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# “Raising Him . . . to Pull His Own Weight”: Boys’ Household Work in Single-Mother Households

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## Abstract

In this study, the authors examine boys’ household work in low- and moderate-income single-mother families. Through describing the work that boys do, why they do this work, and the meaning that they and their mothers give to this work, they add to the understanding of housework as an arena for gender role reproduction or interruption. Their data reveal that adolescent boys did a significant amount of work and took pride in their competence. Mothers grounded their expectations of boys’ household contributions in life experience. They both needed their sons’ day-to-day contributions and wanted their sons to grow into men who were competent around the house and good partners. In demanding household work from their sons, these single mothers themselves work to undermine the traditional gendered division of such labor.

## Keywords

boys, housework, gender, childhood socialization, single-mother

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What is produced and reproduced [by housework] is not merely the activity and artifact of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles, and derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct.

—West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 144)

Examining housework—who in a household does what chores and why—can reveal how the ordering of housework by gender is learned by boys and girls and lived by men and women in day-to-day family life. We refer to *gender* rather than *sex* in the social constructionist tradition whereby the analysis is on the social construction of gender rather than biological difference between men and women (Blume & Blume, 2003). The gendered division of household labor begins early in life with girls doing more household work than boys from childhood on (Gager, Cooney, & Call, 1999). Research on children living in middle-class mother–father households suggests that the household is a location for learning about the gendered division of work via being assigned tasks and observing how tasks are divided between parents (Crouter, Head, Bumpus, & McHale, 2001; Cunningham, 2001; Gager et al., 1999).

Living with one parent rather than two means a different set of parameters for children's experiences in observing and doing work in the home (Benin & Edwards, 1990). Since most single custodial parents are women, both boys and girls will see mothers—not fathers—doing housework on a day-to-day basis. Having only one parent in the household means less adult availability to do work. As a group, single-mother households are disproportionately low- and moderate income, meaning that hiring household help, including adequate professional childcare, is financially unrealistic.

In this study, we examine the housework done by sons of women who are unmarried and not living with a long-term partner. Data come from observations of and conversations with two samples of low- and moderate-income employed mothers and young adolescent sons in the United States. We examine single mothers' motivations to assign work to boys and their sons' reactions to doing housework. We find that boys' household work is key to families' day-to-day routines and that having sons who do housework is also important symbolically for the mothers with whom we spoke. In challenging the notion that housework should be "women's work," these mothers try to raise sons to be good husbands.

## Literature Review

### *Children's Housework Contributions*

Children in the United States do a variety of types of housework (Goodnow & Lawrence, 2001; Lee, Schneider, & Waite, 2003; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981). Children cook, clean, do laundry, run errands, and perform other household management tasks. Youth with younger siblings commonly provide sibling care, including preparing meals and feeding, monitoring, helping with school work, and accompanying younger siblings out of the home. On average children aged 2 to 11 years spend 2 to 4 hours per week doing housework and adolescents aged 12 to 18 years spend 4 to 6 hours (Lee et al., 2003), work that adds up to an estimated 15% of all housework (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991).

Time availability theory posits that children's household work is inversely related to their parents' time at home and positively related to the need for work. In general, the more a mother in a dual-parent household works outside of the house, the more her children will work at home (Blair, 1992; Call, Mortimer, & Shanahan, 1995), although some studies do not find this pattern (Cheal, 2003; Gager et al., 1999). Children work more when there are more children in a household, older children work more than younger children, and the more daughters in a household, the more housework delegated to children (Blair, 1992; Cheal, 2003).

Extant research on children and work largely comprises either secondary data analysis or researcher studies of dual-parent middle-class European American families (Coltrane, 2000; Lee et al., 2003). Changes in national demographics make this dual-parent family type less typical, suggesting a need for learning about processes within other family types. In mother-only families, children spend nearly twice as much time on household chores as those in two-parent families (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). This has been found to be true for both girls and boys (Gager et al., 1999). From 1981 to 1997, children in single-parent households increased the amount of time spent on housework, whereas children in dual-parent households were spending less time (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Income also matters; children in households with fewer financial resources do more housework (Call et al., 1995).

### *Learning the Gendered Division of Housework*

Parents believe housework is important for character development in general (Goodnow & Lawrence, 2001), including development of gender-appropriate

behavior (Evertsson, 2006; Gill, 1998). Understanding how housework may affect beliefs about gender requires a theory of how such beliefs are acquired. Gender is neither a static role nor a superficial display but, rather, “an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 130). In learning gender, children learn both a gender identity and to perform this identity in day-to-day life (Connell, 2002). Applied to housework, this suggests that if children come to learn that tasks are gendered, these beliefs must then be reconciled with their performance of these tasks.

