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# To Marry or Not to Marry

## Marital Status and the Household Division of Labor

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Data from an Australian national survey (1996 to 1997) are used to examine domestic labor patterns among de facto and married men and women. The results show that women spend more time on housework and do a greater proportion of housework than men. However, the patterns are most traditional among married men and women. Women in de facto relationships spend less time doing housework and do a smaller proportion of indoor activities than married women. Men in de facto relationships do a larger proportion of indoor activities and a lower proportion of outdoor tasks than married men. The data also show that couples who have cohabited prior to marriage have more egalitarian divisions of labor than those who have not cohabited prior to marriage. This article concludes by arguing that the incompleteness of the de facto relationship provides a period of relative freedom in which to negotiate more equal roles.

**Keywords:** *cohabitation; domestic labor; marriage; gender*

This article compares the division of domestic labor between couples in de facto and marital relationships. Most research on the domestic division of labor has concentrated on married couples, looking at the factors that promote or hinder egalitarian allocations of household labor between husbands and wives. But an increasing number of studies have begun to examine the allocation of housework across households with differing living arrangements, for example, among de facto and remarried couples (Batalova & Cohen, 2002; Gupta, 1999; Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; South & Spitze, 1994; Sullivan, 1997). Part of the impetus underlying these studies is the trend toward increasingly diverse forms of family living arrangements in which living alone, de facto coupling, divorce, and remarriage are increasingly common. For example, Australia, similar to many other advanced countries, has experienced a huge growth in the percentage of couples choosing to cohabit with their partner in a de facto

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relationship rather than marry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998; Glezer, 1997). In Australia, "of those who married in 1976, almost 16 percent had cohabited prior to marriage. By 1992 this proportion had increased to 56 percent" (De Vaus & Wolcott, 1997, p. 17). Similar figures have been reported for the United States and Europe (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Kiernan, 2000). Raley (2000) has reported that among American women born between 1950 and 1954 who had formed a union by age 25, 18% had cohabited in a de facto relationship, compared to 38% for those born between 1965 and 1969.

Research has consistently shown that wives do more domestic labor than their husbands, although there is some evidence that the gender gap in household labor may be declining with time (Baxter, 1993; Berk, 1985; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Brines, 1994; Shelton, 1992). We know less about what happens within de facto couple households, although previous research has indicated that de facto couples have less traditional patterns of domestic labor than married couples do (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Gupta, 1999; Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994; Stafford, Backman, & Dibona, 1977). These results have been interpreted in terms of the gender perspective that argues that housework is not simply about doing household tasks but involves the symbolic enactment of gender within marriage (Berk, 1985; South & Spitze, 1994).

The current article reexamines housework arrangements among de facto and married couples but also goes beyond most earlier studies by examining whether housework patterns developed within a de facto relationship endure after marriage. This is important because a significant proportion of de facto cohabiters move on to marriage at a later date. Although the percentage of people who cohabit in a de facto relationship at some stage of their lives has increased dramatically, the proportion of couples in de facto relationships at any given time is relatively small (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; De Vaus & Wolcott, 1997; Glezer, 1997). For example, in Australia in 1996, de facto couples composed only about 10% of all couples (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). Some of these cohabitation unions will dissolve, but many others will move on to legal marriage. Bumpass and Lu (2000) report for the United States that about half of de facto unions result in marriage. This suggests that de facto relationships should be seen as a stage in the courtship process or as a trial marriage, with many people then choosing to marry (Glezer, 1997). In other words, for many couples, de facto cohabitation appears to be an alternative at a particular stage in the life course rather than a long-term rejection of marriage.

Earlier research has suggested that the domestic division of labor may be shaped by the experience of previous relationships (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; South & Spitze, 1994; Sullivan, 1997; Thompson, 1991). But most research to date has concentrated on the experience of remarriage, arguing that couples that experienced conflict over housework or unfair divisions of labor in a previous marriage will seek more equitable and congenial arrangements with their new partner. But as South and Spitze (1994, p. 345) point out, if people do increasingly move through transitions during their lives, from never married to de facto to married, divorced, and remarried, it is important to examine the time men and women spend doing housework in each of these living arrangements. In this article, therefore, I shift the focus to examine the impact of a previous period of de facto cohabitation.

### EXPLAINING HOUSEHOLD LABOR

Two main kinds of models have emerged to explain the allocation of household labor. On one hand is the economic exchange model that argues that women perform housework in exchange for economic support (Brines, 1994; Walby, 1986). Under this model, the allocation of labor in the household is seen as fundamentally economic and rational. Men provide income for the household, and in exchange, women perform unpaid domestic labor. The expectation is that as women's time in paid labor increases and as their contribution to the household income increases, the division of labor in the home will become more equal. In other words, child care and housework are performed in a rational and efficient manner in which the person with the most time, and the least economic resources, performs the most domestic labor.

