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What is This?
THE DILEMMA OF GENDER SPECIALIZATION:

SUBSTITUTING AND AUGMENTING WIVES’ HOUSEHOLD WORK

Judith Treas

ABSTRACT

The greater the gender specialization in marriage, the less the overlap in the skill sets and motivations of the partners. The less the overlap, the less readily can the labor of the husband substitute for or augment the labor of the wife (and vice versa). With data on 26 countries from the 2001 International Social Survey Program, this specialization-substitution argument is evaluated based on wives’ preferences for household help and emotional support. As predicted, women in more specialized marriages are more likely to favor kin and others over the husband for assistance. In countries where the public approves of traditional gender roles and men avoid “woman’s work” in the home, wives are more likely than their counterparts elsewhere to prefer the assistance of kin and others over the husband’s help.

KEY WORDS • specialization • gender • household labor • emotional support • cross-national research

Gary Becker (1981) famously argued for the efficiency of specialization within the household. Based on their comparative advantages in market and home, he reasoned, partners will devote their time to one or the other sphere, if only because the learning-by-doing returns to their specialized investments maximize total household production. Men were usually the ones to invest in the market and women in the home. Gender specialization in the household, however, means that the labor of the husband can less readily substitute for the labor of the wife (and vice versa). Nor can the spouse’s labor be easily mobilized when a second worker is needed, either in the market or the home. When circumstances demand substituting or augmenting labor, an individual in a highly specialized marriage faces the dilemma of having a partner who has cultivated a different set of skills and motivations.

To evaluate these implications of specialization, we examine married women’s responses to two questions from the 2001 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) data. First, we consider whom the wife prefers to help out around the house in the event of her short-term illness. Second, we ask whom she favors for social support when she feels disheartened. Both household work and emotional support are largely “women’s work.” Therefore, we anticipate that gender specialization will work against the choice of the husband to help. With housework, the question is one of labor substitution, that is, who should do the work usually performed by the wife. By definition, social support is directed to enhancing the well-being of others. The wife selects a confidant to augment – rather than to substitute for – her own efforts to better her mood. In either case, specialization is expected to figure in the wife’s preference for a helper.

Background

Specialization can be problematic in a number of circumstances. First, marginal returns on investments in routine activities decline, because fatigue and boredom lead to falling productivity. This is recognized by laws to limit hours on the job and by respite programs to relieve overburdened family caregivers. Second, specializing in the home creates risks for the homemaker. Her lack of income diminishes her clout in household bargaining, but her specialized investments are not transferable to the marketplace nor to another relationship (Bernasco and Giesen 2000). Third, partitioned skill sets from specialization mean that husband and wife lack knowledge of the demands of each other’s roles. This makes it harder to monitor one another’s performance (Treas 1993). Fourth, the greater the gender specialization in marriage, the less readily can the labor of the husband augment or substitute for the labor of the wife (and vice versa).

The dilemmas of strict gender specialization are evident in everyday life. If a husband becomes disabled, his wife may have to enter the labor force unprepared. If his wife works a different shift, the husband will have to fend for himself at home – taking on unfamiliar and perhaps unwelcome chores (Presser 1994). Gender specialization is vulnerable to the shifting demands of the life course, which may require two earners and/or two caregivers at some points (Oppenheimer 1997). Specialization is also susceptible to the absence of a partner, because it creates gender-specific labor shortages in the household. Not surprisingly, single people spend
significantly more money than married people to outsource household tasks that routinely fall to the other gender (de Ruijter, Treas and Cohen 2005).

Specialization: Explaining How Husbands and Wives Divide Household Work

Housekeeping, child minding, understanding loved ones, and expressing compassion are all household work, if only because they entail opportunity costs (England and Farkas 1986; Erickson 2005). The distinction between housework and emotional labor may be overstated. Women describe activities like meal preparation as addressing emotional as well as nutritional needs of family members (DeVault 1991). They regard a husband’s help with laundry or dishes as evidence of his “caring” (Sanchez and Kane 1996). Housework is primarily “women’s work,” being performed disproportionately by women (Brines 1994; van der Lippe and Siegers 1994; Singelmann, Kamo, Acoc and Grimes 1996; Baxter 1997; Gupta 1999; Batalova and Cohen 2002; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre and Matheson 2003; Davis and Fuwa 2004; Greenstein 2004; Geist 2005; Yodanis 2005). Women also provide a disproportionate share of emotional support and take charge of managing intimate relationships (Cancian and Gordon 1988; Seery and Crowley 2000; Hook 2004).

