

WHAT IS WORK?
Looking at all work through the lens of unpaid housework

by

Margrit Eichler and Ann Matthews

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Introduction

Without any doubt, work is one of the most important topics in sociology. But what is work? Various sociological dictionaries define work in a manner that includes paid work as well as unpaid housework, only to proceed to immediately exclude the latter from consideration.

Reskin, for instance, suggests:

Although the term “work” generally is used to denote the exertion of effort toward some end, economically it refers to activities oriented toward producing goods and services for one’s own use or for pay. The conception of work as a means of generating income underlies most sociological scholarship on work and most of the available statistics. Unpaid productive work, including that done in the home (indeed, homemaking is the largest occupation in the United States) and volunteer work, tends to be invisible. This article focuses primarily on paid work.(Reskin 2000: 3261)

Other definitions likewise allow for the inclusion of unpaid housework, but then deal only with paid work (Nolan 1993; Marshall 1998; Johnson 2000). Unpaid housework is therefore formally acknowledged as work but in fact not considered relevant in the discussion of work - neglect with a long history (see Eichler 1978).

Housework has been explored as a specific type of work (see for example Lopata 1971; Oakley 1974; Eichler, Guppy et al. 1977; Luxton 1980; Hochschild 1989; Oakley 1990; DeVault 1991; Shelton and John 1996; Hochschild 1997; Luxton 1997; Luxton 2001) in considerable detail. Women perform more of it across the world than men. Unpaid housework and care work produces services and goods of significant economic value (Budlender and Brathauf, 2004; Chandler 1994; Ironmonger 1996).

But what do we mean when we talk about housework? The majority of sociological studies use a list of specific housekeeping tasks, sometimes including childcare, sometimes excluding it. (It is for this reason that we will consistently talk about housework and care work in one breath.) These lists tend to focus on concrete and specific tasks: preparing meals, cleaning, going shopping, etc. They typically do not include the cognitive and planning work and the time management that lies behind these

concrete and very mundane tasks.

“Responsibility for the household involves performing work that is largely mental ...” (Hessing 1994: 613). It often involves coordinating schedules, planning while keeping in mind the needs and desires of persons of different sexes and ages, negotiating conflicts, solving crises, and much more. In most of the sociological literature, this complexity is not reflected. A detailed critique of this literature is presented elsewhere (Eichler and Albanese, 2004) here we merely want to note that the dissatisfaction with the manner in which housework is conceptualized and operationalized provided a starting point for this project.

In the project described below, we started by exploring how people themselves saw the unpaid work they performed within the home. This led to a fascinating set of discussions of what work is and is not. In this paper, we draw on these discussions to reflect on the nature of all work: why are some purposeful activities seen as work and others not? How do these perceptions mesh with how sociology deals with work?

Feminist scholars have argued for decades that unpaid housework and care work is real work by pointing out parallels between paid work and unpaid work. In this paper, we do the opposite: starting with unpaid housework and care work, we explore what makes some activities work and others not for our respondents. We then compare their understanding to the way in which the sociology of work conceptualizes and operationalizes work, and explore the consequences of the various approaches.

The Study

The project on Unpaid Housework and Lifelong Learning is part of a large-scale study on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL). (See <http://wall.oise.utoronto.ca/> for a description of the complete project.) The unpaid housework study consists of four phases. At the time of writing this paper we have completed the data collection for phases 1 and 2. The first phase involved sending questionnaires to members of various women’s groups, asking about the nature of their unpaid housework and community work and the learning attached to it. (see Eichler, forthcoming) The second phase involved 11 focus groups that follow up on some of the findings of the questionnaires. In this paper, we will draw primarily on the focus groups.

We held 11 focus groups in 3 cities. Groups ranged in size from 4 participants to 9. The ages of participants ranged from 23 to 84 years. With respect to racial/ethnic background, most groups were homogeneous: one consisting of Chinese women, two of black women, one of Aboriginal women and one group of women with disabilities from varying backgrounds. The rest of the participants were white. Overall, the ethnic composition was as follows: 21% black, 14 % Aboriginal, 14% Chinese, 4% other, 47% white. Two groups consisted of men only; all others consisted of women only. All the men, except for one Chinese man, were white. Twenty percent of the participants had disabilities. Fifty-two percent had children at home, 48% did not, 14% were never married, 62% currently married or partnered, 21% separated or divorced, and 3% widowed. Fifty percent had a

personal income below \$20,000 (11% a household income below \$20,000) and 5% a personal income (11% a household income) of over \$100,001. Finally, 35 % did not work for pay, 22% worked part-time for pay, and 31% worked full-time for pay and 12% were full time graduate students. In terms of education, our participants were disproportionately well educated: only 8% had high school or less, and 30% had a graduate degree.

