SERVED BY THE CHILDREN: 
THE SPATIALIZATION OF 
CHILDREN’S HOUSEWORK IN 
HAREDI SOCIETY IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

A focus on children’s housework, concerning where and by whom specific chores are performed, how they are viewed and interpreted, and the types of entitlements they entail, shows the significance of space for the way housework is conducted in society. Insights obtained from Haredi (Jewish Ultra-Orthodox) informants of three groups explicate how representations of children performing housework are understood: first, employed mothers evaluated children’s housework from within the family; second, adult bystanders interpreted their observations of children performing housework outside the home; third, children performing housework outside the home conveyed their own experience of it. Findings indicate that children forthrightly defined their activity as work, but local knowledge imparted by adults identified it as learning and that children and the housework they do were supervised by unfamiliar adults. Spatial analysis revealed adults’ dependence on children’s housework, which partially reverses the ordinary adult-child hierarchy.

Keywords:

Housework geography, children, public visibility, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Haredi, Israel
This study examines the daily domestic work of children. Focusing on the effect of public representations of housework by children and of children as domestic workers, it analyzes a midday scene in a typical Haredi street in Israel, showing how various interpretations by mothers, children and adult bystanders reflect child-adult power relations. In so doing this study pertains to two recently emerging research interests: housework and the engagement of children within it (e.g., Bønke, 2010; Warren, 2011). It also calls attention to the geography of housework, especially to that performed by children. The analysis also contributes to the study of the spatiality of work in the Israeli Haredi community (Blumen, 2007a, b).

The Spatialization of Children’s Housework

In developed societies, housework marks unpaid domestic work, referring to all forms of physical and emotional work that ensure the functioning and wellbeing of the family. It normally includes tasks such as cooking, child-care and child-rearing, cleaning, laundering, ironing, shopping, chauffeuring and gardening; moreover, it has been largely recognized as the primary facilitator of the paid economy (Alberts et al., 2011; Kynaston, 1996). Overwhelmingly performed by women as their primary social role, housework connotes the invisibility of home privacy, thereby representing gender hierarchy (Oakley, 1974). Yet housework itself is gendered. Women typically perform the “core” of housework, those routine chores necessary to sustain individuals and maintain homes such as preparation of meals and dishwashing, house cleaning, grocery shopping, and laundry, all of which tend to be obligatory, repetitive, boring, and least flexible and most intensive in terms of time and energy. Men usually perform fewer, discretionary chores which are performed less frequently, tend to be more creative and even recreational, such as repairs, garden and animal care, paying bills and various outdoor chores, and are considered peripheral (e.g., Bianchi et al. 2000; Gupta, 1999; Hochschild 1989). Unsurprisingly, housework practices construct gender identity and underline socialization (e.g., Cunningham, 2001, 2005; DeVault, 1991).

Children are socialized into controlling their behaviour along two major axes: the child–adult hierarchy and generational proximity, i.e., the (in)ability to influence the social order surrounding them (Bendelow and Mayall, 2002; Mayall, 1998). Socialization to housework depends to a large extent on gender: girls are more likely to carry out routine indoor tasks such as cooking and cleaning while boys are more likely to perform occasional outdoor tasks such as yard care (Antill et al., 1996; Blair, 1992; Bønke, 2010). Probing the overall input of children, Marx Ferree
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(1990) has pointed to age being a dimension second only to gender in the allocation of housework. Children assume housework when adults fail to fulfill domestic needs (Gill, 1998; Antill et al., 1996) and their share might be greater than that of their fathers, especially when the mothers are employees (Lee et al., 2003; Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie, 2006). Consequently, children’s housework buttresses the household income and supports the paid economy in general (Mayall, 1996), especially in low-income and single-mother homes (Berridge and Romich, 2011). Such circumstances mark housework as a site where age-power relations can be partially reversed.

