



## **The sociology of subjectivity, and the subjectivity of sociologists: a critique of the sociology of gender in the Australian family**

Allon J. Uhlmann

---

### **Abstract**

In this era of reflexive sociology it is commonplace that subjectivity is of great sociological concern, and that the comprehension by social researchers of their own subject position is essential. Still, old habits die hard. Focusing on selected texts in the sociology of the Australian family, this paper traces the effects of failing to focus the sociological gaze on subjectivity and its variation across society. Highlighted are some patterns of analytic misconstruction of subjectivity, especially the substitution of measurement for a theory of practice, and the projection by sociologists of their own class-specific subjectivity onto society at large. Ultimately, this misconstruction turns works like those discussed in this paper into a powerful denial of alternative subjectivities, and a reinforcement of the socially dominant perspective.

**Keywords:** Subjectivity; reflexivity; theory; family; gender; Australia

---

This study originated from a cultural clash during my ethnographic study of kinship, family and gender among working-class Australians in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> My well-schooled preconceptions of subjectivity and practice were challenged – often directly, and usually politely – by my informants. I found myself negotiating a chasm between two divergent social aesthetics. One was embedded in the family practices of working-class informants, and their views of the intellectual class. The other manifested itself in the sociology of family practice, and the implicit, taken-for-granted constructions of personhood and subjectivity on which it is predicated. Sandwiched between these two opposing perspectives, I could not help but notice the different experience of subjectivity in both populations, a difference which passed largely unnoticed as such by social agents on both sides.

I use the term subjectivity to denote the particular perspectives, feelings, aesthetic beliefs and desires of particular social agents (cf. Solomon 1995) – something akin to Bourdieu's habitus. That subjectivity is influenced by the social and cultural backgrounds of particular agents is pretty much truism in this era of reflexive sociology. It is therefore particularly remarkable that sociologists who study Australian family practices should misrecognize the systemic variation in subjectivity. This misrecognition is a sociological conundrum in its own right, and in this paper I will approach it as such. But I should first note that this paper is emphatically not a review of the sociology of the Australian family. Nor does it purport to discuss the subjectivity and analytical work of *all* sociologists. Rather, by focusing in depth on a very limited body of strategically selected texts, the paper seeks to describe the detailed mechanics of one paradigmatic discursive clash of subjectivities.

Put differently, this paper aims to explain how the unacknowledged specificity of sociologists' subjectivity distorts the sociological research into gender relations in the Australian family. This distortion turns much of this line of sociological research into an elaborate denial of the social variability of subjectivity. In what follows I explore some theoretical and explanatory manoeuvres in a selected number of texts; show how these texts ignore the systemic variation in subjectivity across society (with detrimental consequences to the explication of social practice); and seek to sociologically account for these textual manoeuvres. Ultimately, this paper advocates the centrality of the explicit sociological study of subjectivity.

In order to contextualize the sociology of gender relations in the Australian family, some of the structural contours of the field of sociological production need to be highlighted. Most of the recent sociological work on the Australian family, qualitative as well as quantitative, has followed issues relating to public policy. These issues include the roles and limits of family support networks and how they relate to family wellbeing; the gendered division of labour and income; the relationship between employment and family wellbeing; domestic violence; and family and schooling. This preoccupation with policy-related matters is partly the result of the political economy of the Australian sociology of the family. For example, the Institute of Family Studies which sponsors much of the study of the Australian family is explicitly devoted to generating a body of data and knowledge to serve the development and implementation of public policy (Funder et al. 1996). Moreover, in order to justify their continued position of authority social scientists find themselves under increasing pressure to produce 'relevant' and 'useful' research. This is not only a matter of gaining symbolic capital by producing knowledge that is in demand. The progressive changes in the funding of research put increased pressure on academics to justify their research on grounds quite different from that of the expansion of human knowledge for its own sake. This means that there is great pressure to frame issues, projects and findings in terms which are relevant to

public policy – that is, as problems which lend themselves to legislative or bureaucratic solutions.

A main consequence of the wholesale production of social knowledge for immediate consumption by institutionalized power is that it reduces the autonomy of the field, and encourages those lines of research that reinforce doxa, rather than interrogate it. This does not mean that all research is oblivious to the self-evident. Thus Lyn Richards has explicitly raised the questions of ‘why marry’ and ‘why have children’ (Richards 1985). But such research questions are unusual.

The over-valuation of research that reinforces doxa easily fits in with the symbolic value that is attached to hard sciences and the quantitative method, and the related affliction of quantitative fetishism. I use the term quantitative fetishism to describe the situation whereby researchers gloss over the ontological difference between unquantifiable reality and its operationalization into measurable variables, and mistake the latter for the former. One instance of this is the use of questionnaires to construct and measure attitudes that are seen to unproblematically reflect modes of action.

A good example may be found in Williams’ community study of Queensland miners, a study which focused on the interaction of patriarchy and capitalism (Williams 1981). In studying the gender roles of her informants, Williams classified her informants, both male and female, as having either a patriarchal or egalitarian attitude towards changing sex roles. This was based on the answers of her interviewees to questions such as those regarding how decisions *should* be made, how labour within the family *should* be divided, and so forth (Williams 1981: 149 ff.). The point has been made in the literature that expressed attitudes towards egalitarianism do not correlate in a straightforward way with actual practice (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 129 ff.; Dempsey 1997; Lindsay 1999), but this is not the issue I want to raise here. Rather, I would like to raise the question of whether those two designations – patriarchy and egalitarianism – actually exhaust the different types of attitudes which may exist, and whether they neatly differentiate two distinct approaches of social agents.

