RESEARCH NOTE

Gender, justice and domestic work:
life course transitions and perceptions of fairness

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Abstract

This paper investigates changes in perceptions of housework fairness as men and women make the transition from cohabitation to marriage and experience the birth of a child. Using four waves of data from the Negotiating the Life Course project in Australia, we assess how marriage and parenthood alter perceptions of housework fairness. Consistent with previous research we find that the majority of men and women report that the division of labour at home is fair, despite women spending twice as much time on housework as men. Our results show no changes in perceptions of fairness in relation to marital transitions and only weak evidence of changes in relation to parenthood transitions. We conclude that perceptions of housework fairness are not based on an equal sharing of tasks, but are better understood in terms of distributive justice.

Introduction

Previous research on perceptions of fairness in relation to household labour has typically used cross-sectional data and examined associations between individual characteristics and perceptions at the same point in time (Lennon & Rosenfeld 1994; Sanchez & Kane 1996; Baxter, 2000). We extend this work to examine how perceptions of fairness change as a result of two key life course transitions, marriage and parenthood. With these life course transitions, divisions of household labour typically become more gendered, with women increasing their time on unpaid work (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes 2008). We examine whether men's and women's perceptions of housework fairness also change with transitions to marriage and parenthood.

If perceptions of fairness are based on an equal sharing of household labour between men and women, life course transitions that result in women spending more time on domestic work and less time in paid work may lead to greater perceptions of unfairness. On the other hand, such perceptions of fairness could be driven by a broader set of factors including time in paid work, economic contributions to the household and beliefs about gender roles, all of which might be characterised as a 'distributive justice' approach to fairness. In this approach, housework fairness is not evaluated solely in relation to the division of housework tasks, but encompasses other kinds of household contributions, preferences and entitlements. Drawing on broader liberal philosophical traditions (Rawls, 1971), researchers interested in gender and justice in family life (Okin, 1989; Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991) have argued that perceptions of fairness in relation to housework are based on more than rules of exchange and equity, and are based on a social process that incorporates both justice and

care and is gendered; that is, what is considered a fair distribution of tasks may be different for men and women (Thompson 1991).

A distributive justice approach implies that we expect little change in perceptions of fairness with entry to marriage and birth of a child, even if these life course transitions are associated with more unequal gender divisions of labour at home (Thompson 1991). For example, many studies have shown that men experience a marriage premium in earnings (Loh, 1996; Western, Hewitt, & Baxter, 2005). If marriage leads to an increase in men's economic contributions to the household relative to their wives, both men and women may justify men's lower involvement in housework because of their greater earnings in the labour market.

Perceptions of fairness in the division of household labour may also change as a result of the transition to marriage. One of the most valued outcomes for married couples may be to make the marriage a success and to demonstrate care and commitment to the relationship by taking on additional care work. Under these circumstances both men and women may be less likely to perceive unequal housework arrangements as unfair.

A distributive justice approach would predict similar patterns with the birth of a child. Economic contributions to the household may change after the birth of a child if women withdraw from paid work to care for the infant. Similarly, perceptions might change if men and women prioritise women's time with children over women's time in other activities such as paid employment. For men, the birth of a child may lead to greater prioritisation of their role as economic provider, rather than their contribution to housework. Hence, men's and women's time allocation to paid and unpaid work may change after the birth of a child, but they may be less likely to define this division of labour as unfair compared to prior to the birth.

To investigate change in perceptions of fairness in relation to household labour with marriage or birth transitions, we use four waves of data from an Australian panel study (1996 – 2009). For transitions into marriage we examine men and women who transition from cohabitation to marriage, since our focus here is on perceptions of fairness within couple households. We also consider changes in perceptions of fairness after first and higher order births.