Some attribute women’s specialization in housekeeping and caring labor to innate gender differences. Sensitivity to others is widely attributed to woman’s essential nature (Gilligan 1982; Erickson 2005). Therefore, women are held accountable for the family’s affective welfare, even if men do some of the emotion work in marriage (Sanchez and Kane 1996). Becker (1981) points to intrinsic biological differences to explain women’s specialization in household production: biology gives women a comparative advantage in bearing and rearing children and in complementary household activities. Given comparative advantages in the market and the home, the husband and wife will specialize in either paid employment or household production. By virtue of concentrated, learning-by-doing investments of time, they will enjoy higher productivity than if each focuses his/her efforts on different spheres. Of course, comparative biological advantages are less important when paid jobs require little physical strength and couples have fewer children. Becker (1981) speculates that the rising value of women’s time in the labor market and their decreasing fertility lead to declining returns to household specialization.
Aside from innate gender differences, a gender-neutral logic figures prominently in the study of the allocation of household labor. The couple’s division of housework reflects the household’s demand for domestic services and its labor supply (Shelton and John 1996). More demand for housekeeping translates to greater specialization in the household division of labor. For instance, having young children is linked to more traditional housework arrangements (Presser 1994; Davis and Greenstein 2004; van der Lippe, Tijdens and de Ruijter 2004) as well as less social support between spouses (Ishii-Kuntz and Seccombe 1989). Each partner’s availability to do chores – as measured by hours of employment (Coltrane 2000) or work shift (Presser 1994) – also relates to the household division of labor. Husbands do less housework and wives do more when the wife is a specialized, full-time homemaker rather than a paid worker (Shelton 1990; Blair and Lichter 1991; Cooke 2004). Perhaps because health affects ability to do housework, age is negatively associated with the husband’s participation in household labor (Coltrane 2000). Supply and demand factors, however, are not adequate explanations for the household division of labor.

First, the relative resources (e.g., earnings, educations) of husband and wife are also associated with their relative shares of housework (Coltrane 2000). This is consistent with an exchange paradigm. The resources of husband and wife translate into marital power, which influences the outcome of their bargaining over housework (Brines 1993). From a game theoretic perspective, Breen and Cooke (2005) emphasize female economic autonomy. Women’s economic independence can promote more egalitarian domestic arrangements by enhancing the credibility of women’s threats to leave an unsatisfactory marriage. Although resource-backed bargaining suggests gender-neutral exchange, other research shows that wives’ resources are systematically discounted. This is especially true where there is less parity between men and women in the broader society (Fuwa 2004).

Second, research questions the gender-neutral logic of both the time availability and relative resources arguments. Although wife’s earnings are positively associated with husband’s share of housework, a husband whose wife earns more than he does will perform less housework than other husbands do (Brines 1994; Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre and Matheson 2003). Contrary to Becker’s (1981) specialization argument, these husbands do not defer to their wives’ comparative advantage in the labor market by investing more of their own time in the home. To explain this paradox, the definition of household production has been broadened to include “gender” manufactured through domestic interaction (Berk
1985; West and Zimmerman 1987). Wives do housework and husbands eschew it in order to demonstrate the femininity and masculinity which they value. Even if they violate male breadwinner norms, husbands can reassure themselves and others of their masculinity by avoiding “women’s work” around the house. Another finding is also consistent with the idea that an intimate heterosexual audience prompts people to behave in a way that affirms their gender identity. Women do more housework, and men do less, when they live with an adult of the opposite sex, rather than living alone or with a same-sex adult (South and Spitze 1994; Gupta 1999). If the selective performance of household chores and emotional labor produces gender identities, the gender-neutral logic of supply, demand, and exchange may well be trumped by gender imperatives, which promote specialization between partners.

