

“I Just Can’t Clean the Bathroom as Well as You Can!”: Communicating Domestic Labor Task  
Equity-resistance and Equity-restoring Strategies among Married Individuals

Sarah E. Riforgiate  
Department of Communication Studies  
Kansas State University

Justin P. Boren  
Department of Communication  
Santa Clara University

Author Notes:

Correspondence should be addressed to Sarah E. Riforgiate, Department of Communication Studies, Kansas State University, 136 Nichols Hall/702 Mid-Campus Drive South, Manhattan, KS 66506, E-mail: [sriforgi@k-state.edu](mailto:sriforgi@k-state.edu)

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**Abstract**

Women generally perform the majority of domestic labor despite changes in demographics and household income allocations, contributing to relational conflict and prompting the use of communication strategies to reallocate tasks. This study examines the strategies individuals use to reduce personal or increase partner domestic labor performance. Married individuals ( $N = 228$ ) responded to a questionnaire assessing perception of hours spent on household tasks, global equity, relationship length, and equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies specific to domestic labor. Data indicate that perception of time spent on household tasks is related to equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies. Global assessment of relational underbenefitedness or overbenefitedness was not associated with equity-restoring and equity-resisting strategies when characterized as a continuous variable; however, significant results occurred when equity was characterized categorically, highlighting the importance of methodological choices in equity research. Marriage length was negatively associated in a curvilinear function with the use of equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies.

*Keywords:* division of labor, relational equity, equity-restoring strategies, equity-resistance strategies, marriage length

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a majority of American families financially depend on two incomes (Chethik, 2006), and women now represent almost half of the paid workforce (Rampell, 2009; United States Department of Labor, 2014). Despite increases in women’s presence in paid work, women are still the primary provider of domestic labor, including completing household tasks (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2011; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), caring for children (Mannino & Deutsch, 2007; Mederer, 1993), and managing family time (Kinney, Dunn, & Hofferth, 2000; Schulte, 2014). These disproportionate allocations of domestic responsibilities provide one explanation for women’s slower promotion and lower compensation compared to men in paid labor (Hewlett, 2007; Hochschild, 1997; Valian, 1999) when assumptions about gender roles lead to perceptions that women are not “serious” or “ambitious” (Stone, 2007). On average, women perform two-thirds of all household labor in mixed-sex households, where “for every hour that wives worked, their husbands worked only 35 minutes” (Bartley et al., 2011, p. 87). This pattern emerges even among dual-earner couples where women share their time between public paid labor and private domestic labor (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009; Dillaway & Broman, 2001; Pyke, 1994), as well as among unmarried cohabitating partners (Baxter, 2005; Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2005; Davis, Greenstein, & Gerteisen, 2007).

Although women are spending considerably more time in paid labor, they have not significantly reduced time spent on household tasks and obligations (Sullivan, 2000). However, Mannino and Deutsch (2007) report in a longitudinal study that 43% of women plan to change household task allocations. Further, the division of household labor is a frequent discussion topic among couples. In fact, disagreement over housework is the third leading cause of marital

conflict, contributing to marital dissolution (Alberts, Tracy, & Trethewey, 2011; Bartley et al., 2011; Chethik, 2006; Erbert, 2000). Furthermore, unequal domestic labor allocations increase individuals' experiences of marital distress (Claffey & Mickelson, 2009), stress (Beaujot & Andersen, 2007; Kemeny, 2003), and depression (Bird, 1999) which influence communication patterns (Canary & Lakey, 2013).

Since the division of domestic labor has such a profound impact on daily life and relationships, it warrants further examination. In particular, task allocations can be influenced by both explicit and implicit communication (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997) that individuals use to maintain their relationships when they feel that their relationships are not fair or equitable (Kingsley-Westerman, 2013; Stafford, & Canary, 1991, 2006). To further scholarly understanding of domestic task negotiation, we use an equity theory framework to examine how perceptions of overall relational equity relate to specific communication practices individuals might use to reallocate domestic tasks. We further examine the impact of participant sex and relationship length as factors that influence communication strategy use. Next, pertinent research investigating explanations for relational equity and strategies used to restore or resist equity in division of labor allocations are reviewed.

### **Equity Theory and the Division of Domestic Labor**

Equality and equity represent two related, but different relational concepts. In the case of the division of domestic labor, equality occurs when each relational partner completes the same tasks or proportion of a task, contributing to the relationship (Frisco & Williams, 2003).

Researchers often measure the time spent on performing domestic labor and then compare the time that husbands spend to the time that wives spend, representing the concept of equality (Milkie & Peltola, 1999). However, equality research has come under scrutiny in that it does not

accurately account for contributions of both parties in heterosexual relationships (Klewer, 2011; Tang & Curran, 2013). Equity theory offers a different conceptualization, describing the perception that although each relational partner may contribute different time and resources to the relationship, both parties feel they are receiving as much (although not always in same kind) as they are contributing (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Lively, Steelman, & Powell, 2010).

