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**Socioeconomic Status and Housework:  
Cultural Differences in Participation in Routine Housework  
in Japan, Canada, and the US**

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# **Socioeconomic Status and Housework: Cultural Differences in Participation in Routine Housework in Japan, Canada, and the US**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We analyze time-use diaries from the American Time Use Survey 2003-2016, 1986-2010 Canadian General Social Survey, and the 2011 Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (*Shakai Seikatsu Kihon Chosa*) to investigate whether the effects of the socioeconomic status on housework participation work in the same manner across cultural contexts. Using the negative binomial regression, we test whether socioeconomic status is associated with less time spent on housework as the outsourcing hypothesis predicts. We find that this hypothesis stands only for Canadian and American women in wealthier households and unmarried Japanese women. On the other hand, married Japanese women are unlikely to reduce the participation in housework with the increase of their socioeconomic status. In fact, married Japanese women are likelier to increase their housework participation proportionately to the increase of their household income. The results suggest that in Japan, the institute of marriage places more expectation on women's housework participation, especially among women of higher socioeconomic status.

*Keywords:* gender and housework, Japanese households, routine housework

## **1. Introduction**

The division of household labor depends on a variety of social factors. The recent research in the global north draws attention of unpaid labor researchers to processes connected to class and economic standing of families (Gershuny, 2000; Gupta, 2007; Killewald and Gough, 2010). The reasoning behind increased interest in socioeconomic status (SES) is that higher SES provides households with stronger purchasing power and hence, helps women in such households to alleviate the housework burden.

The analyses of factors explaining gender differences in housework depending on SES oftentimes, however, assume that these factors work similarly in many, if not all, cultural contexts. In this paper, we investigate this assumption and pose the question whether socioeconomic status can predict the patterns of participation in the domestic labor based on SES in Japan, as well as it does in Canada and the US.

The purpose of this project is to analyze whether socioeconomic status produces differences in the allocation of time to household labor among Japanese, American, and Canadian women and men. The study will address two principal research questions (1) What are the patterns of participation in

housework by gender and marital status depending on the socioeconomic status (2) Are the patterns similar among Japanese, American, and Canadian women and men?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

There are two main approaches to the explanation of the gender gap in time spent on household labor: one, more economic, relies on the tenets of the rational choice theory and another focuses on gender. Within the economic camp, there are three major arguments that are relevant with regard to the gendered division of domestic labor.

First, the relative resources argument is based on the premise that households allocate their time in such a way so that they try to maximize the utility of the invested time for the household (Becker, 1981). Therefore, one partner would inevitably specialize more on the labor market activities and accumulate more economic resources than the other. For instance, in Japan, researchers find that with more bargaining power and relative resources women have, the more Japanese men begin to participate in housework and child care (Kubo, 2009; Nakagawa, 2009).

Consistent with the specialization theory (Becker, 1981), another argument is that household members bargain with time rather than with any other economic resource. A partner who has more time is expected to do more unpaid work (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Coverman, 1985; Hook, 2004). Because this argument emphasizes the importance of time availability for household decisions, it is called the time availability or time constraint perspective.

Gupta (2007) criticizes the stance that relative resources and power drive the gendered division of housework exclusively through bargaining mechanisms and insists that absolute, not relative, resources affect the disproportionate allocation of time to domestic chores, emphasizing the autonomous decision-making within households. Thus the third approach within the economic approach is referred to as the autonomy perspective. Killewald and Gough (2010) echo his concern and also confirm that the absolute resources might apply better to explaining the division of household labor.

There are, however, a number of problems with the resource-based explanation. For instance, it cannot account for the culturally prescribed norms and expectations about gender performances (Brines, 1994; Kolpashnikova, 2017; West and Zimmerman, 1987) and gender ideology (Ishii-Kuntz, 1992, 2009). In their turn, the scripts related to gender performances and internalized gender ideology are often dependent on local culture. However, even when the existence of cultural idiosyncrasies is taken into account, the association of gender ideology and identity (Ishii-Kuntz, 2009) with the performances of housework is asserted in most of the previous literature as working in the same way as in the western countries (Ishii-Kuntz, 2003).

