

The Gender Gap in Help Work: Does it decline at older ages?

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Despite considerable changes in men's and women's roles in recent decades, American society is still characterized by a high degree of gender specialization, with men more attached to the paid workforce than women, and women performing more unpaid labor than men. Studies show repeatedly that compared to men, women perform more housework, childcare, and kincare, often amounting to a second shift, or even a third shift, beyond their first shift in the workplace (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Gerstel, 2000). Most of these studies focus on adults in their prime working ages when they are also likely to be raising families and therefore facing the greatest work-family conflicts. However, the gender gap in unpaid labor is likely to vary across the life course, reflecting the changing demands of work and family life (Rexrost & Shehan, 1987; Szinovacz, 2000; Cunningham, 2005; Solomon, Acock & Walker, 2004). What happens after children leave home, and spouses approach retirement? Does the gender gap in unpaid labor become narrower?

The present paper attempts to address this question by examining changes in the gender gap for a cohort of adults as they age from their fifties into their mid-sixties. During this time period, many will retire from full-time employment and make new decisions about how to spend their time. We look specifically at gender differences in the extent to which adults help others, both within and outside of their own families and households. Our notion of "help work" incorporates activities ranging from informal social support and volunteering to more intensive caregiving for ill and disabled relatives and friends (Hook, 2004; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002; Spitze & Trent, 2006). Unlike housework, which has been well-studied in the literature, much

less is known about patterns of help work, especially at older ages. Its importance should not be underestimated, given the rapid aging of our population and the likely rising needs for such care.

Based on theories of household labor allocation, we anticipate that men's and women's help work will become more similar as they grow older. After retirement, women and especially men face fewer constraints on their time, and their relative resources in terms of income have become more similar, both of which would lead us to predict more similar patterns of unpaid labor. In addition, one might argue that traditional gender roles may be less salient at older ages, when individuals have less to prove about their gender identities and indeed may be thrust in to a helper or caregiver role out of necessity.

Our goals in this paper are to 1) empirically assess the gender gap in help work for adults in their fifties, to determine whether and in what ways women shoulder a greater burden of care than men; 2) examine changes in the gender gap as adults age into their sixties, to determine if indeed relatively more men step forward into caring roles; and 3) compare the relative importance of structural factors, such as employment and retirement, versus demand factors, such as family needs, in determining the amount of helping work that women and men provide.

We base our analysis on the 1992/93 and 2004 waves of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), a long-term follow-up survey of over 10,000 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. By 1992/93, the surviving respondents were about 52 years old, and by 2004 they were about 65. We restrict our analysis to the 5,778 men and women who were interviewed in both 1992/93 and 2004. Because the study was restricted to high school graduates in the predominantly white state of Wisconsin, it does not permit analysis of ethnic minorities or high school drop outs. That said, the WLS is still broadly representative of white, non-Hispanic American men and women who graduated from high school.

The WLS data are especially well suited for our analysis because of its rich life history information along with repeated reports of social support and informal care provided to a range of possible recipients both inside and outside of the respondent's family. We rely on a series of questions asked in both 1992 and 2004 about the provision of four types of help to up to five types of recipients (other than the spouse or dependent children under age 19). The types of help include both instrumental and emotional support: i) transportation, errands or shopping; ii) housework, yard work, repairs; iii) advice, encouragement, moral or emotional support; and iv) baby-sitting or child care. This support could be provided to any of the following: i) friend, neighbor or co-worker; ii) sons or daughters age 19 or above; iii) parents or parent-in-law; iv) brothers or sisters; v) other relatives. The WLS also includes detailed information about informal caregiving to ill and disabled friends and relatives.

Our preliminary findings show surprising similarities in the help work provided by men and women (see Table 1). While women are slightly more likely than men to do errands and provide emotional support to people other than their spouses, over two thirds of men claim to do these things. Moreover, half of all men report doing housework, yard work or repairs for other people, a full ten percent more than women. In this sample, the gender gap in these types of support appears to be rather slim. Over time, respondents appear to provide somewhat less care in 2004 (at age 65) than in 1992/3 (when they were 52). However, some of this can be attributed to substantial declines in help provided to parents (many of whom may have died by 2004).

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Table 1. Provision of Help to Any Non-Spouse "Others" by Gender, Marital Status and Employment Status, WLS 1992 and 2003

| | N | | Transportation/ Errands/ Shopping | | Housework/ Yard Work/ Repairs | | Advice/ Encouragement/ Moral or Emotional Support | | Babysitting or Child Care | |
|--------------------|------|------|---|------|-------------------------------------|------|---|------|------------------------------|------|
| | 1992 | 2003 | 1992 | 2003 | 1992 | 2003 | 1992 | 2003 | 1992 | 2003 |
| All Males | 2615 | 2615 | 64.4 | 60.5 | 53.6 | 52.3 | 84.2 | 78.7 | 30.1 | 46.6 |
| All Females | 3163 | 3163 | 70.5 | 65.5 | 43.8 | 36.5 | 92.9 | 89.5 | 50.6 | 53.2 |
| Single Male | 320 | 349 | 64.6 | 59.9 | 55.6 | 49.6 | 82.0 | 74.0 | 15.8 | 17.6 |
| Married Male | 2295 | 2256 | 64.4 | 60.6 | 53.3 | 52.7 | 84.5 | 79.4 | 32.9 | 50.9 |
| Single Female | 574 | 835 | 72.1 | 66.7 | 49.6 | 37.1 | 94.2 | 89.0 | 38.3 | 44.4 |
| Married Female | 2588 | 2315 | 70.2 | 65.0 | 42.6 | 36.4 | 92.6 | 91.1 | 53.3 | 56.4 |
| Married Only | | | | | | | | | | |
| Employed Male | 2175 | 1093 | 64.2 | 58.4 | 53.1 | 46.7 | 84.8 | 80.9 | 31.7 | 48.5 |
| Nonemployed Male | 120 | 1163 | 67.5 | 62.7 | 56.4 | 58.2 | 77.8 | 77.9 | 37.6 | 53.3 |
| Employed Female | 1975 | 824 | 68.8 | 65.8 | 40.8 | 37.7 | 92.8 | 90.1 | 51.4 | 55.6 |
| Nonemployed Female | 613 | 1489 | 74.8 | 64.5 | 48.3 | 35.6 | 92.1 | 88.3 | 59.6 | 56.8 |