

# Integrating Carework and Housework into Household Work

## *A Conceptual Clarification*

*Housework tends not to be defined in the literature. Instead, it is usually operationalized through a list of pre-selected activities, such as cooking, doing dishes, childcare, etc. There are two problems with this approach. First, the list of activities is too restrictive. Drawing on an empirical Canadian study on unpaid housework, we found that it involves a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimension. Second, carework is partially integrated through childcare, but care of adults—adult children or siblings, parents, friends and neighbours—is omitted. Carework and housework are substantially the same, but are defined as housework when the focus is on the activity and as carework when the focus is on the relational aspect. Together the two tendencies make a lot of the work that is actually performed within the home invisible. A new definition of household work is proposed that integrates all four dimensions and housework as well as carework.*

This paper has a very specific focus: to achieve a conceptual clarification of what is meant with the terms housework and carework, and to clarify their relationship to each other. This is important, because the terms are used loosely and in such a manner that many aspects of motherwork, of general household work and carework remain hidden, since they are out of the purview of the literatures that concern themselves with either housework or carework.

Within sociology, motherwork is dealt with primarily under two different headings: carework and housework. Housework is usually understood as consisting of routine, relatively low skilled work, and a large part of it is dedicated to understanding the division of labour among couples (Eichler and Albanese, 2007). This is important, but limited in its focus. The literature on carework tends to look at the interface of unpaid and paid carework, which is very helpful, but it pays relatively little attention to the continuity of care

provision throughout the life cycle of a person. Both perspectives are important in understanding motherwork, both perspectives are partial, and, most important in this context, there is relatively little cross-over between the two literatures, meaning that our understanding of motherwork continues to be quite restricted.

In this paper I am going to explore how the housework literature deals with motherwork and other types of carework, what problems this generates, and how the problems can be addressed. The terms housework, domestic labour, and household work are rarely defined. Instead, they are operationalized into lists of specific task. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with using such lists—the problem comes up not in terms of what is included, but what is excluded. The tasks mostly included are preparing meals, doing laundry, cleaning house, shopping for groceries, doing dishes, and quite often childcare.

In order to explore whether this is truly all there is to it, we conducted a study on unpaid household work and lifelong learning.

### **The study**

The study<sup>1</sup> consisted of four phases of data collection, in which each phase built on the preceding one. Phase 1 consisted of a questionnaire sent to various women's groups, in which we asked people, among other things, to list the household work and carework they did. Phase 2 involved eleven focus groups with a very diverse set of people in which we discussed the more hidden aspects of housework and carework. Phase 3 consisted of individual interviews with 70 women and men who had previously participated in a national survey on lifelong learning and who had undergone a major life change within the past five years. Phase 4 consisted of interviews with ten female house cleaners and ten nannies who did similar work for pay and without pay. In this paper, I will draw only on Phases 1-3, and I am only looking at the relationship between housework and carework, rather than at learning aspects (which is dealt with elsewhere).<sup>2</sup>

### **The meaning of “carework” and “housework”**

The impetus behind Phase 1—a questionnaire to members of women's groups, and in one case also to their partners (all of them were male)—was dissatisfaction with the way housework is usually conceptualized within the unpaid housework literature. A typical approach would be to ask couples who did what with respect to a predetermined list of activities, e.g.: preparing meals, doing laundry, cleaning house, shopping for groceries, and doing dishes.<sup>3</sup> About half of the over 60 studies we surveyed to examine how they operationalize housework also include childcare as one of the activities. A typical example would be a question such as: “Of all the things that have to be done for your household, like cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry, paying bills, doing repairs, caring for children, and so on, what percentage do you do?” (Van Willigen and Drentea, 2001: 579)

This set of questions obscures a lot of the work that is actually going within households by omitting very important parts such as dealing with crises, managing time tables, budgets, social events, school/family relations, doing emotion work, maintaining relations with kin and friends. Caring for children is usually restricted to caring for young children. We wanted to find out in our first phase of our study how women (and some men) spontaneously define housework when they are *not* provided with a list of activities. Appendix 1 shows the range of activities women listed as part of their household and carework.

Our community partner Mothers Are Women (MAW) convinced us that we needed to talk about household work rather than housework. They argued that the term “housework” was too closely associated with repetitive physical tasks such as cleaning, cooking, etc. They also requested that we add a separate question on carework, to allow for the full display of unpaid work that is performed within households. Eventually, we agreed to ask the following questions on the questionnaire:

“What unpaid household work have you done during the last seven days?” with a follow-up question on what they did during the last year. People could list their activities as they saw fit. With respect to carework, we asked “What unpaid carework have you done during the last seven days?” as well as the follow-up question what they did during the year, but we provided space for both the activity and for whom they did the work. There was thus a difference in the way the household and carework questions were asked: the household work questions only asked for the activity, the carework questions asked both for the activity and for whom the work was performed.

