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# A rise in symmetrical families: Fact of fiction?

**Vicky Cross,**  
Nuffield Research Placement Student

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Fact or fiction?**

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## Foreword

This research was carried out by a 6<sup>th</sup> form student who had successfully applied for a Nuffield Research Placement<sup>1</sup>. Students in the first year of a post-16 science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) course are eligible to apply and those who don't have a family history of going to university or who attend schools in less well-off areas are particularly encouraged.

Each year over 1,000 students gain hands-on experience of a professional research environment through a 4 - 6 week placement in their summer holidays, working alongside professional scientists, technologists, engineers and mathematicians. Placements are available across the UK, in universities, commercial companies, voluntary organisations and research institutions.

This was the first year that social science organisations were included. Here at CLS, applicants were given the opportunity to be involved in a range of research and data activities and to develop their writing and analytic skills. This working paper uses the latest available data for the 1970 cohort and reports for the first time on the domestic division of labour in families when the cohort member was age 42, and previously at age 30. It serves as a helpful introduction to other researchers wanting to explore the relationship between the domestic division of labour and socio-economic characteristics in greater depth.

Sam Parsons,  
Research Officer,  
Centre for Longitudinal Studies

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<sup>1</sup> For further details see <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/nuffield-research-placements>

## Introduction

Over the last century the position of women in society has changed dramatically. Not only are more women entering and remaining in paid employment when they have children. In 1971, 53% of women aged 16 – 64 in the UK were employed and this had increased to 66% by 2011. Importantly, there was very little difference in the employment rates of women with and without dependent children. One factor which has contributed to this narrowing of the employment gap is a slight shift in the age of mothers, with more women having children later in life and older mothers more likely to be in employment (ONS, 2011d). More women are also successfully breaking through the glass ceiling and achieving top professional and managerial jobs. In 2014 more than a quarter of all employed women were in professional or senior managerial occupations (26.3%). However, it still remains that women are more likely to earn less and to work part time in less secure sectors of the labour market (Spence, 2011).

With the added responsibility of bringing home a wage, many women are described as doing a triple shift. Not only are they making a significant financial contribution to family life, they still do the majority of all the domestic chores and have the main responsibility of looking after their children, leaving little time for leisure and relaxation. It has been argued, however, that the increasing participation of women in the labour market in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was accompanied by an increase in 'symmetrical families', where we find men taking on an equal share of the domestic duties and spending more time caring for their children (Young and Willmott, 1975). Although it may well be true for some, it remains that the majority of working women still bare the main responsibility for domestic tasks and child care (Park et al, 2013).

Using British longitudinal data collected during the first twelve years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we explore how the sharing of domestic duties and childcare responsibilities has changed among the same families between 2000 – 2012. Specifically, we address

- Are domestic tasks shared more when couples are age 30 or age 42? Have men taken on more responsibilities as they have got older?
- Do men and women agree that the tasks are shared equally or who has the main responsibility for them?
- What are the main socio-economic characteristics that increase joint responsibility of domestic tasks in the home?

For families with children,

- Have men increasingly taken on a child-caring role?

## The data

The 1970 British Cohort Study (BSC70) follows the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970 (Elliot & Shepherd 2006). Over the course of the cohort members' lives, the BCS70 has collected information on health,

physical, educational and social development, and economic circumstances among other factors. Since the birth survey in 1970, there have been eight surveys (or 'waves') at ages 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34, 38 and 42. Information over the years has been gathered from a range of sources and methods, including from the midwife present at the birth, health visitor interviews with the parents, teacher completed questionnaires, medical examinations, educational assessments, self - competition questionnaires and interviews with the cohort members themselves. In certain sweeps, cohort members have also kept nutrition and activity diaries. The surveys at age 5 and 10 augmented their samples by adding immigrants born in the same week. In the latest age 42 survey, 9,842 study members took part.

