



HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

Home Renaissance Foundation

Working Papers

Number 17

Doing Our Home Work:
Toward an Ecological and Interdisciplinary
Approach to the Study of the Work of the Home

By Ann F. Brodeur
June 2010

Doing Our Home Work:
Toward an Ecological and Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study
of the Work of the Home
By Ann F. Brodeur¹

I. Introduction

This essay is about the work done in the home: all of those tasks, big and small, that go into creating a thriving home environment. “Housework” or “work of the home,” in this respect, is not limited to cooking and cleaning, but also extends to caregiving in the home.² In an age in which it is not uncommon for many middle-class households to hire housecleaners, nannies, gardeners and dog walkers, it may seem quaint or passé to point out the need for more study on the work of the home. However, social scientists, medical professionals, educators, and policymakers generally point to a strong relationship between the quality of the home environment and the wellbeing and development of individuals in the home.³ Thus, whether performed by a family member or a paid professional, these tasks are essential to the establishment and maintenance of a home environment that can allow for fullest development of the individuals living in it.

The study of housework (broadly defined) and its relationship to healthy home environments and the overall health and development of household members (and by extension, the community at large) is not without its challenges. These are by no means simple relationships to define and analyze. Even the definition of what constitutes housework shifts across time and discipline, making synthetic

¹ Doctoral candidate in History at the University of Toronto.

² The definition of housework now generally includes childcare, in addition to cooking, cleaning and other home maintenance tasks. Some point out that shifting demographics argue for the inclusion of eldercare in the definition of housework. Margrit Eichler and Patrizia Albanese, “What is Household Work? A Critique of Assumptions Underlying Empirical Studies of Housework and an Alternative Approach,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 32 (Spring 2007): 227-258.

³ M.L. Novilla, M. Barnes, N. de la Cruz, P. Williams, J. Rogers, “Public Health Perspectives on the Family: An Ecological Approach to Promoting Health in the Family and Community,” *Family and Community Health* 29:1 (2006), 31; H. Soubhi and L. Potvin, “Homes and families as health promotion settings,” in *Settings for Health Promotion: Linking Theory and Practice*, BD Poland, LW Green and I Rootman, eds., (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2000): 44-67; I. Kalnins, “Commentary to Shouhbi and Potvin Homes and families as health promotion settings,” in *Settings for Health Promotion: Linking Theory and Practice*, BD Poland, LW Green and I Rootman, eds., (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2000):76-85.

meta-analysis difficult.⁴ This is, in part, due to the highly specialized state of social science research in this area. Current social science research on the work of the home is fractured along lines of academic discipline, and, as a result, can tend toward conclusions that are incomplete and risks a certain reductionism. This is not entirely unexpected nor unjustified, since each discipline seeks to understand a particular subject using a distinct set of methods, theoretical frameworks, and lines of inquiry.⁵ Moreover, each discipline frames an issue in very particular ways. This offers researchers the opportunity to build deeper knowledge and gain more penetrating insight into specific aspects of housework. Yet, it is precisely because of our modern tendency to delimit knowledge by discipline that our understanding of a given subject is sometimes two-dimensional.

The following survey of current social science research on the work of the home reveals a great deal of complexity. Taken as a whole, it can be seen from the research that the work of the home is critical service upon which the health and development of that ecological microsystem called the family or household. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach to the work of the home is needed in order to offer researchers a fuller, more complete understanding of its nature and effects. Because housework bears on the development of the individuals living in the home, its study has clear implications for social policy. The broader the understanding of the nature and socio-economic implications of the work of the home, the more well-rounded and successful the resulting policy recommendations may be.

Furthermore, I argue that research must take into account the systemic nature of the household that housework supports. An ecological approach to the study of housework and the

⁴ As above, for the purposes of this essay, “housework” includes not only all the tasks that are required in the daily maintenance of a household, but also all the carework that can be involved, such as caring for children, the infirm and, increasingly, the elderly. As will be seen below, not all research uses such a broad definition, excluding, for example, carework from the definition of housework.

