Doing Our Home Work:
Toward an Ecological and Interdisciplinary Approach to the Study of the Work of the Home

By Ann F. Brodeur
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I. Introduction

This essay is about the work done in the home: all of those tasks, big and small, that go into creating a thriving home environment. “Housework” or “work of the home,” in this respect, is not limited to cooking and cleaning, but also extends to caregiving in the home. In an age in which it is not uncommon for many middle-class households to hire housecleaners, nannies, gardeners and dog walkers, it may seem quaint or passé to point out the need for more study on the work of the home. However, social scientists, medical professionals, educators, and policymakers generally point to a strong relationship between the quality of the home environment and the wellbeing and development of individuals in the home. Thus, whether performed by a family member or a paid professional, these tasks are essential to the establishment and maintenance of a home environment that can allow for fullest development of the individuals living in it.

The study of housework (broadly defined) and its relationship to healthy home environments and the overall health and development of household members (and by extension, the community at large) is not without its challenges. These are by no means simple relationships to define and analyze. Even the definition of what constitutes housework shifts across time and discipline, making synthetic

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1 Doctoral candidate in History at the University of Toronto.
meta-analysis difficult. This is, in part, due to the highly specialized state of social science research in this area. Current social science research on the work of the home is fractured along lines of academic discipline, and, as a result, can tend toward conclusions that are incomplete and risks a certain reductionism. This is not entirely unexpected nor unjustified, since each discipline seeks to understand a particular subject using a distinct set of methods, theoretical frameworks, and lines of inquiry. Moreover, each discipline frames an issue in very particular ways. This offers researchers the opportunity to build deeper knowledge and gain more penetrating insight into specific aspects of housework. Yet, it is precisely because of our modern tendency to delimit knowledge by discipline that our understanding of a given subject is sometimes two-dimensional.

The following survey of current social science research on the work of the home reveals a great deal of complexity. Taken as a whole, it can be seen from the research that the work of the home is critical service upon which the health and development of that ecological microsystem called the family or household. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach to the work of the home is needed in order to offer researchers a fuller, more complete understanding of its nature and effects. Because housework bears on the development of the individuals living in the home, its study has clear implications for social policy. The broader the understanding of the nature and socio-economic implications of the work of the home, the more well-rounded and successful the resulting policy recommendations may be.

Furthermore, I argue that research must take into account the systemic nature of the household that housework supports. An ecological approach to the study of housework and the

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4 As above, for the purposes of this essay, “housework” includes not only all the tasks that are required in the daily maintenance of a household, but also all the carework that can be involved, such as caring for children, the infirm and, increasingly, the elderly. As will be seen below, not all research uses such a broad definition, excluding, for example, carework from the definition of housework.

5 Intra-disciplinary debates over theory and method add another layer of complexity to the analysis. For instance, recent studies by economists Jennifer Roback Morse and Nancy Folbre point out the limits of classical economic theory when dealing with the family. While Morse and Folbre arrive at different policy recommendations, both critique basic economic concepts, particularly Smith’s notions of altruism and the rational economic actor, when applied to the family and the home. Jennifer Roback Morse, Love and Economics: Why the Laissez-Faire Family Doesn’t Work. (Dallas: Spence, 2001) and Nancy Folbre, The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values (New York: New Press, 2001).
household first acknowledges the interdependence of the individuals living in the home and treats the household as a microsystemic structure that influences, and is influenced by, other systems and structures, from neighborhoods, churches and schools, up to state and national bodies. A framework that recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of the individuals living in the home, and the reciprocal influence between the household and its surrounding environments naturally encourages a broader conception of the nature, function and impact of housework. I contend that an ecological approach to the study of housework, undertaken within a collaborative, interdisciplinary setting, has the potential to allow for a richer comprehension of the complex relationship between the work of the home and the individuals it serves.

This article first explores the broad lines of inquiry in various social science disciplines with regard to the work of the home and points out intersections between them. The second section lays out the case for the interdisciplinary study of the complex bundle of processes and relationships that is called ‘housework.’ Finally, the article suggests future directions for fruitful inquiry.