In geographic studies, housework is widely acknowledged as a gendered issue with women’s unpaid domestic work best known as the facilitator of urban decentralization and suburban lifestyle (McDowell, 1983; Miller, 1983). However, there has been barely any research on the spatialization of the gendered pattern of housework. This pattern is not strict as women are often seen performing some “masculine” tasks, such as gardening, shopping and driving, outside and away from home when many employed men, usually confined to their paid workplaces, remain invisible (e.g., Blumen, 2007a; Mazey and Lee, 1983; Hanson and Pratt, 1995). Thus some representations of housework and the power relations embedded in them are visible in the community public space despite the association with the hidden privacy of the home.

Socialization research indicates that the gendering of housework by adults is replicated by children. Although the spatialization of the children’s housework was also noted it was not problematized, either in socialization research or in geography (e.g., Antill et al., 1996; Blair, 1992). However, the spatiality of children crossing the indoor-outdoor divide is a well known phenomenon (e.g., Bingham, Valentine, and Holloway, 1999; Holloway and Valentine, 2001; Valentine, 1996; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). As the ultimate locus of socialization, children are disciplined and trained mainly in the home. Outside the home, control over children is realized by their spatial confinement to places such as schools, bounded playgrounds and neighborhood parks. In the public space children are constructed as Others, constantly under the watchful eyes of adults who control their experiences (Connolly and Ennew, 1996:133; Valentine, 1996, 1997). However, the power relations embedded in these representations of housework are not limited to gender. The frequent discomfort of viewing breast-feeding babies, diapering toddlers and disciplining children in public (e.g., Blumen, 2007a; Carpenter, 2006; Staehli, 1996) indicates that these representations have additional hierarchies, in which age is inevitably conspicuous, which are publicly displayed, observed and negotiated. There has been only a single
study, which, in passing reported on the awareness of male adolescents of the indoor-outdoor division of housework and how public visibility in performing domestic chores (dis)honours the gender identity of the performers (Curtin and Lineham, 2002).

Work and Children in Israeli Haredi Society

The pursuit of religious wisdom through yeshiva study, which is glorified as a divine occupation and recognized as “holy work” (avodat kodesh), epitomizes Haredi masculinity. This most prestigious vocation contrasts with the entire gamut of dull ungodly types of paid and unpaid work (Finkelman, 2011; Stadler, 2009). In Israel, Haredi Jews comprise about 8 per cent of the entire population but their growing political influence allows many yeshiva men to disparage paid work (up to 60-70 per cent). The Haredi community allocates housework to women (Ben-Shahar–Neria, 2002; Stadler, 2009). Yet, to escape acute poverty, many mothers add paid jobs to their intensive housework and children commonly ease the burden by doing some housework. By 2008, the labor force participation of Haredi women reached 53.9% (nearly 70% for Jewish women) indicating that the phenomenon of the employed mother is a common one.

Appropriating a distinct part of the city is essential in Haredi theology because it equips the community with a public space of its own. Typically Haredi practices are implemented in such "privatized" public space. All told, this spatial tactic yields a Haredi neighborhood, a supportive milieu for adherents facilitating large-scale systems of social reproduction that are publicly displayed and exercised, all the while minimizing conflict with the dominant modern culture (Schnell, 2001; Schwartz, 1996, p. 268; Shaffir, 1997; Shilhav and Friedman, 1985; Boyarin and Boyarin, 1995).

In addition, Haredi society is also young. The average number of children under 18 per Haredi household is 3.9 compared to 1.8 in non-Haredi Jewish households (Ministry of Industry, Trade & Labor, 2009, Table 6). The 2008 Israeli census indicates that in Bnei-Braq almost 40 per cent of the population was under 15 (compared with 25.4 per cent for all Jews: Israel, Central Bureau of Statistics: Table 1.21). Haredi children are regarded as a closed, separate enclave where hierarchies and individual identities are inexorably structured by sex, age and social role. Childhood exists in a superior-inferior paradox. Haredi affiliation values children and adults identically and as superior to non-Haredi, but at the same time and by the same affiliation, children are inferior in the rigid adult-child hierarchy. Strict observance of religious precepts, strong willpower and self-control are the most important qualities in teaching children how to
become either scholars or employed mothers (Heilman, 1992; Yafeh, 2004). The Haredi interface of pious and impious work in Israel has barely been investigated (but see Hakak, 2004; Gonen, 2002; Stadler, 2002, 2009; Berman, 1998; Blumen, 2007a), and housework which has scarcely been studied in connection with women, is hardly considered at all in connection with children (e.g., Blumen, 2002, 2007b, 2008; El-Or, 1994).