⁵ Intra-disciplinary debates over theory and method add another layer of complexity to the analysis. For instance, recent studies by economists Jennifer Roback Morse and Nancy Folbre point out the limits of classical economic theory when dealing with the family. While Morse and Folbre arrive at different policy recommendations, both critique basic economic concepts, particularly Smith’s notions of altruism and the rational economic actor, when applied to the family and the home. Jennifer Roback Morse, *Love and Economics: Why the Laissez-Faire Family Doesn’t Work*. (Dallas: Spence, 2001) and Nancy Folbre, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (New York: New Press, 2001).

household first acknowledges the interdependence of the individuals living in the home and treats the household as a microsystemic structure that influences, and is influenced by, other systems and structures, from neighborhoods, churches and schools, up to state and national bodies.⁶ A framework that recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of the individuals living in the home, and the reciprocal influence between the household and its surrounding environments naturally encourages a broader conception of the nature, function and impact of housework. I contend that an ecological approach to the study of housework, undertaken within a collaborative, interdisciplinary setting, has the potential to allow for a richer comprehension of the complex relationship between the work of the home and the individuals it serves.

This article first explores the broad lines of inquiry in various social science disciplines with regard to the work of the home and points out intersections between them. The second section lays out the case for the interdisciplinary study of the complex bundle of processes and relationships that is called ‘housework.’ Finally, the article suggests future directions for fruitful inquiry.

II. *The Fractured State of Research*

“Interdisciplinary” research generally refers to scholarship that makes use of concepts or methods of more than one discipline. It is more common in some academic disciplines than others; historians, for instance, regularly raid the conceptual and methodological toolboxes of anthropologists, economists, philosophers, and sociologists, among others, for new ways of approaching old problems. Some disciplines take the study of other disciplines or professions as their subject: for example, the sociology of education, law and economics, the economics of health care, medical anthropology, etc.

⁶ Uri Brofbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). Brofbrenner conceived of social organization as layers of systems: microsystems (families), mesosystems (systems with which family members regularly engage, such as schools and the workplace), exosystems (policies, distribution and use of resources across communities, etc), and macrosystems (the cultural trends, moral and ethical beliefs and perspectives that shape and are shaped by all the other systems). For Brofbrenner, these systems are overlapping and interdependent, just as individuals are interdependent upon the individuals and environments around them.

Within institutions, interdisciplinary programs train the gaze of multiple disciplines on a single issue, such as environmental studies, peace studies or women's studies, with the goal of arriving at a rounder picture of the issue in question.

In this sense, however, the study of housework has received limited interdisciplinary attention from social scientists. Academic departments have traditionally viewed the study of housework as an applied science outside of the bounds of empirical research.⁷ Often viewed and misunderstood as mere vocational training in sewing and cookery,⁸ the study of housework as "home economics" was originally envisioned as a movement toward the professionalization of the work of the home, applying the principles of scientific management to housework for the benefit of the family and society at large.⁹ However, after the 1960s and 1970s, with the ascendancy of feminism and the large-scale movement of women into the workplace, the study of housework was relegated largely to home economics departments at state universities and found social application through government funded extension offices.¹⁰

Since the 1990s, the subject of housework has received increasing attention from the various social sciences. A handful of studies have addressed aspects of housework using interdisciplinary approaches,¹¹ and some academic and policy centers deal with the work of the home as part of a

⁷ Sarah Stage, "Home Economics, What's in a Name?" *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1-13. Stage notes that feminists of the 1960s and 1970s equated home economics with restrictive or oppressive domesticity, and dismissed the subject and its study. Subsequent feminist studies of housework in the 1980s framed the issue in similar negative terms: Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, NY: Random House, 1982), Bettina Berch, *The Endless Day: The Political Economy of Women and Work* (New York: Harcourt, 1982) and Glenna Matthews, *"Just a Housewife": The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), among others.

⁸ Rima D. Apple, "Liberal Arts or Vocational Training? Home Economics Education for Girls," *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 79-95.

⁹ Stage, "Home Economics," 5-8; and Sarah Stage, "Ellen Richards and the Social Significance of the Home Economics Movement" *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 17-33.

¹⁰ Cornell University Library's HEARTH project provides a fascinating window on the history and development of home economics and the 'home arts'. Bibliographies and photos are available at http://hearth.library.cornell.edu/h/hearth/about_HEARTH.html, accessed 3/3/09).

¹¹ Nancy Rollins Ahlander and Kathleen Slauch Bahr, "Beyond Drudgery, Power, and Equity: Toward an Expanded Discourse on the Moral Dimensions of Housework in Families" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57 (1995): 54-68. Ahlander and Bahr attempt to intertwine moral philosophy and sociology in their study of the work of the home, preferring to call it "family

broader research agenda.¹² The increasingly porous lines between public and private and between work and home life has spurred a renewed interest in the study of housework. The modern American obsession with time, or the lack thereof, has created a whole new set of challenges with regard to housework, and has fostered the academic and practical search for “work-life balance.” And yet, in spite of this, the work of the home has not generally been studied in a comprehensive manner, but as only one of many pieces in a different research or policy agenda.