II. The Fractured State of Research

“Interdisciplinary” research generally refers to scholarship that makes use of concepts or methods of more than one discipline. It is more common in some academic disciplines than others; historians, for instance, regularly raid the conceptual and methodological toolboxes of anthropologists, economists, philosophers, and sociologists, among others, for new ways of approaching old problems. Some disciplines take the study of other disciplines or professions as their subject: for example, the sociology of education, law and economics, the economics of health care, medical anthropology, etc.

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6 Uri Brofrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). Brofrenner conceived of social organization as layers of systems: microsystems (families), mesosystems (systems with which family members regularly engage, such as schools and the workplace), exosystems (policies, distribution and use of resources across communities, etc), and macrosystems (the cultural trends, moral and ethical beliefs and perspectives that shape and are shaped by all the other systems). For Brofrenner, these systems are overlapping and interdependent, just as individuals are interdependent upon the individuals and environments around them.
Within institutions, interdisciplinary programs train the gaze of multiple disciplines on a single issue, such as environmental studies, peace studies or women’s studies, with the goal of arriving at a rounder picture of the issue in question.

In this sense, however, the study of housework has received limited interdisciplinary attention from social scientists. Academic departments have traditionally viewed the study of housework as an applied science outside of the bounds of empirical research. Often viewed and misunderstood as mere vocational training in sewing and cookery, the study of housework as “home economics” was originally envisioned as a movement toward the professionalization of the work of the home, applying the principles of scientific management to housework for the benefit of the family and society at large. However, after the 1960s and 1970s, with the ascendancy of feminism and the large-scale movement of women into the workplace, the study of housework was relegated largely to home economics departments at state universities and found social application through government funded extension offices.

Since the 1990s, the subject of housework has received increasing attention from the various social sciences. A handful of studies have addressed aspects of housework using interdisciplinary approaches, and some academic and policy centers deal with the work of the home as part of a

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10 Cornell University Library’s HEARTH project provides a fascinating window on the history and development of home economics and the ‘home arts’. Bibliographies and photos are available at http://hearth.library.cornell.edu/h/hearth/about_HEARTH.html, accessed 3/3/0/09).

broader research agenda. The increasingly porous lines between public and private and between work and home life has spurred a renewed interest in the study of housework. The modern American obsession with time, or the lack thereof, has created a whole new set of challenges with regard to housework, and has fostered the academic and practical search for “work-life balance.” And yet, in spite of this, the work of the home has not generally been studied in a comprehensive manner, but as only one of many pieces in a different research or policy agenda.

What, then, is the state of research into the work of the home across the various social science disciplines, and what are the dominant lines of inquiry? As will be seen, most of the research aims to answer one or more of three broad and burning questions: Who does the housework? Who ought to? What is the effect? How they reframe these general questions and arrive at conclusions of course depends on the particularities of the discipline.

A. Economics

For economists, the study of housework and caregiving is naturally framed in terms of time and resource allocation as it relates to production, consumption, and distribution. Much of the work done over the last twenty years has built upon, or replied to, Gary S. Becker’s 1981 *Treatise on the Family*, a neo-classical, micro-economic analysis of the family that briefly discussed the division of labor in the work” in order to emphasize its relational and moral dimensions. Although the study is now nearly fifteen years old, it does provide a succinct historiographical introduction to the development and predominant theoretical approaches to the study of housework, the broad outlines of which have not changed substantially. See also Laura Sanchez, “Feminism, Family Work, and Moral Discourse: A Comment on Ahlander and Bahr’s ‘Beyond Drudgery, Power, and Equity,’” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 58 (1996): 514-528 for a discussion of feminist critiques of housework. Postmodern approaches to housework import concepts from radical feminist theory, socialist theory, Marxist theory, queer theory, social-construct theory, or other concepts from postcolonial studies.