Although some support has been found for this model (Baxter, 1992; Coverman, 1985; Pleck, 1985; Ross, 1987), the results are less than clear cut. There is evidence that women's time in paid labor affects the amount of time that women spend on domestic labor, with longer hours in paid employment leading to a reduction in women's time on domestic work (Baxter, 1992). But there is contradictory evidence of the relationship between paid and unpaid work for men. Some research has found no relationship between paid and unpaid work for men (Ross, 1987), and some has found that increased hours of paid work lead to decreased hours of unpaid work for men (Coverman, 1985; Western & Baxter, 2001), whereas others have suggested that reduced time in paid work leads to

a decrease in men's time on domestic work. There is more consistent evidence of a relationship between relative economic contribution to the household and level of involvement in domestic labor. The research suggests that the smaller the gap between husband's and wife's economic contribution to the household, the more equal the domestic division of labor (Baxter, 1993; Ross, 1987).

Although the logic of the economic exchange model is gender neutral, the alternative model for understanding the allocation of household labor focuses precisely on the symbolic importance of gender for the organization of housework (Berk, 1985; Ferree, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The gender display model points to the symbolic construction of housework as women's work and as a display of women's love for her family and subordination to her husband (Berk, 1985; Ferree, 1990). Berk (1985, p. 201) applied this model to housework, arguing that the current arrangements for the organization of domestic labor support two production processes: household goods and services and, at the same time, gender. She argued that the marital household is a gender factory where, in addition to accomplishing tasks, housework produces gender through the everyday enactment of dominance, submission, and other behaviors symbolically linked to gender. Doing housework, then, is an important component of doing gender and helps to explain why gender far outweighs other factors in explaining who does housework, why housework is not allocated efficiently or rationally according to who has the most time, and why men and women are likely to see the division of labor as fair, even though it is objectively very unequally distributed (Ferree, 1990, pp. 876-877).

### **HOUSEWORK IN DE FACTO AND MARRIED HOUSEHOLDS**

Research on the domestic division of labor has tended to find that housework arrangements are more egalitarian in de facto couple households than in married couple households (Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994). One reason advanced in the literature to explain differences in housework patterns across marital statuses concerns the concept of incomplete institutionalization (Cherlin, 1978). Cherlin (1978) suggested that remarried and stepfamilies may be under greater stress than other families because "they lack normative prescriptions for role performance, institutionalized procedures to handle problems, and easily accessible social support" (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992, p. 217). On the other hand,

incomplete institutionalization also leaves open the possibility of negotiating more equal relationships precisely because of the lack of rules prescribing the conduct of behavior in remarriages (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; Sullivan, 1997). The same explanation might be applied to the situation in de facto relationships. De facto relationships are subject to some but not all of the institutional rules surrounding legal marriages. The incompleteness of these rules may well leave space for de facto couples to negotiate more egalitarian relationships than is the case in conventional marriages.

Thus, to the extent that de facto couples reject marriage as an institution, it may be that they will also explicitly reject the roles of breadwinner and housewife that go along with traditional marriage. Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite's (1995) work would support this view. They find that couples who choose to cohabit in a de facto union tend to be those who find marital roles constraining and who are looking for some flexibility and freedom in their relationships. Of course, de facto couples are not a homogenous group; they may include couples who view cohabitation as a forerunner to marriage, as well as those who have rejected marriage and plan to permanently cohabit in a de facto relationship. But either way, they are likely to identify less with homemaking and breadwinning roles, either because they have explicitly rejected those roles or because they have not yet reached a point in their relationship where they are ready to define themselves as husband and wife.

This approach is also supported by the recent research of Brines and Joyner (1999). In examining the principles that lead to cohesion and stability in married and de facto relationships, they argue that the equality principle is the main element of cohesion for de facto relationships compared to married relationships where principles of specialization are most important.

Cohabiting couples are prone to follow the equality principle because of the conditions they confront: high uncertainty, an unspecified time horizon, and the absence of a reliably enforceable contract. These conditions grant couples a certain freedom to experiment with organizational forms that are less responsive to external norms or contractual obligations and more responsive to the needs of each partner. (Brines & Joyner, 1999, p. 351)

It follows from this argument that if principles of equality are the cohesive elements that bind de facto couples together, as suggested by Brines and Joyner (1999), these principles may also provide the space to negotiate a more equal division of labor. This approach is completely consistent with

the incomplete institutionalization argument suggesting that the lack of clear cultural guidelines for the organization of de facto relationships provides a degree of freedom for the development of alternative ways of organizing domestic labor.

