

## **Does children's housework matter? Adult trajectories of boys and girls who spent time doing household chores and sibling care<sup>1</sup>**

Although research has focused on the impact of youth employment while in high school (c.f. Greenberger & Steinberg 1986, Mortimer, Finch et al. 1996, Mortimer & Staff 2004), less attention has been paid to the responsibilities some young adults have within the household. However, children do considerable homemaking and care work within the house. Estimates of time children spend doing housework vary from study to study, but children's contributions are not trivial. Yun-Suk Lee and colleagues (2003) pooled data from five longitudinal studies and found that on average children aged 2 to 11 spend 2 to 4 hours per week doing housework and adolescents aged 12 to 18 spend four to six hours. An earlier study estimates that children's work constitutes 15 percent of all housework (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991).

What is the impact of this work on children's subsequent development? Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort (NLSY79), we examine housework, sibling caretaking, and subsequent adult beliefs and behavior within a sample of adolescents with younger siblings. Our evidence suggests that work done in the childhood home may have lasting significance on beliefs and roles later in life. For instance, men in their early 40s who had cared for younger siblings as teens were less likely to have children; were more likely to favor women's employment; and were more likely to believe that that men and women should share housework.

### **Background**

Children in the United States do a variety of types of housework (Goodnow & Lawrence, 2001; Lee, Schneider, & Waite, 2003; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981). Common household tasks assigned to children include cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, running errands and other household management tasks. Youth with younger siblings commonly provide sibling care, including preparing meals and feeding, monitoring, helping with school work, and accompanying younger siblings out of the home. Relying on sibling care is a particularly important strategy for lower-income or single-parent households with limited ability to purchase child care (Laird, Pettit et al. 1998; Steinberg 1999; Capizzano, Tout et al. 2000, September). As with adults who perform caring labor on an informal basis, the caring work of children often goes unnoticed (Himmelweit 1999; Folbre 2001).

Clues as to how house and care work may affect subsequent achievement can be seen in two competing views of the phenomenon. One view is that early work builds skills. Caring for siblings – a pattern that anthropologists note is more frequent in developing societies – is a key activity for developing a sense of responsibility and promoting productive adulthood (c.f. Weisner and Gallimore 1977; c.f. Weisner 2001). On the other hand, responsibilities for younger siblings may interfere with other processes that contribute to successful development. Like paid work (Marsh 1991), house work and care-taking assignments may take time that could be spent in other desirable activities such as homework or participation in extracurricular options. Another concern is that parents who rely on children to fill adult roles such as caretakers may be more reluctant to discipline them for age-inappropriate behavior such as smoking, not attending school or staying out late. Such cases of "adultification" (Brooks, Hair et al. 2001, July) or "destructive

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<sup>1</sup> Note to reviewers: This paper does not correspond well with the pre-set PAA categories this year. Please pass it along to the program chair if it is not a fit with the other papers submitted for your session. Thank you.

parentification" (Jurkovic 1997; Jurkovic, Morrell et al. 1999) may weaken the parent's authority and harm the developing youth.

Time spent in housework or caretaking may also alter young persons' views about caretaking and gender roles or subsequent family formation behavior in ways that vary by gender. For girls, looking after siblings may teach and strengthen caregiving skills or reinforce allegiance to traditional gender roles. Alternatively, by providing a realistic sense of the demands of taking care of younger children, sibling care-taking may make girls less likely to want to spend time as full time mothers in the future and may also act as a deterrent to early fertility. Boys who take care of siblings may learn skills that then transfer to their own children, making them more engaged or involved parents. Boys who learn household skills may continue this work in adulthood. In an examination of adult African American men's household participation, Vânia Penha-Lopes (2006) posits that "having done housework early on better prepared them for adult life" (p.265). Their African American parents had emphasized 'socialization for competence,' and it was this skill development that led to greater household participation as adults.