Couples regularly report that they seek to maintain a fair or equitable division of tasks in their relationships (Canary & Stafford, 2007; Coltrane, 2000). Sharing tasks is one of the predominant relational maintenance strategies that individuals use to sustain their relationship (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Stafford & Canary, 1991; 1992). Ragsdale's (1996) findings indicate that task sharing is "the most frequent relational maintenance strategy ... and the one producing the largest gender difference" (p. 364). Differing from the concept of equality, couples report that they share certain tasks, both inside and outside of the household, in various proportions to comprise an equitable division of labor (Brines, 1993; Poortman & Van Der Lippe, 2009). For example, some "traditional" couples may appraise their relationship as equitable with one partner working in paid labor and the other working inside the house on domestic labor (Greenstein, 1996). This perception of equity may be different in dual-earner couples (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Mederer, 1993). Still, equity theorists argue that individual partners will have a unique perception of equity, regardless of how members of the dyad share tasks in their relationship (Lennon & Rosenfeld, 1994). In addition, concern for obtaining equity has an effect on the individual's perception of relationship satisfaction (Alberts et al., 2011; Dainton, 2003; Mikula, Riederer, & Bodi, 2012), marital commitment (Tang & Curran, 2013), and may predict the mechanism by which couples engage in conflict (Bippus, Boren, & Worsham, 2008).

According to equity theory, when a perception of inequity exists in a relationship, one or both relational partners become uneasy about their experience compared to the other partner (Lively et al., 2010; Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Van Yperen & Buunk, 1990). This uneasiness manifests itself in one of two particular styles: (a) *overbenefitedness*, “individuals believe they receive a higher amount of rewards for a lower amount of costs”, or (b) *underbenefitedness*, “individuals feel as though they receive fewer rewards with a relatively higher amount of costs” (Dainton & Gross, 2008, p. 181). Although both states result in negative emotions, they differ in that overbenefitedness is frequently associated with fear and self-reproach, whereas underbenefitedness often results in feelings of anger and rage (Lively et al., 2010). These negative emotions can prompt individuals to make changes to restore equity in their relationships.

Furthermore, inequity can be present in one or more domain of a relationship and that perception of inequity may fluctuate, with dyadic perceptions of equity remaining relatively stable over time (Sprecher, 2001). In such cases, the inequitable division of labor may be a domain-specific source of inequity perceptions that, nonetheless, can affect individuals’ global perceptions of relational equity. In a longitudinal study, Mannino and Deutsch (2007) report that many women who perceive an inequity involving household task allocation indicate an intention to change this domain-specific issue. However, when both men and women perceive inequity in their relationship, this uneasy feeling can result in an attempt to restore equity (Weigel, Bennett, & Ballard-Reisch, 2006).

### **Equity-restoration and Equity-resistance Strategies**

Relational partners often use a range of communication techniques in an attempt to reallocate household responsibilities (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). Hochschild (1989)

offers a set of implicit and explicit communication behaviors specific to the division of domestic labor based on interviews with 50 couples and observations in over a dozen households. Canary and Emmers-Sommer (1997) extend these strategies by incorporating Hochschild's findings with other domestic labor research to produce a listing of common strategies women use to restore balance in domestic labor allocations and men use to resist completing household tasks. Equity-restoration strategies include reducing domestic task performance, increasing benefits or rewards, using communication to persuade one's partner to increase participation, punishing one's partner, or changing the basis of comparison to increase perceptions of fairness (Canary & Emmers-Sommer). Equity-resistance strategies to avoid performing domestic tasks often maintain the current division of household responsibilities. Equity-resistance strategies include performing a task poorly to disqualify future performance, reducing needs to have the task completed, offering other support, and complimenting to encourage continued performance by the other party (Canary & Emmers-Sommer).

Women who perform more household tasks than their husbands, especially those who work in the labor force, use equity-restoring strategies with regard to domestic labor (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). However, because equity is specific to the relationship, there are times where men also might attempt to restore equity if they feel they are underbenefited and are doing more than their fair share. On the other hand, men often resist increasing their household task performance, adhering to gender role expectations of masculinity (Natalier, 2003). Although the original equity-resistance strategies are based on observations of men's attempts to avoid performing domestic tasks, it is quite possible that these strategies could be used to reduce equity imbalances for those who identify themselves as underbenefited. For example, individuals who perform more household tasks and feel generally underbenefited compared to their spouses may

resist performance by reducing time and effort spent on a task, thereby restoring balance that helps maintain the relationship.

