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The distribution of household labor: Comparing spouses' role orientation, ratings of satisfaction, and amount of discussion

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The Distribution of Household Labor: Comparing Spouses'
Role Orientation, Ratings of Satisfaction,
and Amount of Discussion

by

Christina Elaine Hanson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Psychology

Psychology Department
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May, 1996

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ABSTRACT

This study of 114 married couples investigated Role Orientation and how it related to satisfaction with the division of household labor. Husbands' and wives' Role Orientations were significantly different, with husbands being more traditional. *Spouses Role Orientation scores were correlated.* Husbands were more satisfied with the household division of labor. A wife's Role Orientation score was associated with her labor satisfaction, however, the husband's Role Orientation wasn't associated with his satisfaction. Couple's combined Role Orientations were related to their labor satisfaction, and as scores became more modern, *couple satisfaction decreased.* Therefore, the more modern a couple's household labor orientation, the lower their combined labor satisfaction scores.

The amount of reported discussion on division of labor was not found to differ significantly between husbands and wives. The amount of discussion did not affect labor satisfaction ratings. *The results are analyzed for their possible future research and clinical applicability.*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past fifty years, major social, economic, and political changes have influenced the tasks husbands and wives undertake to maintain an American family unit. The marital roles and duties common in the 1950's, which consisted of the working, provider father and the stay-at-home housewife and mother, are becoming less frequent. What husbands and wives were expected to do may have been clearly defined for past generations; today however, married couples often struggle to find an acceptable allocation of work to meet household demands. The current economic climate often requires two income families, which in turn may lead to a shift in household roles. In addition, this shift in roles does not seem to be affected by the employment status or the level of responsibility required by the outside occupation the wife holds (Temple, 1991). Husbands and wives who hold nontraditional attitudes toward family life are also reported to be less satisfied with their marriages (Lye & Biblarz, 1993). Disagreement over who should do what may make marital discord more likely, result in a chaotic home life, and, when children are involved, lead to inadequate child care and inconsistent discipline.

For the purposes of clarifying these concepts, the following definitions were adapted from previous research (Gillespie, 1989):

Sex-Role Orientation represents the extent to which a person ascribes to male and female behaviors deemed as appropriate by societal norms.

Traditional Sex-Role norms are based on the past stereotype which consisted of: the female spending the majority of her time being responsible for household and childcare tasks, placing her own interests secondary to the well being of the family; whereas, the male assumes responsibility for the family's economic survival and acts as provider and decision maker.

Modern Sex-Role norms emphasize equality and androgyny (flexible, broader sex roles) between the sexes, where each spouse has the option of pursuing employment outside the home, and household and childcare tasks become shared responsibilities.

Sex-Role Orientation (traditional versus modern) has been shown to affect household role behaviors, with husbands who enact a traditional provider-role completing fewer household chores than men with egalitarian attitudes (Perry-Jenkins & Crouter, 1990). Agreement on role orientations between husbands and wives has been shown to be an affective predictor of marital satisfaction (Bowen & Orthner, 1983). Li and Caldwell (1987) found that the more equal the household partnership roles were between husbands and wives, the greater the satisfaction ratings of each. Conversely, the more dominant a husband's role, the poorer the adjustment of both spouses. Araj

(1977) found that, while both sexes will express the idea of role sharing, women often complete the vast majority of household jobs. More significantly, the more a duties vary from their ideology on gender role orientation, the more negatively they evaluate their relationships (McHale & Crouter, 1992). Overall, research has shown that Role Orientation is consistently related to the division of labor in the home and to levels of satisfaction with the division of labor in the home.

