

UNPAID HOUSEWORK AND LIFELONG LEARNING

by

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Introduction

There is a fundamental difference between looking at lifelong learning and paid work and lifelong learning and unpaid work: in the first instance, there is a large literature on the subject, in the second, there is almost none. In spite of the notion that informal learning deals with the daily life of people and with making sense of their lives (Garrick 1996; Collins 1998; Williamson 1998), unpaid housework has been virtually ignored in this context (Eichler 2005).

There is also another problem: while we generally understand what we mean with paid work, and while we can expect people to understand what their job is when we ask about learning within the context, this is not so with regard to unpaid housework. For a long time, unpaid housework was not regarded as work at all. While this has changed to some degree, even today we need to establish what constitutes unpaid housework (Eichler and Albanese 2004). We face the problem that many of the aspects of housework are performed without people being conscious and aware of the fact that they are performing this work (Eichler and Matthews 2004). And only when we have answered questions 1 and 2 can we even begin to address the third question: what does the learning look like? It is not possible to reflect on how we learn from what we do not know we are doing.

I will report here on one of the WALL subprojects. To understand the context I will briefly describe the overall project.

Description of Study

The project was informed, from the beginning, by a critical perspective towards the current sociological approach to housework and hence our understanding of what housework actually is. This starting point explains the structure of the overall project, and provides the context for my remarks of today.

The data collection consists of 4 phases. The **1. phase** consisted of a questionnaire sent to members of various women's groups (and to their partners, in one of the groups) in which we ask them what housework and care work they do and what they learn from it. We received 303 questionnaires back. The intent of this phase was not to find out what they do, but what they say they do. We

wanted to know whether the women (and the men) would come up with the same restrictive list that is employed by sociologists. The answer: most did have a list similar to that used by sociologists, some, however, listed many more activities. Most people listed cleaning, laundry, meal preparation, gardening, shopping doing the dishes, childcare if they had children at home – the familiar items on such lists. A few listed emotion work, maintaining social relations, administrative functions and other superordinate activities. This means that the majority of respondents were not aware of the full range of activities they engaged in at home, although a few were highly aware of it.

The 2nd phase consisted of 11 focus groups, and here the intent was sixfold: to find out:

1. the range of activities actually performed
2. whether the activities change over time
3. which activities are considered work and which are considered non-work
4. why activities are considered work or not
5. what they learn through their activities and
6. how they learn what they learn

The major emphasis in this phase was on understanding the conception of work, both unpaid and paid.

Groups ranged in size from 4 participants to 9, with a total of 66 participants. The ages of participants ranged from 23 to 84 years. With respect to racial/ethnic background, most groups were homogeneous:

- 1 group of older white women
- 1 group of younger white women
- 1 group of mixed age white women
- 2 groups of disabled women (1 white, 1 racially mixed)
- 2 groups of black women
- 1 group of Aboriginal women
- 1 group of recent Chinese immigrant women

With respect to family status, within the groups

- 52% had children at home, 48% no children
- 14% were never married
- 62% were currently partnered
- 21% were separated or divorced
- 3% were widowed

With respect to income

- 50% had a personal and 11% a household income below \$20,000

- 5% had a personal and 11% a household income over \$100,000

With respect to paid work:

- 31% were working full-time for pay
- 22% were working part-time for pay
- 12% were full-time students
- 35% were not working for pay

In other words, it was a highly diverse set of groups, with one exception: in terms of education, our participants were disproportionately well educated - only 8% had high school or less, and 30% had a graduate degree.

In the groups we asked respondents, whether they did any or all of the following activities:

- provide emotional support to someone (comfort, console, counsel, give advice, listen) –parallel to Hochschild’s studies of emotion work (Hochschild 1989; Hochschild 1997)
- organise, plan, manage or arrange matters (e.g. family events or schedules, arrange repair people, tutors, play dates for children) – parallel to DeVault’s work on food provision (DeVault 1991)
- deal with crises
- maintain contact with family members or friends through telephoning, writing letters or visiting – parallel to Stack’s notion of “kin keeping” (Stack 1997)
- 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.

Phase 3 consisted of a follow-up interview with 70 people who had responded to the WALL survey and who had gone through a major life change within the last 5 years:

5	“	“	5	“	who had lost a job
5	“	“	5	“	who had taken a new job
5	“	“	5	“	who had lost a partner
5	“	“	5	“	who had acquired a child
15	“	“	5	“	who were disabled
15	“	“	5	“	who had immigrated to Canada from China

This aspect of the study focuses on the learning that is attached to the major life change. The data collection of this phase is completed, but some of the

transcriptions are still on-going.

