

Conflict and Deference

MARJORIE DEVAULT

Studies of contemporary couples suggest that equal sharing of family work is quite rare (e.g. Hood 1983; Hertz 1986; Hochschild 1989). In most families, women continue to put family before their paid jobs, and take primary responsibility for housework and child care. Indeed, some studies suggest that husbands require more work than they contribute in families: Heidi Hartmann (1981a) shows that working women with children and husbands spend more time on housework than single mothers, whether their husbands "help" with the work or not. Some analysts suggest that women's responsibility for housework persists because men's careers are typically more lucrative than women's, but Berk's study of the determinants of couples' family work patterns (1985) shows that these decisions do not depend on economics alone. In two-paycheck families, women continue to do more household work than men, even when such a pattern is not economically rational. Berk's explanation is that the "production of gender"—of a sense that husband and wife are acting as "adequate" man and woman—takes precedence over the most economically efficient production of household "commodities." Her conclusion, arrived at through statistical analysis of a large sample of households, is consistent with clues from the speech of informants in this study, who connected cooking with "wife" and asserted the importance of "a meal made by (a) mother."

This chapter explores the effect of these gendered expectations on the expression of conflict and on relations of service and deference. In order to take account of the diversity of families in this period of change, we must consider several different patterns, ranging from families attempting to share household work to those where relations of male dominance and female submission are enacted and enforced physically, through violence and abuse. I will suggest that expectations of men's entitlement to service from women are powerful in most families, that these expectations often thwart attempts to construct truly equitable relationships and sometimes lead to violence. I do not mean to argue that husbands are all tyrannical or that marriages aiming at egalitarianism do not represent significant change. Rather, my aim is to identify the varied but powerful effects of taken-for-granted beliefs and expectations about gender, and to begin to confront these expectations as barriers to change.

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PROBLEMS OF SHARING

Even when husbands and wives are committed to the idea of sharing household responsibilities, the character of family work contributes to an asymmetry in effort and attention to household needs. Perhaps because the household routine is such a coherent whole, it often seems easiest for one person to take responsibility for its organization, even when others share the actual work. This person—traditionally, the housewife—is the one who keeps an entire plan in mind. In the households I studied, three men shared cooking with their wives, and all three reported that for the most part they take directions from their wives. Ed, a psychologist who has begun to do more and more cooking for his family, still commented:

It's not my domain. I have the minute to minute decisions, because I'm the one who's here, but she's really the one who decides things. I just carry out the decisions. It feels more like my domain now, because I've been doing so much more than I used to, but she's still in charge. She's the organized one.

He perceives her as "organized"; in fact, it is her activity that produces this perception, since even with his increased participation in carrying out tasks, she is the one who does the organizing. Similarly, Robin, whose husband Rick does virtually all the cooking, reported that she was "the supervisor":

He handles the greater portion of, you know, taking care of stuff around the house. I tell him. I say, "OK, we need this, this, and this done," and that's what he does. Like I say, "You better go to the store, we need some milk," or "We need the laundry done," and he'll do it. He's the employee, and I'm the supervisor.

Rick agreed. When I asked if "keeping track of things" was a large part of his work, he responded:

You're talking to the wrong person. Robin tells me when I've got to remember stuff. She's— if she could be a computer, she'd have the greatest memory bank in the world. I'm scatterbrained. And I don't remember a lot of things, I'll let things run down and just let things go completely out . . . She'll keep a list in her head for a week.

Though he is quite comfortable and skilled at doing the discrete tasks of cooking, he seems not to have learned the practices associated with responsibility for feeding; she, rather than he, does the work of keeping things in mind.

The fact that standards and plans for housework are typically unarticulated also makes it difficult for husbands and wives to share work in the family. The houseworker defines the work as part of an overall design for the household routine, but this design is only partially conscious. Phyllis, a white single mother, complained, "Once you've got the whole system in your head, it's very hard to translate that into collective work, I think." She has tried to share the work with her daughters, but finds it difficult:

We once made schedules. There was probably something in the paper about that. And I tried to make—you know, we would all take a chore, and write it down and do it. And you know something? When you work all day, and come home, it's almost easier to do it than to have to supervise other people doing something they don't want to do.

Like a manager, Phyllis is responsible for planning and overseeing a range of activities involving others. At first glance, the problem—to get the children to do some of the work—seems similar to the problem of supervision in the workplace. However, a wife or mother lacks the formal authority of a manager. Further, since family work is mostly invisible, household members learn not to expect to share it, and the woman in charge of a household may not even be able to specify fully the tasks to be divided. The invisibility of monitoring, for example, can make it difficult to share the work of provisioning, because one never knows whether another is thinking about what is needed. A woman whose husband shares some housework commented:

I'll be surprised. Like just the other day, we had just a little bit of milk left. And I know he saw that, because he handled the milk carton. But he went to the store and he didn't buy milk.

Tasks such as planning and managing the sociability of family meals are also invisible, and since maintaining their invisibility is part of doing the work well, people are often unable, or reluctant, to talk explicitly about them.

Serious attempts to share housework require a great deal of communication among household members, because the overall design for the work must be developed, and then continually revised, collectively. Sometimes these attempts at equality provoke conflict over the definition of the work. The problems involved were evident in the comments of a black professional couple, Ed and Gloria, who have been moving slowly toward a more equal division of household work during the course of their marriage. They have had to redefine some activities. Gloria enjoys gardening and yardwork, for example, and used to consider them part of her housework. Her husband Ed is not so interested, and argues that these activities are "hobbies"; he explained, "I say, 'Look, don't be dumping on me because I'm not doing that, because it's not my hobby.'" When they told me about their routine, both of their accounts emphasized that their activities and decisions depended on a variety of factors, and had to be made practically from moment to moment—both kept repeating, "It depends." They must talk about these things, or find some other way of making decisions together. For example, he reported:

She does more cooking, but every now and then she'll say that she wants me to do the cooking. And if I'm really upright, I'll say, "Look, I'll go out and buy it [laughing]. You're working, we can spend the money." Otherwise I'll go ahead and do it.

