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Gender, High -And Low - Control Housework Tasks and Psychological Distress: A Study of Dual-Earner Couples

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**GENDER, HIGH-AND
LOW-CONTROL
HOUSEWORK TASKS
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL
DISTRESS: A STUDY OF
DUAL-EARNER COUPLES**

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YU-CHU SHEN*

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High- and Low-Control Housework Tasks and Distress

Abstract

In this analysis, with data collected from a random sample of 255 employed dual-earner couples, we estimated the association between time spent in housework tasks [absolute and proportional time in 11 housework tasks; absolute and proportional time in 5 low-control tasks (e.g., meal preparation, cleaning up after meals); and absolute and proportional time in 4 high-control tasks (e.g., looking after the car, repairs around the home)] on the one hand and psychological distress on the other. Based on the literature relating job control to mental-health outcomes, we hypothesized that hours spent in low-control tasks, but not total hours spent in housework tasks or hours spent in high-control tasks, would be associated with psychological distress. Further, we hypothesized that absolute but not proportional time in low-control tasks would be related to distress. Finally, we hypothesized that these relationships would not be moderated by gender. After controlling for age, gender, education, occupational prestige, parental status, gender-role ideology, marital-role quality and for total number of hours in paid employment, all hypotheses were supported.

High- and Low-Control Housework Tasks and Distress

Is the performance of household tasks related to psychological distress? Interestingly, in contrast to the large literature exploring the "causes" of the performance of household labor (e.g., maternal employment, gender, gender-role ideology), relatively few studies have addressed the "consequences" of the performance of household labor (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). And, most studies concerned with "consequences" have focused on power within the couple (Blood & Wolfe, 1965), wives' perceptions of equity or the fairness of the division of household labor (Blair & Johnson, 1992), and marital satisfaction (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994), rather than psychological distress. Yet there is reason to believe that the performance of housework tasks is related to psychological distress (Pleck, 1985). In this analysis, we estimate the relationship between the division of housework labor and psychological distress in a random sample of early mid-life men and women in dual-earner couples, all of whom were employed full-time at the start of the project.

It is generally agreed that employed married women report higher levels of distress than employed married men (Barnett, Marshall, Raudenbush, & Brennan, 1993; Cleary & Mechanic, 1983; Pleck, 1985; Hughes & Galinsky, 1994). Some researchers attributed this discrepancy to the relative stressfulness of the employee role for women compared to men (Pleck, 1985). Strong empirical evidence linking employment to positive mental health for women, however, challenged that formulation (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Repetti, Matthews, & Waldron, 1989). Other explanations focused on the stressful aspects of women's compared to men's marital role (Bailyn, 1970; Pearlin, 1975; Pleck, 1985). In particular, it was argued that women have a heavier burden of housework tasks than men (Beckwith, 1992; Berardo, Shehan & Leslie, 1987; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Pleck, 1985), and that this overload was associated with their higher levels of distress.

Although it is widely reported that women perform more housework tasks than men, even in couples in which both partners are employed full-time, few studies, have estimated the linkages between the absolute amount of time spent in household tasks and distress outcomes for employed married men and women in dual-earner couples. Moreover, in most studies, the samples used to estimate this relationship have

varied widely in age, including for example, adults 19 to 65 and older (Blair & Johnson, 1992) or adults 18 to 65 years of age (Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). The results of these studies are hard to interpret because of cohort effects. More specifically, the meaning associated with the performance of housework tasks for men and women and the prevalence of different family forms (e.g., single-earner, two-earner, full-time employed dual-earner) varies between generations. These variables, in turn, may affect both the amount of time spent in housework tasks and the relationship between time in housework tasks and distress. In this article, in a random sample of employed men and women between the ages of 28-42 in dual-earner couples, we estimated the main effect relationship between time in housework tasks and psychological distress, after controlling for the effect of gender-role ideology.

Studies of the relationship between the performance of housework tasks and equity have influenced the way in which the division of household labor has been operationalized. Because "female" tasks are done on a daily basis and with little control (i.e., discretion), in contrast to male tasks, which are performed more irregularly and with considerable discretion, it has been thought that the sharing of female tasks is a "more stringent test of equal sharing" (Steil, Smrz, Wilkens, & Barnett, 1995). For these reasons, most studies of the relationship between the division of housework tasks and either equity or decision making within couples have used proportional not absolute measures to operationalize the division of housework tasks and have focused on stereotypic "female" tasks (Demos & Acock, 1993; Glass & Fujimoto, 1994). Blood and Wolfe (1965), for example, reported that "couples who share more than half their decisions do more housework together," and Perry-Jenkins and Folk (1994) found that relative performance of female tasks was related to wives' reports of marital conflict among working-class wives. Because proportional measures can mask substantial differences in actual time spent in household tasks, absolute measures of household task performance may be better suited to research addressing the association between the burden of household task performance and mental-health outcomes.

High- and Low-Control Housework Tasks and Distress

Because husbands and wives spend time doing male as well as female tasks, we argue that time spent in both types of tasks needs to be taken into account in operationalizing time in housework tasks. In the present analysis, we consider both the absolute and the proportional time spent in 11 male and female housework tasks. In the present analysis, we compare the utility of both proportional and absolute measures of the performance of housework tasks for predicting psychological distress.