12 For instance, there are a number of research centers dedicated to the study of work and family, particularly the challenge brought about by the disappearing boundary between work and family. Their work touches on the work of the home as an aspect of the broader issue of work-life balance. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation has provided financial support for a number of research centers For introductions to these centers and their areas of inquiry, see UCLA’s Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (CELF) at http://www.celf.ucla.edu/ (last accessed 3/30/09); Sloan Work and Family Research Network (Boston College) at http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/ (last accessed 3/30/09); Sloan Center on Parents, Children & Work (a collaboration between the University of Chicago and Michigan State University) at http://wf.educ.msu.edu/ (last accessed 3/30/09); Sloan Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life at http://ceel.psc.isr.umich.edu/index.html (last accessed 3/3/09); MIT Workplace Center at http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/index.html (last accessed 3/30/09); Berkley Center for Working Families (closed in 2002, but working papers still available at http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/berkeley/, last accessed 3/3/09).
household in the larger context of household economics. Becker argued that concern for the maximization of the family’s economic health, along with comparative advantage (which includes biological considerations), influenced household division of labor and intra-household specialization. Becker also contended that the cost of time should be given consideration in the analysis of choice, pointing out that the relative cost of time influences household decision-making, just as the cost of goods does. The less time families have away from market-related activities, the greater the relative cost of their non-market or leisure time, which influences their choices about how to spend it.

Categorizing activities as strictly market or non-market, labor or leisure, has its problems. Becker (1976) argued that some activities do not fall neatly into either one category or another. A particular household activity—caring for children, for instance—may be considered as a form of labor by some, but not by others. Furthermore, some time use surveys do not measure adequately for multi-tasking behavior, such as folding the laundry while watching children. In this example, one could be performing a market activity (laundry) and a non-market activity (childcare) simultaneously. Floro and Miles (2003) explored this methodological difficulty, observing further that failing to account overlapping activities makes thorough economic analysis difficult.

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14 There is considerable debate as what causes intra-household specialization. For instance, see Jens Bonke, Mette Deding, Mette Lausten and Leslie S. Stratton, “Intra-Household Specialization in Housework in the United States and Denmark,” *Social Science Quarterly* 89 (Oct. 2008): 1023 – 1043. Bonke, et al. argue that the difference in the degree of specialization in housework between the U.S. and Denmark is affected by economic notions of efficiency and time constraints. They also contend that Danish egalitarian social values with regard to housework, together with government subsidized child-care reduce the impact children have on specialization in ordinary housework tasks. See also S. Dalmia and P. Sicilian, “Kids Cause Specialization: Evidence for Becker’s Household Division of Labor Hypothesis,” *International Advances in Economic Research* 14 (Nov. 2008): 448-59.
Scholars have used the research on household time allocation in two basic ways. Microeconomic studies have used the data to understand and describe household activity, whereas macroeconomic approaches have relied on time allocation data in the development of economic and social accounting systems.¹⁸ In the latter case, some have used time allocation studies to argue for the use of macroeconomic mechanisms such as tax policy¹⁹ or other legal interventions²⁰ in order to redress perceived inequities between men and women in relation to housework.

Some economists have attempted to calculate the value of the work of the home, and have arrived at widely varied answers, depending on method.²¹ Most calculations have relied on either the opportunity cost approach, which estimates the value of time spent on housework as equal to time spent in the market, or on the market cost approach, valuing time spent on housework as equal to the cost of hiring someone to perform it.

Valuation estimates have been used to various policy ends. Some have used them to argue for the taxation of housework, in order to rectify perceived gender inequities,²² to provide Social Security for stay-at-home caregivers,²³ or as a tool to push women into the labor market.²⁴

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B. Sociology

Sociologists, like economists, have been interested in questions of equity, and have some have characterized the household as a locus of power and oppression, as opposed to collaboration. Many studies suggest that gendered divisions of labor within the household privilege men, and assume that decision-making with regard to dividing the housework are primarily based on differentials of education and income. Fuwa and Cohen (2007) have further suggested that social policies that encourage equal access to employment and benefits, particularly generous parental leave policies, promote a “more egalitarian gender division of housework.” Nonetheless, several studies have pointed out limitations of a binary analysis, arguing that allocation of housework is a complex and dynamic process subject to exogenous factors, such as work-related stress and family life cycle.