What, then, is the state of research into the work of the home across the various social science disciplines, and what are the dominant lines of inquiry? As will be seen, most of the research aims to answer one or more of three broad and burning questions: Who does the housework? Who ought to? What is the effect? How they reframe these general questions and arrive at conclusions of course depends on the particularities of the discipline.

A. Economics

For economists, the study of housework and caregiving is naturally framed in terms of time and resource allocation as it relates to production, consumption, and distribution. Much of the work done over the last twenty years has built upon, or replied to, Gary S. Becker’s 1981 *Treatise on the Family*, a neo-classical, micro-economic analysis of the family that briefly discussed the division of labor in the

work” in order to emphasize its relational and moral dimensions. Although the study is now nearly fifteen years old, it does provide a succinct historiographical introduction to the development and predominant theoretical approaches to the study of housework, the broad outlines of which have not changed substantially. See also Laura Sanchez, “Feminism, Family Work, and Moral Discourse: A Comment on Ahlander and Bahr’s ‘Beyond Drudgery, Power, and Equity,’” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 58 (1996): 514-528 for a discussion of feminist critiques of housework. Postmodern approaches to housework import concepts from radical feminist theory, socialist theory, Marxist theory, queer theory, social-construct theory, or other concepts from postcolonial studies.

¹² For instance, there are a number of research centers dedicated to the study of work and family, particularly the challenge brought about by the disappearing boundary between work and family. Their work touches on the work of the home as an aspect of the broader issue of work-life balance. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation has provided financial support for a number of research centers. For introductions to these centers and their areas of inquiry, see UCLA’s Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) at <http://www.celf.ucla.edu/> (last accessed 3/30/09); Sloan Work and Family Research Network (Boston College) at <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/> (last accessed 3/30/09); Sloan Center on Parents, Children & Work (a collaboration between the University of Chicago and Michigan State University) at <http://wf.educ.msu.edu/> (last accessed 3/30/09); Sloan Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life at <http://ceel.psc.isr.umich.edu/index.html> (last accessed 3/3/09); MIT Workplace Center at <http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/index.html> (last accessed 3/30/09); Berkley Center for Working Families (closed in 2002, but working papers still available at <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/berkeley/>, last accessed 3/3/09).

household in the larger context of household economics.¹³ Becker argued that concern for the maximization of the family's economic health, along with comparative advantage (which includes biological considerations), influenced household division of labor and intra-household specialization.¹⁴ Becker also contended that the cost of time should be given consideration in the analysis of choice, pointing out that the relative cost of time influences household decision-making, just as the cost of goods does.¹⁵ The less time families have away from market-related activities, the greater the relative cost of their non-market or leisure time, which influences their choices about how to spend it.

Categorizing activities as strictly market or non-market, labor or leisure, has its problems. Becker (1976) argued that some activities do not fall neatly into either one category or another.¹⁶ A particular household activity—caring for children, for instance—may be considered as a form of labor by some, but not by others. Furthermore, some time use surveys do not measure adequately for multi-tasking behavior, such as folding the laundry while watching children. In this example, one could be performing a market activity (laundry) and a non-market activity (childcare) simultaneously. Floro and Miles (2003) explored this methodological difficulty, observing further that failing to account overlapping activities makes thorough economic analysis difficult.¹⁷

¹³ Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

¹⁴ There is considerable debate as what causes intra-household specialization. For instance, see Jens Bonke, Mette Deding, Mette Lausten and Leslie S. Stratton, "Intra-Household Specialization in Housework in the United States and Denmark," *Social Science Quarterly* 89 (Oct. 2008): 1023 – 1043. Bonke, et al. argue that the difference in the degree of specialization in housework between the U.S. and Denmark is affected by economic notions of efficiency and time constraints. They also contend that Danish egalitarian social values with regard to housework, together with government subsidized child-care reduce the impact children have on specialization in ordinary housework tasks. See also S. Dalmia and P. Sicilian, "Kids Cause Specialization: Evidence for Becker's Household Division of Labor Hypothesis," *International Advances in Economic Research* 14 (Nov. 2008): 448-59.