The gender-typing of domestic chores (Blair and Lichter 1991; Twiggs, McQuillan and Ferree 1999) underscores the gender specialization in the household. The husband’s household work emphasizes “masculine” tasks like home maintenance, automobile upkeep, and yard work while the wife performs the more time-intensive, routine “feminine” jobs like cleaning, cooking, and laundry. Parents perpetuate this gender-typing when they assign household chores to children (Duncan and Duncan 1978; Blair 1992; Evertsson 2004). These socialization experiences not only provide gender-specific training in particular domestic skills, but they also shape adult activity preferences, performance standards, and criteria for judging the fairness of the division of household labor (White and Brinkerhoff 1981; Gager 1998; Cunningham 2001).

Socialization not only teaches gender-specific skills, but it also results in internalized motivations inclining men and women to do, eschew, or share household activities with their partner. If they feel personally responsible for household chores, women are reluctant to involve their husbands in domestic and caring activities (Allen and Hawkins 1999). If husbands do not participate in household chores, they express less confidence in their ability to take on the wife’s roles around the house (Cast and Bird 2005). If gender specialization means that partners have different skill sets and related motivations, they can less easily substitute for or augment one another’s labor.

Other Sources of Household Help and Personal Assistance

Household help and emotional support come from others besides the spouse. There are markets for both household help and personal counseling,
but they are not very popular. No more than 3% of Australians, Austrians, Americans, British, Hungarians, Italians, and West Germans say they would turn to a psychologist or counselor for depression or marital problems (Hoellinger and Haller 1990). Family doctors and clergy are not used much either, except in the U.S., where 6% report they would go to clergy. Surprisingly few households avail themselves of the convenience of paid household help in the U.S. (de Ruijter, Treas and Cohen 2005), Australia (Bittman, Matheson and Meagher 1999), or the Netherlands (de Ruijter 2004). Hiring household workers raises special issues of trust related to outsiders’ access to the private household (de Ruijter, van der Lippe and Raub 2003). For short-term assistance around the house or with personal problems, the transaction costs for negotiating a contract with an outsider are apt to outweigh the benefits. Household help and social support do not usually demand special talents beyond the aptitudes of ordinary family members (Pollak 1985). With illness or depression, intimates who are known and trusted are apt to be preferred. As England and Folbre (2003) observe, “it is precisely when we need care the most that we are least able to contract with others to meet our needs.”

There are reasons family members are usually preferred for assistance (Wellman and Wortley 1990; Wade, Howell and Wells 1994; Klein and Milardo 2000). Because long-term relationships provide opportunities to learn one another’s needs and preferences, kin can help out without instruction and monitoring. Family members’ good performance is fostered by enduring family bonds and tested by repeated interactions between kin (Blau 1964; Pollak 1985). It is insured by internalized norms (Ben-Porath 1980; Pollak 1985) and by the highly effective sanctioning of shared personal networks (Pollak 1985). Kin ties can be activated in emergencies – even if family members do not routinely exchange help with one another (Silverstein and Bengtson 1997). This explains why people rely on parents or grown children for both emotional support and household services (Wellman and Wortley 1990).

Nonrelatives – friends, neighbors, and co-workers – sometimes provide assistance, especially if their tie is a strong one overcoming trust and information problems (Wellman and Wortley 1990). Non-kin relationships are more specialized than the multipurpose relations with kin. Sharing similar lifestyles, friends are sources of companionship while neighbors are tapped for small services because of their proximity (Wellman and Wortley 1990). Various categories of non-kin serve the same functions in Austria, Australia, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and the U.S. (Freeman and Ruan 1997). From country to country, friends are called on for emotional support rather than for
instrumental assistance (Hoellinger and Haller 1990). Neighbors give instrumental help, but not emotional support.

Given many options, the spouse is often the favored helper (Stone, Cafferata and Sangl 1987; Cantor 1991; Allen, Goldscheider and Ciambrone 1999). Americans report that they feel the most obliged to help their spouse, followed by adult children and parents (Rossi and Rossi 1992). Between 1985 and 2004, Americans became even more reliant on their spouse as a confidant (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Brashears 2006). Marriage incurs many diffuse obligations which must be reciprocated (Blau 1964). Malfeasance between husband and wife is discouraged by person-specific investments and expectations for a continued relationship (Williamson 1981). The privileged status of spouses reflects, in part, the fact that marriage qualifies as such a strong tie – defined as involving a large and voluntary investment in the relationship, a commitment to being together into the indefinite future, and intimate knowledge and support of one another’s needs (Wellman and Wortley 1990).