Considering the impact the division of domestic labor has on relationships, it is also important to consider how global perceptions of equity inform communication strategies used to restore equity related to household tasks for both men and women. Based on our argument, we surmise that individuals seek to restore equity when they perceive an imbalance; however, we do not have enough empirical evidence to support a direct prediction linking equity perception and equity-restoration and equity-resistance strategies. Furthermore, although research consistently indicates that men and women perform different amounts of domestic labor (equality or lack of), this research is extended in this study by exploring how members of each sex respond when faced with a situation that they feel is unfair or inequitable. Finally, length of marriage may have a bearing on how individuals use equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies as an important domain-specific subcategory of the relational maintenance strategy of sharing tasks. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What is the relationship between the perception of individual-to-partner hours spent on domestic labor and equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How do respondents' sex and perception of equity within their romantic heterosexual relationship influence their use of domestic labor equity-restoring strategies?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How do respondents' sex and perception of equity within their romantic heterosexual relationship influence their use of domestic labor equity-resistance strategies?

Relationship Length



While equity theory offers one explanation for how relational partners use communication in an attempt to change the distribution of household tasks, it has been scrutinized both in terms of explanatory power and in methodological application (Ledbetter, Stassen-Ferrara, & Dowd, 2013; Ragsdale & Brandau-Brown, 2007a; 2007b). Relationship length provides an alternative explanation for frequency of relational maintenance patterns (Ragsdale, 1996). From a relational maintenance perspective, relationship length has been negatively associated with one indicator of relationship maintenance – sharing tasks, which includes the division of household labor (Ragsdale, 1996; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). In fact, individuals report sharing tasks more during the early years of their marriage then gradually decrease their task sharing over time (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). The everyday talk and allocation of responsibilities becomes habitual and patterned as marriages mature (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Ragsdale and Brandau-Brown (2007a) recall a participant who had just celebrated 50 years of marriage describing that “he and his wife had long ago stopped using any maintenance strategies. ‘We both love each other,’ he said, as if that explained everything” (p. 50). Therefore, the strategies individuals employ may change over the length of a marriage, where couples may gradually decrease task sharing over time, with task sharing falling sharply and then leveling off in a curvilinear fashion. Therefore, as an alternative explanation to equity theory, we ask:

RQ4: How is length of marriage in years associated with the reported use of equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies?

### **Methods**

Utilizing a cross-sectional survey methodology, we asked undergraduate students in a southwestern U.S. university to recruit an individual to participate in the study. Only those

participants who were over the age of 18 years old and married for at least a year were qualified to participate. We selected the minimum length of marriage to examine those couples who had developed marital patterns and expectations relating to division of household labor over some time. Students were offered extra course credit and provided with an alternative assignment in case they were not able or did not want to recruit a qualified participant. Once qualified, a participant completed an online questionnaire. This study was reviewed and approved by the human subjects committee.

### **Participants**

For the present investigation, 256 participants completed an online questionnaire; 18 participants were removed for failing to meet the minimum relationship length or for not indicating their relationship length and 10 other participants were removed from the study for failing to answer the single item equity measure, yielding a final sample size of 228. Of those participants, 89 were men (39%) and 138 were women (60.5%), all of whom had been married to their spouse of the opposite-sex for longer than 1 year ( $M = 13.87$  years,  $SD = 11.58$ , highest = 47.83 years). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68 years old ( $M = 39.14$ ,  $SD = 13.01$ ). Respondents reported an average of 15.08 hours of household labor ( $SD = 10.15$ ), and that their spouses performed 11.26 average hours ( $SD = 13.69$ ) of household labor per week. These data are further broken down by sex in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

### **Measures**

**Equity.** Perceived relational equity was assessed via the Hatfield Global Equity Measure (HGEM; Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979). This measure assesses whether individuals feel that they are treated equitably in their relationships by using a single item that asks: “Considering

what you put into your relationship compared to what you get out of it, and what your partner puts in compared to what s/he gets out of it, how does your relationship stack up?” Individuals respond to this prompt with a response set ranging from +3 (“I am getting a much better deal than my partner”) to -3 (“my partner is getting a much better deal than I am”). Equity is determined by an individual selecting the neutral item, “we are both getting an equally good or bad deal” (scored with a zero). This measure taps into perceptions of relational equity, based only on one individual’s response. The HGEM has strong test–retest reliability, as well as good construct and face validity (Sprecher, 2001), and it is a widely used measure of global equity (Stafford & Canary, 2006; Young & Hatfield, 2011); moreover, in spite of its simplicity, it is seen as one of the most valid ways to assess global equity (Traupmann, Peterson, Utne, & Hatfield, 1981). There exists disagreement in literature about the proper analytic use of the HGEM, with some researchers categorizing the variables by recoding all of the items that are positive as “overbenefited,” all the negative items as “underbenefited,” and the zero point as “equitable” to represent three categories. Furthermore, while some researchers have used this measure by tricotomizing, best practices for data analytic techniques suggest otherwise (see MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002). Therefore, to shed some light on the potential for difference in results, we decided to conduct one analysis with the measure as continuous on a 7-point scale (1 = -3 to 7 = +3) and another analysis with the categories described herein (see Young & Hatfield, 2011). The majority of the respondents in this sample ( $n = 145$ , 63.6%) reported their relationship as being equitable.

**Equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies.** Using Hochschild’s (1989) research on household labor negotiation strategies and Canary and Emmers-Sommers (1997) extension of this research, we developed items to reflect the reported equity-restoring and equity-resistance

strategies. Because the present study was investigative by nature, the purpose of using these items was to attempt to determine how often individuals use the strategies that were reported by Hochschild (1989) (see Table 2 for items). The prompt for equity-restoring strategies included the phrase, “Think of a specific time when you felt like you were doing more than a fair share of the housework compared to your spouse.” Hence, the measure sought to determine, regardless of perception of global equity, how individuals deal with a specific instance of perceived inequity. In contrast, the prompt for equity-resistance strategies included the phrase, “Now, think of a specific time when you were asked to do housework, but you didn’t want to complete the task.” In that case, strategies focused on household labor and could signal an attempt to restore equity by resisting domestic labor obligations by either reducing or completely avoiding those tasks.

Because there is a conceptual difference between equity-restoring strategies and equity-resistance strategies, we analyzed the five items for equity-restoring and the five items for equity-resistance separately. Specifically, the five items tapping into “equity-restoration” were submitted to a principal components analysis with direct Oblimin rotation ( $KMO = .82$ , Bartlett’s test of Sphericity,  $\chi^2(10) = 331.74, p < .001$ ). Only eigenvalues over 1.00 were extracted and components were validated by a scree plot. The analysis resulted in a single-factor solution that accounted for approximately 57.05% of the variance. Based on that result, all five items were submitted to a reliability assessment, which resulted in a Cronbach’s Alpha of .81 (Scale  $M = 14.31, SD = 7.85$ ). For this scale, the five items were averaged together to create a single mean score for each respondent.

The five items tapping into “equity-resistance” strategies were also submitted to a principal components analysis with direct Oblimin rotation ( $KMO = .73$ , Bartlett’s test of Sphericity,  $\chi^2(10) = 338.47, p < .001$ ). The analysis resulted in a single-factor solution

explaining 54.28% of the variance. All five items were evaluated for internal consistency ( $\alpha = .79$ , scale  $M = 14.42$ ,  $SD = 8.01$ ). Scores were averaged together for a composite and used in subsequent analyses.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

**Perception of hours spent on domestic tasks.** To determine how housework was allocated in the participants' homes, individuals were asked to enter the amount of time in the previous 7 days that they engaged in the following five tasks: preparing meals, washing dishes, washing and ironing laundry, cleaning the bathrooms, and grocery shopping. Although this is not an all-encompassing list of domestic work, it reflects an array of household tasks that tend to be "the most nondiscretionary, routine, and time-consuming" (Erickson, 2005, pp. 342-343). Participants then estimated the number of hours in the prior 7 days that their spouse spent on the same list of household tasks. To measure this variable in context, a percentage of the total hours was computed by taking the respondents' reported hours, divided by their perception of their and their spouses' reported hours combined. As a percentage of total hours, we calculated respondents' perceptions of the amount of their contribution to the household labor. For this sample, percentages ranged from 0% (respondents perceived that they did no housework compared to their spouse) to 100% (respondents perceived that they did all of the housework). Descriptive statistics indicated that this sample perceived doing slightly more of the housework than did their spouses ( $M = 61.41\%$ ,  $SD = 24.84$ ). Skewness (-.31) and Kurtosis (-.72) statistics were both marginally negative, but not large enough to warrant corrective transformation.

## Results

### Research Question 1

To evaluate the first research question about the relationship between the perception of individual-to-partner hours spent on domestic labor and equity-restoring and equity-resisting strategies, we computed a simple linear regression with both the average equity-restoring and equity-resistance scores as predictor variables and the perception of household labor as the criterion. The overall model was significant,  $F(2, 215) = 11.93, p < .001$  and the predictors accounted for about 10% of the variance in the criterion,  $R^2 = .10$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .092$ . Table 3 reports the regression coefficients. Equity-restoration strategies were positively associated with perception of hours spent on domestic labor. The unstandardized regression coefficient (although not causal) indicated that for every one-unit increase in average equity-restoring strategies, perception of household labor use increased by about 3.3%. This finding indicates that when respondents reported greater use of equity-restoring strategies, they may also perceive that they were completing more of the housework compared to their partners.

