



Familial influences on the division of household labour in Malaysian families

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Abstract

Gendered division of household labour is a social issue facing many countries. However, there is limited available research on this issue in Malaysian context. Scholars raise the possibility that differences across racial and ethnic groups are due to differences in historical experiences and cultural background, which may condition the symbolic meanings of daily activities. This possibility remains under-researched in Malaysia. This study examines the gendered experiences of division of household labour among Malay and Chinese couples in Malaysia and reasons given for it. A qualitative semi-structured interview was conducted with 30 respondents (18 women and 12 men) in Malaysia. The respondents consist of 15 Malays and 15 Chinese. The interview findings suggest there are three themes emerged related to the familial influences on couples' domestic behaviours: (1) the way female interviewees see their father's and brothers' attitude towards housework influencing their expectation of their spouse, (2) the way female interviewees see their mother's attitude towards housework influencing their own attitudes, and (3) the way male interviewees were expected by their mothers to engage in housework. These findings suggest that parents are influential in shaping their children's attitudes and therefore their contribution to housework tasks after they form their own families. It also indicates the importance of ethnic identity in influencing the way couple engage in and share housework. This study adds insight to the complexities of the factors that may allow couples to move towards a more equal division of household labour.

Keywords: ethnicity, family, gender, housework, socialization, unequal

Introduction

Gendered division of household labour, where housework and childcare are shared unequally between women and men, is a social issue facing many countries. Unequal division of household labour often affects women's labour force participation and earnings (Antonopoulos & Hirwar, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Likewise, women are more likely to experience higher levels of exhaustion, depression and stress due to unequal

division of household labour (Bird, 1999; Branden, Duvander & Ohlsson-Wijk, 2016; Lively, Steelman & Powell, 2010; Zimmerman, 2000).

Studies on housework in Malaysian families are limited. The quantitative and qualitative studies in Malaysia generally suggests that housework responsibility is still shouldered by women rather than men in Malaysia (Abu Bakar, 2009; Boo, 2018; DaVanzo & Lye, 1978; Ghazali, 2002; Mazidah, Yun & Rokiah, 1979; Noor, 1999; Wee, Urud, Myint, Ho, Abdullah & Hilsdon, 2004). These quantitative studies (Boo, 2018; DaVanzo & Lye, 1978; Mazidah, Yun & Rokiah, 1979; Noor, 1999) which could be generalised to represent Malaysian households, however, most of the studies are nearly two decades old and may not be appropriate in explaining the contemporary division of household labour. Furthermore, most of the studies only focus on one specific ethnic group, Malays (Abu Bakar, 2009; Abu Bakar & Abdullah, 2013; Ghazali, 2002).

Similar to housework, studies on childcare in Malaysian families are also limited. Studies generally suggest that mothers spend significantly more time on childcare than fathers, and mothers are more likely to engage in feeding, cleaning and playing activities than fathers (DaVanzo & Lye, 1978; Hossain, Roopnarine, Masud, Muhamed, Baharudin, Abdullah & Juhari, 2005; Hossain, Roopnarine, Rosnah, Shazia & Sombuling, 2007; Noor, 1999; Roopnarine, Lu & Ahmeduzzaman, 1989). These studies include respondents from only one ethnic group and select respondents from only one or two states in Malaysia, which are similar to the limitations in the studies on housework.

Only two quantitative studies are found in examining the factors that influence the division of housework and childcare in Malaysian families (Boo, 2018; DaVanzo and Lye, 1978). The two studies found that ethnicity is the significant factor in influencing the division of household labour when differences in socio-demographic characteristics are held constant. That is, Malays spend significantly more time on housework but less time on childcare than Chinese. This finding is similar to most studies examining racial influences on the gendered division of household labour in the United States. For instance, studies found that Black women spend more time on housework than White women (Pinto and Coltrane, 2009; Sayer and Fine, 2011); and Hispanic and Asian women spend more time in housework than White and Black women (Sayer and Fine, 2011) when differences in socio-demographic characteristic are held constant.

The lack of studies examining the reasons given for unequal sharing among couples limit a full understanding of the division of housework and childcare in Malaysia. Likewise, the lack of scholarly coverage of Malay and Chinese ethnic groups limits understanding of how ethnic identity might influence the way couples engage in and share housework and childcare. These questions are examined and answered through this study.