Sex-Role Orientation

Recently, gender roles in marriage have become an important focus of research. Matching expectations of roles among marital partners has been shown to be an affective predictor of marital stability and satisfaction (Gillespie, 1989). In couples themselves, men and women have different marital role expectations. Men have consistently shown to have more traditional expectations than women (Komarovsky, 1973), whereas women seem to desire more equity in roles. Women have become less traditional over the last few decades (McBroom, 1984; McBroom 1986). While wives report being happiest when they felt both partners were doing what they perceived as their fair share, and neither person was overloaded with household duties, husbands report being happiest when they perceived their

spouse as doing more than their share of the household tasks (Gilmore & Thomas, 1992). This conflict is also apparent as wives reported equity in the marriage relationship as the factor most important to their marital satisfaction, whereas husbands reported recreational intimacy as the most important variable (Quinn & Davidson, 1986). Li and Caldwell (1987) found that the more egalitarian the husband was, the better the marital adjustment of both spouses, and conversely, the more dominant and traditional the husband, the poorer the adjustment of both spouses. Gillespie (1989) also found that couples who agreed on their roles had the least amount of overall marital conflict.

The Sex-Role Orientation scale, a subsection of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (Snyder, 1979), is used commonly to measure the orientations of couples. It is used to measure the participant's views of appropriate behavior of males and females on a continuum from traditional to modern roles. It measures attitudes on: the division of family responsibilities between the sexes, the gender-based power and decision-making in families, the gender-role training of the children, the employment of men and women, and views on norms relating to dress, politics, and societal customs. The items are answered as true or false. The total possible score on this scale is twenty-five, with the lower the score, the more traditional the participant's

views, and the higher the score, the more modern their views. This scale has been shown to be statistically reliable (Brogan and Kutner, 1976).

Satisfaction with Division of Labor

Hiller and Philliber (1986) found that, although fifty-eight percent of husbands say housework should be shared, less than one-third of husbands studied shared regular household tasks, even by their own report. Eighty-four percent of the couples surveyed agreed that childcare should be shared, however the wives reported that only about one-third of the husbands participated in child care tasks. Husbands were more likely to see household tasks as shared, whereas wives saw themselves as having the major responsibility for the tasks. Also, wives are shown in research to complete more of the tedious "female" tasks, which affected their feelings of fairness in the relationship (Blair & Johnson, 1992). As a result, wives may end up working equal hours outside the home, while being totally responsible for childcare, household chores, and household management. Sabatelli (1984) found that the more traditional the division of labor, the greater the decline in the wives' evaluations of the positive aspects of the marriage, and the greater the decline in their satisfaction. It is possible that spouses' Role Orientation scores relate in some way to their satisfaction with household management.

Based on Sabatelli's work: husbands should be more satisfied than wives with the division of labor in the home. Also, Role Orientation scores should be related to satisfaction, or lack of satisfaction with the household division of labor. Finally, the compatibility of Orientation scores of the couple should be related to household labor satisfaction levels reported by the couple.

Couple's Discussion of Distribution of Household Labor

Studies of both husbands and wives indicated that affective communication is an important predictor of marital adjustment (Quinn & Davidson, 1986). However, it has been shown that, the more traditional the division of labor in the home, the greater the decrease in time spent discussing roles (Booth et al., 1984). Today's wives have also reported that they argue more over the division of labor in the home (Holland-Benin & Agostinelli, 1988). The reported result may be due to the wives' dissatisfaction, or to differences in spouses' perceptions of who is doing the work around the house. It appears that for working-class wives, conflict is avoided when she does "the women's work", while, for middle-class wives, more arguments arise when her husband is not taking on his "fair share" of the household and family responsibilities (Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). It has been demonstrated that relationship satisfaction is strongly negatively related

to the frequency of arguing on issues such as power in the roles of the relationship (Kurdek, 1994). The literature indicates that wives report more marital discussion of the division of labor in the home than husbands, and that the amount of affective discussion is positively correlated with satisfaction ratings of division of labor.

Present Study

This study attempts to fill a void, in the sense that there is no research to date that addresses the possible relationships among role orientations, satisfaction with the division of labor, and amount of the couple's discussion of the division. This study investigates the relationships between the participants' Role Orientation scale scores, self-reported satisfaction with and amount of self-reported discussion of household division of labor. Role orientation (traditional versus modern) has been shown in research to be an important predictor of marital satisfaction since it seems to relate to future household labor behaviors. It has also been shown in research that the more similar a couple's role orientation scale scores are, the less conflict they report over household duties. The study also addresses how this conflict manifests itself: in repeated attempts at discussion on the topic. Since wives have been shown in research to be less satisfied with their share of the

division of labor, the amount of the discussion attempts are also analyzed.

