Research note

Researching the gender division of unpaid domestic work: practices, relationships, negotiations, and meanings

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the potential of quantitative research methods for sociologists who research the gender division of unpaid domestic work. To begin, it reflects on the emergence of the sociological interest in unpaid domestic work and identifies an early core concern with making invisible work visible. It is argued that quantitative research methods provide us with the most valuable opportunities for ‘recognising’ unpaid domestic work since they facilitate larger scale representative projects. However the data in most of the large scale surveys are scant, and fail to reflect developments in the conceptualisation of unpaid domestic work. Four areas of concern to contemporary sociology are identified: domestic work practices, relationships, negotiations and meanings. Given the complex questions that these four sub-topics raise, the paper proposes a range of sub-areas as a focus for ongoing sociological research into unpaid domestic work. It is concluded that, despite the methodological challenges presented, detailed indicators of the multiple dimensions of unpaid domestic work need to be agreed so that valid information can be collected in large scale surveys as routinely as it is on paid work.

Recognising unpaid domestic work

The paper is concerned with how sociologists research the gender division of unpaid domestic work. First, why is this topic a concern? It is well known to readers of this journal that the contemporary sociological interest in unpaid domestic work was stimulated by second wave feminist accounts that challenged the invisibility of female-dominated domestic work within the mainstream sociology of work. Oakley’s doctoral research (1974) remains a fascinating, influential example. In it, Oakley argued that sociology had ignored domestic work, dismissing it merely as a natural part of women’s sex roles. Domestic work is a form of work, she maintained, and as such it could and should be studied sociologically.
The crux of this influential argument, that domestic work should be mainstreamed, has ramifications outside academia since it is not just sociology that has disregarded the female-dominated unpaid work that is undertaken in the home. Official statistics on work also invariably focus on its paid dimensions, with huge investment in gathering detailed and highly complex information on those working in the labour market or looking for paid work, and the characteristics of the work-place. Yet, of all the time women spend on work and study (as a main economic activity) in the UK, fully 60% is dedicated to domestic work (and 36% for men. ONS, 2006: Table 4.4). Recognising the neglect of so much work in official accounts, the UN’s 1993 System of National Accounts (that splits unpaid work into categories according to whether or not the work is taken into consideration in systems of national accounts. SNAs), recommended that unpaid non-SNA work – including unpaid domestic work – should be measured, accurately and regularly (UN, 2005). In this way its contribution to total GDP can be estimated (Antonopoulos, 2008). Building on this, a recent ‘three r’ framework for approaching unpaid work in academic debate and policy formulation, established by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, New York) expert group on unpaid work, time and gender, reiterates the need for more detailed information on unpaid domestic work to feed into policies to shape its ‘recognition, redistribution and reduction’ (Elson, 2008).

If the aim is to research unpaid domestic work sociologically, in part to explore an under-researched but vital form of work, then a key stage is the operationalisation of the concept. How sociologists have approached unpaid domestic work is discussed in the next section. The third section of the paper then considers the potential contribution of quantitative survey methods for the study of unpaid domestic work. It reflects, in particular, on the relative neglect of domestic work in major large-scale data-sets, before going on to propose how we might approach unpaid domestic work quantitatively in future.

Conceptualising unpaid domestic work

How has unpaid domestic work been approached within sociology? Two broad influential literatures will be referred to here: the first one picking up on developments in the sociology of paid work, including emotional labour, and the second one on caring.

First then and going back to Oakley, as well as arguing powerfully for the need to recognise domestic work, to make hidden work visible, her study was also influential in sociology for taking mainstream concerns from the sociology of paid work and using them to analyse the experiences of the housewives she interviewed. Oakley explored women’s domestic work conditions; work identities; job satisfaction; the monotony, pace and fragmentation of work; work routines; and autonomy, making direct reference to debates in industrial sociology at that time (see similar themes in Beynon, 1973; Braverman, 1974 for example).
Innovatively, Oakley showed how women’s unpaid domestic work, despite its lack of a wage relationship and its location within the private sphere, might still be analysed using the sociological concepts that emerged largely out of the study of men’s paid work in the labour market. However, this emphasis on the similarities between unpaid domestic and paid work arguably served to neglect those aspects of unpaid domestic work that did not fit so well with a concept of work that was embedded in the sociology of paid work. In particular, caring elements of domestic practices (Chapman, 2004) posed some of the deepest challenges to sociologists of work. Indeed, a key question within the sociological study of unpaid domestic work has been whether some elements of unpaid caring should or should not be defined as part of domestic ‘work’. This debate is rooted, in part, in a common conceptualisation of work as something that is transferable to others. For example, attempts to make unpaid domestic work visible in national accounts by estimating its contribution to GDP, often calculate what would be the costs if domestic work tasks were outsourced to waged cleaners, cooks, and so on, using average wages rates for these occupations (Antonopoulos, 2008). Given the prevalence of this transferable conceptualisation of work, it has been suggested that there are elements of unpaid caring that are not work: relationship-building caring activities that occur between a parent and child have been cited as examples (Gray, 2006; Himmelweit, 1995).

