collected between 1992 and 1994. Wave II consists of follow-up personal interviews with 10,005 of the original main respondents from Wave I. Of the 10,005 main respondents, 5,624 were either married or cohabiting at Wave II. Survey data from spouses and cohabiting partners were also collected in this wave. Wave II respondents and their spouses were all between the ages of 18 to 65 at the time of the survey. Finally, the NSFH re-interviewed 58 percent (5624 of the original 9643 couples) compared to only 30 percent of the 5624 couples re-interviewed in Wave III.

### *Selection of Sub-sample*

The selected sample consists of 3,327 heterosexual married couple households where both spouses were interviewed, where both spouses were between the ages of 18 and 65 years, where neither spouse was disabled nor a student, and where the spouses were both shared the same race, either white or black.

### *Dependent Variables*

I use four dependent variables, each measuring a different dimension of the housework labor husbands provide to the household. The four dependent variables are the proportion of the household's total housework time that husbands spend in (1) *all domestic labor*, (2) *traditional female tasks*, (3) *traditional male tasks* and (4) *gender-neutral tasks*. I use the proportion of the household domestic labor that husbands perform rather than the absolute number of hours husbands spend on domestic labor, in order to measure husbands' housework activity *in relation to* their wives' housework activity (Greenstein, 1996a; Presser, 2003). Like previous researchers (South & Spitze, 1994; Greenstein, 1996a, 1996b; Gupta, 1999a), to minimize the number of missing cases, I replaced these values with 0. However, I only did so where the respondents had valid answers for at least seven of the other housework questions. I ran separate analyses with and without this method of dealing with missing cases and found that my results were similar in both instances.

#### *Independent Variables*

Previous research hypothesizes the effect of time availability on husbands' housework. The time availability thesis suggests that the spouse with the least amount of paid labor force hours will spend the most time on housework. Some scholars have disputed this and have found evidence to support the claim that some spouses with more time away from paid labor shared less of the domestic labor (Shelton and John, 1993; Brines, 1994). In this analysis, I include the combined employment status and work shift status for each couple (Presser, 1994), and the amount of time each spouse spend in the paid labor force as a measure of their available time.

#### *Control Variables*

Previous scholars have shown that several other variables influence housework sharing between spouses. Based on this literature, I control for cultural, economic, time availability, and

other socio-demographic factors. As a result, I include wives' and husbands' gender ideologies because prior studies show that husbands' housework activities depend, in part, on the interaction between spouses' gender beliefs (Greenstein, 1996a, 1996b; John & Shelton, 1997; Kamo & Cohen, 1998). For instance, Greenstein (1996a) shows that husbands share less when both spouses hold conservative views; but, there are higher levels of sharing by husbands among spouses with more liberal views. I created separate variables to measure each spouse's gender ideological views. Using principle component analysis, I reduced four gender related questions into one common underlying measure of gender beliefs for each spouse (Cronbach Alpha of 0.72 for wives and 0.71 for husbands). In order to measure the interaction between spouses' gender beliefs, I multiplied wives' and husbands' gender ideologies. All the gender ideology constructs are continuous. For interpretation purposes, high values on each gender ideology measure represent more traditional gender ideologies (Greenstein, 1996a).

Another important variable scholars use to help explain gender differences in the household domestic labor is husbands' relative share of the total household income (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Greenstein, 2000; Gupta & Ash, 2008). Prior research shows a non-linear relationship between husbands' proportion of the household income and their share of housework time. These results show that, on the one hand, as husbands' share of the household income increases, their share of the housework decreases. On the other hand, as husbands' income share decreases, their share of the domestic labor increases. The threshold at which husbands' housework is either rising or falling seems to be when wives earn greater than 60 percent of the total household income.

Race is the main independent variable in my analysis. I dummy coded the race variable as whites and blacks, dropping all the other race categories. Finally, I included education, age,



number of children, number of other family members, paid work hours, homeownership, region, and metropolitan area in the analysis since previous research also demonstrates their importance as socio-demographic contextual controls (Greenstein, 1996a, 1996b; Kamo & Cohen, 1998; Bianchi et al., 2000).