Among my informants practical attitudes were contextual: people could and did entertain different principles of organization in different contexts of their relationships. For example, two couples among my informants had an unusual division of labour. The women were the main breadwinners, the men the main caregivers. Still, both women retained the dominant position in relation to childcare, having the ultimate say in decisions relating to food, discipline and so forth. The point I would like to highlight here is the different rationales they used to account for the division of labour in different contexts. When it came to accounting for their role as main breadwinners, the rationale was serial: the spouses were deemed to be functionally interchangeable. The wives happened at some stage to have a greater earning capacity, it therefore made

sense for them to work full-time, and assume the role of primary providers which they did. But when asked about their position as parents they resorted to the supremacy of maternity over paternity, and the 'natural' role mothers play. The rationale here has shifted from de-gendered seriality to one of gendered complementarity, where different genders have different areas of authority. We see here how in different contexts of the relationship between the same persons, different principles structure this relationship. Such nuances are critical for the explication of gender and family practices, yet the contextualization of the principles of the organization of relationships would totally escape studies that aim to uncover the one decontextualized principle of relationships. In other words, Williams' classification of people according to attitudinal orientation overlooks the complexities of practice, and may conceal rather than reveal the ways in which the gender order is produced and reproduced in daily practice.

Williams' slip from measured attitude to practice reflects a certain reluctance to engage with the complexity of subjectivity. This is due in part to the fact that subjectivity is not easily studied by surveys and questionnaires – sociologists' prized methods. But the conceptual difficulty that subjectivity poses is more than merely methodological.

Occasionally sociologists seek to account for motivation by employing a mode of reasoning derived from natural sciences to interpret statistical correlations. This naturalist misconception obscures, rather than clarifies, the logic of its subjects' practice. The following example is taken from Bittman's overview of the family in an introduction to the sociology of Australia.

Painstaking historical research has shown that late marriage has been used to keep fertility levels well below the maximum since (at least) the seventeenth century; postponing marriage was a typical response to economic recession [. . .]. The current tendency to marry later, which became evident in the 1970s, conforms with this general trend [. . .]. Over the last two decades Australian women have, in contrast with their own mothers, delayed having children until middle and later child bearing years. (Bittman 1993: 436)

Such reasoning is quite common in demographic and sociological writings. The rationale of this ascription of motivation to social agents is as follows: there appears to be a correlation between an increase in age at marriage, an increase in age at childbearing, and a decrease in fertility rates. Naturalist reasoning, based in formal logic, would require that the phenomenon that appeared first must be the cause, while the phenomenon that followed it must be the effect. Specifically, marriage generally precedes reproduction, therefore the increase in the age at marriage must be the cause of the increase in the age of mothers, and the consequent drop in fertility rates. This observation, observed through the objectivist prism of scientificity, is then assumed to reflect

the subjective motivations of social agents: a delay in marriage is 'used' to reduce fertility.

This specific argument appears to confuse cause and effect. Pre-marital, extra-marital and non-procreational sex occur regularly. Among my informants in Newcastle – where sex quite often precedes marriage – a correlation between age at marriage and age at parenthood would normally reflect a reverse causality from the one postulated above. The usual chain of events would be as follows: a couple would want to settle down and have children, an existing relationship would then be consecrated as marriage, and then would come the mortgage and the babies. So long as there is no willingness to reproduce, the couple might well decide to refrain from upping the ante in the relationship, and not marry. I did not encounter a single instance where a decision to get married was put off in order not to have children. In other words, decisions about reproduction often precede and motivate decisions about marriage. A similar picture emerges from other studies, too (e.g. Richards 1985: chs 5–6). So the delay in marriage may well be motivated by the delay in fertility, and not vice versa. More generally, the order in which social phenomena appear behaviourally need not reflect the logic of the practice of social agents.

The naturalist misconception of human agency might seem innocuous enough on its own, but is symptomatic of a broader reluctance to theorize practice and subjectivity. All too often sociologists of the Australian family are content to rely on an implicit commonsensical construction of subjectivity. This commonsense, though, and the subjectivity it incorporates, are socially specific, and by no means universal across society. Sociologists may thereby fail to appreciate the variation in subjectivity and social conditions across society, and consequently misconstrue social practice (cf. Bourdieu 1981: 310, endnote 13; 1990: chs 1–2).

To demonstrate the mechanics and dynamics of this misconception of practice, and to further explore its underlying worldview, I will focus on a recent book by Bittman and Pixley, entitled *The Double Life of the Family: Myth Hope and Experience* (1997). I have selected this publication for several reasons. Most importantly, the book – co-authored by one of the foremost sociologists of the Australian family – was very well received in the sociological community (e.g. Barkley 1998; Dempsey 1998; Jamieson 1998; Sarantakos 1998; *Women and Work* 1997). Also, it is the most recent sociological attempt at a comprehensive exposition on the inner workings of the Australian family.