In our questionnaire, we had asked open-ended questions about the unpaid housework and care work the respondents performed. The intent was not to find out what they did, but what they said they did. Would they restrict themselves to the lists of activities usually employed by sociologists? Would they also list some of the cognitive, administrative, emotional and management functions? As expected, the majority of respondents tended to list specific mundane tasks in the questionnaire, only a few listed higher-level functions (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Number of Mentions of Unpaid Housework/Care Work Tasks

Number of Mentions of Household Tasks	
Cleaning	249
Laundry	238
Meal preparation/cook/feed	227
Gardening/weeding/watering/yard work	184
Shopping	174
Dishes	149
Childcare	112
Maintenance, repairs, and building projects	106
Transportation	96
Health maintenance	91
Managerial/leadership/organizational work	91
Housekeeping	87
Money management	79
Garbage/recycling	70
Pet care	57
Entertainment	51
Plant care	45
Personal grooming/hygiene	44
General	36
Car	35
Sew	33
Communication/information	31
Decorate	31
Emotional support	29
Occasional work	20
Educational work	19
Social work/relations	18
Social activities	17

Administrative work	16
Gifts	16
Physical comfort	11
Cottage	10
Handicrafts	6
Other	5
Sports/Physical recreation activities	3
Computer (assistance/fix)	2
Cultural activity	1
Fundraising	1

This finding could have two reasons: either people did not engage in higher-level functions, or they were not aware of the fact that they did. We suspected that the latter was the case, and this is what we explored in the focus groups.

We posed eight questions in the focus groups. The questions relevant here are the following: We asked participants to again to list some of the unpaid household and care work they normally did, and received, as expected, much the same picture as is found in Table 1. We then asked:

Did you do any of the following tasks?

- provide emotional support to someone (comfort, console, counsel, give advice, listen)
- organise, plan, manage or arrange matters (e.g. family events or schedules, arrange repair people, tutors, play dates for children)
- deal with crises
- maintain contact with family members or friends through telephoning, writing letters or visiting
- take care of yourself
- resolve conflicts

Without exception, people in each of the groups would agree that this was certainly what they did. One participant exclaimed spontaneously “This is my life!” while the others in the group nodded and agreed verbally.

We discussed in some detail some of the ways in which people engaged with these tasks, and then discussed whether or not this constituted work and why or why not. After the group interview was completed, the tapes were transcribed and analyzed.

In the following, we will draw on this discussion to identify how respondents defined work.

Definitions of Work

There were five distinct conceptions of work that emerged from the 11 groups. These are not mutually exclusive definitions, instead, they represent conceptions of work that draw the boundaries differently in each case, thus including and excluding different sets of

activities and utilizing different rationales:

- a) the conventional definition (activities that are paid are work)
- b) the extended conventional definition (activities are work if they either could be paid or are directly related to paid work, even though unpaid)
- c) the goal achievement definition (purposeful activities that are oriented towards achieving some goal without being enjoyable at the moment)
- d) the social coercion definition (activities that are unpleasant, would not be done by choice, but must be done)
- e) the energy expenditure definition (any activity that requires energy and effort is work)

Each of the definitions draws a boundary around what counts as work and what does not. To understand the various conceptions of work, we look at the boundaries from the inside out and the outside in: what is included as work? What is excluded and regarded as non-work? Why?

a) The conventional definition

With a few exceptions, people agreed that activities that are paid are work. There was relatively little discussion around this issue, since there was little disagreement. As one older woman said: “If it’s work, you pay somebody to do it. It’s the money that makes it work.”

The only people who disagreed were some people who adopted the social coercion definition of work and argued that paid work that was enjoyable did not constitute work. Patricia, who had just started her own business, said: “I think work is something that ...you have to do and you don’t really want to do it. I work at my own business and get paid for it, and I enjoy it. I love it. I don’t consider it work.”

But by and large people accepted the conventional definition of work as one form of work. Some of the old women (over 80 years of age) struggled with two conflicting views: The view that only paid work is real work, with the recognition that certainly some of the housework feels like work not only to others but to them as well.

I’m of a different generation, and I have trouble, I guess ... I’m a social worker, and work, for me, was out, and I worked outside the home. ... it’s partly my generation.

These women had paid employment at a time when having a paid job was much less common for women in Canada than today. Their paid work preceded the animated discussions around unpaid work as work that started among feminists in the 1970s.

Likewise, the Chinese women, as a group, all agreed that none of the unpaid housework/care work activities under discussion were work, but acknowledged that they felt like work. “In China, women always do the housework. But we don’t take it as work. It’s really work, but we don’t take it as work, because [there is] no pay. There’s no pay.”

For the old women and the Chinese women, there is a discrepancy between the cognitive and the emotional experience of activities as simultaneously work and non-work. This was in sharp contrast to the two black groups, in which all participants regarded all of the activities under discussion as work.

We asked the Chinese women, if providing emotional support, solving crises, etc. is not work, what is it? “If you call your parents in China, or if you talk with a friend, is that work, or is it not work? And why, or why not?” One answer was “I think that’s my responsibility” and it is definitely not work. The women also maintained that it was enjoyable, and did not admit the possibility that it could ever be anything but a pleasure. This was very different from, for instance, the black women who talked freely about the complications of maintaining contact with their parents and relatives in Africa or the Caribbean - and who eloquently expressed both the joys and frustrations of maintaining such relations.

In the Chinese group, the discussion then turned towards looking after children. Xiaoming said:

...but for the take care of the children, sometimes, you must supervise him, like, every day....It’s very boring, but I have to. So, I just think, I must do that. It’s not work, but...it’s my duty.