Housework is gendered through public discourse via various channels such as the media, children’s stories, and policy debates. Family-level discourse does not occur in isolation from these larger shared and contested interpretations of housework. Both children and parents actively ascribe meaning to their interactions within and outside of the household. Regardless of parents’ justification for requiring children’s housework, which may vary across family types, housework is a potential site for gender to be enacted and interpreted by children. The influence is bidirectional as parents also ascribe meaning to sons’ and daughters’ performance of housework.

The gendered nature of housework could be interrupted if children do not learn to associate gender with certain tasks, the theory implicit when parents try to “ungender” housework by assigning tasks to boys and girls equally. Family housework has been studied but largely with samples of economically advantaged families with discretion in the distribution of chore work. These studies find that college-educated parents with egalitarian gender role beliefs are the most successful at dividing housework equally, regardless of a child’s gender (Evertsson, 2006; see also Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Lee et al., 2003). However, gendered housework patterns have been noted even among children of parents who state that they try not to discriminate between sons and daughters (Gill, 1998). In studies about children’s housework, descriptions of the actual work performed or not performed do not provide evidence of any particular meaning associated with it. Together with the recorded actions of family members, member interpretations enable us to understand the evolving status of housework as a site for gender teaching, learning, and resistance (Gubrium & Holstein, 1987).

### *Questions About Boys’ Housework*

What happens to gender socialization through housework in households with a heavy need for children’s labor? In a series of studies of girls’ housework in low-income and single-parent families, Dodson and Dickert (2004) argue that girls in these families do too much work with too little adult guidance. The

authors conclude that low-wage employment among women has increased the demand for girls to play “adult family-keeping roles,” and this work is done out of necessity rather than with the well-being of girls in mind. Largely missing from the literature about children’s household work is an understanding of boys’ work within low- and moderate-income single-mother families.

This study is concerned with what mothers teach boys about housework and what in addition to need, if anything, motivates them to assign work to sons. We focus on three questions: “What work do boys do?” “What motivates moms to assign this work?” “How do boys respond to these housework demands?” We pay attention to both the instrumental role of work in helping run a household and the symbolic meaning of “women’s work” done by boys.

### *Context: Low- and Moderate-Income Employed Single Mothers*

We ask these questions in the context of low- and moderate- income single-mother families, and the implications of focusing on such families bears some discussion. Single mothers are disproportionately likely to be poor and work in low-wage jobs (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Polakow, 1993), but job-holding alone is rarely a complete financial management strategy (Edin & Lein, 1997) nor is white-collar employment necessarily an easy path to middle-class stability (Newman & Chen, 2007). Low-wage work often involves schedule conflicts and wage rates that make supporting a family difficult (Newman, 1999; Newman & Chen, 2007). Mothers with young children must choose among a set of more- or less appealing child care options, including subsidized or unsubsidized formal care, informal care, or relative care, including care by older siblings (Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Eggers-Pierola, 1996; Henly & Lyons, 2000; Lowe & Weisner, 2000). Mothers use social networks, including extended families and friends, for supplementing finances and providing child care (Newman, 1999; Stack, 1974). Transfer programs intended to support work fit the daily routines of some families but they are not helpful to others (Gibson & Weisner, 2001). Overall, life for low-income single-mother families is characterized as difficult (Polakow, 1993), and single motherhood seems to contribute to increasing economic inequality (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

## **The Study**

We began our investigation of the nature and meaning of boys’ household work via a secondary analysis of longitudinal ethnographic data families.

This process yielded descriptive information about the work that boys do as well as preliminary themes and hypotheses about the meaning of this work for both boys and mothers. Stylized versions of the descriptive findings were then presented to focus groups of boys of single mothers and single mothers with sons for verification and interpretation. Respondent interpretation in feminist methodology is intended to provide a check on the researchers' interpretations. This is a move against misrepresentation in the context of unequal power relations between research participants and the researchers who strive to represent their experience (Lloyd, Few, & Allen, 2009). Once data have been collected, participants rarely have the opportunity to respond (confirm, challenge, object) to the working interpretations of the researcher. As authors, we were particularly cautious about inappropriately reading feminist aims into the actions and meanings of sons' housework. Unable to reconnect with the family participants in the ethnographic study, we conducted focus groups with a second sample. Our findings gathered from the second sample do not allow us to verify our interpretations of data collected from the first sample; however evidence from the second set of data suggests that our analysis is accurate. We are making suppositions about the generalizability of these findings across these two samples.