The theoretical elaboration of emotional labour stands in marked contrast to a conceptualisation of domestic work that explicitly excludes elements of caring. Hochschild’s (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* famously identified a number of forms of emotional labour occurring in the workplace. She, and many others since, have shown how emotional labour is a formal part of many jobs, particularly in the service sector, and that there has been an expansion in managerial attempts to prescribe, supervise and measure its performance (Taylor, 1998; Kong, 2006). Accordingly, activities like ‘love labour’ – that might once have appeared alien to students of work in the formal wage economy – have now been conceptualised as work (Lynch, 2007).

Second, an academic tradition that straddles a blurred boundary between sociology and social policy has fore-fronted an influential stream of studies specifically into understanding caring. What emerges from this tradition is that caring as a concept is complex, ambiguous and contested (Daly and Lewis, 2000; Finch and Groves, 1983; Haugen, 2007; Tronto, 1987, 1996). For this article’s specific focus on unpaid domestic work, it is notable that in caring: ‘the distinction between work and non-work, and between paid and unpaid labour, is an especially complex one’ (León, 2005: 205). Daly (2002), for example, argued that caring as a concept was initially used only to depict the nature of the work involved in caring, and tended to refer mainly to care-giving work in unpaid domestic and personal services, but the concept developed to incorporate an ethic or moral orientation as well (Tronto, 1987, 1996; Ungerson, 1983).
These literatures on unpaid domestic work and caring, located within the study of work and the study of care respectively, have begun to coalesce, for Ungerson (2005). She cites as key examples Twigg’s care-based study that analyses touch during bathing in a paid care relationship, and Glucksmann’s work-based research that has developed the concept of the ‘total social organization of labour’ to construe care as a form of labour (both cited in Ungerson, 2005). We can add to these a number of studies by researchers located within the sociology of the family that have led to more nuanced understandings of the meaning of unpaid domestic work for women and men. Finch’s (1989) work on family obligations, for example, that examined various types of transfer within families (including economic and care transfers) asks who gives what to whom and why? Here, Finch researched how duty, obligation and responsibility are worked out within families, considering the importance of people’s evaluations of the ‘proper thing to do’ and hence the ethical and moral dimensions of family obligations. Brannen and Moss (1991) amalgamated concerns with paid work, and unpaid domestic work, highlighting an interest in how couples negotiate their work-family responsibilities. Morgan’s (1999) consideration of how heterosexual couples ‘do gender’ within the household also demonstrated the importance of the meaning of domestic practices within the home, showing how domestic tasks contribute to identity construction. Other discussions of gendered practices within the home (such as those by Brannen, Brannen and Moss, 2004; and Chapman, 2004) have laid stress on the cultural meaning of domestic practices; on allocations and expectations; on the fluidity of practices and hence the potential for change as well as the tensions existing between change and continuity, amongst other key issues.

It is apparent, then, that the sociological study of unpaid domestic work needs to build upon insights from the above influential traditions in order properly to recognise the multiple dimensions of this core concept. Four key areas of concern for sociology can be identified. These are domestic work practices (who does what); relationships (for, from and with whom); negotiations (how); and meanings of domestic work (for those carrying out domestic work and others). Given the complexities involved in researching the concept holistically in this way, what might be the potential of quantitative research methods in the further sociological exploration of unpaid domestic work?

**Researching unpaid domestic work: the contribution of quantitative approaches**

Many of the sociological insights into unpaid domestic work that were identified above have been gleaned from empirical studies that incorporated qualitative methodologies in some way. However, ‘recognising’ unpaid domestic work and making it visible also necessitates embedding questions into large scale surveys. Only in this way is it possible to explore systematically any variations in domestic work practices, relationships, negotiations and
meanings (in relation to class, ethnic group, age, nation and so on), as well as to identify any changes (and continuities) over time in these four dimensions of unpaid domestic work.