At the heart of *The Double Life of the Family* is the hypothesis that the modern family is in the bind of pseudomutuality: family life is strained by a clash between a perception of the way things should be and a reality which contradicts it. The authors borrowed their pseudomutuality hypothesis from studies in the 1970s into the causes of schizophrenia. The hypothesis was that schizophrenia was caused by conflicting emotional signals that patients

received in their families as they were brought up. These conflicting signals were thought to put the patients in a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety regarding the nature of their family relations. Without accepting this theory as necessarily that which accounts for schizophrenia, Bittman and Pixley generalize this description of the dynamics of schizogenic families to all families.

Their specific argument runs as follows. On the one hand, perception of equality is a necessary element of family relations because the emotional basis of the modern family – a romantic attachment between spouses – necessitates that equality should exist between husbands and wives. Bittman and Pixley insist that it is a psychological impossibility for individuals who are unequal to entertain a romantic relationship. On the other hand, equality in the family does not exist, a fact demonstrated by focusing on time-use studies, showing that women spend substantially more time than men on housework. This prevents women from pursuing their career interests as fully as men do. It also means that they have to be confined to meaningless chores, as opposed to their husbands who are free to find self-fulfilling occupations. The financial income associated with participation in the labour market gives men, the main breadwinners, a material advantage compared with women who earn less, and tend to be less involved with the labour market. In addition to material advantage, this difference in remuneration elevates the prestige associated with paid work compared with unpaid homemaking and relegates women to a dependent status. This contradiction leads to a cognitive dissonance which forces people to deny the fact of inequality in order to justify their necessary belief that equality prevails in their families. This, in turn, prevents people from being able to confront and correct the blatant violations of the normative expectations of equality, thereby causing strain to family members. They sense the inequality, but because they deny it, are unable to confront it effectively. This turns the family into a source of great stress which accounts for the common familial misery and increasing divorce rates.

In their own words

Pseudomutuality is a faked or a false complementarity, where the actor may deny or conceal evidence of non-mutuality in order to maintain a sense of reciprocal fulfilment. Pseudomutuality [. . .] is a characteristically ‘modern’ form of the exercise of domestic power. Modern couples subscribe to some version of romantic love which in principle must involve an intimate relation between equals. No man should order his wife about today – they make shared decisions. Yet all the evidence suggests that despite the rise of intimacy, women are still waiting on men and taking the major responsibility for bringing up children. Pseudomutuality is a possible way of explaining how the hurt and exasperation is shuffled off the family stage in various ways. (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 146)

It is important to note that no data are provided to demonstrate, let alone substantiate, the process of pseudomutuality. Bittman and Pixley construct this argument to link three different sets of data: opinion polls suggesting that both male and female respondents support parity in the family; figures suggesting a disparity between the work of men and women in the family; and figures suggesting a modern increase in marital breakdowns. This explanatory manoeuvre is an instance of the fallacy of psychologism.

By psychologism I mean a kind of two-stage explanatory strategy. At the first stage an *a priori* assumption is made regarding what motivates practice, and the standards for logical practice. Normally such putative motivation takes the form of utility maximization. At a second stage, practice which does not conform to this logic is explained away as the product of psychological mechanisms which pertain to agents who act 'irrationally'. This explanatory strategy overlooks the fact that all practice – rational, irrational or otherwise – is psychologically constituted; and that the substantive standards for evaluation of practice may vary across society, and may not be postulated *a priori*. Psychologism is a heuristic device which serves solely so as to shield the *a priori* assumptions from contradictory empirical reality.

What is particularly striking in Bittman and Pixley's account is the extent to which the analysis is predicated upon the class-specific circumstances of the sociologists. No less remarkable in this analysis are the analytical manoeuvres whose essential role is to protect this generalization of class-specific experience from the contradictory reality of other classes.

Mistaking their own class ethos for a universal condition, Bittman and Pixley assert that equality is necessary for romance which is the basis of the modern family. However, the inherent necessity of social equality for the purpose of romance is hardly self-evident. In fact, one can find substantial expressions of erotic and romantic attachments in societies in which equality between romantic partners is deemed neither necessary nor desirable, such as among European settlers in eighteenth-century North America (Norton 1980: ch. 2), where 'the hierarchical organization of such marriages [. . .] did not preclude their being solidly based on mutual affection' (Norton 1980: 64). In other words, romance does not seem to necessitate total equality nor does it require that the two persons involved should believe that they are in an equal relationship. It is only within the broader ideological context of serial individuality – integral to the class ethos of these sociologists – that romance and equality become linked.

Bittman and Pixley very loosely deploy cognitive dissonance theory to further rationalize recalcitrant contradictions in reality out of the analysis (see Bittman and Pixley 1997: 153 ff.). They rely on Festinger's forty-five-year-old general formulations of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957). According to Festinger, subjects strive to maintain cognitive consonance. When faced with contradictory cognitions (e.g. thoughts, attitudes, beliefs), subjects feel

anxiety, which they proceed to reduce by manipulating or distorting the content or significance of some of the contradictory cognitions. The authors seem oblivious to the subsequent literature which has modified the original theory as researchers attempted to delineate the conditions under which subjects would experience a significant distress or anxiety as a result of the dissonance, and the conditions under which subjects act so as to reduce their dissonance (e.g. Aronson 1969; Nel, Helmreich and Aronson 1969; for the development of the field see e.g. Aronson 1997; Markus and Zajonc 1985).