Proximity and face-to-face contact are positively associated with the exchange of household and other services (Wellman and Wortley 1990). Co-residence gives husbands and wives person-specific information about household routines, personal needs, and preferences (Treas 1993). Living together lowers the transaction costs of assistance. A husband can buy a few items on the way home from work. Others must make an extra trip to the shut-in’s home. On the downside, co-residence poses the possibility of shared risks (Pollak 1985). If both partners are immobilized by the flu or struggling with the same depressing issues, the spouse may not be able to help.

To sum up, many factors favor spouses as first responders in time of personal trouble. To the extent that married couples specialize, however, a husband may lack the gender-specific skills and related motivations to augment or substitute for his wife’s labor. Gender specialization in marriage, we have argued, may give an edge to some of the many others who can provide assistance.

Gender Specialization: Couples and Countries

Research on the household division of labor has emphasized its micro-level determinants, such as time availability or relative resources. Recent studies point to cross-national differences in the degree of gender specialization (Batalova and Cohen 2002; Fuwa 2004; Geist 2005; Yodanis 2005; Hook 2006). As an ideal representation of work, family, and gender relations (Blair-Loy and Frankel 2005), the single-earner model of domestic life is
embraced in conservative welfare states like Germany (Fuwa 2004; Geist 2005). More egalitarian arrangements prevail in the social democratic countries of Scandinavia. The societal context also conditions the relation of micro-level variables with the division of housework. Wife’s full-time employment matters more for household task sharing in countries with greater gender parity in the political and economic spheres (Fuwa 2004).

Cross-national differences in public opinion on the appropriate roles for men and women are well documented (Alwin, Braun and Scott 1992; Treas and Widmer 2000). Culture provides cognitive models to guide and rationalize behavior (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004). For example, where it is dominant, the breadwinner-homemaker model offers a convenient, off-the-shelf means of organizing one’s own domestic life. Ready-made cultural practices minimize the transaction costs (conflict, negotiations, trial-and-error) that personalized arrangements require (Treas 1993). Bolstering cultural templates, societal institutions support dominant, taken-for-granted models of family life. This raises the costs and lowers the rewards of alternative family arrangements. Sending children home at mid-day, Swiss schools presume stay-at-home mothers (Charles, Buchmann, Halebsky, Powers and Smith 2001). The lunch and after-hours programs at American schools presume that mothers work for pay outside the home. Dominant practices have both pragmatic and normative currency. They offer efficiencies, and they are seen as morally right and appropriate to emulate.

Within countries, public opinion is an indicator of the relative frequency of contact with individuals who hold, say, traditional gender values. Contacts influence an individual’s attitudes and behaviors by virtue of social comparison processes (Festinger 1954) or the availability of particular reference groups (Kelley 1952; Merton 1957). As broad conceptions of desirable outcomes, personal values influence behavior (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004) although the link between attitudes and action is generally weak (Ajzen and Fishbein 1997). Values that are important to the self are more likely to be expressed in congruent behavior (Verplanken and Holland 2002). Because gender identity is central to self identity, it is not surprising that holding “traditional” gender attitudes is associated with a traditional, i.e., specialized, division of household labor (Coltrane 2000).

Hypotheses and Rationale

Gender specialization implies that spouses develop different skill sets, motivations, and personal stakes in doing or avoiding various gender-typed
activities. These differences work against their augmenting or substituting for one another’s labor. People in gender-specialized marriages are expected to be more likely to turn to kin or others, rather than to spouse, for assistance in everyday life. Both individual and country-level indicators of gender specialization are expected to be associated with the choice of husband, kin, or others for household help or emotional support. The analysis focuses on women for three reasons: 1) Men virtually always choose their wives for household assistance. 2) A number of married men said they talked to no one about their feelings – substantiating the assertion that emotion work is not a traditional male skill. 3) Men are, if anything, more specialized than women, as they are less likely to take on the household tasks associated with the opposite gender (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie 2006).