Additionally, elements of both the economic exchange and the gender model have been incorporated into studies focusing on housework patterns across marital status. Some studies have argued that the production of gender is likely to be more pronounced in married couple households than in de facto couple households (Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994). Rather than

producing only gender, differences in the way that husbands and wives divide their time between paid labor and household labor reflect the production of the particular, and gendered, roles of "wife" and "husband". As such, the accomplishment of gender may be different for wives and husbands than unmarried cohabitators. (Shelton & John, 1993, p. 403)

South and Spitze (1994) also argue that

if heterosexual couples indeed produce gender through performing housework, we would expect women in married-couple households to spend more time doing housework than women in any other living situation; we would expect men's time spent doing housework to be lower in married-couple households than in other household types. (p. 330)

Alternatively, a pattern across households of more or less constant gender difference would cast doubt on the gender perspective (South & Spitze, 1994, p. 330). In other words, the accomplishment of gender is situation specific and is likely to be more pronounced within married couple households than within de facto couple households.

At the same time, de facto and married couples are likely to differ on certain key characteristics relating to the economic exchange model. For example, women in de facto relationships have been found to spend more time in paid work per week and to contribute more to the household income than married women (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; Shelton & John, 1993). This is likely in part because of the fact that de facto couples are less likely to have children than married couples are but may also be because of differing orientations to paid work among women who choose to cohabit rather than marry. Thus, in terms of the economic exchange model, women in de facto couples are likely to be less dependent on their partners than married women are and, hence, to have reduced responsibility for domestic labor compared to married women.

In sum then, the incomplete institutionalization model, the gender display model, and the economic exchange model would all lead us to hypothesize that the domestic division of labor will be more egalitarian among de facto couples than among married couples.

### THE IMPACT OF PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

A number of studies have investigated the impact of previous marital relationships on the domestic division of labor in current marriages (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; Sullivan, 1997). Underlying the research is the notion that couples compare their current situation to a previous relationship as a means of justifying current arrangements or alternatively negotiating for a different kind of relationship. The idea of a comparison referent stems from the work of Thompson (1991), who argued that women's sense of entitlement in terms of domestic work is based on comparisons with people other than their husbands. For example, women may compare their domestic load with that of their mothers or female friends. Hence, women may be more likely to perceive their current arrangements as fair and equitable than if they compared themselves with their husbands. South and Spitze (1994) take this further, suggesting that "spouses may compare themselves to their own past or projected experiences in another marital status, or even to others who are not currently married" (p. 344).

This hypothesis has been explicitly tested by Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane (1992) and Sullivan (1997). Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane used the National Survey of Families and Households in the United States to compare housework patterns between first married couples and remarried couples. They found that husbands in remarried households were significantly "more likely to participate in mundane housework than their first-married counterparts" (p. 229), although the amount of time spent on housework by husbands and wives did not vary across family type (Pyke & Coltrane, 1996). They use Cherlin's (1978) incomplete institutionalization hypothesis to explain their findings, arguing that the lack of prescribed roles and models in remarriages and stepfamilies might have positive impacts by allowing for more experimentation and bargaining over housework allocation.

Sullivan (1997), using data from the British Household Panel Study, produces similar findings. She finds that the proportion of time that the partners of women in their second-plus partnerships spend on housework is greater than the proportion of time spent by partners of women in their first partnership. Similar to Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane (1992), she inter-



prets these results in light of the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis, arguing that the “explanation is related to issues of interaction involved in the negotiation of housework responsibilities within new partnerships” (Sullivan, 1997, p. 10). Furthermore, she suggests that men who have experienced conflict within previous relationships over the domestic division of labor will be more likely to adopt less conflictual habits in their new marriage, whereas women who have experienced unequal divisions of labor in earlier relationships will be likely to seek new partners who are more involved in domestic labor.

However, when investigating the impact of previous relationships on current domestic labor arrangements, Sullivan (1997) does not distinguish between couples who have been previously married from those who have previously cohabited in a *de facto* relationship. Her justification for this is that she is primarily concerned with “live-together relationships within which negotiations and issues of equity surrounding housework would apply” (p. 3). However, I would argue that it is important to distinguish between these two groups because, as Sullivan notes, the issue is complicated by the fact that *de facto* couples do appear to have more egalitarian relationships than married couples do.