In addition to the amount of time spent in household tasks, researchers suggest "...future work in this area should examine domestic working conditions in the same detail and in the same way as we treat paid employment" (Tierney, Romito, & Messing, 1994, p.39; Lennon, 1994). We respond to this call by conceptualizing household chores as differing in job control, a core construct in the job-stress literature (Sauter, Hurrell, & Cooper, 1989). Previous researchers have noted that male and female housework tasks differ with respect to the regularity and urgency with which they have to be performed. Most tasks labelled "male" (e.g., looking after the car, repairs around the home) do not have to be performed on a regular schedule, permitting high control over whether, how, and when they need to be done. However, a close examination of the tasks typically labelled "female" reveals that they differ with respect to the regularity and urgency with which they have to be done. Many have to be done on a regular schedule with slight discretion (e.g., meal preparation, cleaning up after meals, buying groceries, house cleaning) and, therefore, permit little control. In contrast, other "female" tasks (e.g., shopping for clothing, decorating the house) do not have to be performed so routinely, thereby permitting greater control. Treating female tasks as a group may, therefore, mask the fact that female housework tasks differ in control.

Evidence linking job control to distress (Sauter, Hurrell, & Cooper, 1989) suggests that jobs low in control are associated with distress, whereas jobs high in control are not. By extension, it is not the total time in total housework tasks or in high-control housework tasks that is related to distress but the time in low-control tasks. We hypothesize, therefore, that the relationship between time in low-control housework tasks

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will be related to distress, whereas the relationship between either total time in housework tasks or time in high-control housework tasks will not.

Focusing on the degree of control associated with housework tasks rather than on whether the tasks are "female" or "male" has two additional benefits. First, it avoids the implication that only women do female tasks and only men do male tasks, whereas it is likely, especially in dual-earner couples, that both men and women do both male and female tasks. Second, it focuses attention on an important dimension of the tasks rather than on a distinction that may no longer be especially meaningful. Originally "male" work referred to "men's strenuous and dangerous work in the fields and woods", work which "women were not considered strong enough to undertake. Women's work centered in the home, not only because women were incapable of the heaviest outside work but because women are the childbearers. Pregnancy, child birth, and breast feeding make it necessary and convenient for the woman to stay close to home" (Blood & Wolfe, 1965, p. 47).

Indeed, the notion that housework tasks today can be easily assigned to one gender or the other, ignores many realities of our current social situation. Recent data on dual-earner couples suggest that husbands are spending considerable time in housework tasks, many of which are likely to be "female." For example, among two-earner couples in their early middle years, roughly 12% of husbands report hours spent on housework that translate into absolute equality with their wives. "Roughly an additional third fall within a broader definition of equality (40-60%)" (Ferree, 1991, p. 167).¹ Moreover, in a 1988 national sample of couples 19 to 65 years of age, Blair and Johnson (1992) report that 45.5% of the hours husbands of employed wives spend in housework labor are spent in four low-control (female) tasks: meal preparation (17.7%); dishes (12.%); cleaning (1.4%); and ironing and washing (4.4%). Because these data are based on wives' estimates, and because of the relationship between husbands' time in housework and wives' hours of paid employment, these figures probably underestimate the time spent in housework spent by husbands in full-time employed dual-earner couples.

Furthermore, the excess burden hypothesis needs to take into account the fact that employed married men "tend to have longer market work hours than their full-time employed wives" (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994, p. 168). Studies reporting large discrepancies often ignore the gender difference in paid hours and focus solely on differences in time spent on household tasks (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). When time in both paid work and unpaid household tasks is taken into account, evidence suggests that, among men and women in dual-earner couples, the previously reported female excess (i.e., the "second shift") has been "overstated" (Ferree, 1991, p. 158). For example, when Pleck compared time use data from national probability samples of employed men and women between 1960 and 1977, and introduced controls for race, number and ages of children, and full-time employment, he concluded that "these comparisons all led to even smaller estimates of the difference between employed wives' and employed husbands' total work" (Pleck, 1985, pp. 42-43). Accounting for this narrowing of the gender gap was a trend for employed women to do fewer housework tasks and for employed men to do more.

This trend appears to have continued. The gender gap in total work hours is closing: among the full-time employed, men work more hours for pay, whereas women work more hours in the home, resulting in highly similar total work hours (Ferree, 1991; Leete-Guy & Schor, 1989). Indeed, in some comparisons, "employed wives performed less total work than did their husbands" (Pleck, 1985, p. 43).

A 1991-1992 large-scale Canadian study found a notable narrowing of the previously reported gender gap in hours worked on the job and in the home (Higgins, Duxbury, & Lee, 1994). Combining self report data on hours in paid employment and hours on home chores and errands, men spend, on average, a total of 57.02 hours per week compared to 59.78 for the women². Thus, full-time employed women spend on average 2.76 more hours per week (or .048%), a relatively small difference.

Similar findings were reported in a recent randomly selected national sample of employed men and women ages 18 through 64 ($N = 3,381$). Galinsky, Bond, & Freidman (1993), reported that, on average, men

spent more hours per week than women when paid hours and unpaid housework (not including child care) were combined. However, the difference (2.29 hours per week) was only .034%. More specifically, on average, men spent 67.16 hours per week (48.8 hours per week in market work³ and 18.96 hours per week in unpaid housework), compared to 64.87 for women (41.7 hours per week in market work and 23.17 hours per week in unpaid housework).

