Paid Work and Family Life (Coltrane, chapter 3)

Coltrane argues that changes in the economy have resulted in changes in the meanings of men and women in the home and workplace. (But there is a cultural lag.) Some highlights:

The shift from farm work to factory work resulted in the creation of the “two spheres.” Men were responsible for jobs, women for home. (But this was not possible for lower-class families.) Women became viewed as fragile. Men embraced rugged individualism. Women entered the work force during WWII, but the separate sphere ideal returned in the 1950s.

Economic changes in the last third of the 20th Century made the separate sphere ideal not viable for most families. However, the ideal remains important. This is a cultural lag.

Men’s attitudes and behaviors toward housework demonstrate this cultural lag. As more women have entered the workplace, men’s housework has increased, but women still do much more. They also do different chores.

The two spheres ideal affects labor markets. Women’s work becomes invisible. Employers justify discriminatory treatment of women since they assume that men are better workers and women have men to support them.

Because of the two spheres ideal, men can feel they are satisfying their family obligations in working, while women have to justify why working doesn’t make them bad mothers.
Latest Housework Information
Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson (2000.) “Is Anyone Doing Housework?”
Method: time diaries (1965, ‘75, ‘85, ‘95)
Findings:

The housework gap between wives and husbands has shrunk

But wives still do about twice as much as husbands (19.4 hours per week vs. 10.4 hours)

Much of change is due to wives doing less housework

Majority of wives’ housework (15.8 of 19.4 hours) is core housework (e.g., meals, housecleaning, laundry)

Majority of husbands’ housework (6.7 of 10.4 hours) is non-core housework (e.g., outdoor chores, repairs)

Research method: interviewed and surveyed 50 couples, in-depth observations of 12 families

Some major findings:

- Only 20% of husbands shared housework (did over 1/3)
- Women do more of daily jobs (cooking, cleaning, childcare)
- Men do more jobs that are occasional (repairs) or can be scheduled flexibly (changing the oil)
- Women do more undesirable tasks (washing toilets)
- Women do more child maintenance (feeding and bathing)
- Men do more enjoyable activities with children (trip to park)
- Men have more leisure time (“leisure gap”)
Families often develop “family myths” that obscure truth about division of labor in order to manage family tension

**Upstairs-downstairs myth**

“One day, when I asked Nancy to tell me who did which tasks from a long list of household chores, she interrupted me with a broad wave of her hand and said, ‘I do the upstairs, Evan does the downstairs.’ What does that mean? I asked. Matter-of-factly, she explained that the upstairs included the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, two bedrooms, and two baths. The downstairs meant the garage, a place for storage and hobbies—Evan’s hobbies. She explained this as a ‘sharing’ arrangement, without humor or irony—just as Evan did later. Both said they had agreed it was the best solution to the dispute. Evan could take care of the car, the garage, and Max, the family dog. As Nancy explained, ‘The dog is all Evan’s problem. I don’t have to deal with the dog.’ Nancy took care of the rest.” (p. 43)

**Second-shift fetishes**

“For Evan, also, the dog came to symbolize the entire second shift: it became a fetish. Other men, I found, had second-shift fetishes too. When I asked one man what he did to share the work of the home, he answered, ‘I make all the pies we eat.’ He didn’t have to share much responsibility for home; ‘pies’ did it for him. Another man grilled fish. Another baked bread. In their pies, their fish, and their bread, such men converted a single act into a substitute for a multitude of chores in the second shift, a token. Evan took care of the dog.” (p. 47)