

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Sexism in Household Tasks \*

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Most of us are aware that many occupations are linked with one sex or the other. For example, nursing, elementary school teaching and being a telephone operator were seen typically as women's jobs. In contrast, physician, college professor and telephone repair were seen as masculine endeavors. However, in the last few decades, this has been slowly changing. During this period, more women became physicians, and more men went into nursing. Similar changes occurred in other occupations. Have occupational changes been reflected in household tasks for children? Or are children's tasks in the home still biased as to gender?

To explore these questions, two sociologists at the University of Nebraska, Lynn White and David Binkerhoff, did a study on a random sample of 669 children (ages 2-17) in Nebraska in 1979. The parents of these children were interviewed with open-ended questions about the type of work that their children did in the home. (Although this method probably did not uncover all the children's responsibilities, it did provide information on the kinds of work that parents considered most important.)

The study found that the sex of the child had only a limited impact on *how much work* was done. In the 2-5 year range, 66% of the boys and 55% of the girls were responsible for some household chores. These percentages increased steadily with age for both sexes.

The study found more dramatic differences in the type of work performed. Over all ages, *boys performed more outdoor work* than girls. In the 2-5 year category, no girls did outdoor work, while 14% of the boys did so. By 14-17 years, 36% of the girls did outdoor work. However, this seems small when compared to 80% of the boys the same age doing outdoor work. Taking out the garbage was typically a boy's task. This chore was done by 48% of the boys but only 15% of the girls.

In contrast, *housework* was primarily a *female* responsibility. Overall, it was done by 60% of the girls but only 32% of the boys. The difference in percentages was 16% for the youngest age group (2-5). The difference increased with age, until it was 51% for the oldest children (14-17). *Kitchen* work showed a slightly greater overall difference, performed by 62% of the girls and 28% of the boys. The percentage difference in this kind of work also increased with age.

Sex differences for other types of chores — care of personal belongings, care of pets, babysitting siblings (brothers and sisters) and farm work — were small when compared to the previously mentioned types of work.

What factors are related to this sex stereotyping of various chores? White and Binkerhoff explored the mother's employment status, number and sex of siblings, parental education, age of child, social class, rural vs. urban residence, and liberalness of parental sex-role values.

As has been indicated previously, the **child's age** had a strong effect on the type of work performed. The older the children get, the more sex-stereotyped their domestic work assignments become.

Factors involving family structure — mother's employment and number and sex of siblings — had little effect. For example, working mothers caused *both* boys and girls to perform more "*feminine*" tasks. Thus the difference between the sexes was unaffected. In addition, social class did not produce any significant effect on sex differences in tasks.

Beside the age of the child, **parental education and gender role values** both had a significant effect. In contrast to other parents, those with more education and more liberal gender-role values seemed less likely to draw clear lines between the tasks of their sons and daughters. However —even with these parents — there were still sex differences in the tasks assigned.

When exploring rural vs. urban residence, the researchers got a surprise. As expected, they found urban families to be less traditional in work assignments than rural nonfarm families. However, **rural families living on farms** — in contrast to both rural nonfarm and urban families — were less likely to have differences in boys' and girls' work. The researchers concluded that the rural traditionalism was outweighed by the *higher workload* — averaging two hours more per week for each child. The practical necessity to assign work on the basis of age and ability made the sex factor a luxury criterion for work assignments. Therefore, sex typing of jobs was minimal on farms.

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## **The household tasks you assign can limit or expand the range of occupations that your child will consider.**

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At least in part, differences in adult work experiences are a reflection of childhood socialization. If you want your child to restrict his/her occupational choices to traditional fields, it helps to assign household tasks according to traditional sex stereotypes. However, if you want your children — regardless of sex — to expand their occupational horizons beyond the sex-typed limitations, you can help by not assigning household tasks with the traditional gender bias.

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\* Adapted from Jon M. Shepard's *Sociology*, West Publishers, 1984, pages 175-177.