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the basic statistics for the 3327 married couples; however, Table 2 shows that complete employment information for 3,188 of these couples. Table 2 shows that in 62 percent of the households both spouses were employed. Couples, who had a more “traditional” employment arrangement (that is households, where husbands worked outside the home, while their wives remained at home), made up 27 percent of the sample. I also find that the sample consisted of a small number of homes that we may call non-typical in their employment composition, for the American context. In these non-typical homes husbands were unemployed while their wives worked outside of the home. These couples made up a little more than 6 percent of the sample. Finally, in about 5 percent of the homes both spouses were unemployed.

### *Husbands’ Housework Sharing and Spousal Employment*

Models I, II, III, and IV in Table 3 predict the housework share husbands contribute to American households due to spousal employment, after controlling for education, age, number of children, number of other family members, tenure (whether family own or rent their homes), region, and metropolitan area.

*Sharing in All Domestic Tasks:* The regression results in Model I (Table 4) show husbands increased their share of the overall domestic labor in households where only wives

were employed (Beta = 0.04), and in households where both spouses were unemployed (Beta = 0.04). Even though these categories of the employment status and work shift schedules were not significant predictors of husbands' sharing in all domestic labor at the 0.05 and 0.001 probability level, the results hint at the possibility of some significant effect within the individual component parts of the all domestic tasks dependent variable. The other employment status and work shift categories were significantly related to sharing in all domestic tasks.

(Table 3 About Here)

*Sharing in Traditional Female Tasks:* Model II shows the regression results for husbands' housework sharing in traditional female tasks. In Model II, the coefficients for the employment status where wives were employed while their husbands were not was positive and significantly related to husbands' sharing. Thus, husbands were more likely to share in homes where wives were employed and husbands were unemployed (Beta = 0.08) relative to husbands in couples where both employed. The estimated coefficients of the effects of wives' and husbands' work hours were significantly associated with the amount of time husbands contributed to the domestic labor relative to their wives. From the results for the times availability variables, we see that as wives work hours increased so did husbands' housework share; but, as husbands' work hours increased their share of the domestic labor also decreased. This is in keeping with the theoretical propositions of the time availability theory – the more time spent working for pay cut the available time for other activities. These results, not unexpectedly, confirm previous research that found a gendered division in housework sharing in homes with traditional employment arrangements (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). The unemployment of both spouses was unrelated to husbands' house sharing behavior in the traditional female tasks. These results may help us to understand whether the ability of wives with the employment advantage, and less available time

to extract domestic labor from their husbands. Such households are non-traditional, but they inform us as to marital power dynamics that a superior employment situation may bestow.

Clearly, wives' employment status had a strong influence on whether husbands shared in the traditional female domestic labor. This influence was strongest in homes where only wives were employed while their husbands remained unemployed; the Beta value which shows the relative importance for each variable was largest for this category as well. As in Model I, unemployed husbands whose wives were employed shared more of the housework compared to husbands in couples where both spouses worked. The relative importance for this result had increased to 0.08 in Model II from 0.04 in Model I. In addition, the coefficient for this category was significant at a lower level of probability. While this provides some evidence for the argument that unemployed husbands were involved in what is considered feminine chores, we do not know the degree of their involvement. Model II accounts for 15 percent of the variance in husbands' housework sharing in the traditional female tasks.

*Sharing in Traditional Male Tasks:* Model III in Table 3 presents the results for husbands' housework sharing in traditional male tasks. From the results, we see that none of the employment status combinations were significant predictors of the share that husbands contributed to the traditional male tasks.

Model III accounted for only 1.8 percent of the variation in husbands' housework sharing in traditional male tasks, leaving the remaining 98.2 percent unexplained.

*Sharing in Neutral Tasks:* I now turn to the regression results for husbands' housework sharing in neutral tasks. In Model IV, employed husbands in households where their wives were unemployed (Beta = 0.11), and husbands in households where both spouses were out of work (Beta = 0.08) were significantly more likely to share in the neutral tasks than husbands in homes

where both spouses worked. These results suggest several things. In the case of employed husbands and their unemployed wives, husbands may indeed take part in the neutral tasks as a form of taking overall control over the affairs of the family; whereas, in household where both spouses are employed, compromise over the neutral tasks may be necessary. On the other hand, the results also suggest that unemployed husbands may have been compelled by their spouses (or by their work circumstances) to carry out neutral tasks such as driving others around, paying bills, and shopping for grocery either when their wives were employed or when their wives were unemployed. Another possible interpretation as to why unemployed husbands share more of the neutral tasks is that they simply have more time to do so.

