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An Integrative Theory of the Division of Domestic Labor: Threshold Level, Social Organizing and Sensemaking

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The distribution, negotiation and management of unpaid domestic labor are issues that are inextricably linked to the well-being of families, relationships, and our very selves. For example, disputes and arguments about chores rate amongst the most common and destructive in terms of relational conflict. Several theories have been developed to explain the division of household labor, but scholars have yet to be successful in explaining persistent differences in husbands' and wives' domestic contributions. As a step toward doing so, here we provide an integrative theory that builds upon singular explanations such as gender display and evolutionary/biosocial differences. In this paper, we incorporate these theories, introduce the importance of threshold level, and integrate concepts derived from self-organizing systems theory, the economy of gratitude, and individual, dyadic and social sensemaking processes. Together, these provide an integrated theory well suited to explore how couples' communicative practices both create and can ameliorate inequities in the division of domestic labor.

When asked, "Why since she was doing most of the other chores hadn't Noah picked up a rag and cleaned the dust and grime off the windowsills, he replied 'I didn't even notice the dust'" (Chethik, 2006, p. 116).

Every few months or so I erupt again, I've just had enough. Once in a while I just get fed up that I have to do so much in the house then I say to him for God's sake can you just do something every now and then or you can see the washing needs emptying sometimes, can't you? (Wiesmann, Boeije, van Doorne-Huiskes, & den Dulk, 2008, p. 354)

"Hang on a minute. I never asked her to do anything of those things. I can't help it if she has higher standards than I do. I don't *care* what we have for dinner. I don't *care* if the floor gets mopped twice a week" (Coontz, 2005, p. 18).

Despite the considerable efforts of numerous scholars who have sought to explain and/or rectify inequitable divisions of domestic labor (Baxter, 2005; Bird, 1999; Coltrane, 2000, 2004; Ferree, 1991; Medved, 2004, 2009; Mikula, Freudenthaler, Brennacher-Kroll, & Brunschko,

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1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987, among others) cohabitating romantic couples continue to have contentious conversations such as those above. In fact, domestic labor rates as the third most frequent source of conflict for couples, right behind money and children (Chethik, 2006; Cowan et al., 1985). The frequency and intensity of these arguments often are a result of the inequities that still exist in heterosexual households where women perform at least two-thirds of household labor, regardless of their participation in paid labor (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Coltrane, 2000; Hochschild, 1989).

The unequal distribution of domestic chores has a variety of negative consequences in addition to instigating couples' conflict. When women who work for pay also shoulder the responsibility for domestic labor at home, their ability to compete equally with men in the labor market is reduced (MacDonald, Phipps, & Lethbridge, 2005), and their likelihood of "off-ramping" or taking time off from their careers and returning at reduced rates of pay is increased (Hewlett, Luce, Schiller, & Southwell, 2004). Moreover, while work-life conflict is increasing for all employees, those who experience role overload as a result of unpaid labor report increased stress, burnout, rates of depression and physical and mental health problems (Glass & Fujimoto, 1994).

In addition to contributing to decreased professional opportunities and work-life stress for women, women's psychological distress and their attitudes toward their marriages are directly related to inequitable divisions of household labor. Wives who are dissatisfied with the division of labor in their marriages experience decreased marital satisfaction and increased thoughts of divorce (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Hernandez, 1990). On the other hand, women's marital satisfaction and feelings of fairness and equity are positively related to men's greater participation in routine housework (Coltrane, 2004; Erickson, 2005), and, for men, more participation in household labor does not increase their experiences of depression or distress (Bird, 1999).

Given that more equitable divisions of labor benefit women and have few costs for men, intuitively it makes sense that talking about and persuading underperforming individuals of the unfairness of the situation and their need to perform more will affect change, but it simply does not (Coontz, 1997). In fact, a program specifically designed to help couples talk about and create more equitable divisions of labor was minimally effective, if not ineffective (Hawkins, Roberts, Christiansen, & Marshall, 1994).

In part, our failure to understand how couples can talk more effectively about and negotiate a fair division of labor stems from our lack of understanding regarding the underlying dynamics that give rise to an unfair division of labor in the first place. A variety of theories have been offered to explain the ways in which various issues impact the inequitable divisions of labor, including: economic differences (Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2005; Coverman, 1985; Ross, 1987; Tichenor, 2005), sex role orientation (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997; Mauldin & Meeks, 1990), gender enactment (DeVault, 1990; Natalier, 2003; South & Spitze, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987), social processes and discourses (Durkheim, 1893, 1997) and, to a much lesser extent, communication practices (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 1996, 1997; Zvonkovich, Schmiege, & Hall, 1994). However, no single theory has been very successful in explaining why these inequities arise in the first place or – more importantly – how couples can redress them.

As scholars of communication and work-life, we are interested in exploring the processes that contribute to domestic labor inequities so that we may develop communication strategies that help couples negotiate fair and satisfactory divisions of domestic labor. To that end, in this article we develop an integrative theory that may provide at least a partial answer.