Gupta (1999) has also examined the impact of transitions in marital status on changes in men’s time on housework. This is one of only two previous studies that have examined the impact of the transition from *de facto* cohabitation to marriage on the domestic division of labor. Using two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households in 1987 to 1988 and 1992 to 1993, he finds that men substantially decrease their housework hours when they enter coresidential unions, whereas women substantially increase their housework hours when they enter unions. Furthermore, he finds that never-married men decrease their housework time by the same amount when they cohabit in a *de facto* relationship and when they marry, whereas women increase their housework by the same amount when they cohabit in a *de facto* relationship and when they marry, suggesting that “entry into a coresidential union is of greater consequence than the form of that union” (p. 710). Finally, he finds no differences for either men’s or women’s housework time when they move from *de facto* cohabitation to marriage.

On the other hand, Batalova and Cohen (2002), using data from 22 countries in the International Social Survey Programme, find that couples’ premarital cohabitation experience contributes to greater equality in housework sharing. They suggest that this is consistent with the view that “former cohabiters bring more egalitarian expectations and experiences to their subsequent marriages” (p. 753).

In the current article, I investigate the impact of de facto cohabitation on the domestic division of labor among married couples. Using this earlier work as a starting point, I argue that it is important not only to compare the domestic division of labor among currently cohabiting and currently married couples but also to examine the impact of a previous period of cohabitation on subsequent arrangements after marriage. Although Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane (1992) focus on the impact of remarriage and Sullivan (1997) and Gupta (1999) on the impact of previous partnerships (de facto and married), similar to Batalova and Cohen (2002), I focus here on the impact of a previous period of de facto cohabitation on the domestic division of labor within marriage. If the de facto cohabiting experience is a positive experience characterized by more egalitarian divisions of domestic labor than in marriage, we might expect to find that some of this experience is carried over into the marital relationship. On the other hand, married couples who have not lived together prior to marriage and who have thus not experienced a time of incomplete institutionalization in which to negotiate more equitable roles may adopt more traditional arrangements. Similarly, if married couples have a previous period of de facto cohabitation as a *comparison referent*, to use Thompson's (1991) term, then it may be that they will be more likely to negotiate a more equitable arrangement than if they did not have a period of de facto cohabitation as a comparison referent.

In the following analyses, then, I distinguish between three groups: currently cohabiting respondents in a de facto relationship, currently married respondents who have cohabited in a de facto relationship prior to marriage but not necessarily with their current spouse, and currently married respondents who have not cohabited in a de facto relationship.

### DATA, VARIABLES, AND STRATEGY

The data used in this article come from a 1996-1997 national Australian survey, including all states and territories, titled "Negotiating the Lifecourse: Gender, Mobility and Career Trajectories." The sample comprised 2,231 respondents between the ages of 18 and 54, selected from the electronic white pages. Only one individual was interviewed in each household. This person was randomly selected from all 18- to 54-year-olds in the household as the person with the most recent birthday. If the selected respondent was married or in a de facto relationship, a wide range of information about the partner was provided by proxy by the respon-

dent. The data were collected by means of a computer assisted telephone interview, with a response rate of 55%.

The dependent variables in these analyses are a set of measures of the domestic division of labor—two relating to child care and five concerning housework activities. In both cases, I distinguish between the proportionate contribution of husbands and wives to particular activities, in addition to the amount of time spent doing them. This is important because some activities require very little time to complete, whereas others are more time consuming. Often, the tasks undertaken by men, for example, taking out the garbage and mowing the lawn, are tasks that are undertaken only once a week or less, whereas the tasks routinely completed by women, such as cooking and cleaning up after meals, tend to be daily activities and often more time consuming. It is possible, therefore, to have an equal division of labor, where both husband and wife undertake 50% of the domestic work but where women spend considerably more time than men on domestic labor.

The child care tasks were helping with homework, listening to problems, taking children to activities and appointments, playing with them, bathing and dressing, and getting children to bed. The response categories were *I do most*, *I do more*, *we share this equally*, *my partner does more*, and *my partner does most*. Reliability analyses of these items showed that they could be combined into a single scale with an alpha score of .82. The scale was constructed by coding the responses to percentages, as shown below, and then taking the mean of valid scores for each respondent to create a scale ranging from 0% to 100%, reflecting the relative contribution of each spouse. For example, a respondent who reported doing most of a particular task was coded as 100, indicating that they take full responsibility for this task, whereas a respondent who reported that their partner had most responsibility for a task was coded as 0.