¹⁵ While most acknowledge the importance of Becker's contribution, many criticize his theoretical assumptions. For some examples, see N. Folbre, "Cleaning House: New Perspectives on Households and Economic Development," *Journal of Development Economics* 22 (1986): 5-40. (criticizing Becker's assumption of biological difference between the sexes, as reinforcing gender inequity in the division of labor within the household); Michael T. Hannan, "Families, Markets and Social Structures: An Essay on Becker's "A Treatise on the Family," *Journal of Economic Literature* 20 (1982); 65-72 (arguing that Becker's model does not adequately account for the constraining effect of traditional social structure on choice).

¹⁶ Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1976), 99-101 (pointing out the methodological difficulties of categorizing certain activities as strictly work or leisure). One OECD study argued that those activities that could be performed by a third-party should be classified as labor. Ann Chadeau, "What is Households' Non-Market Production Worth?" *OECD Economic Studies* 18 (Spring 1992).

¹⁷ Maria Saguario Floro and Marjorie Miles, "Time Use, Work and Overlapping Activities: Evidence from Australia" *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 27:6 (2003): 881-904. See also John P. Robinson, "The Validity and Reliability of Diaries versus

Scholars have used the research on household time allocation in two basic ways. Microeconomic studies have used the data to understand and describe household activity, whereas macroeconomic approaches have relied on time allocation data in the development of economic and social accounting systems.¹⁸ In the latter case, some have used time allocation studies to argue for the use of macroeconomic mechanisms such as tax policy¹⁹ or other legal interventions²⁰ in order to redress perceived inequities between men and women in relation to housework.

Some economists have attempted to calculate the value of the work of the home, and have arrived at widely varied answers, depending on method.²¹ Most calculations have relied on either the opportunity cost approach, which estimates the value of time spent on housework as equal to time spent in the market, or on the market cost approach, valuing time spent on housework as equal to the cost of hiring someone to perform it.

Valuation estimates have been used to various policy ends. Some have used them to argue for the taxation of housework, in order to rectify perceived gender inequities,²² to provide Social Security for stay-at-home caregivers,²³ or as a tool to push women into the labor market.²⁴

Alternative Time Use Measures" in F. Thomas Juster and Frank P. Stafford, eds., *Time, Goods and Well-Being* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, 1985).

¹⁸ F. Thomas Juster and Frank Stafford, "The Allocation of Time: Empirical Findings, Behavioral Models, and Problems of Measurement," *Journal of Economic Literature* 29 (1991): 473-474.

¹⁹ For example, Marjorie Kornhauser, "Theory Versus Reality: The Partnership Model of Marriage in Family and Income Tax Law," 69 Temp. L. Rev. 1413 (1996) (arguing that changes to the tax code could address inequities in household resource allocation). See also Nancy Staudt, "Taxing Housework," 84 Geo. L.J. 1571(1996) (proposing to tax housework as imputed income) and Lisa Colone, "Taxing Housework...With a Deeper Purpose," 21 Va. Tax Rev. 418 (2002) (building on Staudt's earlier proposal by suggesting that the tax code ought to subject "home labor to income and payroll taxes, [and] concomitantly grant tax deductions to employers of part-time wage laborers in an effort to promote a viable part-time wage labor market.")

²⁰ Gillian K. Hadfield, *Households at Work: Beyond Labor Market Policies to Remedy the Gender Gap*, Georgetown Law Journal 82, (1993), 98-106. Hadfield argues that legal measures should be imposed to rectify inequities in the division of housework, in order to close the compensation gap between genders. Silbaugh forwards a similar argument: Katharine Silbaugh, "Turning Labor into Love: Housework and the Law," *Northwestern University Law Review* 91 (1996), 1-86.

²¹ A. Liskov, "The Valuation of Housework: A Problem of Conceptualization and Measurement," Paper presented at the 72nd Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Chicago, September 5-9, 1977); C. Hefferan, "What is a Homemaker's Job Worth? Too many answers," *Journal of Home Economics* 25 (1982): 30-33; M. Ferber and B. Birnbaum, "Housework: Priceless or Valueless?" *Review of Income and Wealth* 26 (1982): 387-400; Young-Souk Eom and D. Larson, "Valuing Housework Time from Willingness to Spend Time and Money for Environmental Quality Improvements," *Review of Economics of the Household* 4 (2006): 206-207.