We are not alone in this quest, of course. Initially, scholars proposed that the division of domestic labor was tied to partners' individual economic contribution to the household or time availability; however, empirical support for these explanations was not found (Baxter et al., 2005; Blumberg & Goldman, 1989; Gerson, 1993; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Such approaches likely have not been successful because they offer rational explanations that focus on a single aspect of human behavior to account for a complex activity.

On the other hand, Durkheim's (1983, 1997) argument that the division of labor is the result of social processes within society rather than private individual choice has not been well supported either; as social processes related to economic labor have changed, attendant domestic labor changes have not kept pace. Thus, a sole focus on social practices is not the answer either. Indeed, theories that center on single explanations and/or assume that individuals make rational choices are problematic, because human behavior is influenced by more than reasoned argument or social conditions. Human behavior, especially relating to the division of labor, also is affected by biologically and socially constructed identities and relationships as well as innate biologically set protocols for cooperation and social exchange that influence domestic labor and its allocation (Clippinger, 2007).

As communication scholars we believe it is crucial to account for how couples organize around communicatively constructed *meanings* for domestic labor if we hope to understand and change how domestic labor is allocated. More specifically, we argue that individual and dyadic practices are manifestations of the norms, expectations and sedimented meanings that recur and are communicatively constructed across individual, dyadic, familial, and cultural levels.

Therefore, here we build upon past theories that have taken into account broad social dynamics (e.g., socialization) as well as those that examine individual characteristics (tolerance for disorder) and dyadic interactions (e.g., divergence) to examine how couples make sense of, and make decisions about, the division of labor in their homes. Indeed, as we will discuss, the division of domestic labor is fundamentally a communicative and sensemaking event.

Finally, we build upon current research to theorize how individuals and/or dyads may enact transformation in a number of ways, including by changing the meanings they assign to domestic labor, by organizing their practices differently, or by expressing gratitude for domestic labor in the short term. For example, many of the explanations for the division of domestic labor rest upon concepts related to the socialized performance of gender, the most important of which are gender socialization, gender performance and biosocial theories of domestic labor. Clearly, gender is a significant aspect of the explanation for how domestic labor is divided; however, if gender socialization is the sole explanatory and deterministic frame, enacting immediate change can seem untenable. That is, if gender socialization or gender performance processes are responsible for the division of labor, then change necessarily involves altering multiple conscious and unconscious behaviors, expectations, and beliefs across a wide range of individuals and institutions.

Further, changing gender socialization patterns would require parents, teachers, media creators, toy manufacturers and many more to be persuaded to alter their differential treatment of and marketing to boys and girls. In addition, change would require individuals and dyads to rethink and reconstruct their beliefs about caring, femininity, masculinity, and evaluations of gender identity. Such widespread changes can feel overwhelming and impossible to achieve. Therefore, we seek to build upon the gender socialization theory in a manner that offers couples a way to make sense of, communicate about, and negotiate fairer distributions of household labor in the here and now.

This piece outlines an integrated theory that explains how and why the imbalance in division of domestic labor occurs, and also offers a set of empirical questions that can be explored, tested and refined so that we can develop a way forward toward more equitable and less sex-based allocations of tasks. The integrated theory offers a set of constructs that can be studied individually and jointly and that, ultimately, can offer insight into the causes and possible solutions to a thus far intractable problem.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "DOMESTIC LABOR"?

Unpaid labor in the context of work-life typically is manifested in domestic labor, childcare, and emotion work[1]. The precise definition of domestic labor, however, varies across studies. One of the primary ways such definitions diverge is whether only "inside" or both "inside" and "outside" tasks are included. Inside tasks are composed of stereotypically female tasks—such as dishwashing, mopping, and cooking—which must be performed multiple times daily (food preparation), daily (tidying), weekly (shopping) or several times weekly (laundry). On the other hand, outside tasks typically refer to stereotypically male tasks that are performed weekly (lawn care), sporadically (car washing) or rarely (cleaning the garage, car maintenance, household repairs). A second way such studies vary is whether or not childcare is included in the definition.

For this paper, household labor includes the performance of inside and outside tasks related to home and family maintenance. We do not include care work for children or others, in part because, to date, researchers have not delineated the full range of activities that constitute care work, nor have they quantified men's and women's contributions to it (though women are assumed to perform the majority of it). In addition, many people see childcare as nurturing/loving care or a "labor of love," and framing it as work can be problematic (nevertheless, we believe an explanation of the division of childcare duties likely has similar but not identical theoretical underpinnings as our explanation for the division of household tasks). In this paper, we limit our focus to tasks that are not specifically geared toward caring for children, though a number of the tasks included within our definition (meal preparation, laundry, and running errands) likely contribute to the effective care of children.

INTEGRATING EXPLANATIONS: EVOLUTIONARY DIFFERENCES, THRESHOLD LEVEL, SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS, SEX/GENDER, SOCIAL EXCHANGE AND SENSEMAKING

A theory integrating evolutionary biological differences and biosocial theory, self-organizing systems, sex/gender, social exchange, and couples' sensemaking provides a more comprehensive explanation for the diverse and seemingly contradictory patterns that occur as dyads work out the division of labor in their households. When individuals come together to create a household,

[1]We believe it is important to note that, although many dual earner couples are "contracting" out some aspects of care work (e.g., child care, house cleaning, yard maintenance), the gendered imbalances of domestic labor remain firmly in place. Moreover, those who have the means to pay others for domestic labor impact the ability of those same laborers to perform care in their own families and homes (Ehrenreich, 2001; Flanagan, 2004).

typically their decisions regarding joint behavior in the area of household labor are negotiated implicitly and indirectly. Because these decisions rarely are processed consciously or discussed directly—particularly at the onset of living together—they are guided by individual, dyadic, and cultural processes.