The bulk of quantitative studies of unpaid domestic work identified in a review of sociological publications in the UK over the past ten years (references not cited due to space limitations) use secondary analysis of large-scale data-sets, and the bulk focus on domestic work practices. This question is core within the study of unpaid domestic work but, even on this popular dimension, the data in major large scale studies are restricted. Secondary data analysts are invariably constrained in the variables on offer to them (Hakim, 1982), but the real dearth of data on domestic work in even the largest of data-sets is stark. A prime illustrative example is the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). The ECHP is one of the largest panel surveys in Europe that provides valuable data that is at the household level, cross-nationally comparable and longitudinal. In its first wave in 1994, the sample size of the ECHP was around 60,500 nationally representative households. The data that is available on domestic work practices in the ECHP is scant. It has details on how respondents define their own main working status (with housewife/carer as an option); on whether they report carrying out unpaid housework/care; and for how many hours. There is no information at all on the topic of domestic work from some of the participating countries. In contrast, the data-set offers thirty-nine variables on employment, four on unemployment, fifteen on searching for work, twelve on previous jobs and thirty-one on training and education.

Absent or very limited data on domestic work in this and other major surveys testifies to gendered processes at work in survey design that reflect what is seen to be a suitable, serious topic for in-depth academic and policy research (Oakley, 1974; Glover, 1996; Spender, 1980). But the advantages of secondary analysis of these types of data-sets are well recognised: it offers multiple researchers access to high quality data on many thousands of respondents, with large samples providing invaluable opportunities for sub-group comparisons (Dale, Arber and Proctor, 1988; Hyman, 1972). Given the advantages of such secondary analysis, this paper considers what data a sociologist who is interested in the gender division of unpaid domestic work might like to see available. To demonstrate the possibilities, examples of relevant questions that already exist, scattered through some of the main large surveys, are drawn upon too: items specifically on domestic work as well as those on paid work that could be tweaked to asking about unpaid domestic work. The main areas of potential sociological enquiry have been grouped into the four sub-topics identified earlier: domestic work practices, relationships, negotiations, and meanings.

1. **Unpaid domestic work: practices**

Domestic work practices are arguably the most straightforward of the four sub-topics to research, and to do so quantitatively. However, the complexities
involved in collecting data even on the routine performance of everyday tasks, testify to the methodological challenges that are faced. Nine areas for questioning on domestic work practices have been proposed, below. A number of examples of actual survey questions are cited to demonstrate the possibilities (Figure 1).

i. What tasks do you carry out? Beginning with the domestic tasks that a respondent does, can we reveal the variety of tasks that are performed at the same time as seeing which ones figure most frequently in everyday life? One useful, common approach is to ask respondents to pick which tasks they usually do from a provided list (see Figure 1i), whilst the time use survey approach asks respondents to make a note of what they do during the period of the survey.

ii. How long do these tasks take? If we are interested in how domestic work impacts on lives, potentially restricting a respondent’s ability to take paid work or do more paid work and/or rest and/or have fun and/or spend time with family and friends, we need some measurement of time committed. Assessing time spent on domestic work means asking how often tasks are performed and how long they take. Also, are tasks usual and routine or irregular? We can ask if they are performed daily (how many times per day?), weekly, monthly, annually, less often (Figure 1ii).

iii. What is the tempo or pace of the work? Is it leisurely or rushed? ‘Balancing’ unpaid domestic work with a job, and reconciling the needs and demands of family members, contributes to work intensity, creating a ‘third shift’ of work for many women (Hochschild, 1989). Work intensity is an important dimension of women’s domestic lives, but it is under-researched quantitatively (Floro and Marjorie, 2003). Nevertheless, there are questions from surveys of paid work that target the tempo of paid work and can be adapted for use (Figure 1iii).

iv. Task completion. A further temporal dimension to domestic work tasks is whether they are possible to complete in one go. From the paid work literature (eg Braverman, 1974), we know that a completed task can provide more job satisfaction than a task which is scattered, fragmented and partial. A number of questions already exist (on unpaid domestic and paid work. Figure 1iv).