Moreover, the over-reliance on the relative resources may conceal the differences in social class and its association with housework tasks (Ehrenreich 2001; Gershuny, 2000; Gupta 2007). Social class might be better captured by household income rather than relative or personal income. In households of higher SES, housework is more likely to be outsourced (Craig and

Baxter 2016; Gupta 2006). Thus the expectation for the housework performance for women of higher socioeconomic status is that they will spend less time on it than women of lower socioeconomic status (the *outsourcing hypothesis*). In accordance with the resource-based framework, specifically with the absolute resources framework, we can expect to observe the following pattern:

*Hypothesis 1: The higher the socioeconomic status, the less routine housework is performed by women.*

The situation with the overall division of housework in Japan has a similar pattern with any other country: women do a great share of all housework and child care (Inaba, 1998; Ishii-Kuntz, 2009; Matsuda, 2001; Nishioka and Yamauchi, 2017; Tsuyu, 2000). Based on the previous literature on housework in Japan, similar results with regard to the association between socioeconomic status and participation in housework are expected in Japan. However, as a result of differences in social status of women and men in Japan compared to the US, we also expect that the differences between women's and men's participation will be greater in Japan. Thus, the hypothesis 1 can be transformed to include cultural context as well.

*Hypothesis 2: The higher the socioeconomic status, the less routine housework is performed, regardless of cultural context.*

*Hypothesis 3: The absolute gap in time spent on housework will be greater for Japanese women and men, compared to American and Canadian women and men.*

Moreover, life-course transitions such as transition from being single to being married are expected to have significant effect on the participation in housework. For example, Gupta (1999) finds that among both women and men marriage is associated with more housework time. On the other hand, Baxter et al. (2008) find that the effects are more applicable to women rather than men. They found that men's housework time remained considerably stable throughout the life course stages. Thus, we expect the following:

*Hypothesis 4: Married women of all socioeconomic status are expected to contribute more of their time to housework, compared to their non-married counterparts.*

Since the previous research is inconclusive as to the expectations of men's housework time in transition to marriage, we only expect that their time will be less than that of women, married or non-married alike.

### **3. Methods**

For the Japanese data, we employed microfiles of the 2011 Survey on Time Use and Leisure Activities (STULA), also known as the *Shakai Seikatsu Kihon Chosa*. The STULA collects time diaries for two days. The survey sample uses a two-stage stratified sampling method. The primary sampling unit is the enumeration district (ED) of the Population Census

and the secondary unit is households. In 47 Japanese prefectures a total of 6,902 EDs were selected. Some sample EDs in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures were excluded from the survey because they were heavily affected by the Great Tohoku Earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011<sup>1</sup>. Then, 83,000 households were selected from lists of households in those EDs. All household members 10 years of age and above were asked to complete the survey. Foreigners living in Japan were also included in the survey.

For the American models, we use the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), 2003-2016 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Hofferth et al., 2016). The Census Bureau interviewed residents of the US who were at least 15 years of age in 50 states and one federal district. The sampling technique used is a stratified three-stage sample. The Current Population Survey (CPS) is used as the sampling frame for the ATUS and the selected members of households are interviewed 2-5 months after the completion of the CPS. The response rates for the ATUS time diaries are between 57.8 and 49.9%. The final weights adjust for the nonresponse and are used in the present study. The adjustment, however, only results in modest differences and the “set of estimates [with or without adjustment for nonresponse] are broadly similar” (Abraham et al., 2006). These differences are observed not with busier people but with people who have less connections to the community because it is difficult to reach them (Abraham et al., 2006).

Canadian data is from the microfiles of the Canadian General Social Survey (GSS) (Statistics Canada, 2011), cycles 2 (1986), 7 (1992), 12 (1998), 19 (2005), and 24 (2010). The non-institutional residents of Canada who were at least 15 years of age were interviewed in 10 provinces and territories via telephone, using the RDD (random digit dialing) sampling technique. The response rates were between 55.2% and 78.9%. The survey weights adjust for non-response.