Evolutionary and Biosocial Theories

Evolutionary and biosocial theories offer distal explanations for why the burden of domestic labor falls on women. Evolutionary theory suggests that women's keener sense of smell and greater attention to detail made them well adapted to household labor. In addition, it argues that women who were more attentive to cleanliness and home safety issues likely lived long enough to reproduce and were more likely to rear children who survived to adulthood and who could then reproduce and further this genetic legacy (Hrdy, 1999; Shields, 1975).

Biosocial theories argue almost the reverse—that women's relegation to household labor occurred through the sexual division of labor due to their maternal role; this meant that over time women became more aware of and sensitive to cleanliness in the household, a place where they spent more time – and during some time periods considerably more time—than did men (Wood & Eagly, 2002).

Both theories argue that women's greater sensitivity to household cleanliness is associated with their taking on the burden of household labor, with evolutionary biology suggesting that this difference is grounded in biological differences and biosocial scholars claiming women's greater contributions are due more to socialization and experience. Both explanations offer contributions to our current theory. As we discuss next, although real differences exist in men's and women's sense of smell and attention to detail, which likely impact how labor is divided, these biological differences are relatively small (Doty, Applebaum, Zusho, & Settle, 1985; Fox, 2009; Gilligan, 1982; Meyers-Levy, 1993). What, then, might influence small sex-differences such as these to lead to large differences in the performance of domestic labor? "The simplest answer is that *people* do" (Hrdy, 1999, p. 211).

Women may be more predisposed biologically to notice dirt and disorder, but as Hrdy (1999) argues, the impact of this disposition depends on how individuals *respond* to it. In the sections below, we explore how individuals' behavior and dyads' interactions turn small biological and learned differences into large behavioral disparities.

Social Networks and Self-Organizing Systems

Differences among individuals become important when they interact in dyads and groups to create social organizations. Researchers who study how individuals interact to create social organizations explain that social groups have "key network attributes that consistently occur across biological systems, from molecules to ecosystems, from ants to humans" (Fewell, 2003, p. 1867). One of these key attributes is self-organization. Self-organization describes the process by which local interactions between individuals produce group-level attributes (Camazine et al., 2001). In other words, self-organizing systems tend to repeat the same behavior patterns across time and scale (Olson & Eoyang, 2001), and their organization arises from the repeated decision and actions of individuals within the network.

Thus, the individual behavior of one or a few can influence the behavioral choices of other individuals such that, over time, the dyad or group's characteristics are altered (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Gladwell, 2002). Fewell (2003), one of the chief architects of the new social networks theory, argues that "the basic rules generating these dynamics are broadly applicable across taxa whose members show social behavior, and they produce ubiquitous patterns of social organization, including mass action responses, division of labor, and social hierarchies" (p. 1867). Her own work has focused on how self-organization influences the division of labor among bees and ants; however, she and other scholars who study self-organization and complex adaptive systems argue that these principles operate at the level of human behavior and interaction (Camazine et al., 2001; Clippinger, 2007; Hemelrijk, 2002; Hrdy, 1999; Olson & Eoyang, 2001).

Hrdy (1999) does an excellent job of explaining how small differences in individual behavior patterns can create self-organizing systems among humans in her discussion of "aloof fathers and caring mothers" (p. 212). She cites work by Stallings et al. (1997) that examined how new parents respond to two recordings of an infant – one when the child cried first thing in the morning, wanting to be fed, and the other, the distraught cries of a baby being circumcised.

During the study, parents' cortisol, testosterone, and prolactin were monitored, and analyses revealed that at the first signs of real distress, both mothers and father respond with equal speed, but if the infant sounded only uncomfortable but not in distress, the mother is slightly quicker to respond. Hrdy (1999) argues that mothers' responsivity and the physiological reactions that accompany it likely are due to their innate lower threshold for responding to infant signals. Further, because of mothers' slightly quicker physiological responses, she claims, they physically respond to children a bit faster than fathers – a pattern that repeats itself and becomes fixed across time and contexts. She writes ". . . a seemingly insignificant difference in thresholds for responding to infant cues gradually, insidiously, step by step, without invoking a single other cause produces a marked division of labor by sex" (p. 213).

The decision by an individual member to perform a specific task is fundamental to the division of domestic labor. However, multiple factors impact that decision, some that are internal and some external. Internal factors include genetic and cognitive factors and the effects of experience; external factors include the stimuli that elicit task performance, the behaviors of others within the network, and the communicative interactions among potential performers of a task (i.e., household members) (Breshers & Fewell, 2001).