Phase 4 is currently under way and consists of interviews with 10 house cleaners and 10 nannies who do the same work for pay and without pay. This phase focuses on the difference in the work when it is done for pay and without pay.

Current Definitions of Household Work

Looking at current definitions of housework, we find two predominant approaches:

1. Housework (or domestic labour) is treated as a self-evident category and not defined at all.
2. In lieu of a definition we find an operationalization of housework through a list of tasks that are identified (Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990; Horrell 1994; John and Shelton 1997; Sanchez and Thomson 1997; Kamo and Cohen 1998; Baxter 2000; Kamo 2000; Rivières-Pigeon, Descarries et al. 2001; des Rivières-Pigeon, Saurel-Cubizolles et al. 2002; Bittman, England et al. 2003). This comes in a number of variations. Some authors provide lists of specific tasks (cleaning, meal preparation, shopping, etc.)
3. .One variation lists broad areas of activity (e.g. housekeeping and childcare tasks). Another variation employs the third person criterion – only such activities are included that can be delegated to a third person, such as cleaning, cooking etc., but activities that benefit the doer of them (watching a film, taking a bath, etc.) are excluded (Chandler 1994; Ironmonger 1996). In all instances, however, it boils down to a list of activities selected by the author, rather than the participants. By contrast, the definition we are proposing is generated through the responses in the focus groups.

Beyond the operationalization of the concept that we found problematic, an analysis of the sociological literature demonstrated a few other characteristics we wanted to test empirically.

Treating housework as unchanging vs. changing

First, the very lists imply that the activities are unchanging. One always needs to clean – at least a bit – provide food, clean clothes, etc. However, we found that housework and care work varies drastically by one's life cycle stage. The nature of the tasks change – e.g. children grow older, parents grow frail, friends fall ill.

If we simply ask what people do, these changes may not be apparent. When we asked in the focus groups how their life, and therefore their housework and care work had changed over the last five years, we found two types of changes: dramatic changes and gradual changes that take place over time. An example of a dramatic change is provided by Rosie, a young black mother who reflected that

five years ago she was living with her grandmother, now she was in a new union and helping to raise a step-child. The step-child has asthma. This has major implications for her housework and care work:

So there's a lot of things ... the house has to be clean, no dust, you know, regular maintenance of you know his room, especially, and the carpet in his room, making sure that he's always at the doctor, and you know, making sure that he's well taken care of. ... he's my boy as much as he is my boyfriend's boy, and like I sacrifice for him. You know, there's a time when I want these shoes, and it's like ok I can't buy it, because he needs something. So it's just constantly compromising and putting others before yourself.

The presence of the child has an effect not only on the cleaning requirements, but also on her financial management and her time management (he needs frequently to be taken to the doctor).

An example of a gradual change is provided by Alberta, a retired white woman in her 80s. She muses:

When I was working, I used to come home every Friday night, and I cleaned my house from top to bottom, did all my laundry, and everything. Now my house is lucky if it gets hoovered once a month. (laughter). I just can't – I don't understand how I did that, worked all day till 5, came home and did all this, you know? And now, I look at the dust on the coffee table and I pat it and I say, maybe tomorrow. (laughter) ... I was always known to my brothers as the cleaning bug, "she's forever cleaning." And they were laughing when I told them. ... I had to do it a wee bit more regularly when I had my dog. Because of the hair and everything. But now I can't be bothered. I can get up in the morning, and come through, and sit, and have my breakfast, and don't bother. I mean, I'm involved in so much community work, my council work and everything, that I [don't] have time for that. But as far as cleaning the house, and like – one of the ladies said she does the dishes once a day, well I do them maybe once every two days. They get a rinse and that's it. But it's true. It seems to be that we adopt a different attitude when we seem to reach the age, I think – I did it at 75.

When we asked "What changed?" she simply answered "I changed".

Conceptualizing housework as performed by wives and husbands (women and men) only within their own household vs. conceptualizing it as also performed by others and across households.

Second, sociologists seem fascinated by figuring out how much housework is performed by wives vs. husbands. The answer is that wives always perform more housework, although the size of the gap varies. While this is, indeed, an

important issue, the consequence of this preoccupation is an image that housework is basically performed by wives and husbands, sometimes women and men, within their own homes. Very rarely are children included as not only creating work, but also doing some work. What is missing in this picture is the paid and unpaid work by adults other than husband or wife that is performed within one's household, and the fact that many people perform housework outside of their own homes.