**Working with Children: Some Methodological Concerns**

The present study was conducted in Bnei Braq, a mainly Haredi city in Inner Metropolitan Tel Aviv, where about 30 per cent of the Israeli Haredi population live. The city is managed by elected Haredi councilors and daily life is regulated by Haredi lifestyles such as prohibiting motor transport on Sabbath and holydays. Data were obtained through four complementary steps.

First, I conducted 55 in-depth interviews with employed mothers from the Vizhnitz sect. This documented the work routine in their homes and shed light on the contribution of children’s housework. The interviewees were of Ashkenazi origin and aged between 28 and 42; they were the wives of yeshiva students and were mothers of five to eight children. All had graduated from the local Haredi education system. Although qualified schoolteachers, they were employed on a prototype assembly-line at a nearby high-tech firm (Blumen, 2002).

I then observed the midday Haredi public space for two weeks at three busy street corners and evaluated the visibility of children’s housework. Three weeks later, after analyzing my observations, I returned to these sites and conversed with Haredi passersby, both adults and children. The conversations with the adults continued for five successive days and talking with children extended for ten days. Altogether I was present at these sites for five weeks and interviewed 59 people: 30 adults – 13 women and 17 men, and 29 children – 13 girls and 16 boys. Children gave their first names and reported their age, which was between six and twelve years.5

As a “stranger” – a secular woman with an audio-recorder and camera, my persistent “out of place” presence and my attempts to respect local codes (dressing modestly, not directly filming faces) were noticed, recognized and appreciated. Local people quickly became used to my presence so that often a passerby – woman, a man or a child – initiated a brief conversation. Previous work had prepared me for such local encounters; as long as these chats were brief and public, i.e., socially controlled, they were acceptable (Blumen, 2007a). I expressed general
interest in the Haredi lifestyle, relying on the people observed in the street to fuel the conversation. For example, turning my interlocutor’s attention to one of the children doing housework, I chose standard comments such as “S/he looks very young” or “What can s/he be doing with three toddlers on a busy street?” or “I wonder if s/he feels tired”. Such comments were serviceable at two levels. First, they centered attention on the children performing housework and second, my seeking local knowledge reversed, Haredi-modern, interviewee-interviewer and also adult-child hierarchies, at least for a short time.

Conversing with children was a sensitive undertaking. While cooperation was not difficult to obtain, their behavior was strictly controlled. To some extent I could overcome this difficulty because watchful adults were distanced and unable to hear the conversations. Nevertheless I had to keep them short, about four minutes each. Children usually moved in small bands, homogeneous with respect to the gender of the older children and heterogeneous among the younger children. Usually one started the conversation while others watched at a distance; I focused the conversation on the speaker’s experience and feelings; about four-five minutes later the friends came closer and then I apologized and left. In sum, this allowed about four minutes of undisturbed conversation with one child from each group. In general, mixing visual and verbal approaches with children and adults (Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) is a successful technique. These fleeting, semi-controlled conversations, which were recorded and transcribed, allowed me to extract the local knowledge embedded in these ordinary Haredi representations of housework. However, indoor housework was only described, not observed; yet, most significantly, there is validation in the matching reports of mothers, children and passersby.