A key internal factor that influences the decision to perform a behavior—but one that has yet to be taken up as a serious factor in terms of the division of domestic labor—is the individual's "response threshold." Response threshold describes the perceived stimuli that must exist for an individual to decide to perform a task (Theraulaz, Bonabeau, & Deneubourg, 1998). Like Hrdy's (1999) responsive mothers, individuals with low response thresholds for a specific task are moved to perform the task earlier than individuals who have a higher threshold for the task (Breshers & Fewell, 2001; Robinson & Page, 1989).

Thus, individuals "select" or decide to perform specific tasks based on the degree to which they are disturbed if the task is not done. Our integrated theory suggests that a central factor contributing to domestic labor inequities and conflict is that individuals possess different threshold levels based on biological/genetic differences (such as differences in sense of smell or attention to detail) and experiences (e.g., whether cleanliness was a value in one's family home).

These individual decisions by various members of the network together create self-organizing systems and produce emergent properties that are greater than the sum of the individual efforts

(Camazine et al., 2001). A majority of the emergent characteristics of social behavior that arise as a result of self-organization can be categorized as either "convergent" or "divergent" (Fewell, 2003).

Convergent behaviors are those in which individuals' behaviors become more alike (e.g., fashion trends—where a few people wear a specific style, which becomes popular with a few others, and eventually becomes a recognizable trend that influences individual fashion choices broadly). However, more relevant to discussions of division of labor are those behaviors that are divergent, that is, behaviors that, when performed by one individual, reduce the likelihood that other individuals will perform the same behavior (Fewell, 2003).

Divergence has two components. First, the performance of a behavior by one individual reduces the likelihood others will perform the same behavior, and second, one's own stimulus level for the behavior decreases in the presence of others' performance (Breshers & Fewell, 2001). If we take this theory into nature, we see that because some bees have lower thresholds for the stimulus associated with honey production, they will perform this task once they perceive that the level of honey in the hive has dropped to a degree that they find disturbing. In turn, their production of honey reduces the stimulus level, such that other, higher-threshold bees less often, or even never, have a chance to perform the job, because the level of honey rarely drops sufficiently to cause them disturbance (Fewell, 2003).

To bring this theory to bear on an example relevant to human division of labor, if my partner is disturbed when the trash in the wastebasket approaches the rim, while it does not bother me until the trash begins to spill out of the wastebasket, he will take out the trash before I am moved to do so. If the difference in our stimulus (or disturbance) levels is great enough, I likely never will have (or take) the opportunity to empty the trash, because my partner's action will effectively relieve the situation before it even stimulates or bothers me. Models of self-organization and divergence, then, assume that individuals typically perform a task when environmental stimuli reach a level that matches the individual's threshold for response (Fewell & Page, 1999). When an individual performs the task, she reduces the stimulus levels others experience and thus reduces the probability they will perform the task.

Most divergence models also include a feedback loop such that performing a behavior successfully increases the probability that one will perform the behavior again (and failing at the task or lack of opportunity will decrease the probability of performance) (Detrain, Deneubourg, Pasteels, 1999; Plowright & Plowright, 1988).

This pattern creates self-reinforcement, and the individual(s) with the lowest threshold will perform a given task even at low stimulus levels, until he/she becomes a specialist for that task. Thus, when we apply this theory to human domestic labor, it suggests that my partner may begin doing the laundry because he has a lower threshold for piles of dirty laundry, but through repetition, he becomes an "expert" at laundry. Ultimately, he and I will come to see the task as "his," and a self-organizing system of domestic labor is created, reproduced, and maintained in everyday practice.

Studies of the division of labor among insects have found that the division of labor impacts the survival probability of insects. For example, when one ant assumes the role of excavator, if the other ant reduces its labor output, the first ant is more likely to die from overwork (Fewell, 2003). Thus, the emergence of division of labor also leads to the emergence of cost disparity. That is, the creature with the lower threshold typically performs the task and, thus, incurs greater costs. However, the survival of any individual in the system depends on the threshold sensitivity

of the collective system. When it comes to insects, an ant can either live or die, depending on its pairing (Booker, 2004).

When we consider this theory in terms of labor among humans, it suggests that individuals with lower thresholds for tasks undone are likely to suffer a range of costs as a result of their greater contributions. Indeed, empirical research demonstrates that those who do more domestic labor are likely to experience higher levels of work overload, greater levels of stress, and, ultimately, a decrease in health, especially psychological health, due to their contributions (Strazdins & Broom, 2004). Although women, on average, tend to live longer than men, recent research suggest that this gap is narrowing (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control, 2008), perhaps in part due to the increase in women's life stressors.

According to social network and self-organization theories, as social groups (e.g., households) coalesce, the individuals within them take on some specifics tasks while ignoring others. If, say, my partner has a lower threshold sensitivity for clutter, she will be moved to straighten up and put away items in our household before I do, and likely this will become "her" job because she consistently acts to perform it before I do. Similarly, if I have a lower threshold for dirt, I will be moved to dust, sweep and mop before my partner gets around to it, and this task will become "my" job. In addition, the greater the disparity in our thresholds for these tasks, the more likely we will be to "take on" these tasks individually and exclusively.