Data

The data come from four waves (1996/97, 2000, 2003, 2006) of an Australian national longitudinal panel study, Negotiating the Life Course: Gender, Mobility and Career Trajectories (Baxter, McDonald, & Mitchell, 2003; McDonald, Jones, Mitchell, & Baxter, 2003). Wave 1 data was collected in late 1996 and early 1997 with a sample comprising 2,231 respondents aged between 18 and 54. Wave 2 data was collected in 2000 (N=1,768); wave 3 data was collected in 2003 (N=1,192); and wave 4 data was collected in 2006 (N=1,138). We include all people who were married or in a cohabiting relationship with the same partner for at least two waves out of the four. The final analytic sample comprises 1,189 men and women.

Variables

The dependent variable is the participant's response to a question asking "Overall do you think you do your fair share around the house?" The response to the question is measured on an ordinal scale with five categories: 1 = I do much more than my fair share; 2 = I do more than my fair share; 3 = I do my fair share; 4 = I do less than my fair share; 5 = I do much less than my fair share. This variable will be denoted "housework fairness" throughout the remainder of this paper. Combining categories 1 and 2 and categories 4 and 5, the distribution of responses in wave 1 shows that 23 percent of respondents perceive that they do more than their fair share, while only about half this figure, 14 percent, perceive that they do less than their fair share of housework. Across all waves, over 60 percent of respondents report that they do a fair share of housework.

Since we are interested in how birth and the transition from cohabiting to marriage influence change in the perception of housework fairness, the dependent variable for the regression analyses is dichotomised so that 1 = I do more than my fair share (values 1 and 2 on the original variable) and 0 = I do my fair share or less (responses 3, 4 and 5). Conceptually this variable measures whether the division of labour is perceived to be unfair or fair to the respondent. Table 1 shows the distribution of this variable for all waves by gender. The results show that across all waves, approximately 40 percent of women report doing more than their fair share of housework compared to less than 1 percent of men.

Table 1. Perceptions of housework fairness by wave and gender (column percentages)

	Wave 1		Wave 2		Wave 3		Wave 4	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Housework fairness								
I do more than my fair share	0.04	0.38	0.03	0.37	0.07	0.40	0.07	0.38
I do my fair share or less	0.96	0.62	0.97	0.63	0.93	0.60	0.93	0.62
N	1,084		1,064		771		792	

The two primary independent variables measure marital status and birth transitions between two consecutive waves. The marital status transition measure has three categories: 1 = Married at previous wave and still married at current wave; 2 = cohabiting at previous wave and married at current wave; and 3 = cohabiting at previous wave and still cohabiting at current wave. Married at both waves is the reference group.

Birth transition has four categories: 1 = no child at previous wave and no child at current wave; 2 = no child at previous wave and a birth prior to current wave; 3 = at least one child at previous wave and no birth prior to current wave; and 4 = at least one child at previous wave and a birth prior to current wave. Respondents with no children were the reference group.

We also include a number of measures identified as important correlates of perceptions of housework fairness by previous research, with which any effects of the transition variable might be confounded. These include:

- Partner's gross income (logged). Income is a continuous measure of gross (ie before tax) financial year income received and is logged to normalize the distribution.
- Respondent and partner's hours per week in paid employment. Time in paid employment is a continuous measure of hours per week.
- Gender attitudes: "It is better for the family if the husband is the principal breadwinner and the wife has responsibility for home and children." Responses ranged from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. A higher score corresponds to a more liberal attitude.

- Respondent's weekly hours spent undertaking household tasks, including meal preparation, doing dishes, shopping, laundry, vacuuming and cleaning.
- Relative share of housework tasks including: indoor tasks (cooking, cleaning, washing); outdoor tasks (repairs around the house, gardening); and other tasks (taking care of pets, keeping in contact with friends and relatives). The scores ranged from 0 to 100.
- Education coded 1 = Bachelor degree or higher.
- Relationship duration grouped into three categories: partnered for 3 years or less (the reference group); partnered 3-7 years; and partnered for more than 7 years.
- Age coded into four groups: 18-29 years; 30-39 years (the reference group); 40-49; and 50-59.
- Pre-school child measures whether there is a child aged under 5 in the household (coded 1 = yes).

