

BARBARA J. RISMAN *University of Illinois at Chicago*

Gender as Structure or Trump Card?

In “An End to Gender Display Through the Performance of Housework?” in this issue, Oriell Sullivan has paid the compliment to Brines (1994); Greenstein (2000); Bittman, England, Folbre, Sayer, and Matheson (2003); Gupta (2007, 2008); and others to engage thoughtfully and critically with their work. In a nutshell, Sullivan’s thesis is that gender simply doesn’t matter as much as we have come to believe. Married and single women with high incomes are more autonomous and do less household work. Money matters. Men who are dependent on their wives’ income and have more time at home, or different time, do more household labor, even if some of them don’t want to admit it. The take-home message here is to scale back a gender lens on marriage and notice that other variables, such as time and money, actually predict husbands’ and wives’ household behavior.

Is this a convincing argument, on the basis of a reanalysis of the empirical research? Partly. The evidence needs to be considered separately for women and men, and with close attention to historical context and class dynamics. Although Sullivan carefully and consciously integrates findings from quantitative and qualitative research, she does not pay enough systematic attention to change across historical era. The Atkinson and Boles (1984) research more than three decades ago presented convincing evidence that wives who were economically senior partners in their marriages indeed bent over backward, including picking up dust balls, to protect their husband’s pride. There is no reason to deny that, in the past, gender-structured

marriages and those that deviated from the norm hid their transgressions. That is not to say that research from later decades may not have been misinterpreted. Greenstein (2000) reported that women who earned more money relative to their husbands were doing gender deviance neutralization (i.e., more housework) to overcome the gender violation of earning more money throughout the 1980s. Sullivan has argued, using Gupta’s (2007) reanalysis of the same data, that women who earned more than their husbands in that era were likely to have been in poorer families and thus themselves to have had low incomes relative to other women. She has argued that it may have been a statistical artifact of excluding absolute income from the analysis that led to Greenstein’s findings. I found the argument convincing that, by the end of the 20th century, women’s absolute income is related in a linear fashion to less household labor. High income allows women at the end of the 20th century and forward to buy out of domestic work. What seems left out of Sullivan’s argument are changing gender norms and expectations. High income might not have allowed wives such freedom four decades earlier. This isn’t an either-or card game, in which time or money or gender trumps. High-earning women in 2010 have a far different gender consciousness from that of high-earning women in 1975. The latter were gender deviants; the former are trendsetters. But even if norms have changed enough so that women can use their incomes to outsource household labor without normative sanction, this does not mean that men are equally sharing family labor. Rather, it may mean that more privileged women are more often hiring poorer ones to do the devalued feminized household labor. Indeed, the reality that the responsibility for household labor often

Department of Sociology, MC 312, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607 (brisman@uic.edu).

remains women's responsibility is evidence of the continuing significance of gender.

As for men, I am unconvinced that only chronically unemployed and dispossessed men during the mid-20th century decreased household labor when their wives earned more money. Nor is the evidence strong that such men statistically account for the entire curvilinear relationship between men's economic dependence and household labor. Still, Sullivan offers an insightful critique of the survey data used in this research, showing that time-diary data suggest that men with traditional beliefs often distort their responses on surveys by minimizing the household work they actually do. As Sullivan suggests, these men are doing gender—not necessarily by decreasing their family labor, just by lying about it. It may be, as Sullivan suggests, that low-earning men contribute more than they have been willing to admit. Still, if masculine self-esteem is based, at least partly, on the male privilege of enjoying the benefit of wives' domestic labor, then it makes perfect sense that men without jobs and material bases of privilege hold on tightly to gender privilege. But as the data show, this, too, has changed. More recent evidence has found men, especially those at the lower end of the economic ladder, to be more likely to pick up the slack at home when they are unemployed. It is not clear yet whether economically dependent men in the 21st century use the rhetoric of equality to explain their family labor, but gender norms may be less constraining than in the past, as the ideology of the involved father (LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1995; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2000) is now widespread. We await future research to know more about how low-income married women perceive the family labor of their partners.

