

Summary of

“Definitely not gender related”: Gender roles and modern egalitarian relationships

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Introduction

A vast body of empirical literature indicates that we are increasingly adopting egalitarian beliefs about relationships, yet women continue to perform the majority of housework and childcare. Although a number of perspectives have tried to explain the discrepancy in the division of household labour between men and women in heterosexual couples, no explanation provides an adequate solution to the problem. My study seeks to shed light on the inconsistency between people’s egalitarian beliefs and their behaviour in the household. I interview heterosexual couples in order to identify the reasons why the unequal division of work persists within the home. My study confirms that men’s and women’s roles have undergone some changes. For example, it is now common for women to work and some men are considering staying at home to look after the children. However, despite these changes, women’s role within the home remains largely unchanged: women continue to be primarily responsible for household chores and childcare. I argue that we need to recognise the existence of gender roles in order to start a discussion on the unequal division of household labour.

Method

Nine heterosexual couples were recruited to participate in this study. Only established heterosexual couples who lived together were chosen for the study. Participants were required to be at least 25 years of age and be in a committed de facto or marital relationship. To develop a deeper understanding of how men and women make sense of the incongruities between their beliefs and their division of household labour, I adopted grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To gain a better understanding of how participants make sense of their gender role beliefs and how they divide their household labour, I have utilised focus groups as they have the advantage of generating a greater variety of responses in contrast to other approaches (Lewis, 1992). Finally, I used a semi-structured discussion style which included a general set of open-ended questions to help generate responses focusing on understanding gender roles within a relationship.

Results

According to the participants, the true “sharing” occurs in their genderless relationships which they view as more “equal” in partnership compared to traditional relationships. They feel that they “share” these responsibilities “equally” allowing them to have more enriched experiences, achieve closer intimacy, and live more fulfilling lives. However, despite genuine beliefs of couples in the non-existence of gender roles within their relationships, closer examination of what tasks the participants talk about doing, reveal that household tasks are still divided along traditional gender lines. Furthermore, even if attitudes toward traditional gender roles appear to be changing, behaviour is slower to change due to social structures such as inequality in wages which may be one of the reasons why gender roles still exist. Additionally, regardless of women’s participation in the workforce and sharing the breadwinner role with men, what has not changed is their role within the home.

Thus, it is not that too much change has occurred and that there are too many expectations of women, but that not enough change has occurred and that there are not enough expectations of men. For instance, the expectation of women to participate in paid employment is not corresponding with the same expectation of men's increased participation in housework.

Conclusion

Even as participants in this study feel that enormous changes have occurred within gender roles in quite a short period of time, and perhaps too much in the case of women, I would argue that not enough has changed in regards to gender roles in the household. That is, the real issue lies in insufficient emphasis upon the role of men, compared to too much emphasis being placed upon what women should be doing. Consequently, to achieve greater equality within the home, I argue that the real change needed is to increase our expectation of what men can and should do within the home.