Analyses

We estimate binary logistic regression models with random intercepts to examine the association between the perception of "doing more than my fair share of housework" and marital transitions, birth transitions and other variables of interest, accounting for both between and within individual variation over four waves of data. As the data include repeated measures on the same individuals, observations over waves are not independent. Rather, the responses are correlated, because factors that predispose individuals to self-report their perception of fairness with share of housework in a particular way, at the first wave of participation and while in a partnership, are likely to

encourage similar responses over time. Due to this temporal dependence, a standard binary logistic regression model that assumes independent observations is not appropriate. We employ an alternative method of analysis that assumes an individual represents a cluster of repeated observations over time, and the variation in the data can be separated into two components measuring both the variation between clusters of observations (between individuals) and the variation within clusters (or individuals) (Johnson, 1995; Singer & Willett, 2003).

We utilize this approach with random effects rather than the fixed effects model, because we are interested in the between-individual variation associated with time-invariant variables such as gender, which is an important predictor of perceptions of housework fairness, as well as the within-individual variation associated with a marital or birth transition. Both time-invariant and time-variant variables are permitted in the random-effects model, but time-invariant variables are excluded from (additive) fixed effects models.

Data for some of the covariates in the model are missing due to participant non-response for one or more waves and so, for the purpose of comparing model fit and results, the sample is restricted to the 1,094 individuals who have data recorded for all variables. Unstandardized coefficients from these models are reported in Table 2. Model 1 includes the primary independent variables for the marital and birth transitions and the primary control variable for gender. Model 2 includes all of the control variables, except respondent's and partner's housework hours, but these are included as an extension in Model 3. The addition of housework hours to the model enables an assessment of whether any effects relating to marital and birth transitions, on the perception of fairness of housework share, are in addition to the effects of respondent's and partner's housework hours. In Model 4, we introduce the interactions of selected variables with gender and show interaction effects in Table 2. Model 5 is an extension of Model 3 with no gender interactions but with separation of the within- and between-individual covariate effects. The final model, Model 6, is an extension of

Model 5 with the significant within- and between-individual gender interactions included.

Since we are primarily interested in gender differences and changes in perception of fairness with share of housework, we examine models that include gender interacted with covariates. In preliminary analyses, all interactions with gender were included in the model, however, for parsimony, non-significant interactions were excluded from the final models. We estimate six models in the development of the most correctly specified final model. Estimated coefficients for the interactions included in Models 4 and 6 are shown in the regression results presented in Table 2. The Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) statistic is used as a measure of model comparison, and shows that Model 6 is the best fitting model.

Results

Table 2 shows that while there are several significant effects in these models, overall there is little evidence that a transition from cohabiting to marriage or birth of a child changes perceptions of fairness. As shown in Model 6 for each of the primary independent variables, the results indicate that the transition from cohabiting to married is not associated with statistically significant changes in perceptions of fairness, nor is there a significant difference between the effects of consistently cohabiting and remaining married on perception of housework fairness.

The variable representing the birth of a first child in Model 6 has a between-individual regression coefficient that is approaching significance (b <1.43, p=0.07) even when time on housework is included in the model. Although this evidence is not conclusive at the p<.05 level due to the small number of respondents in this category (74 at Wave 2 and 23 at Wave 4), the result indicates that individuals who experienced the birth of their first child since the previous wave were more likely to perceive their share of housework was unfair relative to those who have no children. We are confident that a different approach to dealing with missing data, such as imputation of missing data or weighting to adjust for attrition, would have resulted in a statistically significant finding here.