Children’s Indoor Housework: “I’m Grateful for their Work”

A concise description of the domestic experience of 55 employed mothers reveals how they view their children’s housework. A routine day in a Haredi family starts before 06:00 when the fathers leave for morning prayers and the mothers wake the children, preferably each one separately. The men return from prayers just before the women leave for work; together with the older daughters the men conclude the morning tasks by walking the younger children to school. The men leave the yeshiva around noon, hurrying to meet the youngest children at their schools and shopping for groceries on the way home. In many families children older than six accompany younger siblings home, where they all meet their fathers. At home the men warm up and serve lunch (prepared in advance
by the mothers), supervise their older daughters who tidy up the kitchen and do a little housekeeping before returning to the yeshiva (around 15:00-16:00). In some families older siblings are also responsible for daily shopping and serving lunch. When the mothers return home in the early afternoon, the older daughters help them whereas the boys are usually sent to neighbors, friends, or family to deliver or fetch groceries and other items that have been forgotten. In general, children are independent relatively young, with older children looking after younger siblings; each child has specific duties with girls given many more chores than boys. Teenage daughters provide most indoor help, while teenage boys are yeshiva students (many studying away from home). Still, the women are responsible for the daily functioning of family life and perform most domestic and family chores (for details see Blumen, 2002).

Housework is very demanding. Though it is far inferior to the prestigious studies of men, it is greatly appreciated in the community. The quality of housework in a specific family is often judged by the children’s behavior and mothers are esteemed for having well-behaved offspring. The women I interviewed emphasized this point by means of comparison with modern culture.

Rivka explained:

We’re different. Children are our greatest concern, they are our future and, in fact, the future of the entire Jewish nation... Mothers and homemaking are admired, praised. It energizes the women, and they don’t complain as much as you [modern women].

The women are aware of the intimate relations between housework and the presence of children. Eight aspects structure their descriptions of the work their children do in the family. First, children’s work is acknowledged in a practical sense as it is integrated into the mothers’ daily routine. Second, the children’s work is specified as “help” rather than work (see Blumen, 2007b, 143).

Dvora refers to the other aspects of the children’s housework:

The most important is to set an example for your kids, to teach them how to be [proper] adults... They must learn their duties in the parents’ home before having their own [family homes]. Our family functions smoothly very much because of their help, [which] allows my [paid] work. Although men care more about education I place greater emphasis on their help and appreciate it, I’m grateful for the work they do. The family and the mothers are greatly appreciated for raising successful matches [partners]; when your children are seen as doing the “right thing” – helping, they respect their parents before God [she refers to the fifth
commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother”] … Some say that the help of their children saves a lot of money, which they do not have. For me, even if I, too, don’t have much money, this is not the most important [thing].

Dvora informs how children’s housework, which indicates successful socialization, shapes the third feature enhancing the family’s reputation. The family reputation is a broad meaningful issue embracing three additional facets. It reflects the parental role of adults, especially of mothers; it determines the appeal of siblings in the arranged marriage market; and it also implies religious quality. The economic value of children’s housework, the seventh aspect, is acknowledged but ranked as the least important.

The eighth aspect, the gendering of housework, was just taken for granted. At an abstract level, men emphasize adequate socialization in a general way whereas women stress their children’s concrete contribution. In practice, the women alone are responsible for the functioning of the family and the help the men proffer is usually focused on accompanying children to and from school, managing and supervising the midday hassle at home, and the daily and weekly shopping. Thus, there is a spatial aspect to housework as the women’s work is mostly hidden within the privacy of the home while the men’s work is almost entirely displayed in the community public space (Blumen, 2007b). The housework allocated to children reflects the adults’ gendered pattern. Bearing in mind their age, older children look after younger. Daughters are given many more chores than sons; even as young as seven or eight, daughters provide most indoor help such as serving food, cleaning and “mothering” younger children. Being more active indoors means that girls lose out on the prestige gained from the public visibility of children performing housework outside the home.

