Recent studies indicate that the majority of younger Americans believe in egalitarian relationships between men and women in marriage. These same studies show that many marriages today begin with an equal sharing of household and financial tasks (Gerson, 2002). However, research also illustrates that traditional gender roles, specifically reflected in the division of labor in families, remain ingrained in practice and ideology (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Erickson, 2005; Thompson, 1993). This adherence to traditional gender norms is particularly prominent among white middle class families. According to a wide variety of studies (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Hochschild, 1997; Perry-Jenkins, 1994; Thompson, 1993; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006) women, especially after the birth of the first child, continue to perform most of the housework and caregiving in their families despite working outside of the home in record numbers. Men, on the other hand, continue to define their primary role as economic providers for their families. More recently this division of labor has been referred to as a "neotraditional" arrangement wherein men perform most but not all paid work, and women perform most but not all unpaid work (Moen & Roehling 2005). This discrepancy between stated beliefs and actual practice raises many questions about how conceptualizations of gender roles intersect with work and family issues in American society.

Importance to Work/Family

Work inside and outside of the home is a fundamental feature of family life. However, until relatively recently, most scholars studied work and family life as separate, clearly delineated domains. Gender, while a significant area of study over the last thirty years, was disassociated from research on work-family issues (Thompson & Walker, 1989). This disconnect has persisted despite the fact that the labor force participation of women has increased steadily from approximately 43% in 1970 to 60% in 2001 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Interestingly, it was the pivotal work of an economist, Gary Becker, (1976; 1985) that introduced new perspectives on the relationship between gender and work-family analyses. In particular, he drew attention to the societal factors that induced women to enter the paid workforce. His
work served to highlight inequalities in the division of labor in homes, the recognition of childcare as work and the financial penalties often suffered by parents, and specifically, mothers (Drago, 2005).

More recently, studies in this area (Berk, 1985; Halpern & Murphy, 2005; Pleck, 1985; Thomson, 1991) have revealed that when family work and paid work are combined, studies indicate that women and men work approximately equal number of hours. However, men tend to place their energy into paid work, while women are more likely to emphasize family work (Crittenden, 2001). These studies have drawn attention to disparities in gender roles and have raised questions about analyses based solely on statistical computations of the number of hours worked in and outside of the home. These findings have also directed focus to the fact that until recently women’s work in the family has been unrecognized and undervalued (DeVault, 1987; Greenstein, 1996; Perry-Jenkins, 1994; Crittenden, 2001). This devaluation of women’s work raises concerns about the feasibility of a more equitable division of labor in families, especially when childcare duties become part of the scenario. It also requires more focused examinations of the role of gender ideologies and public policies that allow this situation to persist.

State of Body of Knowledge

Many of our mainstream beliefs about the “appropriate” roles of men and women stem from the industrial era that was characterized by the concept of separate spheres. During this time industrialization led to the differentiation between paid and unpaid work, which also became reflected in the distinction between men’s and women’s work. Men became involved in paid work in the “public sphere” while women became associated with unpaid work in the home, the “private sphere”. As the society moved predominantly towards a market economy, money became the main currency (Hattery, 2001; Boris & Lewis, 2006). This view of a “natural” division of labor was legitimized by conceptualizing the roles of women and men from a biological perspective. Women were thought to be more suited towards childbearing and childrearing, while men were more inclined towards the “public” arena of work and finance. Both men and women continued to care for their families, but men’s work came to be defined as more crucial due to its emphasis on economic provision (Hattery, 2001; Moen & Sweet, 2003). This gave birth to an ideology about gender roles and the division of labor in families that persists in U.S. culture.

Social scientific studies of gender roles have varied in their interpretations of this phenomenon. Some researchers view gender roles as “biological” in nature, and thus, inevitable, and others argue that their persistence can be explained by their functionality (Parsons & Bales, 1955 in Hattery, 2001). More recently, feminists have interpreted this adherence to traditional gender role constructs in families as particularly oppressive to women (Erickson, 2005; Hochschild, 1989; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Thompson & Walker, 1989). While gender role ideology has persisted in the United States to the current time, it is important to note that, in particular, African American men and women, low-income families, and
many immigrants were never able to adhere to these constructs about the “ideal” division of labor due to social and economic constraints (Coontz, 1992; Collins, 1994). These findings, in conjunction with demographic data that indicates a significant rise in the number of women in the paid labor force, raise questions about the processes that reproduce and maintain traditional gender constructs.

Greer and Fox (2000) offer two different explanations. They indicate that according to one interpretation, gender is enacted according to social scripts that are taught and rehearsed until they become internalized by the actors. This leads to a “slide from gender as role into gender as the essence of the self” (p. 1163). From this perspective, gender is an integral part of social structures into which the roles are embedded. Men and women act differently because they fulfill different positions in institutional settings, workplaces, and families. They take on gendered roles that are consistent with the role requirements of that position. This argument would indicate that men and women in the same structural roles can be expected to behave identically. In support of this hypothesis, an exploratory study by Epstein (1987) found no documented difference that can be attributed to the predispositions of men and women. She concluded that differences in the behaviors between men and women can be explained primarily due to gendered roles.