We used several sample selection steps to produce the final analytic sample. There are two main subsamples within models: women and men for all three countries. Personal weights were re-coded based on the original survey weights and scaled to the original sample size, where needed.

### *3.1 Measures*

#### *3.1.1 Dependent Variables*

The dependent variable is represented by an aggregate measure of the time spent on indoor housework, cooking and cleaning. The participation in housework variables in all three countries are measured in minutes on a diary day.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for housework time between women and men in Japan, the US and Canada. There is a significant difference between time spent by women and men in all countries (adjusted Wald test returns significant p-values for all four tasks and their aggregation). The widest gap between women’s and men’s participation in housework is in

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the differences in sampling, the results presented in the paper provide the similar patterns if we use the anonymized data for the full sample of the previous survey for 2006.

Japan. This confirms the Hypothesis 3. On an average day, American women spend 104.6 minutes on cooking and cleaning, whereas men spend only 40.4. Gender gap in housework is higher in Canada than in the US, 78.8 minutes, and in Japan, it reaches 137.3 minutes. Thus the gender gap in housework between Japanese women and men is approximately twice as higher than that in the two north-american countries.

Table 1 Dependent Variables

Variables	Description	Mean (Women)	SE	Mean (Men)	SE	Diff. in Means
Housework						
Japan	Cooking and cleaning (min.)	154.099	(0.717)	16.825	(0.238)	137.274***
USA	Cooking and cleaning (min.)	104.639	(0.514)	40.424	(0.360)	64.215***
Canada	Cooking and cleaning (min.)	121.742	(0.815)	42.933	(0.524)	78.809***

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (adjusted Wald test)

### 3.1.2 Independent and Control Variables

The main independent variable - household income - is measured in ten million JPY in Japan, in hundred thousand USD in the US, and in hundred thousand CAD in Canada. We measure the socioeconomic status by household income, meaning the higher the household income, the higher the presumed economic class of the family.

The interaction dummy variables are gender of the respondent (1=woman, 0=man) and whether the respondent is married (1=married, 0=otherwise).

Additionally, we control for the presence of children (Wight et al., 2013). We also take into consideration that gender attitudes change with time and generation (Baxter and Kane, 1995; Marshall, 2011) and use education and age in years trying to capture the age effects and those associated with differences in socialization as a result of education. Because the effects of age are often non-linear, we add also the quadratic term of age variable into our models.

Since there are usually considerable differences in diaries depending on the day of the week when the diary was collected, we also control for whether the diary day was completed for a weekday or on the weekend (1=weekday, 0=Saturday or Sunday).

### 3.2 Models

To analyze the effects of gender, marital status, and socioeconomic status on participation in routine housework, the models include the interaction terms between the main variables of interest: household income, marital status and gender. Because the association between

household income and time spent on housework can be non-linear, we added quadratic terms for household income into interactions. Using only linear terms for household income bears similar results to those reported in this paper, however, they lack precision compared to the quadratic specifications. We employ negative binomial regression for the analysis due to the non-normal distribution of the response variable. Because of the inherent idiosyncrasy of the time use distributions, it might be better to look at the time spent on an activity as count variable and use the negative binomial regression instead of OLS. Overdispersion parameters show that negative binomial regression is preferable to the Poisson regression in all three datasets (alpha is significantly different than zero). The graphs are produced by estimating predicted margins on all levels of household income based on the results of the models.

The results presented in this paper are robust to the use of other estimation models, such as OLS or the Poisson regression. It is also robust to the exclusion of correlates of socioeconomic status like education.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The estimates for each country, Japan, USA, and Canada, are used to analyze the effects of the socioeconomic status on the time spent on routine housework, cooking and cleaning. Table 2 summarizes the coefficients of the negative binomial regressions for each country. These models include both subsamples of women and men. Table 3 and Table 4 report the results for women and for men, respectively. The resulting effects of SES on housework participation and its interaction with gender and marital status are similar in Canada and the US, however, for Japan the results are distinct. The effects of socioeconomic status on married women's participation in routine housework is opposite to those in the US and Canada: Japanese women spend more time in housework with the increase in their household income. Therefore, the results do not provide support for the Hypothesis 2. There are cultural differences in the effects of socioeconomic status on housework participation.