The amount of discussion is also compared to labor satisfaction ratings, to investigate if the amount of communication on the subject leads to greater satisfaction.

Hypotheses

Seven hypotheses are advanced based on previous research and an analysis of relationships among the variables.

1. Husbands' and wives' Role Orientation scale scores will differ, with husbands being significantly more traditional.
2. Male Role Orientation scale scores will be positively correlated with female orientation scores.
3. Husbands will be more satisfied than wives with the division of labor.
4. Individual Role Orientation scale scores, irrespective of gender, will be correlated with division of labor satisfaction ratings.
5. Couple Role Orientation scale scores will be positively correlated with couple labor satisfaction scores.
6. Wives will report more marital discussion of the division of labor in the home than husbands.
7. The amount of discussion regarding the division of labor will be positively correlated with household labor satisfaction ratings.

METHODS

Subjects

One-hundred fourteen married couples were recruited by students in a research methodology course at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, as part of a class project. The student recruiters were asked to find volunteers for the study by soliciting married students, faculty, or friends.

Materials

A packet of materials, composed of a letter of consent and a set of questions, was distributed to both members of each couple recruited for the study.

Demographic Information

Most of the first page of the packet was a demographic questionnaire. It consisted of questions regarding age, race, gender, years married, level of education, income level, and number of children. (A copy may be found in Appendix A.) This was followed by two questions related to the division of labor and satisfaction. The Role Orientation Scale, a subsection of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory, was used to assess the respondents attitudes. It has been found to reliably discriminate between distressed and non-distressed couples (Snyder et al., 1981).

Discussion of Division of Household Labor

The amount of discussion regarding the division of labor was rated by the participants on a 1-7 Likert scale, with 1 representing “never” and 7 representing “often”.

Satisfaction with Household Division of Labor

The satisfaction with the division of labor was rated on a 1-7 Likert scale also, with 1 representing “not satisfied” and 7 representing “very satisfied”.

Role Orientation Scale

The next section, called the Role Orientation Scale, a subsection of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory, was developed by Snyder (1979). It consists of 25 statements to which the participants respond true or false, depending on whether they agree or disagree with the statement. A score of 25 represents *extremely modern attitudes*, whereas a score of zero indicates very traditional attitudes about male and female roles, such as who should do childcare chores. Representative statements taken from the scale are:

“If a child gets sick and the wife works, the husband should be just as willing as she to stay home from work and take care of the child.”; “A husband and wife should share responsibility for housework if both work outside the home.”; “Earning the family income is primarily the responsibility of the husband.”; and, “The responsibilities of motherhood are a full-time job.”.

Procedures

The couples were asked to complete the questionnaires separately and if they wished to discuss their answers, not to do so until after they had completed their packets. The questionnaire packets were numbered by the pair. Packets took about twenty minutes to complete. The subjects were informed that their answers would be kept strictly confidential, and that only overall statistical results would be reported. They were asked to read and sign a letter of consent (included in the Appendix). The participants were told the purpose of the study was for general research on the area of the Household Division of Labor by the University's Psychology Department. *The consent statement briefly described the process and gave contact information.* The subjects were debriefed by personal letter after they completed the packets by reassuring them of confidentiality and thanking them for their participation.

RESULTS

A total of 114 husbands and wives completed the questionnaire packets. The couples had been married an average of 11.38 years (SD = 8.49). The average age of the wives was 35.47 years (SD = 8.66) , and the average age of the husbands was 38.32 years (SD = 10.70). All couples had children, with an average of 2.29 children (SD = 1.32) per couple. A summary of the demographic data is presented in Table 1.

