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Unveiling the Invisible Learning from Unpaid Household Work: Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning

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Abstract: This paper explores the different dimensions of unpaid household work, and the informal learning involved in unpaid household work, and other non-work related activities. As part of a research project on Work and Lifelong learning (WALL), this paper draws its Data from a National Survey on Work and Learning (2004) done by the WALL research network, and compares them between different ethnic groups and recent immigrants, especially Chinese immigrants.

Introduction

In the past two decades, numerous studies have been done on the gendered nature of unpaid household work (Devault, 1991; Hochschild, 2003; Luxton, 1990; Waring, 1999), and on lifelong learning and its impact on adult education (Edwards, 2000; Grace, 2002, Jarvis, 1999). Despite the many insightful results generated in each field and an increased awareness of the importance of lifelong learning in informal contexts (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2004), most of such research focuses on men's informal learning for paid work, ignoring women learners (Hayes, 2000), the homeplace as a learning site (Gouthro, 2005) and unpaid household work as a means to learn knowledge and skills that are useful for both paid and unpaid work (Eichler, 2005, Liu, 2006).

This paper explores the different dimensions of unpaid household work, and the informal learning involved in performing housework and care work tasks, and other non-work-related activities, with the focus on recent Chinese immigrants in Canada. By using a critical feminist analysis, I argue that unpaid household work and care work are highly gendered. Similarly knowledge and skills related to such work are also gendered, and are influenced by race and ethnicity, as well as period of immigration. As part of a project on unpaid household work and lifelong funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), this paper draws and compares data from a National Survey on Work and Learning (2004) done by the research network on the Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL)

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Literature Review

For a long time, unpaid housework was not considered real work, but simply a “labour of love” (Luxton, 1980). This is because traditional definition of “work” excludes unpaid work and is measured only through paid activities linked to the market (Beneria, 1999). As a result, unpaid housework is often ignored, and undervalued.

Numerous studies have indicated that unpaid household work is a highly gendered activity, with women performing two thirds of all unpaid household work, despite their increasing participation in the paid employment, whether full- or part-time (Baxter 1997, Beaujot et al. 2000, Beneria, 1999; Coverman 1989, John & Shelton 1997, Luxton, 1980; South & Spitze 1994, Zukewich, 2002). Women are also more likely to be responsible for tasks that are not flexible and frequent (i.e., cooking, cleaning), while men are more likely to do tasks that are non-routine, less frequent (i.e., household maintenance) or seasonal in nature (i.e., gardening). This gendered nature of household work has been observed in research on various family patterns (Baxter, 2005; Hochschild, 1989; Giddings 1998; Ilig, 1999; South & Spitze, 1994), in different countries (Alvarez and Miles, 2003; Frederick, 1995; Zuo and Bian, 2001), and among different ethnic groups (Haddad and Lam, 1994; Hossain, 2001; Kamo and Cohen, 1998; Kim et al., 1979; Orbuch and Eyster, 1997).

From the very beginning, research on lifelong learning has had its focus on government policies and their impact on formal education (see Collins, 2003; Edwards, 2000; Hart, 1992; Jarvis, 1999; Schuetze, 2000). Despite growing attention to informal forms of lifelong learning in recent years, the focus is on paid labour, ignoring the homeplace as a learning site (Gouthro, 2005) and unpaid household work as a means to learn knowledge and skills that are useful for both paid and unpaid work.

Past literature indicates that the home is a location of few opportunities for learning, as skills in housework and childcare are perceived as intuitive and natural rather than learned (Hayes, 2000b). However, Gouthro (2005) argues that, as a core aspect of the lifeworld, the homeplace is the first site for individual learning experiences, a place where values, beliefs, morals and goals are often discussed and negotiated. It is also a place where women develop their gender identities and learn in personal ways the effects of gender hierarchies in social relationships and the sexual division of labour.