**Children’s Housework in the Public Space**

Three issues comprise the public representation of Haredi children: their visibility as domestic workers and the interpretation of their appearance by adults and by other children. By midday, about 10 minutes before the official end of the school day, legions of men dash out of the yeshivot but the average level of noise on the streets hardly changes. A little later this restrained silence is dispelled by an influx of many noisy children and adolescents. Women, many of them schoolteachers, also join this public mayhem but in small numbers. This persists about 30 minutes and then slowly dissipates, finally subsiding about 90 minutes after it had started.
The children are more publicly conspicuous than at any other time of the day and their role as domestic workers is most noticeable. Dressed in colorful clothes, their small bodies, particularly the young ones, emphasize their presence while their school uniforms categorize them as Others. A reflexive comparison with the larger bodies of adults, mostly those of the men, scurrying along in their almost uniform dark clothes, is inescapable. Children fill the air with noise and tend to move slowly and leisurely. Men are almost always seen accompanying children and the image of an impatient man, dragging one or two children by the hand behind him, is very common (Blumen, 2007b). However, many children move independently. Uncontrolled by adults, shouting, yelling and dragging their feet, children of various ages walk little by little in noisy gaggles; many, some as young as six or seven, push baby buggies, hold toddlers’ hands, or carry grocery bags. They stop at the neighborhood store, play in the park, or sit on a low wall in a shady street corner to chat. These settings evince children’s housework, implying the exemption of many parents from this daily phase of childcare and shopping.

“They learn to help”: Adults’ View of Children

Across the street-dialogues with Haredi adults, children (to whom I referred as “she” or “he”) were categorized as children. Most significantly, women and men alike identified age as the most apparent feature; none classified any of the children observed performing housework as domestic workers. A woman in her early forties smiled at my comment that the children appear joyful and energetic. We then turned our attention to four girls, aged about eight, with schoolbags on their backs. One carried a plastic bag containing some groceries and two others each held the hand of a toddler about four years old. She pointed at this company of six young children and continued with an unmistaken tone of pride:

How happy our girls are. At school they expand the wisdom to help them to become worthy women, to be a proper match for nice [yeshiva] students and decent mothers to their, our, children… These children know what they have to do simply by watching others… And if they marry a gifted [yeshiva] man their life will be very meaningful, even if they have to work hard for the money [to support the family].

In front of a noisy group of nine children composed similarly of young girls watching toddlers in their buggies in a shaded corner, I heard a very similar description with some elaboration from a man in his thirties:
Children demand a lot of work, especially from their mothers but they give us all, much satisfaction... The girls will be real Jewish mothers and the boys are to become true workers of God devoting their life to [yeshiva] study... They’ll be happy with one another so that their children will follow them, because for us the survival of the faith is the most important. This is why we are so strict about our children. We teach them what they need to know in order to keep the Jewish spirit. This pious spirit guides them to stay away from an evil, worthless life – disobedience, drugs, prostitution, God knows what else.

Boys performing housework were also perceived in terms of the future. A man in his late forties referred to two boys about ten years old who were looking after two younger ones about six years old.

It looks as if they are friends, they are probably neighbors and in the same school. In a few years they’ll go to a yeshiva [away from home] and will become scholars, so we’ll all [the Haredi community] be proud of them... They learn to help at home, how to be good husbands, so that in ten or twelve years when they are married, their brides [wives] will appreciate their help and then they will set a proper example for their scholarly sons how to be good husbands for their wives... The children are our [the nation’s] survival. We are served by them, today and in the future.

Altogether several themes structured the impressions the adults on the street have of children performing housework. Children form a distinct category, educated and supervised by adults, recognized as the objects of adults’ housework. Indirectly, this reveals how adults depend on children as an important source of personal and collective meaning. This dependence stems from children symbolizing the future of a chosen (Haredi and national) collective, which causes the interviewees repeatedly to emphasize the importance of socialization to both religious values and family life as a unitary fabric. The socialization of Haredi children is accepted as gendered and as rigid so that the two roles are complementary. Finally, added value is ascribed to Haredi children by their detachment from modern irreligious mores. It is difficult to tell whether this comparison was provoked in response to my [modern] presence or is typical of Haredi internal discourse (e.g., Yafeh, 2004), yet it is noteworthy that this impression reaffirms the testimonies of the employed mothers.
Children’s view of Children’s Housework