Potential Moderators

Gender. Does the relationship between time spent in low-control tasks and psychological distress differ by gender? In other words, is the nature of the tasks per se the stressor or does the stressfulness of the tasks differ depending on whether they are performed by husbands or wives?

The job-stress literature argues that the stressfulness of a job inheres in the job per se, independent of the characteristics of the employee. Thus, a job that is low in control will be stressful for anyone performing that job. The person-environment fit literature, in contrast, contends that the stressfulness of a job depends on the fit between the job and the personal characteristics of the employee. Hence, a job that is stressful for one employee may or may not be stressful for another. These two views lead to different hypotheses regarding the impact of gender on the relationship between performing low-control housework tasks and distress. The job-stress literature suggests that gender will not moderate the relationship between low-control housework tasks and distress, whereas the person-fit literature suggests that it will. The weight of empirical evidence, particularly concerning dual-earner couples, favors the job-stress perspective. For example, in a previous analysis with the first-year data from the current study, the job conditions that were related cross-sectionally to psychological distress were the same for both men and women, and the magnitude of the relationships were not affected by gender (Barnett & Brennan, 1995).

Potential Co-Variates and Moderators

Gender-role ideology. Gender-role ideology is treated both as a co-variate and a moderator. We control

for the effect of gender-role ideology for two reasons: 1) previous research has established a small but significant correlation between gender-role ideology and the division of household labor (Blair & Johnson, 1992); and 2) among employed women, preference for employment, an indicator of gender-role ideology has been related to depression (Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983).

In addition, previous research indicates that gender-role ideology might moderate the relationship between the housework tasks and distress. For example, Cleary and Mechanic (1983) suggest that distress is related to conflict over time in housework tasks not to the absolute amount of time spent in housework is related to distress. Such conflict might arise if the performance of these tasks is counter to one's ideas about appropriate gender-role behavior (Blair & Johnson, 1992; Cleary & Mechanic, 1983; Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). Stated differently, the meaning of doing these tasks may vary among individuals with traditional or non-traditional attitudes toward gender roles (Biernat & Wortman, 1991). Accordingly, gender-role ideology may moderate the relationship between performing low-control housework tasks and distress. There is, however, no directly relevant empirical evidence on this hypothesized interaction.⁴

Further, the impact of gender-role ideology on this relationship may vary with gender. For example, employed women with traditional gender-role attitudes may experience less distress in relation to performing low-control housework tasks than their husbands (Ferree, 1991).

Parental status. Because parental status affects both the amount of housework to be done and distress levels, we include parent status as a control (Cleary & Mechanic, 1983; Pearlin, 1975). In addition, the relationship between low-control housework tasks and distress may depend on parent status and/or the joint effects of parent status and gender. For example, Cowan and Cowan (1988) found that parents' gender-role attitudes and behavior became more traditional after they became parents. Hence, time spent in low-control household tasks may be more closely related to distress among employed men who are fathers compared to their counterparts who are not fathers.

Hours in paid employment. Hours in paid employment is included as a control and as a possible moderator. Because on average men work longer hours for pay than do women and because hours on the job may be related to distress (Leete-Guy & Schor, 1989), time in paid work is entered as a control variable.

In addition, it may be that the relationship between time in low-control housework tasks and distress varies depending on how many hours per week one works for pay. In this sample, the men and women were all employed full-time at the start of the study. Over the two-year study period, however, some subjects decreased and some increased their time on the job. Thus, 17% work less than 35 hours per week, and 34% work more than 45 hours per week.

Obviously, the number of hours spent in market work has an impact on the time available for household tasks, especially for low-control tasks. For example, many low-control tasks have to be done at meal time. For full-time employees, the end of the workday coincides with the need to perform many low-control tasks under time pressure. For part-time employees, in contrast, these same tasks may be performed under less pressure because of their greater time flexibility.

Marital-role quality. Because the quality of one's marital relationship is a significant predictor of psychological distress (Barnett, Brennan, Raudenbush, & Marshall, 1994), and may affect the division of household tasks, we include it as a control variable.

In sum, in this random sample of 255 employed men and women in dual-earner couples, we conceptualized time in housework task in six ways (absolute and proportional time spent in 11 housework tasks; absolute time in low- and high-control housework tasks; and proportional time in low- and high-control housework tasks), and we tested the following three hypotheses relating time in housework tasks to psychological distress:

1. Absolute or proportional time in 11 housework tasks will not be significantly related to psychological distress.

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2. Absolute time in low-control but not in high-control housework tasks will be associated with psychological distress.

3. Proportional time in either low-control or high-control housework tasks will not be associated with psychological distress.

We also estimated the two-way interaction effects of four moderators (i.e., gender, parental status, gender-role ideology, and number of hours in paid employment) as well as two three-way interaction effects (i.e., of gender X gender-role ideology and gender X parental status) on the above relationships.

Method

Sample

The data for these analyses come from the third data collection of a three-wave interview study (over two years) of a random sample of 300 dual-earner couples residing in eastern Massachusetts, in which the men were between the ages of 25-40 at the first data collection (Fall of 1989 - Spring of 1990). The attrition rate across the three waves was 8%. The 255 couples in which both partners were at least part-time employed at T3 constitute the sample for this analysis.