Other studies have tried to introduce other family members into the household division of labor, specifically children. Lee, Schneider and Waite (2004) conclude that greater participation in

housework by children is due to changes in family structure, such as households headed by a single parent, and demographic changes, such as dual-earning families. That said, by and large, most studies assume that housework is divided between the couple only. Sociologists generally do not assess children as participants in household work, but rather as a factor that generates more work in the home.

Scholars studying the sociology of education are also interested in the quality of the home environment insofar as it affects educational outcomes. Most studies addressing this relationship are interested in the quality of the relationships within the household, as opposed to who does the work in the home. Amato (2005) and others studying the relationship between the home and educational outcomes generally conclude that instability in family structures and home environments contribute to poorer educational outcomes and lower socio-economic attainment in adulthood, among other things.\(^\text{30}\)

C. Psychology

The psychological and cognitive effects of housework have received some limited attention. Some have pursued the question of psychological effects of gendered divisions of household labor, arguing that greater equity in the allocation of housework leads to greater psychological health and relational


satisfaction. On the other side of the coin, some studies have found that greater inequity in the division of household labor leads to greater psychological distress. Even so, others have simply pointed to the general psychological benefits of housework: 20 minutes of regular housework or light exercise reduces the incidence of depression or anxiety by 20 percent.

Psychologists have also demonstrated an interest in the effects of housework on children. Goodnow (1988) shows that participating in household work benefits children’s cognitive and interpersonal growth, assisting in the development of cooperative behavior, the ability to follow direction, and a sense of responsibility, among other things. Children’s participation in the work of the home also enables them to make distinctions between different types of work, such as self-care (brushing one’s teeth) and care of others (such as doing the dishes). Others have observed how children’s participation in the work of the home carries different, often overlapping, meanings for different families: that housework is a opportunity for physical, cognitive and social development, that child participation in housework teaches reciprocal obligation, that participation is based on extrinsic reasons, and/or that housework promotes greater task learning.

As White and Brinkerhoff’s 1981 study points out, regardless of the motive for including children in the household tasks, doing shared


33 “Housework Keeps You Sane” New Scientist 4/19/2008, pp. 4-5 (citing a University College London health survey conducted in Scotland).

34 As opposed to other social scientists who assess the effect of children on housework; cf. at note 10, Dalmia and Scilian, “Kids Cause Specialization.”


work conveys a family’s values, reinforces familial bonds, and transmits expectations about the duties family members owe one another.

D. Medicine & Public Health

Health professionals are generally interested in the study of the work of the home from several angles. Some researchers are interested in the physical impact of housework on those who perform it, particularly those suffering from a medical disability or are recovering from a medical procedure.38 Others have explored the caregiving aspects of housework on both carers and their dependents. This area is receiving increasing attention, particularly as aging populations have given rise to the number of households caring for older persons in their home. Researchers and medical professionals have shown particular regard for the physical and psychological health effects of caring for infirm and aging family members on the caregivers themselves.39

A current public health issue related to the work of the home, specifically cooking, nutrition and technology in the home, is the rise in overweight and obesity. This has given rise to a new interest in the relationship between eating behaviors, the family and the home environment. Recent studies have suggested that more structured eating habits, centered on family meals, can lead to healthier eating styles.40 Kime (2009) further contends that the level organization in a household’s eating habits


40 N. Kime, “How children eat may contribute to rising levels of obesity: children’s eating behaviours: an intergenerational study of family influences,” *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education* 47 (Jan-March 2009): 4-12; H Patrick and
("ordering of eating") directly affects the health of the individuals in the home. The more meals are eaten together at the same time and place, the less likelihood of overweight or obesity in the home. Dr. Kime also argues that greater order in a family’s eating regimen places constraints on what and how much is consumed at a family meal. In homes with a laissez-faire approach to eating, there are fewer constraints on how much or the quality of what is eaten.