²² Marjorie Kornhauser, "Theory Versus Reality: The Partnership Model of Marriage in Family and Income Tax Law," 69 Temp. L. Rev. 1413 (1996);

B. Sociology

Sociologists, like economists, have been interested in questions of equity, and have some have characterized the household as a locus of power and oppression, as opposed to collaboration. Many studies suggest that gendered divisions of labor within the household privilege men, and assume that decision-making with regard to dividing the housework are primarily based on differentials of education and income.²⁵ Fuwa and Cohen (2007) have further suggested that social policies that encourage equal access to employment and benefits, particularly generous parental leave policies, promote a “more egalitarian gender division of housework.”²⁶ Nonetheless, several studies have pointed out limitations of a binary analysis, arguing that allocation of housework is a complex and dynamic process subject to exogenous factors, such as work-related stress²⁷ and family life cycle.²⁸

Other studies have tried to introduce other family members into the household division of labor, specifically children. Lee, Schneider and Waite (2004) conclude that greater participation in

²³ Atkinson, A. B., *Public Economics in Action: the Basic Income/Flat Tax Proposal*. Oxford, 1995 and Atkins, A.B, “The Case for a Participation Income”, *The Political Quarterly* 67:1 (1996): 67–70; Van Parijs, Ph., “The Second Marriage of Justice and Efficiency”, *Journal of Social Policy* 19 (1990), 1–25 and Van Parijs, Ph., “Basic Income and the Two Dilemmas of the Welfare State”, *The Political Quarterly* 67 (1996): 63–66.

²⁴ Roberts, Dorothy E. ,” Welfare Reform and Economic Freedom: Low-Income Mothers' Decisions about Work at Home and in the Market”, *Santa Clara Law Review*, 44:4, 2004, pp.1029-1059; Ward, C./A. Dale/H. Joshi, “Combining Employment with Childcare: An Escape from Dependence?”, *Journal of Social Policy* 25 (1996): 223–247.

²⁵ For example, A. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); M.L. DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); M.M. Ferree, “The Gender Division of Labor in Two-Earner Marriages: Dimensions of Variability and Change,” *Journal of Family Issues*, 12: 158-180; Stevi Jackson, “Towards a Historical Sociology of Housework: A Materialist Feminist Analysis” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 15 (1992): 153-172; Yun-Suk Lee and Linda Waite, “Husbands’ and wives’ time spent on housework: A comparison of measures,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (2005): 328-336 (observing that husbands’ and wives’ estimates of their own time and their spouse’s time spent on housework differs substantially, and that the absolute size of the gap between hours spent by husbands and wives is smaller than usually perceived or assumed). Michelle Frisco and Kristi Williams, “Perceived Housework Equity, Marital Happiness, and Divorce in Dual-Earner Households,” *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (Jan 2003): 51-73 (proposing that unfair perceptions by women about the division of household labor decreases women’s marital quality and leads to role strain, making them more likely to end a marriage).

²⁶ Makiko Fuwa and Philip Cohen, “Housework and Social Policy” *Social Science Research* 36 (June 2007): 512-530. Feminist legal scholarship has also pushed in similar directions: for instance, Katharine Baker argues for the creation of legal specialization agreements that would insert more equity between mothers and fathers in child care and other household responsibilities. K. Baker, “Supporting Children, Balancing Lives,” *Pepperdine Law Review* 34 (2007): 359.

²⁷ Joe Pittman, Catherine Solheim and David Blanchard, “Stress as a Driver of the Allocation of Housework” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 456-458.

²⁸ Scott South and Glenna Spitze, “Housework in Marital and Nonmarital Households,” *American Sociological Review* 59 (1994): 327-347.

housework by children is due to changes in family structure, such as households headed by a single parent, and demographic changes, such as dual-earning families.²⁹ That said, by and large, most studies assume that housework is divided between the couple only. Sociologists generally do not assess children as participants in household work, but rather as a factor that generates more work in the home.

Scholars studying the sociology of education are also interested in the quality of the home environment insofar as it affects educational outcomes. Most studies addressing this relationship are interested in the quality of the relationships within the household, as opposed to who does the work in the home. Amato (2005) and others studying the relationship between the home and educational outcomes generally conclude that instability in family structures and home environments contribute to poorer educational outcomes and lower socio-economic attainment in adulthood, among other things.³⁰

C. Psychology

The psychological and cognitive effects of housework have received some limited attention. Some have pursued the question of psychological effects of gendered divisions of household labor, arguing that greater equity in the allocation of housework leads to greater psychological health and relational

²⁹ Yun-Suk Lee, Barbara Schneider and Linda J Waite, "Children and Housework: Some Unanswered Questions," *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* 9 (2004): 105-125. See also Nancy Rollins Ahlander and Kathleen Slauch Bahr, "Beyond Drudgery, Power, and Equity: Toward an Expanded Discourse on the Moral Dimensions of Housework in Families" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57 (1995): 54-68.