Table 2. Mixed effects binary logit models for perceptions of housework fairness over four waves

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Primary independent variables						
Still married (ref)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cohabiting-married	0.04	0.19	0.04	-0.004	0.35	0.22
Still cohabiting	-0.05	0.13	0.29	0.22	0.39	0.34
No child-no birth (ref)	-	-	-	-	-	-
No child-first birth	0.13	0.50	0.62	0.60	1.31†	1.43†
Child-no birth	0.56***	0.50*	0.35	0.38	0.02	0.13
Child-higher order birth	0.44	0.54	0.44	0.44	0.79	0.82
Controls						
Female (1=yes)	3.79***	3.51***	1.69***	0.64	1.15***	-0.79
Age Group						
18-29		-0.16	-0.25	-0.28	0.55	0.59
30-39 (ref)		-	-		-	-
40-49		0.02	-0.15	-0.14	0.05	0.003
50-59		0.02	-0.23	-0.27	-0.63	-0.64
Bachelor degree		0.07	0.20	0.19	0.34	0.35
Respondent work hours		-0.008	0.005	0.008	0.03**	0.03***
Partner work hours		0.003	-0.005	-0.004	-0.01	-0.009
Respondent income (log)		0.11	0.24*	0.19	0.09	0.03
Partner income (log)		0.14	0.03	0.01	-0.08	-0.11
Relationship duration						
3 years or less		-	-	-	-	-
4 to 7 years		0.41	0.37	0.35	3.48*	3.12*
Greater than 7 years		0.73	0.54	0.49	3.20*	3.09*
Preschool child		-0.23	-0.26	-0.09	-0.70	-0.62
Paid help		0.10	0.04	1.01*	0.39	1.78***
Share of indoor tasks		-0.001	-0.003	-0.002	0.005	0.005
Share outdoor tasks		-0.005	-0.005	-0.02***	0.009	-0.02
Share of other tasks		0.007	0.004	0.005	0.04***	0.04***
Gender attitudes		-0.09	-0.02	-0.42*	0.05	-0.49*
Housework hours			0.08***	0.15***	0.12***	0.22***
Partner's housework hours			-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.15***	-0.15*
Two-way interactions: with gender						
Female x paid help				-1.15*		-1.66*
Female x outdoor task				0.02**		0.03*
Female x housework hours				-0.09***		-0.11**
Female x gender attitude				0.44*		0.62*
Within-person effects (models 5 & 6)						
Still married (ref)					-	-
Cohabiting-married					-0.63	-0.66
Still cohabiting					-0.79	-0.90
No child-no birth (ref)					-	-
No child-first birth					0.02	0.07
Child-no birth					0.20	0.28
Child-higher order birth					-0.02	0.09
Age 18-29					-0.84	-0.83
Age 40-49					-0.003	-0.07
Age 50-59					0.23	0.04
Bachelor degree					-0.14	-0.15
Respondent work hours					-0.001	0.001
Partner work hours					-0.007	-0.006

(Table 2 cont'd)

Respondent income					0.17	0.14
Partner income					0.05	0.05
Relationship duration						
3 years or less					-	-
3 to 7 years or less					-0.05	-0.08
greater than 7 years					0.01	-0.10
Preschool child					-0.15	0.02
Paid help					-0.22	0.40
Share of indoor tasks					-0.002	-0.002
Share outdoor tasks					-0.009**	-0.02**
Share of other tasks					-0.002	-0.001
Housework hours					0.05***	0.10**
Partner's housework hours					-0.11***	-0.11***
Gender attitudes					-0.08	-0.51*
Two-way within-person interactions						
Female x paid help						-0.74
Female x outdoor task						0.02*
Female x housework hours						-0.06
Female x gender attitude						0.49
Constant	-4.94	-5.90	-4.46	-3.55	-10.07	- 8.27
Number of individuals	1094	1094	1094	1094	1094	1094
Number of person years	2769	2769	2769	2769	2769	2769
Between-person heterogeneity (proportion of unexplained variance)	0.55	0.55	0.48	0.47	0.47	0.45
AIC statistic	2380	2386	2220	2198	2197	2182