She described unspoken decisions about cleaning up after dinner:

That depends on how tired I am or how tired I feel he is. If I've had a hard week or a hard day I just leave, and I don't care, I just walk out. And either Ed does it or it's there in the morning. And then it depends on how much time I have. If I have to go straight out, then

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I don't know what happens. But if I have some time then I might clean up some dishes. And then if I'm feeling up, or if I think he's down, then I'll clean up after supper.

Making these decisions requires sensitivity, and when there are problems, explicit talk:

We just feel each other out. We know each other so well that we can read each other. I know when he's uptight and he knows when I'm uptight. We don't really talk about it. The only time we talk is when we're not reading each other very well, and then one person starts to feel dumped on. Then we talk, we say "What's going on?" and we try to work it out.

Such comments illustrate the extent to which housework is typically hidden from view. When one person takes responsibility for the work, others rarely think about it. Even the one who does it—because so much of her thought about it is never shared—may not be fully aware of all that is involved. Her work can come to seem like a natural expression of caring.

When couples begin to share the work of care, its "workful" unnaturalness—the effort behind care—is necessarily exposed. The underlying principles of housework must be made visible. The work must be seen as separable from the one who does it, instead of in the traditional way as an expression of love and personality. Some couples do attempt to discuss the effort required to produce the kind of family life they desire. But as the next section will show, many people accept with little thought pervasive cultural expectations that connect relations of service with the definitions of "husband" and "wife," and "mother" and "father."

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

When I talked with women about their household routines, many of them spoke of their partners' preferences as especially compelling considerations. In discussions about planning meals, several women mentioned their husbands' wage work as activity that conferred a right to "good food": "He works hard," or "He is in a very demanding work situation." (And their more detailed comments indicate that they use the phrase "good food" here to mean "food that he likes.") These comments are consistent with the findings from studies of power within marriage, which suggest that paid employment brings power and influence within the family (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Family members easily recognize the importance of paid work, and Charles and Kerr (1988) found that many women rationalized their sole responsibility for cooking in terms of their husbands' wage work. However, beliefs about work and domestic service do not operate in the same way for men and women. While men who work are said to deserve service, women who work for pay are (at most) excused from the responsibility of providing that service; they are rarely thought entitled to service themselves (Murcott 1983). Studies of the impact of women's employment on family patterns suggest that men's work at home increases only slightly when their wives take jobs. Employed wives typically manage household tasks by redefining the work and doing less than they would if they were home. I will argue here that women's service for husbands is based on more than the importance of men's paid work. Women's comments about feeding reveal powerful, mostly unspoken beliefs about relations of dominance and subordination between men and women, and especially between husbands and wives. They show that women learn to think of

service as a proper form of relation to men, and learn a discipline that defines "appropriate" service for men.

✓ Rhian Ellis (1983) suggests that many incidents of domestic violence are triggered by men's complaints about the preparation and service of meals. She notes, for example, the expectation in some working-class subcultures that a wife will serve her husband a hot meal immediately when he returns from work, and she cites examples from several studies of battered women who report being beaten when they violated this expectation. Typical accounts portray husbands who return home hours late, sometimes in the middle of the night, and still expect to be served well and promptly. In other studies, researchers report that conflict can arise from men's complaints about the amount or quality of food they are served. Some of the researchers who report such incidents remark on the fact that violence can be triggered by such "trivial" concerns, but Ellis suggests that the activities of cooking and serving food in particular ways are in fact quite significant because they signal a wife's acceptance of a subservient domestic role and deference to her husband's wishes. In these situations, men insist on enforcing exaggerated relations of dominance and subordination within the family. We will see below that some of the patterns taken for granted in families without explicit violence are based on similar assumptions about women's deference to men's needs: assumptions that women should work to provide service and that men are entitled to receive it. Though battering represents an extreme version of inequity between husbands and wives, it highlights the significance of the observations that will follow, and suggests a vicious circle: the idea that some version of womanly deference is "normal" may contribute to an ideology of male entitlement that supports violence against wives and mothers.

The households I studied were not, to my knowledge, ones in which violence was prevalent. Only a few of the people I interviewed spoke of any discord with their spouses. But their reports of daily routines suggested that implicit marital "bargains" were often based on taken-for-granted notions of men's entitlement to good food and domestic service. It was clear, for example, that in most households, wives are very sensitive to husbands' evaluations of their cooking. Teresa, a young Chicana woman, described the pressure of learning to cook when she was first married and her husband and brother-in-law, who ate with them regularly, were both "judging" her:

It was really a lot of strain, to make two men happy, who were judging you. You know, "You don't make it half as good as my mother did." So that kind of pushed me a little to learn fast.

After seven years of marriage, her husband still has a great deal of influence over her routine. He buys most of the meat for their household, since they both agree that he knows more about butchering and can purchase better meat than she does. He has high standards and communicates them clearly. When he goes shopping with her, Teresa reported, "I go through the canned food aisle, and he'll say, 'Why are you taking so many cans?'" Teresa does not think of her husband as particularly demanding. She not only accepts her husband's preferences, but also thinks of her occasional failures to satisfy them as "cheating":

I do cheat a little and I—like beans take about an hour to make—so if I forget that I've run out of beans and I don't make any, I'll just open a can of beans and just warm them up.

