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Gender, justice and work: A distributive approach to perceptions of housework fairness

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ABSTRACT

Most women and men report that the division of domestic labor in their household is fair, despite women undertaking approximately seventy percent of housework. This raises questions about how fairness is evaluated within partnerships. We explore how parenthood and relationship transitions affect perceptions of housework fairness using panel data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey and panel regression models. Our results indicate that net of actual housework divisions, socio-demographic factors, time availability and relative resources, the transition to parenthood increases women's perceptions of housework fairness immediately following the birth of a child, but decreases them in the long run. Relationship transitions have no independent effects. Our findings suggest that parenthood transitions are associated with changes in women's identity, cognitive evaluations of fairness and feelings of entitlement, as indicated by distributive justice theory.

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1. Introduction

Perceptions of fairness concerning the domestic division of labor refer to beliefs about whether the allocation of household work within couples is just and appropriate. Such perceptions have received a substantial and increasing amount of academic attention, as they are considered important precursors of attitudes and behaviours that promote or undermine gender unequal arrangements at home and at work. If men and women perceive household work divisions which are seemingly unfair to women as 'fair', then this might result in conformity to and inaction against a *status quo* that oppresses women.

One of the puzzles identified in earlier studies is the high proportion of women and men who report that the division of domestic labor, of which women undertake approximately seventy per cent, is fair (Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994; Smith et al., 1998; Baxter, 2000). This raises questions about how perceptions of housework fairness are developed and suggests that aspects other than involvement in domestic work are important in determining evaluations of housework fairness. One possibility is that individuals assess fairness of housework arrangements in relation to total work hours spent in paid and unpaid work or in relation to economic resources contributed to the household. If men spend more time on paid work than women and earn more than women, both men and women may evaluate arrangements in which women do the bulk of

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housework as fair. Another possibility is that women and men believe that housework is women's main responsibility and that it is fair for women to spend more time on these tasks than men.

One way to investigate factors associated with perceptions of fairness is to examine how perceptions change as individuals and households change. There is overwhelming evidence that life course events such as the birth of a child and relationship changes result in vast changes in the amount of time men and women spend in paid and unpaid work and the share of the household income they contribute (Sanchez and Thompson, 1997; Gupta, 1999; Budig and England, 2001; Kluwer et al., 2002; Baxter et al., 2008). These life course transitions may change perceptions of fairness of the domestic division of labour because they change the amount of time men and women spend on paid and unpaid work and their contributions to household resources. However, it is also possible that life course transitions change perceptions of housework fairness by changing individual values, comparison referents and identity, as proposed by the distributive justice approach (Thompson, 1991). Individuals may experience cognitive or identity changes as a result of changed circumstances and movements across life course stages. These subjective changes might in turn change the way in which individuals form their evaluations of the fairness of housework arrangements. With the exception of qualitative studies specifically designed to investigate these issues (e.g. Gager, 1998), few researchers have access to suitable survey items that directly measure the symbolic meaning and subjective evaluations of housework.

There are also just a few longitudinal studies examining variations in perceived fairness of housework divisions (Kluwer et al., 2002; Baxter et al., 2013), and these studies provide relatively limited contributions. First, none of them disentangles the two explanations reported above. Therefore, we do not know whether life course transitions affect perceptions of housework fairness by shifting objective circumstances or subjective views. Second, these studies are based on small or non-representative groups of people, which limits extrapolation and generalization of results. Third, they are based on data which provide only a small observation window on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, and subsequently only a few event occurrences (Baxter et al., 2013).

In this paper, we examine men's and women's perceptions of the fairness of the domestic divisions of labor in their household using panel data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. We add to the existing literature in two main ways. First, we examine these issues using long-running longitudinal survey data which enables us to assess whether and how partnered individuals' perceptions of housework fairness change with key life course events over a long period of time. Second, we exploit the panel structure of the HILDA Survey data to residually test whether the changes in perceptions of housework fairness which accompany life course transitions are due to changes in instrumental factors (such as relative resources and time availability) or psychological mechanisms (such as identity changes).

2. Previous research

Scholars usually take two approaches to understand perceptions of fairness of the division of household tasks. The first and most widely used perspective, which we term the *instrumental* approach, encompasses relative resource and time availability theories and highlights the role of time and resources in influencing the division of household labor. The key predictors proposed by these include time spent on domestic work, time spent on paid work and individuals' resources relative to their partners' (e.g. education, earnings and non-labor income). For example, Gager and Hohmann-Marriott (2006) examined how perceptions of housework fairness depend on time spent on paid work and housework, with findings suggesting that they both play an important role. Broadly speaking, these approaches suggest that fairness is evaluated in a rational way proportional to the time and resources contributed to the household. Building on social exchange theory, the relative resource approach argues that couples use personal resources relative to partners as bargaining tools to decide and evaluate the distribution of household labor (Coltrane, 2000).

The second perspective used to understand perceptions of housework fairness, which we term the *distributive justice* approach, focuses on symbolic meanings and subjective evaluations of the division of housework, including comparison referents, subjective identity and attitudes (Nordenmark and Nyman, 2003). It is unlikely that perceptions of housework fairness are based solely, or even primarily, on instrumental factors such as levels of involvement in domestic labor or time spent in paid work. As suggested by previous research, a broader range of factors that include subjective assessments of household arrangements must be considered. The distributive justice perspective provides a possible framework for identifying relevant broader subjective factors to consider (Thompson, 1991; Hawkins et al., 1995; Kawamura and Brown, 2010). Following social deprivation theory, the distributive justice perspective proposes that subjective evaluations of equity and justice are based on (i) valued outcomes, (ii) comparison processes, and (iii) values and sense of entitlement (Major, 1987; Thompson, 1991; Gager, 1998; Greenstein, 1996, 2009).

In a seminal study, Thompson (1991) stresses that even if all women aspired to an equal (50/50) share of tasks, they may simultaneously value other competing outcomes, such as a stress-free romantic relationship, fulfilling relationships with children, or a sense of enjoyment and reward that comes from taking care of one's family. In addition, her work draws attention to 'comparison referents', those individuals who are used as a point of comparison when evaluating whether a situation is fair. Most research on housework assumes that women will judge the fairness of their housework load in relation to the amount of housework done by their partners. But women may judge their load in comparison to other reference points, such as their mothers or sisters (Thompson, 1991). Such comparisons might mean that women judge their own loads as fair, even if these are substantially higher than those of their male partners. Women may also compare their husbands to other men,

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