v. When are the tasks carried out? Are domestic tasks performed during the day, evening or night, during the week or at weekends? (Figure 1v). This information links us to useful debates on the negative impact of ‘unsocial’ work time on people’s leisure and family lives. From the paid work literature, for example, Presser (1995) has demonstrated how unsocial shifts of paid work impact negatively on health and family life, whilst Warren (2003) illustrated the time poverty experienced by shift workers.

vi. Where are the tasks carried out? The location of domestic work tasks has important ramifications for the experience of doing them. Doing the laundry is an illustrative example here, with important class dimensions
| Data-set | Example questions |
|----------|-------------------|
| BHPS     | Preparing and cooking food; buying groceries; cleaning the house; doing the laundry; ‘diy’. |
| MACA     | Which of these ‘caring jobs do you do’? List to choose from |
| TUS      | What is done during the period of the survey. |
| ESS      | Thinking about the youngest child in the household, I would like to ask you about his/her usual childcare, not counting lessons in school |
| EQLF 2003 | How often respondents are involved in domestic work over a specified period? |
| TUS      | Detailed time data collected. |
| ECHP     | How many hours respondents spend on housework each week |
| EWCS     | Does your job involve working at very high speed* |
| EWCS     | Are you able, or not, to choose or change your speed or rate of work?* |
| ESS      | I can choose myself when and how to do housework |
| EWCS     | How often do you have to interrupt a task you are doing in order to take on an unforeseen task?* |
| EWCS     | Are these interruptions disruptive?* |
| BSA (2006) | There are so many things to do at home, I often run out of time before I get them all done |
| ESS      | I can choose myself when and how to do housework |
| EWCS     | Normally, how many times [a week] do you work in the evening, for at least 2 hours between 6.00 pm and 10.00 pm?* |
| EWCS     | ‘Normally, how many times [a week] do you work at night, for at least 2 hours between 10.00 pm and 05.00 am?’ * |
| ESS      | About how many hours are spent doing housework during a typical weekend? |
| ESS      | How often does your work involve working evenings or nights* |
| ESS      | I can choose myself when and how to do housework |
| TUS      | Location of activities recorded |
| ESS      | How well equipped is your home for housework? (If, 0 means a home which does not have running water and 10 means a home with a dishwasher, how would you rate your own home?) |
| ESS      | I can choose myself when and how to do housework |
| TUS      | Primary and secondary activities recorded |
| TUS      | Time spent planning (family meals, parties and so on) is reported. |
| BSA      | Do you supervise the work of others?* |
| ECWS     | Who decides the division of the tasks?* |
| ECWS     | Generally, does your job involve, or not: assessing yourself the quality of your work?* |
| WERS     | Pick from a list of ways in which ‘you monitor the quality of the work undertaken at this workplace’.* |

* Questions specifically on paid work, but useful for adaptation

**Figure 1** Practices: examples of existing survey questions
to it. Are clothes washed in a respondent’s own home, with a washing machine? (Figure 1vi). Or has the laundry to be collected and carried (on foot, on public transport, in a car) to a launderette or the home of a family member or friend to use their facilities? Jarvis’s (2005) geographical research identifies the classed impact of differential access to private transport on the co-ordination of households’ work (see also Warren et al., 2009). TUS data provide details on where activities are carried out, but other questions also exist (Figure 1vi).

vii. What else is the person doing as they carry out that task? If multi-tasking, what are the main, secondary, tertiary activities? Multi-tasking might make an onerous task more enjoyable – watching the television while ironing is an example – but it might contribute to feelings of work intensity. Multi-tasking can also help us take into account passive domestic tasks: ‘being present’ while a child is at home for example (Lader et al., 2006). Linked to this, it is vital to know who is ‘on call’ for a task: if respondents are at a paid job, who will attend their child if s/he is sent home sick from school/nursery or attend to a call from a sick relative? Whose sleep is disturbed by responding, or being ready to respond, to a call from someone for whom they have a caring responsibility? (Joseph et al., 2009; Venn et al., 2008). Aside from the TUS (Figure 1vii), few surveys tap into these aspects of domestic work.

viii. Complex tasks. It has been argued that far more consideration within the analysis of unpaid domestic work is needed of the amount of unpaid planning work and mental activity that takes place within the home (Lynch 2007). It is also vital to recognise the provision of emotional support: both routine emotional support to family members as well as the extra levels of emotional support required in a time of crisis (Finch, 1989). Indeed, domestic crises, and other ‘big events’, have received little attention in much of the quantitative research into the ‘who does what/when/how long’ aspects of unpaid domestic work since studies mostly tap into what people do routinely in their everyday lives. While vital, one of the limitations of a focus only on the routine and everyday is that it omits irregular but potentially major domestic work tasks. This includes the domestic work associated with potentially enjoyable big events like organising a party, visiting relatives, buying birthday presents, entertaining guests. But domestic big events can include crises that happen rarely or may never actually happen, yet might still need to be planned for. They are important to consider here because the potential of a crisis can act as a daily stressor. A common example cited by parents of dependent children is worrying what might happen if a child-care arrangement breaks down (Warren et al., 2009).