## **Sample characteristics**

In 2000 when age 30, 11,261 took part in the survey as did 9,842 in 2012. Only cohort members married or cohabiting at each survey completed questions on the domestic division of labour. At age 30 in 2000 this was 67% of the sample and in 2012 at age 42 this was 76%. The sample here consisted of the 4,893 cohort members (45.9% male, 54.1% female) who completed the domestic division of labour questions included in the questionnaires at age 30 *and* age 42, i.e. they were married or cohabiting at both time points. Study members that were living alone or were only living with a partner at one time point were excluded from the analysis.

In our reduced sample, at age 30, 65.8% were married and more than half had become parents – 56.1% had at least one child. By age 42 more than 4 in 5 cohort members were now married (83.5%) or had children (80.1%). This increase in marriage and parenthood was accompanied by a reduction in families where they both worked full-time (51.8% in 2000, 38.9% in 2012) and an increase in one full-time one part-time working families (25.0% to 42.3%). There was little change in the proportion of families where one partner worked full-time and one was not employed (19.8% to 16%)<sup>2</sup>. In nearly one in three couples at age 30, tertiary education and higher had been experienced by one (16.1%) or both (12.5%). By age 42, at least one partner in more than half of all couples had achieved a degree or higher. In more than one in five (21.8%) couples both partners held a degree.

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<sup>2</sup> No more than 3% of families had an 'other' combined employment status at each age.

## Domestic division of labour questions

At age 30 and age 42 cohort members were asked questions about who had the main responsibility for a number of domestic tasks. The response options were; 'I do it', 'my partner does it', 'we share it' and 'other'. The questions were:

In your family who does each of these things most of the time?

- Preparing and cooking the main meal,
- Doing the shopping,
- Cleaning the home,
- Laundry and ironing,
- Looking after the household money and paying the bills,

For those with children, there were three additional questions

- Looking after children when they are ill,
- Teaching the children good behaviour,
- Generally being with and looking after the children.

It is important to remember that how domestic tasks are shared, are only reported by cohort members and not their partners. We therefore discuss differences in how male and female cohort members report sharing domestic tasks, acknowledging that there will be some differences in the characteristics of their partners. For example female partners of male cohort members will generally be a few years younger, whereas male partners of female cohort members will generally be a few years older.

## How are domestic tasks split in the home?

The data did not support a great increase in the proportion of families that could be described as 'symmetrical'. In 2000, when cohort members were aged 30, although half reported shared responsibility for shopping this fell to a third for cooking, cleaning and paying the household bills and to just a quarter for doing the laundry. By 2012, reported shared responsibility had decreased across all tasks.

## Gender

For each of the five domestic tasks more men than women reported shared responsibility. Whereas, women were more likely to report that they had the main responsibility. For example, at age 30 37.8% of men reported having shared responsibility for the cooking compared to only 32.1% of women. Conversely, 57.4% of women and 48.5% of men reported that women had the main responsibility. This biggest difference by gender was for shopping, with 54.8% of men reporting that responsibility was shared, compared with 42.1% of women. Although the same proportion of men and women reported shared responsibility for looking after the cash and making sure all the bills were paid, more women reported their partner had the main responsibility and more men, reported that their partner had main responsibility.



**Table 1: How domestic tasks are split in 2000 (Age 30)**

Task		Male (%)	Female (%)	Joint (%)	Other (%)
Cook	m	13.1	48.5	37.8	0.6
	f	10.3	57.4	32.1	0.3
Shop	m	8.5	36.1	54.8	0.6
	f	6.1	51.3	42.1	0.5
Clean	m	4.8	51.9	39.9	3.4
	f	3.0	63.9	29.4	3.7
Laundry	m	5.7	63.8	28.2	2.3
	f	4.0	73.3	20.8	1.9
Cash	m	31.0	30.5	37.7	0.4
	f	41.6	21.0	37.2	0.2

By the age of 42, men are more likely to report shared responsibilities than woman. For example, 23.4% of men said that they shared responsibilities for the washing and laundry compared to only 17.4% of women; 37.6% of men said they equally shared the shopping compared with 27.3% of women. However, unlike when they were 30, both men and women reported that they are mainly responsible for looking after the cash and paying all the household bills.