We explored this issue further. Why was supervising your children not work? The answer was provided in very explicit cultural terms, and agreed to by all group participants: “Usually we don’t think some work happening in our family as work. We just felt as a duty, responsibility. We don’t take it as work.” Consciousness is the important issue here, as is manifested by the parting remarks of some of the Chinese participants. One of the Assistant Facilitators took notes of the comments made by the participants as they left the room, talking among themselves in Mandarin. An excerpt from her notes reads as follows:

I see everyone still excited from the conversation just held with Margrit. ...they are talking in Chinese. One says: “I’ve learned from Margrit that housework is work.” Another says: “Next time, I may argue with my husband and tell him what I have learned here if he would say I do nothing at home. I can even ask for payment for housework I do every day, hahaa –” Someone else agrees to say: “Now I know housework is work, but I did not realize/know housework is work before.”

Similarly, a recent immigrant from Kenya reported that she used to think of work as happening only outside the house, but that she learned in North America that unpaid housework is work.

When unpaid housework and care work are not seen as work because one simply does it, as part of one’s role as a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, daughter or friend, we are

essentially dealing with a pre-feminist as well as non-sociological understanding of housework. Role obligations are accepted so unquestioningly that they seem as natural, rather than socially constructed.

The focus on paid work led to three definitions of unpaid activities that constitute work, all centering around paid work. We are therefore calling it an extended conventional definition, since the rationale is still organized around pay.

b) The extended conventional definition

The three versions of an extended conventional definition are the third person criterion, the two-person career, and unpaid work that is a necessary background work for paid work.

b1) The third person criterion

This definition is favoured by economists when computing the value of unpaid work. Margaret Reid first proposed it in 1934 (Ironmonger 1996). The question posed is: Could this activity be done by someone else for pay? If so, it counts as work. Our respondents explicitly put forward this criterion. In particular, one of the two men's groups spent a considerable amount of time discussing this criterion, and people within the group largely agreed.

Paul, for instance, suggested:

When you're looking at it from the standpoint of a lot of the things we do, we can actually hire people to do them for us, but we choose not to. So ... we're not getting paid to do it, we're kind of using our time instead to do tasks.

When asked which tasks could be performed by someone else, people listed primarily unpaid housekeeping and child care tasks: "... you could hire a maid, people to clean your house, or nannies, child care, you can hire people to walk your dogs, home renovation, any repair work that you do."

Everybody within the group agreed that these tasks were work, but there was a discussion about some of the tasks we had listed. Michael, for instance, mused:

I agree that the other ones are work ... but a lot of these things require ... your own touch. And it's private. It's not as close as having to breathe to live, and you can't give somebody else the job to make you breathe ... but the example you have about conflict resolution. I mean, technically you could have a counselor doing something like that as well, but in a way, maybe the people you're dealing with wouldn't want to go to the counselor, they would probably think you're nuts to even suggest it.

Michael wavered whether or not conflict resolution between family members did or did

not constitute work. Bryan challenged him by arguing that because of the pleasure one gets from helping, for instance, one's parents, it is not necessarily work. However, when we challenged them by asking whether paid work is never pleasurable, people agreed that paid work could be highly pleasurable as well.

In the women's groups, the third person criterion definition came up as well and was pretty much accepted.

I do think it's work, because ... almost everything that some people can afford to pay other people to do it, and those who can't afford will just take on everything and do it. So it's all work.

One particular case deserves special mention: a young white woman who had actually implemented the third person criterion by getting herself paid by her husband. Babette recounted:

...the way we do our finances, my husband pays me for the time that I take care of the kids during the week, and he pays me for doing the finances and things, because otherwise, we would have to pay someone else. And what I was realizing is, I wasn't even breaking up my time into manageable tasks until he paid me for them, because I was just thinking that I have to get all of this done, and I should just be able to get everything done and everything. But, it just wasn't possible, so then I started paying other people and I thought, "Well, wait a second? Why don't I just pay me to do that?" You know, so, we shifted things around. So yeah, I do think of it as work ...

Since they do not claim the money transfer on their taxes, this is a symbolic transaction rather than one with legal meaning.

The third person criterion tends to be the one that is invoked when economists calculate the value of unpaid work. Ironmonger (1996), for instance, uses this criterion in his calculations of the value of unpaid housework, as does Chandler, who defines it as "those economic services produced in the household and outside the market, but which could be produced by a third person hired on the market without changing their usefulness to members of the household." (Chandler 1994: 3.1; see also Marshall 1998: 706; Grint 1998: 30).

b2) The Two-Person Career

Papanek (1973) defines the two-person career as a career that requires a husband-wife team to perform it but in which only the man is paid, while the wife renders supportive and necessary but unpaid assistance. The classic example is the wife of the "corporation man" of the 1950s-1960s (Whyte 1956) but it includes many other occupations. It also described the unpaid work of some of our participants.

Gloria, a retired university teacher in her 80's, recounts how she helped her second

husband, who was a politician:

... he said, when we got married and the Privy Council gave a dinner for us, he concluded his bridegroom's remarks by saying, "I hope you agree that a politician and a political scientist make good bedfellows." And then, along comes an election. That's when I really worked. I would knock on the doors and all the things you used to do for politics. I opened four and five church bazaars every Saturday. I found that work, although it was fun. I enjoyed it, too. ... I didn't earn any money that way, either. But, I don't know that I thought it was work. I just thought I was part of the team, doing something.