The structuring of time and space in the home Indeed, more researchers are contending that a generally well-structured home environment correlates with better physical health outcomes for the individuals living in it. Indeed, this growing body of literature is beginning to look at the family and the home as a critical basic building block for strengthening broader public health.

III. The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Research

As can be seen from a cursory overview of the approaches taken to the study of housework by the various social sciences, it is a complex, multi-faceted subject. And while there are certainly points of convergence, particularly in the kinds of questions pursued, there are clearly points of departure between disciplines in their study of the issue. This diversity of approach and methodology can be

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brought together to build a better, more refined understanding of the work of the home and all that it entails. Furthermore, an ecological understanding of the home can lead to research on housework that better appreciates its nature, function and effects. This, in turn, can greatly benefit the individuals living in the billions of homes around the world, as the research finds application in policy.

There are many beneficiaries of an interdisciplinary, ecological approach to the study of the work of the home. The academy could clearly gain as interdisciplinary research collaboration inspires new and innovative ways of addressing the work of the home. Current research has centered on questions of definition, equity and effect, but needs to go further in order to understand how home environments, which depend to a great extent on housework, affect the growth and development of the people who reside in them. One possible avenue for future inquiry lies in exploring the practical and qualitative “how” and “why” of housework: how and why does the quality of the work done in the home contribute to the wellbeing of the individuals living in the home? What kinds methodological approaches would allow for fair measurement of the relationship?

Because policy relies on research, and is only as solid and complete as the research upon which it is based, policymakers can also benefit from interdisciplinary research on housework. If the home is more than a locus for production and consumption, or economic and social inequity, then research should reflect this reality. Research that respects the complex intersections of processes and relationships affecting the wellbeing and development of the individuals living in the home will make for sounder policy recommendations.

A more holistic understanding and firmer grasp of the nature and implications of the work of the home have the potential to lead to sounder policies. And, as the home is an essential part of the larger social web, sound policy that reflects its complexity can lead to better social, economic and health outcomes, which benefits the public as a whole. At the governmental level, it can lead to substantive policy change regarding a whole host of issues: parental leave policies, policies that
promote better education and professional recognition of this work, aging and caregiving, child care, diet and nutrition, among other things. Furthermore, it can lead to more family-friendly policies in the private sector with regard to parental leave, family sick leave (caregiver leave), flexible work arrangements, etc.

Moreover, interdisciplinary research that takes seriously the work of the home has cultural implications that can benefit those who actually carry out the work. The increased attention and acknowledgement of the complexity and importance of subject can confer greater respect for those who carry out the work. Certainly, the billions of men and women who serve and care for others in the home, whether they are paid or not for their work, have struggled for greater appreciation and recognition of their labor, both culturally and politically. For those who are studying in professional training centers to work in the home as caregivers, assistants, or chefs, there is tremendous benefit from interdisciplinary research. Students in these growing professional fields could benefit greatly from enriched content that reflects a holistic understanding of professional work of the home.

Those that could benefit the greatest from increased interdisciplinary research, however, are the men and women who perform household work on a full-time or part-time basis. Greater understanding of the relationship between housework, home environments and outcomes for the individuals living in the home can confer an increased in the value that society places on their labor.

**Conclusion**

Existing social science research on housework reveals a complicated, often politically freighted subject, the nature and implications of which are not fully understood or appreciated. Collaborative, interdisciplinary study of the work of the home, particularly its relationship to healthy home environments and the overall wellbeing and development of the individuals living in the home, offers the possibility of a deeper, richer understanding of it. In addition, a conception of the home that
recognizes it as an interconnected, interdependent ecological system in reciprocal relationship with its surroundings can enable a more refined comprehension of the effect of housework upon the household. Exploring these relationships promises to benefit not only the academy, but policymakers and households as well.