Haredi children indicate a self-awareness of belonging to a distinct category — children. A ten-year-old boy, Meir, testifies to that sense:

Boys with suits are not boys, they are bigger, and anyway after bar-mitzvah … boys are not boys anymore. With girls it’s more difficult to tell… Maybe they have to be a little older to be [considered] grown-ups. Then, there are the biggest children like me, and there are little children about three or four or five and maybe even six. Before that there are babies… And there are the children between them [little children] and us [oldest children] “children in the middle”. After my tenth birthday, on Tu-b’Shvat [a festival four months earlier], I became a big boy.

Question: Why is it difficult with girls?

Because they don’t wear suits, like grown-up boys. But for children this doesn’t matter, it’s not important. Me and my [eight year old] sister are the same, only at school we are not together, but our schools are close [to each other]. When we grow up it will be different but now we are children, we do almost the same with our little brothers.

You see that some children go with their fathers. They can’t talk or play with friends, they’re the little ones, and they get home the quickest … There are children who go home with their older sisters and brothers. Then there are children – big and in the middle, and maybe even little, but not many – who go to collect their little brothers and sisters or baby brothers and sisters [from day care and schools], and take them home. And there are the children who go home with their friends [who] don’t have to walk their little sisters and brothers. Sometimes children have to shop at the grocery. If they go with [are accompanied by] their father they wait for him, and still they get home quickest; [if they go] with friends, they do the shopping and the friends wait for them and [when necessary] watch the little ones, and even if they [the shoppers] are not with young brothers all the friends wait for them so that the gang stays together. Children like to go together with friends. It takes more time to walk with friends and [younger] children also want to play and [that is why] children with children get home the latest.

Age appears to be the prime criterion as to who is a child. At the same time, it also marks the heterogeneity within the children category. While gender forcefully adds to this heterogeneity, the children themselves, who are familiar with its significance, tend to minimize it. Heterogeneity is also embedded into the children’s activity. The presence of relatives or
friends and the frequent need to buy groceries are important determinants of how time is spent and whose housework is represented. Adult relatives restrain the children they accompany. Children who perform housework are absorbed by such frivolities as admiring cars, staring at passersby and watching animals (cats, insects), enjoying the company of friends and sharing domestic tasks with them, as well as chatting and playing together. It appears natural to all the young respondents that children’s outdoor housework is performed within a reciprocal nexus that bonds co-equals who offer mutual help in performing their chores. In this sense, it enhances their sociability within age-mixed ensembles and children accompanied by adults are not part of this bustle.

All the young informants confessed a preference to hanging around, dawdling and losing track of time. A ten year old girl, Sarit:

Very often people on the street, neighbors and people we don’t know, tell us to hurry up, to stop playing or chatting and run home to help our moms. I love to help my Mom, but I also love being together with my friends, and usually my Mom is not angry with me being a little late because at home I help a lot before and after she returns [from work].

While adults disapprove and are often annoyed by the delays in the journey home, they tolerate it as a typically immature characteristic. By extending the journey home, children actually adapt their tasks to their needs to mix and play. This local knowledge suggests that seeing children proceeding leisurely is also a reflection of resistance. The longer the delay, the greater is the perceived resistance to and the sense of the adults’ dependence on children’s housework and the adults’ frustration is an outcome. The children often mentioned that dawdling children are discovered, chased away and told by unfamiliar adults to hurry home, demonstrating that adults apply age hierarchy and supervise children they don’t know. The superior-inferior paradox is apparent: while embracing the children as the progeny of an entire community of superior believers, this practice of adults reinforces the inferiority of Haredi children as subordinate to all adults. This suggests that adults possess local knowledge, which recognizes and appreciates the importance of children’s housework — “go home to help your Mom” — even if it contradicts their inclination to define children’s activity in terms of socialization. This collective supervision indicates what goes unadmitted: Haredi adults (i.e., parents) depend on the work of children. All the children interviewed were well aware of their parents’ reliance on the housework they provide in maintaining the family routine. Sarit labeled her outdoor activity as “work,” but when she focused on her mother’s work inside and outside
the home, her own contribution was redefined as “help”. The power of the indoor-outdoor dichotomy reveals the principles by which children spatialize their housework and their resistance to the burden of housework itself, its intensity and the rhetoric (“help”) that devalues their input.