### *Phase I: Secondary Analysis of Longitudinal Ethnographic Data*

**Participants.** Ethnographic data were drawn from an in-depth study of 40 families who applied to an antipoverty program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (for more information, see Weisner, Gibson, Lowe, & Romich, 2002). The current analysis was begun after fieldwork ended. Our interest in chore and sibling care work among sons of single mothers led us to restrict the sample to boys who were 8 to 14 years old at the beginning of the 3-year fieldwork period, had at least one younger sibling, and lived with their mother, but not a mother's spouse or coresident partner, for at least 1 year. This yielded a sample of 15 families with 21 boys in the target age range. Twelve of the boys are oldest children. At the start of fieldwork, 9 boys were between 8 and 11 years old; 12 boys were between 12 and 14 years. Ten boys are African American, 8 are Hispanic, and 3 are biracial. All families were economically poor; average household income was less than \$15,000.

**Data.** Field-workers visited each family on average of 19 times over the 3 years beginning in spring 1997. Field visits typically lasted 1 to 5 hours. Mothers were the primary contact for each family, but children, relatives, and friends also participated and answered questions. Up to two children in each

family were randomly selected as “focal” children and particular efforts were made to contact and observe these children. Parents and children were engaged in semistructured interviews, and field-workers observed and took part in routine family activities including sharing meals, running errands, accompanying members to schools, workplaces, churches, and celebrations. The aim was to witness daily routines and gain an understanding of families’ resources, constraints, and the meanings of daily activities. When appropriate, encounters were audiorecorded, and in other instances, field-workers recorded detailed notes immediately following each visit.

Data collection was guided by a list of domains to be documented in field notes. Among these domains were mothers’ employment, child care, budget, health care, social supports, family history, daily family routines, and children’s schooling. Children’s housework was not an explicit part of the fieldwork template nor was it an original focus of the study. However, child housework was mentioned in field notes from each family, most often under the topics of daily routines and parenting philosophy. Field-workers observed children doing work and the consequences when chores were not completed and rewards for a job well done. They also witnessed family discussions and arguments about housework. Field-workers were able to capture the tensions between mothers’ parental philosophies and the lived realities, which were particularly evident in the arena of household chores. As such, the field notes capturing housework have a naturalistic quality in which children’s housework was only mentioned when it affected family day-to-day life or well-being.

*Phase 1 data analysis.* Data include verbatim transcriptions, notes taken by field-workers directly after visits, and transcriptions of primary documents, such as journals or schoolwork, created for or shown to the field-worker. Data were cleaned to remove identifying information. For Phase 1 of our analysis, the first author read the complete field notes for each family and coded any information relevant to household work for later retrieval. In coding field note sections, we erred on the side of inclusion to fully capture any information relevant to making sense of boys’ work within the household. We then extracted all coded data to prepare summaries of each boy’s work. Key information was summarized for each case, including basic family demographics, the types of tasks performed, and the frequency and consistency of household work. These factual summaries were put into a matrix and checked for cross-case completeness by both authors.

Next both authors reviewed the excerpted field notes to answer a series of analytic questions: “Why does this boy do this work?” “How does he feel about it?” “How does his mother feel about his work?” Themes emerged as we answered these questions: Boys’ work was important for achieving family

goals, mothers felt conflicted about needing so much work from their sons, boys took pride in their work, mothers felt that sons were learning important lessons by doing work, and mothers felt that housework prepared their sons to be better men and partners. After generating a list of themes, we reread the note excerpts for all cases and noted instances of evidence consistent or inconsistent with themes.

*Continuing questions.* Across cases, we found solid evidence about the work that boys did, but the depth and completeness of information on the meaning of that work within the family varied. For some families we know a lot about why boys work and how they and their mothers felt about it; for other cases our data are less complete. Such unevenness is to be expected in this sort of secondary analysis. To test whether our preliminary interpretations rung true across multiple families and to answer other questions that emerged for which we did not have sufficient data, we decided to conduct a second phase of this study.

## *Phase 2: Further Interpretation by Focus Groups*

*Recruitment and sample.* Because the longitudinal ethnography had ended, new groups of participant boys and single women with sons were recruited to take part in focus groups in order to validate and help interpret the ethnographic findings. The first author's existing relationship with a suburban middle school in the Puget Sound area allowed us to recruit 11- to 14-year-old boys from the school population. This site was selected from several possible options for recruiting samples of convenience because it is a largely working-class area with a larger percentage of students of color than surrounding areas.<sup>1</sup>

Staff members of the school's social work office visited classrooms and distributed information about the study to all boys, regardless of family structure. Boys of single mothers were selected via a brief screener included on the parental permission form. Mothers were indirectly recruited by the form, since they could indicate their interest in the study while signing the form, as well as through snowball sampling from the initial volunteers. Mothers and sons were not recruited as pairs nor was there any attempt to match mother group participants with boy group participants.