Based on the discussion above, two individual-level hypotheses test whether specialization works against spousal assistance.

1) The more the wife works for pay, the more likely she is to favor her husband over kin and others for help. Working wives have less specialized marriages than do women who do not work for pay. When the full-time homemaker needs extra help with housework, she will be less likely to turn to her husband. Presumably, he will have little housekeeping experience and will lack the skills and motivating feelings of competence and responsibility for domestic tasks.

2) If there are children in the household, the wife will be less likely to turn to the husband for help than if there are no children. As research shows, children lead husband and wife to take on more “traditional” gender roles. Because this specialization means the husband will have limited experience and felt-obligation for “woman’s work,” the wife is expected to turn elsewhere for casual support and assistance.

At the country-level, hypotheses predict that greater gender specialization at the societal level will influence the choice of helper, net of the wife’s characteristics and the couple’s degree of specialization.

3) Wives who reside in a country where husbands participate more in female-typed household tasks will be more likely to rely on the husband for help than wives in countries where husbands participate less. As discussed above, the dominant model of domestic arrangements in a country will influence attitudes and behavior, either via social comparison or reference group processes.
4) Wives who reside in a country where public opinion is more liberal regarding women’s work and family roles will be more likely to rely on husbands for help than wives in countries with less liberal public opinion. Public opinion on the appropriate roles for women indicates the degree of support for gender specialization. Public opinion influences individual attitudes. Attitudes, particularly those tapping salient values like gender, will influence behavioral choices.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to theorize control variables, previous research points to factors to be considered in a study of the division of labor between husband and wife. Specialization has been negatively linked to the wife’s education, reflecting her resources in household bargaining or the gender egalitarian influences of higher education (Shelton and John 1996; Coltrane 2000). Being negatively associated with husband’s participation in household labor (Coltrane 2000), age captures cohort or age differences (Artis and Pavalko 2003). Kin availability is also controlled, because close family members are the leading alternatives to relying on a spouse. In addition to having a surviving mother and adult child, not having been residentially mobile increases contact with kin (Fischer 1982).

Data and Methods

This paper analyzes the 2001 Social Networks Survey data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). This analysis covers 26 countries, including Australia, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany (East and West), Great Britain, Hungary, Israel, Japan, Latvia, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, The Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. Countries were limited to those also participating in a 2002 ISSP survey, the source of macro-level indicators. The ISSP is conducted by independent organizations in member countries, often as part of on-going studies. There are sampling differences, but the surveys are intended to be representative of national populations. The response rate (interviews completed for eligible cases) averaged 56.9% over the 23 countries that provided necessary data to calculate responses (Klein and Harkness 2001).

Respondents are women, 18–65, who were married or, according to the conventions of a few countries, “living as married.” The very few
married women who named no potential helpers or no confidantes are excluded. Pooling across countries yields an effective sample of 7823. Because country samples are small, ranging from 103 in East Germany to 478 in Russia, caution is advised in evaluating estimates on particular countries, but the multi-level models are robust. We report weighted data.

Dependent variables come from two items in the 2001 ISSP: “First, suppose you had the ’flu and had to stay in bed for a few days and needed help around the house, with shopping and so on. Who would you turn to first for help?” “Now suppose you felt just a bit down or depressed, and you wanted to talk about it. Who would you turn to first for help?” Responses were recoded into three categories – spouse, kin, and non-kin other. The wife’s work status (full-time, part-time, not employed/homemaker) is an indicator of gender specialization. Preliminary analyses show that husband’s availability (i.e., employment status) is unrelated to the choice of helper. The presence of a child, 0–17, in the household also reflects on the degree of specialization, consistent with parents’ more traditional domestic arrangements. The data do not permit us to distinguish between small children who raise the demand for housekeeping and older ones who supply help. Dummy variables indicate whether or not the woman has a surviving mother, has an adult child, and has moved after age 17 from the community where she was born.