Literature review

In the 1970s, feminists argued that family is patriarchal, and it produces the inequality between men and women (Oakley, 1974; Hoshschild, 1989). Some women do not perceive housework as an enjoyable work but dull, unfulfilling and monotonous unpaid work (Oakley, 1974). Feminists argued that the persistence of cultural and traditional gender ideologies is the reason for the slow change in the division of household labour (Hochschild, 1989). The responsibility for the household tasks still rests on women's shoulders and not men.

Feminists have long argued that women continue to be primarily responsible in thinking, planning and doing the household chores (Braverman, 1991). Feminists argued that housework should be divided equally between women and men, but there has been little change in society because women still do most of the housework. For example, rather than seeing the ‘march of progress towards symmetry’ proposed by Young and Wilmott (1973), Oakley (1974) argued that housework and childcare were dominant tasks for women and not men.

Apart from feminist perspective, three theoretical perspectives dominate the empirical literature on gender division of household labour: (1) time availability, (2) relative resources, and (3) gender perspectives. The time availability perspective argues that the gender division of household labour is based on a rational decision of who has more time for household work (Coverman, 1985; Hiller, 1984). This perspective suggests that employment reduces time available for household work, and that one spouse will do more household tasks if the other spouse does not have time to be involved in household work, regardless of gender (Bianchi et al., 2000; Brines, 1993; Craig and Brown, 2017; Dotti Sani, 2014; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008; Pinto & Coltrane, 2009; Pinto & Ortiz, 2018; Sayer, 2016). However, a few empirical findings show that the major problem with the time availability perspective is that it fails to account for gender differences in the effects of paid work hours and children on housework time (Gough & Killewald, 2010; Shelton & John, 1996).

The relative resources perspective builds on the work of Blood and Wolfe (1960) and conceptualises the division of household labour as a rational process leading to a “fair” exchange between couples. According to this perspective, also known as the economic exchange or economic dependence model (Gupta, 2006), the division of household labour is shaped by power dynamics between partners, based on the relative resources each brings into the household (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Brines, 1994). In particular, higher levels of income and education relative to one’s spouse are expected to translate into more bargaining power, which is used to avoid doing housework tasks (Carlson & Lynch, 2017).

Studies show that women’s absolute educational level is negatively associated with their housework time (Brines, 1993; Coltrane, 2000; Craig, 2006; John & Shelton, 1997; Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994). That is, women with higher education spend less time on housework than those with lower education. A number of studies support the notion that when, within the household, women’s earning increases relative to men’s, women are able to reduce their housework time (Baxter, 1992; Bianchi et al., 2000; Bittman, England, Folbre, Sayer & Matheson, 2003; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008; Pinto & Coltrane, 2009). Some studies find that when a woman earns a higher income than her spouse, it can increase men’s housework time, and thus the division of household labour will become more equal (Bianchi et al., 2000; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008; Pinto & Coltrane, 2009). However, other studies find that when women earn relatively more than men, men do less, not more, housework (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000). Suggested explanations are that men reduce their housework time as a way to maintain their masculinity and traditional gender roles.

The gender perspective argues that the division of household labour is not based on a rational decision of who has more time for household work (time availability perspective) or based on a rational process and a “fair” exchange between partners (relative resources), but argues that housework is an enactment of gender relations (Bianchi et al., 2000; Greenstein, 2000; South & Spitze, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This perspective emphasises that “household work does not have a neutral meaning but rather its performance by women and men helps define and express gender relations within households” (Bianchi et al., 2000, 194).

Early formulations of the gender perspective focused specifically on gender role ideologies which are based in socialisation theories. The gender ideology perspective posits that men and women are socialised into male and female gender roles and are expected to behave accordingly (Cunningham, 2001; Epstein & Ward, 2011; Fuwa, 2004). It is based on the idea that people's gender ideology is situated on a continuum that ranges from traditional to egalitarian. It predicts that couples with more egalitarian attitudes will have more equal division of household labour than couples with more traditional attitudes. Specifically, it predicts that women who hold more egalitarian gender ideology will perform less housework than women with traditional gender ideology; whereas men who hold more egalitarian gender ideology will spend more time on housework than men with traditional gender ideology (Coltrane, 2000; Fuwa, 2004; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008; Shelton & John, 1996). Scholars criticise the time availability and relative resources perspectives because they fail to explain the gendered meanings that occur in the division of household labour (Bianchi et al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000; Greenstein, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Scholars claim that each of these theoretical explanations is not strong, and that they are linked and connected to each other; the division of household labour is a complex process which is influenced by multiple factors (Coltrane, 2007; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Overall, gender has the strongest influence on the division of household labour (Craig & Mullan, 2011; John & Shelton, 1997).