³⁰ P. Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," in *The Future of Children* 15 (2005): 75-96. See also L. Bisnaire, P. Firestone and D. Rynard, "Factors Associated with Academic Achievement in Children Following Parental Separation," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 60 (1990): 67-76; P. Amato and B. Keith, "Consequences of Parental Divorce for Children's Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 10 (1991): 26-46; P. Amato, "Children of Divorce in the 1990s: An Update of the Amato and Keith (1991) Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 15 (2001): 355-370; S. McLanahan and G. Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Harvard University Press, 1994); S. Cavanaugh and K. Schiller, "Marital Transitions, Parenting, and Schooling: Exploring the Link Between Family-Structure History and Adolescents' Academic Status" *Sociology of Education* 79 (2006): 329-354;

satisfaction.³¹ On the other side of the coin, some studies have found that greater inequity in the division of household labor leads to greater psychological distress.³² Even so, others have simply pointed to the general psychological benefits of housework: 20 minutes of regular housework or light exercise reduces the incidence of depression or anxiety by 20 percent.³³

Psychologists have also demonstrated an interest in the effects of housework on children.³⁴ Goodnow (1988) shows that participating in household work benefits children's cognitive and interpersonal growth, assisting in the development of cooperative behavior, the ability to follow direction, and a sense of responsibility, among other things.³⁵ Children's participation in the work of the home also enables them to make distinctions between different types of work, such as self-care (brushing one's teeth) and care of others (such as doing the dishes).³⁶ Others have observed how children's participation in the work of the home carries different, often overlapping, meanings for different families: that housework is a opportunity for physical, cognitive and social development, that child participation in housework teaches reciprocal obligation, that participation is based on extrinsic reasons, and/or that housework promotes greater task learning.³⁷ As White and Brinkerhoff's 1981 study points out, regardless of the motive for including children in the household tasks, doing shared

³¹ For example, S. Coltrane, "Research on household labor: Modeling and measuring the social embeddedness of routine family work," *Journal of Marriage & the Family* 62 (2000): 1208-1233 (also provides a good survey of the literature from 1989-99). For more recent examples, see M. Khawaja and R. Habib, "Husbands' involvement in housework and women's psychosocial health: Findings from a population-based study in Lebanon," *American Journal of Public Health* 97 (2007): 860-866 (correlating higher psychosocial outcomes in women with greater involvement of husbands in housework); H. Badr and L. Acitelli, "Attachment insecurity and perceptions of housework: Associations with marital well-being," *Journal of Family Psychology* 22 (2008): 313-319.

³² For example, see Chloe E. Bird, "Gender, Household Labor and Psychological Distress: the Impact of the Amount and Division of Housework," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 40 (1999): 32-45; Jennifer Glass and Tetsushi Fujimoto, "Housework, Paid Work, and Depression Among Husbands and Wives" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 35 (1994): 179-191.

³³ "Housework Keeps You Sane" *New Scientist* 4/19/2008, pp. 4-5 (citing a University College London health survey conducted in Scotland).

³⁴ As opposed to other social scientists who assess the effect of children on housework; cf. at note 10, Dalmia and Scilian, "Kids Cause Specialization."

³⁵ J. Goodnow, "Children's Household Work: Its Nature and Its Functions," *Psychological Bulletin* 103 (1988): 5-26. See also J. Goodnow, et al., "Would you ask someone else to do this task? Parents' and children's ideas about household work requests," *Developmental Psychology* 27 (1991): 817-828 (studying the cognitive aspects of household work and its distribution).

³⁶ J. Goodnow and S. Delaney, "Children's household work: Task differences, styles of assignment, and links to family relationships," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 10 (1989): 209-226.

³⁷ L. White and D. Brinkerhoff, "Children's work in the family: Its significance and meaning," *Journal of Marriage & the Family* 43 (1981): 789-798.

work conveys a family's values, reinforces familial bonds, and transmits expectations about the duties family members owe one another.