Our theoretical question behind these empirical questions was whether or not the respondents would restrict themselves to the usual list of largely physical activities, or whether they would include some of the functions that are often invisible: the planning and organizational work that lies behind the performance of physical tasks, and the emotion work. Given that most of the women among our respondents defined themselves as sympathizing with feminism (61 percent identified themselves as feminist, 33.6 percent said that they did not define themselves as feminist but sympathized, and the rest did not sympathize), and that housework has been a prominent theme within feminist scholarship (e.g. Coverman, 1989; Cowan, et al., 1985; Cunningham, 2001; des Rivières-Pigeon, Saurel-Cubizolles and Romito, 2002; DeVault, 1987, 1991; Doucet, 2000; Ferber and Green, 1985; Gerzer-Sass, 2004; Ironmonger, 1996; Kamo, 2000; Lopata, 1971; Luxton, 1980, 1997, 2001; Noonan, 2001; Oakley, 1974; Sullivan, 1997; Waring, 1988), we thought that at least some of the respondents might include some of the more managerial and emotional aspects of work. MAW is a feminist organization that is oriented around housework issues, so we expected that at least some of our respondents would be more fully aware of the range of activities they engage in than most people are.<sup>4</sup>

As we expected, the majority of respondents stuck with the usual narrow way in which housework is depicted, but some did go far beyond this and provided detailed information on the less visible aspects of the work.

When we looked at the data collected through the questionnaires, we encountered four levels of difficulty: first, the meaning of the term carework is ambiguous for people. Second, we needed to find an unambiguous way to deal with the ambiguity. Third, the relevant scholarly literature on the topic is also ambiguous. Fourth, there was no clear distinction between the way respondents saw housework and carework.

Looking at the first level of difficulty, a number of the respondents had trouble understanding the meaning of the term “carework.” This was true both in Phase 1 (in filling out a questionnaire) and Phase 3 (in answering questions in a interview). In Phase 1, some went as far as calling me to inquire what we meant with the term. My answer was invariably that it meant whatever they considered carework. Others expressed their confusion right on the questionnaire. One wrote, for instance, “I have trouble distinguishing betw. household work + carework.” A number of other people commented that they identified “carework” with care for the sick. Here are two comments to this effect:

*Fortunately we are all healthy—see carework as defined for someone who is not well.*

*We are both healthy—so zero time is spent on caregiving. Daughters live in their cities. Husband’s & my parents have passed on. 10–15 years ago many hours were spent on caregiving.*

In phase 3 we asked people about specific tasks they performed, as well as a broad question on how people’s housework and carework had changed over the past five years, and what they had learned through this. We used a semi-structured approach, in which the questions were set, but they were asked in a conversational context. Here again a number of people requested clarification of what was meant with carework. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents in both Phase 1 and 3 were able to answer both questions.

What we can conclude from this experience is that the meaning of the term “carework” is ambiguous. Some people restrict it to apply only to care for people who are sick or disabled; some have difficulty assigning any clear meaning to the term, while many do feel able to answer questions as to what carework they do.

Their answers led to the second level of difficulty: disentangling the meaning of housework and carework. This came to the fore when devising a coding system for the open-ended data from Phase 1.

Besides asking about their household and carework, we had also asked people about their community work (no one had any difficulty in assigning a meaning to this term!). When it came to coding the activities, we started out

with trying to devise separate codes for all three types of work.

It soon became clear that this was not only impossible, but also theoretically problematic. The activities listed under household work and carework overlapped greatly. In spite of the fact that only the carework questions asked “who you did the work for,” some of the respondents also identified who they did the work for under the household work question.

Most revealingly, one respondent put a star on a number of responses in the household work question, including “cooking, laundry, phoning (trades people, dentist, computer repair etc.), shopping (groceries, gifts, clothing), teaching, driving (children on activities), tidying up, supervising” and commented “I guess these could just as easily be defined as carework.” There was thus clearly an overlap between the activities listed under household work and carework.