Setting aside the theoretical developments in cognitive dissonance theory, and taking up the authors' interpretation of cognitive dissonance – in this case as a process of mystification of reality when it conflicts with the way things should be – we are still faced with some difficulties. How does their theory account for the desire of never-married men and women to marry, or of divorced women to remarry? In both instances agents are not married, and need not experience a contradiction between the way things should be in marriage and the way things are. We would therefore expect them to be very much aware of the inequality in the family, and of the unacceptable nature of that inequality, and consequently, of marriage altogether.

Moreover, given that women are the disadvantaged party according to Bittman and Pixley, we would expect them to experience a harsher dissonance, and to be more strongly committed to misconstruing reality in order to alleviate their stronger dissonance. We should therefore expect men to be more aware than women of the reality of inequality in the family: men should be more inclined to believe that there is inequality in the family, and less inclined to trivialize that inequality, while women should be more inclined to believe that there is equality in the family, and more inclined to trivialize expressions of inequality. This, however, does not conform to Bittman and Pixley's data.

Furthermore, why should this particular conflict be so acute as to require a mystification of reality? Bittman and Pixley's analysis overlooks the fact that people are able to handle quite effectively the realization that things may not be as they should be. In a similar vein, Bourdieu has already demonstrated that practical logic can hold what formal logic would see as contradictions (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). I mentioned earlier that among my informants, at least, egalitarian aspects of intimacy exist in particular circumstances of relationships, while other non-equal aspects might prevail in other circumstances, so that the contradiction would never emerge as such.

Additionally, distorting the perception of inequality in the family is not the only way such a putative dissonance can be resolved. Another way would be for subjects to drop their belief in the necessity or desirability of equality in the family. If Bittman and Pixley's analysis were correct we would expect a large number of people to resolve the dissonance in this way, too. Bittman and Pixley might argue that a sense of equality is a psychological imperative for romantic attachment, and this is presumably the reason why social agents do

not resort to that strategy. It is, none the less, quite conceivable for people to drop any belief in the necessity of romance for marriage, and have stable long-lasting marital unions which are not held together by romance. (In fact, if their analysis were correct, it would be hard to imagine the historical scenario whereby romance could have become so intricately linked with the inherently inegalitarian institution of marriage.) Such a resolution does not even occur to Bittman and Pixley.

This heuristic deployment of cognitive dissonance theory is ironic. Faced with two conflicting cognitions: the persistence of marriage on the one hand, and the assumed intolerability of relations within marriage on the other, the authors resort to cognitive dissonance theory as a heuristic means to resolve this cognitive dissonance. In so doing, they expose their profound psychological and theoretical dependence on a specific notion of agency – namely, individualistic and utility-maximizing – which is generalized to the whole of society at large. In fact, one might read the entire book as a defence of a socially specific subjectivity, which incorporates an aesthetic according to which ascribed statuses are of no legitimate social significance, and self actualization is the life-long project of discrete autonomous individuals – prototypically the professional or the academic.

Bittman and Pixley's demonstration of inequality itself contains revealing theoretical gaps. The use of time-allocation studies of housework and paid work as an operationalization of inequality or immiseration is problematic.<sup>2</sup> Such studies compare the hours spent by men and women in various tasks, as well as the total time they spend on all tasks. The usually implicit assumption is that there is a uniform disutility value for time spent on work both paid and unpaid. However, this assumption is hard to justify. One hour of washing dishes may not be the same as one hour of sociological research, and neither would equal one hour of manual labour at a blast furnace, one hour of changing nappies etc. If the accounts are right regarding the amount of time men and women work, and if men and women feel there is a measure of equality in their relationships, perhaps it is the uniform-disutility assumption that needs to be modified. (It is a simple algebraic procedure to calculate a series of disutility coefficients for the hours of work involved in different tasks which would equalize the disutility value of the total time men and women spend on work.) Bittman and Pixley appear to be oblivious to the very possibility that disutility values of activities might vary by age, class and gender.

This ideological commitment to individualization is so powerful as to undermine the very recognition of obvious methodological contradictions. The difficulty with operationalizing inequality through time-use measures comes to a head when considering the position of children in two-parent households. Children's contribution to carrying out house duties is very low. This should indicate that children exercise superior power over parents, and exploit them. Indeed, Bittman and Pixley conclude that 'These findings are consistent with

the idea that parents bear a disproportionate amount of the housework burden, that is, parents are in a sense slaves to their children' (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 103). However, all the mechanisms that according to Bittman and Pixley support male domination in the household (such as control over economic capital), should support parental domination over children. This leads to a contradiction of sorts. If economic dependency is behind familial oppression, children are oppressed. If the amount of housework done represents the extent of oppression, parents are oppressed. The suggestion that children enslave their parents might strike a chord with many a weary parent, but cannot be sustained by a closer observation of the power relations as they are negotiated in practice within the family, nor is it consistent with figures concerning youth homelessness and child abuse when compared with parental homelessness and parental abuse.

Simply put, the uniform-disutility hypothesis is wrong, and the relative share of home keeping that one performs is not in and of itself an accurate measure of immiseration or power inferiority. The resilience of this hypothesis attests to sociologists' ideological commitment to notions of an essential identity of interests and subjectivity across gender and other social divides.