This is another example of the ambivalence of women who saw their unpaid work as a natural – rather than a socially constructed - part of their family role.

Marjorie, also in her 80's, was also involved in a two-person career and showed no such ambivalence:

My husband was in the Foreign Service, so I spent a lot of my time abroad. ... I had no doubt that was work. You know, it was supporting him, but I wouldn't have given a choice. ... My role as the wife of ambassador - that was work. Now, nobody paid me for it, and I was involved in efforts to ... try and get the department to look at whether they could do something about payments for the wives of ambassadors, because they really do ... a job.

Both women are typical examples of wives in two-person careers, which used to include wives in a number of other jobs, such as Minister's wife, executive's wife, etc. While it seems that the number of two-person careers has somewhat diminished, due to the fact that most wives today have their own job or career, it is by no means dead. (Mederer and Weinstein 1992; Frame and Shehan 1994)

b3) Self-care in preparation for a paid job

The third way in which unpaid work was directly linked to paid work and hence recognized as work involved self-care that consisted of making oneself presentable for a paid job. Self-care represents a most interesting borderline case of how work is defined, and we will consider it below in some detail. Here, we are only considering one particular aspect of it, which was non-controversial. As Dorothy explained:

... if I'm going to work, that's when you feel like you really have to make the effort, and to me, that's work. I mean, just getting up and washing your face and going about your day, that's one thing. But having to go to work, you have to do a little extra. ... I'm that much older, and I figure if I start looking sloppy or something, then I'll get dumped. ... now it's not that easy, so I have to make a little effort to look, you know, as presentable as you can. And that, to me, is a little bit more work.

Overall, then, the expanded conventional definition still takes its cues from our understanding of paid work. Unpaid work is recognized as work either because it unambiguously could be paid for because the service is in fact available on the labour market (the third person criterion), or it is the acknowledged support role for a paid position (the two-person career), or it is seen as necessary for successfully engaging in one's paid employment (self care in preparation for a paid job).

c) The Goal-Achievement Definition

The next definition was not one of the more prominent ones and was put forward only by a relatively smaller number of people. We are including it as a definition here anyhow, because it straddles some of the other definitions in an interesting way. It first appeared when discussing the role of a student in one of the men's groups. Was studying work or not was the question that was debated. All agreed that studying is definitely work. The question then was what made it work? The student responded:

There's no immediate gratification. I guess. You know, I'm sure once I get out into the working world again, when school is over, it'll all be worthwhile ... for the moment, I would say when you're working at any kind of academic work, I would consider it work, yeah.

Another group member responded: "So you're going to ultimately get paid for your education, in a sense."

One man contrasted this with his father, who loves to study languages in order to travel. He provided this, as an example of studying that is not work. If his had been the only application of the goal achievement definition, we would have classified it as another version of the expanded conventional definition of work. However, various people also applied it to non-paid work.

For instance, when asking whether playing with one's own kids was work or not, the first response was, with laughter, "Depends on the kids!"

One man explained that it was work because "... as an adult, I don't really get a lot out of the things that interest him, so it's not really pleasurable for me as much." He does it in order to foster his son's development. A mother of young children concurred:

We all put effort into all of these things, and don't necessarily get much back, sometimes, immediately. Sometimes, with children, it's years down the road that the effort you put into a particular thing will get ... some benefit for somebody down the road, in terms of a healthy adult.

The goal achievement definition of work implies that activities that are not intrinsically enjoyable, and that are engaged in because of some desired outcome in the future, are work, because there is no immediate gratification, and a definite goal is to be achieved. It may be something as specific as improving one's job opportunities through studying or

something as diffuse as helping a child develop in a positive way. This means that the goal achievement definition crosscuts the paid/unpaid divide. However, it was not a definition that was put forward by many people.

d) The Social Coercion Definition

A quite different view is an alienated view of work that considers activities that are hard, unpleasant, not freely chosen, drudgery, and difficult, to be work.

As one woman said: “For me, work is often something that you don’t want to do that you have to do in order to provide for your family. It can be paid, it can be not paid.” She cited as examples “Oh, I just love scrubbing toilets! (laughter) Or killing spiders, yeah that’s right up at the top.”

The definitions for this version of work were highly consistent across groups. Someone in one of the men’s groups suggested: “I’d say that work would be anything you feel like you must do. Or, or have to.” He went on to say that if you do something “out of your own good will, then I don’t believe that would be considered work” and cited as an example providing emotional support.

In spite of the fact that in all groups people tended to agree that paid work could be very enjoyable while still being work, there was widespread agreement that unpaid work that was not enjoyable was definitely work. Another example of unpleasant work was filing your papers. “That’s definitely work.” To the query of why this was so, the answer was “Well, if it’s unpleasurable and you don’t like doing it then it’s definitely work.”

The examples that were provided ranged widely. It was clear that it is not the activity itself that determines whether something counts as work or not, but whether the person dislikes doing it. If locus of control is external rather than resting with the person it definitely becomes work. Mary stated:

I guess it depends on how much control you have over it. Which is another factor for me, if I have to do something then I have to go into the work column [rather] than the pleasure column.

