

When the last child moves out: Convergence and continuity in spouses' housework time

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Objectives & Context

(First) Longitudinal analysis of spouses' allocation of routine housework time around the transition to the "empty nest"

GAPS OF KNOWLEDGE & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Gendered dynamics of housework participation over the life course
- How do mothers and fathers adjust their housework time when their last child moves out of their family household?
- Does education moderate this process?

GERMANY

- Conservative welfare regime, prevailing traditional gender ideologies and gendered behavior in the family
- Continuity and convergence of gendered housework time over the life courses of women and men, mothers and fathers
 - Highest gender gap in early midlife, around the transition to parenthood
 - Convergence until lowest gender gap in later life
 - To date: women still are doing the major share of (routine) housework

Background | Two alternative views

The transition to the "empty nest"...

- ... occurs for mothers and fathers in Germany their early/mid fifties (52-55)
- ... changes the structure of the family household fundamentally, leaving behind the couple who created it
- ... releases parents, and particularly mothers, from their direct parenting roles and parental time binds
- ... creates the opportunity, but concurrently the need, to re-arrange activity patterns for oneself and within the couple

ROLE LOSS

- Parental roles are essential for mothers' and fathers' identity formation and well-being
 - Mothers, in contrast to fathers, draw a massive sense of accomplishment from caring for the household, the family and the children
- Losing this role when children move out triggers processes of adjustment to this new situation, or compensation to fill this gap with new and gendered symbolic meaning
 - Less (no?) scope of action for mothers because of traditional gender role expectations: *fathers should reduce their routine housework hours to a greater extent than mothers*

ROLE STRAIN (RELIEF)

- Parental roles expose spouses to stressors in everyday interaction and the organization of daily living
 - Mothers, more than fathers, are relieved from the demands and the time binds of direct parenting and family caring when their children leave home
- The empty nest is an opportunity to reduce role strain and to engage in fewer roles, but also evokes the need to re-negotiating gendered arrangements in the household
 - Increases mothers' scope of action to a larger extent than fathers': *mothers should reduce their time for routine housework to a greater extent than fathers*

EDUCATION AS A MODERATOR

- Higher education is associated with less traditional attitudes and gendered behavior
 - Higher educated mothers should react more strongly in reducing their housework time
- OR
- lower educated mothers should be the ones to experience a stronger reduction in routine housework time, if higher educated mothers realize lower hours from the start

Data and Method

Data

- German Socio-economic Panel Study (version 36)
- Longitudinal data on routine housework time and household composition from 1991 to 2019

Sample

- Baseline: German couples, ≥ 2 panel waves, ≥ 1 child in the household
- Treatment sample: 843 mothers and fathers, who transitioned to the empty nest with 8569 yearly observation around the event
- Control sample: 1328 mothers and fathers, at risk but right censored before the event, 7083 yearly observations

Outcome: Time use for routine housework

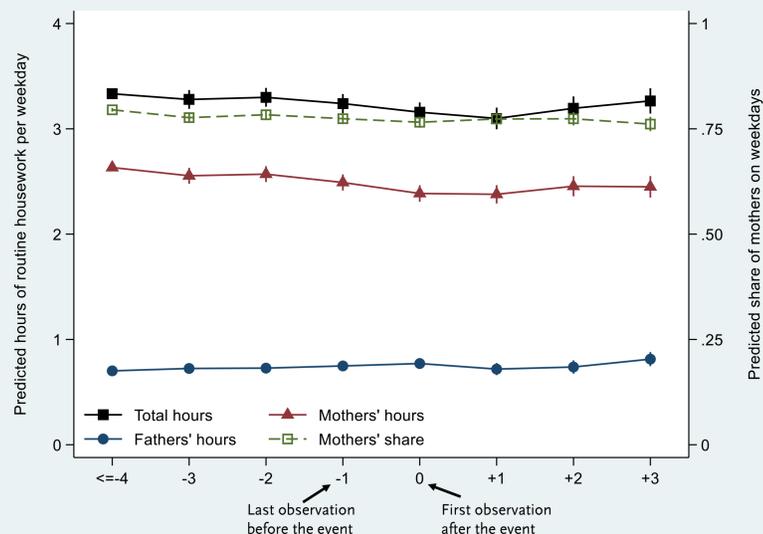
- Measured as "stylized estimate"
- Yields "valid" estimates in longitudinal settings, adequately reflects gender gaps and individual change

Modeling: Fixed-effects panel regression

- Focusing exclusively on within-person/-couple change
- Controls: Age only,
- Several sensitivity analyses supported the impression of robustness

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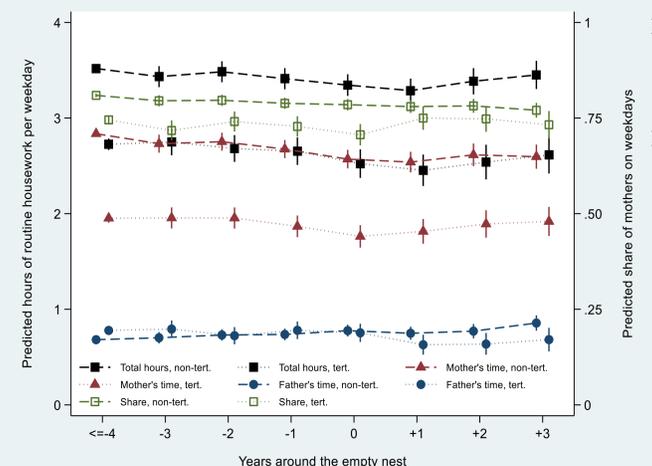
Development of spouses' housework time when the last child moves out



- **Mothers' (and total) time for routine housework decreases slightly** at the transition to the empty nest (6 minutes per regular weekday on average)
- **Fathers' time for routine housework remains rather stable**
- **Relative contribution of mothers does not change** in the window of observation

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Education as a moderator?



➤ **Notable level differences, but little indication for effect heterogeneity**

➤ **But: Lower educated mothers reduced their routine housework time to a larger extent than higher educated mothers (small effect; null-finding for higher educated mothers might be caused by smaller sample size)**

Conclusions

- **Continuity despite (very moderate) convergence:** the effect of the transition to the empty nest is small in scope (6 minutes per normal weekday), albeit significant for mothers
- As with other family events in later life, the transition to the empty nest contributes (**slightly!**) to the life-course **reduction in gender inequality**
- **Mothers are more responsive to family transitions** than fathers – in line with idea of the persisting relevance of the traditional separate spheres-family model in a rather conservative welfare regime such as Germany