Two focus groups were completed each with mothers and boys for a total of four groups and 18 participants. Preliminary analysis of the groups' discussions revealed considerable overlap; the same themes were brought up repeatedly. Heeding the rule of thumb that data collection should cease when data become saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we did not conduct additional groups. The participants were 11 boys from either single-mother



households or households with a stepdad present and seven mothers of middle school-aged boys. In an attempt to replicate the primary data sample from the ethnographic study, the target sample for this phase was boys with single mothers, but we were unable to recruit a sufficient number of participants without including boys with a stepfather in the household. This resulted in a sample in which all boys had been part of a single-mother household at some point; but 4 boys did not reside in single-mother households at the time of participation.

Interviewer observations of race and ethnicity suggest that our focus groups contained, in declining order, White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic students. Mothers were not asked to identify their occupations, but of those who volunteered that information, their positions were school cafeteria worker, administrative assistant, advertising representative, and elementary school teacher. This information as well as district demographics suggest that the families in this sample were on average better off financially than the ethnography participants, although regional differences in costs of living and the range within each sample suggests considerable socioeconomic overlap between the better-off members of the ethnographic study and the less advantaged members of the focus group study.

*Procedures and data collection.* Boys' focus groups were held at their middle school, whereas mothers met at a local restaurant. Participation was voluntary. Boys were compensated with \$10 gift cards and mothers were given \$25 gift cards. Discussions were audiorecorded for the duration of 60 to 90 minutes.

Facilitators presented short vignettes drawn directly from data collected through the ethnographic study. Each vignette represented a major theme revealed by longitudinal data. Participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions about the feelings and motivations of the story people in the vignettes. For example,

Jeff is 13 and watches his little brother, Will, after school. Now that Jeff is going to be entering high school his mother thinks he won't want to stay home to watch Will in the afternoons but would rather be out with his friends. Do you think Jeff's mom should continue to have Jeff watch his brother when Jeff enters high school?

Participants were prompted with follow-up questions and asked to explain their responses. Boys and mothers were also presented with a list of common household chores such as cooking, taking out the trash, and doing dishes. We

asked them to informally rank chores from most to least favored among boys their (or their son's) age and justify the rankings.

The focus group questions aimed to generate discussion about participants' opinions about fictitious characters and situations. Although some participants chose to draw on their personal experiences of their own households, the study sought to reveal rationales and the meanings attached to various housework situations, rather than personal information about household dynamics.

### *Combined Analysis*

Focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using the same thematic coding system begun in the Phase 1 analysis. For instance, all comments that focus group mothers made about men and housework were amassed with comments made by mothers in the ethnography about men and housework.

Our two sets of data differ in nature and participant demographics. The primary data are contextualized with rich descriptions of the families' environments and interactions, whereas the focus group data come from purposive questioning based on the themes drawn from the ethnographic data. The samples themselves differ: Focus group participants are advantaged financially over the families in the ethnography and live in a suburban area rather than an inner city. These dimensions are a weakness in our data; however, similar themes about boys and housework emerged in both samples.

### **Descriptive Findings**

Our descriptive findings are based on the boys in the Phase 1 ethnographic data. Although some focus group participants volunteered information about the specific housework they did or assigned, this information was not systematically collected nor would such reporting in a group format have been as reliable as the ethnographic data collected through participant observation. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

### *Household Tasks*

What work do boys do? More than half of the ethnography boys helped out around the house by cleaning common areas. Chores included cleaning and mopping or vacuuming the bathroom, kitchen, and living room; ironing; doing the laundry; cleaning or putting away dishes; and taking out the trash. Fourteen of the 21 boys participated in two or more of these chore categories. One quarter prepared meals for themselves and family members. Whether

formally drafted and posted or dictated verbally by the mother, most families had some form of a chore schedule so boys understood what was expected of them. Mothers taught these boys to cook and clean, citing either the importance of this skill for self-sufficiency or the value to the household. As one woman stated, when her son learned to do dishes, it was, “a burden lifted from my shoulders.”

### *Sibling Care*

Sixteen of the 21 boys performed some kind of care work, including sibling care, nonsibling child care, and care for mothers or other adults. Thirteen boys provided supervised and/or unsupervised care for siblings. All but one out of the 12 oldest boys in the sample provided unsupervised sibling care, saving their mothers high day care costs and the hassle of identifying trustworthy caregivers. One mother calculated the exact sum she saves in day care costs by having her son walk his sister to school: \$90 a week. Most mothers did not work traditional 9 to 5 jobs and used sibling care to fill the hours during their swing or graveyard shifts. Another mother considered not taking a particular job because she had to be home in time to make sure her daughter went to school. Her older son told the mother to take the job. He would take on the task of getting his sister to school, driving her himself if necessary.

After-school sibling care duties coincided with after-school tutoring programs and other activities that older boys who were responsible for looking after younger siblings would otherwise have been able to attend. Mothers who relied on their sons for sibling care were well aware that their boys were unavailable for these extracurricular activities. This concern was amplified when boys entered high school. When possible, mothers made arrangements for their teenage boys to watch siblings only in emergencies or a few days each week.