To probe such topics, ‘what if’ scenario tasks can be employed. Respondents can be asked to reflect back on actual ‘crisis events’ and/or speculate on ‘what ifs’. A core ‘what if’ question is what happens (or what might happen) to domestic work practices if the main task do-er is taken ill.
This ‘key event’ as trigger approach is a strategy employed usefully in quantitative research into economic well-being (McKay and Kempson, 2003). Here we can ask: what happened with various domestic work tasks when ‘x’ happened: x being the birth of an own child, if applicable, for example, or when a close relative/friend had a baby, or when a close relative was sick.

ix. Responsibility. An important elaboration of the ‘who does what’ question in sociology has been the exploration of ‘who is responsible for what’. Some of the major surveys already examine ‘who has major responsibility’ for a list of domestic tasks, but being responsible for domestic work is more than just this: it can also include planning the domestic work, organizing tasks and allocating the work. Taking responsibility for, in effect being the manager of the work, involves quality control too, and so we need to know who (if anyone) sets standards and who makes sure that the work has been done and to the right standard. Such topics appear regularly in surveys on paid work and can be adapted (Figure 1ix).

2. Unpaid domestic work: relationships

i. Once we have explored who does what, a further dimension concerns the relationships between those who are doing the work and those for whom the work is being done. The core question ‘who does what for whom?’ reflects Finch’s (1989) work into domestic transfers that asked ‘who gives what to whom?’. Here, we would need to identify whether domestic work is under-taken for oneself only, for someone else only, for both, or for many. Both the intra- and inter-household divisions of domestic work are crucial here, and this information can also link us to debates on whether elements of domestic work are waged, whether someone receives some form of payment in kind for the work and whether there is reciprocity in work being done (Pahl, 1988. Figure 2i).

ii. While we need data on what work a respondent does for others, what respondents receive from others (or what work others do for them) must also be explored (Figure 2ii).

iii. Feeding into our analysis of the relationships involved in domestic work practices, information is needed on who is present when jobs are carried out: the ‘with whom’ dimension. There are two aspects to this: the first taps into whether the work is performed alone or with others; the second explores whether work – that is carried out alone – is undertaken while others are present. The UK TUS provides ‘who is present’ data (Figure 2iii).

3. Unpaid domestic work: Negotiations

After establishing who does and/or receives what, and for/from/with whom, a further concern is ‘how’ this all occurs as it does. We are interested here
| Dataset | Example questions |
|---------|-------------------|
| i. For whom ESS | How much support in everyday housework or care do you provide for your grown up children or grandchildren who live apart from you? |
| ii. From whom ESS | If you needed help, is there anyone outside your household you can count on to give you unpaid help with childcare, other care, housework or home maintenance? |
| ESS | How much support with your everyday housework or care do you currently receive from your grown up children or grandchildren who live apart from you? |
| TUS | Do you receive any help in the form of Childcare, Food preparation, Cleaning, tidying-up, Vehicle servicing (car, bikes etc.), |
| iii. With whom TUS | Who is present |

*Questions specifically on paid work, but useful for adaptation

**Figure 2** Relationships: existing survey questions
in negotiations: in ‘working it out’ (Finch, 1989). Previous research has shown that domestic negotiations are embedded in relationships (see point 2); that domestic practices are worked out over time; that negotiations are context specific; and that they have a moral dimension (see point 4). Is it possible to explore these issues quantitatively?

