

What determines the sense of fairness regarding household division of labor between spouses?

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1. The Purpose of the Study

Women in industrial countries do most of the household chores and yet find this “fair” (e.g., Fuwa and Tsutsui 2010). This study sets out to investigate two questions: 1) Why do many women find an unbalanced division of labor to be “fair”? and 2) Do women feel happier if they find their division of household labor to be “fair”?

2. Data and Methods

Original micro data collected through a web-administered survey on Japanese married women aged from 25 to 54 (N=1496) were used in the analysis. The data include variables for economic resources, time constraints, gender values, reference group, sense of fairness regarding household division of labor, and sense of overall happiness. Multinomial regression analysis is used for the first question, and ordered logistic regression analysis is used for the second question.

3. Results

Regarding the first question, Why do many women find an unbalanced division of labor to be “fair”?, four hypotheses that purport to explain this finding are tested: 1) The economic resource theory; 2) The time constraint theory; 3) The gender value theory; and 4) Relative deprivation theory. The results support the time constraint theory and the relative deprivation theory. The wife’s work hours affect her sense of fairness, while income and gender values were not significant. Moreover, women are more likely to accept the division of household labor as fair, if they perceive that their mothers and other wives with similar life settings in the general public are faring poorly, controlling for other variables.

Regarding the second question (Do women feel happier if they find their division of household labor to be “fair”?), the answer is yes. The sense of fairness in household divisions of labor actually affects married women’s sense of overall happiness.

4. Conclusion

The results show a somewhat ironic picture. A woman who perceives that her mother and other wives with similar life settings as herself bear unbalanced household divisions of labor, sees her own unbalanced division of labor as fair, and is actually happier. By not knowing there are couples with more evenly balanced household divisions of labor, those women actually managed to be happier. But, it can also be understood as a rational choice, given the lack of alternatives in the market. If “other husbands” in the general public with similar familial and work settings have unbalanced divisions of labor, it is very unlikely that a woman could find an alternative husband who provides a larger share of the household labor.

Whether a woman’s perception is illusory or not, perceiving that other wives are faring poorly in the household division of labor, makes women do more household chore and stay happier.

Reference

Fuwa M. and Tsutsui J. 2010 “A cross-National Comparison of the Perceived Fairness of the Division of Household Labor” *Japanese Journal of Family Sociology*, 22(1): 52-63.