D. Medicine & Public Health

Health professionals are generally interested in the study of the work of the home from several angles. Some researchers are interested in the physical impact of housework on those who perform it, particularly those suffering from a medical disability or are recovering from a medical procedure.³⁸ Others have explored the caregiving aspects of housework on both carers and their dependents. This area is receiving increasing attention, particularly as aging populations have given rise to the number of households caring for older persons in their home. Researchers and medical professionals have shown particular regard for the physical and psychological health effects of caring for infirm and aging family members on the caregivers themselves.³⁹

A current public health issue related to the work of the home, specifically cooking, nutrition and technology in the home, is the rise in overweight and obesity. This has given rise to a new interest in the relationship between eating behaviors, the family and the home environment. Recent studies have suggested that more structured eating habits, centered on family meals, can lead to healthier eating styles.⁴⁰ Kime (2009) further contends that the level organization in a household's eating habits

³⁸ Friederike Kendel, et al., "Does Time Spent on Household Activities or Housework Stress Complicate Recovery Following Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery?" *Women & Health* 48 (2008): 325-338 (noting that while stress associated with housework could slow recovery, the time spent doing housework did not); J.Z. Ilich and R.A. Brownbill, "Habitual and low-impact activities are associated with better bone outcomes and lower body fat in older women" *Calcif. Tissue Int.* 84 (Oct. 2008): 260-71; M. Asztalos, et al., "Specific associations between types of physical activity and components of mental health," *J Sci Med Sport* [forthcoming] (noting that housework caused higher levels of stress among blue-collar workers, with an inverse relationship between housework and stress among white-collar workers).

³⁹ Sirpa Salin, et al., "Informal carers of older family members: How they manage and what support they receive from respite care," *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 18 (Feb 2009): 492-501; Sharon K. Ostwald, "Who is caring for the caregiver? Promoting spousal caregiver's health," *Family & Community Health* 32 Supp.1 (Jan-Mar 2009): S5-S14; Nancy Folbre, "Reforming Care" *Politics and Society* 36 (2008): 373-387 (arguing that the work/family balance, particularly caregiving, increases gender inequality and disempowerment, and that "public policies should provide greater support for caregiving outside the market, improve the supply and quality of purchased care services, and challenge conventional accounting systems that mismeasure economic welfare.").

⁴⁰ N. Kime, "How children eat may contribute to rising levels of obesity: children's eating behaviours: an intergenerational study of family influences," *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education* 47 (Jan-March 2009): 4-12; H Patrick and

("ordering of eating") directly affects the health of the individuals in the home. The more meals are eaten together at the same time and place, the less likelihood of overweight or obesity in the home.⁴¹ Dr. Kime also argues that greater order in a family's eating regimen places constraints on what and how much is consumed at a family meal. In homes with a laissez-faire approach to eating, there are fewer constraints on how much or the quality of what is eaten.

The structuring of time and space in the home Indeed, more researchers are contending that a generally well-structured home environment correlates with better physical health outcomes for the individuals living in it. Indeed, this growing body of literature is beginning to look at the family and the home as a critical basic building block for strengthening broader public health.⁴²

III. The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Research

As can be seen from a cursory overview of the approaches taken to the study of housework by the various social sciences, it is a complex, multi-faceted subject. And while there are certainly points of convergence, particularly in the kinds of questions pursued, there are clearly points of departure between disciplines in their study of the issue. This diversity of approach and methodology can be

TA Nicklas, A Review of Family and Social Determinants of Children's Eating Patterns and Diet Quality. *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, 24:2 (2005), 83-92; D Neumark-Sztainer, PJ Hannan, M Story, J Croll, C Perry, "Family meal patterns: associations with sociodemographic characteristics and improved dietary intake among adolescents." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 103 (2003): 317 –322. There has been a substantial amount written on the relationship between family dinners and positive health and academic outcomes for children and adolescents. For example, see JA Fulkerson et al., "Family dinner meal frequency and adolescent development: relationships with developmental assets and high-risk behaviors," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39 (Sept 2006): 337-345; Bisahka Sen, "The relationship between frequency of family dinner and adolescent problem behaviors after adjusting for other family characteristics," *Journal of Adolescence*, (May 2009): [forthcoming, available through ScienceDirect]; N.I. Larson, D. Neumark-Sztainer, P.J. Hannan and M. Story, "Family meals during adolescence are associated with higher diet quality and healthful meal patterns during young adulthood," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 107 (2007): 1502–1510.