There are many potential questions to ask when the main concern is with the process of negotiating domestic work practices. For example are commitments/ responsibilities for domestic tasks defined, negotiated and agreed? How are standards agreed and set, if at all? Is the domestic work managed and processed? How? For example, is this on a day to day or week to week basis? Does it involve agreed or delegated job routines, job lists, requests, demands? Are there any negotiations about how practices are worked out? Wiesmann et al.’s (2008) qualitative study of Dutch couples found that many did not consider explicitly their division of domestic work. Conversely, if negotiations are identified then what reasoning is employed? Magnusson (2008) shows how couples draw upon a range of discourses to support gender inequality in the home, including ‘individual differences’, ‘sex differences’, and the ‘primacy of domestic peace’. So, do respondents draw upon preferences and wishes of themselves and others in explaining their domestic work practices? Do they draw upon assumptions about sex roles or on ideas about ‘the proper thing to do’? (Ungerson, 1983). Are other roles considered, for example whether someone does more and/or higher waged paid work? Is competence (or perceived competence) a factor in who does what – is x seen to be better at a task like ironing or cooking or putting up shelves than y. If there are negotiations, who initiates them? Is there agreement? If not, who ultimately decides?

There are some limited survey questions on domestic work negotiations already but we can also draw upon questions dedicated to how teams manage their work from workplace surveys (Figure 3).

4. Unpaid domestic work: meaning

We end with perhaps the most difficult dimension of domestic work to approach quantitatively: its meaning. Survey experts agree that variables that try to explore subjective experiences raise the most difficult measurement problems in surveys (Marsh, 1982). Five sub-topics have been identified under ‘meaning’ here: views about the work task itself; feelings about the doing of domestic work; feelings about the division of unpaid domestic work; views on the fit between domestic work and the rest of life; and the moral meaning of domestic work.

i. The task. It is uncommon to consider how various domestic tasks are perceived in general. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin by considering whether tasks are seen to be essential to domestic life or trivial (Metcalfe, 2009). Whether they are viewed as skilled or unskilled? This information can feed into an analysis of the value attached to diverse elements of
| Data-set | Example questions                                                                                                                                 |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BSA      | How often do you and your spouse/partner disagree about the sharing of household work, or how to divide housework?                                |
| ESS      | When you and your partner make decisions about the following, who generally gets their way: how to divide housework                                   |
| ECWS     | Who decides the division of the tasks?                                                                                                             |
| WERS     | Do members of the team decide by themselves on the division of tasks?                                                                             |
| WERS     | Do team members jointly decide how the work is to be done?                                                                                       |
| WERS     | Are teams given responsibility for specific products or services?                                                                                  |
| WERS     | Are team meetings held, how regularly, and which issues, (from a list provided), are discussed?                                                    |
| WERS     | Does management normally negotiate, consult, inform or not inform about hours of work…?                                                           |

* Questions specifically on paid work, but useful for adaptation.
domestic work, and hence to an (under-) appreciation of the work of those who specialise in these elements (see 4ii). Pertinent examples might include views on the tasks of dusting, ironing or washing the car.

ii. Doing the task. Considering first the views of the person actually doing the work: how does their work make them feel? Do they obtain work satisfaction? Is doing domestic work felt to be a duty, an obligation, a responsibility (Finch 1989)? Is it felt to be dreary, trivial and mundane, or creative and skilled? Is it enjoyable? Is their domestic work, or elements of it, experienced as an act of love and affection (Pahl, 1988)? Does the respondent feel that their work is noticed? Women in numerous qualitative studies report that the domestic work that they do for others remains invisible to and unappreciated by family members, conversely men who do domestic work are often highly praised (Hochschild’s 1989 notion of an economy of gratitude; Brannen and Moss, 1991). Do respondents feel that their work is appreciated, and do they feel that others are grateful for their work? Is appreciation important to the respondent? Finally, do respondents’ feelings about their domestic work vary depending on context (if a task is carried out for a special occasion for example).

Next, it is important though rare also to consider the attitudes and feelings of those for whom domestic work is done. As above, do these respondents ‘see’ and appreciate the work that is done for them? Is the work carried out on their behalf seen to be trivial or important? Is its quality deemed satisfactory? In numerous qualitative accounts, women are reported to be critical of the quality of the work (such as cleaning and ironing) that their male partners have undertaken (Brannen and Moss, 1991; Charles and James, 2005; Metcalfe, 2009).

iii. The division of unpaid domestic work. Are arrangements and practices seen to be fair? Concepts like fairness and equality in the study of unpaid domestic work, as elsewhere, are complex to research (Nordenmark and Nyman, 2003). Nevertheless, this is a core sociological interest since women and men are expressing increasing support for the idea of more gender equality in domestic work practices but the lived reality lags behind the rhetoric (Fox et al., 2009).

