

## “WHERE IS THE VALUE OF HOUSEWORK?”

### RE-CONCEPTUALIZING HOUSEWORK AS FAMILY CARE ACTIVITY

#### Abstract

This research aims at scrutinizing closely actors' perceptions of the value, meanings, and meaningfulness of doing housework, in order to discuss the way in which people who do housework receive recognition. In doing so, it clarifies the function of familiar-private spheres in life, which differ from the market or political arenas. It is based on a two-pronged approach: firstly, to reveal conceptually the value of housework and to demonstrate its significance, thereby indicating ways to give recognition to doing housework, including something not yet included in political economic literature, namely actors' perception of doing housework. Secondly, it aims empirically to show how actors' perceptions of housework can offer a clue to comprehending the care deficit. This care deficit is often conventionally diagnosed as the result of increasing women's participation in the labour market, in line with modernization, industrialization and demographic change. However, while this conventional perspective sees women's contribution in family life, especially when the family is a unit of production, it does not, importantly, ask why men have not taken on housework in proportion to women's withdrawal from it.

In order to examine the underlying mechanisms of actors' practices of housework and their relation to the care deficit, this thesis uses the lenses of social psychology and of everyday life. In that our practices in everyday life produce and re-produce ourselves and society itself (Heller 1984), the every-day practice of housework is focused on here as the locus of care change. Then, relying on the rationale of symbolic interactionism, i.e. that we act on the basis of the meaning we find in interacting with external conditions and with others (Blumer 1969), this research analyses the value, meanings, and meaningfulness of doing housework, as shaped by actors' everyday practices.

South Korea is an exceptionally good case in which to consider housework, given its compressed modernity, which is characterized by rapid socio-economic change with partially overlapping pre-modern and post-modern phases (Chang 1999). In Korea, compressed modernity has provoked intricately knotted interactions among actors, creating markedly different everyday housework practices in different generations. To begin to understand these, and the variety of life conditions and their relation to housework, in 2013 I conducted 79 biographical interviews in 8 categories of household in two generations (elderly couples, single elderly women, single elderly men, paid domestic workers, full-time housewife couples, dual earning couples, single mothers and co-housing couples), as well as a full-time house-husband couple and three focus groups (men with paid work, women with paid work and full-time housewives).

To analyse this data, firstly (after transcribing all the interviews), relying on inductive reasoning, I considered actors' perceived value and meanings of doing housework by categorizing interviews based on life strategies and trajectories. Secondly, by combining a framework of pathways to meaningful work (autonomous self, contribution, self-connected, and social self) (Rosso et al. 2010) and the different standards for social recognition in pre-modern and modern society (Fraser and Honneth 2003), I interpreted the meaningfulness of doing housework. Thirdly, I paired the three spheres in which people gain recognition (love, law and individual achievement) put forward by Honneth (2003) with three value

domains (care, justice, and freedom) by Van Staveren (2001), to allow a conceptual discussion of ways recognition is gained by doing housework and thereby how the value of housework can relate to well-being in everyday life.

In Korea's early industrialization generation, which experienced extensive poverty and a very unequal gender order, the "gendered role division (women for the private arena/family, men for the public arena)" was fairly striking. Within this role division, given the significance of production within the family at a time of industrial underdevelopment, women's work (including house-work) was a central source of material life in the family. Women's housework was crucial for family survival. Based on women's huge contribution to family material life, women's housework does receive recognition from other family members, as a mothers' sacrifice and as a material contribution. However, this recognition was only given after the role was completed, and within a strong gender hierarchy.

For the democratization generation, which has experienced economic development and laws proclaiming gender equality, the "gender division of labour (women for caregiving, men for breadwinning)" has a different meaning. It reinforced the economic inferiority of women. Also, housework and the meaning of doing housework lost its productive character. It remained necessary labour linked to the well-being of the family, but became an obstacle to everyday life. The everyday practices of housework have shrunk within two generations, from: "as a woman I should do it as far as I can, I think to do housework is my reason" in the early industrialization generation to "I'm not such a person who is good at doing housework" in the democratization generation. This shift is rooted in the loss of the meaningfulness of housework and has resulted in a care deficit.

Three factors contribute to this loss of meaningfulness. Two are related to weakening traditional gender norms: gender equality and having a choice between housework and another lifestyle. These lead to the third factor, the decrease in the embodied value of housework. This stems firstly from the decreasing proportion of material value that housework contributes to family life, secondly from using market logic to perceive its value and, thirdly from the insufficiently fulfilling desire to take enjoyment from the non-material value of housework. As for the first, this decreasing contribution stems from economic development; we indeed have more room for choice. As for the second, perceiving housework by market logic is a conceptual fallacy discursively entwined with both social cultural standards. It is common within academic discourse and follows logically from the leading cultural ideology of individual achievement in modern society, which give priority to the public over the private. This conceptual fallacy excludes the non-market value of housework, causing the embodied value of housework to be undervalued. In everyday life, perceiving housework using market logic distorts the feature of giving, an enjoyment of its nonmarket value. This provokes the third factor. Since the way one earns a social self is now wholly through acting in public, housework and care are devalued, and each individual's genuine choice is limited.

These findings gain greater depth when integrated with recognition theory (Fraser and Honneth 2003) and the triad economic value domains (Van Staveren 2001) and a triad of human deeds modified from a theory from Arendt ([1958] 1998). Employing this framework, I argue against the theoretical discussions that consider housework to be work, the root that allows people to consider housework using market logic. Unlike existing discussion about work, which focus on realms where the deed is conducted such as private or public, or goods and services which would involve values, I focused on the different ways people allocate goods and services. Integrating the framework with the experiences of paid domestic

workers, who do house-work both as paid domestic workers and (sometimes) as providers in care action programs in addition to care within their own families, I discussed distinctive features of allocating goods and services in the triad of care spheres.

The distinctive feature of doing housework at home is giving with no contract, by which the receiver can enjoy the value of care and feel themselves to be precious as a person to whom someone willing to give care out of love. If someone does care work in the labour market, the care worker should get equal exchange between the work and the salary, thereby enjoying the value of freedom. To consider the relational feature of care relying on care theory would provoke a care penalty because it would hurt the basic logic of care in the market, where receivers get care work and fulfil their care needs through their ability to buy it. At the same time, as democratic citizens, all of us have a duty and right to a legitimate good public care system, allowing us equal access to a decent care level, according to the resources of the state. Thus, what makes the specific values in three domains visible is the way goods and services circulate. The human deeds related to care can consist of care work in the market, care activity in the home or community, and public care action in politics. This categorization is anchored in the empirical world thanks to domestic workers' embodied knowledge. It allows housework to finally be reconceptualised as "family care activity"

In sum, care value is not revealed in the logic of the market. Care is manifested by giving within familial-private spheres, which is between care givers and receivers, via shared experiences that include positive emotional values of gratitude and love. In this way, care is part of creating an individual self. The self also exists in two other spheres: in the market for the value of freedom and in politics for the value of justice through political action. The balance of these three domains (home, market, and public) in everyday life is not only the basis of the "work-life-balance" but also a vital life condition simultaneously creating the individual self and the social self.