Most research on the domestic division of labor has concentrated on married couples looking at the factors which promote or hinder egalitarian allocations of household labor between husbands and wives. But recently a number of studies have appeared which examine the allocation of housework across households with differing living arrangements, for example amongst cohabiting and remarried couples (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; South and Spitze 1994; Sullivan 1997).

The results of this research tend to suggest that cohabiting and remarried couples have less traditional patterns of domestic labor than married couples (Stafford et al. 1977; Shelton and Daphne 1993; South and Spitze 1994). These results have primarily been interpreted in light of the gender perspective that argues that housework is not simply about doing household tasks, but involves the symbolic enactment of gender, a process which is most evident within marriage (Berk 1985; South and Spitze 1994; Bianchi et al. 2000).

Part of the impetus underlying these studies is the trend towards increasingly diverse patterns of family formation and dissolution which lead to an increasing variety of living arrangements. Australia, like many other advanced countries, has experienced a huge growth in the percentage of couples choosing to cohabit with their partner in a de facto relationship rather than to marry (Glezer 1997; ABS 1998). “Of those who married in 1976, almost 16 per cent had cohabited prior to marriage. By 1992 this proportion had increased to 56 per cent” (De Vaus and Wolcott 1997: 17).

However, while the percentage of people who cohabit at some stage of their lives has increased dramatically, the proportion of couples in de facto relationships at any given time, is relatively small (De Vaus and Wolcott 1997; Glezer 1997). In Australia in 1996, cohabiting couples comprised only about 10 per cent of all couples (ABS 1999). This suggests that cohabitation should be seen as a stage in the “courtship” process, or as a trial marriage, with most people moving on to marriage (Glezer 1997). In other
One of the major changes in Australian family patterns in recent years has been the huge increase in the numbers of couples who cohabit prior to marriage. Do cohabitees have more egalitarian arrangements than married couples? And what impact does cohabitation have on domestic labour patterns after marriage? This article examines the impact of cohabitation on child care and housework patterns.

words, cohabitation appears to be an alternative at a particular stage in the lifecourse, rather than a rejection of marriage as an institution.

This paper re-examines housework in cohabiting and married couples, but also goes beyond earlier studies by examining the impact of the cohabitation experience on subsequent domestic labor patterns within marriage. This is important since most cohabitees move on to marriage at a later date. Earlier research has suggested that the domestic division of labor may be shaped by the experience of previous relationships (Thompson 1991; Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; South and Spitze 1994; Sullivan 1997). But most research to date has concentrated on the experience of remarriage, arguing that couples who experienced conflict over housework or unfair divisions of labor in a previous marriage will seek more equitable and congenial arrangements with their new partner.

In this paper I shift the focus to the experience of cohabitation prior to first marriage. If people do increasingly move through transitions during their lives from never married to cohabiting, to married, divorced and remarried, it is important to examine the time men and women spend doing housework in each of these living arrangements (South and Spitze 1994: 345).

Housework in cohabiting and married households

There are a number of reasons why we might expect cohabiting couples to have more equal domestic labour arrangements than married couples. To the extent that cohabiting couples reject marriage as an institution, it may be that they will also explicitly reject the roles of breadwinner/housewife that go along with traditional marriage. Of course, cohabiting couples are not necessarily a homogenous group; they may include couples who view cohabiting as a forerunner to marriage, as well as those who have rejected marriage and plan to cohabit permanently. But either way, they are likely to identify less with homemaking and breadwinning roles, either because
they have explicitly rejected those roles, or because they have not yet reached a point in their relationship where they are ready to define themselves as husband and wife.

At the same time, cohabiting and married couples are likely to differ on certain key characteristics. For example, cohabiting women have been found to spend more time in paid work per week and to contribute more to the household income than married women (Shelton and John 1993). This is likely to be due, in part, to the fact that cohabiting couples are less likely to have children than married couples. Thus cohabiting women are likely to be less dependent on their partners than married women, and hence to have reduced responsibility for domestic labor compared to married women.