First, in respondents’ views, is there a fair exchange of tasks in their own home? Who ‘does’ versus who ‘should”? Is work seen to be reciprocal? Is reciprocity important? (4iii). Studies have shown that the actual hours committed to domestic work by partners are less important in ‘partnership satisfaction’ than perceptions of fairness (Wilkie et al., 1998). Second, is the division of domestic work seen to be fair in society in general? (4iii). Respondents’ views on general statements, that are explored commonly in surveys, can be employed here (see 4v). Hakim (2000, 2003) warns against confusing individuals’ personal lifestyle preferences with their approval or disapproval of general attitude statements.

iv. Work-life reconciliation. Do the respondents feel that their unpaid domestic work fits in with the rest of their lives? Do they feel that they have
enough time to do what they need or want to, in terms of family life, leisure, community participation, and so on? Or does one domain of their lives spill over and impact negatively on others (Dilworth, 2004)? Do they worry about ‘balancing’ or reconciling paid and unpaid domestic work, if applicable? Do they experience the stress and hard work of a third shift? A large number of surveys already ask a range of useful questions about work-life balancing (Figure 4iv), and quality of life is also widely researched (see Phillips, 2006).

v. The moral meaning of domestic work. Literatures on caring and care work and on paid work have asserted that ‘what you do’ in terms of work shapes ‘who you are’. The moral dimension to domestic negotiations and the ‘ethic of care’ are also linked firmly to identity construction. Domestic practices often reflect what seems right in given conditions and what is seen as the proper thing to do. Moreover these practices are known to be gendered (as well as classed and racialised) (Duncan, 2005). For Morgan (1996), for example, vacuuming, from one perspective, can be seen to be necessary for keeping the home clean and so can be performed by anyone. From a gender perspective, however, doing vacuuming is a way of ‘doing gender’. Studying women’s domestic work thus connects us to key ideas about being a good woman/mother/partner. It also links us to classed debates about being respectable (Skeggs, 1997). It is vital then to interrogate normative rules, and variations in these, around domestic work to consider what people feel that they should do, and to identify any differences between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’: between beliefs and actions (Finch, 1989). Examining people’s interpretations of ‘the normative’ in terms of domestic work, and their own stances on it, is valuable for allowing us to identify similarities and differences in domestic working in diverse cultural settings.

Looking at normative views, a number of surveys ask respondents to agree/disagree with general statements on the division of domestic work. And, since individuals’ own preferences should not be conflated with their approval or disapproval of general attitude statements, we should also consider personal preference (Figure 4v).

Finally, how are these attitudes to unpaid domestic work shaped? There is currently little quantitative information on this. However, respondents could be asked, as an example, to reflect on their own domestic work practices and to consider whether the views and domestic practices of their parents have had an impact on their own lives. They could be asked if they are aware of the domestic practices of their friends and peers (Metcalf, 2009), and whether they compare these with their own. Where applicable, too, do their children undertake domestic work, and do respondents feel it is important to teach children about doing domestic work? In household surveys in which children are also interviewed about domestic work (such as the BHPS), parental and children’s views on domestic work can be compared.
| Dataset | Example questions |
|---------|-------------------|
| ESS     | i. The task       |
|         | | ii. Doing the work |
|         | | ESS I find my housework stressful |
| ESS     | | ECWS In your job you have the opportunity to do what you do best * |
| ECWS    | | ESS You [job] gives you the feeling of work well done * |
| ECWS    | | Which of your caring jobs do you dislike the most, and why? |
| PAOC    | | Because of caring fed. I am doing something good, stressed, lonely, closer to my family etc. |
| PAOC    | | To what extent do you feel that you get the recognition that you deserve for what you do? * |
| PANOC   | iii. The division of unpaid domestic work: fair? |
|         | BSA Would you like your (partner) to spend more time on home chores, less time, or about the same amount of time as now? |
| BSIA    | iv. Work-life      |
|         | BSA In general, do your working hours fit in with your family or social commitments outside work very well, fairly well, not very well, not at all well? |
| ESS     | v. The moral meaning of domestic work |
|         | ESS To what extent do you feel that you get the recognition that you deserve for what you do? * |
| BSA     | | BSA What, if any, of the things on this card would you say is your main ambition in life?... having a good job, a family, to be well off, etc. |
| YPSAS   | | Figure 4 Meanings: existing survey questions |