Another perspective views gender as “a social construct embodying cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity” (Greer & Fox, 2000, p. 1164). As a crucial part of social structure, gender is connected with other aspects of society such as class and race and becomes distinctly intertwined with the distribution of power, autonomy, privilege and resources. This approach focuses attention on the hidden processes that assign value and privilege based on sex. “Differential gender privilege, in turn, reinforces the establishment and maintenance of a culturally constructed, shared understanding of the differentness of men and women” (Greer & Fox, p. 1164). From this perspective, men and women vary in their degrees of “masculinity” and “femininity” and need to be constantly reminded to “do gender” (Greer & Fox, p. 1164). This perspective draws on the work of West and Zimmerman (1987), Ferree (1990) and Thompson (1993) who contend that gender constructs are enacted in specific contexts and, thus, vary across cultures and various times in history.

This social constructionist perspective has only attracted attention in the more recent gender role literature with various authors arguing that “not only do men as a group exert power over women as a group, but the definitions of masculinity and femininity reproduce those power relations” (Kimmel & Messner, 1989, p. 8). Additionally, Ellman and Taggart (1993) suggest that differences in power between women and men are institutionalized by culture and are expressed in the everyday relations of men and women, particularly in families. Tichenor (1999), for example, found that even among couples where wives earned more than their husbands, women still maintained most of the responsibility for the household. Based on this finding, she theorized that in order to maintain their femininity, women refrain
from taking on a more powerful role in their families, and instead, adhere to traditional notions of the roles of men and women. Further, many women deliberately make an effort to protect their husband’s masculinity by working to appear that their husbands are in control.

Strikingly, the bulk of research in the work, gender, and family arena continues to reflect a clear division of labor with women burdened by a “second shift” in their families once they return from their employment outside of the home (Artis & Pavalko, 2003; Hochschild, 1989). Greenstein (1996), for example, draws attention to the fact that although married women are more than twice as likely to work full-time today as in 1970, married men still do not participate in any significant manner in the day to day work in the household. Men have become more involved with childcare due to changing cultural norms, but when it comes to the daily maintenance of the home, women still assume the bulk of responsibilities. This finding is mediated by class differences. For example, Perry-Jenkins and Folk (1994) report that working-class wives performed a significantly higher amount of housework than middle class wives while Risman and Johnson-Sumerford (1998) found that among highly educated couples, role sharing has become the accepted norm.

Interestingly, studies indicate that women of all classes want men to participate in a more equal division of labor by taking on child care and household responsibilities (Apparala, Reifman & Munsch, 2003; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). And, yet, many factors seem to stop men from participating more extensively in family work. Some of these factors include the societal notion that family work is “women’s work”, a general devaluation of what women do, a lack of role models for participating in family work; men’s inexperience with certain household chores; and “even women’s difficulty in sharing control over the household domain” (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993, p. 191).

As noted before, most of the above mentioned studies have focused exclusively on the experiences of white middle-class couples. An examination of other groups in U.S. society reveals that it is difficult to discern clear cut boundaries between the work-family domains. In many ethnic and racial minority communities, women’s labor force participation has historically been much higher than among whites (Collins, 1994, 2001; Dill, 1994; Espiritu, 1997; 2003; Glenn, 1983; Romero, 1997). Particularly, African American families who trace their roots back to slavery share a different history than whites with respect to gender relations in the work and family domain. Historically, all African American women had to work regardless of marital, pregnancy, or motherhood status. In their case, race, and not gender, was the defining characteristic. After the Civil War, men faced employment discrimination, and, thus, women sought work as domestics, again balancing work, marriage, and motherhood (Collins, 1994).

Recent research among African American families indicates that couples often share an egalitarian perspective on the division of labor and economic provision for the family, with men just as likely to assist
in childcare activities and family work as women (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993). This more egalitarian viewpoint is reflected in hours spent on family work. For example, John & Shelton (1997) estimate that African American men spend an average of 21.7 hours per week participating in housework, while Caucasian men average of 17.8 hours. These differences in male participation rates may be explained by different conceptualizations of family work. Piotrkowski and Hughes (1993) theorize that African American women perceive their employment outside the home as part of their familial “care” obligation. Thus, men are expected to participate equally in household chores. Blee and Tickamyer (1995) point out that African American men are more likely than White men to have experienced living in a household with a working wife/mother and, thus, may be more egalitarian in their attitudes.

The sparse literature on work, gender and family among other racial and ethnic minority groups reveals the complexity of attempting to unravel ideology from practice. For example, Segura (1994) indicates that once the children of Mexican-American women are of pre-school age, they tend to become involved in the paid labor force in order to support their families despite an ideological adherence to traditional gender norms. In a similar vein, Lim (1997) found that even though traditional gender role behavior is the norm in Korean culture, once Korean women came to the United States they seek to create a more equitable division of labor by soliciting their husband’s participation. In those cases when they are unsuccessful, they resort to strategies that include resignation to their position and attempting to decrease their share of the tasks.