Boys caring for siblings not only provided physical supervision but also meted out discipline and managed other housework. Frida's 14-year-old Enrique got better results than his mother as the authority figure for his younger sister, so when his sister refused to obey Frida, Enrique would step in. Emilo Jr. also took part in disciplining his younger brothers; in one instance, 14-year-old Emilo voluntarily reprimanded his 13-year-old brother for participating in a theft.

Nearly half of the boys who are the oldest in their households defined their role through their contributions as the oldest boy or man of the house, which resulted in taking on management and disciplinarian roles. For instance, 14-year-old Emilo Jr. told his younger brothers that their mother should not

have to do all the work and made them clean the house. Boys who were not the oldest also helped enforce their mothers' rules. While explaining the family's chore schedule to the field-worker, one boy directed his younger sister to get dressed, wash her face, take a bath, and clean the kitchen. He exclaimed, "Why don't you stop sitting around and get to cleaning that kitchen already. All she wants to do is sit. She's lazy!"

### *Other Care Work*

Boys also cared for nonsibling relatives and nonkin. Four boys provided supervised or unsupervised care of children at the day care centers where their mothers worked or babysat the children of relatives without pay as a favor to the larger family. Enrique, described above as a key authority figure for his sister, told a field-worker that he regretted babysitting without pay for a family member because he felt the informality of the arrangement made it difficult for him to keep the children quiet. In addition to family child care, Enrique and his sister helped their mother care for the day care children at her place of employment. Eight-year-old Jose's mother Juanita ran a day care business out of her home. She coped with the stress of caring for young children by taking short breaks. During these breaks, she would ask one of her own kids, sometimes Jose, to watch the day care children so she could take a quick walk around the block. Getting away from the noise and frustration for a few minutes would, she said, "keep me from going crazy."

Four sons in the ethnographic sample exhibited eight different types of personal care work for their mothers, ranging from physical protection to medical supervision. With few exceptions, neighborhoods were perceived as dangerous by mothers, who cited recent shootings as evidence. This real safety concern offers insight into the value of protection that boys provided. One 14-year-old boy walks his mother to the car at night. Another boy called and then met with the police after his mother's boyfriend grew violent. Other boys provided more personal care. Jose, the boy who provided respite for his mother during work at her daycare center, also anticipated his mother's needs and would voluntarily type her paperwork and help her navigate the electronic catalogue at the library. One boy warned his mother to stop drinking when he saw her getting drunk. After having a stroke, another mother was put on a treatment regime for blood pressure and diabetes. Field notes summarize her description of her 11-year-old's care work: "[Her son] comes into her room every night and checks, 'Ma, you take your medicine?' He won't leave until she's 'gone through the whole routine,' including her insulin shot."

## Interpretive Findings

In this section, both the ethnographic and focus group data are used to describe why mothers assign work and the meaning this work has for mothers and boys.

### *Need for Housework Help*

In choosing to focus on single-mother households, we expected that the need for household help would be a primary motivator for mothers to expect contributions from their sons. Indeed, these mothers had considerable demands on their time including job duties, child care, and household management. The multiple demands on single mothers trickled down to demands on their sons.

One ethnographic mother stated that she relied on her son more than anyone else, a fact that was revealed to be true to varying degrees for other mothers. Faced with a son who was reluctant to do his chores, one focus group mother said that she told him to “meet me somewhere on this . . . everyone has to play their part in the family to make it work.” Another focus group mother who felt overwhelmed by her day-to-day life described why she asks her sons to help:

There’s times I’m just absolutely exhausted, between work and the stress and work and things going on and coming home and the emotional stress and the financial stress of being a single mom and not getting a lot of help from their dad . . . I will just break down and just go, “You know what? I need your help.”

Mothers were disinclined to conceal struggles or shelter their sons from the realities of supporting a family. On the contrary, they invited, commanded, or begged their sons to engage in household participation as a matter of contributing to the common effort. According to mothers, sons required an explanation of the situation to fully comprehend what helping role they were called on to play and why.

### *Socialization*

Mothers stated that they valued the role housework played in teaching their boys practical life skills and responsibility. This theme emerged in

the ethnographic data and was strongly echoed by the mothers in the focus groups. One focus group mother listed her sons' areas of competence:

Both my boys, they can clean bathrooms, they clean toilets, they clean showers. I mean there isn't any chore that they can't do . . . they can change their laundry—if anything happens to me tomorrow they will make it just fine.

A key motivation for socializing boys to do housework was "raising him to be a good partner and to 'pull his own weight.'" In addition to instilling basic competence in skills needed in adulthood, mothers recognized the need for independence from strict household gender roles. Socialization, according to these mothers, did not mean teaching their sons to excel at traditionally masculine work but, rather, teaching for competence in daily-life tasks that would be required of any individual, man or woman, who is self-reliant.