Research note: Researching the gender division of unpaid domestic work

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Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with a significant but under-researched area of work: the unpaid domestic work that is carried out in the home, mainly by women. It has been argued that a commitment to making this ‘hidden’ work visible, to ‘recognising’ it, is best facilitated by research that employs large scale survey methods. These methods are vital for the identification of patterns and trends in the gendering of unpaid domestic work, as well as for uncovering diversity amongst social groups by class, ethnic group, age, region, country, and so on. A wealth of information has been collected by qualitative sociological studies of unpaid domestic work, but most have focused on domestic work practices. The potential for large-scale quantitative research into even just this one dimension of unpaid domestic work has been restricted by the paucity of relevant data in the major data-sets. It has been argued that it is vital that unpaid domestic work is quantified more thoroughly so that information can be collected for detailed comparative studies, as well as for explorations across time (and see Warde and Hetherington, 1993).

A review of data available in the large data-sets re-affirmed the value of some sources. Time use surveys, for example, offer detailed information on many aspects of the ‘domestic work practices’ research questions. The British Time Use Survey asks respondents to complete two 24-hour diaries, which are broken down into ten minute slots (Short, 2006). The survey also has a Child Questionnaire. The strengths of a time use survey for the analysis of unpaid domestic work include allowing researchers to identify a vast number of tasks as well as recording simultaneous activities. The British survey also provides information on where the activity occurred, the presence of other people, and for whom the activity was carried out. However, information on negotiations and meanings of domestic work practices are lacking. Given the narrow, though detailed and valuable, information on practices, time use surveys that have been designed to act as separate but linked modules within broader household surveys offer great potential. Many national household surveys already include questions on who performs a number of routine domestic tasks as well as who provides the bulk of any care work for children and elderly family members. The most useful large surveys include a panel element to facilitate longitudinal analysis as well, feeding into key questions of change and continuity (see the British Household Panel Survey, now incorporated into the UK Household Longitudinal Study).

Unfortunately, few household surveys reflect developments in the conceptualisation of unpaid domestic work and no survey provides enough detail for a comprehensive analysis of unpaid domestic work using the ‘practices, relationships, negotiations, and meanings’ framework proposed in this paper. Indeed, remembering the neglect of unpaid domestic work in the ECHP, it might seem laughable to argue for a full module on unpaid domestic work that would incorporate these four dimensions and that would total eighteen
sub-topics at least, running easily to one hundred questions. But if quality surveys, like the UK Household Longitudinal Study, are fully committed to covering ‘every important aspect of who we are and how we live’ (Understanding Society, 2008), far more detailed attention to unpaid domestic work is essential.

This paper has focused on the potential of large scale quantitative methods for sociological research into unpaid domestic work, but employing a range of methods can of course offer the most fruitful of approaches for researching a topic holistically. A multi-methods strategy offers advantages in terms of answering complementary questions about unpaid domestic work, for enhancing the interpretability of results and providing better opportunities to explore their validity (Denzin, 1978; Robson, 1993). Hence, the main research questions identified above, under the ‘practices, relationships, negotiations, and meanings’ framework, can also be employed in qualitative (and mixed methods) studies. In this way, in-depth information on unpaid domestic work would be collected to complement the broader findings that emerge from large-scale surveys.

The main conclusion of the paper then is that what is needed is more debate over how we can develop well-operationalised, multiple indicators for sociological research into unpaid domestic work. Far more discussion is needed amongst sociologists over what elements of domestic work practices, relationships, negotiations, and meanings should and can be explored, and how.

Appendix. The surveys providing sample questions for Figures 1–4

BHPS British Household Panel Survey; BSA British Social Attitudes Survey; ECHP European Community Household Panel Survey; ECWS European Working Conditions Survey; EQLS European Quality of Life Survey; ESS European Social Survey (various rounds); ISSP International Social Survey Programme (third module on Family and Changing Gender Roles); MACA Multidimensional Assessment of Caring Activities; MWLB the Work Foundation’s manual on work–life balance; PANOC Positive and Negative Outcomes of Caring; TUS UK Time Use Survey; WERS Workplace Employee Relations Survey; YPSAS Young People’s Social Attitudes Surveys.

Note

1 This is not to say that Oakley paid no attention to caring. In the chapter ‘Children’, she briefly examines differences in how the working and middle class women talked about child-caring, with the latter more likely to express its pleasurable dimensions and the former often focusing on the extra work that children bring (such as washing nappies).
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