The related proposition that the authors put forth, namely that women sacrifice their desired career opportunities in order to carry out the additional hours of housework, assumes that if not required to carry out their home-making capabilities women would have the choice of a career, and that they would choose to pursue these careers. These are remarkably class-specific assumptions. Sociologists, like artists, achieve self-actualization through their occupation. Gender differences among sociologists in orientation to work are considerably less than among working-class people. In the class fraction of which sociologists are part the logic of de-gendered seriality prevails as an ideological imperative at the expense of gender complementarity.

Various surveys, however, have shown that women's career aspirations in large segments of society are not the same as men's. Many women, including full-time workers, report they would rather be involved in the labour market on a part-time basis (e.g. Baxter 2000; Baxter, Lynch-Blosse and Western 1996; Baxter and Western 1998; Wolcott 1997). This is in line with Catherine Hakim's findings that throughout European metropolitan and settler societies the work commitment and orientation of most women is different from that of men and career women (Hakim 1995, 1996, 1998).

The polemical way Bittman and Pixley dismiss this point further attests to the ideological nature of their project. Consider this thinly veiled put down

Recent arguments suggest that upper- and middle-class couples are the most advantaged from their dual-earnings status, on the grounds that most low-income households are one-earner or non-earning units (Jamrozik and Sweeney 1996). This idea is supported by British sociologist Catherine

Hakim, who suggests that 'career women' are quite different from the majority of women who 'prefer' part-time jobs at most, which do not detract from a lifetime of home-making and caring (Ginn et al. 1996; Hakim 1995). Such suggestions are immensely popular among conservative politicians. (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 254)

This is the full extent of the authors' rebuttal of the argument that women and men might sometimes play for different stakes in the games of family and work. Having tagged the proposition conservative, they have put it outside the scope of the thinkable, thereby erecting one of the boundaries that enclose the thinkable.

Bittman and Pixley's commitment to the uniformity of interest calculations across society and their refusal to accept that men and women might have different interests and preferences, blinds them to the implications of some of their very own quantitative data. The question of different standards of cleanliness is a case in point. The argument for different standards is extremely common outside social science in accounting for the fact that women 'spontaneously' tend to do the bulk of cleaning work without the distribution of housework being explicitly negotiated. Bittman and Pixley argue that men and women do not have different standards of cleanliness. Their argument, however, is contradicted by figures they quote in other contexts. For example, when discussing the figures on time spent on domestic chores by young men and women who live alone the authors conclude

The rise in men's unpaid work on leaving home, is, however, made more dramatic only because it is an increase from a very low base. Whereas at home sons devote 12 minutes in a whole week to laundry, ironing and clothes care (perhaps about the time it takes to dump one's dirty washing in the laundry basket), this increases to 1 hour 9 minutes per week among men living alone. It is almost half the time spent by women living alone. The same is true of the increase in cleaning and tidying. In relation to cooking, however, men living alone spend a comparable time to their female counterparts, despite the fact that those still at home barely do any cooking. (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 104)

In other words, women living alone spend twice as much time on domestic chores than men living alone. The two possible explanations for this are greater efficiency on men's part, an unlikely explanation, or a difference in standards of cleanliness and housework. The difference in standards along gender lines is further confirmed when considering the situation in shared households.

In the case of shared households, women's hours spent in indoor work are marginally lower than those spent by women living alone and considerably

higher than those of daughters at home. Men in shared households, in contrast, spend substantially less time than men living alone on these indoor tasks and in some cases this represents only a fractional change from their pattern as sons at home. Since these figures about shared households are an average of all shared households regardless of sex composition, it appears that if women share with women, the standards of housework are higher than if men share with men. If women share with men, it would seem that women do a disproportionate share. (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 104–5)

It is significant that the standards of all-women households seem to be remarkably higher than those of all-men households.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, Bittman and Pixley's denial of the gender differences in standards is significant. The contradictions in their own material are hidden by a gap of several chapters. The figures quoted above are in chapter 4, 'Working for Nothing', in which the authors seek to prove that women spend more time on housework than men do. When discussing differing standards in chapter 6, 'Pseudomutuality: the Disjunction between Domestic Inequality and the Ideal of Equality' the authors contend that such differences in standards do not exist. This they base solely on a series of phone interviews with 220 Sydney couples in which respondents were asked questions like 'When do you think the washing up should be done?' and were offered various set responses like 'straight after a meal', 'at the end of the day' etc. Similar questions were asked regarding other tasks. Women and men differed little in their responses. This the authors take to demonstrate that there is no difference in standards of house cleaning between men and women (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 159–64). This argument is extremely weak given the power of the evidence in Bittman and Pixley's own data to the existence of a difference in standards between men and women. Also, the general nature of the interview questions invited general responses. They are totally divorced from the practicalities of concrete behaviour. Differences in standards might be revealed, perhaps, not in the answer to the question of when a particular chore should be done, but by questions more along the lines of 'if you are tired and very busy, do you think you might leave the dishes in the sink till later?' Or 'how uncomfortable would you feel knowing that the dishes had not been done and are waiting in the sink?' or 'How embarrassed would you feel if your next-door neighbour walked in and the dishes were stacked up in the kitchen?'