Providing emotional support to others was one of the activities where opinions diverged greatly as to whether this was work or not. Most people either stipulated the conditions under which it would be work and when it would not be: if it was strenuous, difficult, and not convenient at the moment but necessary, it was work. Barbara, for instance, recounts that “... when I’m taking care of my son, and supporting him emotionally, and I feel like I’m making a difference, that doesn’t feel like work.” She contrasts this with a situation where she feels this turns into work:

But then, when I have to really dredge it up to, you know, to really do the mental machinations. Okay, how do I tell him what words not to say without saying all those swear words myself? You know, that was work to do that. So, I think it’s

the amount of effort, the amount of satisfaction I get out of it.

Another mother of a young child included her own personal situation at the moment to decide whether something was work or not:

Sometimes, the exact same situation can feel like work or not feel like work. If you're feeling confident, well rested, on top of things, you can handle a meltdown really well, and you're satisfied at the end of it. You say, "Oh, I handled that really well." But, if you're hungry, and you're losing it, and your husband just told you he's going to work late another three hours, then it's work, so it depends, also, on those kinds of things.

Here again we find a situation in which a mother of a young child would prefer not to have to deal with a situation, but she is compelled to do so by circumstances. Like the provision of emotional support, maintaining contact with family and kin also generated considerable debate as to whether it constitutes work or not. One person summed it up quite succinctly when she stated: "To me, it depends on the quality of the relationship." She then recounted as an example that if her in-laws from Greece visit, it's work:

They are just high maintenance people who have high expectations and expect to be catered to, and always ask very difficult, probing questions, and put you on the defensive. Those people I find really difficult to have around. Whereas, we have some friends who we don't see enough of, because when they do come over, it's a pleasure to have them and cook for them, because they're happy with whatever I do. ... to me, that doesn't seem like work. That seems more like pleasure.

In this view, work is not determined by pay or its relation to pay, but by a number of variables which make it unpleasant. Either the work itself is intrinsically unpleasant - scrubbing toilets, killing spiders - or the work itself can range from pleasant to unpleasant, and then it depends on the circumstances as to which part of the continuum the activity falls - e.g. friends whose visit is a pleasure versus in-laws whose visit constitutes work. The quality of the experience can also be affected by one's own personal situation at any given moment in time: if feeling rested and energetic, an activity may not feel like work, but if feeling tired and stressed, the same activity may turn into work. It is definitely work when the locus of control is external - it is something that one must do, against one's wishes. It can be either paid or unpaid.

Work, in this case, is defined in terms of the experience of working, as well as by a feeling of being compelled. This feeling may be a reflection of an external compulsion - for instance, in the case of a woman who is married to an abusive man who insists on a certain level of service. It may be also an internalized standard of a behaviour that - although socially generated - comes with considerable leeway with respect to its implementation. For instance, when entertaining visitors there are differences in internalized standards as to what degree of cleanliness and hospitality are necessary. This may affect whether such visits are experienced as work or pleasure.

One of the men sums this definition up perfectly: “I think work is something that you have to do and you don’t really want to do it” - for whatever reasons, be they personal, impersonal, external, internal, inherent in the work or not.

e) The Energy Expenditure Definition

The energy expenditure definition came up in each and every group, including the group of Chinese women, which was the only group in which there was unanimity that most of the unpaid housework activities do not constitute work. While not every participant agreed with this definition, it was clearly the one that was most frequently put forward. The wording is almost identical between members of the different groups: “I think anything that takes time and energy is work. Whether you’re paid or not.”

This definition jives with that given in various social science dictionaries and encyclopedias. Reskin defines work as “the exertion of effort toward some end” (Reskin 2000: 3261; see also, Marshall 1998: 706; Nolan 1993: 715-716). The difference, of course, is that they then proceed to ignore the unpaid dimension of it, while in the focus groups the whole discussion centered on this type of work.

The most extreme version of this definition was put forward by just a few women, such as Heidi, who stated that all activities are work because life is work. “To me, anything that I do is work, whether I enjoy it or not, because ultimately, I reap something from it.” This included, for this woman, all activities, including those that would have been clearly identified as non-work by others, such as taking a bath, going to the movies, going out for dinner. It was not a point of view shared by many people. In effect, for her, non-work did not exist, but it was a distinction that just about everyone else could and did draw, albeit in very different ways.

What is not work?

What is perceived as not-work is clearly contingent on one’s definition of work. If the definition of work is that it is paid or that it supports paid work, then activities that are not paid and do not support paid work are not work (the conventional and expanded conventional definitions). If activities are defined as work if they directed towards achieving a specific goal, then those activities which are engaged in because of immediate gratification, where the activity itself is the goal, are not work (the goal-achievement definition). If work is defined as undesired activities that are engaged in because of some external or internal constraint, those activities that are freely chosen are defined as not-work (the social coercion definition). And finally, if work is defined as energy expenditure, then those activities that regenerate our energies are defined as non-work (the energy expenditure definition).

It was interesting to note that the term leisure did not crop up even once in the discussions. Instead, people talked about pleasure, enjoyment, and relaxation, as receiving, rather than giving energy. As one young white woman said:

You know, when I call my friends, to me, that's a joy, that's a pleasure. I do it because it fills my soul, and I want to do it, and I enjoy that communication, and it's a give and take relationship. As opposed to what I feel I do at home, which is give. A lot of giving, or the volunteer work is giving. ... It's almost an equally reciprocal relationship with my friends, and I enjoy doing that because I feel filled, I feel happy at the end of it.

