

Households, gender and work-life articulation

Abstract

The article presents a revision of the literature that has given the household a central role when studying different dimensions of the gender division of labour. One body of literature has looked at the household as a space of definition of (female) labour supply. Another stream of research has focused on the gendered division of domestic and care labour. These contributions are reviewed in the article and it is thereby argued that more integration of approaches and findings across them is warranted. Through this revision, the paper aims to put forward the need for future research to look at the gendered interdependences across work and family domains over the life course. Finally, the article highlights the advances of research on the societal contexts and institutions that shape gendered patterns of employment and housework, but argues that there is still a long road ahead in the study of the social embeddedness of work-life articulation.

Keywords: Household, work, domestic and care labour, work-life articulation

Introduction

With the development of the capitalist economy, the family loses its role as unit of production, and family membership and labour activity cease to coincide. Tasks concerning the social reproduction of individuals are separated from the production of goods. The constitution of a relatively autonomous productive sphere entails the construction of the reproduction sphere and a redefinition of the family's position in it (Chabaud-Rychter, Fougereyrollas-Schwebel and Sonthonnax, 1985). Under this setting, the sphere of production has often been conceptualized as the sole space of economic relations and as fundamentally different from those activities and relations taking place in the family sphere. It appears as if there was no link between the labour market and the family, except for wages providing resources for consumption. Neither labour nor economic relations are viewed to take place in the family, which seems to have become the place for affection and primary socialization only (Saraceno and Naldini, 2001).

Feminist social movements and scholars have long combatted this definition of the family and its implications. In the early 70s, the process of epistemological rupture with the concept of labour as a synonym for employment emphasized the value of labour performed by women outside of the productive sphere (Borderías and Carrasco, 1994; Chabaud-Rychter *et al.*, 1985). It showed its key role in the processes of human reproduction, which are in turn essential for the subsistence of the market (Picchio, 1992). The focus of the analysis moved from processes taking place in the market to those occurring in the domestic sphere.

Against the 'separate spheres doctrine', the family is not conceptualized in this new approach as an isolated sphere, but as an integral part of economic and political systems (Chabaud-Rychter *et al.*, 1985; Ferree, 1990). The sphere of social reproduction is understood as a fundamental component in any economic system and cannot be considered a private, marginal issue (Picchio, 1992). Accordingly, the concept work-family system has been used in the Anglo-Saxon literature to refer to the interrelation between employment and family organization, as a structured whole of interdependent activities and relations (Pleck, 1977). The French tradition has referred to the *rappports sociaux de classe et de sexe* to reflect how the gender division of labour is a constitutive component of the capitalist division of labour (Chabaud-Rychter *et al.*, 1985). Certainly, the gendered division of tasks and responsibilities competences among the family's adult members represents one of the key elements of such structured interdependence between the family and the market (Saraceno and Naldini, 2001).

Under this perspective, the family/household is situated at the centre of the analysis, for it constitutes the link between the spheres of production and reproduction (Humphries and Rubery, 1984). It is in the family that (productive and reproductive) activities are assigned and resources allowing human reproduction are distributed. Thus, it is only by looking at them through the household lens that such processes may be understood in their full broadness and complexity (Blossfeld and Drobnič, 2001; Moen and Wethington, 1992).

On the basis of such theoretical premises, over the last three decades we have seen in the European and US context a proliferation of studies that have analysed different dimensions of the gender division of labour focusing on the household as a unit of analysis. One important body of literature has looked at the household as a space of definition of labour

supply, and particularly of female labour supply. Another major stream of research has addressed the dynamics of the gendered division of domestic and care labour in the household. More recently, both corpuses of literature have benefited from the insights provided by longitudinal research. These different contributions are reviewed in the article and it is thereby argued that more integration of approaches and findings across them is warranted. Through this revision, the article aims to put forward the need for future research to look at the gendered interdependences across work and family domains over the life course. That is, in order to account for the presence of an individual in the production (or reproduction) sphere it is essential to look at the situations of the other household members, and particularly at that of the partner, both in the labour market and in domestic and care work. Moreover, in order to fully grasp the dynamics of the gender division of labour, we need to understand how the interdependences of the members of the couple in employment and care take shape over the life course. Finally, the article also highlights the advances made by research on the societal contexts and institutions that shape gendered patterns of employment and housework, but argues that there is still a long road ahead in the study of the social embeddedness of work-life articulation.