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Teresa told me proudly that he likes the way she cooks and that he has gained so much weight that people tease him about what a good cook she must be. But she is still anxious about judgments of her cooking:

Maybe that's why I still don't like cooking, because I know that every time I serve something on the table I'm going to be judged and criticized, and you know, "This tastes awful."

[MD: Do you really get that?]

No, no. But I'm afraid of it, right.

She describes a more relaxed kind of meal on the days when her husband works a second job and she eats casually with the children:

Now Saturday, my husband works on Saturdays, and that's the day that my kids are home also. So Saturday would be hot dog day . . . To them it's a big treat to have hot dogs. And to me it's another treat, because I don't have to go to the whole trouble of doing or preparing a whole dinner . . . [She explains that her husband works until 10 or 11 at night.] So that means the whole day, we don't have a father to yell over us. That's what Felix says, he says, "Oh, we don't have a dad to yell over us." So we'll have some kind of Campbell's soup, some kind of vegetable or chicken or something, out of a can.

Some writers have suggested that men are especially authoritarian in Hispanic families, and the pattern that Teresa describes—with "a dad to yell over" the family—is consistent with such an idea. However, I found instances of a similar attitude among women in all of the class and ethnic groups included in this study. While none of these women—including Teresa—described their own attitudes in terms of service or deference to husbands (in fact, many took some trouble to explain to me that they were not mere servants in their own households), they spoke of accepting husbands' demands in a matter-of-fact tone that illustrates the force of male preference. For example, one affluent white woman explained:

My husband doesn't like a prepared salad dressing. So I make my own. And he now is on a kick of having me make orange juice, rather than buying the frozen concentrate. So I'm going to have to go out and get an orange juice squeezer.

Her tone suggests that she takes for granted that his preferences should determine her work: that he is "on a kick" means that she will buy new equipment and adopt a new method for preparing juice. The same idea appears in one of Donna's comments, as she talked about the foods that she and her husband like:

I used to have pork chops three or four times a week. And then he just said, "I don't want pork chops and that's it." And I haven't bought them since.

She tells a small story here that conveys the drama involved in such mundane matters.

By casting her report in this way, she indicates how easily (and thus, we assume, how legitimately in her mind) he puts forward his claims: "he just said . . . And I haven't bought them since." Susan, remembering times when she had to scrimp and save, explains how things are different now: "If the man wants a steak, he gets it. Period. No questions asked." Again, the sense is of men's entitlement to make claims and have them met within the family.

A number of women referred to husbands as the sources for elaborated standards. For example, a recently divorced, white professional woman commented on how the change had affected her cooking; before the divorce, meals for her husband and children had been rather elaborate:

The expectations of supper, you know, the big meal of the day. I knew that I had to have meat and potatoes, and you know, the usual fanfare. But you know, that really required me to be home, by five o'clock in the afternoon, to get all of this ready by six. But I knew that was expected of me.

After the divorce, food was "not a priority," and her routines became "very simple." She is concerned about nutrition, and carefully monitors her children's eating, but she no longer prepares elaborate meals:

After my husband left, things got very simple with food. I found, you know, I didn't have to be in the kitchen, and shopping all of the time. I had always flirted with the idea. But you know, being married, you're just a slave to the kitchen. And once I got out of that, I just had more choices. I mean I had more flexibility in what I could do and couldn't do.

She does not explain exactly why her choices expanded; we do not know precisely how her husband influenced her decisions before the divorce. But she describes a shift from "the usual fanfare" to a "very simple" routine, and her language is clearly that of constraint and permission: her husband's presence—whether explicitly or through her own expectation—dictated what she "could do and couldn't do."

The fact that many women seem unaware of this tone of deference toward husbands, or at least are unable to articulate its basis, does not detract from its force. Indeed, for those who value some form of egalitarianism in their marriages, the requirement to serve a husband—which might be resisted if it were more explicit—is not necessarily diminished by its invisibility. One white woman, whose husband is an executive, provides an example. When she is home alone during the day, she eats very casually, and she talked about how difficult it is, when her husband occasionally works at home, to prepare a "really decent lunch." When I asked why he could not eat the same lunch that she does every day, she was unable to explain except on the basis of an inarticulate "feeling." She attempts to explain her concern as an issue of nutrition, but her talk about non-fattening food is peppered with references to meals that are "really decent" in some other way:

It would be hard, if I had to feed him every day, to think up really decent lunches. I eat yogurt, and peanut butter and jelly, all kinds of fattening things that I shouldn't, and every day I say I shouldn't be doing this. But it's hard to think of a well-rounded, man-sized meal.

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asked what she might prepare for him, and she gave an example:

All right. Yesterday, we thought our girls were coming out the night before and I had bought some artichokes for them, so I cooked them anyway. So I scooped out the center and made a tuna salad and put it in the center, on lettuce, tomatoes around. And then, I had made zucchini bread . . . So that was our lunch. If I had to do it every day I would find it difficult.

[MD: When you make a distinction between the kind of lunch you would have and what you'd fix for him, what's involved in that? Is it because of what he likes, or what?]

I just feel he should have a really decent meal. He would not like—well, I do terrible things and I know it's fattening. Like I'll sit down with yogurt and drop granola into it and it's great. Well, I can't give him that for lunch.

[MD: Why not?]

He doesn't, he wouldn't like it, wouldn't appreciate it. Or peanut butter and jelly, for instance, it's not enough of a lunch to give him.

