

From **The Sociology of Housework** (1947)

Chapter 10, 'Conclusions'

The survey of housework presented and discussed in previous chapters goes some way towards remedying the predominantly male orientation of sociology which was charted at the beginning of the book. One of the many yawning gaps caused by an underlying concern with male interests and activities within the discipline can begin to be, if not filled, then at least bridged. But the survey also has a wider relevance. Issues concerning the situation of women today are now publicly, and even popularly, discussed. The assignment to women of domestic activities both inside and outside the home, and women's own seeming predilection for domesticity, are structural features of their general situation in industrialized societies at the present time. Therefore any research which examines women's feelings and attitudes about housework can be expected to have something to say about both the 'oppression' and the 'liberation' of women.

1 The research findings: a summary

Before moving on to this latter question, I want first of all to summarize some of the main findings of the research. This will serve the dual function of recapitulating the important findings, and also of drawing together themes relevant to the discussion of housewives and women's liberation which occupies the last part of the chapter. The first group of findings comes under the heading of feelings about housework.

(a) Feelings about housework

The principal aim of the study was to conceptualize housework as work, rather than simply as an aspect of the feminine role in marriage. In this way it differs from previous sociological surveys of family life or women's domestic situation. The concept of 'satisfaction with housework', analogous to the notion of job satisfaction in the employment sphere, follows from the housework-as-work perspective.

1. The major finding here is that dissatisfaction with housework predominates. Seventy per cent of the women interviewed came out as 'dissatisfied' in an overall assessment of feelings expressed about housework during the course of a long indepth interview. This figure lays to rest the idea that only a tiny minority of women are discontented housewives.

2. Monotony is a common experience. Three quarters of the sample report it, and eighty percent of these are dissatisfied with housework. Fragmentation - a characteristic of work related to monotony - is also experienced by the majority of housewives, but is not associated with work dissatisfaction. The reason for this lack of connection appears to be the expectation that housework must necessarily be fragmented work: women are not made dissatisfied by an outcome they predict.

Excessive pace in work, a second characteristic of work often associated with monotony in studies of industrial workers' attitudes, is reported by half the sample. Like fragmentation, it is unrelated to work satisfaction patterns. All three of these experiences - monotony, fragmentation and excessive pace - show a higher incidence among housewives than among factory workers. In this respect housewives have more in common with assembly line workers than with factory workers engaged in more skilled and less repetitive work.

3. Loneliness is a frequent complaint. Most of the women who are dissatisfied with housework report a low level of social interaction with others. This parallels the finding from industrial sociology that the opportunity to engage in social relationships with other workers is one of the most prized aspects of any job.

4. Autonomy is the most highly valued dimension of the housewife role. 'Being one's own boss' - a phrase used by nearly half the sample - and exercising control over the pace of work is a facet of housewifery which contrasts favourably with employment work.

5. Housework is the most disliked aspect of 'being a housewife'.

6. Another disadvantage is the low status of the housewife role; the low prestige and trivialization of housework implied in the phrase 'just a housewife'. A perception of low status is related to housework dissatisfaction - more of those who complain about their status are dissatisfied than satisfied.

7. Attitudes towards the separate tasks that make up housework show considerable variation between tasks, although not between women. The most liked tasks are (in order) cooking, shopping, washing, cleaning, washing up and ironing. The consistency between different women's answers follows from the fact that particular work conditions or contexts are experienced as more satisfying than others. For example, the opportunity to talk to other people while working, having enough time in which to complete tasks, and possessing the right environment or tools of work, are conditions which promote a positive attitude to housework activities. While the heterogeneity of housework duties is emphasised in these findings, so also is the similarity of the experiences women cite as leading to enjoyment of these duties.

8. Housewives have a long working week. The average in this sample is seventy-seven hours, with a range from forty-eight (the only housewife employed fulltime at the time of the interview) to 105.

9. An important dimension of work behaviour is the felt need to specify standards and routines to which the housewife must adhere in the course of work performance. This process has a number of origins and functions. First, it appears to be a means of creating unity out of a collection of heterogeneous work tasks. Secondly, it is a way of expressing the feeling of personal responsibility for housework. Thirdly, it establishes a means of obtaining reward in housework - satisfaction can be gained daily from

successful adherence to these standards and routines. An incidental function is that of job enlargement. There is a relationship between the extent of standards- and routine-specification and the number of hours worked; the majority of those housewives with a 'high' specification work seventy or more hours a week.

With the provision of these job definitions women relinquish, to a considerable extent, the experience of autonomy. For a day-to-day control over work rhythms is substituted a psychological need to follow certain rules. These become 'objectified' i.e. are felt as, in some sense, external to the housewife as worker.

10. The relationship between the specification of standards and routines and work satisfaction patterns is in the direction of more satisfaction in the high specification group. This draws attention to the importance of self-reward; by attaining the standards and repeating the routines they set themselves, women may be able to gain a measure of psychological satisfaction. The corollary to this is that a failure to achieve one's pre-set goals may bring about substantial dissatisfaction.

11. Experiences connected with women's performance of jobs outside the home have some bearing on their satisfaction with work in the home. All the women who held high status jobs in the past (such as computer programmer, manicurist, fashion model) are dissatisfied with housework. This phenomenon can be described as a case of incongruence between the housewife's separate statuses: the high status of one's previous job contrasts with the low status of being a housewife....