The Gendered Meaning of Clean: An Experimental Housework Design

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Gender stands out, even today, as one of the strongest divisions in social life. Women and men behave differently on many dimensions: speech patterns, sexual activity, paid work patterns, and housework. For scholars of housework and gender, one question has been whether men and women behave differently because they are socialized to have different identities, traits, and preferences, or because, during the course of social interaction, others hold them accountable to gendered expectations. Although research before the 1980s often emphasized the role of gendered socialization, which emphasizes how internalized norms guide men and women to later behavior, the “doing gender” perspective, introduced in the mid 1980s, has become popular to explain the gender division of household labor (Brines 1994; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987). According to this perspective, housework is one way in which men and women “do gender,” or match their behavior to normatively gendered social expectations. From this, scholars of housework studies draw deeply on the symbolic interactionist perspective, documenting housework as a site of reproduction and reinforcement of gender (Berk 1986; Goffman 1977). Yet while the gender production perspective is often cited as an explanation for patterns of housework, it can be difficult to distinguish gender production from internalized gender norms. Men and women might do different amounts of housework because they hope to match others’ expectations, or simply because they perceive mess (or lack thereof) differently.

To date, establishing direct evidence for one or both of these theoretical mechanisms---internalized gender norms and gender production---has been challenging given that most prior studies rely on survey data or in-depth interviews that are limited in their ability to evaluate causal relationships. We address this gap by employing a novel experimental design that allows us to test a) whether men and women systematically perceive mess differently (internalized gender norms) and b) whether individuals police mess differently on the basis of gender (gender
production). First, an expectation of internalized gender norms would predict that women, for whom cleanliness is more central to norms of femininity, would be more likely to notice and to attach negative values to mess. While a range of sociological research shows that women do more housework, the question remains as to whether they see mess differently than men. By addressing this question, we gain a deeper understanding of whether perceptions of mess capture the internalization and actualization of gender norms.

A second question is whether, in accordance with the doing gender perspective, the consequences of mess are more detrimental for women than men, that is, whether women are judged more harshly than men for having similar types of housework mess. Violating the norms of cleanliness may have subjective consequences. These may range from minor, including perceiving women as less feminine or likeable, to severe, including perceptions of women as incapable or unemployable. In contrast, men’s mess may be more easily excused as masculinity is not tied to the cleanliness of one’s home. From this, we make a contribution to understanding the interactive process of gender norms by measuring the consequences of gender deviance.

We use an online experiment to address these important theoretical questions. We ask 360 participants to view a photo of a room and to rate its degree of messiness. Each participant is randomly assigned to evaluate a photo of a room that is believed to be in either a man or a woman’s residence, and that is in either a messy or a clean state. We then ask the respondents to rate the room’s occupant across a range of outcomes to determine whether women are a) held more responsible for and/or b) more harshly criticized for mess.

Our study design is innovative and allows us to identify the importance and consequences of gendered expectations. Specifically, this research attempts to answer the question of what types of gender norms exist around housework. We focus on two main possibilities. First, it may
be that norms surrounding housework are internalized: that men and women perceive mess differently. This possibility would lend credence to the argument that women do more housework than men because they are more likely to believe that something needs to be addressed (i.e. women do more housework because they have stricter standards of cleanliness). A second possibility is that individuals judge men and women differently for mess. If this is true, then it is more likely that men and women do different amounts of housework because they are sensitive to the fact that they may experience negative consequences if their behavior deviates from the gendered expectations of others. As such, our study aims to identify important consequences of the gendered dimensions of housework.

THEORY
In recent decades, scholars have established that gender can simultaneously be a property of individuals as well as social interactions (Ferree, Lorber and Hess 1999; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 1998). For instance, men and women may be socialized toward different identities, traits, and preferences, yet they may also be compelled to behave in gendered ways because they know that others will hold them accountable to widely shared cultural beliefs about the way that men and women are or should be (see e.g. Ridgeway 2011).

Both of these theoretical perspectives have been invoked to understand the gender division of household labor. For instance, even after accounting for time availability, income, and employment status, women still take on the lion’s share of the housework in the vast majority of families (Bianchi 2011). On one hand, this pattern may arise because women tend to see mess differently from men, such that they have a lower tolerance for it and are therefore more readily motivated to clean it up. On the other hand, this pattern may arise because men and
women tend to “play” or “perform” their gender in accordance with others’ expectations (see e.g. Goffman 1977): a woman may expect to be readily judged by others if she fails to keep her home tidy, whereas a man may actively avoid doing too much housework in an effort to avoid being viewed by others as less masculine.

Although these accounts have been readily invoked in the literature, showing direct empirical evidence for them has proved difficult. Indeed, scholars often suggest that gender (or “gendered”) norms may help produce observed gender differences in behavior (Kornrich, Brines, and Leupp 2013). Although it may be reasonable to infer the relevance of normative expectations from gender differences in behavior, it can also be difficult to distinguish these norms from other types of explanations for the household division of labor, including economic (cf. Brines 1994). Thus, although the behavior itself may normative, it is more difficult to establish the extent to which the norm exists and has bearing on behavior.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We will gather a sample of 360 respondents from all age ranges. Respondents will be recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk), a subsidiary of Amazon.com. Individuals register with Mturk and take surveys that are interesting to them. Although these samples are not strictly representative of the national population, they are often more representative than samples of college students who are typically used in experimental research.

We plan to randomly assign respondents to one of four experimental conditions. We manipulate two independent variables: the messiness of the room in the photo (messy/clean), and the resident’s gender (man/woman). We will then collect a wide range of outcome variables. For instance, we will ask the respondents to rate their perceived messiness of the room and the extent
to which the mess seems acceptable or justifiable (e.g. How urgent is it that the mess be cleaned up?). We will then ask respondents to rate this person on a series of traits and characteristics, which include their perceptions of this person's competence, abilities and likeability.

By experimentally manipulating the gender of the room’s occupant, we will be able to determine whether women are systematically judged more harshly than men for mess and whether these judgments result in women being viewed as lesser across a range of dimensions. Furthermore, because we ask men and women participants to rate an identical room in either a messy or clean state, we will be able to gain empirical leverage on the question of whether women are likely to view mess differently than men.

We have received clearance from IRB to begin data collection, and we have funding for data collection efforts. We have already completed pretests for this study, which show that, in the absence of any information about the resident, evaluators perceive the messy photo to be significantly more “messy” than the clean photo, and that neither photo primes information about the resident’s gender, race, class, or family status. We plan to collect data in October and November 2015 and analyze results shortly after.