Mothers were both glad that their sons were learning to be self-sufficient and satisfied with the message their sons were absorbing about what constituted appropriate tasks for boys. As one focus group participant proudly stated, "My boys have no idea what girls are supposed to do." Mothers feel that having these skills and attitudes will inculcate their boys against absorbing more dominant gender attitudes. One spoke about her sons' experiences after having spent some time staying with relatives in a home where chores are assigned along traditionally "male" and "female" categorizations.

Every once in a while our boys will go over there and they'll say [to my nephew] you know, [your sister or mother] shouldn't be doing that for you, you should be doing that for her. . . . Because that's what they see at our house. So they see that it's inequitable and they're not comfortable with it.

These mothers were proud to be raising boys who were both able and willing to do housework.

In discussing the type of men that they wanted their sons to grow up to be, mothers often contrasted them with their own past or present male partners. Mothers strongly believed boys should be able "fend for themselves." One woman in the ethnography invoked this phrase when she explained why men should learn how to cook: "They will be able to fend for themselves in case their wives do not know how to cook." This woman noted that that her boys' father did not know how to cook but that she was teaching them to. A focus group mother said that she does not want her son to have to get married just

because he cannot fend for himself. Other mothers agreed that future men should be taught to cook and clean. As one put it, “being a single mom, we get to date and it is amazing how many men are absolutely incapable of taking care of themselves.”

Women were frustrated with men who expected relationships to follow what the women saw as outdated gender norms either actively through demanding that the woman do the housework or passively through not being good at housework (a strategy termed *disaffiliation* by Hochschild, 1989). Our mothers taught their boys that feigning ignorance on the “second shift” is unattractive behavior. One woman emphatically agreed with the consensus that boys should learn to do housework:

That’s true. That’s what I keep telling my son is I’m raising him to be a good husband one day and to pull his own weight and I keep telling him, because if your wife calls me complaining about how you never do anything around the house, you’re going to be in serious trouble as far as I’m concerned . . . I tell you, I will take her side right now!

Another mother echoed,

I think as [boys] get older and they get married . . . I want them to be able to contribute instead of [saying to their wives,] “well, you’re a girl so you’re supposed to do that. Didn’t your mom raise you that way?”

Mothers recognized their role in socializing sons to be good partners who help with housework rather than perpetuating gender inequity in the home. Teaching for competence is one element, but teaching boys that theirs is a critical household role was key.

For some mothers, combating the gendered nature of housework stemmed from a desire not to perpetuate the unequal workload that burdened their own girlhoods. One of the mothers who wanted her sons to grow up to “fend for themselves” contrasted the way she raised her boys with the way her mother raised her brothers to be served by the women of the house. She felt that her brothers experienced free and easy childhoods at the expense of hers and her sisters’ in a household where work expectations fell within traditional gender norms. Another mother explained,

I have just one brother and there’s six of us and I’m the oldest . . . .  
I got stuck with a lot and my brother because he was the male child and he just didn’t have to do anything.

This retrospective view of her childhood was consistent with accounts in Dodson and Dickert's (2004) interviews with adult women.

For others, rejecting traditional gender roles was linked to other progressive ideals. They recognized their personal experiences as being driven by culture. A focus group participant who had cared for her siblings when she was a child described this in social terms, "[Assigning child care] is what we [society] do with the women, with the girls." Another woman described her efforts to teach her boys to do housework alongside her work to teach them to be proud of their biracial heritage:

I come from a very diverse background and I find the benefits behind that and I don't want my boys to grow up and think because I'm a boy, I don't need to do that, or you're a girl, that should be your job.

### *The Meaning Boys Make of Housework*

To describe how boys feel about doing the physical and emotional labor needed to keep their households going, we searched the field notes to analyze conversations with boys and mothers and queried the focus group boys and mothers about how boys in the vignettes might understand their work. Unlike their mothers who assigned work for both instrumental and transformational reasons, the boys focused on the practical. They praised their own skills and talked about the pride in doing their work.

Some sons and mothers told us about areas of housework expertise. For instance, 12-year-old James took over doing the family ironing from his older brother. The older brother was less competent at this activity, but James showed off to a field-worker how well he could press front creases into pants. On a later visit, he was out of town, and his mother missed him, in part because he kept the house clean. She pointed to dust on the table and said that if James were there, he would not allow the dust to pile up like that.