Espiritu’s studies (1997, 2003) on gender relations in Asian American and Latino immigrant families highlight the fact that the practice of gender in families intersects with class and occupational status. Based on an analyses of various studies of Asian American families, Espiritu (2003) found that more educated couples tended to share and practice greater egalitarian relationships within their households. While women still performed more of the housework, their husbands did participate in all aspects of family work. This increased participation by men may be explained due to an equal monetary contribution from men and women which led to wives successfully forcing their husbands to participate in domestic chores (Espiritu, 2003; Kibria, 1993).

The limited studies on work, gender, and family relationships in racial and ethnic families do not paint a clear picture of the extent to which egalitarian relationships have taken hold either in practice or ideology. For example, Kibria (1993) points out that middle class ethnic women living in white neighborhoods often do not have access to social support networks that might assist them in managing family work. Also, studies indicate that in working class families, men’s egos are often threatened by their wives’ provider roles, which, in extreme circumstances, can culminate in incidents of domestic violence (Foner, 1998). It is important to point out that particularly among very poor ethnic and racial minority families, survival of the family takes predominance over egalitarian gender relationships between the
conjugal couple.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

In a pivotal article, Thompson and Walker (1989) argued that it is difficult to understand the dynamics of gender relationships in families until we know more about the complex meanings of paid and family work for men and women. Building on the work of Berk (1985) they suggested that research needs to examine how partners alter or retain the gendered distribution of work through their daily interactions. They also pointed out that research findings indicate that most women collaborate with men to maintain gender specialization. This observation has since then been repeatedly reinforced in a variety of studies that indicate that while the ideology around gender roles has moved towards a more egalitarian model, in practice women seem to be as unwilling as men to move away from traditional conceptualizations of gender roles. Nevertheless, the literature on work, gender, and family has not answered the questions raised by Thompson and Walker in 1989. We have a proliferation of studies on work-family conflict, work-family balance, and work-family interaction (Halpern & Murphy, 2005). But we still do not know much about how and why men and women resist adopting more egalitarian models in practice. A notable exception is the work of Nicholas Townsend (2002) whose ethnographic study gives some insight into the values that middle class men hold and how they work to put these values into practice in their families.

Part of the problem with incorporating gender into work-family research may stem from methodological issues. Much of the work-family literature is based on statistical evidence. Studies tend to focus on macro-level phenomena such as the growth of women's participation in the paid labor force or the number of hours spent at work or at home. However, statistics do not capture the motivations behind individual's actions. They also do not take into account the larger cultural context. For example, changes in the society and economy affect different groups disproportionally. Low-income individuals and members of racial and ethnic minority groups often are more adversely affected by swings in the economy. They may work shift jobs, earn minimum wage, and are more subject to being laid off. More educated, white collar individuals often are privileged by having more flexible work schedules and due to earning more money, have better access to child care (Marler & Moen, 2005). Gendered behaviors in families are part of this larger context where belief systems around appropriate roles are shaped by the larger environment. They are subject to cultural influences, class differences, regionality, and socio-historical time.

Further, gender roles in family life and work need to be studied in the context of development across the life course (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Moen & Orrange, 2002; Moen & Sweet, 2004)). Virtually all contemporary studies are cross-sectional in nature, capturing work-family issues at one point in time. Longitudinal and developmental studies would uncover many unrecognized characteristics of men's
and women’s gendered behaviors. For example, research might highlight the fact that men and women’s careers may develop in different stages and may even have different meanings attached to them. Further as Greenhaus and Parasurman (1999) point out, much of the current research is conducted at an individual level of analysis. We need more studies that look at how couples at the family level make decisions, in order to understand how dual-earner partners view their roles (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999) and, also, how the context of the community intersects with these decisions (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Finally, virtually almost all studies on gender role behavior have focused on heterosexual, white married couples. We need to expand the focus to include cohabiting, ethnic, racial, gay and lesbian couples in our research. Including other family forms may help to unravel some of the complexities of the relationship between gender role constructs, work issues and family life.

**Conclusion**

Examining the persistence of traditional gender roles and the division of labor in families remains an elusive topic, characterized by generalizations and many gaps in our knowledge about various groups in our society. However, it is also a productive area of study as it allows us to understand more about power and control dynamics between men and women (Perry-Jenkins, 1994). Further, the reliance on traditional gender roles continues to "serve as a legitimate basis for the distribution of rights, power, privilege, and responsibility in families" (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998, p. 23). By expanding our studies to include diverse groups, better regional samples, and ethnographic findings, we can gain more insight into the role of ideology in individual’s lives and why gender relationships in families remain a terrain characterized by contradictions.

**References**


Halpern, D & Murphy, S. (2005). From balance to interaction: Why the metaphor is so important. In D. Halpern & S. Murphy (Eds.), *From work-family balance to work-family interaction: Changing the metaphor* (pp. 3-10). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Press.