This woman's discussion is quite confusing; when she is alone, she does "terrible things" but her husband "wouldn't appreciate." Yet she went on to report that in fact, he likes peanut butter and jelly and would probably enjoy a peanut butter sandwich. Still, it is "not enough of a lunch to give him." In fact, her explanations—the references to nutrition concerns and what he "appreciates" or not—obscure what seems the real point, that "not enough of a lunch," means simply that she has not done enough to prepare a meal. Her example shows how much trouble she takes to prepare a "decent" meal and serve it attractively. A "man-sized meal" may not be so much larger in quantity, but should be a meal she has worked on for him.

What we see in all of these comments are specific versions of a socially produced sense of appropriate gender relations, a sense that certain activities are associated with the very fundamental cultural categories "man"/"husband"/"father" and "woman"/"wife"/"mother." (Haavind [1984] discusses similar interpretive frames for marital exchanges among Norwegian couples.) These associations are learned early and enforced through everyday observation of prevailing patterns of gender relations; they are rarely justified or even articulated explicitly, but explicit statement is hardly necessary. For most people, these understandings have become part of a morally charged sense of how things should be, so that even those who strive for some version of equity are prey to their persuasive effects.

MEN WHO COOK

Perhaps the one who cooks tries, "naturally," to please the one he or she cooks for, regardless of gender. That is, in homes where men did as much cooking as women, perhaps the inequalities of service and deference found in typical family settings would be less pronounced. The possibility is one that is difficult to assess, precisely because gender is so strongly associated with activity. In the sample of households I studied, only three men cooked more than occasionally. Of these three, only one (Rick, a white transportation worker) has taken on almost all of the cooking, as women have typically done in traditional families; one (Ed, a black psychologist) prepares the dinners most evenings, but

usually by finishing the preparation of foods his wife organizes during the previous week-end; and the third (a white professional worker) reported cooking about twice each week. Since even Rick reported that his wife is the one who organizes their routine, reminding him what needs to be done each day, none of these men has taken on the kind of sole responsibility for family work that has been the most common pattern for women, and none seems to do even half of the coordinative work of planning. In short, they cook, but they are only beginning to share the work of "feeding the family" in the broader sense I have been developing. These few men's reports cannot provide any definitive answers to questions about gender and household activity, but they are worth examining alongside their wives' accounts if only as suggestive pointers toward understanding how men's and women's understandings of family work might differ. Their comments indicate that they have begun to learn and practice household skills such as preparing specific foods, juggling schedules in order to bring the family together for a meal, and improvising with the materials at hand. However, their reports also suggest that they do not feel the force of the morally charged ideal of deferential service that appears in so many women's reports.

When women talked about what they cook, they frequently referred to husbands' and children's preferences as the fixed points around which they designed the meals. Such comments are mostly absent from the reports of these men, except for occasional references to particular foods that young children will not accept. Rick, for example, likes cooking partly because he can be inventive; his explanation emphasizes his own creativity more than the tastes of those he serves:

I don't use any recipes. It's just by what I want to put in the thing. And if I like it . . . It's just whatever I have up here, what can I think of now?

He reported that his wife and child like his cooking, but only late in the interview, in the context of a longer exchange. When I asked him what kinds of cooking he did best, his answer again suggested freedom from external standards even as he mentioned his attention to his wife's tastes; he explained that he has not mastered baking, and then continued:

Other than the meats and stuff, it's just my imagination, whatever I want to do with it. And whatever Robin, you know, I might ask her, like the taste of this, do you like it? And if she doesn't like it I won't put it in.

Picking up on this last comment, I attempted to probe for some elaboration of his feelings about the evaluations of others:

[MD: So what about Robin and Kate? Do they think you're a pretty good cook?]

Yeah. I surprise them. I surprise myself sometimes [laughing].

[MD: Yeah. They don't have too many complaints, then?]

No. If so, I don't know . . . [laughing and shaking his head as if the thought had never occurred to him].

Rick takes on more responsibility than the other men I talked with, and he does so even in the face of some pointed teasing from some of his working-class friends who disap-

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prove. But even though he understands the urgent demands of children who need to be fed, he seems able to set limits for his efforts more comfortably than most of the women I talked with, and has more success saying no to the tasks he simply does not enjoy. Both he and Robin reported that she cooks when they entertain large groups; he explained that she cooks "if it's gonna be any effort out on cooking—you know, let's go, go for it—instead of just fixing one or two things like I do." And in contrast to the many women who spoke of their own "laziness" and "bad habits," his matter-of-fact reporting of his faults, while perhaps more reasonable, is striking in its lack of shame:

I don't remember a lot of things, I'll let things run down and just let things go completely out. I do that quite frequently. Keeping things in your head—well, I know what I really need. But it's going out and getting it—and having the money. Or just going out and getting it, that you know, if I'm extra tired and I don't feel like going out, I'm just not going to go out. The heck with that. I'll think of something else, or do something else with it, or not use it, whatever.

Like the women I have discussed, Rick takes advantage of the flexibility built into housework to avoid work he dislikes; unlike many women, he seems to do so guiltlessly.

A somewhat different situation provides another version of this attitude. Ed took up cooking not because he enjoys it but because he had to, when his wife's new job and long commute meant that she returned home too late to prepare their meals. As he explained the routine, she plans meals for each day, but he decides when he begins the cooking whether or not to follow her plan, and she accepts whatever he decides. I saw the system in operation when I observed a dinner at their house. Just as he started to serve, Ed stopped and said, "Oh, I forgot—Gloria would have liked us to have a salad." But then, shrugging, "Well, I didn't get to it." The ability simply to dismiss the work that cannot be completed, without the anxieties that plague so many women, springs at least in part from differential cultural expectations: the notion that caring work is optional or exceptional for men while it is obligatory for women.