**Table 2: How domestic tasks are split in 2012 (Age 42)**

Task		Male (%)	Female (%)	Joint (%)	Other (%)
Cook	m	13.3	54.9	31.1	0.6
	f	10.3	60.8	26.6	0.3
Shop	m	11.1	50.9	37.6	0.4
	f	7.9	64.6	27.3	0.2
Clean	m	5.6	53.5	35.0	5.9
	f	3.8	66.3	23.3	6.6
Laundry	m	6.3	67.2	23.4	3.1
	f	4.5	75.2	17.4	2.9
Cash	m	36.2	30.1	33.6	0.1
	f	26.6	42.2	31.1	0.1

## Socio-economic characteristics and sharing of domestic tasks

We also looked at whether reports of joint responsibility differed across a range of socio-economic characteristics: marital status, number of children, employment, age left full-time education and highest qualification. Employment status and education levels were combined for cohort member and their partner.

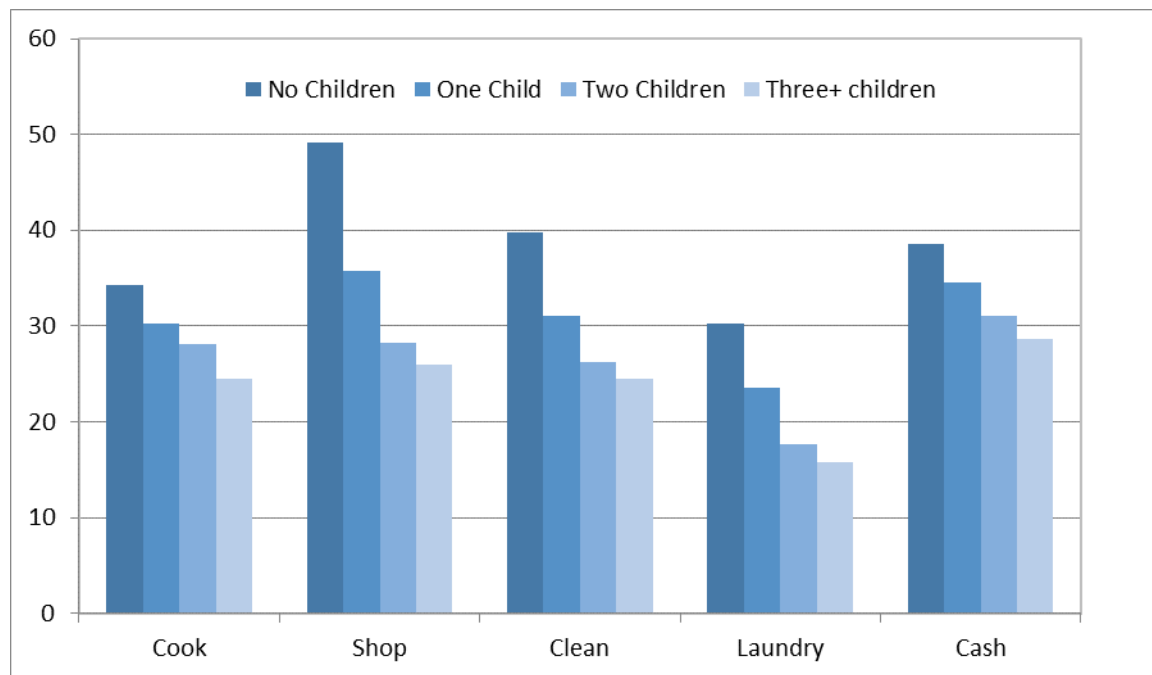
### Marital status

At age 30, joint responsibility across all five domestic tasks had a stronger association with cohabiting than being married. For example, 30.9% of married couples reported shared responsibility for cleaning the house, compared with 40.7% of cohabiting couples; 44.7% of married couples equally shared the shopping compared with 54.3% of those cohabiting. However, by age 42, only shopping (30.9% married, 38.0% cohabiting) and cleaning (27.5% married, 34.9% cohabiting) was more likely to be shared equally by cohabiting couples.

