

"I'LL PASS YOU TO THE SOCIAL SECRETARY": GENDER ROLES IN HOUSEHOLD FRIENDSHIP MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the normative acceptance in Australian culture of the role women play as the 'social secretary' in marriages. It is based on a qualitative study of men and women's experiences and expectations in friendships. Using a dramaturgical framework, and drawing on Hochschild's (1979) notion of emotion management, it explores the tacit acceptance by both men and women of this gendered division of domestic labour. Rather than seeing the unequal distribution of domestic duties as being disadvantageous to women, it is argued that the work women conduct in managing a couple's social affairs is a potential site of power. Because of this uneven distribution of labour men do not learn the skills for developing broad support networks. The example of men who are suddenly left without wives is used to illustrate the potential negative effects for men in not participating in friendship management work throughout their marriages. When men experience dissatisfaction due to the restrictions their wives may place on their friendship activity, they either need to adopt emotion management strategies to gain access to an acceptable level of friendship and support or do 'deep acting' to change their feelings to align with gender norms.

1 INTRODUCTION

The gendered division of household labour has received a great deal of attention from sociologists since the 1970s. Most studies focus specifically on the performance of household tasks (who does the washing, who does the gardening, and so on). However, since Arlie Hochschild (1979) brought the notion of 'emotion management' under the sociological gaze, the definition of domestic labour has broadened to include those tasks surrounding the work that goes into caring for and managing the feelings of belonging and well-being of other family members (Delphy & Leonard, 1992:21; Strazdins et al. 1997:223). Meg Carter (2007:8) points out that researchers of domestic labour have either focused on the 'convergence' of time spent on household duties by men and women (how they are changing towards more egalitarian ideals) or on the 'persistence' of traditional gender norms in the division of labour in households. She found that those studies that took the 'persistence' view were more likely to be qualitative and to factor in the emotional labour conducted in the management of families (Carter, 2007:10). It has been found that emotion work in families falls mostly to women to perform, and that this part of their domestic responsibilities causes high levels of dissatisfaction for most women (McMahon, 1999:26).

Hochschild (1983) has put forward a convincing argument that women's roles in the labour force mirror those in the domestic sphere, where women are expected to manage their own emotions in order to take care of the emotional wellbeing of others. Goffman (1959) proposed that individuals exert effort in performing outwardly to create an

impression that meets wider social expectations of appropriate gender behaviour. However, Hochschild (1979) noted that this merely focuses on the 'surface acting', and advanced the dramaturgical model by adding a second layer of impression management: 'emotion management'. She proposed that 'deep acting' is the work an individual performs to change their own feelings about the roles they play based on the appropriate 'feeling rules' (the way one 'ought' to feel) attached to the situation and setting (Hochschild, 1979:558).

Taking a dramaturgical approach and using Hochschild's concept of 'emotion management', this article adds new findings to those studies that focus on the 'persistence' of gender norms. It does so by examining the labour women conduct in establishing and maintaining friendships within and between families, particularly the friendship activities of spouses. The study made visible the taken-for-granted assumption in heterosexual relationships that women take on the co-ordination and responsibility for social affairs of both herself, and her partner (and if there are children, she also assumes the responsibility for the management and emotional labour for supporting their social lives). It was evident that just as a secretary in the workplace attends to 'her' boss's business affairs: scheduling appointments, making travel arrangements and acting as a gate-keeper, so too the wife attends to the management of her partner's social affairs. However, as pointed out by Fineman (2003), women's emotion work does not necessarily disadvantage them, but can be leveraged in their interests as a tool for personal and group gain.

This paper is based on the data collected from a broader study that examines the expectations and experiences of Australian men and women in everyday friendship activity across the lifespan. It involved conducting in-depth interviews in 2003 with 80 Melbourne participants (40 men and 40 women) in three age cohorts: early adult (20-25 years); middle years (40-49 years) and retirement years (65 years and over). The aim of the study was not to make large generalised claims about gendered friendship patterns. Rather, applying an interactionist analysis to the qualitative data enables one to better understand the processes, the feeling rules and the performative elements in the presentation of gendered selves through friendship practices. The discussion that follows focuses on the narratives of the middle-years and retirement-years cohorts, as the participants in the youngest cohort were predominantly single, and therefore friendship management dynamics in couple relationships were not discussed in their interviews.