I do most = 100%  
 I do more = 75%  
 We share this equally = 50%  
 My partner does more = 25%  
 My partner does most = 0%

Respondents were also asked about a range of housework tasks. As with the child care tasks, the responses to these questions were coded from 0 to 100, indicating the relative contribution of husbands and wives to housework. To distinguish between different kinds of household tasks, two housework scales were constructed. Indoor tasks combines those

items that are conventional female chores: doing the dishes, preparing breakfast, preparing the evening meal, cleaning and vacuuming, doing the laundry, ironing, cleaning the bathroom and toilet, shopping, and keeping in touch with relatives. Reliability analyses of these items produced an alpha score of .92. Outdoor tasks is based on items considered to be conventional male tasks: repairing things around the house, taking out rubbish, mowing the lawn, and driving the car ( $\alpha = .81$ ). In each case, the scale was constructed by taking the mean of valid responses for each respondent.

Respondents were also asked how much time was spent on child care and housework. Respondents were asked to indicate how many hours they spent on each activity in an average week. For child care, the question asked about child care as a whole, whereas for housework, the question specified hours per week on three main activities: (a) preparing meals and doing dishes, (b) grocery shopping, and (c) other housework, including laundry, vacuuming, and cleaning.

I construct two measures of marital status. The first measure is a dichotomous variable that distinguishes between those who are currently cohabiting in a de facto relationship ( $N = 179$ ) and those who are currently legally married ( $N = 1,231$ ). A de facto relationship is defined as living together in an intimate relationship for at least 3 months. I use this measure to first investigate differences in housework patterns between de facto and married couples. In the second stage of the analyses, I distinguish between married couples who cohabited prior to marriage and those who did not cohabit prior to marriage. The aim here is to examine the impact of de facto cohabitation on housework patterns after marriage. In these analyses, I subdivide the married group into those who have cohabited for a period of at least 3 months prior to marriage ( $N = 607$ ) and those who have not cohabited prior to marriage ( $N = 621$ ). Note that I have not confined the sample to those who cohabited with their current spouse but include those who have experienced de facto cohabitation for at least 3 months with any partner.

The other independent variables included in the analyses measure factors found in previous research to be significantly related to the domestic division of labor or are included as controls for key sociodemographic differences between de facto and married couples that might influence the domestic division of labor.

The economic exchange model is examined with three variables: respondent's paid work hours, partner's paid work hours, and a measure of the husband and wife income ratio (logged). Paid work hours is a measure of the number of hours worked in the week prior to the survey, includ-

ing overtime. The husband and wife income ratio is the logged ratio of husband's to wife's income in the year prior to the survey. Annual income includes wages and salary measured in Australian dollars, in addition to any income from self-employment or business, pensions, benefits, allowances, rents, dividends, and interest in the financial year preceding the survey. The husband and wife income ratio is constructed by dividing husband's income by wife's income and logging the score.

The gender perspective is measured by a gender role attitudes scale based on two items ( $\alpha = .61$ ). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the following statements: (a) It is better for the family if the husband is the principal breadwinner and the wife has primary responsibility for the home and children, and (b) a wife should give up her job whenever it is inconvenient to her husband and children. Responses to these items ranged from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5). The items were coded and summed to create a scale ranging from 2 to 10, with a low score indicating a more egalitarian attitude.

Sociodemographic variables included in the analyses are whether there are preschool children in the household, level of education attained, household income, and age of respondent. The presence of preschool children is both a measure of life-course stage and an indicator of the amount of time required for housework. It is measured with a dummy variable coded 1 if there are children under the age of 5 living in the household and 0 if not. Level of education is coded as three dummy variables: primary education includes respondents who have primary school education only or incomplete secondary schooling; secondary education includes respondents who have completed secondary schooling but have no further qualifications; and postschool qualifications, the contrast category, includes respondents who have completed high school and have a post-school qualification. Household income is the sum of the respondent's and partner's annual income in Australian dollars. Age is the respondent's age in years, ranging from 18 to 54. Gender is coded 1 for men and 0 for women.

The analyses first examine whether de facto couples have more egalitarian housework arrangements than married couples do. The second stage of the analyses examines the impact of the explanatory variables on housework and, in particular, whether any observed differences by marital status remain when key sociodemographic differences are held constant. Additionally, the regression equations examine the influence of a previous period of cohabitation on housework arrangements after marriage. Missing data dummy variables are included in the regression analyses for the missing cases on respondent's paid work hours (1% of cases), partner's

paid work hours (1.5% of cases), the husband and wife income ratio (7.6% of cases), and household income (1.9% of cases). Missing data on the other independent variables are less than 1%.

#### DOMESTIC LABOR AND MARITAL STATUS

Table 1 shows a bivariate analysis of men's and women's involvement in child care and housework in relation to marital status. Recall that only one partner was interviewed per household. Hence, the proportion of domestic work performed by men and women does not necessarily add to 100%. For example, married men report performing 26% of indoor work, and married women report performing 81% of this work. If the sample were based on reports from both partners in the relationship, we would expect these figures to sum to 100%. In the current case, however, the figures always sum to more than 100 (but only by a few percentage points), suggesting some overreporting of involvement in domestic labor by either men or women, or possibly both.

