

Fathers, Daughters and the Second Shift

April 11, 2014

The phrase “the second shift” entered the popular lexicon a quarter century ago, when sociologist Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung published a popular book by that name. Based on in-depth interviews and in-home observations of working couples, the book revealed that, despite entering the labor market and pursuing careers in record numbers, women were still taking care of most of the routine household and childcare responsibilities. The authors documented the toll that balancing career and unpaid domestic labor was taking on families, and women in particular—in stress, marital tension, exhaustion and guilt.

Many others have studied this “double burden” in the years since, and surprisingly little has changed. Wives still report doing about twice as much housework and childcare as their husbands, and this imbalance often poses a barrier to women’s professional advancement. One difference is that today’s couples, even if they unconsciously embrace traditional gender stereotypes and live less-than-egalitarian lives, may publicly proclaim more egalitarian values.

How are these conflicted couples’ kids affected by all of this? Are their own professional and family aspirations shaped by what they see at home, or by what they hear publicly, or by hidden stereotypes—or by all three? University of British Columbia psychological scientist Alyssa Croft and her colleagues decided to explore this important question, and to disentangle these competing influences on kids’ views of gender and work—and their hopes for the future.

To do so, the scientists recruited more than 300 children and at least one of their parents. Fathers of sons and daughters and mothers of sons and daughters were all represented in the sample, so the scientists could explore the various parent-child dynamics. They first asked parents and children who did what at home—dishes, cleaning, cooking, childcare, laundry—and how many hours each partner worked for pay outside the home. They also asked the adults to choose the stereotype—working person or stay-at-home parent—they identified with. In addition to asking them directly, the scientists used a test of automatic, implicit attitudes toward gender and work.

Then they assessed the kids. They asked them which stereotype they most aspired to be like when they grew up. They also asked them specifically what adult occupation they had in mind for the future.

The scientists analyzed all the information from parents and children, with some interesting insights. For example, mothers’ explicit views about gender roles at home—this was a reliable indicator of their kids’ attitudes toward this issue. But for daughters in particular, what mattered in shaping their gender attitudes were what the parents really believed and how they acted. Specifically, girls were more likely to envision themselves in careers when their fathers were more egalitarian in their beliefs about domestic labor—and also when their mothers actually did less household work and were more career-oriented.

Talk is cheap, and when it comes to gender roles, not that influential. Over and above parents’ explicitly

stated beliefs, fathers' actual dishwashing and diaper changing played a key role in shaping daughters' aspirations for the future. That is, when dad believed in equality at home, and didn't unconsciously link women and housework, and actually did his share of the drudgery—if all this was true, their daughters aspired to less stereotypic careers. These findings suggest that, even when parents explicitly endorse gender equality at home, their hidden stereotypical beliefs and an actual non-egalitarian division of labor at home—these send the more powerful message to young girls that they should limit their aspirations.

The findings about fathers, reported in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, are particularly interesting and surprising. Despite being male and despite the mothers often being the primary caregiver and controlling domestic matters, fathers powerfully influence their daughters' professional aspirations. Why is unclear. They could be modeling future mates, signaling to their daughters that they can and should expect a man's contribution at home. Or fathers that really pitch in may have more opportunities to influence their daughters, acting in effect as gatekeepers to roles that are not stereotypical.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation is the most obvious: Fathers' influence on the daughters may result from the beliefs and actions of the mothers in these families. After all, dads who do the laundry and make school lunches may very well marry women who are successful at work and who themselves defy the stereotypes.

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