Psychological Perspectives on Gender Deviance Neutralization

The gendered division of housework has interested social and behavioral scientists for half a century, starting as early as 1960 with Blood and Wolfe’s *Husbands and Wives*. This interest was instigated by the increased participation of women in the paid labor force and the fact that those changes did not lead to parallel changes in the division of housework. Women still do a much larger share of the housework than men do, regardless of their employment status, both in the United States (for reviews, see Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Coltrane, 2000) and in Western Europe (for a review, see Kluwer & Mikula, 2002). Although the amount of time men invest in housework has risen over the past decades, it is not enough to compensate for women’s increased labor-force participation. It is not surprising that the fundamental question in this large area of research has consistently been, why does housework remain women’s work?

Oriel Sullivan’s (2011) article “An End to Gender Display Through the Performance of Housework?” in this volume provides a compelling critique of the evidence for the gender-deviance-neutralization hypothesis that posits that men and women who have non-stereotypical roles in their household, as when the husband earns less than his wife, display their gender through respectively decreasing (husbands) or increasing (wives) their contribution to housework (Brines, 1994; Bittman, England, Folbre, Sayer, & Martheson, 2003; Greenstein, 2000). Brines’s (1994) provocative gender-display model holds that couples who violate the traditional family structure resort to more traditional divisions of housework to communicate and regain their stereotypical gender role. Her article has been highly influential, witnessed by the fact that it has been cited more than 200 times, yet Sullivan casts considerable doubt on the hypothesis. She claims that the gender-deviance-neutralization effect (a) disappears among women when absolute levels of income are taken into account, (b) is present only among a small group of long-term jobless men, and (c) is currently no longer present because the contributions to housework of men in lower income groups has increased over the past decades.

Although I concur with Sullivan’s analysis, I think there are several important issues that are missing in her critique of the evidence for the gender-deviance-neutralization hypothesis. Below I first discuss some methodological limitations of this evidence and then present alternative explanations from a psychological perspective.

First, one can have serious doubts about the robustness and the strength of the gender-deviance-neutralization effect. The findings of prior research that are discussed in the article are based on three studies with inconsistent results: Brines (1994) found the gender-deviance-neutralization effect among husbands, Bittman et al. (2003) found the effect to occur only among wives, and Greenstein (2000) found evidence among husbands but also among wives when a distributional measure of housework was used. To convincingly show evidence for the presence (or absence) of gender display, more empirical evidence is needed. Ideally, a meta-analysis,
even on a small number of studies, should be conducted to test whether gender display effects are reliable across studies. In addition, the work by Brines (1994), Greenstein (2000), and Bittman et al. (2003) can be criticized for providing only correlational evidence while assuming that a nontraditional family structure causes men and women to compensate for their nonstereotypical gender role by doing less (or more) housework.

Second, Brines (1994), Greenstein (2000), and Bittman et al. (2003) did not consider men’s and women’s contributions to child care. Although Sullivan briefly addresses this fact, I believe her discussion is insufficient given that child care takes up most of the time that is spent on family work. In fact, this issue concerns the broader scientific literature on housework: The lack of attention to child care continues to be a major shortcoming of research on housework (Coltrane, 2000). Evidence for gender-deviance-neutralization behavior should include child care, and Brines (1994), Greenstein (2000), and Bittman et al. (2003) would have made a much stronger case had they shown evidence for the gender-deviance-neutralization effect on child care as well. Furthermore, although it is not likely for reasons that I address shortly, we cannot yet rule out that husbands who earn less spend more time taking care of the children, therefore spending less time on routine housework, and that the opposite occurs among wives who earn more.

Third, and most important, there is no evidence that the effects that Brines (1994) found among husbands were truly effects of gender display, that is, that the nontraditional family structure is the reason less-earning men did less housework. Greenstein (2000) considered gender ideology and assumed that if Brines’s effects were truly effects of gender display, the effects would be minimized when gender ideology was taken into account. His findings showed no support for this reasoning: The curvilinear effects of economic dependence were still present when gender ideology was included in the model, and gender ideology did not interact with the curvilinear effect. Greenstein interpreted his findings as evidence for a more general deviance-neutralization process rather than gender display.