The first point to note is that women do a significantly larger proportion of child care and routine indoor housework tasks than men, regardless of marital status. Additionally, women spend more time on housework than men do, an average of 19 to 25 hours per week compared to 9 hours per week. Men report most responsibility for outdoor housework activities, and women report least responsibility for these activities. In terms of gender then, the differences are quite stark and similar to those reported in other studies of the domestic division of labor (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992; South & Spitze, 1994; Sullivan, 1997).

In terms of differences across marital status, the results show no significant differences between de facto and married respondents in relation to child care (although the cell sizes are very small in some cases), but there are significant differences between these two groups in relation to housework. Men in de facto relationships do a greater proportion of indoor housework activities than married men do (40% compared to 26%) and a smaller proportion of outdoor housework activities than married men do (73% compared to 83%). Although men in de facto relationships do a greater proportion of indoor housework than married men do, there is no difference in the amount of time spent on housework for the two groups. In both groups, men report spending approximately 9 hours per week on housework. For women, however, there is a significant difference in time spent on housework in relation to marital status, with married women spending approximately 6 additional hours per week compared to women in de facto relationships. This finding supports the work of Shelton and

**TABLE 1**  
**Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Domestic Labor Variables by Gender and Marital Status**

	<i>Men</i>						<i>Women</i>									
	<i>De Facto</i>			<i>Married</i>			<i>De Facto</i>			<i>Married</i>						
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	t <sup>a</sup>	t <sup>b</sup>	t <sup>c</sup>	t <sup>d</sup>
Child care hours	24.70	23.29	20	23.31	20.58	325	65.20	37.29	41	56.76	33.52	407	-1.52	-0.29	-4.44*	-15.77*
Child care tasks	35.50	16.56	20	38.35	16.08	326	69.45	13.79	41	69.37	16.19	407	-0.03	0.77	-8.44*	-25.85*
Housework hours	8.58	5.78	66	8.86	7.25	521	18.88	14.08	111	25.04	13.54	701	4.43*	0.30	-5.67*	-24.78*
Indoor tasks	39.23	22.87	66	25.92	17.53	523	71.41	19.31	111	81.02	16.23	702	5.65*	-5.60*	-10.00*	-56.80*
Outdoor tasks	72.54	23.59	66	83.37	15.01	523	29.73	19.75	111	27.83	20.45	702	-0.91	5.12*	12.96*	52.46*

a. A *t* test for difference between de facto and married women.

b. A *t* test for difference between de facto and married men.

c. A *t* test for difference between de facto women and de facto men.

d. A *t* test for difference between married women and married men.

\**p* < .0001.

John (1993), who reported that marital status affects women's time on housework but not men's. Married women also report significantly greater responsibility for indoor work than women in de facto unions do.

To what extent are these differences the result of marital status or of other sociodemographic differences between de facto and married couples that may lead to differences in domestic labor patterns? As Table 2 shows, there are clear differences between married and de facto respondents on a number of variables. Men and women in de facto relationships tend to be younger, are less likely to have young children in the household, and have more egalitarian gender role attitudes than married men and women. Additionally, women in de facto relationships tend to spend longer hours per week in paid employment than married women do, whereas men in de facto relationships tend to spend fewer hours per week in paid employment. Finally, there is evidence that women in de facto relationships contribute a higher proportion of income to the household than women in married relationships, as indicated by the male and female income ratio. These differences may contribute to more traditional divisions of labor in married couple households than in de facto couple households. The question is, then, do the differences in domestic labor patterns according to marital status observed in Table 1 remain when these possibly confounding differences are held constant.

The answer is yes, for both men and women. Because the numbers of de facto cohabiting respondents with young children in the household are quite small and because there were no observable differences in child care patterns between de facto and married respondents, I focus solely on housework activities in the remaining tables. As Tables 3 and 4 indicate, marital status is a significant determinant of domestic labor involvement when differences in the sociodemographic characteristics of men and women are held constant. Women in de facto unions do significantly less indoor work and spend significantly fewer hours per week on housework than women in marital unions do. On the other hand, men in de facto unions do significantly more indoor work than married men and significantly less outdoor work. In general then, the differences observed in Table 1 hold in the multivariate analysis, suggesting that married respondents have less equal and more traditional housework arrangements than de facto cohabiting respondents do.