Two country-level measures relating to gender specialization, both standardized by sex, are constructed from the 2002 ISSP Family and Gender survey. Attitude toward gender specialization is measured with five Likert-type attitudinal items: 1) A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works, 2) All in all, family life suffers when a woman has a full-time job, 3) A job is alright, but what women really want is a home and children, 4) Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay, and 5) A man’s job is to earn money; A woman’s job is to look after the home and family. The country-specific mean – with higher values meaning more liberal views of gender roles – is derived from a factor analysis for male and female respondents (alpha = .67). Parity in the division of household tasks is the country-specific mean, reported by married men and women, 18–65, for a scale of who does five female-typed, household chores. The chores are laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping, caring for sick family members, and meal preparation. Responses are recoded to “1” (always the woman) to “5” (always the man). Omitting cases with responses on fewer than three items, the scale score is their summed value divided by the number of items with complete data.
For each dependent variable, we first consider the results for a weighted, baseline model of the micro-level independent variables. The dependent variable is a set of unordered categories (husband, kin, other). A multinomial model simultaneously considers the likelihoods of turning to kin versus husband and others versus husband. Then, we test whether these likelihoods vary as a function of country-specific indicators of gender specialization. Using HLM software, multinomial hierarchical models estimate the individual-level model as well as incorporating the country-level variables in a macro-level model (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). HLM multinomial logistic models permit the individual-level predictors to have different associations with the probabilities of turning to kin versus husband and others versus husband (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). For each country, HLM provides empirical Bayes estimates of the predicted preference for kin versus husband and others versus husband, net of controls. The Bayes coefficients for independent variables are similar to coefficients from a multinomial logistic model with a dummy variable for each country (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002), but HLM uses information from the total sample to produce estimates for each country that are closer to the mean effects.

The multinomial logit link yields a pair of equations at the individual level:

\[
\eta_{1ij} = \beta_{0j(1)} + \beta_{kj(1)}X_{kij},
\]

\[
\eta_{2ij} = \beta_{0j(2)} + \beta_{kj(2)}X_{kij},
\]

where \( \eta_{1ij} \) is the log-odds of respondent \( i \) turning to her kin in country \( j \) (relative to husband), \( \beta_{kj(1)}X_{kij} \) are individual-level independent variables for the log-odds of turning to kin, \( \eta_{2ij} \) is the log-odds of turning to others (relative to husband) in country \( j \) and \( \beta_{kj(2)}X_{kij} \) are individual-level independent variables. Because individual-level variables are centered at their grand means, the effect of, say, age, is the deviation it produces from the overall log-odds of turning to kin versus husband (or others versus husband) for a married woman with average characteristics on the other individual-level variables. Each respondent’s log-odds equal her country-specific intercept.

The country-level equation predicts the log-odds of turning to kin versus husband (\( \beta_{0j(1)} \)) or others versus husband (\( \beta_{0j(2)} \)) as a function of the country-level measures of public opinion and domestic arrangements with all individual-level characteristics fixed. The equation takes the form:
\[ \beta_{0j(1)} = \gamma_{00(1)} + \gamma_{0k(1)} W_{kj} + u_{0j(1)}, \]
\[ \beta_{0j(2)} = \gamma_{00(2)} + \gamma_{0k(2)} W_{kj} + u_{0j(2)}, \]

where \( \gamma_{00(1)} \) is the country-level log-odds of turning to kin (versus husband) in a “typical country,” \( \gamma_{0k(1)} W_{kj} \) are a vector of controls, \( \gamma_{00(2)} \) is the log-odds of turning to others (versus husband) in a “typical country,” \( \gamma_{0k(2)} W_{kj} \) are control variables for the log-odds of turning to others versus husband, and \( u_{0j(1)} \) and \( u_{0j(2)} \) are random effects at the country level for turning to kin versus husband or others versus husband, respectively. With the error term included, HLM produces predicted values for the intercept of the typical country (i.e., averaged over all countries). All individual- and country-level predictors are centered at their grand means.