The sample was drawn from the town lists of all residents of two Boston-area towns. These towns were selected because they were socioeconomically diverse and included a large proportion of working women. (In one town, 70.1% of women aged 20-54 were employed in 1980, according to the U.S. Census:1980. In the other, 75.2% of women aged 20-40 were employed in 1980, according to the U.S. Census: 1980.) The participation rate among the eligible couples whom we were able to contact was 68%. (See Barnett, Marshall, Raudenbush, & Brennan, 1993 for a complete description of the sampling procedures.)

Whereas the sample includes respondents with a range of educational attainment, the study sample is better educated than the general population of the two towns from which the sample was drawn (U.S. Census: 1990). Of the sample men, 73% completed a B.A. or more, compared to 58% of men, ages 25-44, in the two towns. Comparable figures for the women are 74% for the sample, and 58% for the population. A higher

refusal rate from working-class respondents, which this data suggest, is not uncommon in large, in-depth research studies.

The two towns that served as the sampling frame for this study are also better educated than the greater Boston area of which they are a part (only 44% of the men ages 25-44, and 42% of the women ages 25-44 in the Boston Greater Metropolitan Statistical Area have completed a B.A.). In spite of these educational differences, the mean family income, for families with husband and wife employed, are similar: \$71, 339 for the two towns, \$73, 548 for the greater Boston area, and \$76,953 for the sample (U.S. Census: 1990). To the extent that the results presented in this paper may be affected by respondent's education or social class, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. The sample is, however, representative of population income levels for two-earner married couple families.

The population of these towns is overwhelmingly White, as is the sample we obtained. The actual racial composition of the sample was: 97% Caucasian, 1% Hispanic, 1% Black, and 1% Native American and Other.

On average, the men in the sample were 37.14 years ($SD = 4.25$), whereas the women were 36.21 ($SD = 4.82$). The men and women, on average, had completed 16 years of schooling, that is, they completed a college degree ($M = 16.37$, $SD = 2.32$ and $M = 16.21$, $SD = 2.07$, for men and women, respectively). However, there was a wide range of educational attainment: among the men, 27.2% had not completed four years of college, whereas 39.6% had some graduate education; among the women, 25.3% had not completed four years of college, compared to 36.6% who had some post-college education.

The couples had been married, on average, 8.28 years ($SD = 5.22$) and 70.9% were parents.

The majority of both men and women were employed in managerial/professional occupations (67.7% of the men and 71.1% of the women). Approximately one-quarter of the women (24.9%) compared to less than twenty percent of the men (17.7%) were employed in technical/sales/administrative support occupations.

Finally, more men than women (14.6% compared to 4.%) were employed in either service/precision production/crafts/repair occupations or as operators or laborers.

Procedures

Subjects were interviewed separately in their homes or offices by trained interviewers. Each interview took about 1.5 hours and covered many aspects of the men's and women's lives, including their experiences in their job and family roles, as well as measures of psychological distress. The interval between interviews was approximately 1 year (12-15 months). Unfortunately, time spent on household tasks was assessed only at the third data collection. Each couple received \$25 for participating in each wave.

Measures

Psychological distress. Psychological distress was assessed by the anxiety and depression subscales of the SCL-90-R, a frequency of symptoms measure (Derogatis, 1975). Subjects indicated, on a 5-point scale (from 0 = not at all, to 4 = extremely), how often in the past week they were bothered by each of 14 symptoms of anxiety and 10 symptoms of depression. The SCL-90-R has high levels of both internal consistency and test-retest reliability. In this sample, coefficient alpha was .80 for the anxiety scale, .85 for the depression scale, and .90 for the combined scale, indicating that the items measure a common underlying construct. These figures are similar to those reported by Derogatis (1983). The decision to combine the scales into a psychological distress score was based on the high alpha for the combined scale, the high correlation ($r = .72$) between the scales, and the similarity in the pattern of correlations between the anxiety and depression scales and the other variables of interest in the study. Satisfactory test-retest correlations (.82 for depression and .80 for anxiety) have also been reported (Derogatis, 1983). The scores were reversed so that high scores reflect low levels of symptoms. The mean for the reversed scale was 49.6 ($SD = 10.22$); the range was 0-53.

Absolute time in 11 housework tasks. Subjects were asked to indicate how much time they spent each week in 11 housework tasks: planning and preparing meals; cleaning up after meals; house cleaning; buying

groceries and household needs; shopping for clothing; doing laundry; repairs around the home, taking out garbage, paying bills, looking after the car, and caring for plants, garden, and yard. Subjects were also asked to report how much time their spouse spent in each of the above 11 tasks. Following Perry-Jenkins and Folk (1994), extreme responses, those beyond three standard deviations, were given missing values for all housework tasks.

Because self-reports of time in housework tasks may be biased, absolute time in each task was operationalized as the average of the time each subject and his/her spouse reported that the subject spent in each task. Total absolute time is, therefore, the sum of these averaged scores for the eleven tasks.

Proportional time in 11 housework tasks. Using these averaged scores, proportional time for each task was calculated as each partner's proportion of total time both partners spent doing each task. Total proportional time is, therefore, the average proportion across the 11 housework tasks.