For the purpose of this paper, I adopt the simple, yet encompassing, definition of domestic labour as used by Carter (2003:2) as 'doing tasks, organising and being responsible for tasks, and the emotion work of looking out for people's feelings and keeping everything running smoothly'. Because friendship activity is typically defined as being an enjoyable intimate relationship, it has been more readily associated with 'leisure' than 'labour' (Bell, 1981:12). However, it is evident that effort is required in order to initiate, maintain and provide the emotional support that is seen as a prerequisite of friendship, which is viewed as an important form of social capital (Pahl, 2000:145-8). The expectations and obligations of friendship mean that it has the ability to add to one's personal resources for support, however, the rule of reciprocity dictates that effort is required from both parties. There are socially sanctioned rules that surround the initiation, maintenance and dissolution of friendships. Generally, the rules can be broken into four categories: those that signal or sustain intimacy; those that prescribe the exchange of rewards; those that regulate potential sources of conflict between the friends and those that regulate potential sources of conflict deriving from interaction with third parties (Argyle & Henderson, 1984: 231). Therefore, there are both practical rules (arranging to meet up, making meals, helping friends) and emotional rules (pre-empting and managing sources of conflict, listening to and appearing interested in a friend's views, withholding criticism in the interest of a friend's emotional wellbeing) to the labour required to maintain friendships. Put simply, for individuals to benefit from the social

good available through friendship, labour is required. When the work is performed in support of other family members, it falls within the category of domestic labour.

2 DISCUSSION

The findings from this study suggest that in heterosexual couples and families, it is the wife/mother who shoulders the bulk of the responsibility for initiating, scheduling and accommodating friendship activities for both husband and wife. This is seen as the norm in Australian marriages, as seen in the wide usage of the term: 'social secretary'. The views of husband and wife, John and Candice, are examples:

I'm not one of those people who gets on the phone and rings around everyone and gets a group together. That's something Candice is good at. It might sound a little condescending, and I don't mean it that way, but I refer to her as my 'social secretary'. She takes care of our social life, and we always seem to be busy... So I don't really need to do any of that organising, Candice takes care of it (John, 48 years).

John, felt that it was not necessary to organise social activities when Candice was so capable of keeping the calendar full. He confidently relinquishes these duties to her. In contrast, rather than seeing women as being competent in this type of work, Candice claimed that men are simply not 'proactive' when it comes to arranging meetings between friends.

For the most part ... it's the women who do the organising of all the friendship stuff in the relationships, not the men. I don't know many men who are proactive friends, that might be a reflection on the sort of friends we have – one [male] friend is a proactive friend – but other than that I think it's really mostly the women who keep it up (Candice, 49 years).

In some cases the men appeared to have virtually no friends of their own, but were happy for their wives to make friends for them.

Summing it up, Annie makes the friends for both of us... See all the neighbours that are friends, with the exception of [one male neighbour] probably Annie's friendly with them and I feel like I tag along... So if [friends] ask us over for something or other and Annie decides we should go, then I'll go... but I enjoy it, I'm very happy for her to make the friends (Duck, 76 years).

Both the men and women in this study saw the role women play as 'social secretary' in functionalist terms. Just as woman's role as the 'carer' in families is seen by many as 'natural', the role women play as 'social secretary' is unquestioned.

A difference between the views of the men and women was that the men spoke of organising social events in terms of 'work', whereas the women spoke of it in terms of 'sharing affections'. Although this work that women conduct in their personal and shared communities would be termed as emotional labour, this was not seen as labour by the women, but rather an activity they enjoyed participating in. In investigating why it is that women do not find this additional labour unfair or burdensome, one could argue that it is because she has accepted the familial ideology and essentialist views that as a female she is naturally suited to, and should not see as work, the 'labour of love'. Taking Hochschild's critical approach to this finding, the question remains, have the women conducted 'deep acting' in order to align how they feel with how they 'ought' to feel?

Social scientists and feminists have been criticised for not taking women at their word in their acceptance of playing out gender roles (Nock, 2000). There was certainly no evidence when conducting micro-analysis on the interview data to suggest the women in this study should not be taken at their word. It could be posed, therefore, that women do not question the fairness of this distribution of labour because they enjoy it and have access to a degree of power by playing the role of 'social secretary'. This is reflected in Jan's comments:

I find that women are the social secretaries of the family, so we keep up very well with my friends, but *his friends have drifted off a bit* – that he had before I met him. And I know when we're doing the ring around to go places, you'll laugh and say 'can I speak to the social secretary' instead of the 'wife' if you speak to the men [laughs] (Jan, 68 years – emphasis added).

The labour women contribute in the form of social co-ordination can act as a site of power and resistance for women. Just as family matriarchs can hold degrees of power through taking charge of family decisions and activities, women in partnerships hold the position of power in regards to friendship activity. Rather than contest this power, men readily relinquish authority when it comes to their social time. This might be because there is no socially sanctioned status attached to men in taking on the tasks associated with maintaining friendship and because it reinforces ideologies of women being of service to men.

Social research on the division of domestic labour tends to focus on the disadvantage women face due to the uneven distribution of work. However, although the men in this study did not question the inequity of friendship management work, it was apparent that they are vulnerable to disadvantage due to the power women hold in the management of men's personal relationships. This power should not be viewed simply as having control over who the couple have dinner with, but it is power within networks of social support. It has been shown that having strong personal communities is a predictor of both the emotional and physical health and productivity of individuals, specifically in old age (Pahl, 2000:147). Without participating in the development and maintenance of their personal communities, men are left vulnerable to loneliness and isolation, as will now be demonstrated.