Self-organization and social network theories, as applied to the division of labor, suggest that understanding the division of domestic labor requires more than group or dyadic explanations. Rather, individual threshold levels must be interrogated and researchers must explore how the choices of one individual influence and constrain those of other individuals within the household as well as how these "choices" are perceived, interpreted, and discussed.

Unlike ants and bees, however, humans possess the ability to exert conscious effort to minimize such pre-existing differences, yet often they do not. Instead, small initial differences often become exaggerated through interactions and experience then blown out of proportion by cultural customs and norms (Hrdy, 1999).

Sex/Gender

One of the most important social and cultural issues influencing the division of household labor is biological sex and attendant gender roles. Baxter (2005) found that biological sex accounted for 17% of the variance in who performs household labor. As biosocial and social role theories posit, gender socialization contributes to patterns of inequity in the division of domestic labor (Ferree, 1991; Mederer, 1993; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

According to these theories, children observe sex-based division of tasks in their homes and learn which ones are appropriate for girls and boys to do (Maccoby, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Certainly sex differences exist in parents' allocation of domestic tasks to their sons and daughters. For example, studies of families with both male and female children indicate that from a young age girls are required and taught to perform indoor household tasks while males are encouraged and taught to engage primarily in outdoor household tasks and that girls perform 50% more domestic labor in their teens than do boys (6.1 hours per week vs. 4.2) (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997).

However, this socialization serves not just (or perhaps even primarily) to teach children what tasks each sex performs; it develops different *competencies* in boys and girls. We would argue that it is useful to consider these differential competencies, along with differences in threshold level (whether biologically based or socially learned), as a way to help explain why couples who espouse the most egalitarian or feminist views do not necessarily share household responsibilities any more equally than more "traditional" husbands and wives (Bittman & Pixley, 1997; Brayfield, 1992; DeVault, 1990; Risman, Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1994). Further, these factors help explain the fact that though men's and women's sex roles have undergone significant transformation in the workplace, such changes have lagged in the private sphere (Tracy & Rivera, 2010).

Associated with gender socialization is gender production theory (De Ruijter, Treas, & Cohen, 2005), which contends that individuals perform (or refuse to perform) household tasks and child-care to communicate their gendered identities (West & Zimmerman, 1987). That is, women are said to perform domestic labor as a way of demonstrating their femininity and caring (DeVault, 1990), while men engage in resistance and refuse to perform stereotypically feminine household tasks as a way to enact masculinity (Natalier, 2003).

Clearly, sex and gender strongly impact the performance of household work; however, they cannot fully explain the processes by which, despite cultural shifts in belief and labor performance, inequities persist. For this, we need to examine other explanations for dyadic interactions. Specifically, our integrated theory accounts for how social and cultural notions of equity, justice, and reciprocity may impact the domestic division of household labor.

Social Exchange

Despite the role that individual response threshold likely plays in the division of labor, other social/cognitive processes as well as cultural structures affect the tasks individuals take on and how they make those tasks meaningful for themselves and their relationships. For example, social exchange processes are some of the innate human abilities that make it possible for individuals to work together and to create communities. These processes include a "person's sense of justice and guilt, social reciprocity, gift giving and an ability to interpret social cues" (Clippinger, 2007, p. 60).

Social exchange theory treats the exchange of benefits as the basis for human interaction (Homans, 1961; Zafirovski, 2005). It posits that human social behavior arises out of the exchange of activities, which may be concrete (money) or abstract (affection). Furthermore, it proposes individuals enter into and maintain relationships and activities that they deem advantageous (that is, they entail more rewards than costs) or that at least are equitable (e.g., involve an equivalent level of costs and rewards). These relationships are presumed to be reciprocal or they would not continue over time (Zafirovski, 2005).

Economic explanations of the division of labor are grounded in social exchange, and research suggests that social exchange principles do operate, to some degree, in married couples' sense-making and *evaluations* of divisions of labor. For example, qualitative research reveals that wives with higher levels of resources feel more entitled to an equitable division of work (Sayer & Nicholson, 2006) and that perceptions of inequity and conflict level are strong predictors of marital unhappiness and considerations of divorce (Hernandez, 1990).

More specifically, husbands and wives who perceive their relative level of participation in household chores in addition to working for pay as unfair are less likely to think the marriage

is happy and more likely to think they would be better off divorcing than remaining married (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Hernandez, 1990). Thus, individuals' attitudes, perceptions and communication about domestic labor do appear to be influenced by social exchange processes.

Despite this evidence, a purely social exchange explanation of the actual division of labor has not been supported. According to exchange theory, a spouse with fewer resources to exchange should have less power to negotiate favorable bargains. Therefore, spouses with greater resources should be able to buy themselves out of tasks they do not wish to do (household labor) and to engage in preferred activities (leisure) (Hernandez, 1990). However, research on division of labor does not support this prediction. That is, many wives are not able to leverage higher economic resources into more bargaining power (Baxter et al., 2005; Blumberg & Goldman, 1989).

A key problem exchange theory overlooks is the way that macrosocial structures and discourses affect individuals in their exchanges (Zafirovski, 2005). That is, social exchanges, like responses to threshold level, are affected not only by individual preferences and attitudes, but also by larger social and cultural issues, such as socialization and the attendant sensemaking that occurs between romantic partners, described by Hochschild (2003) as the "economy of gratitude."