Male-female interdependences (only?) in employment

A number of studies have recently taken the couple as the unit of analysis when tackling issues related to employment. These have shown a growing interest in the way households shape labour supply and, especially, female labour supply (Adam, 1996; Bernardi, 1999; Bernasco, de Graaf, and Ultee, 1998; Blossfeld and Drobnič, 2001; Kitterød and Rønsen, 2012). In particular, expanding longitudinal research has provided interesting insights on the (inter)relations of both partners' employment situations under a dynamic perspective. For instance, Bernardi (1999) and Bernasco *et al.* (1998) tested the New Home Economics' prediction according to which the partner's employment achievements would be negatively correlated, due to the benefits of specialization. Both studies showed evidence (for Italy and the Netherlands respectively) that a better employment position of the man reduced the chances that the woman entered the labour market or remained in it, but increased the chances of a better employment situation for those who did go into employment. Similar findings were provided by González-López (2001) for the Spanish case. Adam (1996) revealed the effects of labour market segmentation upon the

trajectories of the partners, by showing an association between male and female employment rotation.

Researchers have also paid attention to changes in the household's labour supply in the event of job loss by one of its members. In particular, they have aimed to identify the existence of an 'added worker effect' – that is, whether the female partner moves into the labour force after the man loses his job. These studies have been applied to contexts of economic expansion and of crisis, and they have as well compared both periods, providing varying support for this thesis across contexts (Bryan and Longhi, 2013; Gong, 2011; Harkness and Evans, 2011; Juhn and Potter, 2007; Kohara, 2010; Lundberg, 1985; Mattingly and Smith, 2010).

These contributions clearly represent an advance in respect of previous 'individualistic' analyses of women's employment, which have conceptualized women's labour market activity as if it were independent of their family situation, and, in particular, as if it had no relation with the presences and absences of the male partner (Author, 2016a). However, it should be noted that the cited studies are ultimately concerned with women's labour supply. In contrast, studies looking at the way households shape men's labour supply are less common, although it must be acknowledged that this is a field of study that seems to be recently growing (Dermott, 2006; Dommermuth and Kitterød, 2009; Kanji, 2013). Also, little attention has been paid to the 'consequences' of male employment on couple relationships or children, whereas the impact of women's employment has been a widespread concern (Rogers, 1999; Vannoy and Philliber, 1992), revealing the implicit family model underlying these studies (Saraceno and Naldini, 2001). More importantly for the article's main argument, the above-mentioned studies, albeit using the household as the unit of analysis, they limit their analyses to the dynamics of the productive sphere. They examine the interrelations between the employment trajectories of the partners but do not address their links with the male and female presences in the reproductive sphere.

Briefly, these studies are only partially able to capture the interdependence between the members of the couple in shaping the household's labour supply, because they do not address the interconnectedness of the domains of work and domestic and care labour. Such a limitation is made evident by Gush, Scott, and Laurie's (2013) work. The authors examine the couple's behaviour in the event of job loss by one of its members, by means of qualitative interviews to British couples

during the Great Recession. They show that other responses are more common than that of the 'added worker', i.e. the efforts to maintain the previous gender division of labour and the reduction of expenses. This explains why the 'added worker effect' identified by quantitative studies is less important than the one predicted by economic theory. These findings not only show why we need to look at the reproductive sphere in order to account for labour market participation and attainment. They also reflect the advantages of a qualitative approach in addressing these issues. This allows to analyse the contexts and intentional processes giving place to certain forms of work-family articulation.

All in all, if most studies tend to look at the household when they are concerned about female employment, it is possibly because they reckon, more or less implicitly, that women's labour market participation (and not men's) is most affected by what happens in the household, that is, by the unequal division of domestic and care labour.