There were three participants in the retired cohort who had experienced the sudden loss of their wife (social secretary), either due to her initiating divorce unexpectedly or due her death. All three men referred to this transition as deeply lonely, dark and extremely difficult to traverse. There was reference made to turning into hermits and suicide attempts in the stories they told. Panachel, who lost his wife at the age of 57 years, referred to sinking into a 'black hole' and he found it extremely difficult to rebuild his life.

When you lose a person who is that close, the world looks fairly black and it takes some considerable time – between twelve and eighteen months – to work yourself out of that hole. During that first period my experience was that I didn't form any friendships ... but then after a certain period of time ... you start to look around for friendship – make a *deliberate attempt to make friends* ... it becomes a driving force to establish a whole new world of friends and friendships ... I can recall actually putting *great effort* into trying to make friends with people (Panachel, 77 years – emphasis added).

This friendship maintenance work, that would have ordinarily been taken care of by Panachel's wife in the past, now presented itself as needing to be done or Panachel would have no social support whatsoever. For Panachel this represented 'great effort'.

A further finding that added to these men's vulnerability, which is beyond the scope of this paper to expand on, was that the men each claimed their wives to have been their best friends, to the exclusion of developing their own close same-sex friendships. Although they did not give the impression that they wanted or needed close male companionship, by following these gender role rules, each of these men had effectively alienated themselves from close support networks with others, and as a result, were left devastated in the absence of their wives. However, unlike losing a secretary in the work place, they were unable to hire a 'temp' to take over the labour. This meant having to suddenly learn to apply the practical and emotional skills they had otherwise taken for granted. Two of the three men discussed here remarried within two years of the first wife's departure, and regained a sense of control in *giving over once again* the control of their social life.

By contrast, not one of the 15 women in this study who had experienced separation or the death of their spouse across their lifespan referred to having to rebuild social networks at the time of loss. They were able to focus purely on their grieving process with a strong support network by their side; whereas the men mentioned were left grieving their wives in isolation.

Bluey (75 years), was the one widower in this study who had defied the gender rules throughout his married years and had maintained close friendships outside of his marriage. When his wife died he had an active support network to comfort and care for him. He spoke of being humbled by the amount of support he received from friends during his time of grieving. Unlike Panachel and Liam, Bluey did not remarry and said that he does not feel isolated. By ensuring he continued to do the labour that is required for maintaining friendships while his wife was alive, Bluey was able to set himself up with a strong support network that came into full force in his time of need.

In most cases the men did not view the uneven distribution of friendship management to be problematic, in fact as stated, they preferred it that way. However, there were two participants, Skippy (48 years) and James (45 years), who were dissatisfied with their experience of the gendered division of labour in private social affairs. Both men stated that they would like to have more social time with their friends; however, their wives restrict their time with friends, placing their husbands in a perceived position of powerlessness in relation to their friendship activity. In these cases, the men played out complex scripts in order to spend more time with their friends. Skippy referred to telling his wife on several occasions he had to work late when he was actually going out to dinner or to the pub with his friends. Rather than resorting to the overt rule breaking strategies Skippy used, James referred to using psychological manipulation to plant the idea of spending time with friends in his wife, Carla's, head while making her feel like it was her idea.

I do consider myself a people person, but I think of myself as a 'restricted' one... very rarely is someone allowed over. A guy rang up the other day and said 'mate, can I drop in and have a game of billiards and have a chat with you?' and I had to turn around and say to Carla 'do you mind if Peter drops in?' and she said 'don't let him over today' and I said 'well when?' she goes 'I'll let you know' and that was probably six months ago, so it's just never happened. She just doesn't like people coming over, ... I've got to try and manipulate Carla to invite them over [laughs] (James).

The experiences of James and Skippy also demonstrate the vulnerability of men when their ideal level and type of friendship activity is in conflict with their spouse's ideal. In these situations, men are required to do emotion work of their own to align their feelings with the feeling rules, or to challenge or resist these gender norms.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This study provides evidence of the normative acceptance in Australian culture of a further role that women play in domestic labour. The 'social secretary' role encompasses both practical tasks and emotion management. The women in this study did not question the inequality of the role, as it proves to be a site of power and area of control in their lives. Men also do not question the inequity because this work is seen to be 'better suited' to women and provides a level of friendship and support without effort on their part. However, men experience dissatisfaction when they feel their access to friends is restricted. They are also left vulnerable in the event of the sudden departure of their spouse. In both cases, men must learn and adopt emotion management strategies to gain access to an acceptable level of friendship and support, or perform deep acting to change their feelings so they come into alignment with gender norms.

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