Economic Dependency and the Division of Household Labor: A Longitudinal Examination of the Impact of Relative Earnings on Household Labor

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Abstract

The economic dependency approach to explaining spousal household labor posits that the economic dependence or independence of one spouse on the other influences their participation in domestic tasks. The argument is in theory gender neutral, however, it is often utilized to explain why, despite wives' increased labor force participation and contribution to household income, there remains an unequal division of household labor. Studies examining this approach focus on cross-sectional examinations of economic dependency, measured as the difference between a husband's income and a wife's income divided by the total household income, on the time spent on household labor by each spouse. This study advances research in this area by using a longitudinal approach to test how changes in economic dependency within marriages impact household labor patterns. Data from 3,070 married couples from the first and second waves of the National Survey of Families and Households are employed to determine how continuity and change in economic dependency within marriages impacts spousal participation in domestic tasks. The expected result of this analysis is that decreases in wives' economic dependency on husbands will decrease wives' time spent on household tasks.

Introduction

In response to dramatic increases in women's labor force participation over the last century a large body of research attempting to elucidate how this change impacts family life has developed. One topic that has received considerable research attention is the relationship between women's labor force participation and the household labor contributions of husbands and wives. Despite increases in female labor force participation and the resulting increase in women's contribution to family income there has been little change in the distribution of household labor among spouses (Coltrane 2000). Over recent years husbands' participation in household labor tasks has increased while wives' has decreased, however, the changes are relatively small. This area merits research due to the impact household labor has on marital and personal well-being. The current study advances over past research in this area by using a longitudinal approach to examine how continuity and change in spousal earnings and economic dependency impact household labor patterns within marriages.

Data

The data are from the first and second waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. The first wave was conducted in 1987-88 and the second in 1992-1994. Because the main predictor variable is a measure of earnings, those couples where either spouse reports a disability impacting their ability to work for pay and those where either spouse is age 65 or older are not included in the sample. Additionally, since the focus is on changes among spouses over time only those couples who are married in wave 1 and remain in this marriage until wave 2 are included. The analytical sample is 3,070 couples.

Measures

The dependent variable is a measure of the change from wave 1 to wave 2 in weekly time spent by each spouse on nine household tasks. The tasks include preparing meals, washing dishes and cleaning up after meals, cleaning house, shopping for household goods, washing, ironing and mending, paying bills and managing finances, auto maintenance, driving other household members, and outdoor or other household tasks. Greenstein (2000) suggests that a relative measure of domestic labor participation may better reveal equity and inequity in the division of household labor than an absolute measure of labor contributions. Following this suggestion, both a measure of absolute hours spent on household labor tasks as well as a relative measure of time spent by each spouse of the total household labor will be used. Separate models will be run to predict changes in the absolute time spent in household labor between wave 1 and wave 2 as well as the change in the proportional time spent by each spouse on the total household labor.

The independent measure is a categorical variable of continuity and change in the distribution of earnings among spouses derived from a measure of economic dependency. The indicator of economic dependency, which was originally developed by Sorenson and McLanahan (1987) and adapted in later studies by Brines (1994), measures dependency as a spouse's partner's earnings minus their earnings divided by the total earnings of the couple. The range for this variable is from -1 to 1. Computing this formula for a married male respondent, a score of negative one corresponds to a dependent wife, a zero to equal dependency, and a one to a dependent husband. Nock (2001) argues that equally dependent spouses are those who each earn between 40-59% of total household earnings. Using this specification any value from the above computation ranging from -1 to -.20 is categorized as wife dependent, from -.19 to .19 as equally dependent, and those values at .20 and above are husband dependent. From these categories at each wave a typology of continuity and change in dependency over the waves can be specified. Appropriate adjustments are made to make the earnings amounts in each of the waves comparable in 1993 dollars. The final categorization is:

Wave 1	**Wave 2**
Wife Dependent	Equally Dependent
Wife Dependent	Wife Dependent
Wife Dependent	Husband Dependent
Husband Dependent	Equally Dependent
Husband Dependent	Husband Dependent
Husband Dependent	Wife Dependent
Equally Dependent	Equally Dependent
Equally Dependent	Husband Dependent
Equally Dependent	Wife Dependent

Following suggestions from past research numerous control variables are incorporated into the analysis. They include educational attainment, race, age, gender role attitudes, number of children, birth of children between waves, religion, type of household structure, and region of residence, household income, paid work hours. In addition, since the dependent variable is a measure of change in household labor, a variable is included to control for household labor at wave 1.

Analytic Technique

Multiple linear regression is the multivariate analytic technique. Models are run to assess differences in absolute and proportional household labor participation between waves 1 and 2 separately for husbands and wives. Additive models are run in steps starting with only the dependency variables, then adding measures of education and employment characteristics, followed by the earnings of the couple, then household characteristics such as the presence of children in the household, and finally adding gender role attitudes and religious beliefs.

Anticipated Findings

The anticipated findings are that decreases in economic dependency of a spouse will translate into decreased time spent on their own contributions to household labor. For example, among those couples where the wife is economically dependent on the husband at the time of wave 1 but the couple has become equally dependent by wave 2, it is expected that the results will indicate decreased time spent on household labor tasks by the wives. In addition, for couples where the husband is economically dependent on the wife at wave 1 and is no longer dependent on the wife at wave 2, it is expected that the results will indicate decreased household labor participation by the husband.

Research on economic dependency indicates that individuals' efforts to fulfill traditional gender role norms may ultimately override the relationship between economic dependency and household labor contributions. Past research looking at economic dependency and household labor has suggested a curvilinear relationship between dependence and domestic labor contributions resulting from what Greenstein (2000) terms 'deviance neutralization'. He examines economic dependency using a proportional measure of labor contributions and suggests that when husbands and wives violate traditional gender norms in relation to the role of economic provider they may act to neutralize their deviant status by altering their participation in domestic chores. According to this line of reasoning the results of this study may reveal a curvilinear relationship between economic dependence and household labor due to the attempt of spouses to engage in deviance neutralization. The household labor contributions of husbands who become economically dependent on their wives over the waves may ultimately decrease below what would be expected under the economic dependency model if husbands decrease their household labor contributions as a way to neutralize their deviant status of not being the economic provider in the household. This potential curvilinear relationship between economic dependency and household labor will be examined.

In conclusion, this study looks at the relationship between economic dependency and the household labor participation of husbands and wives. Using a longitudinal approach to examine how changes or continuity in the economic dependency of husbands and wives over time impacts household labor contributions within marriages, this study represents a significant advance over research in this area that has previously focused on cross-sectional examinations of this relationship. This research not only advances a new line of inquiry in this area, but the results will also contribute to our understanding of this topic more generally.

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