### Number of children

Far more families had one or more children by age 42 than age 30. Reporting of shared responsibility of domestic tasks was far greater among couples with no children and decreased as the number of children increased. This was particularly linear at age 42. For example 34.4% of couples that had no children shared responsibility for the cooking, compared to 30.2% that had one child, 28.1% that have two children and 24.5% that had three children or more. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1: Shared responsibility by number of children at age 42**



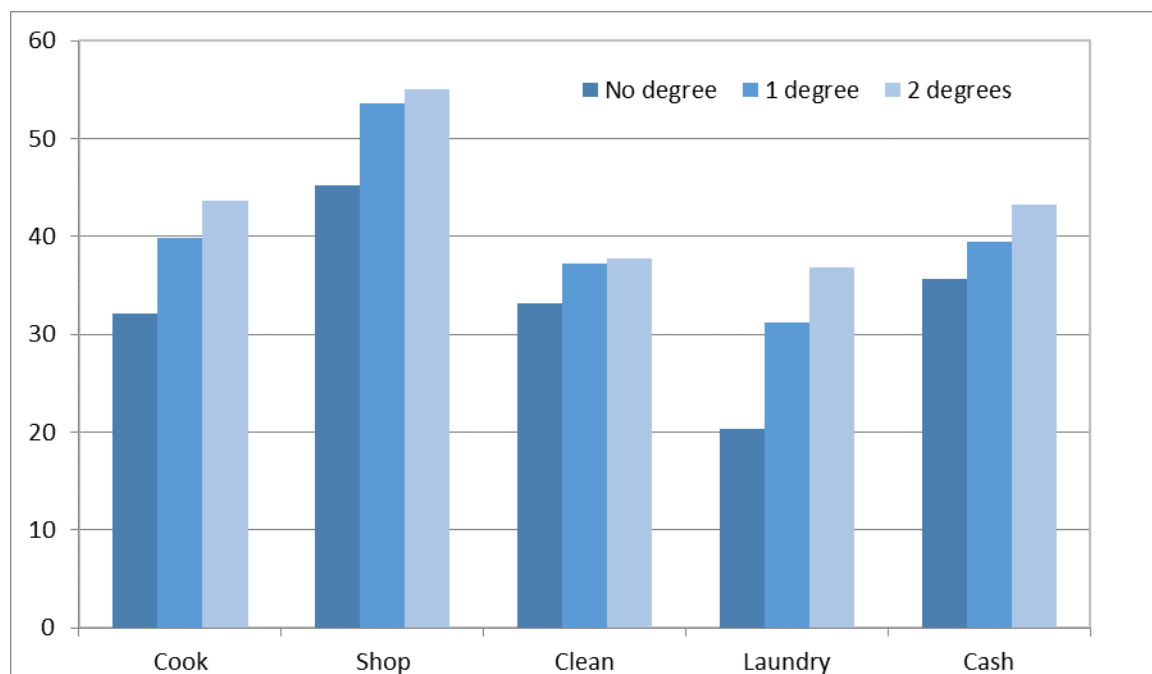
## Employment

More families, in which both partners worked full time or both were not working, reported that they shared responsibilities of domestic task compared with couples where only one person worked fulltime. For example at age 42; 38.4% of couples who both worked fulltime and 38.8% of couples where neither worked, reported that they shared the responsibility of shopping. This compared to 27.8% of couples where one partner worked fulltime and the other worked part time and 26.7% of couples where one partner worked fulltime and one did not work at all.