The division of domestic and care labour (and its incidence on female employment)

Most empirical studies on the division of domestic and care labour seem to provide accumulative evidence of a long-established reality: increased female participation in the labour market has not been followed by an equivalent implication of men in reproductive labour (Bianchi *et al.*, 2000; Coltrane, 2010). Several scholars have tried to identify the determinants of a more or less equal division of domestic and care labour in the household, testing hypotheses of time-availability, relative-resources and gender beliefs and expectations (Bittman *et al.*, 2003; Brines, 1994; Ferree, 1991; Gupta, 2007; Halleröd, 2005; Kan, 2008; Moreno-Colom, 2015). These quantitative studies have provided mixed evidence, partially supporting both the economic explanation and the argument of time availability, but also reflecting that, generally, women continue to do more housework than men, irrespective of their working hours or earnings.

As argued by Coltrane (2010), this focus on "who does what", has often taken precedence over the analysis of "what difference does it make". Specifically, it is here argued that we still do not know enough about the way in which the division of housework impinges on women's participation and attainment in the labour market. Undoubtedly, one of the main contributions of labour studies from a gender perspective has been to

point out the incidence of social reproduction on women's labour market participation (Picchio, 1994). The analysis of domestic labour as specifically female labour has revealed how the social division of labour is to a great extent supported onto the division of labour within the family (Saraceno and Naldini, 2001). In fact, domestic labour has been defined as women's work (*mise au travail des femmes*) in the service of the family (Chabaud-Rychter *et al.*, 1985). It has been highlighted that women are in an unfavourable position compared to men, because most of the burden of household labour falls on their shoulders. However, there is a need for more empirical research that explores the specific mechanisms that hinder women from pursuing demanding career opportunities or professional advancements. Moen's (2003) study of dual-career couples in the US would be a significant contribution in this respect. By providing new insights on the occupational and family strategies of these couples, it reveals how the assumption of the primary responsibility for housework and childcare by women exerts a negative effect on career progression.

The mentioned study also highlights the potentialities that qualitative methods offer for this field of study. Indeed, it is qualitative research that has explored the reasons for the persistence of the gendered nature of housework. Many studies have drawn on West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'doing gender' approach and have thus looked at the gendered meaning attributed to everyday practices. They have highlighted the mechanisms through which the gender division of labour is (re)produced in couple's everyday interactions, showing that housework plays a key role in establishing the 'gender borders' in the household (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015; Author, 2016b; Hochschild, 1989). However, this stream of literature appears mainly disconnected from those studies that have focused on the gendered and negotiated meanings of breadwinning. These have shown the lack of consistence between gendered beliefs and expectations, behaviours and actual breadwinning situations (Hood, 1986; Potuchek, 1992). They have also identified the mechanisms of redefinition of these situations, implemented (mostly by men) in order to reduce the strains imposed by such lack of coherence (Author, 2016b; Tichenor, 1999). If we are to understand the interrelations across life domains, there is a need to address both the meanings attributed to employment and to domestic and care labour. Breadwinning and caregiving being two sides of the same coin, they cannot be treated as independent fields of meaning, but as communicating vessels. Moreover, these meanings are not the result of individual processes but of focused interaction (mainly, but not only) in the

couple, as recent research has shown (Author, 2016b). It is thus necessary to address both the interdependence of life domains and of the partners in the production of meanings around the gender division of labour.

Altogether, more integration of findings across these literatures is definitely desirable. Just as they would benefit from an integration of the contributions of longitudinal and life course studies.