Method and study area

In this study, convenience sampling was adopted to recruit respondents because there was no time use surveys conducted in Malaysia and no existing data available to examine the division of household labour. The inclusion criteria included only married couples who have children aged below 12 years old in the households. An interview call was created to recruit sample. Respondents were recruited through online parenting websites, non-parenting websites and online classified advertisement on Facebook.

517 female respondents (335 Malay and 182 Chinese) volunteered for the interviews. The interview study area was across Central and Northern regions of Malaysia because most of the women in Central and Northern regions responded to the study. This is consistent with the data of Malaysia's internet users are mainly from Central and Northern region (comScore 2011). Respondents who expressed interests to participate in this research were randomly selected through SPSS analytical software. 30 interviews were conducted with 18 women and 12 men. The 12 men are the spouse of the women who participated in the interviews. Ethics approval was given by the University of New South Wales (Approval number: HC 11272).

In a total of 30 interviews (women and men), most of the interviews (18) were conducted in the respondents' homes, 6 took place in a café, and 6 over the phone. The couples had been interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes. Couples were interviewed separately in order to capture their perceptions and experiences without the influence of their spouse's presence. The interviews were conducted in the language that the respondents preferred. This allowed them to express themselves fully without language restrictions (Bryman, 2008). The interview data was analysed using a thematic approach to understand the meanings women and men attached to experiences associated with the division of household labour.

All interviewees were married and lived with their spouse and children. In terms of age, all the women were in their thirties. Of the 12 male interviewees, eleven were in their thirties and one was in his forties. Mostly, couples have one and two children in the households. Half of the female interviewees have at least Bachelor's degree and a quarter of the male interviewees have at least Bachelor's degree. Majority of the female interviewees earn less than their spouse whereas only two of the male interviewees earn less than their spouse. A summary of female and male interviewees' characteristics is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Characteristics for female interviewees

Characteristics	N = 18
Number of children	
One child	7
Two children	7
Three or more children	4
Educational attainment	
Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or O-level	3
Certificate	2
Diploma	4
Bachelor's degree	7
Master's degree	1
PhD degree	1
Income status	
No income	6
Earn less than their spouse	10
Earn more than their spouse	2

Table 2. Characteristics for male interviewees

Characteristics	N = 12
Educational attainment	
Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or O-level	3
Certificate	1
Diploma	4
Bachelor's degree	3
Master's degree	1
PhD degree	0
Income status	
No income	0
Earn less than their spouse	2
Earn more than their spouse	10

Results

Thematic analysis was used to analysis the interview data. To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research, thematic analysis procedures suggested by Creswell (2014) were followed. First, interview data were transcribed and saved in NVivo software. Second, interview data was read and coded. Third, interview data was reviewed according to codes to find themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed and named accordingly.

In this study, about two thirds of the interviewees mentioned familial influences on their housework, rather than on childcare. The themes that emerged include: (1) the way female interviewees see their father's and brothers' attitude towards housework influencing their expectations of their spouse; (2) the way female interviewees see their mother's attitude towards housework influencing their own attitudes; and (3) the way male interviewees were expected by their mothers to engage in housework. It should be noted that it was rare for interviewees to mention familial influences on childcare, so this section only discusses housework.

(1) The way female interviewees see their father's and brothers' attitude towards housework influencing their expectations of their spouse

Several female interviewees (more Malays than Chinese) related that male members of their family of origin were involved in housework tasks, and that this led them to believe that men are capable of housework and should help out with it. It influenced their expectations regarding their spouse's attitude to housework. These women expected their spouse to do as their fathers and brothers had. A Malay woman, Wani, described how her father and brothers influenced her expectation towards her spouse.

My father helps in housework. My father-in-law also helps in doing housework. I think this influences me, so I want my husband to help me in housework.

When we just got married, I was not satisfied with his contribution to housework tasks. He just wanted to rest, watch movies and read books while I was preparing the meals. I was not satisfied so I voiced my dissatisfaction. We discussed it. It slowly becomes a normal practice where both of us will contribute in the housework.
(Wani, Malay woman)

A similar experience was reported by a Chinese woman, Rebecca.