We eventually resolved our dilemma by coding activities that were simply listed as activities, without an indication for whom the work was performed, as part of household work, no matter where the answer was given. If, on the other hand, the respondent had indicated that the work was done for someone, we coded it as carework, even if it was in answer to the household work questions. If it was indicated that the work was for oneself, for instance “took care of myself,” it was coded as carework. We ended up with one list of 40 activities (plus a category of “other”)<sup>5</sup> and a total of 187 sub-categories that derive from the answers to a series of questions on household work, carework and community work.

This method of proceeding rests on the theoretical insight—based on our data—that the activities performed under the heading of carework and household work are the same. The difference is simply whether the stress is on the activity (in which case it counts as housework<sup>6</sup>) or on the beneficiary of the work (in which case it counts as carework).

We can thus think of housework and carework as two sides of the same coin, which form both a unity (one coin) as well as showing us different faces. If I want to buy something, a Canadian quarter is a quarter is a quarter. However, if I collect coins, I may wish to see whether there is the head of a moose, the heads of two veterans, a maple leaf, or a British Columbia landscape on the tail side.<sup>7</sup>

I am therefore not suggesting that we eliminate the terms carework and housework, but simply recognize their nature as two sides of the same coin.

### *Why the one-coin approach matters*

So far, I have looked at the issue of the relationship between housework and carework simply in terms of what emerged from our project data and experiences. If we turn to the housework literature and ask how it deals with carework, we find a very different approach.

First, housework is restricted to a set of very limited activities. Second, carework is only partially integrated: childcare is seen as an important aspect

of housework, although not always included, while care of adults, including adult children and care of self, are excluded.

### *Including all carework into household work*

Here we come to the third level of difficulty: there is no theoretical reason for the partial inclusion and partial exclusion of carework within housework that I have been able to find. Childcare is generally accepted as part of housework, care for adults is generally excluded. It seems to be simply a practice that has evolved. The consequence of this practice, however, is to make a large amount of work that happens within the home, including motherwork, invisible. In addition, there are other aspects that are largely invisible, such as most of the emotional, mental and spiritual tasks.

### **Expanding the range of activities included in household work**

As noted above, one impetus behind the project was dissatisfaction with how the housework literature implicitly defines housework. Phase 1 established for us how a particular group of mostly feminist women (and some of their partners) define housework. We found some awareness of the cognitive and organizational work involved as well as a majority of respondents who restrict themselves to listing only the more mundane and physical tasks. The intent in Phase 1 was not to find out what housework people *do*, but what they *think* they do.

In Phase 2, in the focus groups, we therefore explored the wider range of housework activities people engage in. We asked participants:

Did you do any of the following tasks?

- provide emotional support to someone (comfort, console, counsel, give advice, listen to)
- organize, plan, manage or arrange matters (e.g. family events or schedules, arrange repair people, tutors, play dates for children)
- deal with crises
- maintain contact with family members or friends through telephoning, writing letters or visiting
- take care of yourself
- resolve conflicts

Invariably, participants described in great detail their work in all of these areas. We concluded, with their help, that physical, mental and emotional work is integral to housework (Eichler and Matthews, 2005). Unexpectedly, a fourth dimension of work emerged, about which we had asked no question and which nonetheless was very evident in the various focus groups: a spiritual dimension. We define as spiritual whatever gives meaning to life (Eichler and Albanese, 2007). Given this unexpected finding, we included some specific questions about learning concerning the meaning of life through housework

in Phase 3. Consistently, spirituality emerged as one important dimension of housework.

We therefore ended up with four dimensions of household work: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

### **Conclusion: Household work consists of housework and carework**

If we accept the notion that housework and carework are two sides of the same coin, it makes no theoretical sense to include only one segment of carework. Our interviews provide many graphic illustrations of the importance of caring for adults—adult children, spouses, disabled adult family members, siblings, parents, also neighbours and friends. Motherwork does not cease because the children grow up.

We therefore devised the following definition of household work:

*Household work consists of the sum of all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual tasks that are performed for one's own or someone else's household and that maintain the daily life of those for whom one has responsibility.*<sup>8</sup>

This suggests that the term “household work” can be used as an overriding term that includes both housework and carework, including all of motherwork. It recognizes the one-coin nature of housework and carework, maintains housework as that part of the work where the emphasis is on the activity and carework as the concept that expresses the relational aspect of the work—both useful for different purposes. It provides a comprehensive view of the work performed that includes those aspects of household work that are often ignored: the mental, emotional and spiritual work, the care for adults, and work performed in other people's households. If this more comprehensive definition of household work were used in empirical studies, it would help to make more of the invisible aspects of this work visible. If we understood motherwork as care of children throughout the entire life—from the time the children are born to the time the parents die—we would gain a more comprehensive picture of the actual work involved in being a mother.