Another reason for expecting differences between cohabiting and married couples relates to Cherlin’s hypothesis of “incomplete institutionalisation” (Cherlin 1978). Cherlin suggested that remarried families and stepfamilies may be under greater stress than other families because “they lack normative prescriptions for role performance, institutionalised procedures to handle problems, and easily accessible social support” (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992: 217). At the same time however, incomplete institutionalisation may leave open the possibility of negotiating more equal relationships precisely because of the lack of rules prescribing the conduct of behaviour in remarriages (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; Sullivan 1997).

The same explanation might be applied to the situation in cohabiting relationships. Cohabiting relationships are subject to some, but not all of the institutional rules surrounding legal marriages. The “incompleteness” of these rules may leave space for cohabiting couples to negotiate more egalitarian relationships than is the case in conventional marriages.

**Impact of previous relationships**

What impact does cohabitation have on domestic labour patterns after marriage? A number of studies have begun to appear recently concerned with the impact of previous marital relationships on the domestic division of labor in current marriages (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane 1992; Sullivan 1997). Underlying the research is the notion that couples compare their current situation to a previous relationship as a means of justifying current arrangements, or alternatively negotiating for a different kind of relationship. The idea of a comparison referent stems from the work of Thompson (1991) who argued that women’s sense of entitlement in terms of domestic work is based on comparisons with people other than their husbands. For example, women may compare their domestic load with that of their mothers or female friends. Hence women may be more likely to perceive their current arrangements as fair and equitable than if they compared themselves with their husbands. South and Spitze (1994: 344) take this further suggesting that “spouses may compare themselves to their own past or projected experiences in another marital status, or even to others who are not currently married.”

However, most of the research has focused on the impact of previous marital unions on domestic labour patterns after divorce and remarriage. Typically this research finds that remarried couples have more equal arrangements than couples in their first marriages. One explanation is that men who have experienced conflict within previous relationships over the domestic division of labor will be more likely to adopt less conflictual habits in their new marriage, while women who have experienced unequal divisions of labor in earlier relationships will be likely to seek new partners who are more involved in domestic work (Sullivan 1997).

In this paper, I investigate the impact of cohabitation on the domestic division of labor amongst married couples. Using this earlier work as a starting point, I argue that it is important not only to compare the domestic division of labor amongst cohabiting and currently married couples, but also to examine the impact of a previous period of cohabitation on subsequent arrangements within marriage.

If the cohabiting experience is a positive experience characterised by more egalitarian divisions of labor will be more likely to adopt less conflictual habits in their new marriage, while women who have experienced unequal divisions of labor in earlier relationships will be likely to seek new partners who are more involved in domestic labor (Sullivan 1997).

Women do a much larger proportion of child care and routine indoor housework tasks than men, regardless of marital status.
period of cohabitation as a comparison referent, to use Thompson’s term, then it may be that they will be more likely to negotiate a more equitable arrangement than if they did not have a period of cohabitation as a comparison referent.

Data
The data used in this paper come from the first wave of a national longitudinal Australian survey conducted in 1996–97 titled Negotiating the Life-course: Gender, Mobility and Career Trajectories. The sample comprised 2231 respondents between the ages of 18 and 54 years, selected from the electronic white pages. This included 179 respondents living in a cohabiting relationship and 1231 married respondents.

The survey included detailed questions about the allocation of child care tasks within the home and the division of housework tasks. The child care tasks were helping with homework; listening to problems; taking children to activities and appointments; playing with them; bathing and dressing; and getting children to bed.

In order to distinguish between different kinds of housework tasks, three housework scales were constructed on the basis of these questions. “Indoor tasks” combines those items which are conventional female chores – doing the dishes, preparing breakfast, preparing the evening meal, cleaning and vacuuming, doing the laundry, ironing, cleaning the bathroom and toilet, shopping and keeping in touch with relatives. “Outdoor tasks” is based on items considered to be conventional male tasks – repairing things around the house, taking out rubbish, mowing the lawn, and driving the car. The remaining four tasks, caring for pets, organising your social life, gardening and making arrangements to have repairs done, were combined into a scale referred to as “other tasks.” “Total housework tasks” is the sum of all 17 tasks.