The results also indicate that a previous period of cohabitation makes a significant difference to women's involvement in indoor and outdoor activities but no difference to the amount of time they spend on housework. Married women who did not cohabit prior to marriage do significantly more indoor work and significantly less outdoor work, suggesting a



**TABLE 2**  
**Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for**  
**Independent Variables by Gender and Marital Status**

	<i>Women</i>						<i>Men</i>					
	<i>De Facto</i>			<i>Married</i>			<i>De Facto</i>			<i>Married</i>		
	M	SD	t <sup>a</sup>	M	SD	t <sup>a</sup>	M	SD	t <sup>b</sup>	M	SD	t <sup>b</sup>
Respondent's paid work hours	27.65	20.66	19.81	19.89	19.81	-3.78***	36.79	20.49	20.49	43.69	21.00	2.54*
Partner's paid work hours	37.48	18.94	41.21	41.21	21.32	1.73	27.62	20.10	20.10	19.36	20.35	-3.09***
Gender role attitudes	4.22	1.95	5.14	5.14	2.06	4.39***	4.34	1.94	1.94	5.04	1.91	2.84***
Logged male and female income ratio	0.32	0.96	0.71	0.71	1.24	3.23***	0.21	0.96	0.96	0.68	1.08	3.41***
Preschool child (1 = yes)	0.18	0.38	0.31	0.31	0.46	2.30*	0.18	0.38	0.38	0.31	0.46	2.30*
Household income	58,523.80	29,973.48	59,110.00	36,453.22	0.16	54,943.46	30,963.74	70,542.39	60,210.42	2.10*		
Education												
Primary	0.23	0.42	0.27	0.27	0.45	1.03	0.29	0.46	0.46	0.22	0.42	-1.34
Secondary	0.18	0.39	0.16	0.16	0.36	-0.63	0.13	0.34	0.34	0.10	0.30	-0.92
Postschool qualification	0.59	0.49	0.57	0.57	0.50	-0.45	0.57	0.50	0.50	0.68	0.47	1.79
Age	33.26	9.28	38.21	38.21	8.08	5.87***	32.18	8.81	8.81	39.18	7.65	6.98***

a. A *t* test for difference between de facto and married women.

b. A *t* test for difference between de facto and married men.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

TABLE 3  
**Unstandardized Coefficients of Regression of Domestic Labor Variables on Marital Status  
 and Other Explanatory Variables for Women**

	Indoor Tasks		Outdoor Tasks		Housework Hours	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
De facto	-4.38***	3.79	-0.13	2.29	-3.14*	1.39
Married, de facto prior to marriage	—	—	—	—	—	—
Married, not de facto prior to marriage	2.31 *	1.10	-4.91 **	1.61	0.07	0.98
Respondent's paid work hours	-0.20***	0.03	-0.05	0.04	-0.19***	-0.03
Partner's paid work hours	0.14***	0.03	0.08*	0.04	0.07**	0.02
Gender role attitudes	1.12***	0.28	0.04	0.37	0.76***	0.22
Logged male and female income ratio	0.66**	0.25	-0.34	0.33	0.19	0.20
Preschool child (1 = yes)	1.11	1.37	-4.45*	1.82	3.06**	1.10
Household income (Unstandardized Estimate $\times$ 10,000)	0.23	0.17	0.14	0.23	0.41 **	0.14
Education						
Primary	3.27*	1.31	-0.46	1.74	3.72***	1.05
Secondary	1.02	1.54	-1.81	2.04	-0.30	1.24
Postschool qualification	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age	0.14	0.08	0.07	0.09	0.08	0.06
Constant	66.50		27.59		19.95	
Root mean square error	15.20		20.16		12.23	
Adjusted $R^2$	.20		.02		.21	
N	811		811		810	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE 4  
**Unstandardized Coefficients of Regression of Domestic Labor Variables on Marital Status  
and Other Explanatory Variables for Men**

	Indoor Tasks		Outdoor Tasks		Housework Hours	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
De facto	7.93**	2.40	-7.61**	2.35	-1.30	1.00
Married, de facto prior to marriage	—	—	—	—	—	—
Married, not de facto prior to marriage	-0.65	1.52	2.67	1.49	-0.43	0.64
Respondent's paid work hours	-0.12***	0.04	0.02	0.03	-0.06***	-0.01
Partner's paid work hours	0.21***	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.02
Gender role attitudes	-2.13***	0.37	0.36	0.37	-0.40*	0.16
Logged male and female income ratio	-0.40*	0.20	-0.15	0.21	0.11	0.09
Preschool child (1 = yes)	-1.18	1.73	3.86*	1.69	1.27	0.72
Household income (Unstandardized Estimate $\times$ 10,000)	0.14	0.13	0.17	0.12	0.12*	0.05
Education						
Primary	-4.76**	1.68	-3.62*	1.65	-1.67*	0.70
Secondary	1.16	2.34	-3.38	2.29	0.36	0.97
Postschool qualification	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age	0.01	0.10	0.05	0.10	0.03	0.04
Constant	41.89		76.88		12.86	
Root mean square error	16.55		16.20		6.90	
Adjusted $R^2$	.21		.06		.05	
N	589		589		587	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

more traditional division of labor among this group. This suggests that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage for women is important for establishing less traditional arrangements that may then carry over into the marital relationship. However, prior experience of cohabitation in a de facto relationship has no bearing on men's proportionate involvement in housework or amount of time spent on housework.