Many feminist scholars attribute the devalued life-affirming learning to a masculine definition of work and the devaluation of unpaid labour (Waring, 1999; Eichler (2005). Others (Gouthro; 2005; Hart, 1997) see a political dimension in this absence of homeplace from the dominant discourse on lifelong learning which reflects how a masculine perception has largely defined research parameters in education. Building on previous feminist scholarship on housework and lifelong learning, Liu (2006) argues that the masculine, market-oriented discourse of lifelong learning not only makes unpaid household work invisible, but also renders its learners and their knowledge genderless, classless, and raceless, thus ignoring the

¹ 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."

impact of those factors on the content of learning, process of learning, ways/means of learning, as well as the purpose of learning.

Methodology

The Canada-wide survey of work and lifelong learning (WALL) was conducted through telephone interviews in 2004. It was done as part of the research network on The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL). The survey involves 9,063 Canadian adults over age 18, of whom, 5121 (56.5%) are women and 3942 (43.5%) are men. Based on their self-report, the majority of the people surveyed are white (86%), about a quarter (24.4%) are non-white. 1784 respondents are immigrants, about 30% of whom came to Canada after 1990.

The WALL survey on Work and Lifelong Learning was the first in North America to examine informal learning related to unpaid housework and community work. In the survey, housework includes cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare and other often complex household tasks, while community work includes organization-based volunteering and unpaid help to friends and neighbours in their communities. In this paper I will examine data on unpaid housework, and other unorganized, non-work related activities and the learning involved in them.

Research Findings

Participation Rate and Duration of Household Work

According to the WALL 2004 surveys, virtually all women and men did some general household work (including cooking, cleaning, shopping, home budgeting, yard work, home maintenance) on a weekly basis. But women remain responsible for most of it even though their participation in paid work has continued to increase relative to men. Child-care remains a large and incalculable responsibility, mainly for women. Many less people perform elder care but those who do spend over 10 hours per week. Over 40 percent of adults participate in community volunteer organizations, while two thirds are involved in helping friends and neighbours. Overall, time devoted to unpaid work is comparable to paid work (Please see Table 1).

Table1. Participation Rate (%) and Duration (Average weekly hours) of Unpaid Household Work

Sex	Housework		Childcare		Eldercare		Helping neighbours	
	[%]	Hours	[%]	Hours	[%]	Hours	[%]	Hours
Male	97	12.8	36	21.3	15	10.4	70	5.0
Female	97	20.7	39	39.1	16	14.1	63	5.8
Total N	8508		9025		9026		8607	

Sources: WALL Survey, 2004.

As Table 1 indicates, 97 percent of both women and men claimed to have done unpaid housework. But as the table also shows, women still devote substantially more weekly time to housework, an average of 20 hours versus 12 hours for men. This is consistent with the 2005 General Social Survey, which found averages of 23 hours for women and 14 hours for men per week respectively (Statistics Canada, 2005b). This WALL survey indicates that the gender gap in general housework may be narrowing but it still appears to be very substantial.

In 2004, over a third of Canadian adults reported some involvement in unpaid childcare, for an average of over 30 hours per week. Again, while general participation rates are fairly close between males and females, the bulk of unpaid labour continues to be performed by women. The respective averages were almost 40 hours per week for women and just over 20 hours per week for men; the majority of women caregivers devoted over 30 hours per week while the majority of men spent less than 20 hours per week in child care duties.

Eldercare is also becoming a more prominent form of unpaid work in our aging society, with about 15 percent of adults now engaged in such caring activities for an average of about 12 hours per week. Women appear to devote only slightly more time to eldercare than men.

The 2004 WALL survey found that over 65 percent of those over 18 did volunteer work of helping out friends and neighbours in their communities over the past week. It suggests that unorganized volunteer work is widespread in Canada and that Canadians spent an estimated average of 5 hours per week in helping friends and neighbours over the past year.

The Survey also indicates that, among married or common-law couples, where partners are both employed full-time, males and females are slightly more likely to report a more equitably division of household labour than other couples. But around half of women employed full-time indicate they still always or usually do most of the housework while only a handful of full-time male partners do so.