My father does more housework than my mother. Also, my brothers do more housework than me. I think their attitudes in housework don't have any impact on me because I am not good in doing housework. But I think my father's and brothers' attitudes in doing housework do give me a perception that men can do housework. I purposely wanted to train him in doing the housework. I don't think housework should be done by women.
(Rebecca, Chinese woman)

The quotes suggest that a father, father-in-law or brother who is helpful with housework may influence women's perception of men's domestic competence. It should be noted, though, that these examples may be exceptional. Not many men are helping out or doing more housework than women, as suggested by the previous studies in Western countries (Dotti Sani, 2014; Fuwa, 2004; Fuwa & Cohen, 2007; Geist, 2005; Sayer & Fine, 2011) and in Malaysia (Abu Bakar, 2009; DaVanzo & Lye, 1978; Ghazali, 2002; Mazidah, Yun & Rokiah, 1979; Wee et al., 2004).

These quotes are nonetheless important in giving insight into how families of origin may influence women's perceptions of their spouse's housework behaviour.

(2) The way female interviewees see their mother's attitude towards housework influencing their own attitudes

Malay women reported that their mothers were role models who encouraged them to do housework. Perhaps the best example is Aisha.

I saw how my mother did housework since I was young. My mother did all the housework, so I started to imitate what she did at home since I was young.
(Aisha, Malay woman)

Aisha reported that when she was young her mother did a lot of housework, making her think that this was normal for women. Her mother's experience in doing almost all of the housework influenced Aisha to do likewise. In addition, her mother-in-law did a lot of housework, which also influenced Aisha. It seems likely that women follow women in how they engage in housework. However, Aisha's husband Ali did not see his mother as *his* role model. Ali avoided doing housework because his mother used to complete the housework tasks without Ali's involvement. Aisha also reported that Ali's father seldom did housework. It seems likely that because Ali is male, he followed his father's lead. Hence, according to Aisha, Ali's mother and father were negative examples that discouraged Ali from engaging in housework.

The next example illustrating a mother as role model is Fatimah.

My mother can do everything, but my father is kind of limited in doing housework. I think I am influenced by my mother in the way she did all the housework herself. I wanted to do everything on my own too after I formed my own family.
(Fatimah, Malay woman)

Fatimah reported that her mother did not train her to do housework when she was young. She learnt how to do housework after she was married. Fatimah's and Aisha's quotes similarly describe their mothers doing most of the housework themselves and suggest that these Malay women are influenced by their mothers' attitudes and practices and imitated them after they were married.

A Chinese woman, Rebecca, reported that her mother's attitude towards housework influenced her own attitudes after she formed her own family. Her mother did a lower share of housework than her father. Also, her mother was not as good at doing housework tasks as her father. Rebecca did less housework than her spouse, apparently following her parents' example. These examples suggest that for both Malay and Chinese women, mothers' level of involvement in housework may influence their own. The familial influence may encourage or discourage them from doing more housework, depending on their mother's example.

(3) The way male interviewees were expected by their mothers to engage in housework

Perhaps the strongest theme relating to familial influences is male interviewees were expected by their mothers to engage in housework tasks. About half of the men (more Malays than Chinese) claimed that their parents' expectations had influenced them. Some were expected to help in housework when they were little and were purposely trained so that they could complete the tasks on their own, perhaps when parents were away at work. It gradually became a habit for these men to engage in certain domestic tasks since they were trained when they were young.

I think I was brought up to do housework. I am used to do(ing) housework at home. I have a brother. My mother treated us like normal people, expected us to do housework, clean dishes, clean house and prepare meals. My mother wanted us to help in housework.

(Jamal, Malay man)

I had to clean the house and do other housework tasks when my mother went to work.

(Tramizi, Malay man)

My mother was busy working. She taught us [to do housework] when we were young. My mother did not help me to iron clothes, so my siblings and I did it ourselves.

(Ben, Chinese man)

My mother trained me to do it [housework] when I was young. I am used to do it.

(George, Chinese man)

It should be noted that not all men were expected to do all types of housework tasks as youngsters. Several Malay men had been expected by their mothers to do only a few specific tasks and continued this practice after forming their own family.

I wash my own dishes. I used to wash my own dishes when I stayed with my parents. I have to wash my own dishes after I eat. So, this becomes a habit that I wash my own dishes even after I got married.