These comments can only be taken as suggestive, since so few men were interviewed, and since even these represent only a few of the variety of household arrangements that are possible. Still, the language of these few men points toward some rather different understandings of what in the work is "burdensome" or "convenient." Ed, for example, sees as a "burden" an aspect of planning that the women I talked with took so much for granted that few even mentioned it. He reported:

We occasionally get some fresh vegetables, but we usually have frozen vegetables. Because the fresh stuff, somebody has to be there to consume it, you can't delay. Then it becomes my burden, you know, I have to be thinking, and orchestrating, how to use such a variety of food.

And another man explained to me that he and his wife never use "convenience foods," but then defined as a "convenience" the extra work that she puts in on the weekends:

One convenience that we will use sometimes is this. You know when you come home from work and you have to cook you don't really have much time. You don't have time to sim-

mer sauces or anything like that. So sometimes on the weekend Katherine will make up something, or if she has time maybe two or three things, something that can be heated up later in the week and will actually taste better then.

Here, we see how thoroughly women's household work is obscured from view and thus framed as not requiring discussion or negotiation. Even as they began to share this work, all three of these men continued to attribute imbalances in the division of labor to their wives' "personalities," defining much of the extra work that wives did in terms of fortuitous propensities for organization or planning.

Men who care for children alone probably take the work of feeding more seriously, simply because they are forced to take sole responsibility for this work that most men are unaccustomed to doing. In addition to the men who served as informants in this study, I talked briefly with two single fathers who do all of the work to care for their families. Both emphasized the terrific worries produced by the necessity of feeding their children. One talked of an "overwhelming anxiety" that began each day as he finished work and realized that he had to get a meal on the table for his three demanding children; the other wrote me that I should emphasize "the STRUGGLE involved in this feeding work," and the fact that "behind closed doors, dinner is often a nightmare." These are the comments of men who cannot rely on partners even to help out or fill in (much less to plan menus and prepare meals during the weekend), who are forced to learn, as most women do, that "if I don't do it, no one else will." Such comments may also reflect the lack of guidance—and resulting panic—for men who must unlearn cultural expectation, disentangling work and gender, separating "care" from "woman"; they must learn to provide service instead of receiving it.

STRUGGLE AND SILENCE

Overt conflict about who will do housework is surprisingly rare.¹ Informants in only two of the thirty households I studied discussed any sustained, explicit conflict about who would do the work or how it should be done, and results from a large survey are similar: over half of the wives responding reported no difference of opinion over who should do what, and only seven percent reported "a lot" of difference of opinion (Berk 1985:188; see also Haavind 1984). Fairly quickly, most houseworkers develop adjustments that are satisfactory enough to mute potential complaints from household members. The boundaries that produce complaints become the givens of the work, and those who do it find ways to manage around these givens. The perception that routine is chosen provides an interpretive frame for redefining the adjustments that are made.

Susan, who is quite happy with her household routine, told a story from the early days of her marriage, of her first definitions of her work, an episode of resentment, and its resolution:

When we first got married, I played "Suzy Homemaker." I was young and stupid—what did I know? We lived in the suburbs and I worked in the city, and I had to get up at five every morning to get to work. And then on my days off, I'd get up to fix him breakfast, and you know, put on makeup, all that kind of thing. After a while my sister-in-law kind of pulled me aside, and told me I'd better cool it, or he'd get used to that kind of thing.

I still remember, once I came home after a grueling day, and there was my old man, sit-

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ing in front of the TV with his potato chips. I said, "God, in my next life I hope I come back as a 26-inch Zenith, I'd get more attention!" That was probably our first fight. But it had been brewing for about four months. You know, we were just getting used to our differences.

I like the way I do things, I'm used to it. I just get it all done on Monday and then I don't have to worry about it. If I don't do it, I'm a wreck by Wednesday. It's not that I like this kind of work, but you have to do it.

She thinks of this as something other than conflict over work: they were "getting used to [their] differences." She knows that she "has to do" housework, so she has found a way of doing it that she "likes," or at least, that she is "used to." Now, her husband goes to work before she is up; he has coffee and a doughnut, or buys something to eat on the job, and she sleeps until her daughter wakes up. She says, "If I'm in a pinch, my husband's not beyond doing the laundry, or washing a floor." But it is clear that she accepts responsibility for the housework: it is her domain, and though she would not say that she likes the work, she has accepted what seems to her a satisfactory compromise.

In many households, like this one, such compromises are negotiated with little overt struggle. Some men accept more responsibility, or are less demanding than others; some women are satisfied to take on the family work with little help. But accommodations cannot always be found. When conflict about housework does arise, it can be quite painful, at least partly because it carries so much emotional significance. Women who resist doing all of the work, or resist doing it as their husbands prefer, risk the charge—not only from others, but in their own minds as well—that they do not care about the family. When I talked with Jean, for example, she was engaged in an ongoing struggle to get her husband to share the housework. She spoke of her continuing frustration in two interviews, a year apart, and I felt her ambivalence when she told me:

In spite of all this, I love him. [Laughing, but then serious] No, I do love him, and I'm willing to make some sacrifices, but there are times when I really just go off half-crazy. Because the pressure is just too much sometimes. I just feel it's not fair. It's not a judicious way to live, a fair and equal way to live.

She seems afraid that any complaint will be heard as her lack of feeling for her husband. She insists, indeed, that she is willing to make "sacrifices," as a loving wife should. His resistance to helping with family work is apparently not subject to such an interpretation.

Since feeding work is associated so strongly with women's love and caring for their families, it is quite difficult for women to resist doing all of the work. Bertie, for example, had been married for over twenty years when I talked with her, and had experienced a long period of difficult change. She told the following story:

There was a time when I was organized, did things on time, on a schedule. I cooked because I felt a responsibility to cook. I felt guilty if I didn't give my husband a certain kind of meal every day . . . When I made the transition it was hard. For me and him. And he's still going through some problems with objecting to it. But I felt that I had put undue pressure on myself, by trying to do what people used to do, you know . . . when the husband could pay the bills, and the wife took care of the house . . .