Economies of Gratitude

Social exchanges are affected not only by individual differences and gender but also by the value of individual offerings or exchanges. The economy of gratitude addresses how dyadic interactions are conditioned by socially constructed norms, especially in terms of division of labor. Hochschild (2003) argues that in relationships, individuals offer each other "gifts," which are interpreted by a partner as something extra, beyond what is expected.

> The sense of genuine giving and receiving is a part of love, thus it is through gifts that we express love. In the context of marriage, what each person counts as a gift is determined by cultural values and norms that influence their "marital baseline" – what each partner expects of the other (p. 104).

Sometimes couples agree on the definition of a gift, but when strong cultural currents affect men and women differently, a marriage may contain two separate and conflicting baselines.

Pyke and Coltrane (1996) argue that husbands' and wives' gendered self-images, which are part of their cultural "inheritance," contribute to their viewing some actions in their marriage as gifts and others as burdens. They also claim that what each spouse feels he or she is owed and what is owed to the partner reflects the specific "gender strategy" of each spouse. Hochschild (1989) explains that a "gender strategy is a plan of action through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the [deep-seated and typically taken-for-granted] cultural notions of gender at play" (p. 15). Thus, each spouse's gender strategy is the baseline against which he or she determines whether an offering is a gift or a cost, which in turn determines whether they will respond to an exchange with appreciation or with displeasure. Grateful individuals feel indebted to their spouses and obligated to reciprocate in some manner, while displeased individuals expect their spouses to give even more because they have tolerated something unpleasant (Pyke & Coltrane, 1996).

Economies of gratitude vary, so that the same behavior for which one person is grateful can be viewed as a burden by another. For example, wives' work for pay may be viewed as a gift by some husbands and as cost by others. Economic theories of the division labor would suggest that

husbands of employed spouses will feel indebted to their wives' for contributing financially and will, therefore, "help out" by doing more housework (Gerson, 1993; Hochschild, 2003; Pyke, 1994). However, some husbands think they are doing their wives a favor by tolerating their participation in paid labor (Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Thus, they do not feel they need to do more family work, but rather they feel their wives should be grateful that they are allowed to work outside the home. Similarly, some women employed outside of the home feel guilty for not being home more and compensate by performing virtually all of the housework as a "gift" to compensate for their absence (Pyke & Coltrane, 1996; Tichenor, 2005). Hochschild (2003) summarizes one couple who typifies this situation:

> Nina *made up* for out-earning her husband by working a double day. . . . In the end, Peter benefited from Nina's salary. But he also benefited from a second order of gifts his wife owed him *because* she had given him the first gift—an apology expressed in housework (p. 114, emphasis in original).

Yet, another scenario exists in which husbands are grateful to wives who reduce or forgo paid labor to focus on home and family. These men often reciprocate by doing more work than other husbands, even though they should have fewer motivations for sharing, according to rational choice models (Gerson & Jacobs, 2004; Pyke, 1994). However, when men do increase their housework, women often feel they need to reciprocate by engaging in the emotion work of gratitude. Emotion work refers to "activities that are concerned with the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and with the provision of emotional support" (Erickson, 2005, p. 338). These activities that help maintain the emotional life of relationships are not simply natural outgrowths of care, but require time, effort and skill and are often ignored in studies of the division of labor which tend to focus on instrumental task accomplishment.

The role of the economy of gratitude in social exchanges is a key component in our integrated theory of couples' allocation of the division of domestic chores. It helps explain the fact that husbands and wives are more satisfied in their marriages when they perceive their spouses as doing more than their fair share of the work (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Kluwer et al., 1996). That is, when one views a partner's offer in an exchange as a gift, then he or she is grateful and happy in the marriage. In short, the economy of gratitude can help explain a variety of findings related to women's work hours and men's participation in domestic labor.

Specifically, social exchange *when combined with* economies of gratitude helps elucidate several central puzzles that persist in terms of the inequitable distribution of domestic labor, including: 1) why some full-time employed wives still perform most or all of the household work (because they see their careers as a "gift," from their husbands); 2) why men who earn less and work fewer hours do not necessarily increase their contributions to domestic labor (they define their own household work as a gift, for which they should be compensated by wives' paid labor); and 3) why both men and women tend to see an unequal distribution of labor as "fair" and equitable (because women are expected to do such work while men's participation is a gift).

Sensemaking and Communicating About the Division of Domestic Labor

Our integrated theory of domestic labor allocation is of value in its own right. However, for communication scholars, this theory is particularly useful for laying the groundwork for how couples can make sense of, talk about, and negotiate more equitable divisions of that labor. When faced with the reality of domestic labor, few couples explicitly discuss task allocation

(Wiesmann et al., 2008); instead, they rely upon individual tolerance levels, custom, habit and experience to direct their behavior and only attempt to makes sense of their choices explicitly when a disjuncture occurs.

Cultural norms related to socialization, gender performance, self-organizing, and women's greater competence create a situation where it makes sense to couples for women to perform indoor household labor and men outdoor labor. Once labor becomes divided this way, however, it becomes difficult to renegotiate, in part because behaviors have become habituated and in part because of the meanings individuals and couples assign to domestic labor.