## Education and qualification

At age 30 there was a strong relationship between reported joint responsibility and the age in which the couple had left education. Across all five domestic tasks, the later the couple left education, the greater the reported shared responsibility. For example; 20.3% of couples where neither had a degree, shared responsibilities for washing and laundry, compared to 31.2% of couples where one partner had a degree and 36.8% of couples where both had a degree. This was also found for the responsibility of paying all the household bills, as 35.7% of couples, where neither had a degree shared this equally, compared to 39.5% of couples, where one had a degree and 43.2% of couples which both had a degree (See Figure 2). However, this was not observed at age 42. For example; 19.4% of couples, where neither partner had a degree, shared responsibility for the laundry, compared to 24.5% of couples where one partner had a degree and 22.2% of couples which both had a degree.

**Figure 2 Shared responsibilities by education level at age 30**



## Caring for children

For the cohort members who had children, teaching their children good behaviour was the task most likely shared by the couple, with over four out of five couples sharing this responsibility at age 30 (87% of men and 83.5% of women) and at age 42 (92.9% of men and 83% of women).

## Gender

As found with the domestic tasks, at age 30 for all three childcare tasks more men reported joint responsibility, whereas women reported that she had the main responsibility and very few men had the main responsibility. For instance 52.4% of men reported shared responsibility for caring for their children when they are sick, compared to only 37.1% of women. However, twice as many women than men reported that their partner took main responsibility for caring for their sick child.

**Table 3: Sharing childcare responsibilities by gender in 2000 (Age 30)**

Responsibility		Male (%)	Female (%)	Joint (%)	Other (%)
Tends	m	0.8	46.3	52.4	0.5
	f	1.6	61.1	37.1	0.3
Teach	m	4.5	8.4	87.0	0.1
	f	1.5	15.0	83.5	0.0
Cares	m	1.4	50.6	47.4	0.5
	f	1.5	59.1	38.7	0.6

By the age of 42, men reported sharing responsibilities of all three childcare tasks, more than women. For example; 59.3% of men reported joint responsibility for generally being with and looking after their children compared to only 47.8% of women. The most shared task was teaching their children good behaviour with 92.9% of men reporting this role as being shared and 83% of women. Far more men were involved in teaching their children than for caring for them when they were ill or just generally looking after them.

**Table 4 Sharing childcare responsibilities by gender in 2012 (Age 42)**

Responsibility		Male (%)	Female (%)	Joint (%)	Other (%)
Tends	m	2.4	47.4	49.6	0.6
	f	1.6	65.3	32.9	0.2
Teach	m	2.8	4.3	92.9	0.1
	f	0.7	16.3	83.0	0.0
Cares	m	2.2	38.1	59.3	0.4
	f	1.2	50.8	47.8	0.3

## **Socio-economic characteristics and sharing of childcare tasks**

### **Marital Status**

More shared responsibility was found if the couple are married for teaching the children good behaviour and looking after their sick children, at both ages 30 and 42. For example at the age of 30, 40.4% of cohabiting couples reported shared responsibilities for looking after their sick children, compared to 44.7% of married couples. By age 42, 36.5% of cohabiting couples sharing tending to their sick child compared to 41.4% of married couples. However, generally being with and looking after their children varied, as at the age 30, 46% of cohabiting couples shared the responsibility compared to 41.5% of married couples. However, at the age of 42 there was no differences, 52.5% of cohabiting couples shared this responsibility compared with 53.1% of married couples.

### **Number of Kids**

At the age of 30, the more children the couple have, the least equality there is for tending for them when they are ill; 39.4% of couples with three children or more reported a shared responsibility, compared to 41.4% of couples with two children and 44.2% of couples with only one child. This is replicated at the age of 42, with generally being with and looking after their children following the trend as well. For example 59% of couples with only one child reported joint responsibilities regarding generally being with and looking after their child, compared to 53.6% of couples with two children and 47.3% of couples with three or more children. Across nearly all childcare tasks, couples with three or more children reported the least equality.