I told my family that there were certain things that I needed, which went neglected for many years. And when I recognized my own needs, there was a problem . . . I had given so much of my life to my husband and children, that he thought that I was wrong, not to give them that much time anymore. But I needed to go back to school, needed to improve myself, I needed time to myself . . . They've come to accept it now. Five, six years ago it was really rough. But now they accept, that you know, I'm a person. I am to be considered a person. I have rights, you know, to myself. It was a rough ride for a while. And I suppose it could have gone in another direction. But it didn't.

Things had changed by the time I talked with Bertie: she was pursuing a degree and spent less time cooking elaborate meals. Her husband and children have not taken on much of the work burden, and typically do without meals when she is away from home in the evening—sometimes the girls will prepare sandwiches—so Bertie continues to be responsible for the bulk of the work, simply doing less than in the past. Yet when she talks about their struggles, she still worries about being “selfish”:

I do take that time now for myself. But I count my study time, and my class time, as my own, you know. You know, so that I don't—I try not to be selfish.

When I asked what “being selfish” meant, she replied:

I make sure that I have time with them. If my stuff gets to be too much, whatever is necessary, whatever, whatever is important, I try to do. Because we still have the children to raise. So there must be some sharing. They're still there, I can't treat them as though they're not there. Even though they're pretty independent, on their own, they still require a lot of attention. So I have to be careful not to give too much to myself. Because you can fall into that. You know, studying too much. It's hard to describe.

It is, indeed, hard to describe. She claims that she has “rights,” like any other person. Yet she will do “whatever is necessary” for her family, and must be “careful not to give too much” to herself. Her talk reveals quite different standards for evaluating her own needs and those of others. Raising such issues within the family requires this intense scrutiny of a woman's own desires.

Bertie's system for accounting her time was not unique. Jean, the other woman who was struggling with these issues, reported considering her situation in similar terms. She identified two blocks of time as “hers,” but both were hers in a rather ambiguous sense:

I feel the only real time I have to myself is usually my lunch hour [at her job]. I consider that my time for myself.

She has to be firm to maintain even this break officially sanctioned by her employer. Her husband, who works at night and wakes up around noon, would like her to come home so that they could spend time together. But, she reported:

I do kind of resist that, on any kind of a regular basis. Although, in order to keep a marriage going I should maybe not do that. It's hard for me. Because I know there's a need

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there, I feel that too. But this gets into all kinds of other issues, about him not helping. I feel that if he would help out more around the house, I'd be more willing to come home and spend more time with him. But you know, I feel like this is my own time for me.

On Sundays they go to church, partly for the children, and partly because she and her husband enjoy the "social aspect," and she counts this activity as her own time as well:

So Sunday morning is never a time when I can do chores or anything. And in a way, I mean, I count that as time for me, in a different sort of way.

These women have asserted to their families that they are people too, with rights (and it is surely striking that they feel a need to put forward such a claim). However, they still must calculate which time to claim as "theirs," and the logic of caring for others labels any too-active exercise of their rights as "selfish."

These women's stories help to show why there were only two of them in the group I studied, why conflict about housework is infrequent. They illustrate how, in the family context, a mother's claims for time to pursue her own projects can so easily be framed as a lack of care, and a mother's claim even to be "a person" may be taken as "selfish." If the act of pressing a claim for time off or help from others is so fraught with interpersonal danger, it is perhaps not surprising that so many women choose to accommodate to inequitable arrangements instead of resisting them.

THE LANGUAGE OF CHOICE

Many women spoke of doing work they did not enjoy in order to please their husbands. However, very few of them expressed explicit discomfort about these efforts, and only those described above reported any sustained, overt conflict with their husbands. I was puzzled and a bit dismayed by their complacency about what I saw as inequity. But as I analyzed their reports, I began to see how the organization of family work contributes to their responsiveness to husbands' demands. As I showed in the last chapter, individuals have considerable flexibility in designing household routines, and they choose routines shaped to the idiosyncrasies of those in the family. They find ways to adjust to special demands, and then take their adjustments for granted, often describing them as no particular trouble. These choices, and the sense of autonomy that comes with making them, combine to hide the fact that they are so often choices made in order to please others.

Both deference and a sense that her deferential behavior has been freely chosen can be seen in Donna's comments, for example. Her husband, a mail carrier, is moody and unpredictable, difficult to please and quite openly critical when he does not like the meal she prepares. Although she told me several times that he is "not fussy," she also reported checking with him about every evening's menu before she begins to cook. I remarked that his preferences seemed quite important, and she responded:

Yeah. I like to satisfy him, you know, because a lot of times I'll hear, 'Oh, you don't cook good,' or something like that.

The possibility of such criticism becomes part of the context within which she plans her work. She thinks ahead about what to prepare, but final decisions depend on his

responses. When I asked what she would prepare the night of our interview, she could not answer:

I haven't talked to him today, so I really don't know . . .

[MD: Does he always know what he wants?]

Well—I give him choices. Or he'll say "I don't care." So then it's up to me and I just take out something. Hopefully tonight—I would like to have the pot roast—so maybe he'll say yes. Because he actually bought it the other day, so he might want it.

Donna finds ways to build a routine that provides some shape for her work and still allows accommodation to his day-to-day tastes. She explained, for instance, how she plans her shopping:

Like I'll ask him, what do you want me to pick up? you know, what kind of meat do you want me to pick up? And he'll go through the paper, and he'll tell me, do this, get this. But as far as really making it out [a menu], I just don't. Because sometimes he might not be in the mood for it, he might not want it, or something like that. So I just leave it up in the freezer.