When women become dissatisfied with the division of household labor and attempt to renegotiate it, they often encounter ambivalence within and resistance without. They may be ambivalent about requesting a reallocation, in part, because of their gendered identities. Despite these feelings, overburdened women often attempt to renegotiate household responsibilities. However, when (male) partners are confronted with their failure to contribute, they may make sense of the inequality by arguing that "it doesn't bother me so I shouldn't have to do it" (Coontz, 2005). A study of roommate's decision making about and management of household chores, for example, revealed that roommates—especially male roommates—believe that the person who is most disturbed by the dirt, unwashed dishes and smelly trash should be responsible for taking care of it (Riforgiate & Alberts, 2008).

Such beliefs disadvantage women in that, as indicated above, females often have a lower tolerance for dirt and disorder and therefore are more likely to believe household chores need to be performed more frequently and regularly and to be disturbed if they are not. It can be difficult to negotiate frequency of task performance and a fair division of that performance if one partner automatically assumes the other "more bothered" partner should perform the task. It also follows that the partner who is not disturbed may feel put upon and as though being asked to do a "favor" or give a gift if requested to perform a task.

As noted in our opening, Coontz (2005) recounts one's couple's conflict centered on this issue:

> She (the wife) complained about how unappreciative he (her husband) was of the effort she took in making gourmet dinners and keeping the house clean. He said "Hang on a minute. I never asked her to do anything of those things. I can't help it if she has higher standards than I do. I don't *care* what we have for dinner. I don't *care* if the floor gets mopped twice a week" (p. 18, emphasis in original).

On the face of it, the husband's comments reflect a common sense notion of how the world works – if it bothers you, you should fix it. However, such a reading of the interaction masks how microdecisions can add up to structural inequality. As Natalier (2003) points out, such discourse frames household labor (shopping, cooking, childrearing) as a "choice." If individual effort is framed as voluntary, then, others' labor cannot be demanded and "attempts to change the behavior of others cannot be legitimate" (Natalier, 2003, p. 266). In practice, however, much of household labor is not a choice (food must be bought, laundry must be washed), and framing it as a choice places the burden of responsibility on the individual who "chooses" to perform more domestic labor in the home.

Finally, individuals' experiences and expectations can undermine efforts to distribute labor equally. A specific experience that undermines these efforts concerns how tasks are to be performed. Because girls and young women are socialized to perform more traditionally "feminine" tasks such as laundry, dishwashing, and bed making, typically they enter shared households with greater skills and higher standards for performance of these tasks than do men. Coupled with their low

tolerance levels, these attributes lead them to criticize the less skillful performance of their partners and to redo or take over tasks "so they are done right" (Wiesmann et al., 2008). Such behavior tends to undermine men's contributions or is used to justify their failure to do so, as Marc, a participant in a focus group study of roommates (Riforgiate & Alberts, 2008) explains here.

> Now, I've attempted to do the washing a few times, but I didn't do it quite right. I should have thrown this or that in as well. Or she starts moaning and nitpicking. So she ends up doing it herself. So that's gone automatically.

As Hawkins et al. (1994) suggest, wives may send mixed messages to their partners about needing and wanting their assistance while at the same time communicating a desire to retain control over the domestic sphere and standards for cleanliness or neatness. Indeed, women often treat men as unskilled assistants, refuse to relinquish control, and keep their standards too high for them to meet (Coontz, 2005).

Thus the ways that women and men individually and together make sense of domestic labor and its performance are guided by fundamental aspects of our integrated theory – threshold level, self-organizing systems, socialization, and economies of gratitude. This theory and its underlying processes propose ways that couples' might best communicate and negotiate task allocation more effectively. That is, simply asking and negotiating with underperforming partners is not successful (Hawkins et al., 1994) because so doing requires that the under-performing partner (who typically is male) change his/her behavior out of goodwill. However, a theory focused on social organizing and sensemaking suggests that *both* partners need to understand and communicate about the underlying dynamics of labor allocation and that *both* need to change their behaviors since the performance of domestic labor is part of a social organizing system created by all participants.

With an outline of this theory in hand, the next step is to evaluate several of its specific components and ascertain the extent to which each component contributes to couples' decision-making, sensemaking and communication about labor allocation. With empirical examination, we can develop more effective ways for couples to make sense of and communicate about allocating labor. For example, empirically demonstrating that threshold level is an important determinant of task performance can help reshape the degree to which such performance is seen as voluntary and provide a starting point for couples to discuss differing expectations without resorting to personal attacks of laziness, perfectionism, irresponsibility or stubbornness.

EVALUATING THE INTEGRATED THEORY OF THE DIVISION OF DOMESTIC LABOR

Although the proposed theory is grounded in existing scholarship, some of the specific propositions (e.g., individuals possess differing threshold levels) have not been empirically demonstrated nor have the interaction effects of the components of the theory been examined (e.g., individuals with lower threshold levels perform more domestic labor). To establish the usefulness of the theory, research could fruitfully explore the following propositions:

- Individuals possess differing threshold levels for household tasks.
- On average, women possess lower threshold levels for a greater number of household tasks than do men.

