Background

Earliest US time diary evidence in current use dates from 1965. USDA, under the Purnell Act made a major diary study (of farm, town and college women) in the 1920s and early 1930s. This material is currently represented in the time-use literature only through the sparse tabular evidence published in the 1930s. It provides unique potential to explore daily life before the diffusion of modern domestic equipment.

Research objectives:

1. Recovering original material: Around 1500 women were surveyed. The materials so far located include survey information, mostly incomplete, for 675 of these. Two sorts of primary data: diary records, and a supplementary questionnaire. Also researcher-produced individual-level diary “summary” sheets giving weekly aggregate times in activities for individual home-makers, coded to a 60-category activity schema, plus weekly totals of help in various specific household tasks.

2. Database for statistical analysis: Aggregate activity totals, and available supplementary information coded directly into SPSS or STATA files. Sequence data files from the own-words diaries coded compatibly with daily dates in 1965 onward. Database will be made freely available to the research community.

3. Single day physical activity comparisons: Physical activity includes a great deal more than sport and recreational exercise. Walking, and other travel activities, some paid employment, many domestic production and caring activities also have substantial physiological consequences. So changes in, among others, occupational employment patterns and in domestic technology and materials can affect physical activity and hence health outcomes. Tudor-Locke has provided a comprehensive set of exercise-level ratings for each element in the ATUS activity schema. The Purnell study will allow us to compare the physiological consequences of women’s activity patterns in the 1920s and 1930s with single day diary data in the ATUS.

4. Seven-day physical activity comparisons: Exercise patterns vary by day, whereas the medical outcomes turn on the individual’s pattern of exercise through the week (or longer). 7-day collection method of the 1920s/30s data allow estimation of activity distributions. 7-day survey (for 1998-2001, collected for the Sloan Foundation at the University of Maryland: Robinson, 2006) provides a comparator for modern US women’s weekly exercise levels.

Example Diary

Mrs Edward Damon provides a representative example of the College women’s diaries. The USDA researchers required seven consecutive days of diary recording. Overleaf from each day sheet is a record of both unpaid and paid domestic work time contributed by household members and others. A separate questionnaire asks about household composition, characteristics, appliances and other equipment, as well as feedback on the performance of the diary instrument.

Policy Relevance

Obesity and exercise: a missing link in the chain of explanation of the obesity epidemic; the hypothesis of historically declining physical activity levels. Purnell act material almost doubles the historical coverage of exercise from diary materials.

Women’s unpaid work: Women’s disproportionate responsibility for domestic labor is a key source of female disadvantage in the labor market. Previous research findings from tabulations in published reports on the Purnell Act studies imply domestic work time actually increased from the 1920s-1960s. This project attempt to disentangle the historical effects of increased domestic equipment and of reduced “outsourcing” (use of paid domestic labor) in the home.

Preliminary finding

(on basis of aggregate time use for 199 farm women):

Domestic help is associated, contrary to our expectations, with extra domestic work for farm women. We suspect that a different result will emerge once we enter the evidence for the town and college samples.

Women’s housework time (mins/day) by specific help received ("no help" = < 10 mins/day)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help</th>
<th>Prepare</th>
<th>Clear</th>
<th>Laundry</th>
<th>Shopping</th>
<th>House work</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>124</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>199</td>
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<tr>
<td>no help</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>90</td>
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<td>82</td>
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http://www.timeuse.org/