For these reasons, this study examines the relationship between sibling caregiving and the following domains: gender role attitudes, desired and actual fertility, secondary educational attainment, and marriage. The trajectories of sibling caretakers are interesting in and of themselves. However, simple correlations that show child caregiving is "related to" outcomes actually reveal little about whether such work alters youths' trajectories. Because sibling caretaking is an arrangement that arises naturally in families, analysis must account for differences between youth who spend time in caretaking and those who do not, as well as differences between families in which caretaking occurs and families in which this does not happen. The preliminary analyses here contain controls for common socioeconomic factors that may be related to both family of origin work and adult attitudes and attainment. Later analyses (described below) will examine whether any causal effects can be found.

## **Data**

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 allows for a prospective examination of close to 2,000 youth caretakers. The NLSY79 is a longitudinal sample of over 12,000 individuals who were age 14-22 years old in 1979. This cohort was interviewed annually until 1994, and is currently being queried on a biennial basis. The NLSY can be weighted to be representative of youth living in the U.S. in 1979, and the survey over-sampled black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged white youth, making it particularly informative for these groups.

Several data restrictions reflect the current focus on caring for younger siblings. The crucial set of questions about time spent in child care were asked as part of the NLSY79 1981 Time Use Survey, so only youth interviewed in 1981 are included. The sample is further restricted to youth under the age of 19 who lived with younger siblings and did not have children of their own to capture youth who were most likely to be still living in their parents' household and providing caretaking to siblings. These restrictions result in a sub-sample of N=1986 young adults.

## **Preliminary Findings**

Providers of sibling care differ from other youth in several predictable ways. Table 1 shows the prevalence and extent of caregiving among the sample. Overall, 15.8 percent of these teens spent time caring for siblings the day before the survey, and those who provided care reported spending

just under three hours. Girls are more likely to provide care than boys and caregiving is less common for older youth. Mothers’ education is a stronger predictor of caregiving time than is employment. Children whose families fall below the poverty threshold are most likely to provide care.

Do adolescents who spend time doing chores or providing sibling care have different life trajectories from those who do not? Table 2 summarizes coefficients from a series of multivariate regression in which the dependent variable is a measure of family or educational attainment and the key predictor is the daily number of hours spent doing chores or engaged in sibling care. Boys who spent more time on chores tended to have their first child at an earlier age and were significantly more likely to have a child before marriage. Men who spent time in sibling care, on contrast, were significantly more likely to reach their early 40s without having a child. There is no statistically significant relationship between females’ teenage housework/sibling caretaking and later outcomes.

Table 3 summarizes relationships between household work as adolescents (16 to 18 years old) and beliefs about gender roles later in life (41 to 43 years old). The underlying items were based on a four-choice scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Results shown are from ordered logit models controlling for basic family origin household demographics. Men who did household chores are more likely to agree that men should share housework and that that working wives feel more useful than wives who do not hold jobs. Men who cared for younger siblings were also more likely to agree that men should share housework, as well as being more likely to believe that inflation makes it necessary to have two parents working. One interpretation of these findings is that that boys who take on caretaking roles become more progressive or home-involved men. Chore and sibling care work done by girls has fewer and less consistent effects on women’s beliefs. Girls who did sibling care are more likely to disagree that working wives feel more useful than wives without employment. This may reflect additional knowledge about contemporary women’s challenges in balancing employment and parenting. Women who did chores as girls are more likely to agree that the employment of wives leads to juvenile delinquency. Oddly, there is no corresponding effect of having done sibling care on women’s beliefs about the employment-delinquency link, so this may be a spurious result.

### **Additional Analyses**

This paper is part of a larger project on children’s roles in household resource flows. Funding and time have been allocated to perform these analyses over the coming six months (“Give and take: Child agency in intergenerational resource allocation” NIH R01 HD045635-01, J. Romich, PI). A full analysis will be available in advance of the PAA meetings. Additional analyses and improvements will focus on several areas, two of which are noted here.