The factors explored in this paper that test the effects of SES are household income and education, albeit to lesser extent. We find that the association between SES of Japanese married women and their housework time results in patterns that are not expected under the assumption of Hypothesis 1 (the outsourcing hypothesis) which states that higher social status helps women to reduce their housework. Opposite to the expectations of Hypothesis 1, we find that Japanese married women spend more time on routine housework with the increase in their household income, while the association was in the expected direction for American and Canadian women. For example, for Japanese married women, exponentiating the b coefficients for all interaction terms with household income ( $e^b$ ) produced an incidence ratio of 1.384. This value indicated that each 1 mln yen (roughly, 10000 USD) increase in the amount of household income was associated with a 3.84% increase in the count of time spent on housework by average Japanese women. Whereas the incidence ratio for American married women is .220, meaning each 10000 increase in household income would be associated with 8.8% decrease in housework time count.

**Table 2** Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients, Full Models for Japan, USA, and Canada

	Japan (N=349133)	USA (N=167637)	Canada (N=48573)
Female	0.879*** (0.092)	0.759*** (0.053)	0.848*** (0.075)
Married	-0.661*** (0.101)	-0.205** (0.070)	-0.230** (0.086)
Female*Married	1.087*** (0.106)	0.717*** (0.076)	0.671*** (0.096)
Income	-2.594*** (0.423)	-0.368 (0.215)	-0.260 (0.249)
Female*Income	1.412* (0.442)	-0.537* (0.235)	-0.788** (0.299)
Married*Income	1.685*** (0.455)	0.487 (0.253)	0.257 (0.292)
Female*Married*Income	0.359 (0.476)	-0.460 (0.278)	0.025 (0.348)
Income*Income	1.409*** (0.375)	0.075 (0.168)	-0.018 (0.180)
Female*Income*Income	-1.040** (0.388)	0.252 (0.183)	0.361 (0.233)
Married*Income*Income	-1.114** (0.394)	-0.170 (0.184)	0.069 (0.204)
Female*Married*Income*Income	0.208 (0.394)	0.181 (0.202)	-0.201 (0.259)
Education in Years	0.015* (0.006)	-0.007** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.003)
Children	-0.036 (0.020)	0.196*** (0.017)	0.266*** (0.017)
Weekday	-0.174*** (0.017)	-0.272*** (0.012)	-0.289*** (0.017)
Age	0.077*** (0.003)	0.050*** (0.002)	0.045*** (0.003)
Age*Age	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Constant	1.196*** (0.122)	2.702*** (0.076)	2.802*** (0.096)

Robust standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Moreover, education has the opposite effect on women's participation in housework in Japan than in the US and Canada (see Table 3). Thus, Japanese women with higher levels of education are expected to spend more time on routine housework than those with lower levels of education. The incidence ratio is 1.015, which means that for Japanese women, each year of additional education is on average associated with 1.5% time count increase in housework. The effects of education are significant in Japan and the US, but although they are not significant in Canada, their association with participation in housework is in the expected direction both in Canada and the US (see the second and third columns in Table 3). That is, women in the US and Canada do less housework when they have more education.

The results of previous research that showed that men increase their participation in housework with the increase of their education levels (Inaba, 1998) appears to still hold true and is mainly confirmed by the present results, including in the case of Japanese men, albeit not on a



statistically significant level, *ceteris paribus* (see Table 4). The incidence risk for Japanese men is 1.023 ( $e^{0.023}$ ), meaning that each additional year of education is associated with a 2.3% increase in Japanese men's time count in housework participation. Thus among both genders and three countries under analysis, Japanese women appear to be the only group for whom higher levels of education are associated with more time spend on routine housework, controlled for income and other demographic variables.