At the same time, equity-resistance was negatively associated with perception of hours spent on domestic labor. Looking again at the unstandardized regression coefficient for this association, with every one-unit increase in reported equity-resistance, perception of hours spent in domestic labor decreased by about 5.4%. Individuals reported that they were engaged in equity-resistance, they may also report participating in fewer hours of household labor compared with their partner. The unique variance of equity-restoration on perception of time spent on domestic labor was expressed by the semipartial correlation of .19 and for equity-resistance was -.31.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked how do respondents' sex and perception of equity within their romantic heterosexual relationship influence their use of domestic labor equity-restoring strategies. To answer this question, we utilized hierarchical regression techniques predicting equity-restoring scores in multiple steps. The first step included the dummy-coded sex variable (1 = Men, 2 = Women) and the mean-centered version of equity measure (on a 1- 7 point scale with 4 being "equitable"). The second step included the squared equity measure to account for a suspected quadratic relationship. The third step included a cross-product interaction term between sex and the mean-centered quadratic equity variable. None of the steps produced a significant F-test or significant change in  $R^2$ , Final model,  $F(4,222) = 0.73$ ,  $p = .58$ ,  $R^2 = .12$ . Therefore, we could presume that sex and perception of global equity may not influence domestic labor equity-restoring strategies. However, given that some researchers still treat equity as a categorical variable despite warnings to the contrary by behavior statisticians (MacCallum et al., 2002), we conducted such an analysis to demonstrate how the categorical approach differs from leaving equity in its original continuous metric.

Therefore, we classified participants' scores on the Hatfield global equity measure into three discrete categories. Keeping in line with prior research that has used the global equity measure (see Sprecher, 2001; Stafford & Canary, 2006), and as described in the methods section, scores on the equity measure were coded with a -3 (most underbenefited) to a +3 (most overbenefited); respondents indicating perceived equity were scored with a zero (see Young & Hatfield, 2011). A categorical variable was created with all negative scores ( $n = 36$ , 15.8%) coded as underbenefited, all positive scores ( $n = 43$ , 18.9%) coded as overbenefited, and all scores of zero ( $n = 145$ , 63.6%) were coded as equitable. These frequency percentages represent

individual perceptions of the overall relational equity and not perceptions of performance of household tasks.

For further exploration to evaluate research question two, a 2 (sex of the respondent; male or female)  $\times$  3 (equity category; underbenefited, equitable, or overbenefited) between-subjects analysis of variance was computed with the equity-restoring mean score included as the dependent variable. Since there were unequal sample sizes present in each condition, we computed the ANOVA using Type II sums of squares (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). Levene's test for equality of means was nonsignificant,  $F(5, 217) = 2.21, p = .054$ . The results of the ANOVA indicated a nonsignificant main effect for sex,  $F(1, 217) = 1.35, p = .25, \eta^2 = .006$ . There was also a nonsignificant interaction effect between sex and equity category,  $F(2, 217) = 2.18, p = .115, \eta^2 = .02$ . However, there was a significant main effect for equity category,  $F(2, 217) = 7.378, p < .01, \eta^2 = .064$ , accounting for a small effect. To probe the main effect for equity category, a Least Squared Difference post-hoc test was conducted with significant differences found between underbenefited ( $M = 3.35$ ) and equitable ( $M = 2.52$ ) as well as between equitable and overbenefited ( $M = 3.48$ ). Table 4 reports the LSD post-hoc test mean difference, standard error, and 95% confidence intervals. Importantly, we describe the implications of the analytic decisions here for future equity researchers in our discussion section.

[Insert Table 4 here]

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asked how respondents' sex and perception of equity within their romantic heterosexual relationship influences their use of domestic labor equity-resistance strategies. We started our exploration of the data similarly to RQ2 with a regression analysis seeking a potential curvilinear relationship between the variables. Therefore, a hierarchical linear



regression was computed by using the same predictor variables (in the same order) as in RQ2 with equity-resistance as the criterion variable. Each of the steps produced a significant  $F$ -test (Final model,  $F(4,221) = 2.84, p = 0.25, R^2 = .22$ ); however, none produced significant change statistics, indicating that one variable contributed most of the variance. This was confirmed by the fact that none of the predictors except for sex (dummy coded as 1 = men, 2 = women) produced significant standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta_{\text{sex}} = -.23, t = -3.09, p = .002$ ). Therefore, while no quadratic effect was detected, these data do demonstrate that a main effect for sex (with men reporting greater use of domestic labor equity-resistance strategies than women) was present, providing a limited answer to our research question.