The results I presented in Models I through IV in Table 3 indicate that husbands' housework share was more responsive to combination of spouses' employment status in traditional female tasks compared to the other types of housework tasks. The adjusted r-squared for Model II was about 5 to 6 times larger than the adjusted r-squared of Models III, and IV, and about times larger than the adjusted r-squared of Model II.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Control Variables

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Wives Education	3327	13.47	2.33	2	20
Husbands Education	3327	13.64	2.78	0	20
Number of Children	3327	1.33	1.25	0	9
Number of Other Family Members	3327	3.54	1.33	0	12
Wives Age	3327	39.56	9.42	19	65
Husbands Age	3327	41.85	9.79	20	65
Wives Paid Work Hours	3327	24.06			
Husbands Paid Work Hours	3327	40.79			
	Freq.	Percent			
<b>Tenure</b>					
Own (=0)	2745	84.07			
Rent (=1)	520	15.93			
<b>Region</b>					
Northeast	601	18.12			
North Central (Midwest)	1088	32.8			
South	1124	33.89			
West	504	15.19			
<b>Metropolitan Area</b>					
Rural (=0)	958	28.79			
Urban (=1)	2369	71.21			
<b>Race</b>					
White (=0)	2981	89.6			
Black (=1)	346	10.4			

Table 2. Spousal Employment Status

Spousal Work		Frequency	Percent
1	Husbands & Wives Empl	1,973	61.89
2	Husbands Empl; Wives Not	851	26.69
3	Husbands Not; Wives Empl	195	6.12
4	Husbands & Wives Not	169	5.3
Total		3,188	100

Table 3. Husbands' Housework Sharing Regressed on Husbands and Wives' Employment Status Combinations and Control Variables

	Model I All Domestic Tasks Beta		Model II Traditional Female Tasks Beta		Model III Traditional Male Tasks Beta		Model IV Gender-Neutral Tasks Beta	
<b>Employment Status Combinations</b>								
(Comparison Group: <b>Husbands &amp; Wives Employed</b> )								
Husbands Employed, Wives Not	-0.021		-0.0285		-0.04		0.1065	**
Wives Employed, Husbands Not	0.0391		0.076	***	-0.027		-0.0016	
Husbands & Wives Not Employed	0.0421		0.0421		-0.0062		0.0763	**
<b>Control Variables</b>								
Wives Education	0.10604	***	0.1397	***	-0.0155		-0.0606	**
Husbands Education	0.02351		0.0468	*	-0.0536	*	0.1274	***
Wives Age	-0.05028		-0.0728		-0.0361		0.0728	
Husbands Age	-0.03029		-0.0351		-0.0134		-0.0741	
Number of Children	-0.10543	*	-0.1059	*	0.0151		-0.086	
Number of Other Family	0.02751		-0.0015		-0.0059		0.0256	
Tenure (Rent = 1)	0.02273		0.0856	***	-0.0041		0.0438	*
Northeast (West)	0.008		-0.0288		0.1131	***	-0.0108	
Midwest	-0.02322		-0.0525	*	0.069	**	-0.021	
South	-0.02851		-0.0759	**	0.103	***	-0.0514	
Metropolitan (Urban = 1)	0.07973	***	0.0984	***	0.0383	*	0.0484	*
Wives Paid Work Hours	0.21338	***	0.2157	***	0.0512		0.1503	***
Husbands Paid Work Hours	-0.06897	**	-0.0674	**	-0.0426		-0.063	*
Constant	0.26635	***	0.1278	***	0.86347	***	0.29316	***
R <sup>2</sup>	0.103		0.154		0.023		0.036	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.098		0.15		0.018		0.031	
N	3062		2950		2916		2940	

\* p < 0.05 \*\* p < 0.01 \*\*\* p < 0.001