Our questionnaires showed that 59% percent of the women said that they performed some unpaid housework for someone outside of their own household, 49% said they received such unpaid out-of-household help, and 48% received some form of paid help with their household work. Putting these various activities together, 76% either received and/or provided unpaid help with housework, and if we add paid help into the equation, a total of 86% of the women indicated that there was some exchange of housework across households on either a paid or unpaid basis. We cannot generalize these findings, since we used an opportunity sample, but it does demonstrate that a) housework is performed across and not just within one's own household, and b) housework is performed by people other than just wives and husbands – it includes adult children, parents of adult children, friends, neighbours, and others.

The lists of activities typically focus on the repetitive, mundane tasks – cleaning, cooking, taking out the garbage, etc. Only rarely do they include the mental aspects, even less often the emotional aspects, and never the spiritual aspects – which we found in our focus groups to be important for our respondents.

Focussing on the lower-level physical work rather than higher-level work including mental and emotion work.

Third, the lists typically include housekeeping activities such as cleaning, cooking, shopping, that are considered mundane, repetitive, and requiring low skill. This ignores that much housework is also mental work as well as emotional work. Some of it requires sometimes very complicated planning, often the more complicated the more people live within a household. Other aspects involve careful – and sometimes exhausting – emotion work. For instance, one of our Aboriginal women described how she had to deal with her brother until it was recognized that he was a schizophrenic.

Integrating care work incompletely through including childcare but excluding all other care work vs. integrating all care work into housework

Finally, childcare is often included under housework. This means, that the current understanding of housework includes a portion of care work, but excludes other care work. If someone is looking after an aged parent, or a disabled adult child, sibling or spouse, this is typically excluded. This makes little sense. We therefore include all care work under the overriding concept of housework.

A New Definition of Household Work

On the basis of our data we have defined housework as follows:

Housework consists of the sum of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual activities that are performed for one's own or someone else's household to maintain the daily life of oneself or others for whom one has responsibility.

This definition is quite different from current definitions. Briefly, it foregrounds the mental and emotional tasks over the physical tasks. It adds a spiritual dimension which has so far not received attention in scholarly housework research. It integrates all caring functions with housekeeping functions. This solves the dilemma that is currently created through the artificial overall separation of these two functions with the partial integration of some aspects of care work – namely childcare – with the concomitant exclusion of care for adult children or other adults. It allows for the possibility that housework may be exchanged across households and that it may change with the people for whom one has responsibility – in other words, that it changes with the life cycle. It thus allows the creation of a dynamic rather than a static picture of housework.

Unpaid Housework and Lifelong Learning

The next comments are still tentative, since we have just started the analysis of the learning part. I am here drawing on only 10 of the 70 interviews we conducted in our follow-up with the WALL respondents. These are the 5 women and men who were selected because they lived in Toronto, had volunteered for a follow-up interview during the WALL survey and had lost a partner through divorce, separation or death within the last five years. The hypothesis behind this was that people who had lost a partner would have to learn to live differently, which would require different skills in their housework. However, we asked respondents to identify the major events that had happened to them in the last 5 years and then select the one that was most significant for their housework. If they identified another event, the interview used the event they had chosen as the focus for learning.

Dimensions of Learning

Following our definition of housework, I am examining whether people who had gone through a major life change (phase 3) learned something within each of the four dimensions of housework we had identified earlier: mental, physical, emotional and spiritual (in phase 2).

The questions were not phrased around these four dimensions, but instead around some very concrete skills (e.g. did you learn to cook differently because of the major event?), some more abstract questions (e.g. did you learn to solve

conflicts differently because of the event?) and some very broad questions (did you think about yourself differently? and did you learn something about the meaning of your life?)

Fitting the answers within three of the four categories was simple, the only case in which there were some difficulties was in the dimension of physical learning – for the simple reason that no task is *simply* physical, there is always a mental element attached to it. I therefore reinterpreted this dimension as referring to relatively simple, basic skills that have a clear physical aspect.

Learning about physical, basic tasks

We did find that for some people there was considerable learning about very simple basic tasks. For instance, Jeffrey, a 58-year old postal worker, whose wife divorced him five years ago, obviously had not done much of the regular housework while he was married. After the divorce, he had to learn how to cook and clean. As an example, with respect to cooking, he learned that

You can't rush things. You can't turn the heat up high thinking it's going to get done faster.

He also learned that you cannot use ordinary soap in a dishwasher and that you cannot cook eggs in the microwave.

Sondra, a retired Superintendent of Community Services, had to learn a number of basic skills after the death of her husband – how to put the extension leaf into the table, and how to move furniture by herself. “I remember buying these things from Canadian Tire that you put under pieces of furniture that you can move, which I would never have needed previously because there's two people to move things ...”