Similarly to RQ2, we further probed the data by dividing the continuous equity variable into three distinct categories: underbenefited, equitable, overbenefited. A  $2(\text{sex}) \times 3(\text{equity category})$  between-subjects analyses of variance was computed with equity-resistance strategies as the dependent variables using Type II sums of squares to account for unequal sample sizes (Maxwell & Delaney, 2004). The results of the ANOVA [Levene's test,  $F(5, 216) = 1.39, p = .23$ ] resulted in a significant main effect for sex,  $F(1, 216) = 9.83, p = .002, \eta^2 = .044$  with a small effect, a nonsignificant main effect for equity,  $F(2, 216) = .26, p = .77, \eta^2 = .002$ , and a nonsignificant interaction effect between these variables,  $F(2, 216) = 1.34, p = .27, \eta^2 = .012$ . Among these respondents, men reported greater use of equity-resistance strategies,  $M = 3.45, SE = .19, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.07, 3.83]$ , than women,  $M = 2.69, SE = .18, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.34, 3.04]$ .

#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth research question asked what the association is between number of years married and equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies. Given that the number of years married was not normally distributed (the variable had both slight positive skew and moderate

negative kurtosis), a Spearman's Rho correlation was computed (Siegel, 1956). Number of years married was negatively associated with equity-resistance strategies,  $r_s(221) = -.15, p = .024$  and negatively associated with equity-restoring strategies,  $r_s(222) = -.14, p = .04$ ; however, both of these correlations only demonstrate small effects. These negative associations could indicate that the longer couples are married, the fewer reported strategies are employed. However, we cannot surmise a causal link here, given the methods employed in this study.

In order to contextualize these associations with number of years married, two regression models were computed predicting equity-restoration and equity-resistance strategies, respectively, with the mean-centered number of years married entered into the first block and the quadratic (squared term) inputted into the second block. The model predicting equity-restoration produced a nonsignificant F-test with just the linear component of married years. The second block, which included the quadratic term produced a significant change in  $R^2$ ,  $F_{\Delta}(1, 221) = 7.48, p = .007$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .038$ . The second block resulted in a change in the sign of the beta weight from the linear predictor ( $\beta = -.12$ ) in the first step to the quadratic predictor ( $\beta = .20$ ) in the second step. This change from negative to positive indicated a change in the direction of the line and supports a curvilinear relationship. See Table 5 for regression coefficients and Figure 1 for a plot of the lines using three cut-points for the predictor on the criterion.

[Insert Table 5 Here]

The second model, predicting equity-resistance strategies, produced a significant change in  $R^2$  from the model that only included the linear predictor,  $F_{\Delta}(1, 220) = 4.65, p = .032$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .03$ . The second block resulted in a change in the sign of the beta weight from the linear predictor ( $\beta = -.15$ ) in the first step to the quadratic predictor ( $\beta = .16$ ) in the second step. Similar to the model reported above, these data appear to be associated in a curvilinear

relationship. See Table 5 and Figure 1. Taken together, we believe that there is evidence to support the relationship between marriage years and the use of both equity-resistance and equity-restoring strategies.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

### **Post hoc Analysis**

Finally, we decided to take each of the strategies and report means and standard deviations for reported sex, equity category, and number of years married (see Table 6). In exploring these data, some interesting patterns emerged. For equity-restoration, the highest-rated communication strategy, regardless of sex, equity category, and years married was the “I tried to persuade my partner to do more household tasks” technique. Women reported this strategy more than men, underbenefitted partners reported using this strategy more than other equity categories, and those who were married fewer years reported greater use of this technique. Of the equity-restoration techniques, this appeared to be the most “active” in terms of communication.

[Insert Table 6 Here]

Similarly, of the equity-resistance strategies, the one that was rated highest across the variables was “I complimented my partner on his/her work around the house.” This equity-resistance technique was used more by men, more by underbenefitted (but only marginally more than equitable), and more by those individuals with the lowest number of years married. While this doesn’t represent the most active of the strategies, it does represent a rather complex technique – to compliment a partner on his or her ability to do a task when a household labor inequality was felt demonstrates a rather passive technique in attempting to resist. Taken together, these data could demonstrate that individuals may want to use active equity-restoration techniques but more passive equity-resistance techniques.

### **Discussion**

The primary goal of the present investigation was to better understand equity-restoring and equity-resisting strategies in relation to domestic labor. To do so, this study considered relationships between perceptions of global relational equity, participant sex, and marriage length to examine individuals' use of equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies. Domestic labor was considered within an equity framework, because the household task division is regularly reported as a major source of relationship conflict, a noted source of relationship inequity (Bartley et al., 2011; Chethik, 2006), and part of task sharing which is a primary relational maintenance behavior (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Further, equity-restoration and equity-resistance were examined in terms of relationship length as an alternative explanation to equity to explain relational maintenance patterns (Ragsdale, 1996).