I am not surprised by the fact that gender ideology did not explain Greenstein’s results, but for a different reason. Ample psychological research has shown that ideology (or attitude) often does not translate into actual behavior (e.g., Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Wicker, 1969). People simply don’t walk the same line that they talk. In particular, Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) pointed out that predictive accuracy of attitudes is low when the measured attitude is a general one and the behavior is specific. The measure for gender ideology in the National Survey of Families and Households, which Greenstein (2000) used, was quite general, and some items even pertained to a different domain (e.g., “Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed”) and the behavior that was measured, quite specific (i.e., number of hours spent on housework). Poortman and Van der Lippe (2009) used both a general measure of gender ideology and a specific measure of attitudes toward housework (i.e., enjoyment, quality standards, and feelings of responsibility). They showed not only that women had more favorable attitudes toward housework than men did but also that those attitudes were associated with their greater contribution to housework, even when taking employment hours and wage rates into account. They found little support for gender ideology.

I argue that research on gender display should have considered gender identity, which refers to the degree to which stereotypically feminine (expressive) or masculine (instrumental) traits characterize the personality (Bem, 1974), rather than gender ideology, to show that the effects are motivated by gender-deviance neutralization. When men and women actually compensate for their nontraditional family structure as a display of gender, as Brines (1994) proposed, this effect should be more evident among men and women with a gender-typed identity. Gender-typed individuals (i.e., feminine women and masculine men) are especially concerned with adhering to stereotypical norms and should therefore show more compensating behavior when they are in a nontraditional role that violates their identity. Notably, Poortman and Van der Lippe (2009) found that men’s attitudes were more influential than women’s attitudes and that men’s greater leverage to act on their attitudes was especially pronounced for less favored household tasks (i.e., cleaning and cooking). This concurs with my own research on marital conflict over the division of labor, in which I found what I have called the status quo effect (Kluwer, 1998; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 2000).
in favor of the status quo are more likely to reach their goal during conflicts and negotiations with their spouse than are those who desire a change in the relationship. That is, those who want to maintain the current (often traditional) division of labor are more likely to get their way than are those who want their partner to spend more time on housework. In general, changing the status quo is costly, and people tend to disproportionately stick with the status quo (Ritov & Baron, 1992). With regard to the division of labor, those who want to maintain the division of labor can reach their goal without the cooperation of their partner simply by doing what they normally do and changing nothing. Consequently, because men more likely want to maintain the status quo and women more likely want to change the status quo (Kluwer et al., 1996; 2000), diversions from the traditional division of labor are unlikely. I therefore argue that men and women with a nontraditional division of paid labor might well persist in a traditional division of labor at home because of status quo effects.

Another alternative explanation for the assumed gender-deviance-neutralization effects can be found in the literature on spillover, which refers to the effects of work on family, and vice versa, which generate congruence between the two domains (for a review, see Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). As Sullivan notes, Brines’s (1994) effects were found primarily among low-income and long-term-jobless men. Research in the organizational literature has shown that unemployment has a negative effect on psychological and physical well-being because it may reduce self-esteem and economic security and thus produce anxiety and depression (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). In addition, a lower income is related to less happiness, less self-confidence, and more vulnerability (Adelmann, 1987). Thus, negative emotional arousal related to work or unemployment could spill over into the home and feelings of depression and apathy might cause low-income and long-term-jobless men to contribute little at home. In contrast to negative emotions, positive emotions are associated with being more externally focused (see Carver, 2003). Numerous studies have found that physical or social aspects of a job can result in increased energy and mental resilience (i.e., vigor), thus enlarging psychological resources (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005) or even physical resources (Frederickson, 1998) at hand. Thus, hardworking women might experience benefits from their work that spill over into their behavior at home, thus causing them to contribute more in the household.

To summarize, I have argued that there are methodological reasons, in addition to the ones Sullivan mentioned, to cast doubt on the evidence for the gender-deviance-neutralization effect. I have further shown that there are plausible alternative theoretical explanations that suggest that reasons other than gender display might explain why less-earning men do less and more-earning women do more in the household. I do not argue that these explanations are superior, nor are they exhaustive; I merely argue that there are alternative psychological explanations for the effects that cast considerable doubt on the gender display argument. A final point I wish to make is that I believe that the field is ready to move beyond explaining gender-deviance-neutralization effects. As Sullivan rightly notes, times have changed, and men have increased their proportion of housework over the past 20 years. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most men still do much less housework than women do and that men’s contributions have changed at a much slower pace than women’s (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Coltrane, 2000). Hence, the issue that still needs research is why men continue to contribute less to family work—and specification of the conditions associated with men doing more. I believe that investigation of psychological processes, such as attitudes toward family work, marital interactions and negotiations over family work, and work-to-home spillover, continues to be a viable avenue for further research. This research might well illuminate the psychological underpinnings of doing gender.

REFERENCES