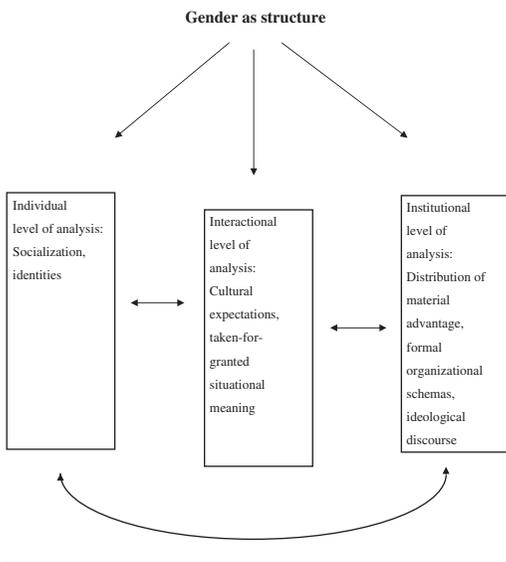
Sullivan's article offers more than simply a technical dispute among researchers. The intellectual debate it offers centers on the core issues of how we conceptualize gender, including male privilege, inside heterosexual marriage. These are big theoretical issues, indeed, even if somewhat cloaked in statistical arguments about spurious findings.

If we step back from the details of the argument, the central debate is about which theory best explains changing gender patterns in the last half of the 20th century among heterosexual married couples, what patterns change, and why. We know the big picture from Sullivan

(2006) herself. Men have increased their participation in household labor at slow but steady rates in nearly every country. At the same time, men continue to do far less work than women do in their joint households. And even when they do significant labor, they often leave the management and responsibility in their wives' hands. The forest seems to get lost in the trees of the article. Yes, we need to understand what predicts both women's and men's time in household labor. And we may be underestimating the changes that have happened throughout the 20th century. But we cannot forget the larger context, either historical or in the present. As long as we have had an industrial economy, in which paid work has required leaving one's household, family labor has been considered wives' responsibility. Poor working women were still expected to clean their homes and raise their children. As more women, and middle-class women, went into the labor force with the ideological support of a feminist movement, this has begun to change. The debate is over how much, why, and under what conditions that change happens. Yet the social context we are analyzing is one in which married women still do more household labor, even as men's contributions have increased.

So the real story here is when, how, and at what pace social change happens. I suggest that, rather than conceptualize the question as gender display versus autonomy versus economic dependency theory, we embed the empirical questions inside a theoretical framework that helps clarify the major questions about social change. It is important to remember that the central variables debated in the competing theoretical traditions that Sullivan discussed are not unrelated. Time might be a powerful predictor of housework, but how it comes to be that wives have fewer paid hours in the labor force and thus more housework is itself an aspect of gendered expectations. As I have suggested elsewhere (Risman, 1998, 2004, 2009), a useful conceptual framework is to understand gender as structure. Just as every society has a political structure (e.g., democracy, monarchy) and an economic structure (e.g., capitalist, socialist), so, too, every society has a gender structure (from patriarchal to at least hypothetically egalitarian). Gender structures have implications for socialization and for the development of identities and selves (e.g., the individual level). But gender structures also shape the social roles women and men

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUALIZING GENDER STRUCTURE.



are expected to follow, what “doing” gender means in any given interactional encounter, and how marriage is understood and defined. Gender structures also are formalized into institutional laws, rules, and organizational norms. Workplaces have particular power to affect the family labor that workers must do, or have done for them, outside of the employment sector. Figure 1 depicts the essentials of this conceptualization of gender structure.