The mean score Role Orientation scale for the husbands was 15.70 with a standard deviation of 5.19. The mean score Role Orientation scale for the wives was 16.97 with a standard deviation of 4.68. The mean reported discussion rating reported by the husbands was 3.46 with a standard deviation of 1.77. The mean reported discussion rating reported by the wives was 3.76 with a standard deviation of 1.96. The mean household labor satisfaction rating reported by the husbands was 5.54 with a standard deviation of 1.30. The mean household labor satisfaction rating reported by the wives was 5.01 with a standard deviation of 1.55. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 2.

The investigation of possible correlations among the variables for the study presented mixed results. Role Orientation scale scores of husbands and wives were found to be significantly correlated (0.53, $p < .01$). While the

couple's combined Role Orientation scale scores ($-0.24, p < .05$) and the wife's scores ($-0.22, p < .05$) were negatively correlated with labor satisfaction ratings, no such significant correlation existed for the husbands (-0.15 n.s.). The rating of reported discussion on the division of labor between the couples was not found to be correlated with the rating of satisfaction with the household division of labor. These findings are presented in Table 3.

Each of the hypotheses were evaluated using t-tests or additional correlational analysis. Hypothesis 1 was that husbands and wives Role Orientation scale scores will differ, with husbands being found to be significantly more traditional. The results were found to be significant at the 0.05 level, (t value = -2.84). Husbands and wives Role Orientation scale scores regarding the division of labor in the home were significantly different, with husbands being found to report significantly more traditional Role Orientations than their wives.

Hypothesis 2 was that male orientation scores will be correlated with female orientation scores. The results were found to be significant at the 0.01 level, ($r = 0.53$). Husbands and wives Role Orientation scale scores were significantly correlated.

Hypothesis 3 was that husbands will be more satisfied than wives with the division of labor. Husbands were found to be significantly more

satisfied than their wives with the division of labor in their homes, t value = -3.04 at the 0.03 level.

Hypothesis 4 was that individual respondent's Role Orientation scale scores will be correlated with their household division of labor satisfaction score. This hypothesis was broken down further into hypothesis 4a), male Role Orientation scale scores are correlated with male labor satisfaction scores, and hypothesis 4b), female Role Orientation scale scores are correlated with female labor satisfaction scores. The results of hypothesis 4a) was that male Role Orientation scale scores were not found to correlate significantly with their household division of labor satisfaction scores, (n.s., $r = -0.15$). The results of hypothesis 4b) was that female Role Orientation scale scores were significantly correlated with their division of labor satisfaction scores, $r = -0.22$ at the 0.05 level. The results suggest that a wife's Role Orientation scale score significantly affects her labor satisfaction, however, the husband's Role Orientation scale score does not significantly affect his satisfaction with the division of labor in the household.

Hypothesis 5 was that couple Role Orientation scale scores will be correlated with couple labor satisfaction scores. This was confirmed, $r = -0.24$ at the 0.05 level. As couple scores became more modern, couple household labor satisfaction decreased significantly. Therefore, the more

modern a couple's orientation is in regard to the division of labor in their home, the lower their combined labor division satisfaction scores.

Hypothesis 6 was that wives will report more discussion on the division of labor in their homes than their husbands do. The results were not found to be significant, (t value = -1.64, p 0.103, n.s.).

Hypothesis 7 was that the amount of discussion regarding the division of labor will be positively correlated with household labor division satisfaction scores. The initial hypothesis was broken down into further hypotheses. In hypothesis 7a), male labor satisfaction scores will be correlated with the reported amount of discussion on the division of labor, in hypothesis 7b), female household labor satisfaction will be correlated with the reported amount of discussion on the division of labor, in hypothesis 7c), couple labor satisfaction will be correlated with the couple's combined reported amount of discussion on the division of labor and in hypothesis 7d), couple discussion difference scores will be correlated with the couple's labor satisfaction scores. The results were not found to be significant for any of the correlations. The results related to hypothesis 7a) were not found to be significant, (r = 0.09, n.s.). The results related to hypothesis 7b) were not found to be significant, (r = -0.15, n.s.). The results related to hypothesis 7c) were not found to be significant, (r = -0.11, n.s.). The results related to hypothesis 7d) were not found to be significant, (r = 0.10, n.s.). The amount