The oldest fourteen children (out of 29) briefly pointed out that this noontime bustle is all about children: “People go home because they care about their children”. An eleven year old boy tied this insight to his indoor housework: “All the people go home because children have to have their lunch on time.” In his view, the needs of the children determine the community standard of returning home at noon. Although the younger interviewees tended to describe themselves as providers of housework for the benefit of their family, especially mothers and younger siblings, they also recognized themselves to be objects of housework. However, this adults-children hierarchy which was embedded in their description of the division of housework was limited to relations with their mothers within the home; the fathers’ contribution was generally ignored and four children even played down its value directly, describing it as an “addition” and “help” to their own housework.

The children also seem to encounter a gender paradox. Whereas they describe their own personal experience as barely gendered, they realize that gender undeniably fashions the lives of everyone around them, including the gendered spatialization of the housework performed by adults (Blumen, 2007b). Their own juvenile experience is segregated. At home, brothers or sisters play and perform housework together and it is common to see boys and girls playing together when various groups meet at the same playground. Some children resolve this paradox by deferring the gender effect until adolescence and adulthood; others by emphasize playing preferences or ignore it entirely. Regarding housework, the experience of children is far less gendered than that of adults and the less gendered experience of the spatialization of housework is evidently shaped by age. Age separates them from the world of adults and age appears to be a vigorous natural focus of bonding, cohesion and identity, linking their daily experiences most significantly, overshadowing other effects, including gender.

**Housework, Children and Space**

This study raises two main concerns: (a) housework should be examined from a spatial perspective and (b) in addition to gender, housework is also allocated by age. The research shows that housework is divided between the publicly invisible and often unnoticed chores performed inside the home and tasks performed visibly in the public space. The public space is
where social negotiation is ongoing and the allocation of tangible and symbolic entitlements to various social groups is bargained and contracted. This also applies to housework and those who perform it so that outdoor visibility awards some extra value (Blumen, 2007b).

This study has demonstrated the consequences of this spatialization of housework for children in Haredi society in Israel. Many Haredi women become breadwinners in addition to having responsibility for all housework and performing most of it, usually indoors. The men, usually engaged in unpaid religious studies, take on a modest share of all housework, typically performed outdoors and visible (Blumen, 2007b). Children’s housework is mostly performed outdoors in the community public space, resembling that of men. Concentrated around midday, children’s housework starts by public performances of child-minding and shopping, usually continuing indoors until the mothers return from their paid employment in the early afternoon. However, the children’s practices are disputed. Adults identify them as “learning” while children adamantly called their activities (house)“work”, indicating that similar activities and their differing visibilities yield differential impressions and entitlements.

This is an excellent example of generational proximity: the children, tentatively aware that their contribution is disparaged cannot change this state of affairs because of their age subordination. However, speaking to outsiders who apparently lack local knowledge, they rhetorically amended their underprivileged standing, equating it with that of adults, especially the fathers (see Bendelow and Mayall, 2002; Mayall, 1998). Considering the tributes frequently showered on women for their housework and the compliments men often receive for their domestic help, the children’s insistence on defining their activities as “work” expresses a reflexive resistance, clearly located outside the home in the public space. At home, children structured another hierarchy, which appreciates the vast amount of housework performed by their mothers; some ranked the contribution of the fathers to housework as tertiary, after their own. This not only shows how the children spatialized their own housework but that their related resistance is also spatialized by indirectly equating their daily outdoor housework with that of their fathers. A few even managed to lessen the value of the housework performed by the fathers indoors: “sometimes my Dad comes home to eat with us and I also give [serve] him lunch, and then he helps me clear the table.”