Munaza, a doctor from Pakistan, whose husband had tricked her into emigrating to Canada, then stayed in Pakistan himself with his new love, had never cooked before, nor cleaned, nor shopped, nor looked after her own children. The cooking was done by her mother, mother-in-law and servants, her mother would buy produce from carts that came to the house and sold their wares at the door, and other regular housekeeping functions such as cleaning, doing the laundry, picking up things, etc. were all performed by servants.

She arrived in Canada in the winter with two small children, very little money, no friends, and no job. She had to learn how to clean, to shop for unfamiliar items, to cook, to tidy up, to do the laundry, and how to deal with her own children. She has not yet made close friends, but she learned from neighbours, TV – especially the cooking channel - reading, the internet, trial and error, and from her children.

Learning about mental tasks

A number of people learned about tasks that can be clearly categorized as mental skills, such as time management, organizing one's house and life, budgeting their finances, etc. Munaza said that due to her move to Canada and having to learn to run her own household: "I am a more skilled organizer, as far as household is concern." Overall, however, this was not a subject that was mentioned frequently. Indeed, more people said that they had unlearned organizational skills than learned. For instance, Sondra, noted that after her retirement "if anything, I've become more disorganized than I used to be." Compared to a paid job that requires a certain type of organization, the structure of housework is to a greater degree created by the self, which is a more difficult thing to achieve.

Learning about emotional work

The big surprise was that each of the respondents stated that they had learned how to deal with emotions better. They had all sustained a loss, although the severity of the loss was very different. At the one end, Jimmy, a young man who had split up with his girlfriend had since married another woman, at the other end, Teddy, in his early 70s, had lost his wife of 53 years and was still grieving.

Nevertheless, going through a loss made everybody in this group except for one woman more empathetic. They learned what behaviour is helpful and what is not helpful: listening is helpful, immediately mentioning their own experiences is not helpful, being open to someone else's concerns and making oneself available when someone else has a need to talk is helpful, initiating a contact in such a situation also helps. They all professed to be more proficient in this area than before the event.

Munzana, a doctor from Pakistan who treated a lot of refugees describes how what she has learned since she came to Canada will be useful for her work as a doctor. A highly self-reflective woman, she talks about how dealing with her own children has taught her patience, and how she would apply this – and the experience of her own pain – in her work. In Pakistan, she understood the pain and frustration of her patients intellectually, but she never related it to herself, because they were clients, she was Pakistani, and on the other side of the table. "But now I know what they would have gone through, because now I consider myself in the same position, when I am applying for the job or anything." Now she has herself experienced "the pain they were going through", and she feels that this will make her a much better doctor – once she manages to get a job in Canada in that capacity.

The one exception to learning emotion work, Marie, a 65-year old woman who was widowed twice said "I don't have any family. They are all gone. There isn't a soul that's alive." She made this statement in spite of the fact that she lives

together with her 44-year old son. She is clearly isolated, and not a person who would easily trust anyone. “I’m not saying that I don’t trust the odd friend, but basically speaking I don’t trust anybody.” Nevertheless, she does claim that she is good at listening to other people, but says that she has not “learned anything! I just automatically know what to do.” However, considering her degree of social isolation, her skills at emotion work do not seem very convincing.

Spiritual learning

We define as ‘spiritual’ anything that gives meaning to one’s life.¹ We asked people whether because of the event (either the loss of their partner or whatever they had defined as most important) they thought about themselves differently and whether it had changed the meaning of their lives. We introduced this question because this was a prominent and completely unexpected part of our findings in phase 2. Especially the disabled women, the black and Aboriginal women talked about spiritual learning. We were not sure what to expect, but after some initial surprise all respondents gave thoughtful answers to both questions, and all indicated learning in this area.

Sondra reflects that the meaning of her life is different now that she no longer has her challenging job. “I guess what gives life meaning ... now is to reflect back on the contributions I made, and how in many cases people have gone and built on those, have taken work I started and advanced it, so that’s very satisfying.”

Teddy, whose wife died unexpectedly, has learned to do “things when you are able to do them, and don’t keep putting them off. There were a lot of things that we were going to do that we ... kept putting off, and, darn it, we shouldn’t have done it.”

Jay, a Japanese handyman, who had broken up with his girlfriend, but had since acquired a new girlfriend, was reflecting on what he owed his parents. His older brother was thinking of taking his wife’s name, which put the onus on Jay to provide a child that would carry on the family name – the one thing that he felt he owed his parents. His parents brought him into the world – he felt he needed to repay them by bringing forth the next generation, and felt torn between this obligation and the fact that his girlfriend could not have children.