**Table 3** Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients, Japanese, American, and Canadian Women

	Japanese Women (N=183761)	American Women (N=94086)	Canadian Women (N=26283)
Married	0.304*** (0.032)	0.485*** (0.030)	0.415*** (0.042)
Income	-1.265*** (0.119)	-0.736*** (0.099)	-0.856*** (0.174)
Married*Income	1.678*** (0.125)	0.006 (0.115)	0.219 (0.189)
Income*Income	0.431*** (0.095)	0.263*** (0.075)	0.249 (0.150)
Married*Income*Income	-0.778*** (0.098)	0.023 (0.084)	-0.076 (0.160)
Education in Years	0.023*** (0.004)	-0.028*** (0.002)	-0.026*** (0.003)
Children	0.083*** (0.016)	0.352*** (0.016)	0.370*** (0.018)
Weekday	-0.010 (0.011)	-0.206*** (0.011)	-0.175*** (0.017)
Age	0.134*** (0.002)	0.055*** (0.002)	0.043*** (0.003)
Age*Age	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)
Constant	0.843*** (0.076)	3.405*** (0.058)	3.845*** (0.084)

Robust standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The effects of other control variables are similar for the three countries. Thus individuals are likely to perform more housework on weekends than on a weekday in all countries. More so for women in Canada and the US, where the incidence ratios are higher than in Japan. However, the result on weekday housework participation is not significant for Japanese women. It means that time spent on housework for Japanese women may not depend on the day of the week. The results for age show that age affects women's participation in housework in the way that they increase their participation to certain point and then start reducing it with age (negative quadratic association). However, because the quadratic term is close to zero, it is safe to say that the association between age and participation in housework is close to a positive linear association: older women do more housework. It is also similar for American and Canadian men, but the slope is flatter for Japanese men. This means that Japanese men's participation in housework does not change much with their age. Having children increases the involvement of women in housework in all three countries, although less so for Japanese women.

**Table 4**

Negative Binomial Regression Coefficients, Japanese, American, and Canadian Men

	Japanese Men (N=165372)	American Men (N=73551)	Canadian Men (N=22290)
Married	-0.895*** (0.109)	-0.130 (0.069)	-0.200* (0.085)
Income	-2.866*** (0.451)	-0.446* (0.210)	-0.358 (0.250)
Married*Income	2.566*** (0.484)	0.448 (0.246)	0.269 (0.290)
Income*Income	1.536*** (0.403)	0.084 (0.161)	0.025 (0.181)
Married*Income*Income	-1.494*** (0.424)	-0.150 (0.178)	0.049 (0.204)
Education in Years	0.016 (0.009)	0.015*** (0.004)	0.019*** (0.005)
Children	-0.114** (0.040)	0.036 (0.029)	0.157*** (0.030)
Weekday	-0.405*** (0.032)	-0.349*** (0.020)	-0.401*** (0.028)
Age	0.019*** (0.005)	0.045*** (0.007)	0.047*** (0.005)
Age*Age	0.000** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Constant	2.448*** (0.186)	2.717*** (0.109)	2.616*** (0.131)

Robust standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ 

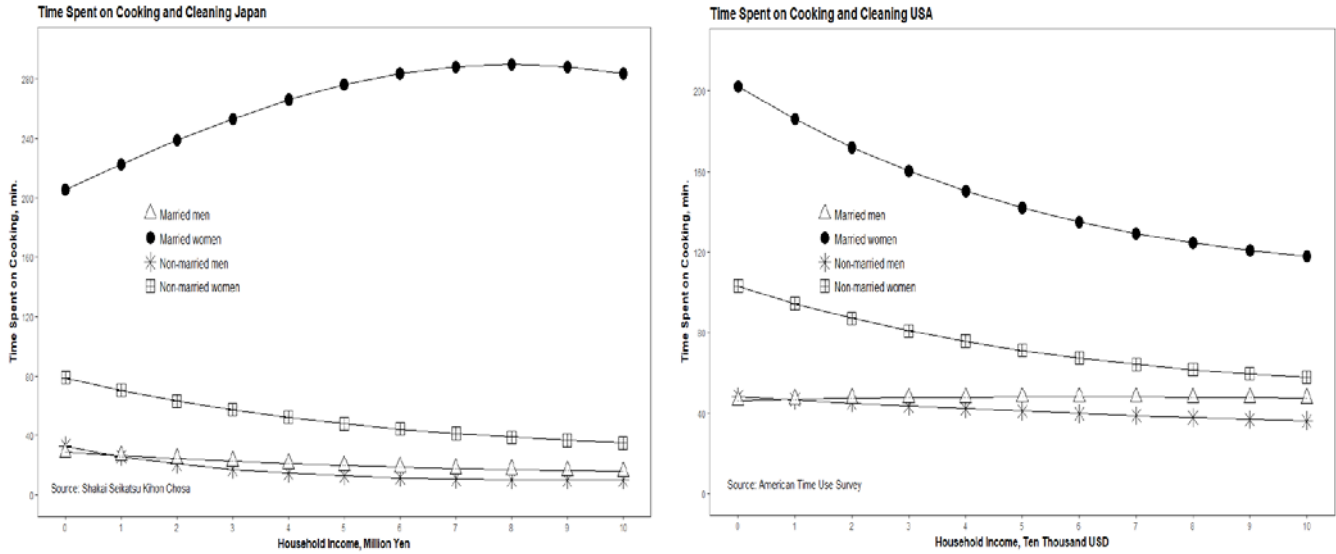
Contrary to the argument proposed by social class explanation proponents, the results in Japan are opposite to those in North American countries. We do not find evidence to confirm the Hypothesis 2 in Japan, *au contraire* we find that higher levels of SES are associated with more housework time for Japanese women.