Moreover, their inability to accommodate gender difference in aesthetics and standards of cleanliness leads Bittman and Pixley to dismiss out of hand what their very interviewees told them. They write that

In the couples surveyed, most men used the notions of competence or preference [. . . to account for the gendered division of labour]: women specialize in doing the housework and childcare because they are better at it

or because they like it more than their husbands. (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 164-5)

The absence of women's explanations from Bittman and Pixley's text is remarkable, but conforms to their depiction of total passivity on the part of women in families. For example

there is a persistent pattern showing that, on average, Australian males will transfer indoor housework to their wives upon marriage, and devote any increase in time spent on domestic tasks to traditionally 'masculine' outdoor activities. The appearance of infant children will produce a strengthening of the pattern of sex segregation in domestic tasks. (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 152)

But what are women doing as their husbands transfer more drudgery to them? One might be forgiven for getting the impression that women's destiny lies solely in the hands of their exclusively agential husbands. This removal of agency from women is not based on any observational data, but is a reflection of the judgment of a socially specific subjectivity – women could not possibly desire their social destinies and are therefore by necessity passive victims.

In this context it is interesting to note that among Bittman and Pixley's interviewees 'A majority of respondents, both women and men, suggested they had never discussed the allocation of unpaid work' (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 167). The same is true of my informants, Richards' (Richards 1985: ch. 5), and others. This would suggest that Bittman and Pixley are wrong to present the division of labour as the product of an imposition by men on reluctant women. Rather, it would seem that both men and women gravitate spontaneously towards their socially prescribed destinies. This reflects precisely the social variability of subjectivity across gender.

Their misconstruction of women's practice ultimately drives Bittman and Pixley to wonder why women still marry. After all, they rhetorically ask, 'Who would want marriage (or cohabitation) if it is only about male sexual access, or even mutual access, and acrimonious disputes over male demands for domestic servicing?' (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 234). The answer is, of course, probably nobody. But then, this presentation of marriage conforms neither to objective reality nor to the way family life is experienced.

What is explicitly intended as research thus inadvertently becomes an act of symbolic violence: the difference in subjectivity is denied to members of subaltern social milieux, and with it the legitimacy of their alterity.

By contrast with the 'number crunchers', sociologists who conduct qualitative studies come up directly against the ethos of other classes, and are compelled to relate their understanding of practice to the native point of view. Not surprisingly, these studies highlight both the fact that women play an active

role in reproducing the gender order, and that many women do not experience the gendered nature of the division of labour as victimization (Bryson and Wearing 1985: 363; Dempsey 1990: 289 ff.; Dempsey 1992; Dempsey 1997). Still, the general tendency among qualitative researchers, too, is not to allow for the variability of subjectivity.

Dempsey ascribed the continuation of the traditional division of labour to the stranglehold that traditional ideologies have over women, especially, and over men (Dempsey 1997). He uses the concept of ideology to account for the seemingly irrational recalcitrance of the old division of labour. He first identifies a contradiction when he notes that couples are more likely to couch their relationships in terms of partnership, but are still not following through with an egalitarian division of labour. He subsequently resolves this by arguing for the continuing influence of the traditional ideologies.

Here ideology operates heuristically like Bittman and Pixley's psychologistic rationalization. Dempsey's a priori assumption of a uniformity of interests between men and women leads him to identify the familial order as disadvantageous to women. The active role women play in sustaining this order is therefore mystifying. Moreover, oblivious to the fuzziness of the logic of practice Dempsey identifies a contradiction between the increase in explicit egalitarian discourse on the family on the one hand, and the lack of equality in the division of labour on the other. The practice of agents, especially women, thus emerges as inconsistent and irrational. This inconsistency and irrationality is explained away as the effect of 'traditional ideologies', thereby allowing Dempsey not to question the validity of that which he holds as self-evidently rational.

Dempsey's argument does not allow for the possibility that men and women may have internalized different desires, with different emotional and social interests. Moreover, the fuzziness of the logic of practice is also lost in Dempsey's formal reconstruction of the contradictions in practice. In fact, the contradictions and ambiguities of quotidian practice can be quite consistent with the logic of practice. When abstracted out of the always contextual lived experience, and organized schematically, all the contradictions become apparent in a way they never do to living social agents. But such a formal reconstruction of practice is ontologically different from the logic of practice. This point is easily forgotten by those sociologists who are committed to the scientific rationalist interpretation of social dynamics. Thus, the underlying logic of practice in Dempsey's analysis is formal logic, regardless of its social context. Consequently, there could be no substantial variation in subjectivity across society.

While still committed to a notion of universal subjectivity, some sociologists recognized the importance of the difference in life chances across class. For example, Bryson (1996) sought to approach the practice of women by a closer understanding of the context of their practice, rather than by pre-judging

whether their practice is logical. Bryson argued that women exercise power within the domestic sphere by virtue of their autonomy. A more egalitarian division of labour does not appeal to many women because it would mean that they would be giving away some autonomy, and getting in return a marginalized position in the labour market (Bryson 1985: 96–9).

Bryson's approach is more reflexive than Bittman and Pixley's in that she acknowledges the variation in conditions across society – especially in the experience of labour – and is willing to examine the actual consequences of alternative practices of social agents rather than project her own circumstances onto society at large. She allows for the consequences of practice to vary systemically so that social agents might differ in their strategic choices, and still be similarly rational. Still, even Bryson remains committed to a universalist view of subjectivity, whereby the preferences and desires of social agents of different classes are deemed a priori to be substantially the same.