- The performance of specific household chores is associated with individuals' threshold level for those chores.
- Individuals' lower thresholds for specific tasks are associated with greater competence in performing those tasks.
- Individuals are less grateful for tasks their partners' perform habitually.
- Differing threshold levels among dyads is associated with greater conflict concerning the division of household labor.
- Explicit discussions of task allocation before/after sharing a domicile mitigate conflict/inequities in the performance of household labor.

In addition, we propose the following research questions related to the communication implications of the theory:

- How do overperformers ask underperformers to habitually perform a task? How do underperformers respond to such requests?
- How do underperformers respond when asked to increase their expressions of gratitude for overperformers' domestic work?
- How do underperformers persuade overperformers to modify their standards?
- Does explicitly discussing threshold levels lead to more equitable and satisfying divisions of domestic labor?

We have begun exploring several of these propositions in two completed and two in-progress studies. In the first study, the first author and a member of her research team conducted a focus group study of 33 undergraduate students who lived in same-sex households (Riforgiate & Alberts, 2008). Three of the five groups were composed of female roommates, and two included male roommates only. The study analyzed participants' expectations toward and experiences with dividing domestic labor, specifically examining threshold level and task performance.

Analyses revealed that participants of both sexes articulated a range of threshold levels from very low to high and that respondents connected their performance of individual tasks to their expectations for cleanliness. One participant's description of his concern for bathroom cleanliness illustrates this finding; he cleaned the toilets regularly, he explained, not based on need, but because the toilets were *really* important to him, and he could not tolerate this task remaining incomplete. He added, "I do the bathroom. I just, I don't know man, just toilet, nasty toilet it's just not, not cool. I, so long as I do it, I know it's clean and I know it's done to my standards."

By removing the variable of sex that often masks individual preferences for cleanliness, our preliminary analysis suggests that individual tolerance levels are important in determining task allocation. Thus, it is not simply that men are messy and women are clean; rather, the desired level of cleanliness contributes to the individual's performance in terms of task completion and frequency. Participants also indicated that they "owned" certain tasks because they were especially bothered if those tasks went undone and, therefore, performed the tasks almost exclusively. However, in this study, the authors did not objectively measure threshold level, so it cannot determine if women, on average, demonstrated lower threshold levels than men.

The authors did determine, however, that the sexes seem to develop different methods of allocating domestic labor as well as patterns of cleaning. Male participants discussed cleaning

based on "need" (i.e., when they identified the residence as dirty), while women were more likely to say they develop task schedules and cleaned on a routine basis. Thus, females were more likely to maintain a set level of cleanliness, often performing tasks before they noticeably required attention. In addition, females identified washing windows and dusting as necessary domestic tasks. Male participants did not mention these tasks, and when asked specifically about them, men indicated there was no need to perform them.

If further studies substantiate these initial findings, these differences in cleaning patterns may explain why even if couples have similar threshold levels, women perform more household tasks. That is, if a male-female dyad has similar threshold levels but males clean only when they perceive a specific need while females clean regularly on a schedule, males may never have occasion to recognize a need to clean. The regularity of women's cleaning means that the house may never become sufficiently dirty for men to recognize that it "needs" to be cleaned. Over time this difference, then, may contribute to gender-based task allocation patterns in the home.

In a second study, the first author and a member of her research team examined threshold level and the frequency and negativity of conflict management among 99 pairs of undergraduate student roommates (198 total participants) (O'Colmain & Alberts, 2008). It was determined that differences in threshold level—as measure by the Level of Cleanliness (LC) subscale of the Attitudes Toward Housecleaning Scale (ATH; Ogletree, Worthen, Turner, & Vickers, 2006) and the Threshold for Disorder six-item scale (Riforgiate & Alberts, 2008) were strongly associated with both conflict frequency and negative conflict management.

The results indicated that roommates who were similar in terms of their threshold levels for chores undone experienced less conflict, were more apt to use positive conflict management strategies, and were less likely to resort to negative conflict management strategies when engaging in conflict over the division of household labor. On the other hand, roommates who differed from each other in terms of their threshold levels tended to fight about housecleaning issues more often and to do so in less positive and more destructive ways.

In addition to the two completed studies, the first author and her research team are currently conducting studies of married couples' threshold levels, task performance and experiences of gratitude as well as a study of first-year college students' threshold level, division of household labor and satisfaction with roommate. Taken together, these studies offer initial empirical support for the influence of individual threshold level on the division of domestic labor and its association with frequency and type of conflict strategies invoked.

CONCLUSION

Past research has provided considerable insight into the various factors that affect the (inequitable) division of domestic labor. However, past work based on singular theories has been unable to provide an adequately nuanced and multifaceted approach for explaining the persistent inequities and attendant conflict associated with the division of domestic labor. We believe the current integrated theory provides a significantly complex, and empirically demonstrable, foundation for examining the multiple influences that together shape how household labor is allocated, perceived, and interpreted. Such a theory is generative in terms of myriad directions for future research, especially in terms of an eye toward developing communication strategies that can redress current inequities.

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