The adult-child hierarchy in the public space includes additional rhetoric. The tendency of the adults to think about children in future terms not only disparages their current contribution but also rationalizes their existing disentitlement. This explains why children’s experience, especially with respect to housework, underplays the effect of gender and
intensifies that of age. Similarly, almost all the informants were silent about the economic value of children’s housework. Yet this did not seem to upset the children, reflecting the Haredi denigration of the pursuit of wealth. This is consistent with a widespread disregard by researchers of the routine work performed by children and the still common tendency to overlook the economic value of housework in general (Boyden, 1990; Marx Ferree, 1990). Additionally, the adult interviewees emphasized socialization, thereby reflecting both the Western view and the Haredi inclination to classify children as incomplete adults and to order Haredi adherents by their social roles (Bendelow and Mayall, 2002; Mayall, 1998; Heilman, 1992; Yafeh, 2004). In the public space, supervision by unrelated adults commonly validates the lower status of children. As adults oversee each other’s children, thus facilitating the functioning of each others’ homes, they share their parental authority with unfamiliar adults. This is a twofold standard. It ensures close control over children while also pointing to the extent of the adults’ dependence, and that of the entire community, on children’s housework. Considering that housework is ranked second only to religious work and that these two types of unpaid work are more prestigious than paid work, this study has shown that in practice, children are also integrated into the social division of labor. Their performances, entitlements and related resistance are spatialized in a distinct pattern, exposing their age subordination.

Although this is only a single case, by examining such issues as where specific chores are performed and by whom, how they are regarded and interpreted and the types of entitlements they entail, this study on children’s housework shows how space is important for understanding the conduct of housework in society. In this study of a relatively poor population, it is also worthy of note that housework was conducted within the family and rarely by paid domestic workers, downplaying the effect of class and allowing the effect of age-power relations to emerge also as a spatial issue.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the anonymous referees and the editor for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Served by the Children: The Spatialization of Children’s Housework in Haredi Society in Israel


**NOTES**

1 For some studies on the issue see Jefferson and King, 2001; Marx Ferree, 1990; Oakley, 1974; Walby, 1986.

2 Another benefit (also obtained by political means) often connected to Ultra-Orthodox men’s long stay at the yeshiva is the exemption from compulsory military service (e.g., Hakak, 2004; Stadler, 2009). About the labor force participation of Haredi population see note 4 below.

3 The dearth of data is due to lack of cooperation with outsiders, high rates of informal employment among women (who do not want to lose state benefits) and the inevitable reliance of surveys on ecological assessments (and fallacies related to areas of mixed Jewish population). The general impression is that labor force participation of Haredi men is less than 35%–40%. That of women is assessed at 54% yet varies considerably between vicinities in peripheral regions, where the number of suitable jobs is scarce, and neighborhoods in the central parts of metropolitan areas. Still, most women (66%–80%) work part-time as teachers and in other public services (Hakak, 2004; Ilan, 2000; Malchi and Greenstein, 2010; Ministry of Industry, Trade & Labor, 2009, Table 15).

4 In terms of urban politics a distinct public space is produced by the concentration of adherents in defined areas where they make up the majority of the electorate and the population that supports practices of separatism. However, material clues such as eruv, synagogues, ritual bath houses, kosher restaurants and food stores are usually hard to distinguish in dense built-up areas, whereas...
the Ultra-Orthodox body is inexorably noticeable (e.g., Valins, 2000; Siemiatycki, 2005; Blumen, 2007a).

5 Age distribution of the 29 young interviewees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviewees</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 The typical Israeli school day is short. Public kindergartens and elementary schools start at 8:00 am and end by 1:30 pm, the latest.

7 At noon many employed women who are still at work, are absent and so the overall number of women is lower and the gender composition of the crowd on the street emphasizes men’s presence.

8 A comparison of the Haredi modern lifestyles usually includes references to the involvement of men and children in housework, but in-community discourse does not necessarily refer to that of the children.