For those who used the energy expenditure definition, non-work was whatever restored energy - which meant different things for different people.

Spiritual activities such a prayer, meditating, going to church, participating in healing circles for the First Nations' women were all examples of activities which replenished energy, and which were definitely non-work for most (but not all) people.

Barbara, a retired accountant over 80 years of age, who is astonishingly active as a volunteer in multiple organizations, stated:

When I was getting paid to be in public relations or advertising, it was work. ... But now that I'm doing that work as a volunteer, I do it because I believe in the organization's mission statement, and I do it because I'm working with women I enjoy being with. It's not work. It's like gardening. If it's a creative endeavour, it's therapeutic.

In this instance, the volunteer work is not draining, not done for an extrinsic reason - namely pay - but for the pleasure it conveys, it's therapeutic. In energy terms, it provides energy, rather than drains energy.

One definition of non-work that crosscuts the five definitions of work are activities associated with family or friendship roles that are taken as natural. This coincides with another divide: for whom the work was performed in order to determine whether it counted as work or not. Many - but not all - people drew the line narrowly around the self - if something was done for oneself, this was a reason for not counting it as work. People who drew the line this way very clearly considered the work done for their children, spouse, or close friends as work. However, as we will see below, the thoughts around self-care were considerably more complicated than stated here.

Others drew the line a bit wider. If the work was performed for members of one's own family, it did not count as work. This was the case with those who used a conventional or extended conventional definition of work. Those who held a social coercion view of work did not make the distinction whether the work was performed for their family or others, but looked instead at the quality of the experience.

Whatever the definition of work employed, the vast majority of participants did regard unpaid housework as work and not as non-work or leisure. Nolan (1993: 716). thus is wrong when he writes: "For millions of people work is synonymous with paid employment, and many activities which would qualify as work on the broader definition are described and experienced as non-work leisure pursuits."

How Do Participants See Self Care?

As we have seen, there was no agreement across groups or within most groups what aspects of housework or care work constitute work or not. The one point, where participants differed the most and where the various definitions came into clearest view, was self-care. We will therefore examine why people included or excluded various aspects of self-care in their definition of work.

Originally, we included self care in the list of questions we used in the focus groups because we had found a suggestion within the literature¹ that people with disabilities would have a different definition of what aspects of housework constituted work, and specifically that they would include self care when others would not. This did not turn out to be the case. There were no discernible differences on this issue between women with or without disabilities.

There were two extremes with respect to self care: on the one hand, the view that everything that takes energy is work, hence self-care is work, and on the other hand that nothing one does for oneself is work; work is by definition performed on behalf of others. Most people fell somewhere in between these two understandings of self-care. They drew the line between work and non-work in the following terms:

Preparation for self-care is work; enjoying the activity itself is not. For instance, preparing for taking a bath, going out for dinner, driving to do yoga, scheduling time for such activities is work, but engaging in the activity is not. As one young woman explains:

I would say it's work to make to make it happen. I had to make the decision to not go shopping, I had to come home, and then I had to assert with my family and say, "I'm going up to take a bath." And then I had to, you know, set the mood, with the candle in the bubble bath. I mean, that's work, right? But then, it wasn't work once I was in there - it was great.

Then there is the notion of minimal self-maintenance, which includes all activities that are needed to maintain your health and well-being and which may not be enjoyable or relaxing, but which are necessary. A middle-aged woman recounted:

I enjoy my yoga class, but all the way there, I'm sort of thinking, I'd rather sit in a coffee shop and read. My feet keep moving, but it's like, I really want these two hours in the coffee shop to just read. But afterwards, I'm always glad I did it. So, it is work, but I know ... I need it. ... So, I think taking care of myself physically, I try and make an effort to walk more. Just before I came here, I joined Weight Watchers for the first time. So, I had to make the effort to go there, and it was like work, and I thought, "Do I really want to do this?" And it's like, "Yes." For years, I've been trying to lose some weight in a healthy fashion, and I haven't been able to do it properly, and it seems like work. I think this is a good step. So, I made the

¹ Unfortunately, we have misplaced the reference.

decision, but it was work.

Everyone agreed that minimal self-maintenance means different things for different people. It includes looking after one's health, such as getting blood tests done, which no one saw as pleasurable, and it includes for at least one woman getting a massage - which others, with less muscle tension, saw as an explicit example of non-work.

Both preparation for self-care and minimal self maintenance are goal-oriented activities, engaged in to achieve a specific purpose: In the first case, to be able to engage in a pleasurable activity, and in the second, to maintain oneself in order to be able to engage in one's daily work. Various participants made this statement very explicitly.

We now have derived five definitions of work from our respondents. We will next compare them to the approach taken by sociology of work, and then consider the consequences for each of the approaches taken.

What Approach Does the Sociology of Work Take?