In terms of the competing models for explaining the gender gap in housework, there is support for both the economic exchange model and the gender perspective. For men and women, there is support for the impact of gender role attitudes, paid work hours of respondent and partner, the husband and wife income ratio, the presence of young children, household income, and education on involvement in housework. The relationships are all in the expected directions. Note that the *R* squared terms for some of the equations are quite small, particularly for the outdoor housework variable but also for housework hours for men. This is possibly because of the smaller levels of variation in these dependent variables compared to indoor work and housework hours for women. In other words, there is much less variation to explain in these models, particularly once gender is controlled.

## CONCLUSION

This article adds to our understanding of the relationship between marital status and the household division of labor by examining differences in housework patterns between de facto and married couples. It is important that it also considers the effect of a previous period of de facto cohabitation on housework patterns after marriage. In support of previous studies, the findings indicate that de facto cohabiting couples have more egalitarian domestic labor arrangements than married couples do (Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994). The gender perspective, the economic exchange model, and the incomplete institutionalization hypothesis all predict that housework will be shared more equally between de facto cohabiting partners than between married partners. The results presented here show that the gender division of labor between partners in a de facto relationship is less traditional, and at least for women, de facto cohabitation is also associated with less time spent on domestic labor compared to married women. What this suggests is that for women, it is not just the presence of a man that leads to spending more time on housework and having greater responsibility for more of the household tasks, but it is the presence of a husband. It appears that the institution of marriage

exerts influence on men and women to behave in particular kinds of ways, independently of the social and economic differences between married women and women in de facto unions that we know lead to women doing more housework (e.g., having young children in the household, women spending less time in paid work, and women contributing less of the household income).

In terms of the gender perspective, there is some support for the view that doing gender is less important in de facto households than in married households. Of course, doing gender is clearly also important in de facto households, as indicated by the large gender gaps in housework time and responsibility across these household types. But to the extent that the gender gap in time and responsibility is larger between married partners, this suggests that doing gender is more important here than in other kinds of relationships. This is further supported by the importance of the gender role attitudes scale, which is a significant predictor of both men's and women's involvement in particular kinds of household activities and their time spent on housework.

But there is also significant support for the economic exchange model that argues that women perform housework in exchange for economic support. For both men and women, time spent in paid work by respondent and partner is a key factor predicting not only what kind of work one does in the household but also how much time is spent doing it. At the same time, the husband and wife income ratio indicates that greater contribution by women to the household income reduces women's share of indoor work and increases men's share of indoor work.

Additionally, the results show that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage changes the balance of labor after marriage, at least for women. Although there are no differences in the number of hours spent on domestic labor after marriage, the results show that women who have not cohabited prior to marriage do proportionately more indoor work and less outdoor work compared to women who have cohabited prior to marriage. This suggests a less traditional division of labor among those who have spent some time as de facto cohabiters prior to marriage. The implication is that at least some of the patterns established in the cohabiting period carry over into the marital relationship. Alternatively, women who have cohabited in a de facto relationship prior to marriage may use this period as a positive point of comparison, allowing them to establish and maintain more equal arrangements than would otherwise be possible.

One way of thinking about these findings is to see de facto relationships as incompletely institutionalized. Following Cherlin (1978), de facto relationships may lack the normative prescriptions set out for mari-

tal relationships. His argument was that this incomplete institutionalization would lead to greater stress, dissatisfaction, and marital breakdown. But what the current research would suggest is that incomplete institutionalization also provides greater freedom to negotiate alternative roles and responsibilities. Although this may still lead to greater stress and less social support from other outside agencies or other family members than is the case for married couples, alternative kinds of living arrangements may also open the way for more equal sharing of domestic roles (Ishii-Kuntz & Coltrane, 1992). At the same time, it appears that a period of incomplete institutionalization may also open the way for more egalitarian relationships at a later period. Although the data clearly show that all marriages are less egalitarian than cohabiting relationships, the evidence indicates that for women, the patterns established during a period of de facto cohabitation carry over after marriage.

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