The deployment of the same subjectivity in different social contexts is what produces the difference in patterns of practice. Bryson argues that the access that women might generally hope to gain to the public domain is restricted, and therefore not worth the losses in reduced autonomy which would accompany the greater participation of the husband in the household. The assumption is that the desires and values of these women are essentially the same as those of their menfolk (and sociologists), and the differences in their chosen strategies lie in the different socio-economic circumstances of their practice. But this does not account for the fact that even women who participate in the labour market on a full-time basis retain the major responsibility for household tasks (Bryson 1996: 214). Nor is it consistent with the surveys I mentioned above (on page 88) regarding gender differences in work preferences and commitments.

Moreover, this analysis begs the question of why most women do not make full use of the lifting of formal restrictions on their labour-force participation to try to seek non-marginal positions in the marketplace. More significantly, given that in dominated-class settings the access of men to the economy is also marginal – they are workers, often in degraded labour positions, and not capitalists – Bryson's analysis runs the risk of constituting as irrational (and thereby inexplicable) working-class men's attachment to the labour market, and their disinclination to seek equality in the division of labour within the household.

To my mind, the pattern whereby women tend to spontaneously seek control over the domestic domain while men tend to spontaneously dominate the household's access to the labour market suggests that there is something in the constitution of the subjectivity of men and women that, within the prevailing social circumstances, incline women and men towards somewhat different goals. This is, in fact, what interviewees and informants have been telling researchers all along.

Gender differences in subjectivity might also explain why, among my working-class informants for example, the division of actual labour varied across families, and across time within single families, in response to economic circumstances – but the division of primary responsibility for tasks was less varied, and more stark in its gendered character. The resilience of the gendered division of responsibility, coupled with the regularity of the gendered division of actual labour, would suggest that the gendered division of labour is rooted in internalized dispositions rather than external conditions. This conclusion is supported by international comparisons (Hakim 1994, 1997, 1998).

Put differently, while Bryson convincingly argues that women's reluctance to break down the gendered division of labour might well have the effect of securing their grip over the domestic domain, and while this might or might not motivate their reluctance to equalize the division of labour, this is not the *reason* that women specialize in the domestic domain, but rather the *result* of that specialization. In other words, the domestic division of labour is part of a broader gendered division of social labour, and predicated upon it (even as it reproduces it).

Much of the confusion in the sociology of the Australian family would be avoided if sociologists directly studied the variability of subjectivity across class and gender. In fact, not all studies of the Australian mainstream family refuse to observe the systemic variability of dispositions across society (e.g. Stivens 1974, 1978; Richards 1985; Cameron 1996/97; Uhlmann 2000, 2001). But such studies are few and marginal within the corpus of the sociology of the Australian family.

That sociologists, of all social agents, should be oblivious to the social variability of subjectivity serves as stark reminder of the blindness of subjectivity to its own ontological status. While being socially variable it appears to itself to be natural and universal, indeed, commonsensical. This theoretical blindness is paradigmatic, and is not confined to the texts I have specifically addressed above. The extent to which it prevails in the literature at large will require a different investigation. Still, persisting in an era of reflexive sociology, this reluctance to theorize the social conditioning of practice and subjectivity reflects the profound emotional and intellectual challenge that such a task poses, and the heavy weight of interests – emotional, intellectual and material – which might be stacked against it. However, it is essential that subjectivity – and the social patterns of its variability – should be a major object of the sociological gaze, lest sociology become an act of symbolic violence rather than social de-mystification.

(Date accepted: October 2003)

## Notes

1. The fieldwork was conducted from late 1994 to early 1996, and included participant observation, interviews and focus groups. I intensively studied some 15 informants, and had more superficial contact with many more.

2. This use of time-allocation studies, though, continues to be quite common in sociological literature despite conceptual criticism like Van Every 1997.

3. The difference in standards between

men and women was also reiterated in my interviews with women and focus groups, where it was confirmed to me that social pressure towards high standards of cleanliness was both internalized by women (for example in the form of shame if their homes or children were not up to par in their presentation), and embodied in comments from other women – mothers, mothers-in-law, female friends – but not men (Uhlmann 2000).