### **Employment**

Couples where both partners either worked full – time or neither worked at all, had the greatest shared responsibilities compared to the least equality for families where only one partner worked full – time. For example at age 30, 52.7% of couples which both worked full – time and 56% of couples where both were not working reported having joint responsibilities for looking after their child when they were sick. This compared to only 35.4% of couples where one partner worked full time and the other did not work and 43.5% of couples where one partner worked full time and the other worked only part time. This pattern also appeared for generally being with and looking after their children.

### **Age of leaving full – time education**

The least amount of shared responsibilities for; tending to their children when they were ill and generally being with their children was found among couples, where they both had a degree, the most equality being when they both did not have a degree. For example 43.8% of couples without either having a degree at age 30 shared responsibilities for generally being with their child, compared to 36% of couples where only one partner had a degree and 35.7% of couples where both partners had a degree. By age 42, the amount of reported shared equality had increased; with 54.9% of couples where neither had a degree shared

responsibilities with looking after their children, compared to 51.9% of couples where only one partner had a degree and 45.2% of couples where both partners had a degree.

## **Logistic regression analysis**

So far, the descriptives above have only analysed the relationship between one variable and the outcome variable at a time. By carrying out logistic regression models we can understand which of the individual variables have the strongest relationship with the domestic division of labour tasks when taking all the measures into account. Social class and employment status were not included in the regression analysis as social class was not significantly related to the domestic tasks at the bivariate level and combined employment status was heavily associated with having children. For example, three quarters of couples with no children were both working full time and around ninety percent of families where one partner worked full time and one partner either worked part time or did not work had at least one child (88% and 90% respectively).

We ran logistic regression models predicting reported joint responsibility to see which of the particular characteristics remained significantly associated with the domestic tasks when all other measures in the model had been controlled for. Results are discussed in terms of Odds Ratios (OR), or the ratio of the odds of an event (e.g. sharing responsibility) occurring in one group (e.g. cohabiting couples) to the odds of it occurring in another (e.g. married couples). The OR for the reference group is set as 1, thus an OR greater than 1 indicates that a characteristic has a positive association with shared responsibility and an OR less than 1 indicates the characteristic has a negative association with shared responsibility.

### **Joint responsibility at age 30**

Results in Table 5 suggest that men, couples without children, cohabiting and more educated families were significantly more likely to report sharing joint responsibility for cooking, shopping, laundry, cleaning and paying all the household bills. The few exceptions were that gender was not associated with the sharing of household bills, cohabiting was not associated with sharing of the laundry and education levels were not associated with sharing cleaning tasks.

After accounting for all other measures included in the model, not having children had the greatest impact on reported shared responsibility. For example, for shopping, laundry and cleaning, the odds of reporting shared responsibility among couples without children was more than twice that for couples with one or more children. The significantly increased odds of reporting shared responsibility among men was greatest for shopping (OR 1.63) and lowest for cooking (OR 1.25). Education levels had the strongest relationship with shared responsibilities for laundry whereby one partner having a degree increased the odds to OR 1.49 and where both had a degree to OR 1.68.

We also ran models predicting the reporting of women having the main responsibility for domestic tasks. The results were a near mirror image of the results for joint responsibility:

men, couples without children, cohabiting and more educated families were significantly *less* likely to report women had the main responsibility for domestic duties.

**Table 5: Logistic Regression analyses: predicting reporting having joint responsibility for different domestic tasks at age 30 (Odds Ratios)**

	Cooks	Shops	Laundry	Clean	Cash
Gender (ref. female)	1.25***	1.63***	1.43***	1.55***	1.00
Marital Status (ref. married)	1.18*	1.13*	1.11	1.20**	1.18*
Children or not (ref. children)	1.61***	2.09***	2.29***	2.17***	1.25**
Educational Level (ref. no degree)	1.25**	1.18*	1.49***	.99	1.11
1 Degree					
2 Degrees	1.35***	1.11	1.68***	.90	1.25*

Note: \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

The next step was to look at the likelihood of a cohort member reporting joint responsibility for a domestic task at age 42, taking into account how they previously reported how a domestic task was shared at age 30. We also included the same socio – economic characteristics as used in the age 30 models, updated to reflect status at age 42.