Absolute time in high-control and low-control housework tasks. The two investigators independently sorted the eleven tasks into high and low control, using the following definitions: High-control tasks can be scheduled to reflect the personal needs of the performer. Low-control tasks need to be done on a schedule independent of the personal needs of the performer. The two raters were in complete agreement. Six tasks were classified as high-control (i.e., looking after the car; taking out the garbage; caring for plants, garden, yard; doing repairs around the house; shopping for clothing; and paying bills).⁵ To assess the internal consistency of this set of 6 items, we computed Cronbach alpha. Results indicated that the alpha was improved when two items were deleted (i.e., shopping for clothing, and paying bills). The alpha for the final four-item high-control housework task scale was .66. Absolute time in high-control tasks was operationalized as the average time spent in these four tasks; proportional time in high-control tasks, as the proportion of the time both partners spent in these tasks that was spent by each partner.

Five tasks were categorized by the investigators as low-control (i.e., planning and preparing meals,

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cleaning up after meals, house cleaning, buying groceries, and doing laundry). Chronbach alpha for this scale was .74, and the alpha was not improved by the deletion of any item. Absolute time in low-control tasks was operationalized as the average time spent in these five tasks; proportional time in low-control tasks, as the proportion of the time spent in these tasks by both partners that was spent by each partner.

Subsequent factor analysis using varimax rotation method validated these findings. Results indicated two factors (high-control and low-control) with eigenvalues greater than 1.

Total time in paid employment. This variable was operationalized as the absolute number of hours per week the subject spends in paid employment in one or more jobs, including commuting time.

Marital quality. Marital quality was measured by a 52-item scale that assessed both the rewarding and the problematic (i.e., "of concern") aspects of the marital relationship. Participants used a 4-point scale (from 1= not at all to 4= extremely) to indicate to what extent, if at all, each of the items was currently rewarding or of concern. For example, subjects were asked, how rewarding was "Enjoying the same activities" and how much of a concern, was "Your partner being critical of you." The reward items were weighted by positive one, the concern items by negative one, and the weighted mean constituted the marital-role quality scale score.

To establish the reliabilities of these scores, Cronbach alphas and test-retest reliability coefficients were computed. Cronbach alphas were computed separately for the men and women: for the marital-reward scale, alphas were .93 for men and women; for the marital-concern scale, the figures were .89 and .90. Test-retest reliability coefficients were calculated for approximately 10% of the sample ($n = 64$; 32 men and 32 women) who were reinterviewed within three months of their initial interview. For marital-rewards, the figures were .91 and .84; and for marital-concerns, .95 and .81.

Gender-role ideology. Gender-role ideology was assessed with a 12-item scale based on Mason, Denison, & Schact (1975). Subjects were asked to respond on a 4-point scale (from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree) to such items as: "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works," and "A

working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work." Each person received an average per-item score. Scores were reversed on 4 items so that low scores indicated non-traditional attitudes and high scores reflected traditional attitudes. Test-retest reliability coefficients were calculated for approximately 10% of the sample ($n = 64$; 32 men and 32 women) who were reinterviewed within three months of their initial interview. The test-retest correlation coefficient was .70 for the total retest sample.

Parental status. A dummy variable was created for parental status (0 = no children living in the home, 1 = one or more children living in the home).

Socioeconomic status. SES may be related both to the number of hours spent in housework and to distress (Thoits, 1982). We use three SES indicators: occupational prestige, education and household income.

Occupational prestige. We used the Bose Index (1985) to code occupational prestige. This index uses the 1980 Census Three-Digit Occupation Code and assigns prestige values separately for each gender.

Education. This variable is the number of years of education that each participant completed.

Household income. This variable reflects the absolute salaries of both partners plus their unearned income, if any. Preliminary analyses indicated that household income was collinear with number of children living in the home. To reduce this problem, we calculated per capita income by dividing household income by the number of children in the home plus two. Because the distribution of this variable is highly skewed, we use the natural log per capita income.

Results

Absolute and Proportional Time in Housework Tasks

Women in dual-earner couples spend significantly more time per week doing housework tasks than do their husbands ($M = 26.94$ hours, $SD = 9.44$, $M = 21.11$ hours, $SD = 8.94$); whereas their husbands spend significantly more time in paid work than do their wives ($M = 48.49$ hours, $SD = 9.58$; $M = 41.99$ hours, SD

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= 8.43). (See Table 1.) When we consider the total number of hours in paid work and in housework tasks, men in dual-earner couples spend significantly more time per week than do their wives ($\underline{M} = 69.43$, $\underline{SD} = 12.47$, $\underline{M} = 67.48$, $\underline{SD} = 11.19$), although the absolute difference of 2 hours is relatively small compared to the standard deviations for the two composite time variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

Women in full-time employed dual-earner couples spend proportionally more time in household tasks than do their husbands ($\underline{M} = .61$, $\underline{SD} = .14$, $\underline{M} = .39$, $\underline{SD} = .12$), and this difference is significant ($p < .001$).