of reported discussion on the topic of the division of labor in the home is not significantly correlated with household labor satisfaction. For hypothesis 7a) male labor satisfaction scores are not significantly related to the amount of reported discussion. For hypothesis 7b) female labor satisfaction scores are not significantly correlated with the amount of household labor discussion she reports. For hypothesis 7c) couple household labor satisfaction scores are not significantly affected by the amount of discussion the couple reports. For hypothesis 7d) the degree of difference between the scores of husbands and wives, in the amount of reported household labor reported, is not correlated with household labor division satisfaction scores.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Sample's Demographic Information

(n = 114 couples)

Demographic		
Variables	Husbands	Wives

<u>Age</u>		
Mean	38.32	35.47
Standard Deviation	10.70	8.66
<u>Years Married</u>		
Mean	11.38	
Standard Deviation	8.49	
<u>Children</u>		
Mean	2.29	
Standard Deviation	1.32	

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Role Orientation Scale Scores,
Discussion Rating Scores, and Reported Degree of Satisfaction With the
Household Division of Labor

(n = 114 couples)

	Husbands	Wives	t-value	p
Role Orientation				
Means	15.70	16.97		
Standard Deviation	5.19	4.68	2.84	<.05
Discussion				
Means	3.46	3.76		
Standard Deviation	1.77	1.96	1.64	n.s.
Satisfaction				
Means	5.54	5.01		
Standard Deviation	1.30	1.55	3.04	<.05

Table 3

Correlations

Variable	Correlations
Role Orientation Scale Score	
Husbands' with Wives'	0.53**
Role Orientation with Satisfaction	
Husbands'	-0.15
Wives'	-0.22*
Couples' Combined	-0.24*
Discussion with Satisfaction	
Husbands'	0.89
Wives'	-0.15
Couples' Combined	-0.11
Difference Score	0.11

* p < .05 ** p < .01

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationship between Role Orientation, ratings of household labor satisfaction, and the amount of reported discussion on division of household labor. It found that husbands and wives Role Orientation scores were significantly different, with husbands significantly more traditional than their wives, though husbands and wives scores were correlated with one another. Husbands were significantly more satisfied with the household division of labor. A wife's Role Orientation score significantly influenced her household labor satisfaction, however, the husband's Role Orientation did not. The couple's role score was found to be related to their household labor satisfaction. As couple scores became more modern, couples reported decreased household labor satisfaction. Therefore, the more modern a couple's orientation is in regard to the division of labor in their home, the lower their combined labor satisfaction scores. The amount of reported discussion on the topic of the division of labor did not differ significantly between husbands and wives. The amount of reported discussion regarding the household division of labor is associated with labor satisfaction ratings.

This study's findings validate the 1993 study performed by Lye and Biblarz which found that nontraditional Role Orientation scores adversely affect marital satisfaction. With this study's sample of couples, modern Role Orientation scores correlated with decreased household labor satisfaction. This study also validated previous research findings (Komarovsky, 1973) with regard to husbands' higher division of labor satisfaction levels.

It seems apparent that the amount of reported discussion does not significantly affect the couple's household labor satisfaction ratings. Communication is widely reported to be an important variable for marital satisfaction in our society. However, at least on the topic of satisfaction with household labor, this limited study conflicts with this widely stated claim. It also appears that, at least for wives, their spouse's actions regarding the division of labor, rather than their words, are a much more significant household labor satisfaction variable. It should be noted that this study was limited in scope by the somewhat smaller ability to generalize the student chosen sample pool and the psychometric limitations inherent in a non-validated subsection of a larger scale. It is possible that future research will investigate the undiscovered effect of variables that will lead to a greater understanding of these findings.