Informal Learning Through Unpaid Household Work

In the survey, respondents who indicated they did housework or volunteer work were asked whether they engaged in any of a variety of related informal learning activities, and then asked to estimate the amount of time they devoted to these learning activities on a weekly basis. All respondents were also asked whether they engaged in any other informal learning in their general interest pursuits (such as sports or leisure) not directly related to either paid or unpaid work. The basic findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Participation rate (%) and Average weekly hours in informal Learning by Activity, All Eligible Respondents.

Area of Informal Learning	Male [%]	Female [%]	Average [%]	Average [Hours]	Total Number
Housework	83	82	82	5.8	8607
Volunteer Work	79	74	76	5.0	3745
General Interest	83	80	82	4.0	9024
Job			87.6	5.3	5428
Total		91		13.9	9024

Sources: WALL Survey, 2004.

*Only those who reported doing some Non-work-related informal learning were asked questions about the topics.

*Average hours per week are calculated as mean of those doing informal learning.

Table 2 indicates that the vast majority of participants in housework, in volunteer work and in general interest activities indicated that they engaged in some types of related informal learning. The participation rate was over 80 percent in all of these unpaid activities in 2004. These rates tend to be only slightly lower than those on job-related informal learning (87.6%).

Overall, the participation rate of Canadian adults in some form of informal learning was very high (91%). Considering all forms of self-reported informal learning for all participants, the time devoted averaged around 14 hours per week. Unlike the participation rates in unpaid work which vary greatly, from a minority in volunteer work, to over 60 percent in paid work to virtually everyone in some form of housework and general interest activities (See Table 1), the estimated amount of time on related informal learning appears to be quite similar in all of them, averaging around 5 hours per week in both paid and unpaid activities. Although such averages are merely rough approximations estimated by the respondents themselves, we can at least conclude that there is very substantial informal learning occurring in relation to each of these adult activities, which warrants further consideration in a learning society.

Content of Non-work Related Informal Learning by Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Period of Immigration

The survey indicates that housework-related informal learning is probably the most widespread type of unpaid work-related learning, although the least studied. In terms of basic housework activities, more women indicated involvement in informal learning related to cooking (51%), childcare and elderly care (35.9%, 26.4%), while more men claimed informal learning on home maintenance (51%), home renovation and gardening (51%), and equipment and appliances (49%). Non-white women reported a higher involvement in learning related to elderly care (35.1%), while non-white men and women share an equal amount of learning related to parenting or childcare (41.1 vs. 42.2%). However, more Chinese men (26.7%) than women (20.9%) reported learning involved in eldercare and parenting/childcare.

In other non-work-related activities, more Canadian born reported informal learning in the following areas: health and welling (61.4%), Leisure & hobby (52.9%), social political, and environmental issues(48%), interpersonal/social skills (44.3%). For recent immigrants who came after 1990, nearly 60 percent were engaged in learning language skills (58.9%), and computers (64.7%). Recent immigrants were also more active in learning cultural traditions and customs (51.7%), religion and spirituality (47.1%) and science & technology (43.5%).

In many aspects, recent Chinese immigrants share similar trend in their learning trajectory. They have higher rates in informal learning related to communication skills (57.5%), Intimate relationship (46.2%), and they have the highest rate in informal learning about computers (70.7%), language skills (69.7%), science and technology (53.3%), and culture (48.7%). Compared to the early Chinese immigrants, there is a significant increase among the recent Chinese immigrants involving in learning religion and spirituality (41.3% vs. 28.2%). This is probably because, unlike the early immigrants who were mostly from Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, the majority of recent Chinese immigrants came from Mainland China. Most of them had not had any contact with religion or had any before they came to Canada. Immigration gave them the opportunity to get close to church or religious beliefs, and to explore their spiritual life in Canada.

Conclusion

The national survey on Work and Lifelong Learning reveals that virtually all women and men did some household work, and that housework-related informal learning is probably the most widespread type of unpaid work-related learning. However, just as household work is highly gendered, informal learning through housework and carework follows the same pattern, and is also shaped and influenced by race, ethnicity, education and length of time in Canada. Given the long neglected reality of unpaid household work and the difficulty in defining and

measuring such activities, further studies are needed to explore the different dimensions of informal learning involved in unpaid household work.

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