Participants in the focus group echoed the importance of skill development through housework. Boys stated that being able to help mom out was a benefit of getting older and more capable. When asked to rank chores in the order of preference, one boy gloated that he put "cooking for number one because I make a pretty good mean taco." He went on to explain that he ranked a lot of chores high on his list, "I put a lot of stuff [as preferred chores] because people taught me." Having learned to cook was also a source of pride for another focus group boy, "First I like to cook a lot because my dad came from a family that cooked a lot because my grandma, she'll make a big dinner every single night . . . she taught me how to cook."



Like James, who willingly took over the task of ironing, boys took pride in having unique skills or responsibilities. Eldest boys in particular were often able to do things that other siblings could not or were not allowed to try. This included directing younger siblings or being the one allowed to call mother at work (and keeping her number memorized). In some cases, eldest boys volunteered for extra jobs or found tasks they could do without bidding. For instance, when one woman was pregnant, her 14-year-old eldest started doing extra chores and helped get a room ready for the birth of his new sibling.

The persisting power of conventional gender norms in housework appeared in boys' judgments about the relative difficulty of tasks. Although focus group boys beamed when they told personal stories about how their own chore competence influenced their number one and number two choices for ranking the list of chores, they did not consider all chores appealing to boys. When asked why the group had concluded that cleaning the floors was the worst job for a boy to do, they spoke to gender norms: "Because it's the hardest and I mean boys don't really like cleaning a lot." Another emphasized that the sister would probably do the cleaning because "girls don't like taking out the trash, they just like cleaning." One boy stated that boys prefer "cleaning up the dirty stuff." When asked how a sister and brother who were the same age might divide house responsibilities when their mother was in bed with the flu, some boys agreed that boys should "take the harder stuff and she takes like stuff that's kind of easy like washing the dishes." And why would the sister take the "easy stuff"? Because "she's a girl."

### *Persistence of Gender Socialization*

How far were women willing to go to instill housework responsibility in their boys? In theory the mothers said that an equal division of housework between girls and boys is a priority. In practice they admitted it is harder.

One of the hardest things of being a single mom is having the energy to follow through, that you want the help of the children because there's no one else to rely on, they have to help you, part of the family, but at the same time, by the time you get home from work, especially if you're tired and you're not feeling good, you have a headache, it's "I don't want to deal with you not doing your chore, and so I'm going to just leave it alone."

Single mothers have little time to argue with boys who are resistant to doing housework, leaving no choice but to give up or pass the chore onto a less

resistant child. For these reasons, mothers admitted to making strategic decisions about chore assignments, even if these decisions were inequitable.

Women with just sons told us that it is easier for them than for women with daughters because mothers of sons only do not have to make a choice about gender as they figure out who does what. For instance, one woman who more often relied on one son rather than another for kitchen duties noted that if the competent son were a daughter, she would feel more conflicted. The gender implications of dealing with incompetence or reluctance vary by whether the household has chore-aged girls or not. Although women preferred that their sons learn skills, they admitted that girls are often better at doing some household tasks. One explained it in terms of attention span, "I think girls tend to gravitate toward more domestic type stuff where boys just kind of do the quick stuff, like taking out the trash or maybe tidying up the bathroom." When perceived or real aptitude differences align along gender lines, mothers have to acknowledge them. For instance, one ethnographic study mother appreciated how her daughters rose to the occasion when she was off her feet after surgery. Despite the fact that her son was the oldest, he was the most resistant to chore assignment and consequentially, the mother concluded that "the biggest help is for him to just stay out of my way."

Mothers also felt conflicted about asking their sons to do work when they knew that it reduces the time available for age-appropriate leisure activities: "It's a fine line between teaching them responsibility and giving them freedom to be kids . . . . So it's tough to find that fine line—you're constantly changing." One mother stated that she did not want to give her son too many responsibilities as a child like her mother did with her. This was a particular concern as boys got older. One mother in the ethnographic study foresaw a change. Her 12-year-old son watched his younger sister at the beginning of fieldwork, but the mother already anticipated that entering high school in a couple years would pull her son out of the house and into more activities with friends. Three years later she only asked him to watch his sister 2 days a week during summer months. Another mother in a similar situation resigned herself to the idea that it is natural for a teenage boy to want to "start doing their own thing."

Outside employment also pulled boys away from the household. Boys wanted paid jobs because they could have their own money and adultlike autonomy. In some cases, boys did less housework as they took on outside jobs, particularly if they started paying for their own school or sports expenses. In other families, outside work did not supplant housework. One focus group participant recounted that her son stopped following through on his chores after he started a job. When she confronted him about it, he said he no longer had the time. She jumped on the teaching opportunity:

I'm like, "Well, let's see here. I worked an 8-hourr job and I still got up at 4:30 in the morning and I took you to school by such and such a time, I would go back home, pick up the other two, take the other two to school, come back home, get ready, go to work, come back, stop off at [the store], come home, help with homework"

For this mother, her son's job led to a lesson in time management and family responsibility, a lesson rooted in a single-mothers' day-to-day life.