The mode of learning: social vs. individual

We tend to think of housework as being carried out within one’s own home and therefore as somewhat isolated. However, when we checked how people learn, we did find that they learned by doing, reading, from TV/radio, tapes and videos, the internet etc., all of which are activities which may be carried out alone, but we

¹ We thank Lois Wilson for this definition.

found an even stronger social component. Everybody said that they learned from someone more knowledgeable than themselves, as well as from professionals.

Table 1

Modes of Learning by number of people who mentioned it:

Mode of learning	# of people who mentioned it
Learn from someone more knowledgeable	10
Learn from professionals	10
Learn by doing	9
TV/radio	7
Trial and error	7
Discussion with friends/others	6
Reading	5
Experience	5
Watching someone else do it	5
Just know how to do it	3
Internet	2
Classes	1
Therapy	1

While much of the learning is experiential (learning by doing) and an important part can be carried out by a person alone, it is clear that there is a very strong social component.

The Failure to Learn

Most people learned significantly through their housework. However, we also found instances in which people did not learn. We believe that it is just as important to study when people learn as when they fail to learn.

I will briefly consider the case of Teddy, a man in his early 70's who had recently (less than a year before the interview) lost his wife of 53 years. This man had clearly led a marriage with a traditional division of labour, in which the wife did all the housework. Her death deprived him not only of her company, but also of the comforts that go along with having someone else perform all the housework on a daily basis.

Due to the fact that his wife did the housework, Teddy found himself at a loss with many things when she suddenly died. While he learned some of the basic skills such as using the microwave oven, cooking remained a big problem for him. He stated emphatically that it is "one of those things I can't do", only to observe that he does not want to do it, "maybe that's it".

His daughter comes once a week on Sundays and cooks a meal for him. She also prepares a shopping list for him. His neighbour prepares an occasional meal, and recently he had taken Meals on Wheels for the rest of the time. Although he complained about the quality of the food, he did not learn to cook, nor did he want to learn. He said quite clearly that he was not a cook. "I never was, I never will, I hate doing that sort of stuff." As a consequence, the quality of his life has been drastically reduced.

He also needs a cataract operation, but is concerned how to put in the drops. He is not sure he can do that by himself. "So, I've put that off for this year, and hopefully it won't get so bad that they can't be done next year sometime."

He has learned other things: for instance, to be careful to use his puffer four times a day, to provide emotional support to a friend of his wife in need of support, to be more sympathetic when someone has suffered a loss, and to clean windows.

He has not learned to organize a situation so that someone would be able to help him with his eye drops if he is not able to do it himself, to cook properly or to do his laundry. Indeed, he has not tried to learn these skills.

Teddy is not the only one who has not learned certain skills. Most of the respondents mentioned things that they had not yet learned something when we asked about this. For example, Kathryn feels that she needs to learn to organize her time better, Jimmy feels that he has more to learn with regard to buying household cleaners, Sondra would like to become more efficient in her housework, John is planning to learn to handle his sleep, his debt and his stress better, and so on. The difference between Teddy and the others is that Teddy is unwilling learn, whereas the others intend to learn the skills they mention. It seems that willingness to learn as well as failure to learn should be routine issues looked for in all instances when studying life long learning.

Conclusion

As we have seen, housework leads to learning that is mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Given that I have here considered only one subset of the interviews we conducted in phase 3 – those who experienced the loss of a partner within the past 5 years – it is likely that the emphases in terms of learning will be different in the other subsets.

But people not only learn – some also unlearn some skills, and some do not learn certain skills at all. This raises the question of the motivation to learn. In unpaid housework, there is no monetary gain in terms of promotion on the job, a higher salary, etc. to be gained by learning. Learning is done for its own sake – sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of the desire to do things better. We

unfortunately did not ask why people learn, we only asked what they learn, how they learn, and from whom they learn. Some, however, volunteered why they learn, and the answer was often "out of necessity". Nevertheless, some refuse to learn when outside observers would think that it would be necessary to learn something, such as in the case of Teddy who put off his cataract operation because he was afraid he would not be able to put in the eye drops?

Expanding research on lifelong learning to include unpaid housework leads us to place the emphases somewhat differently. It alerts us to the fact that learning has at least four dimensions: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. It suggests that it may be useful not only to focus attention on why people learn, but also on why they do not learn. Applying these concerns to paid work and learning would open up some new and interesting questions.

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