Notes $^{†}p<0.10$, $*p<.05$, $**p<.01$, $***p<.001$

We also find significant within-individual effects for share of outdoor tasks in Model 6 (b = -0.02, p = 0.003) and the gender interaction for outdoor tasks (b = 0.02, p = 0.038). Gender attitudes (b = -0.51, p = 0.041), respondent housework hours (b = 0.10, p < 0.001) and partner's housework hours (b = -0.11, p < 0.001) are also statistically significant in Model 6. Thus, for both men and women, perceptions of unfairness in housework share vary directly with respondent housework hours, and inversely with partner's housework hours. The within-individual gender attitude interaction is not statistically significant in model 6, but this is partly a function of low statistical power. The magnitude and direction of this coefficient imply that women's attitude changes are not related to their perceptions of fairness, but that as men become more (less) liberal, they view their share of domestic labour as becoming less (more) unfair. For men, fairness perceptions also vary inversely with their share of outdoor tasks. This association with outdoor tasks does not hold for women.

Additionally, the results for Model 6 show that men and women who worked longer paid hours than average, were in a relationship for more than three years, had a higher share of "other" tasks or whose partners did less than average housework hours, were more likely to perceive that their share of housework was unfair. The gender interactions show that men were more likely than women to perceive that their share of housework is unfair when they had paid help with housework, and were less likely than women to perceive that their share of housework was unfair when they had more liberal gender attitudes on average. Women who did more than an average share of outdoor tasks were more likely to perceive that their share of housework was unfair; and, both men and women who did more housework hours are more likely to perceive that their share of housework was unfair. However, the perception of unfairness was greater for men at a given length of housework time.

Conclusions

This paper used four waves of data from a nationally representative panel study to investigate perceptions of housework fairness in relation to two key life course transitions, moving from cohabiting to married and the birth of a child. No research that we are aware of has examined perceptions of fairness using large scale longitudinal data. But such data provide important insights into how fairness perceptions change or do not change in relation to life course transitions, and enable us to better understand the basis of fairness perceptions. We argued that if equality is the basis of perceptions of housework fairness, marriage and parenthood would exacerbate perceptions of unfairness as both transitions lead to more time for women on housework. Alternatively, if distributive justice underlies perceptions of housework fairness, marriage and parenthood would lead to few changes, or a decline in perceptions of unfairness.

Given the amount of time that women spend on housework, over twice as many hours per week compared to men, if equality in housework distribution and time on housework is the key factor underlying perceptions of fairness of housework, we would expect the majority of men and women to report that housework arrangements are unfair. But, on the contrary, the majority of men and women report that housework arrangements are fair.

Our regression results show some evidence that the birth of a child increases perceptions of unfairness, but there is no support for the notion that this is more likely for women than for men. There is no evidence that the transition from cohabitation to marriage changes men's or women's perceptions of housework fairness. These results indicate that equality, defined as a 50/50 split of time and tasks, is not the main basis of either men's or women's perceptions of housework fairness. In contrast, a distributive justice approach defines perceptions of fairness of housework in relation to a broader range of factors that include, but are not restricted to housework contribution, for example paid work hours, earnings and preferences. Our results indicate that perceptions of housework fairness vary in relation to gender attitudes, work hours and relationship duration, as well as housework contribution. Overall then, our findings provide most support for distributive justice as the basis of perceptions of housework fairness.

Our paper has a number of limitations that may be addressed by further research. First, we have not used methods of data imputation or weighting to adjust for survey attrition and missing cases. Such techniques may provide more robust estimates of the relationships between life course transitions and perceptions of fairness. Second our data are limited to only 4 waves of observations. A longer period of observation may lead to different conclusions and enable examination of whether perceptions of fairness converge over time to levels similar to those observed prior to a life course transition. Third we have only examined two life course transitions, marital status change and parenthood. Examination of other kinds of transitions, such as changes in employment status, may also provide important insights into the bases of perceptions of housework fairness.

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