## Discussion

In this article, we examined boys' housework in single-mother low- and modest- income families. Our data reveal that boys did a significant amount of work and mothers relied on their work. Boys cared for siblings, cleaned, cooked, laundered, and ironed for their families. Mothers insisted on housework for boys both because they needed help and because they viewed chore assignment as an opportunity to socialize boys to take on traditionally feminized housework. Mothers grounded their expectations of boys' household contributions in life experience. They wanted their sons to grow into men who were competent around the house and good partners.

The boys in our study knew that their work was important. Naturally they did not like doing all tasks, but on balance they took pride in their skills and contributions. Our purpose here is to define the work and meanings of boys' participation to families rather than to track its outcomes. However, it should be noted that doing age-inappropriate tasks such as intense care work—particularly the caretaking of adults as observed in the ethnographic study—may prove stressful for boys who are not developmentally ready for such work (Jurkovic, 1997; Winton, 2003).

## Limitations of the Study

Our findings should be considered in the context of the study design. We used data from two samples that differed in racial makeup, geographical area (a Midwestern center city and a Northwestern suburb), and income strata (working poor vs. moderate income). Although the patterns from the Milwaukee ethnographic sample of families of color were reflected by the largely White participants in the Northwest focus groups, the demographic differences between our two samples limits the robustness of our findings. Our sample was not designed to compare and contrast families across race or culture, and there are likely important racial and ethnic variations in children's work and

its household meaning not captured here. With its focus on single-mother families, this analysis cannot tell us about work patterns or strategies in other types of families. It may be that mothers with husbands have similar motivations for assigning work to their sons; this possibility should be explored. Although we focused on boys and the work that they do take on, we have no reason to contest other studies that find or suggest that girls do a disproportionate amount of household work. Indeed, the mothers in our sample who had only sons said that they felt “lucky” in being able to assign chores to boys without having to navigate intrafamily gender differences. This analysis excludes the potential impact of family composition and makeup on boys’ housework. Although the theme emerged of oldest boys who defined their roles as man of the house and took pride in their responsibilities, our sample size does not allow us to draw conclusions about sibling order.

### Conclusion

This close examination of boys’ work in mother-headed households adds to our collective understanding of how beliefs about gender appropriate tasks are shaped in day-to-day life. Mothers in our study believed that the strategy of teaching their sons to do housework would result in them growing up to be men who did housework. Their working model was that competence would lead to participation. This dovetails with Penha-Lopes’s (2006) analysis of Black men’s recollections of the housework they performed as boys. Penha-Lopes’s respondents, most of who seem to have been raised in two-parent families with employed mothers, reported doing a wide range of household chores including cooking and cleaning. They felt that “having done housework early on better prepared them for adult life” (p. 265). This instinct is validated by Gager et al.’s (1999) study of housework sharing between professional husbands and wives, which established that having done a type of housework as a child was related to a greater likelihood of doing that task as an adult. This is not to optimistically suggest that housework will be ungendered within a generation or two. Presumably some of the men the single mothers in our sample complained about were themselves raised by single mothers. Why were they not more useful around the house? Childhood patterns—while important—exert influence alongside adult preferences.

Although married professional women may be able to isolate the need for household tasks to be completed from the desire to shape their children’s beliefs and skills, the instrumental need and gender dimension are inseparable for the single nonprofessional working women in our study. Mothers did not merely want their sons to be able to do housework, they *needed* it to get

through day-to-day life. Through criticizing how their male partners did not do work, they implicitly stated that they expected to have more help managing a household than they were getting. However, the women in our study did not reject gendered relationship roles all together. They wanted their sons to grow up and become “good husbands,” just not the type of husbands who expect women to do all the housework. Stopping short of teaching sons that being a man means doing traditionally feminized housework, mothers essentially undermined the role of housework in reproducing gender beliefs. Mothers coached their boys in all household tasks and taught them that everyone has to play his or her part to make the household work. These sons of single mothers may or may not become equal partners in housework, but they will certainly be more competent helpers.

The mothers in our sample not only worked to get through day-to-day life but also worked to shape their sons’ attitudes and skills. This is gender work, albeit far less visible work than more public gender rights protest or political engagement. Who does housework under what conditions matters to women’s—and men’s—lives on a daily and cumulative basis. Ironically, just as the productive value of care and housework has historically gone under recognized, so does the equality-oriented gender socialization attempted by these single working-class mothers.

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## Note

1. For the school district as a whole, 31.8% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. White students comprise 71.7% of the district, and 10.4% are Hispanic, 9% Asian, 4.7% Black, and 4.1% American Indian. Statistics are not released at the individual school level, but conversations with a member of the school social work office suggest this particular school had proportionately greater representation of both low-income students and students of color than the district as a whole.

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