## Bibliography

- Aronson, E.** 1969 'The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: a Current Perspective', in L. Berkowitz (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 4.
- Aronson, E.** 1997 'The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance: the Evolution and Vicissitudes of an Idea', in C. McGarty and S. A. Haslam (eds) *The Message of Social Psychology: Perspectives on Mind in Society*, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Barkley, M.** 1998 'The Double Life of the Family', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 33(1): 149–50.
- Baxter, J.** 2000 'The Joys and Justice of Housework', *Sociology* 34(4): 609–31.
- Baxter, J., Lynch-Blosse, M. and Western, J.** 1996 'Gender Differences in Work Satisfaction', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 31(3): 291–309.
- Baxter, J. and Western, M.** 1998 'Satisfaction With Housework: Examining the Paradox', *Sociology* 32(1): 101–20.
- Bittman, M.** 1993 'The Nuclear Family and Its Future', in J. M. Najman and J. S. Western (eds) *A Sociology of Australian Society: Introductory Readings*, 2nd Edition, Melbourne: Macmillan Education Australia.
- Bittman, M. and Pixley, J.** 1997 *The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Bourdieu, P.** 1977 *Outline of A Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P.** 1981 'Men and Machines', in K. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel (eds) *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-Sociologies*, London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P.** 1990 *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bryson, L.** 1985 'Gender Divisions and Power Relationships in the Australian Family', in P. Close and R. Collins (eds) *Family and Economy in Modern Society*, Houndmills: The Macmillan Press.
- Bryson, L.** 1996 'Revaluing the Household Economy', *Women's Studies International Forum* 19(3): 207–19.
- Bryson, L. and Wearing, B.** 1985 'Australian Community Studies – A Feminist Critique', *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 21(3): 349–66.
- Cameron, J.** 1996/97 'Throwing a Dishcloth into the Works: Troubling Theories of Domestic Labor', *Rethinking Marxism* 9(2): 24–44.
- Dempsey, K.** 1990 *Smalltown: A Study of Social Inequality, Cohesion and Belonging*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Dempsey, K.** 1992 *A Man's Town: Inequality Between Women and Men in Rural Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Dempsey, K.** 1997 *Inequalities in Marriage: Australia and Beyond*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

- Dempsey, K.** 1998 'The Double Life of the Family', *Journal of Sociology* 34(1): 72–3.
- Festinger, L.** 1957 *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Evanston, Ill.: Row Peterson.
- Funder, K., Edgar, D., Whithear, D., Brownlee, H., Glezer, H., Harrison, M., Hartley, R., McDonald, P., Ochiltree, G. and Wolcott, I.** 1996 'Family Studies in Australia', *Marriage and Family Review* 22(3–4): 287–332.
- Ginn, J., Arber, S., Brannen, J., Dale, A., Dex, S., Elias, P., Moss, P., Pahl, J., Roberts, C. and Rubery, J.** 1996 'Feminist Fallacies: A Reply', *British Journal of Sociology* 47(1): 167–77.
- Hakim, C.** 1994 'A Century of Change in Occupational Segregation 1891–1991', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 7(4): 435–54.
- Hakim, C.** 1995 'Five Feminist Myths about Women's Employment', *British Journal of Sociology* 46(3): 429–55.
- Hakim, C.** 1996 'Labour Mobility and Employment Stability: Rhetoric and Reality on the Sex Differential in Labour-Market Behaviour', *European Sociological Review* 12(1): 1–31.
- Hakim, C.** 1997 'A Sociological Perspective on Part-Time Work', in H.-P. Blossfeld and C. Hakim (eds) *Between Equalization and Marginalization: Women, Working Part-Time in Europe and the United States of America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hakim, C.** 1998 'Developing a Sociology for the Twenty-First Century: Preference Theory', *British Journal of Sociology* 49(1): 137–43.
- Jamieson, L.** 1998 'The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience', *Sociology* 32(3): 616–17.
- Jamrozik, A. and Sweeney, T.** 1996 *Children and Society: The Family, the State and Social Parenthood*, Melbourne: MacMillan Education.
- Lindsay, J.** 1999 'Diversity But Not Equality: Domestic Labour in Cohabiting Relationships', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 34(3): 267–83.
- Markus, H. and Zajonc, R. B.** 1985 'The Cognitive Perspective in Social Psychology', in L. Gardner and E. Aronson (eds) *The Handbook of Social Psychology, Volume 1: Theory and Method*, 3rd Edition, New York: Random House.
- Nel, E., Helmreich, R. and Aronson, E.** 1969 'Opinion Change in the Advocate as A Function of the Persuasibility of His Audience: A Clarification of the Meaning of Dissonance', *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 12(2): 117–24.
- Norton, M. B.** 1980 *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Richards, L.** 1985 *Having Families: Marriage Parenthood and Social Pressure in Australia*, rev. edition, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books.
- Sarantakos, S.** 1998 'The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience' (Review), *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 19(2): 230.
- Solomon, R. C.** 1995 'Subjectivity', in T. Honderich (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stivens, M.** 1974 'Kinship and Class: A Study in a Sydney Suburb' *Department of Anthropology*, Sydney: University of Sydney.
- Stivens, M.** 1978 'Women and Their Kin', in P. Caplan and J. M. Bujra (eds) *Women United, Women Divided: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Female Solidarity*, London: Tavistock Publications.
- Uhlmann, A. J.** 2000 'Incorporating Masculine Domination: Theoretical and Ethnographic Elaborations', *Social Analysis* 44(1): 142–61.
- Uhlmann, A. J.** 2001 'Intertwined Refractions: The Mutual Constitution of Gender Style and Class Fraction in a De-Industrialising Australian Town', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7(3): 449–66.
- Van Every, J.** 1997 'Understanding Gendered Inequality: Reconceptualizing Housework', *Women's Studies International Forum* 20(3): 411–20.

**Williams, C.** 1981 *Open Cut: The Working Class in an Australian Mining Town*, Sydney: George Allen & Unwin.

**Wolcott, I.** 1997 'Work and Family', in D. de Vaus and I. Wolcott (eds) *Australian Family Profiles: Social and Demographic Patterns*,

Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

**Women & Work** 1997 'The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience', *Women & Work* 18(2): 16.