To understand the conceptual focus of the sociology of work a selection of books and articles in sociological journals were surveyed (Caplow 1954; Nosow and Form 1962; Berger 1964; Simpson and Simpson 1981; Wipper 1984; Watson 1987; Ritzer 1989; Abbot 1993; Lowe and Krahn 1993; Bender and Leone 1995; Auster 1996; Grint 1998; Castillo 1999a; Castillo 1999b; Vallas 2001; Cornfield and Hodson 2002). We disregarded publications that discussed work in a specific context. The intent was to find out the way in which the sociology of work discusses unpaid housework and care work.

Historically and up to the present, the sociology of work is associated most closely with the sociology of occupations and industrial sociology (Grint 1998). The focus in both areas is on the paid work of both men and women. The discussion of unpaid housework and care work is not entirely ignored in the sociology of work but is circumscribed in a particular way. Cornfield and Hodson (2002) note that one of the core topics is the movement of women from the home into the paid workforce. Unpaid housework and care work are discussed specifically within this framework, often under the general heading of gender, which in turn, is largely equated with a focus on women. Furthermore, "most empirical studies are based on male workers and tend to assume that women are oriented towards the home rather than work" (Grint 1998: 27). Abbott's (1993) research reinforces the finding that articles about work and gender (women) are connected to paid work concerns; the closest these articles come to talking about unpaid housework and care work is in discussions of the relationship between family and paid work. For instance, Auster (1996) and MacBride-King and Paris (1993) discuss the balancing act women perform in combining paid work and family. Valente (1995) considers the benefits for families who have working mothers, while Neuman (1995) reflects on the benefits that accrue to families from having stay-at-home mothers. Although authors, such as Caplow (1954) and Grint (1998), refer to unpaid household work as "work", they fail to recognize unpaid household work in any way other than its relationship to paid work.

Even when framing work as being paid and unpaid, the unpaid portion is not followed up on. For instance, Grint (1998) indicates at the beginning of his book that he will look at work in a very broad context. He states:

The ambiguous nature of work is a central theme running through this book. Rather than restricting the review to paid labour, and concentrating on male factory workers as much of industrial or occupational sociology does, it considers work in a rather wider perspective which includes unpaid domestic labour, which highlights the links between the sphere of employment and the domestic sphere, and which incorporates the notions of ethnicity and gender as well as class (Grint 1998: 1).

Grint has the fullest discussion of domestic labour of the books and articles surveyed. Nevertheless, he, like other authors and editors (Caplow 1954; Nosow and Form 1962; Simpson and Mutran 1981; Lowe and Krahn 1993; Bender and Leone 1995; Cornfield and Hodson 2002) only gives a nod to unpaid housework and care work. The majority of Grint's book continues to be focused on paid work. The problem, therefore, is not so much with the definition of work, but rather with the way that it is operationalized within the sociology of work.

Consequences of Each of the Definitions of Work

Definitions are not right or wrong – they are useful or useless. We will examine here what questions are opened up with each of the definitions. While the sociology of work tends to adopt a version of the energy expenditure definition in principle, *de facto* it adopts the **conventional definition**, by largely disregarding unpaid housework and care work.

As a consequence, the sociology of work concerns itself, at present, with only a slice of the total work performed. This becomes particularly problematic within policy contexts. When unpaid work is ignored, we cannot adequately assess the effect of various policies. For instance, the Canadian health system is currently being squeezed in terms of money and available staff, with the effect that patients are discharged to their homes much earlier than used to be the case. Such early discharges will likely result in a steep increase in the intensity of the unpaid care work performed by family and friends. A decrease in paid work leads to a direct increase in unpaid work. This should be factored into policy decisions.

Similarly, we found in our questionnaires that mothers of young children engaged in an astonishing amount of so-called voluntary labour on behalf of their children's schools. We found that fifty-nine percent of the women respondents, who had children with ages from five to fourteen years, did volunteer work for a school. If such efforts are truly voluntary and result in an enrichment of school programs, this is probably a positive factor, but we need to critically examine the effects of such voluntary work where it replaces work that used to be performed by paid professionals.

The **extended conventional definition** draws our attention to issues that were for a long time invisible. The **third person criterion** serves as one basis for calculating the economic value of unpaid housework and care work. The **two-person career** is tied to a particular employment type, and brings its shadow portion to light. **Self-care in preparation for a paid job** tends to be ignored in the sociology of work, although the housework literature addresses it somewhat in the notion of the social reproduction of self and others for the paid labour market. Extending the conventional definition therefore brings in some aspects of unpaid work that would otherwise remain obscure.

The **goal achievement definition** at present can be integrated into the energy expenditure definition, and we will discuss it in that context. The **social coercion definition** draws our attention to alienated labour under a capitalist system, and at the same time raises the interesting question to what degree unpaid housework and care work is socially coerced, through “doing gender”, and to what degree this coercion is externally applied versus being internalized.

The **energy expenditure definition** is, as we have seen, the one put forward by the sociology of work in order to be promptly forgotten. What would happen if we were to take it seriously? If we define work as energy expenditure towards a particular goal, the line between paid and unpaid work would not disappear, but would lose a fair amount of its significance. We would routinely look at all work performed by people, rather than just one segment, and consider all work as of equal relevance for understanding how societies work.