If we embed the questions and debates that Sullivan offered in an understanding of gender as a structure, we can see the set of questions and answers that the cumulative research tradition offers us. We no longer have to see it as an either-or theoretical debate but as a set of inter-related findings that help us understand when and how our gender structure is changing over time. I shall use a gender structure framework to recast Sullivan’s arguments as a summary of the ways in which social science has been documenting how the change in our gender structure is affecting marriage and the family.

The qualitative research in the mid-20th century shows quite clearly that women were expected by others, including their husbands (interactional level of the gender structure), and expected themselves (at the individual level of the gender structure) to take care of their men, their families, and their homes. That’s what a good wife did, whether or not she earned a living

as well. The doing-gender or gender-display theory captured this reality well. The double shift Hochschild (1989) identified was real. And when men did not provide economically for their wives and children, when their women “had” to work, they were considered failures by others (interactional level of the gender structure) and by themselves (at the individual level). They did gender by withdrawing from—or at least not increasing—household labor, even when they had the time. The research Sullivan has discussed shows us that this is changing, as the pace and the particular triggers for specific aspects of the gender structure change what we see debated here. Was it the relative income differential that women were striving to hide with gender neutralization techniques? Has that now come to an end? Does an increase in absolute earnings for women and men lead to decreased household labor? Is the process the same for women and men? These questions are all about just how much both individual senses of selves and interactional expectations have changed for wives and husbands. Despite having an economic context (e.g., the institutional aspect of the gender structure) in which men, on average, earn more than women in households, more than one of three wives earns more than her husband. Women as senior economic partners are no longer deviants; they are friends, neighbors, and well within the mainstream. Indeed, in the current recession, nearly every couple is worried that one or the other will be unemployed, and the statistical reality is that it is more likely in this economy to be the husband. Although it is statistically impossible to control for family income, in entering relative spousal income and wives’ absolute income into one equation regression, it is quite likely that each condition influences the division of household labor at different historical moments.

When we take a step back and focus our attention on the big picture, what all this research shows is that, over time, women’s and men’s lives are converging. Women no longer consider gender deviance neutralization techniques to bolster a husband’s pride simply because they are in the labor force. But they surely continue to use subtle means to bolster their men’s self-esteem if they earn considerably more (Tichenor, 2005). Still, given the direction of change and its pace, that, too, might soon become an historical artifact. And men are becoming more active players in their homes, doing housework and

child care (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). Have we reached equality? Of course not. How far can individuals negotiate equality in marriage when the economic organizations in which they are employed continue to reward “ideal” workers (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000) who have little actual or moral responsibility for caretaking? Do all these data suggest that the gender structure is changing and, with it, slowly bringing convergence in the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives? Absolutely. Gender change is uneven, and this research shows it is due partly to relative incomes, women’s absolute income and subsequent autonomy, and spousal economic independence. The research traditions that debate exactly which variables trigger which changes and when are useful, cumulative, and important. It is that research that Sullivan has usefully integrated. But the big story here is that the gender structure is changing and with it heterosexual relationships.

One way to think about the change in the gender structure is to conceptualize gender-conscious actors actively making that change, or “undoing” gender (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). When young wives remain ambitious workers, committed to their own independent economic success, and expect their husbands to be equal partners at home, these women are undoing gender and changing the gender structure. When men use paternity leaves, when they take responsibility for their share of household labor, they, too, are undoing gender, including the male privilege that has defined gender as a stratification system and a structural aspect of our society. As Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory suggests, structures constrain and shape human behavior, but so, too, human creativity and agency construct them. We are living through a major change in human history, as one of the central linchpins of families, our gender structure, is changing. Will gender disappear entirely as a structure that shapes individuals, expectations, and the economy? Will husbands’ and wives’ behavior converge once and for all into spousal and parental expectations that do not differ for men and women? Only by closely studying the marriages that today’s brides and grooms are fashioning can we know the answer. Will gender triumph as a structure of inequality, or will it fade away as a stratification system in modern postindustrial states, as did feudal serfdom and slavery? As family scholars, such

change is at the center of our work: analyzing just what families of the future will be.

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