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Housework in Pair Relations

Strategies of Coping with the Division of Household Labor - Findings from Germany

(Talk given at the Annual Meeting of Midwest Sociological Society (MSS) „Mobilizing for Change“, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States, 31.03.-03.04.2005)

1. Introduction

In this paper attention is drawn on a so far little investigated area of the societal change of gender relations and family structures, namely housework-related everyday life practices in intimate relationships. The results presented here stem from a research project on the division of household labor within different forms of unions: married and unmarried couples, spouses with one or with two separate households and with or without children.¹

For the investigation reported here I used qualitative analyses of interviews and additional information from a standardized questionnaire. My objective is to show how coping with housework-related discrepancies may or may not lead to a change of the labor division in the household. Strategies of coping are examined partners employ in reaction to stress caused by dissatisfaction with the perceived sharing of housework. That means, theoretically, housework is considered as a factor that causes stress that individuals have to cope with. This micro-analysis of individual behavior and of pair interaction can contribute an answer to the question why – on the macro-level – the traditional division of household labor in Germany has remained remarkably stable during the last decades.

¹ Research has been funded by the The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) 1999-2002 and by The Fritz Thyssen Stiftung (Fritz Thyssen Foundation) since 2004. For the overall theoretical framework and the results of the combined analysis of standardized and not standardized data see Huinink and Röhler 2005.

At first I will specify the German situation. What we find in Germany is a puzzling discrepancy of two macro-level findings: on the one hand there has been high stability of traditional patterns of the division of household labor in Germany (e. g. Bundesministerium für Familie 2003), whereas on the other hand there is substantial evidence that gender ideologies and gender relations have been changing. A growing number of female and male individuals have modernized attitudes towards the sharing of housework (Künzler 1999). That means, firstly, that the reason for the very slow change of household realities cannot be seen in a “cultural lag” between modernized economic realities (above all women's labor force participation) and the persistence of traditional gender ideologies, as prominent feminist authors suggest like for the United States Arlie Hochschild (1989) and for Germany Elisabeth Beck Gernsheim (1992). Secondly, explanations of this puzzling phenomenon that accept that a change of attitudes has taken place, tend to assume that men hold merely hypocritical attitudes and are “not really” willing to contribute to the household tasks. So a newer qualitative study comes in the German situation to the conclusion that latent gender norms undermine the intellectual agreement over equal sharing of household matters in highly educated Double-Career-Couples (Koppetsch and Burkart 1999). However, these explanations are not satisfactory as they give no convincing argumentation of *how* old gender norms override new attitudes. That suggests that interaction processes related to housework must be further examined in order to gain a better understanding of the possibilities of initiating change in housework patterns.

In search for better explanations it seems useful to look in closer detail at the micro-level of housework-related pair interaction. This could help, so the starting point of my analysis, to develop a more convincing explanation for the above stated discrepancy, on the basis of deeper insights in the dynamics of spouses' interaction that contribute to a certain division of labor within the household. The analysis of the interaction process divides into two parts. First part is the investigation of the individual coping strategies a person employs if she or he experience cognitive and emotional dissonance between the perception of the realized housework situation and the expectations stemming from the person's self concept. Secondly, the interaction of the individual coping behavior on the pair level must be considered. This should answer both questions how a certain division of housework is stabilized or changed through individual action and how emotional, cognitive and structural factors work together in this process.

2. Theoretical model, method of data collection and sample construction

The basis of the theoretical modeling of the housework-related coping behavior are the widely used theories of Social Psychology on coping with stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), furthermore theories of control behavior (Rotter 1966; Heckhausen and Schulz 1998; Hoff and Lempert 1990) and Hochschild's theory on emotion management and the employment of gender strategies (Hochschild 1983; 1990).

A certain division of housework that has been established within the relationship is perceived and evaluated by the actor according to his or her expectations (for the following explanation see Figure I at the end). Stress occurs if the expectations concerning the labor division between the partners are missed. Then negative emotions have to be managed and primary and secondary strategies of control are employed in order to diminish the cognitive and emotional dissonance between the real housework situation and the ideals of the person's self concept. Emotion management is necessary in both possible ways of coping: if an action is undertaken in order to change the division of housework what is called a strategy of primary control and, too, if a cognitive restructuring takes place in order to adapt to the circumstances, that means a strategy of secondary control is employed. In the first case, emotion work is used to prepare for a certain action, for example feelings of love towards the partner are suppressed to be able to engage in an argument with him or her. In the second case, emotion management helps to adopt one's own perception to the contents of the self concept, for example if anger about the partner's low participation is suppressed and positive feelings about his engagement in other spheres of the relationship are highlighted.