Male and female interdependencies over the life course (and across life course domains)

Perhaps the literature that has most explicitly attempted to address the gendered structures governing everyday life, encompassing both the role of reproductive and productive labour, are the studies on the social uses of time (Gershuny and Sullivan, 1998). Drawing on time diary data, these studies have highlighted the unequal patterns of distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women and their evolution over time (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie, 2006; Sayer, 2005; Sayer, England, Bittman, and Bianchi, 2009). However, these have only occasionally used household-based data, allowing the identification of the interdependences between the members of the couple (Ajenjo Cosp and García Roman, 2014). Time diary studies have also shown limitations in their ability to grasp the subjective dimension of time and the meaning attributed to different activities. It has also proven difficult to capture the rigidity of certain tasks as compared to others. Briefly, it is true that analyses of time uses have been able to go beyond time distribution merely, grasping sequencing, simultaneous occurrence, context, and something of its subjective meaning (Gershuny and Sullivan, 1998). However, they have not been able to identify the mechanisms lying behind such patterns and they have generally drawn on cross-sectional data.

As previously argued, significant advances have been made in the field of longitudinal and life course studies over the last couple of decades. We already reviewed in the first section those that have looked at the interrelations of couple's work trajectories. Less attention has been paid to the configuration of the division of housework over the life course, with some significant exceptions. To be highlighted is the study by Grunow, Schulz, and Blossfeld (2012), who used a panel survey of German households to analyse the division of housework among spouses over 14 years. The study shows evidence of increased inequality and inertia. Most

men reduce their contribution to domestic labour over time, and marriage duration is negatively related with change in its distribution. This means that changes in the gender division of housework take place early in the relationship, and turn into routines in the long run. Moreover, whereas it is true that when both partners' contribution to family income is similar, there are decreased chances that men will reduce their participation in housework, the fact that the woman works more hours or earns a larger income does not translate into an increase of men's contribution to domestic labour. These findings refute refuting Becker's specialization thesis as well as theories of economic bargaining.

Again, we argue that more integration between both bodies of literature is warranted. Methodological advances have allowed to model the interdependence of roles across life-course domains and over time (Macmillan and Copher, 2005) but these have rarely been applied to the interrelations of paid and unpaid labour. Also, whereas the concept of 'linked lives' (Elder, 1995) has been highlighted at the theoretical level, there is a need for data and methods that go beyond the individual level in order to address the intertwined (work and family) trajectories of household members. One major exception in this respect would be Han and Moen's (1999) work, who adopt a life course perspective and apply a *coupled careers model*, emphasizing «the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions, within and across life stages, between both men and women and work and family» (Han and Moen, 1999, p. 101). Their analysis reveals the gendered relation between work and family trajectories. This relation is weak in the case of men but much stronger in that of women. Specifically, a trade-off between professional life and family life exists for women, but not for men. Moreover, women's employment trajectories appear clearly linked and subordinated to their partner's careers, whereas such a relation is inexistent in the case of men (Han and Moen, 1999).

The potentialities of this kind of approach have not been fully explored. Comparisons with more recent data and for different social contexts would certainly be of interest for the field. We still do not know enough either about the mechanisms that shape those trajectories over time. Some studies have looked at the strategies of dual-career couples, showing how apparently gender-neutral family strategies end up having a gendered translation (Becker and Moen, 1999; Moen, 2003). Others have revealed the way power relations operate in decisions about work, division of housework and care organization within the couple. Such decisions may represent turning points over the life course with very different implications

for men and women (Author, 2016b; Zvonkovic *et al.*, 1996). Again, an integration of the findings from quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as the use of mixed methods research designs in future research would certainly provide new and fruitful insights into this field of study.

The social embeddedness of work-life articulation

Comparative research of employment and the family has been largely driven by a focus on policy regimes and gender cultures (Lewis, 1992; Pfau-Effinger, 1998; Sainsbury, 1994), often ignoring how these regimes operate in practice (Daly and Rake, 2003). More recently, we have seen a growing interest in the study of household's work patterns or work-family arrangements, as reflective of a society's gender contract (Haas *et al.*, 2006; Hook, 2015; Lewis, Campbell and Huerta, 2008; Author, unpublished manuscript). The concept of a 'gender contract' refers to the explicit and implicit rules that regulate the gendered division of labour in the spheres of economic production and social reproduction (Fouquet, Gauvin and Letablier, 1999), drawing attention to the socio-institutional dimension of the issue. Pictures such as the 'multi-equilibrium models', reflective of a period of 'normative confusion' and 'unstable equilibria', as drawn by Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015), neglect the role of material and institutional conditionings of work-life articulation. Instead, the 'gender contracts' approach provides a more comprehensive understanding, in that it is rooted in a historical and societally specific analysis that considers inequalities between groups created by segmented labour markets (Author, unpublished manuscript).