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### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics: Married Women, 18–65, in 26 Countries, 2001

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<td>0.50</td>
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<td>−0.53</td>
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**Figure 1.** Distribution of Turning First to Husband, Other, or Kin for Help around the House: Married Women, 18–65, in 26 countries, 2001

**Figure 2.** Distribution of Turning First to Husband, Other, or Kin for Emotional Support: Married Women, 18–65, in 26 countries, 2001
Findings

In the pooled sample, three-fourths of married women say they turn to their husband first for household help when they are sick (Table 1). Women who do not turn to their husbands for household help almost always rely on family members rather than non-kin others. When they are depressed, half of women talk to their husband first. The rest are evenly split. About a quarter of all women opt for kin and another quarter for others. Figures 1 and 2 show the country-to-country variation in the percent of wives who rely on husbands. As seen in Figure 1, although 95% in Norway turn first to the husband for household help, only 47% in Chile do. As for emotional support, the numbers in Figure 2 range from 74% in Norway to 35% in Latvia. The Spearman rank order correlation of .70 indicates that countries where women rely on husbands for housework tend to be ones where they look to them for emotional support, too.

Help Around the House

In Table 2, we consider the choice of household helper. Model 1 shows the association of individual-level variables with the choices of kin versus husband and others versus husband. With homemakers as the omitted reference category, wives with full-time employment, an indicator of low gender specialization, are predictably less reliant on kin (left panel, \( p < .001 \)) and on others (right panel, \( p < .05 \)) as opposed to the husband. Part-time employment does not differ significantly from homemaking at the .05 level. Minor children, who are known to prompt gender specialization, are also associated with greater reliance on kin as compared to husband (\( p < .001 \)). Children are unrelated to relying on others versus husband, however. Age is not statistically significant for the choice of kin over husband. Net of kin availability, however, older women are more likely (\( p < .05 \)) to choose non-kin others, perhaps paid helpers, for household assistance. Wife’s education is not statistically significant. As expected, the likelihood of turning to family members rather than husband for household help is significantly higher when the woman has a surviving mother (\( p < .001 \)) or an adult child (\( p < .001 \)). An adult child is negatively associated (\( p < .05 \)) with choosing others over husband. A wife’s residential mobility is negatively associated (\( p < .001 \)) with choosing kin, but not non-kin, over the husband.

Macro-level variables are added in Model 2. Controlling for the individual-level variables, women in countries where husbands, on average, perform more of the “feminine” household tasks are significantly less
likely (p < .001) to turn to kin over husband for household assistance. There is no significant association between the degree of task-sharing in a country and the wife’s choice of others rather than husband. In countries with more liberal attitudes on gender roles, respondents are, as hypothesized, less likely to favor either kin or others over husband. At the bottom of Table 2, the components of the between-country variance show that taking account of individual-level differences can explain 16% of the variance (.725 − .606)/.725 for the choice of kin versus husband and 5% for others versus husband. With individual-level variables controlled, country-level indicators further reduce the variance—explaining 59% (kin versus husband) and 40% (others versus husband). Country-level variables are quite important, but the model better accounts for the helping patterns for kin versus husband than for non-kin others versus husband.

**Emotional Support**

Table 3 considers the person the wife talks to when feeling depressed. For individual-level variables, wives who work full-time
for pay are again less likely (p < .001) than homemakers to favor kin instead of husband. With non-kin others, full-time workers are not significantly different from homemakers, but women who work part-time are more likely than homemakers to choose non-kin over the husband (p < .05). Predictably, minor children are associated with higher odds of choosing confidantes who are family members (p < .001) or non-kin others (p < .001) over the husband. Older women are more likely (p < .05) to turn to someone besides the husband for emotional support. Better educated women are less likely (p < .05) to talk about problems with kin rather than the husband, but education is not significantly associated with the choice of others. Having a surviving mother or an adult child is associated with a preference for kin over husband (p < .001). The availability of these relatives is unrelated to the choice of others over the spouse. Mobility is associated with a lower likelihood of favoring relatives (but not others) over the husband for emotional support (< .001).

At the country level, parity in household chores was relevant for the choice of household helper, but it is not significantly related to the preference

<table>
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<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 0</th>
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<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 0</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kin vs. Husband</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>Education (logged)</td>
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<td>0.741*</td>
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Variance Components

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<th>Model 2</th>
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<td>Intercept variance</td>
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<td>0.232***</td>
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<td>0.157***</td>
<td>0.166***</td>
<td>0.161***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variance explained</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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Significance level (one-tail): * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001, N = 7823
for emotional supporter. More liberal public opinion on gender roles, however, translates into weaker preference for emotional support from kin (p < .001), but also from others (p < .05), as compared to the husband. For kin versus husband, the country-level variables explain a substantial share (42%) of the variance between the countries after individual-level factors are controlled. In contrast to household help, the variance components show that the model accounts for little of the preference to turn to non-kin others rather than the husband for emotional help.