Research Applicability

This study may have utility as a base for developing further research. It would be very useful to assess the expectations of the individual members in couples before marriage as a possible predictor of later marital happiness. Relevant issues to be included could be: the expectations on children for both partners, the expected division of labor in the home (i.e., housework, childcare, money management, income earning), and the congruence of the role ideologies of the partners (traditional versus modern). The information gained from this type of study could be used in premarital and marriage counseling to assess incongruent areas that could be discussed, ideally before they have become a problem for the couple. Education on current marital realities for premarital couples can help them become aware of what they may be up-against in marriage, before hard-to-break patterns have been formed. Possible areas for discussion here could include: the importance of the male's prerogative in marital role formation, the importance of equality for women's marital household labor satisfaction, and the importance of congruence in their roles for marital stability.

Appendices

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

Title of Study: Sex-Role Congruence- Marital Satisfaction and Household Division of Labor

You are being asked to participate in a study of the relationship between marital satisfaction and sex-role orientation for Married couples. We hope to discover what couples expect from the Marriage relationship and what is actually happening for those who have been in the Marriage relationship for some time. We hope to use this Information to design and develop the appropriate courseware for use in our Research Methods class. We hope to enhance the quality of our student's learning environment through the use of applied statistical skills analyzing and comparing this current data to findings of former research endeavors. For this reason it is extremely important that you answer all of the enclosed forms completely and honestly to ensure the success of this novel academic undertaking.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer some questions about who does or should do certain chores around the house. In addition, you will be asked some informational questions about your marital status, and the number of hours you and your spouse or significant other work.

Some of the questions are of a personal nature. Be assured that THE DATA YOU GENERATE IN THIS STUDY WILL NOT BE ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR IDENTITY IN ANY WAY. The purpose of this project is to investigate the relationship between these variables for entire groups, not for individuals. The data from your completed packet will be coded such that your name never appears with the questionnaires.

Your participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. If, during the project (or after it is completed) you have any questions about the procedures, feel free to ask the researcher to clarify for you. The study is being conducted by the Psychology department of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. If you have any questions about the project, you can contact Jack Gillespie, Teaching Assistant, by calling (739-3217 or 737-3305)

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO
VOLUNTEER
AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT AND THAT YOU HAVE READ THE
INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE

DATE

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. AGE ____

2. RACE ____

3. GENDER: (circle one) M or F

4. EDUCATION: (Circle number of years completed)

K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

5. YEARS MARRIED ____

6. NUMBER OF CHILDREN ____

7. YOUR OCCUPATION _____

8. SPOUSE'S OCCUPATION _____

9. YOUR ANNUAL INCOME (check one):

_____ less than \$1,000
_____ \$ 1,000- \$10,000
_____ \$10,000-\$20,000
_____ \$20,000-\$30,000
_____ \$30,000-\$40,000
_____ \$40,000-\$50,000
_____ more than \$50,000

10. SPOUSE'S
ANNUAL
INCOME (check one):

_____ less than \$1,000
_____ \$ 1,000- \$10,000
_____ \$10,000-\$20,000
_____ \$20,000-\$30,000
_____ \$30,000-\$40,000
_____ \$40,000-\$50,000
_____ more than \$50,000

11. HOURS YOU WORK PER WEEK ____

12. HOURS SPOUSE WORKS PER WEEK ____

13. SIBLINGS: (include any stillborn or deceased brothers and/or sisters)

NAME (first name only)	AGE	GENDER	IF DECEASED OR STILLBORN DATE OF DEATH

INSTRUCTIONS:

This survey is concerned with domestic task performance between partners in the home. Please **DO NOT FILL OUT** the questionnaire **IN THE PRESENCE OF YOUR SPOUSE**. After the questionnaire is complete we encourage you to discuss your responses with each other.

14. Indicate how often you and your spouse discuss the division of labor in your home:

NEVER

OFTEN

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

15. Indicate how satisfied you are with the division of labor in your home.

NOT SATISFIED

VERY SATISFIED

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

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