The used method of data collection is a problem-centered interview (Witzel 1995) that has gained some prominence in qualitative research in Germany. This interview method was combined with a standardized questionnaire that included sets asking for the socio-psychological factors of the theoretical model (as for example: gender ideologies, locus of control, control strategies, self esteem, pertinacity and flexibility (as predictors of control behavior)) and dimensions of partnership presumed to influence the perception and dynamics of housework issues (quality of the relationship, satisfaction with it, exchange orientation and communal orientation).

Table I: Survey Sample of the Study „Housework in Pair Relations“
(64 pairs; this is 128 individual interviews; cpls. = couples)

region of socialization	GDR/GDR (30 couples)			FRG/FRG (30 couples)			GDR/FRG; FRG/GDR (4 couples)	
household integration	one household (24 cpls.) / LAT			one household (24 cpls.) / LAT			one household (4 cpls.)	
relationship status / children within the union ↓	married (12 cpls.)	non married (12 cpls.)	married / non married (6 cpls.)	married (12 cpls.)	non married (12 cpls.)	married / non married (6 cpls.)	married (2 cpls.)	non married (2 cpls.)
no children (32 couples)	6	6	3	6	6	3	-	2
with children (32 couples)	6	6	3	6	6	3	2	-

The sample includes 64 couples (128 interviewed persons) in different living arrangements (married or non-married; with one household or „living-apart-together“ (LAT) in separate households; with and without children; people who were socialized in East (former GDR) and West Germany (old FRG)). For an overview see Table I above. The underlying assumption of this sample construction was that differences in the housework- related coping behavior could be identified in respect to the above characteristics.

3. Empirical analysis and results

In this section method and theoretical framework of data interpretation will be reported as well as the results of my investigation.

Methodically the housework-related coping episodes that occurred in the persons' narrations were reconstructed following the schema of the above mentioned theoretical model of coping (compare Figure I at the end). Several pieces of background information were taken into account: the questionnaire data on the division of household labor and information about the premises of housework with parents and in previous life phases and pair relations.

The interpretation of the interview material turned from a complex theoretical framework that differentiates between three types of housework-related coping behavior. In opposition to the

main stream of the research on housework, that focuses one-sided on the work done within the household and neglects the impact of the specific interaction in intimate relationships, these pure types (*Idealtypen*) take into consideration the interplay of pair integration and household activities. In the process of interpretation I applied a categorization of social relations that was established by Max Weber in his considerations on „basic sociological terms“ (see Weber 1978: 40-43). The main assumption of my categorization is that all contemporary relationships are based on the code of romantic love and that is why the feeling of the partners that they belong together is founded on affectual reason in the Weberian sense. Probably, this assumption seems to be a banal one. That it is not can be shown by the fact that the interplay of romantic love and housework-related interaction has not been systematically considered in research so far. Referring to this assumption and Weber's categorization contemporary pair relationships can be considered as affectual communal relationships (*affektuelle Vergemeinschaftung*, Weber 1978: 40) but they differ in the ways of dealing with the housework issue and, dependent on that, in the ways how work and love interrelates. Using Weber's categorization again to differentiate the housework aspect (see Weber 1978: 40-43), there are as one type affectual-traditional relationships (*affektuell-traditionell*), where gender roles dominate the housework-related behavior. A second type is affectual-associative relationships (*affektuell-vergesellschaftet*) where individualized partners deny gender roles and want to share housework equally. Yet another relationship type I will call affectual-pragmatic (*affektuell-pragmatisch*) because here persons will organize the household entirely due to their preferences what means that equality is not aimed at by the partners. This is, with respect to the dealing with housework, a type of associative relationship (*Vergesellschaftung*) as well but it is not aimed at the rationally motivated adjustment of interests (*Interessenausgleich*), as in the affectual-associative type, but at a rationally motivated agreement (*Interessenverbindung*). The latter type is especially interesting as individualization (Beck 1986) and pursue of equality do not go along, a case that has not considered in research so far, for the focus was on traditional versus egalitarian couples.