**Conclusion**

The downside of gender specialization in the household is that the labor of husbands and wives is not completely interchangeable. Partners cannot always substitute for one another, nor can they readily augment one another’s labor. Couples where the wife works for pay deviate from the extreme gender specialization of separate spheres. As hypothesized, wives’ full-time paid employment is associated with a lower likelihood that women will rely on kin instead of their husband for help around the house. Although we lack individual-level measures of the husband’s household work to parallel the wife’s market work, the results are largely consistent with the argument that specialization in the household division of labor reduces the substitutability of labor. Other individual-level variables known to be associated with specialization also predict to whom a woman will turn. Couples with minor children, for example, are known to take on more conventional (i.e., specialized) gender roles. Our analysis shows that women living with minor children are, indeed, more likely to favor their kin over their husband for household help as well as emotional support.

Country-level characteristics matter more than do individual ones such as the woman’s labor force status, as shown by the variance components for macro-level and micro-level variables. Just living in a country where public opinion and predominant household practices reject strict gender specialization is associated with a significantly lower likelihood that women will favor kin or others over the husband for help around the house. Of course, low household specialization may well reflect a country-level labor demand for gender substitution (say, as evidenced by women’s high levels of education, employment, and representation in traditionally male occupations).

Overall, the husband is the generally preferred provider when assistance is needed. In 25 of 26 countries studied, women look first to their
husband to help out around the house when they are sick. In 17 countries, they look first to their mate for emotional support. Wanting a spouse’s assistance is consistent with the “hierarchical compensatory model,” which posits ordered preferences for caregivers based on the primacy of the relationship (Cantor 1979). It also squares with the “task-specific” model, which assumes particular tasks favor helpers whose characteristics map to the demands of the task itself (Litwak 1985; Messeri, Silverstein and Litwak 1993). The task-specific model explicitly recognizes that tasks requiring a high level of technical knowledge and a complex division of labor argue against informal supports like family and friends (Messeri, Silverstein and Litwak 1993). Our analysis of household gender specialization—with its implications for skill sets and performance motivations—suggests that staffing dilemmas can also be posed even by low-tech tasks with only a two-person division of labor.

Strict gender specialization in marriage partitions skill sets and motivations of husbands and wives and, thus, favors reliance on same-sex kin and others. Because strict gender specialization has been on the decline, the gains to specialization are no doubt declining. In the U.S., married women’s labor force participation is now so common that women are increasingly selected into marriage based on their wages (Sweeney 2002). Married men have increased the time they spend in household chores (Gershuny 2000). Men may now be selected into marriage based on their potential contributions to housework, rather than merely on their earning power (Press 2004). Of course, gender complementarities may well be increasing, as Becker speculated (1981). Men spend more hours in childcare than they used to (Bianchi and Mattingly 2004). This implies that greater complementarities (that is, labor inputs from both parents) are now required to raise children.

Gender specialization also flounders on the modern ideal of the companionate marriage, which holds that marital satisfaction depends on shared leisure time, joint decision-making, and a break-down of the sharply gendered division in domestic labor (Kalmijn and Bernasco 2001). In an era of individualistic reflexivity, the distinction between instrumental males and expressive females is outmoded (Parsons 1954). Emotional work, once a largely feminine skill, is increasingly demanded of husbands, because the intimacy of mutual disclosure is said to be the hallmark of satisfied couples in “pure relationships” (Giddens 1992). A married woman’s happiness is found to depend not merely on her household division of labor, but also on her satisfaction with the affection and understanding her husband shows her (Sanchez and Kane 1996; Wright and Acquilino 1998; Wilcox and Nock 2006). Emotional intimacy makes
extreme gender specialization problematic, not because partners must substitute for one another’s labor, but rather because contemporary norms for marriage call on them to reciprocate one another’s efforts in kind.

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REFERENCES


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