⁴¹ M. Novilla, et al., "Public Health Perspectives on the Family: An ecological approach to promoting health in the family and community." *Family and Community Health*, 29:1 (2006), 28-42. However, if family dinner takes place in front of the television, the gains are limited. Eileen Fitzpatrick, Lynn S. Edmunds and Barbara A. Dennison, "Positive effects of family dinner are undone by television viewing," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 107 (April 2004): 666-672.

⁴² For example, see B Swinburn, G Egger and F Raza, "Dissecting obesogenic environments: the development and application of a framework for identifying and prioritizing environmental interventions for obesity," *Preventive Medicine* 29 (1999), 563-570. A. Lindsay, K. Sussner, J. Kim, and S. Gortmaker, "The Role of Parents in Preventing Childhood Obesity" *The Future of Children* 16 (Spring 2006): 169-186; K. Rhee, "Childhood Overweight and the Relationship between Parent Behaviors, Parenting Style, and Family Functioning," in *Overweight and Obesity in America's Children: Causes, Consequences, Solutions: Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 615 (Jan. 2008): 11-37.

brought together to build a better, more refined understanding of the work of the home and all that it entails. Furthermore, an ecological understanding of the home can lead to research on housework that better appreciates its nature, function and effects. This, in turn, can greatly benefit the individuals living in the billions of homes around the world, as the research finds application in policy.

There are many beneficiaries of an interdisciplinary, ecological approach to the study of the work of the home. The academy could clearly gain as interdisciplinary research collaboration inspires new and innovative ways of addressing the work of the home. Current research has centered on questions of definition, equity and effect, but needs to go further in order to understand how home environments, which depend to a great extent on housework, affect the growth and development of the people who reside in them. One possible avenue for future inquiry lies in exploring the practical and qualitative “how” and “why” of housework: how and why does the *quality* of the work done in the home contribute to the wellbeing of the individuals living in the home? What kinds methodological approaches would allow for fair measurement of the relationship?

Because policy relies on research, and is only as solid and complete as the research upon which it is based, policymakers can also benefit from interdisciplinary research on housework. If the home is more than a locus for production and consumption, or economic and social inequity, then research should reflect this reality. Research that respects the complex intersections of processes and relationships affecting the wellbeing and development of the individuals living in the home will make for sounder policy recommendations.

A more holistic understanding and firmer grasp of the nature and implications of the work of the home have the potential to lead to sounder policies. And, as the home is an essential part of the larger social web, sound policy that reflects its complexity can lead to better social, economic and health outcomes, which benefits the public as a whole. At the governmental level, it can lead to substantive policy change regarding a whole host of issues: parental leave policies, policies that

promote better education and professional recognition of this work, aging and caregiving, child care, diet and nutrition, among other things. Furthermore, it can lead to more family-friendly policies in the private sector with regard to parental leave, family sick leave (caregiver leave), flexible work arrangements, etc.

Moreover, interdisciplinary research that takes seriously the work of the home has cultural implications that can benefit those who actually carry out the work. The increased attention and acknowledgement of the complexity and importance of subject can confer greater respect for those who carry out the work. Certainly, the billions of men and women who serve and care for others in the home, whether they are paid or not for their work, have struggled for greater appreciation and recognition of their labor, both culturally and politically. For those who are studying in professional training centers to work in the home as caregivers, assistants, or chefs, there is tremendous benefit from interdisciplinary research. Students in these growing professional fields could benefit greatly from enriched content that reflects a holistic understanding of professional work of the home.

Those that could benefit the greatest from increased interdisciplinary research, however, are the men and women who perform household work on a full-time or part-time basis. Greater understanding of the relationship between housework, home environments and outcomes for the individuals living in the home can confer an increased in the value that society places on their labor.

Conclusion

Existing social science research on housework reveals a complicated, often politically freighted subject, the nature and implications of which are not fully understood or appreciated. Collaborative, interdisciplinary study of the work of the home, particularly its relationship to healthy home environments and the overall wellbeing and development of the individuals living in the home, offers the possibility of a deeper, richer understanding of it. In addition, a conception of the home that

recognizes it as an interconnected, interdependent ecological system in reciprocal relationship with its surroundings can enable a more refined comprehension of the effect of housework upon the household. Exploring these relationships promises to benefit not only the academy, but policymakers and households as well.