It is not a new idea that families with different positions within the social structure are able to formulate diverse strategies of work-life articulation (Crompton and Brockmann, 2006). More recently, the idea of 'balkanised gender contracts' has been used to capture the extent to which traditional patterns of household employment persist or change between different social groups (O'Reilly and Nazio, 2014). Several studies have provided evidence of the strong internal diversities of household types within countries (Haas *et al.*, 2006; Hook, 2015) and how the crisis has only come to reinforce or even exacerbate such differences (Author, 2016b). Briefly, these works have revealed how viewing the constellations of employment and economic status through the household lens can provide some new insights for comparative research on the relationship between gender and labour, by identifying the tensions between characteristic

typologies and how social change is creating more hybridisation between regime types (Rubery, 2011) and an increasing balkanisation of gender contracts (O'Reilly and Nazio, 2014).

However, there is still a large divide between this comparative literature and the one focusing on the micro-level dimensions of work-life articulation. Although some progress has been made by research of the division of household labour (Cooke, 2007; Hook, 2006; Sullivan *et al.* 2009), we still know little about the causal mechanisms through which macro-level factors impinge upon the micro-level negotiation of work-life articulation. Thereby, it is here argued that there is still a long road ahead in the study of what Sullivan (2006) has called 'embedded interaction': the possibility to see «gender relations as being simultaneously and interpenetratingly constructed at the institutional level and negotiated within individual relationships» (Sullivan 2006, p. 108). Briefly, a major research line to be developed in the future is that of the social embeddedness of work-life articulation, that is, the processes by which the everyday negotiation over who does what in the household is shaped by wider cultural, economic and social contexts.

Conclusions

The article has presented a revision of some of the literature that has analysed different dimensions of the gender division of labour, focusing on the household as a unit of analysis, in the European and US context over the last three decades. We have seen how quantitative studies have analysed the interrelations between the employment trajectories of the members of the couple, but have not addressed their links with the male and female presences in the reproductive sphere. These studies have only been partially able to capture the interdependence between the partners in shaping the household's labour supply, because they have not addressed the interconnectedness of the domains of work and domestic and care labour. Besides, we have referred to the literature on the division of housework and to how it has generally focused on the determinants for its more or less equal distribution. Accordingly, we have argued for the need for more empirical research on the causal mechanisms that hinder women from pursuing demanding career opportunities or professional advancements. Additionally, we have highlighted the contributions of life course research, both in the field of interrelated employment trajectories and in that of the configuration of the division of housework over the life course. However,

we have argued for the need to further integrate both fields of research, in an analysis of the intertwined (work and family) trajectories of household members. Finally, we have referred to some advances from comparative research on work and family, and have argued that we still do not know enough about the complex links between the micro-level bargaining of the gender division of labour and its wider societal, economic and political contexts.

With this discussion, we have aimed to put forward the relevance of four key concepts and the need to integrate them in a household-based comprehensive analysis of the relation between gender and labour. First, the *interdependence* between household members, and particularly, of the members of the couple, as in Elder's (1995) notion of 'linked lives'. However, this interdependence between the partners must be considered simultaneously with the idea of *multidimensionality*. Household members are interdependent across the interconnected domains of work and family. Moreover, such multidimensional interconnectedness may only be fully grasped by adopting a *dynamic approach*, as highlighted by the contributions of life course research. A life course approach can allow in turn to capture the *social embeddedness* of work-life articulation, that is, how social-institutional factors contribute to shaping the everyday bargaining of the division of paid and unpaid labour. The challenges of developing such a comprehensive approach lie at the theoretical but particularly at the methodological level. In this respect, the potentialities of integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods in future research appears evident.

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