(Ali, Malay man)

He was asked to do cleaning of the house but not cooking meals, washing clothes and washing dishes when he was young. I think he is used to cleaning the house since he was young, so he helps in cleaning the house now.

(Nana, Malay woman)

Discussion

Thus far, the experiences of Malay and Chinese women and men suggest that familial influences do impact the behaviour of some towards housework tasks. This pattern may not be generalised to all women and men in Malaysia, but it does suggest that parents are influential in shaping their children's attitudes and therefore their contribution to housework tasks after they form their own families. This is in line with the gender ideology perspective that posits men and women are socialised into male and female gender roles and are expected to behave accordingly (Cunningham, 2001; Epstein & Ward, 2011; Fuwa, 2004). It should be noted that only one or two Malay and Chinese female interviewees mentioned that they would like to train their children at about 5 years old to participate in some housework tasks. This may suggest that female interviewees' expectations that their children help in housework differ from their own parents' expectations.

One important point to note is that familial influences were reported by more Malay than Chinese interviewees. This ethnic difference may be related to women's and men's responsibility varying with religious and cultural norms. That is, Malay mothers have responsibility for household work so they may be role models for their daughters (female interviewees). Malay fathers are encouraged by Islamic religious teachings to share household labour, which may have influenced the female interviewees' perception that if their fathers can do housework, their spouse can too. Also, Malay parents have responsibility to socialise children by training them to do household work when they are young because this is how the Prophet Muhammad taught his children (Al-Husaini, 2015; Gerner, 2008; Mustaffa, 2003). It is seen as a means of developing children's responsibility towards family and preparing them for marriage (Gerner, 2008). These findings imply that familial influences on the housework behaviour of Malay interviewees are related to the explicit religious teachings and cultural norms surrounding them.

Familial influences on the division of household labour were less reported by Chinese interviewees than Malays. This ethnic difference may be related to Chinese culture which is based on a patriarchal and patrilineal kinship system (Loh-Ludher, 2003). That is, Chinese women are expected to have the sole responsibility for domestic labour and children especially sons, are less expected or trained to help in housework. Chinese children are less expected to be trained and to help out with housework because their parents want them to concentrate on doing schoolwork in order to have a better future (DaVanzo & Lye, 1978; Goh & Kuczynski, 2014; Liang, Okamoto & Brenner, 2010).

The way Chinese parents less likely to train their children in doing housework contradicts with the way Malay parents have the responsibility to train their children in doing housework. This suggests that how parents socialize children in doing housework varies across the two ethnic groups. This is important because this is related to how ethnic identity influence the division of household labour in Malaysian families.

Thus far, this study explored the gendered subjective experiences of housework and childcare in Malay and Chinese families. This is an under-researched area in Malaysia where only a few previous studies have used a qualitative approach to understand this issue (Abu Bakar, 2009; Abu Bakar & Abdullah, 2013; Ghazali, 2002; Wee et al., 2004). These previous studies focus primarily on one specific ethnic group (Malays) and have limited understanding of the experiences of Chinese couples. More importantly, these previous studies only briefly present how couples allocate their time on household work and how couples engage in different tasks and conclude that men do slightly more household work when women engage in employment.

Notwithstanding the influences noted, the reported experiences of Malay and Chinese couples suggest that the division of household labour remains gendered. This is consistent with previous studies that women do a higher share of housework and childcare than men in both ethnic groups (Boo, 2018; DaVanzo & Lye, 1978). More importantly, the couples' experiences suggest familial influences is important in the division of household labour, adding insight to the ethnic differences in the division of household labour.

Conclusion

Through qualitative study, this study explored the viewpoints of 18 women and 12 men engaging in household labour. The qualitative findings provided detail and depth on how Malay and Chinese couples differ in their experiences of the division of household labour. The qualitative analysis suggests that familial influences on the division of household labour among Malay and Chinese couples. Findings suggest that Malay and Chinese have some similar experiences, although familial influences appear stronger for Malays than Chinese. Further research could extend this research by investigating couples' experiences on the themes of familial influences in housework and childcare uncovered during the qualitative interviews.

It is true that there is unequal division of household labour between women and men in Malaysia. While the two ethnic groups had much in common, it was also apparent that in important ways, Malays and Chinese couples experienced the division of household labour differently. We can now understand not only how the two ethnic groups come to an unequal division of household labour, but also the familial influences which may allow them to move towards a more equal division of household labour.

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