Table 6 shows that once again being male and not having any children significantly increased the likelihood of reporting joint responsibility for both cooking and laundry tasks. Marital status now held no significant association with how domestic tasks were shared, as did education levels for laundry. However, education levels now significantly reduced the odds of shared responsibility for cooking once other measures were taken into account.

We looked at the specific relationship between reported shared responsibility at age 30 and 42 in two ways; or rather we used different reference categories to fully understand what was going on. In both models, we observed a very strong association. When previous joint responsibility was used as the reference category, in families where women were reported as having the main responsibility for either cooking or the laundry at age 30 their odds of reporting joint responsibility at age 42 were a third that of families with joint responsibility at age 30 (OR 0.32 and OR 0.29 respectively). In families where men were reported to have the main responsibility for cooking at age 30 their odds of reporting joint responsibility at age 42 were also significantly lower than families with joint responsibility at age 30 (OR 0.76). In families where women were reported to have main responsibility for domestic tasks was the reference categories, the odds for families where men had the main responsibility for tasks at age 30 having joint responsibility for tasks at age 42 was now more than twice that for families where women were reported to have main responsibility (OR 2.35 for cooking, OR 3.01 for laundry).

**Table 6 Logistic Regression analyses: Predicting joint responsibility of domestic tasks at age 42 (Odds Ratios)**

	Cooks	Wash		Cooks	Wash
Gender (ref. female)	1.16*	1.29**	Gender (ref. female)	1.16*	1.3**
Marital Status (ref. married)	1.05	1.06	Marital Status (ref. married)	1.05	1.06
Children or not (ref. children)	1.25*	1.73***	Children or not (ref. children)	1.25*	1.73***
Educational Level (ref. no degree)	.86*	1.13	Educational Level (ref. no degree)	.86*	1.13
1 Degree			1 Degree		
2 Degrees	.72***	1.02	2 Degrees	.72***	1.02
Responsibility at 30 (ref. joint)			Responsibility at 30 (ref. women)		
Other	.34	.38***	Joint	3.08***	3.40***
Female	.32***	.29***	Other	1.06	1.29
Male	.76**	.89	Male	2.35***	3.01***

Note: \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05

## Summary of findings

The research did not provide evidence of an increase in the proportion of families that could be described as 'symmetrical'. If anything results suggested that equal sharing of domestic tasks declined within our families as they moved from their thirties into their forties. Men were more likely than women to report having equal responsibility for all of the tasks, women that they had the main responsibility.

After controlling for all measures, results suggest that men, couples without children, cohabiting and more educated families were significantly more likely to report sharing joint responsibility for cooking, shopping, laundry, cleaning and paying all the household bills. However, not having children had the greatest impact on reported shared responsibility and the more children a family had in 2012 the least likely they were to report shared responsibility.

By including how domestic tasks had been reported previously at age 30, we were able to see how this influenced the domestic divisions of labour at age 42. Essentially, if a family had shared responsibility at age 30 they were by far the most likely to also have it at age 42. However, in comparison to families where the female partner had the main responsibility for the domestic tasks at age 30, the small number of families where the male partner was



reported to have had the main responsibility at age 30 were more likely to have become 'symmetrical' and share responsibility for the tasks at age 42.

Although we are looking at reported sharing of tasks and do not know if this is a true reflection of the actual situation, this could suggest that men are perhaps willing to give up having prime responsibility for tasks whereas if women have the main responsibility for a task, they are very likely to always have it. This seems particularly so once a couple has children.

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