#### 4.1 Marginal Effects

Figure 1 summarizes the results of the Table 2 and the marginal effects of levels of household income on housework participation for married and non-married women and men for two countries, Japan and the US, taken at means and controlled for other variables. Because the results for Canada are similar to those in the US, they are omitted in this section. In both countries women's predicted time spent on housework based on the results of the models is higher than that of men.

The topmost curve on the left panel of Figure 1 represents the association between household income and participation in routine housework for married Japanese women. Their pattern reveals that married Japanese women in fact increase their involvement in routine housework with the increase in their socioeconomic status. This is opposite to the pattern of non-married Japanese women (the first curve below the upper curve on the left panel of Figure 1). Non-married Japanese women decrease their housework time with the increase of their

household income, *ceteris paribus*. Moreover, their pattern is very similar to the pattern of non-married American women (right-side panel of Figure 1). The results suggest that such pattern is the effect of marriage rather than gender performance, or more specifically of the gender performance in marriage. Therefore, the institute of marriage in Japan remains a “site for doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) or the ‘gender factory’ (Berk 1985).



Unlike married Japanese women, married American women decrease their participation in housework with the increase in their socioeconomic status. This might suggest that they outsource a part of their housework responsibilities to hired help. The pattern is similar to the non-married American women (see the right panel of Figure 1), although married women on average are expected to perform more housework than non-married women. For both Japanese and American men, their participation in routine housework does not change much with marriage or household income level. These results are similar to those discussed in Baxter et al. (2008). However, married men spend a little more time on housework than non-married men, especially American men with higher socioeconomic status.

Overall, the results show that the institute of marriage in Japan places higher expectations on women as to the performance of housework, especially on women of higher SES. This is opposite to the social class expectations in the West, where higher social status alleviates the housework burden for women to some extent.

## 5. Conclusions

The approaches applying economic reasoning to housework participation can explain a considerable portion of the gender gap in the household division of labor. However, the ways how these factors work in different cultural contexts are often underplayed. The results of the present study show that even though socioeconomic status provides Japanese women with an ability to outsource most of the housework, the married women with higher household income

are unlikely to do so, whereas non-married wealthier women are almost as likely to reduce their time spent on housework as married and non-married American and Canadian women. It is in the context of Canada and the US and perhaps other countries of the global north that social class is associated with reduction in housework time among married women. Yet in some cultural contexts, such as that of the Japanese society analyzed in this paper, we might find the evidence that cultural meaning to housework is more complex and culturally-bound than the researchers of social class assume.

The future research of gendered division of housework could benefit from developing theoretical frameworks which take into consideration contextual nuances. Specifically, we urge the proponents of the resource-based theoretical stance to reconsider and take into account cultural and other social factors, not only economic, which often come into play when we talk about gender inequality. At times, their effects are more meaningful than that of the resource-based explanations.

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