Respondents’ responses to the child care and housework task questions were coded as percentages and then summed to create a scale ranging from 0–100 per cent reflecting the relative contribution of each spouse: “I do most” = 100 per cent; “I do more” = 75 per cent; “We share this equally” = 50 per cent; “My partner does more” = 25 per cent; “My partner does most” = 0 per cent. Thus a respondent who reported doing most of a particular task was coded as 100 indicating that they take full responsibility for this task, while a respondent who reported that their partner had most responsibility for a task was coded as 0.

Respondents were also asked how much time was spent on child care and housework. In both cases, respondents were asked to indicate how many hours they would spend on each activity in an average week.

Domestic labor and marital status
Figures 1 and 2 show the relationship between marital status and men’s and women’s involvement in child care and housework. The first point to note is that women do a much larger proportion of child care and routine indoor housework tasks than men, regardless of marital status (Figure 1). Additionally, women spend more time on housework than men, an average of 19–25 hours per week compared to nine hours per week (Figure 2). Men report most responsibility for outdoor housework activities and women report least responsibility for these activities. Thus in terms of gender, the differences are quite stark and similar to those reported in other studies of the domestic division of labor (Baxter 1992; Baxter 1993).

In terms of differences across marital status, the results in Figure 1 show no differences between cohabiting and married respondents in relation to child care involvement (although admittedly the cell sizes are very small in some cases), but some differences between these two groups in relation to housework. Cohabiting men do a greater proportion of indoor housework activities than married men (40 per cent compared to 28 per cent) and a smaller proportion of outdoor housework activities than married men (70 per cent compared to 81 per cent).

But although cohabiting men do a greater proportion of housework tasks overall, as shown in the total housework tasks scale, there are no
differences in the amount of time spent on housework for cohabiting and married men (Figure 2). In both groups, men report spending nine hours per week on housework. However, for women there is a significant difference in time spent on housework in relation to marital status with married women spending an additional six hours per week compared to cohabiting women. This finding is very similar to the findings of Shelton and John (1993) who report that marital status affects women’s time on housework but not men’s. Married women also report significantly greater responsibility for indoor work than cohabiting women, and greater involvement in housework tasks overall.

Key socio-demographic differences between cohabiting and married couples may account for a large proportion of these observed differences in domestic labor patterns between the two groups. Table 1 shows that cohabiting men and women are less likely to have children than married men and women and are less likely to own or to be purchasing their own home. These are two factors that may contribute to less time spent on housework by cohabiting women. Cohabiting women also spend longer hours in paid employment than married women and have more egalitarian gender role attitudes than married women. These factors may contribute to less involvement overall in domestic labor for cohabiting compared to married women. Similarly, cohabiting men on average are more egalitarian in their views on gender role attitudes than married men, are less likely to be employed, have lower education levels, and are younger on average than married men.

The question is then, do the differences in domestic labor patterns according to marital status observed in Figures 1 and 2 remain when these possibly confounding differences are held constant?

Finally, in order to examine the impact of a previous period of cohabitation on domestic labour patterns after marriage, a further set of multivariate analyses were carried out. In these analyses I confine the sample to respondents in their first marriage and compare the domestic labour arrangements of those who cohabited with their spouse for a period of at least three months prior to marriage (N=435) with the domestic labour arrangements of those who did not cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage (N=630). Again I control for socio-demographic characteristics and gender role attitudes in order to counter arguments that any observed differences in housework patterns are due to differences in the characteristics of people who choose to cohabit prior to marriage compared to those who do not.