### **Appendix 1 Summary of Activities**

- 1 administrative work
- 2 car
- 3 childcare
- 4 cleaning
- 5 computer (assistance/fix)
- 6 communication/information
- 7 cottage

- 8 cultural activity (hang art show, historian, illustrations for publication, jury shows, choir, fashion show, holiday home tour)
- 9 decorate
- 10 dishes
- 11 educational work
- 12 emotional support (comfort/console, counsel/advise/listen to/ converse with/discuss problems/ telephone advice/advocate for, make time for, bereavement support, love)
- 13 entertain
- 14 environmental work
- 15 fundraising activities
- 16 garbage/recycling
- 17 gardening/weeding/watering/yard work
- 18 general (help, look after someone's affairs, volunteer, support, be responsible adult at home, usher/greeter, spouse care, care for elderly, pastoral care, personal care, act as power of attorney, friend did hard work)
- 19 gifts (make/give/buy/exchange gifts, send flowers, make baby blanket, knit gift, exchange cookies, money for grandchildren, make donations)
- 20 handicrafts
- 21 health maintenance
- 22 housekeeping
- 23 laundry
- 24 library work
- 25 maintenance, repairs, and building projects
- 26 managerial/leadership/organizational work
- 27 meal preparation/cook/feed (breakfast/lunch/dinner/snacks)
- 28 money management
- 29 occasional work
- 30 personal grooming/hygiene (help with)
- 31 pet care
- 32 physical comfort (rock, snuggle, sleep with, give back massages, foot-rub)
- 33 plant care (water plants/re-pot)
- 34 political work
- 35 sew
- 36 shopping
- 37 social work/relations
- 38 sports/physical recreation activities
- 39 social activities
- 40 transportation (other than for medical reasons)
- 41 other



*This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Mother's Day Conference of the Association for Research on Mothering on Carework and Caregiving, 2006.*

<sup>1</sup>The data reported on here were gathered as part of the research network on The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) from 2002 through 2006 as a Collaborative Research Initiative on the New Economy (Project No. 512-2002-1011). This network is composed of a large national survey and 12 case study projects. For further information, see the network website: [www.wallnetwork.ca](http://www.wallnetwork.ca). A large number of students were involved in our project at various points of time as coders, interviewers, transcribers, data analysts and collaborators in a broader sense. I want to thank them cordially for the contributions they made. They are: Robyn Bourgeois, Alexia Dyer, Lingqin Feng, Susan Ferguson, Young-Hwa Hong, Willa Lichun Liu, Gada Mahrouse, Carly Manion, Ann Matthews, Tracey Matthews, Gayle McIntyre, Thara Mohanathas, Sam Rahimi, Susan Stowe, Carole Trainor, and Natalie ZurNedden. Willa Lichun Liu and Ann Matthews are both writing their Ph.D. theses on this project, and their contribution is consequently considerably more substantial than that of other students who were involved for shorter periods of time. Susan Ferguson coded 40 of the interviews of Phase 3 into N6 and thus contributed substantially to the analysis. Patrizia Albanese is a co-investigator of this project.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on the study, see Eichler (2005, and forthcoming); Eichler and Matthews (2007); Liu (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup>These are the tasks identified by Twiggs, McQuillan, and Ferree (1999).

<sup>4</sup>Eight-hundred and fifteen questionnaires were mailed to Mothers Are Women (MAW and their partners): National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC); Older Women's Network (OWN); Eta Zeta Sorority (EZ); and the National Farmers' Union (NFU). Two-hundred and fifty-four questionnaires were completed and returned—a 31percent response rate. In addition, the focus group participants also filled out the questionnaire.

<sup>5</sup>See Appendix 1 for the list of activities (minus the subcategories).

<sup>6</sup>I am aware that I am using the terms household work and housework in a manner that may seem inconsistent and confusing. This is due to the fact that our understanding of the difference between household work and housework evolved during the process of data interpretation. I use household work when referring to the questions we asked, since that is the term we used on the questionnaire, but most of the literature would refer to it as housework. I use housework when discussing the results in a more general manner, since we have now established a difference between housework and household work, see below.

<sup>7</sup>These are the different quarters in my wallet as I am writing this.

<sup>8</sup>In the fall of 2005, we held a "Report Back" conference to which we invited all those had participated in any phase of the research project. We asked par-

participants for their own definition of household work, which, to our surprise, turned out to be very close to the one we had come up with. We modified our definition somewhat in light of the discussion that ensued.

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