*Nature of caregiving time.* The *NLSY79 1981 Time Use Survey* included details about caregiving time which can provide a more full picture of the nature of caregiving time. For instance, youth reported whether caregiving was their primary or secondary responsibility during the time. They also reported time spent engaged in specific tasks such as bathing or feeding younger siblings. These are important considerations since many of the hypothesized negative impacts of caregiving concern the intensity of the commitment, with extended periods of intense caregiving responsibilities seen as more likely to lead to parentification.

*Multiple siblings.* Preliminary work did not consider multiple children within families. Can compare the sibling care allocation between older and younger siblings assuming both were part of the original survey design. The NLSY79 interview sample included all children within the sample age who were living in the selected households. Hence a subset of the sample has a close-age brother or sister also in the sample. These were treated as independent observations in this preliminary analysis. There are both statistical and substantive reasons for more careful consideration of such multiple-sibling households. Future analyses will use cluster or multi-level methods to account for the non-independence between youth from the same household. Additionally, sibling fixed-effects models are a promising strategy for separating the effects of caregiving from other unobservable family level effects such as socialization (Griliches 1979; Ruhm 2000; Duncan, Ludwig et al. 2001).

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**Table 1. Sample characteristics and prevalence of sibling care**

Sample: 16-18 year-olds with younger siblings (NLSY79, wave 3)

	N	Provide care (%)	chi-sq p-value	Hrs/day (among caregivers)
Full sample	1982	15.8	-	2.94
Girls	933	18.6		2.80
Boys	1049	13.3	.001	2.46
Age				
16	521	20.0		3.07
17	742	17.4		2.67
18	719	11.1	<.001	3.20
Mother's education				
<HS	812	17.4		3.01
high school	727	15.7		2.83
>HS	311	12.2	.106	2.53
Mother's work				
none	737	16.1		2.99
part time	390	16.4		2.61
full time	800	14.8	.671	3.09
Household poverty status				
above FPL	1346	13.4		2.82
below FPL	566	21.7	<.001	3.01

**Table 2. Household work at age 16-18 and subsequent household and educational attainment**

Outcome as of age 41-43	Men				Women			
	Chores		Sibling care		Chores		Sibling care	
	coef	s.e.	coef	s.e.	coef	s.e.	coef	s.e.
Ever married	.072	(.093)	.016	(.111)	-.174	(.115)	-.125	(.111)
Age at first marriage	-.149	(.217)	.049	(.265)	-.122	(.210)	-.138	(.216)
Ever had a biological child	.030	(.098)	-.246	(.104) *	.030	(.107)	.025	(.109)
Age at birth of first child	-.545	(.203) **	-.170	(.265)	.029	(.205)	-.001	(.207)
Had first child before first marriage	.269	(.118) *	-.081	(.150)	-.032	(.123)	-.044	(.121)
Highest grade completed in 2004	.031	(.077)	-.023	(.092)	.032	(.081)	-.041	(.082)

Note: Results are based on separate multivariate analyses (logit or ols) controlling for family of origin demographics.

Rejection Level: \*\*\*&lt;0.001, \*\*&lt;0.01, \*&lt;0.1

**Table 3. Summary of relationships between household work as adolescents and gender role beliefs in adulthood**

<b>Beliefs at age 41-43</b>	<b>Household work at age 16-18</b>			
	MEN		WOMEN	
	<i>Chores</i>	<i>Sibling care</i>	<i>Chores</i>	<i>Sibling care</i>
A working wife feels more useful than one who doesn't hold a job	More likely to agree	-	-	More likely to disagree
Employment of wives leads to juvenile delinquency	-	More likely to agree	More likely to agree	-
Inflation necessitates employment of both parents	-	More likely to agree	-	-
Men should share housework	More likely to agree	More likely to agree	-	-
<i>No significant relationship was found between adolescent home work and the following beliefs:</i>				
Women are happier in the traditional roles				
A woman's place is in the home				
A wife who carries out her full family responsibilities doesn't have time for outside employment				
Traditional husband/wife roles are best				

Note: only relationships statistically significant at the \*P<0.10 or less are reported. Results are based on separate multivariate analyses controlling for family of origin demographic information.