Absolute Time in High-Control and Low-Control Tasks

On average, men in dual-earner couples spend significantly more time per week doing high-control household tasks than do their wives ($\underline{M} = 7.62$, $\underline{SD} = 5.41$; $\underline{M} = 2.99$; $\underline{SD} = 2.69$; for men and women, respectively). Results of a paired- t test indicated that this 4.63 hour per week difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Not surprisingly, women in dual-earner couples spent significantly more time per week than their husbands doing low-control tasks ($\underline{M} = 20.38$ hours, $\underline{SD} = 9.15$; $\underline{M} = 11.89$; $\underline{SD} = 6.71$; for women and men, respectively). Results of a paired- t test indicated that this 8.49 hours per week difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Proportional Time in High-Control/Low-Control Tasks

A similar result was obtained using the proportional time in high-control and low-control tasks as the measurement. On average, men in dual-earner couples do proportionally more high-control household tasks per week than do their wives ($\underline{M} = 0.68$, $\underline{SD} = 0.21$; $\underline{M} = 0.32$, $\underline{SD} = 0.21$; for men and women, respectively). Results of a paired- t test indicated that this proportional difference of 0.36 was statistically significant (p

<.001).

Conversely, women in dual-earner couples do proportionally more low-control household tasks per week than do their husbands ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 0.16$; $M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.16$; for women and men, respectively). Results of a paired- t test indicated that this proportional differences of 0.38 was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Correlations

For employed married women, but not for employed married men, the more hours they spend in paid work, the fewer hours they spend in housework tasks ($r = -.26$, $p < .001$, $r = -.02$, ns , for women and men, respectively). (See Table 2.) In addition, among married employed women, the more hours they spend in paid work, the fewer hours they spend in low-control tasks ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$). Although this relationship was in the same same direction, it did not reach conventional levels of significance for men ($r = -.16$, ns). Finally, the more hours spent in paid work, the lower was the proportion of low-control tasks women and men did ($-.29$, $p < .001$; $r = -.24$, $p < .001$, for women and men, respectively). Of note, the relationship between hours in paid employment and either absolute or proportional time in high-control tasks, was not statistically significant for men or women. Thus, it appears, that time on the job interferes more with time spent in low-control than time spent in high-control housework tasks.

Insert Table 2 about here

H1: Time in 11 Housework Tasks Will not be Significantly Related to Psychological Distress

A regression model was estimated with absolute and proportional hours in 11 housework tasks as the predictor and controls for total number of hours in paid employment, age, education, occupational prestige, household income, gender-role ideology, marital quality, parent status and gender. Although the models were

significant, the betas for absolute and proportional hours were not. (The data are not shown.) This finding supports Hypothesis 1. Thus, among dual-earner couples, absolute and proportional time per week spent in 11 housework tasks was unrelated to reports of psychological distress.

H2: Absolute Time in Low-Control but not High-Control Housework Tasks Will Be Related to Psychological Distress

A regression model was estimated with hours per week in high-control and low-control housework tasks as the predictors and controls for age, occupational prestige, education, household income, marital quality, parent status, number of hours in paid employment, gender-role ideology, and gender (Table 3). The model was significant [$F(508, 11) = 11.19, p < .001, R^2 = .20$]. Moreover, hours in low-control, but not high-control, tasks were significantly related to psychological distress ($B = .27, p < .05$). This finding supports Hypothesis 2.

Insert Table 3 about here

Two additional findings from Table 3 are of interest. First, although not significant, the regression coefficient for time spent in high-control housework tasks was negative ($B = -.15$); among men and women in dual-earner couples there is a tendency those for who spend more time in high-control tasks to report lower levels of psychological distress. Second, when hours in high-control and low-control housework tasks are controlled, the the main effect of gender is not significant. Women in dual-earner couples do not report higher levels of psychological distress than their husbands after taking into account time spent in low- and high-control housework tasks.

Interaction-effects regression models. We estimated the moderating effects of gender, gender-role ideology, hours in paid employment, and parent status on the relationship between time in low-control

housework tasks and psychological distress by adding four two-way interaction terms, of the form gender X low-control housework tasks, to the main effects regression model. None of the two-way interaction terms was significant (data not shown). Thus, time in low-control tasks was associated with psychological distress equally for men and women, for parents or not parents, for those participants with traditional or non-traditional gender-role ideology, and for those working for pay more or fewer hours per week.

Finally, we estimated the joint interaction effect of gender and both parental status and gender-role ideology. To this end we added separately to the above interaction-effects model, two three-way interaction terms (i.e., gender X gender-role ideology and gender X parent status). Neither three-way interaction term was significant. Accordingly, time in low-control tasks was associated with distress equally for men and women in dual-earner couples with traditional or non-traditional gender-role ideology, and for parents and non-parents regardless of gender.

H3: Proportional Time in Low-Control and High-Control Housework Tasks Will Not Be Related to Psychological Distress

A regression model was estimated with proportional time per week in high-control and low-control housework tasks as the predictors and controls for age, occupational prestige, education, household income, marital quality, parent status, number of hours in paid employment, gender-role ideology, and gender (Table 4). The model was significant [$F(11, 497) = 10.448, p < .001, R^2 = .19$], but the betas for the two predictors were not. Thus, neither proportional time in low- or in high-control household tasks was significantly related to psychological distress, supporting Hypothesis 3.

Insert Table 4 about here

We then estimated the moderating effect of gender, gender-role ideology, hours in paid employment,

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and parent status, on the relationship between proportional time in low-control tasks and psychological distress. We added to the model in Table 4 four two-way interaction terms of the form gender X proportional time low-control housework tasks. None of the two-way interaction terms was significant.