Now I turn to the results of the empirical analysis. An outstanding result is that it could be shown that affectual-pragmatic arrangements of pair relationships are not only a theoretical built pure type but do exist in the data. This variant of interrelation of pair integration and housework-related interaction opens new perspectives for the consideration of the future of housework. Individuals in these relationships are highly individualized and organize

housework according to each partner's preferences so that it fits their individualistic practices of self-realization. For the integration of the relationship the sharing of work between the partners is unimportant as long as everyone can follow his or her preferences even if this entails strong inequality of work loads. Not justice is the mode of integration but the acknowledgment of the self of the other person with all its idiosyncratic aspects including preferences towards housework. So there is no reason for negotiations about fairness. Important is instead to acknowledge all facets of the other person's self that are important to this person. The relationship concept of these partners is an association of two autonomous people who let each other enough freedom for self-realization.

The partners of the second type of pair relationship are individualized, too, but in addition to that they are also exchange orientated and understand their relationship as a balance of input and output. They negotiate about the just sharing of the work to be done and its pay-offs and, therefore, housework becomes a field of arguments and conflicts, too. Concerning these negotiations, the partner who has least interest (for the general concept see Waller 1930) in housework (e. g. because of lower standards of order and cleanliness) has an advantage, for this person can wait until the other one gets active and by that profits from the higher interest of the partner. This is because most products of housework – like a clean kitchen or a tidied-up living room – are public goods (Olson 1965) within the relationship and the partner can not easily be excluded from using them. The principle of least interest plays an important role in the pragmatic relationship type as well but it does not lead to any conflicts there because there is no association with exchange orientation and claims for equality. However, this mechanism supports a traditional division of household labor although both partners want to share equally. This is because women chiefly have higher standards of housework and, thus have a higher interest in engaging in household activities. This argumentation is a more satisfactory explanation than the concept of “latent gender roles” (Koppetsch and Burkart 1999).

The last, well-known, type, I only mention here, contains relationships where partners act according to overtly held gender roles. The interaction of the partners' strategies stabilizes traditional housework arrangements. We find two subtypes here: one is to be found in middle class couples where housework is part of the “affectual” romantic love arrangement and thus the man's involvement is taken as a sign of love. The household is here an important aspect of

the pair's communal integration (*Vergemeinschaftung*). The second subtype is represented by the working class family where sex spheres are strictly parted, the man is the breadwinner and the woman the homemaker. In this subtype the household is only a matter of adequate gender role display and therefore there is no linkage to emotions of romantic love.

4. Conclusion

In sum, it can be argued that processes of everyday interaction in pair relations stabilize traditional housework arrangements, even in those couples where partners have modernized gender ideologies. This contributes to answer the question why only little change of traditional housework patterns has taken place although individual gender norms have been widely modernized. The qualitative analysis suggests that, along with the decline of the liability of socialized role demands and, too, with the implementation of modern relationship codes, there is a "new need for structuring" in pair relationships. This need is met by certain interaction mechanisms like for example the principle of least interest that, as I argued, leads to an unequal sharing of housework. As mostly women are more socialized to identify with household activities they have often a higher interest in doing housework, a constellation that leads to traditional patterns of labor division. However, and this is a very important finding, the new mechanisms of pair interaction that structure housework have also the potential to individualize housework-related pair arrangements and thus bring about greater variety on the micro-level of spouses' interaction. Namely the spread of the affectual-pragmatic type of pair interaction can cause more differentiation in housework patterns. If this micro-level differentiation leads to a decrease in the occurrence of traditional housework patterns on the macro-level, depends on whether, on average, women lower their interest and men develop a higher interest in housework activities.