Energy expenditure raises the question of energy regeneration. Energy may be expended - and re-generated - through both paid and/or unpaid work or neither, depending on the nature of the work and the circumstances under which it is performed. Once aware of the need for energy regeneration we can ask: under what circumstances is work totally energy depleting, leading to burnout and eventual incapacity to work at all? Under what circumstances will energy be regenerated through work?

One of the points that became abundantly clear in the focus groups is that it is not the activity per se that determines whether an activity is perceived as work or not, but the conditions under which it is performed. This leads us to focus on the work environment rather than on the nature of the work. By work environment we mean the totality of the environment, including the built and natural environments, and the social, political, economic and spiritual environment. Spiritual refers to that which gives meaning to our lives and work.

This leads us to a slew of questions concerning both paid and unpaid work:

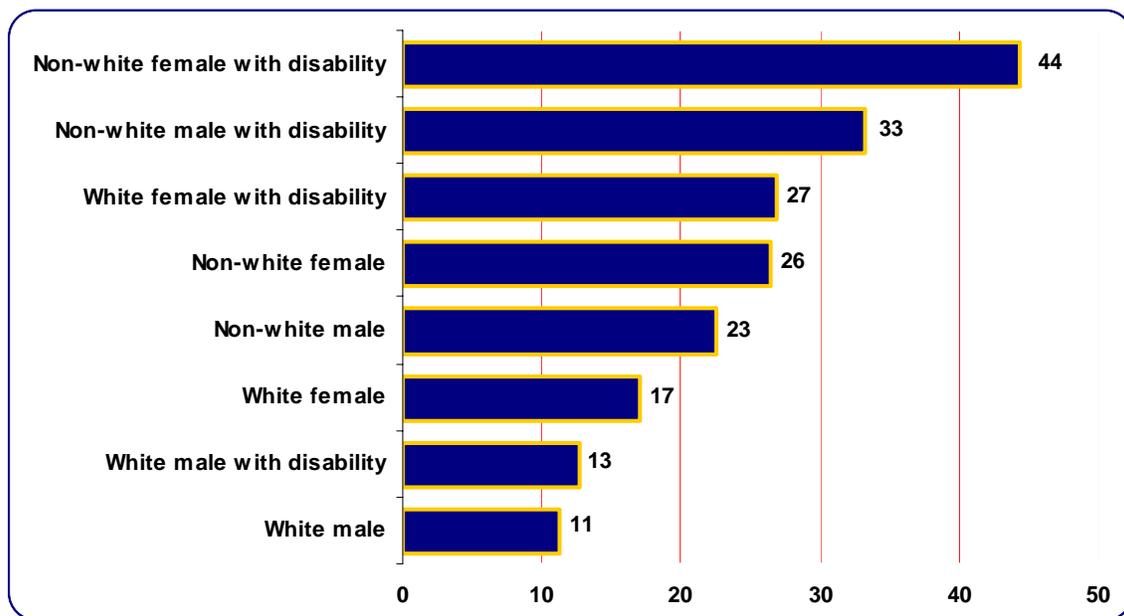
Work takes energy. Failing to look at what replenishes it is somewhat parallel to the way we look at the natural environment. Most often, the natural environment is treated as a resource to be exploited, without regard to the limits of this exploitation and for the need to restore a balance between what is taken out of it and channeled back into it. This raises the question whether our work environments are sustainable? What makes them

sustainable? What makes them unsustainable? Are the factors that make work environments un/sustainable the same for paid and unpaid work?

Taking the energy expenditure approach to work seriously, we could take into account the variable amounts of energy that are available to specific groups of people. People with disabilities, for instance, have long argued that we may have to re-define what counts as full-time work for particular subgroups.

Such an approach would also let us integrate an equity concern. It takes energy to deflect discrimination on the basis of race, age, sex, disability, etc. The WALL survey (2004) demonstrates that black and aboriginal people, as well as people with disabilities, feel that they are discriminated against more frequently than white people or people without disabilities, and they also report more stress on their jobs.

Table 2 - Job Discrimination by Race, Disability Status and Gender [%]



[Source: WALL, 2004.]

What are the costs of being discriminated against in terms of energy expenditure? How can the energy thus expended be replaced?

In order to develop this approach, we would have to develop measures for energy output and regeneration. Some obvious indicators for energy depletion spring to mind: number of burnouts, breakdowns, etc. We would also need to identify different types of energy, for instance, physical, emotional, intellectual (or mental) and spiritual energy. This is, however, beyond the scope of the present paper.

Clearly, taking the energy expenditure definition of work seriously would open the way to some interesting, important and innovative new questions.

Conclusion

The sociology of work and occupations is currently restricting itself largely to studying paid work, some gestures towards unpaid housework notwithstanding. Castillo suggests that the discipline needs a “critical evaluation and reformulation” (Castillo 1999b: 21) and that the sociology of work should provide an “analysis of real social problems” (Castillo 1999b: 31). He argues that the field should move beyond “the most serious type of sociological censorship, namely the use of ‘categories of thought which prevent certain things from being thinkable’” (Castillo 1999b: 34). He concludes “The future of the sociology of work lies in contribution to the theoretical - and political - task of revealing the real and complete nature of work, of production and of the situation of the men and women who work”(Castillo 1999b: 36). We concur, and wish that Castillo - as well as the other authors we surveyed - had taken his suggestion seriously.

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