#### **Equity Strategies and Perceptions of Time Spent on Domestic Labor**

Participants' responses for research question one indicated that equity-restoring strategies were positively associated with individual-to-partner perception of hours spent in domestic labor, whereas equity-resisting strategies were negatively associated with individual-to-partner perception of hours spent in domestic labor. In other words, when individuals thought that they were spending more time on tasks compared to their partner, they also reported using strategies to restore global equity in their relationship. The equity-restoring strategy, "I tried to persuade my partner to do more household tasks", indicates explicit communication and was used most frequently.

Interestingly, individuals who believed they were spending less time on tasks compared to their partner also indicated they were more likely to use equity-resistance strategies when they did not want to complete a task. Of the two types of strategies, equity-resistance strategies

correlated with a greater hourly change in domestic labor compared to equity-restoration strategies. From a communication perspective, the relationship of unit change in strategy compared to perceived hours spent on domestic labor suggests that equity-resistance strategies may have a greater impact on time spent on tasks compared to equity-restoring strategies. One explanation for this finding may be that as a whole, equity-resisting strategies contain more explicit (rather than implied) communication compared to the equity-restoration strategies. Even the most frequent equity-resistance response, “I complimented my partner on his/her work around the house” requires direct communication, although the strategy is more subtle in terms of refusing to complete the task.

In addition, equity-resistance strategies are self-determined, allowing individuals control over task performance. Even if individuals do not use an equity-resistance strategy effectively, they can still not complete the task. However, equity-restoration strategies require coordination of behavior with one’s partner, which may be why a direct communication strategy was preferred. If individuals believe that they are doing more than their “fair share” of household tasks, they can attempt to increase their partner’s contribution, but ultimately their partners have to agree for the strategy to result in task allocation changes.

A complementary explanation comes from the integrative theory of the division of domestic labor (ITDDL; Alberts et al., 2011). The ITDDL is a complex theory; however, one component is that individuals have varying threshold levels for cleanliness, which are triggered when persons are bothered by an uncompleted task. It is possible that those who use equity-restoration strategies have lower thresholds (are more bothered when tasks are not completed) compared to their partners. If their equity-restoration strategies do not garner partner support, the individual may feel compelled to complete the task regardless of equity perceptions, potentially

explaining why those who use equity-restoration strategies also report spending more time cleaning. Yet those with higher comparative thresholds may never be inclined to clean because their partner completes tasks before are bothered. High-threshold individuals may then see cleaning as a choice and feel justified in using equity-resisting strategies, such as complimenting their spouse, even if they recognize that they clean less than their partner (Riforgiate, Alberts, & Mongeau, 2012). However, because this is correlational data, more research is needed to fully determine the direction of the relationships.

### **Participant Sex and Equity Assessment Related to Equity-restoration Strategies**

Research question two asked about how sex of the respondent and individual perception of equity may influence individuals' reported use of equity-restoring strategies in the domain of household labor. The results of the hierarchical regression where equity was conceptualized as a continuous variable were not significant for equity category or for sex for equity-restoring strategies.

However, the results of the ANOVA, where equity was divided into categorical variables, indicated that there was a significant difference in reported use of equity-restoring strategies for those who perceived their situation as being overbenefited or underbenefited and individuals who perceived their relationship as equitable. However, there was no difference in strategy use between sex of the respondents for either the continuous or categorical equity variables even though Hochschild (1989) originally observed that women used these strategies. Furthermore, for equity as a categorical variable, the results indicated that both overbenefited and underbenefited individuals were equally likely to use the strategies.

These findings have important methodological implications that speak to the ongoing debate in equity research regarding the categorization of equity as either a continuous or a

categorical variable (Canary & Stafford, 2007; Ragsdale, & Brandau-Brown, 2007a; 2007b). Concerns about categorizing continuous variables include “spurious statistical significance” (MacCallem et al., 2002, p. 38), which may be why the regression models garnered different findings compared to the ANOVAs. More specifically, the ANOVA categories placed all individuals with a -3 to -1 in the underbenefited category and all individuals with a +1 to +3 in the overbenefited category. However, one who feels that “my partner is getting a somewhat better deal” (-1) is closer to the equitable person (0) compared to someone who indicates, “my partner is getting a much better deal” (-3) and equidistant from the latter as from the person who indicates, “I am getting a somewhat better deal” (+1). Considering the point distances demonstrates the difficulty in creating arbitrary distinctions when grouping categorical variables. Given that there is contradictory information reported from these two different analytic techniques, an important methodological implication of the present study is that caution should be used when interpreting findings when tricotomizing the continuous global equity measure.