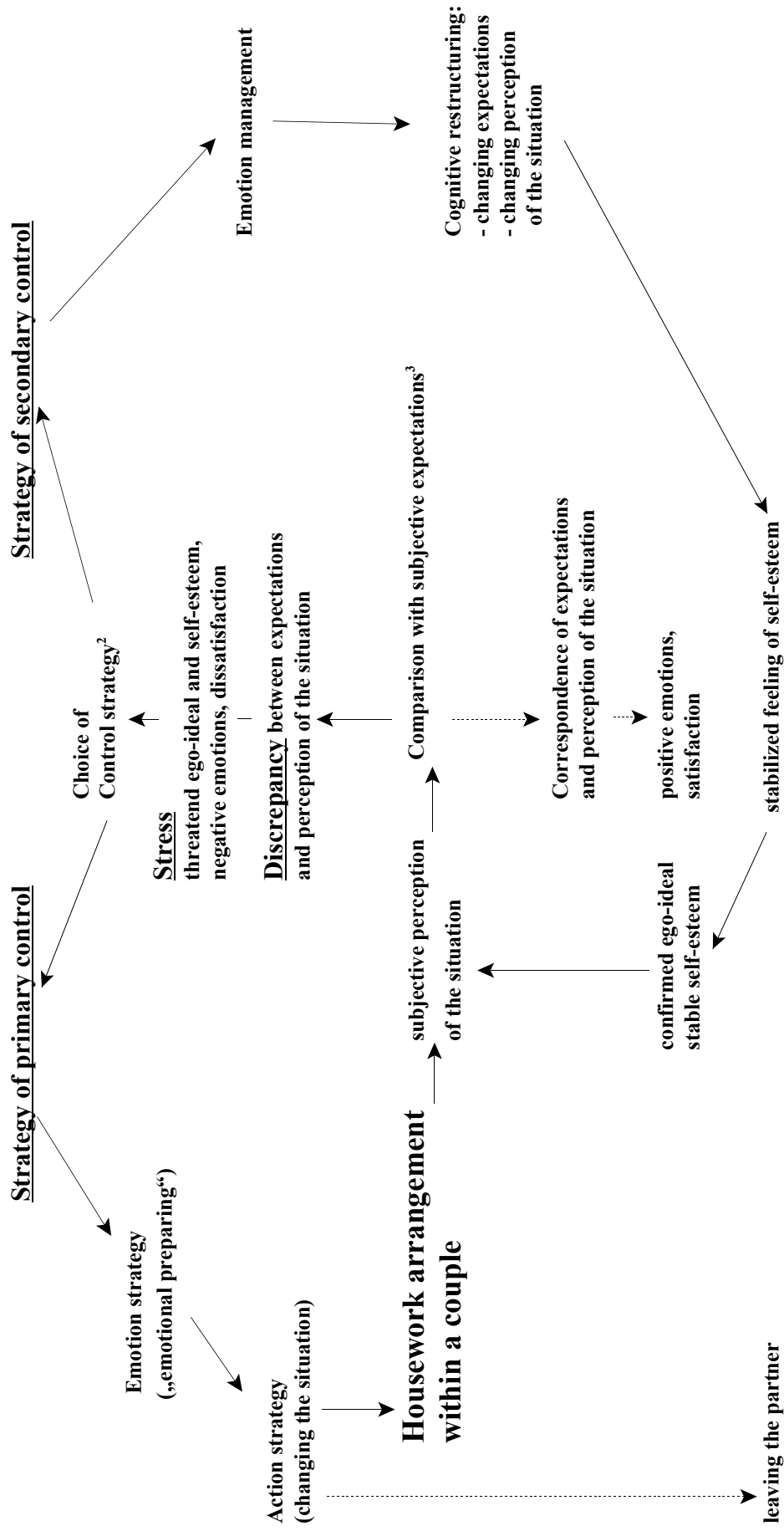
To say more about future tendencies would afford to operationalize the qualitatively built up classification and undertake some quantitative research in order to know, firstly, about the distribution of the three relationship types within the whole (German) population and, secondly, to know more about how great the variety is of the patterns of housework-related interaction by now. The latter question is an important one to be clarified because today's degree of diversity of housework arrangements within couples with children is the starting

point of „individualized“ socialization processes that even will increase diversity of housework patterns in the next generation and by that contribute on the macro-level to an un-gendering of the sharing of household labor.

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Figure I: Individual housework-related coping with the labor division between spouses



² depends on subjective expectations, perception of the situation and perceived locus of control.

³ are determined by the housework-related contents of the actor's self-concept.