In addition, we added separately to the above interaction-effects models, two three-way interaction terms (i.e., gender X gender-role ideology and gender X parent status). Neither three-way interaction term was significant.

Thus, in dual-earner couples, proportional time in low- and high-control housework tasks was not significantly related to distress for men or women, for parents or not parents, for those participants with traditional or non-traditional gender-role ideology, and for those working for pay more or fewer hours per week.

Discussion and Conclusions

The main findings of this study of a random sample of white, primarily middle-class, employed men and women in dual-earner couples are: 1) absolute time spent in low-control housework tasks, but not total time in 11 housework tasks or absolute time in high-control housework tasks, was related to psychological distress; and 2) the magnitude of this relationship was not affected by gender, gender-role ideology, parent status, or number of hours in paid employment. Thus, housework is a complex construct; it consists of different types of tasks, only some of which are related to distress. Among employed men and women in dual-earner couples, absolute time spent in such low-control tasks as meal preparation, cleaning up after meals, buying groceries, and house cleaning is associated with psychological distress, whereas time spent in such tasks as looking after the car and making repairs to the house is not.

Importantly, proportional time in housework tasks (i.e., in all 11 tasks or in either low- or high-control tasks) was not significantly related to psychological distress. Proportional measures, although important for

studies of such constructs as perceived fairness, equity, and conflict, mask differences in absolute time spent and may thus be less desirable for studies of the correlates of psychological distress.

Many tasks previously labelled as "female" bear important resemblance to tasks described as low control in the job stress-illness literature (Sauter, Hurrell, & Cooper, 1990). Job control refers to the degree to which the employee can exercise discretion over the nature of the job tasks and their timing. In dual-earner households, there is a considerable likelihood that female tasks are performed under pressure of time and urgency, e.g., the evening meal has to be prepared and cleaned up after work, regardless of how tired one is; it cannot be postponed until the weekend. In contrast, the timing of male tasks can more easily be adjusted; these tasks, therefore, permit high control.

Because men perform some "female" housework tasks and women perform some "male" housework tasks and because these tasks resemble tasks that vary in control, we propose to replace the female/male distinction and refer instead to high-control and low-control housework tasks. The finding that low-control tasks are associated with distress, whereas high-control tasks are not, is commensurate with a large body of literature indicating the pivotal role of job control in the job stress-illness relationship. Thus, it appears that housework can be well described as a complex job consisting of at least two different types of tasks: high-control tasks which are not associated with distress, and low-control tasks which are.

Though there was no gender difference in the relationship between time spent in low-control tasks and psychological distress, it is important to remember that employed married women in dual-earner couples spend significantly more time doing such tasks than do their husbands. Conversely, time spent in high-control tasks was not significantly related to distress, and men spend significantly more time in these tasks than do women. These findings help explain the otherwise anomalous previous finding that for employed men time spent in housework was unrelated to depression (Ross et al, 1983), and was positively related to psychological well-being, whereas for employed women time spent in housework was negatively related to well-being (Pleck,

1985). It appears that the important predictor of distress is the time spent in low-control tasks, not the total time in housework tasks nor the time in high-control housework tasks.

It is also important to remember that time in paid work is associated with reduced time in low-control tasks and men spend more time in paid work than do women. Hence, these findings shed light on the seemingly inconsistent previous findings that time in paid work "makes people feel under pressure" (Pleck 1985, p. 108), and time in paid work "has the most significant positive effect" on men's mental-health indicators (Pleck, 1985, p. 108). Although employees may feel rushed when they are working long hours, they enjoy the mental-health benefit of relief from low-control tasks at home. For men, who do relatively few low-control tasks, any reduction associated with long hours on the job may account for the greater mental-health benefit they enjoy compared to their wives when hours on the job are long. In addition, although women work fewer over time hours and are less likely to work on weekends or to travel out of town for their jobs than are men, to the extent that they engage in extended work time, they report fewer psychological symptoms (Hughes & Galinsky, 1994).

Interestingly, the relationship between low-control tasks and psychological distress did not vary by gender-role ideology, parent status, or number of hours in paid employment. Whereas these three variables may affect the level of low-control housework tasks that are done (Deutsch, Lussier, & Servis, 1994), they do not affect the relationship between time spent in these tasks and distress. In other words, the more time employed dual-earners spend in low-control tasks, the higher their distress regardless of whether they hold traditional or non-traditional gender-role attitudes, whether they are parents or not, or whether they work more or fewer hours per week.

Furthermore, these results suggest a plausible explanation for the oft-reported finding that part-time employment for women is not associated with lower distress than full-time employment (Wethington & Kessler, 1989). Previous explanations have focused on the loss of salary, benefits, challenge, companionship,

and competitive advantage experienced by part-time workers. In addition, it is also possible that women who are employed less than full-time do more low-control housework tasks than do their full-time employed counterparts. We were able to conduct a post hoc test of this hypothesis. In this sample, there were 78 women who were employed less than full-time (i.e., they worked less than 35 hours). We compared the part-time employed women to the full-time employed women with respect to the number of hours spent in low-control and high-control housework tasks. Interestingly, compared to full-time employed women, part-time employed women perform significantly more low-control tasks but not more high-control tasks. More specifically, part-time employed women spent 2.37 hours per week more than full-time employed women in low-control housework tasks, and this difference was significant ($p < .01$). Thus, their higher rate of low-control tasks might increase their distress, thereby offsetting any mental-health gains their increased flexibility might confer. There is, of course, no way to discern whether they perform more household tasks because they are employed part time or whether they are employed part-time because they perform more household tasks.