Her scheme sometimes involves an extra trip to the store:

Then if he wants something, then I'll just go to the store and get what he wants. It's really kind of day by day. I find it easier that way. I couldn't sit there and write what I'm having for dinner every day. I just can't do that.

When I asked why not:

I don't know, I figure maybe it's just me. I just can't sit there and write, well, we're going to have this and this and this. And then that day you might not have a taste for it. And then you'll want something else. That's the way I look at it.

She "finds it easier" to plan meals day by day, and she presents this as just her way, a personal inclination. It seemed clear to me that her strategy was shaped by her husband's demands, in response to his moodiness and in order to avoid his sharp words of criticism. Within the constraints of their relationship, she does make choices in order to avoid trouble. Interpreting her accommodations as choices freely made, she translates his peculiarities into a general observation: "you might not have a taste for it. And then you'll want something else." And thus she presents the result of her strategizing as her own belief: "the way I look at it."

Even when family members are not so demanding, the pattern of choosing to adjust to others is common. Another woman explained how she has chosen a breakfast routine that lets her sleep a bit later instead of eating with the family:

During the week I usually get their food to the table and then I make a lunch [for her husband]. It's more pragmatic. I could get up earlier and do that, but I choose to stay in bed and avoid sitting at the table.

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Such comments stress autonomy and choice; however, it is clear that these women's decisions are not so freely made as they suggest. When husbands decide to press their claims, these become the fixed points around which adjustments and "choices" are made. One white woman, married to a journalist, reported a more conflictual negotiation over the breakfast routine, and explained how she has adjusted her morning schedule to accommodate her husband's ideas about breakfast:

Breakfast has turned into more of a social occasion than I perhaps would care for. For my husband it's a real social affair, and we got into huge fights years ago. He always from the day we got married expected me to get up and fix his breakfast, no matter what time he was going anywhere. Then we lived overseas and we had two maids, and I couldn't see any point in getting up just to sit with him—I didn't even have to *make* the breakfast. Well, that was a "dreadful, dreadful thing." Finally he got over that, and I don't mind getting up, you see, all right, that's a personal thing . . . So I usually fix breakfast for the two of us. Which is nice—but I would like to be able to read the newspaper, myself.

On this issue, her husband is adamant—it is a "dreadful, dreadful thing" not to have breakfast together—and she has adjusted to this "personal" preference. But she also describes her adjustment in somewhat contradictory terms: she "doesn't mind getting up," it's "all right," even "nice," but still, she would rather read the newspaper.

The choices that women talk about are not entirely illusory: in many ways, houseworkers can choose to do the work as they like. They adopt different general strategies: some maintain that they "couldn't live with" a regular routine, while others describe themselves as "disciplined" and "big on rules." To some extent, people even choose not to do the kinds of work they dislike. One woman, who would like to "just forget about" cooking, has simplified her food routine so that her work is quite automatic: she prepares meals that are "very easy to cook, and very quick also." And Sandra, who enjoys cooking and prepares elaborate meals for her husband (in addition to simpler, early meals for the children), thinks of her efforts as "compensation" for the cleaning that she does not enjoy, and often does not do. Still, these real choices—some of which certainly do ease the burdens of housework—seem also to provide a rationale for deference: women emphasize their freedoms and minimize their adjustments to others.

As women make choices about housework, their decisions include calculations about when to press their own claims and when to defer to others. The choice to do something in the way one prefers oneself is made to fit among the more compelling demands of others, especially husbands. The houseworker comes to understand her work in terms of a compromise that seems fair: since she is free to choose in some ways, it is only fair to defer in others. Most women seem only partly conscious of this logic. They, and others, notice the choices but not the deference. In their talk about decision making they tend to conflate benefits for the household group all told with their own more specific interests and preferences.

Such calculation can be seen in this affluent white woman's comment about going out to dinner. She explained that she does not really enjoy cooking and "always looks forward to" going out. But she often thinks that her husband is not so interested, and "being sensitive" to him can interfere with her enjoyment:

If it's just family, and we wait a real long time, I keep thinking of all the things I could be doing instead of waiting, and then I wonder if it's really worth going out for dinner. And I think part of that is being sensitive to my husband's thinking. Because he has to eat out every noon anyway. And sometimes a couple of times a week he has to take people out for dinner. So it's not a great pleasure for him, to go out again just to get me out of the kitchen. So if it takes a real long time, I just feel, why did I do this, you know?

She does not feel this way—and can relax and enjoy herself—when she eats out with her son; knowing her husband's feeling changes her own, to the point that she wonders, "Why did I do this, you know?" Donna, managing a household with little extra money, worries about the expense of eating out, but talks about the decision to go out in much the same way:

To me, I can go to the store and pay for two days', meals, or go to a restaurant and pay for one meal. And a lot of times the kids don't finish their meal . . . I was going to suggest for Easter, going out to eat. But maybe I'm better off just getting something and having it here.

Her own preferences disappear into those of the household group: though she might enjoy a holiday, the children might not eat and money spent would be wasted. In the end she concludes, "I'm better off" doing the work of cooking at home.

