Who is Responsible for Household Tasks in Long Term Marriages of the “Young-Old” Elderly?

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ABSTRACT: Little is known about the way in which golden anniversary couples divide the responsibility for household tasks. This article examines the division of responsibility for 12 household tasks within a sample of 18 couples. At least one partner is under 75 years of age. The findings indicate that these “young-old” couples have developed interdependent, gender differentiated divisions of household tasks, although they share several tasks. There is congruence between what they expect and how they actually divide the responsibility for household tasks.

Within the past thirty years, the research spotlight has been focused on the study of marriages of young persons. Adjustment to marriage, the birth of a child, and other topics have received considerable attention. Occasionally the beam of the research light has been broadened to include couples who have raised and launched their children. However, the dynamics of long-term marriages have seldom been illuminated. Couples who have achieved 50 years or more of marriage are survivors (Brubaker, 1985a). First, they have outlived many other people and, second, they have stayed married to one person for a long time. The experiences and patterns of behavior established by these husbands and wives may provide clues to younger couples about the complexities of the marital relationship.

The way in which married couples divide the responsibility for household tasks has received some attention from family researchers. For example, Brubaker and Hennon (1982) compared the divisions of household responsibility of dual-earner and dual-retired wives. Szinovacz (1980) interviewed retired women while Keating and Cole (1980) studied retired teachers and their wives concerning the impact of retirement on the divisions of household tasks within their marriages.

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One recent study (Brubaker, 1985b) considered the divisions of household responsibility in the marriages of elderly aged 75 years or older. This article is concerned with the way in which responsibility is divided between the husbands and wives in the marriages of 18 couples in which one partner is aged 74 years or younger. In gerontological literature, a distinction between the "young-old" (74 years and younger) and "old-old" (75 years and older) elderly has been made. Generally, the "young-old" are more active and have fewer health difficulties than the "old-old." Since the physical ability to perform household work may alter the division of household responsibility (Szinovacz, 1980), a look at the marriages of the "young-old" is warranted. This paper is primarily descriptive and the findings will be compared to those reported in Brubaker (1985b).

The description of household responsibility includes expected as well as actual divisions as reported by the husbands and wives. These long married couples were asked what responsibility they expected and actually had for twelve household tasks. Do they expect to share responsibility with their spouses? Or, do they expect their spouses to be responsible for activities which have been traditionally associated with their spouses' gender? Answers to these questions provide some insight into the sex role orientations of these older people.

**Previous Research and Theory**

*Research on Household Tasks*

Research focusing on the division of household tasks indicates that there is a continuation of task assignment rather than a change in the later years. For example, Szinovacz (1980) studied 24 retired wives to determine if their retirements had an effect on the way in which they divided household chores. Prior to retirement the wives had a gender differentiated division of household tasks. The husbands did the "outside" activities and the wives completed the "inside" chores. After the wives retired, these patterns continued. Husbands became more involved in the "inside" work if their wives had health problems that precluded their involvement in the household tasks. Thus, health difficulties, not retirement, altered the way in which the household chores were divided.

Two other studies reported similar findings. Keating and Cole (1980) queried 400 retired teachers and found that retirement did not significantly alter the traditional divisions of household labor. Bru-