Our results are consistent with others indicating that women spend disproportionately more time in housework tasks than their husbands. When time in paid work is taken into account, however, the gender difference disappears. We find no evidence of a second shift. Among full-time employed white middle-class couples, both husbands and wives are spending roughly 70 hours per week in a combination of paid work and unpaid housework.

Finally, it is important to note that when time in paid work and time in low-control housework tasks was controlled, employed married women did not report higher levels of distress than did their husbands. It appears that the previously reported excess of distress reported by employed married women compared to their husbands was due not to their excess hours in total paid and unpaid housework tasks, but to greater hours in low-control housework tasks. This finding supports and extends the growing consensus that women's and men's differential involvement in social roles accounts for the gender gap in mental health outcomes (Bird &

Fremont, 1994).

It is important to remember that most of the men and women in this analysis were employed full-time (indeed, all were employed full-time at the start of the study, two years before the data for this analysis were collected) and were in dual-earner couples. They may differ from men and women in other family configurations and future research will, therefore, have to establish the generalizability of these findings.

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Footnotes

1. Among couples who vary widely in age, this relationship is not found (Brines, 1994). Cohort differences in the meaning of housework may account for this difference.
2. These figures were computed from those given in Table 3 (p.147). We multiplied the dialy hours in paid work by 5 and the daily hours in homechores and errands by 7 and added the two numbers together. We weighted the sums equally, added these combined figures across the three life-cycle groups, and divided by three.
3. The figure for paid work includes overtime and commuting time.
4. In a study of the relationship between the division of household labor and wives' perception of fairness in the division labor, Blair and Johnson (1992) found no evidence of an interaction effect of gender-role ideology.
5. The original list of household tasks was not generated to assess high- and low-control tasks, and therefore the number of items reflecting these two constructs is relatively low.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations and Paired T-tests

Variable	<u>Women</u>		<u>Men</u>	
	M	SD	M	SD
Total time in paid work	41.99	8.43	48.49	9.58***
Absolute time in household tasks ^a	26.94	9.44	21.11	8.94***
Proportional time in household tasks ^a	0.61	0.14	0.39	0.14***
Absolute time in low control tasks	20.38	9.15	11.89	6.71***
Absolute time in high control tasks	2.99	2.69	7.62	5.41***
Proportional time in low control tasks ^b	0.69	0.16	0.31	0.16***
Proportional time in high control tasks	0.32	0.21	0.68	0.21***
Total hours in paid and unpaid tasks	67.48	11.19	69.43	12.47***

Note: N = 520 unless otherwise noted. ^a N = 510. ^b N = 510.

*** p < .001.

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Table 2

Intercorrelations Between Predictors

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Hours in paid work		-.04	-.21***	.04	-.16	.04	-.24***
2. Absolute time in 11 household tasks	-.26***		.38***	.76***	.72***	.11	.43***
3. Proportional time in 11 household tasks	-.27***	.58***		0.0	-.15*	.28***	.88***
4. Absolute time in high-control tasks	-.01	.43***	-.15*		.46***	-.10	-.03
5. Absolute time in low-control tasks*	-.31***	.94***	.13*	.28***		-.03	-.11
6. Proportional time in high control tasks	.09	.22***	.40***	.06	.09		-.01
7. Proportional time in low control tasks	-.29***	.49***	.89***	.02	.06	.14*	

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Table 3

Regression of Psychological Distress on Absolute Time in High-Control and Low-Control Household Tasks

Predictor	b	B	SE
Age	.02	.01	.11
Occupational prestige ^a	-.02	-.03	.04
Education ^b	.37	.07	.29
Household income	1.42	.07	1.19
Hours in paid work	-.07*	-.09	.04
Marital quality	-5.16***	-.39	.55
Gender-role ideology	4.31**	.11	1.45
Parental status	-2.83	-.11	1.28
Gender	.64	.03	1.02
Absolute hours in high-control tasks	-.15	-.04	.18
Absolute hours in low- control tasks	.27**	.13	.10

$R^2 = 0.20$

Note: $N = 520$.

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Table 4

Regression of Psychological Distress on Proportional Hours in High-Control and Low-Control Household Tasks

Predictor	b	B	SE
Age	.03	.01	.11
Occupational prestige ^a	-.02	-.03	.04
Education ^b	.37	.07	.29
Household income	.78	.04	1.18
Hours in paid work	-.08*	-.10	.04
Marital quality	-5.30***	-.40	.56
Gender-role ideology	4.42**	.13	1.48
Parental status	-2.36	-.09	1.28
Gender	1.02	.04	1.64
Proportional hours in high-control tasks	-.59	-.01	2.36
Proportional hours in low-control tasks	-2.47	-.05	3.13

Note: $N = 520$. $R^2 = 0.19$. ^a Bose Index (Bose, 1985).

^b Years of schooling. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.