These are issues that are difficult for many women to discuss; their talk is often hesitant, sometimes contradictory. But my point is not that they are confused or disingenuous about their positions relative to others. Rather, I mean to show that they are in a situation not easily described in terms of either autonomy or control. These women do make choices about their work, though many of those choices are made within a structure of constraints produced by others. The work itself is defined in terms of service to others, and husbands' demands are given special force through cultural assumptions about appropriate relations between husbands and wives. What a husband insists on typically becomes a requirement of the work, and a woman who arranges the routine to satisfy her own preferences as well as his may simply be making her work more difficult. The fact that so many women frame these accommodations as "choices" means that they are less likely to make choices more obviously in their own behalf when the interests of family members conflict. In such situations, women seem to assume that they have made enough choices, and often come to define deference as equity.²

DOMINANCE AND SUBORDINATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

- ✓ I have argued throughout this book that the work of "feeding a family" is skilled practice, a craft in which many women feel pride and find much satisfaction. Such a view suggests that wives care for family members not because they are coerced or compelled by despotic husbands, but because they believe the work of care is valuable and important. The discussion in this chapter, however, suggests as well that the work of caring—however valuable or valued by those who do it—is implicated in subtle but pervasive ways in relations of inequality between men and women. Some husbands insist quite explicitly that their wives display subordination by providing domestic service. For most men, however, such coercion is as unnecessary as it would be unpleasant. In most households,
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wives display deference to husbands simply because catering to a man is built into a cultural definition of "woman" that includes caring activity and the work of feeding. For many women and men, patterns of "womanly" service for men simply "feel right." In some cases, the recognition of a husband's claim to service is quite direct ("Like I said, whatever he wants, I'll make it the way he likes, and everything he likes with it."); in other reports, references to "really decent," "man-sized" meals point toward a more diffuse sense that a husband, because he is a man, deserves special service. Both kinds of statements show how the everyday activities of cooking, serving, and eating become rituals of dominance and deference, communicating relations of power through non-verbal behavior (Henley 1977).

Many women take pleasure in preparing food that pleases, in serving family members, in rewarding a husband for his work at a difficult job. Many think of the craft of attentive service as work they choose. But few women are themselves the recipients of a similarly attentive service in return. We might assume that men who cook like to please the ones they cook for. But they do not talk about preparing a meal that is "enough for a woman." Indeed, they cannot talk (or think) this way: the idea of a "woman-sized meal" is so dissonant with prevailing cultural meanings that it sounds quite wrong. Here, we see how categories of expression interact with people's everyday family activity. The gender inequalities inherent in language and in a multitude of nonverbal behaviors are woven into the fabric of social relations produced as people go about the mundane affairs of everyday life. Even when fathers cook, their activity—however similar to that of mothers who cook—is framed differently. There are no terms within which men think of cooking as service for a woman, no script suggesting that husbands should care for wives through domestic work. Some women are beginning to insist on more equal relations, and some husbands are beginning to struggle at taking equal responsibility for family work. But these attempts are made without a cultural imagery to support them, and in opposition to established understandings about appropriate activities for men and women.

Because of the expectation that women will be responsible for caring work, their own independent activities are likely to conflict with requirements for family service. When wives and mothers assert their rights to pursue individual projects, they often discover the limits of choice and the force of cultural expectation. When women resist—by demanding help with housework or a respite from serving others—they challenge a powerful consensual understanding of womanly character by suggesting that women's care for others is effort rather than love. Many have trouble speaking plainly about the limits of caring work, and many find that in the long run it is easier to do all the work required than to press claims for an equitable division of labor.

The invisibility of the work that produces "family," the flexibility underlying perceptions of "choice" about the work, and the association between caring work and the supposedly "natural" emotions of a loving wife and mother all tend to suppress conflict over housework. Since the work itself is largely unrecognized, and often misidentified as merely "love" rather than also effort, redefinition is required before questions of dividing the work can be discussed. Those who have benefited from the work often have trouble recognizing it as such, and indeed, have little incentive to do so. Further, many women find that they can make enough choices and adjustments in some areas that accommodation in others seems preferable to sustained conflict. Those who insist on negotiating

new household patterns must confront their own and others' sense that they do so out of "selfishness" or insufficient concern for others. Even as they struggle for more equitable arrangements, these women carefully ration ("count") the time and attention they give to their own needs, while attempting to provide "whatever" their families require. Their demands for themselves are painfully visible within the family, while their accommodations to others remain largely unacknowledged.

✓ The claim that caring is work, or that this work should be shared by all those who are able to do it, must be made against powerful beliefs about the naturalness and importance of family life, and about men's and women's dispositions and roles. For a woman to provoke and sustain conflict in this area is to risk the charge that she is unnatural or unloving. The costs of conflict are high. Conversely, when a husband complains, or even hints at complaint, his claims carry with them the weight of generations of traditional practice and a body of expert advice about housekeeping and family life based on the assumption that women will serve others. As women adjust and accommodate, choosing deference to others and fitting their own projects into frames established by others, their actions contribute to traditional assumptions about woman's "nature." Thus, we see that in addition to its constructive, affiliative aspect, the work of care—as presently organized—has a darker aspect, which traps many husbands and wives in relations of dominance and subordination rather than mutual service and assistance.

NOTES

A portion of this chapter first appeared in "Conflict over Housework: A Problem That (Still) Has No Name," in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change: A Research Annual*, edited by Louis Kriesberg (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1990), pp. 189–202. Reprinted by permission.

1. This is not to say that other kinds of family conflicts are not sometimes expressed through the provision of food or reactions to it. I was less interested in these emotional dynamics associated with food than with the practices of organizing, preparing, and serving it, and I did not ask interviewees to speculate about the significance of food in conflicts other than those focused on family work issues. Charles and Kerr (1988) provide somewhat more information about food practices as expressions of interpersonal struggles, especially between parents and young children.
2. Haavind, in an analysis of "Love and Power in Marriage," based on studies of Norwegian couples, makes a similar observation about understandings of "choice" that accompany marriage based on romantic love: "If you have the right to marry whom you please, the responsibility for how it works out is also yours. Therefore, it is difficult to share our disappointment with anyone outside our own marriage" (1984:161).

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