The results showed no differences between the two groups for men, but significant differences for women. Married women who did not cohabit with their spouse prior to marriage do significantly more indoor work and significantly less outdoor work, suggesting a more traditional division of labor amongst this group. This suggests that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage is important for establishing less traditional arrangements which are then carried over into the marital relationship.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cohabiting</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Cohabiting</th>
<th>Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage employed</td>
<td>85 (68)</td>
<td>94* (404)</td>
<td>76 (111)</td>
<td>69 (546)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage with children</td>
<td>37 (68)</td>
<td>88* (404)</td>
<td>54 (111)</td>
<td>89* (546)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage owning/buying dwelling</td>
<td>49 (68)</td>
<td>86* (399)</td>
<td>68 (109)</td>
<td>86* (535)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage with post school qualification</td>
<td>57.4 (68)</td>
<td>69 (404)</td>
<td>59.5 (111)</td>
<td>57 (546)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>32 (68)</td>
<td>39* (528)</td>
<td>33 (111)</td>
<td>38* (703)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean sex role attitude score</td>
<td>7.7 (68)</td>
<td>8.8* (528)</td>
<td>6.8 (111)</td>
<td>8.2* (703)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean paid hours per week</td>
<td>43.2 (57)</td>
<td>47 (482)</td>
<td>36.8 (82)</td>
<td>29* (481)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean household income</td>
<td>54,943 (68)</td>
<td>70,542* (517)</td>
<td>58,523 (110)</td>
<td>59,110 (688)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant differences between marital status groups (<.05)

Notes: Tests of differences by marital status within gender were carried out using either a t-test of difference in means or a Chi - square test.

Source: Negotiating the Life course Study 1996-97

The answer is yes, for both men and women. Multivariate regression analyses indicate that marital status is a significant determinant of domestic labor involvement when differences in the socio-demographic characteristics and gender role attitudes of men and women are statistically controlled. Married men do significantly less indoor work and significantly more outdoor work than cohabiting men. On the other hand, married women do significantly more indoor work than cohabiting women, and spend an additional 3.6 hours per week on housework compared to cohabiting women. In general then, the differences observed in Figures 1 and 2 hold in the multivariate analyses suggesting that married respondents have less equal and more traditional domestic labor arrangements than cohabiting respondents.

Conclusion

In support of previous studies, these analyses indicate that cohabiting couples have more egalitarian domestic labour arrangements than married couples (Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitz, 1994). The results presented here show that the gender division of labour between cohabitating partners is less traditional, and at least for women, cohabitation is also associated with less time spent on domestic labour compared to married women.

What this suggests then is that, for women, it is not just the presence of a man that leads to spending more time on housework and having greater responsibility for more of the household tasks, but it is the presence of a husband. It appears that the institution of marriage exerts influence on men and women to behave in particular kinds of ways, independently of the social and economic differences between married and cohabiting women which we know lead to women doing more housework (for example, having young children in the household,
women spending less time in paid work and women contributing less of the household income).

Additionally, the results show that a period of cohabitation prior to marriage changes the balance of labour after marriage, at least for women. Women who have cohabited with their husband prior to marriage do proportionately less indoor work and spend less time on housework compared to women who did not cohabit with their husbands prior to marriage. This suggests that, at least some of the patterns established in the cohabiting period carry over into the marital relationship. Alternatively, women who have cohabited may use this period as a point of comparison allowing them to establish and maintain more equal arrangements than would otherwise be possible.

One way of thinking about this finding is to see cohabiting relationships as “incompletely institutionalised.” Following Cherlin (1978), cohabiting relationships may lack the normative prescriptions set out for marital relationships. His argument was that this “incomplete institutionalisation” would lead to greater stress, dissatisfaction and marital breakdown. An alternative conclusion would be that “incomplete institutionalisation” also provides greater freedom to negotiate alternative roles and responsibilities. While this may still lead to greater stress and less social support from other outside agencies or other family members than is the case for married couples, alternative kinds of living arrangements may also open the way for more equal sharing of domestic roles.

At the same time, it appears that a period of “incomplete institutionalisation” may also open the way for more egalitarian relationships after the institution has been completed – in other words, after the relationship has been legally sanctioned as marriage. Although the data clearly show that all marriages, even those that involved a prior period of cohabitation, are less egalitarian than cohabiting relationships, the evidence clearly shows for women that patterns established during the cohabiting period carry over after marriage.

References


Janeen Baxter is Associate Professor in Sociology at The University of Queensland. She researches and teaches in the areas of family, gender, work and inequality.