### **Participant Sex and Equity Assessment in Relation to Equity-resistance Strategies**

Research question three asked how sex of the respondent and individuals’ perception of equity influences individuals’ reported use of equity-resisting strategies in the domain of household labor. The results of the hierarchical regression where equity was conceptualized as a continuous variable were not significant for equity, but indicated a main effect for sex where men were more likely to use equity-resisting strategies. Similarly, the results of the ANOVA using categorical variables found no significant results for equity category, but indicated that there was a significant difference in reported use of equity-resisting strategies based on respondent’s sex, with men using equity-resisting strategies more frequently compared to

women. There was not a significant difference for equity or an interaction effect between respondent's sex and equity.

Men using equity-resistance strategies more frequently is particularly interesting considering that men and women both reported perceptions that women completed a greater number of hours of domestic labor (men  $M = 17.29$  hours; women  $M = 17.38$  hours) compared to perceptions of men's time spent in domestic labor (men  $M = 11.39$  hours; women  $M = 7.52$  hours). Considering this information, men are more likely to use equity-resistance strategies in regards to household tasks and spent fewer hours on domestic tasks, which supports Hochschild's (1989) observations.

The finding that women spend more hours engaged in domestic tasks than men is not surprising, especially given empirical evidence supporting that notion (see Coltrane, 2000, 2004; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Sullivan, 2000). The actual tasks used to measure hours spent in domestic labor might provide an explanation for the discrepancy in time spent on task performance reported by men and women. Although housework items included on the questionnaire were chosen carefully to represent frequently performed tasks (Erickson, 2005), the tasks are also considered to be feminine (Blair & Lichter, 1991). For example, feminine tasks include "inside tasks" such as cooking, dishwashing, and vacuuming, whereas masculine tasks often encompass "outside tasks" such as repairs and lawn maintenance (Blair & Lichter, 1991). Because tasks associated with men performing a masculine gender role occur less frequently compared to feminine tasks, they require fewer hours to complete over time than daily reoccurring tasks. In addition, although both feminine and masculine tasks can be outsourced, generally the tasks represented in this study are routine in nature and are not outsourced completely (preparing meals, washing dishes, washing and ironing laundry, cleaning the



bathrooms, and grocery shopping). The fact that discrepancies still exist in allocations of domestic labor between men and women reinforces the idea that expectations of performing masculinity and femininity are alive and well (Schulte, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

### **Marriage Length and Equity-restoration and Equity-resistance Strategies**

Research question four asked how the length of marriage in years is associated with the reported use of equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies. The regression models indicated a negative association between years of marriage and use of both equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies where participants who had been married longer reported lower strategy use. The quadratic relationship indicated that the slope of the regression line flattened out as length of marriage increased. It is possible that individuals work actively earlier in marriage to share tasks and create feelings of equity through both equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies. As relationships mature over time, household tasks become routinized (Alberts et al., 2011) and individuals may accept disproportionate task allocations. Further, sharing tasks as a relational maintenance strategy includes other components besides household labor; couples might negotiate arrangements over a range of tasks that they feel are equitable, even if household tasks are not equal, over their marriage. It may also be that over time communication patterns become habitual (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) and individuals do not realize they are using strategies because they are routinized, causing them to report lower equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategy use.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although this study provides a unique picture of the influences of equity perceptions and domestic labor performance, there are many directions for future research. For example, dyadic data would allow for a more nuanced understanding of couples' perceptions of equity. The fact

that one individual might find a relationship equitable, whereas his or her partner finds the relationship inequitable, draws attention to the importance of perceptions on a practical and theoretic level. Caution should be taken with some of the findings in this study, as we did employ a single-item measurement of equity. That said, perhaps one reason why many respondents reported equitable relationships, when their reported perception of household labor was not balanced, is because data were collected only from one relational partner using a single item measure.

While an important contribution of this study is the translation of qualitative data into a unidimensional and reliable scales, future researchers should seek to establish validity and further develop the measures of equity-resistance and equity-restoration, as these scales could be useful in a variety of relational applications. It would be helpful to include additional items tapping into direct and indirect communication strategies to provide a more comprehensive measure of the range of behaviors used to restore equity. In addition, a larger sample of underbenefited or overbenefited individuals might influence the strategies reported. The sample for this study consisted primarily of individuals who reported a global feeling of equity in their relationship, limiting the statistical power of this analysis.

In line with existing division of domestic labor research, this study focused on the most frequent and necessary household tasks (Erickson, 2005). However, the inclusion of children living in the household and childcare responsibilities would add an interesting dimension to the analysis for future studies. Often children are not accounted for in division of domestic labor research because there is controversy regarding what childcare tasks are considered work (i.e., feeding, supervising, etc.) and which could be categorized as leisure or a labor of love (i.e., playing with children; Alberts et al., 2011). Further, childcare and domestic tasks often occur

simultaneously (i.e., making dinner *while* supervising children), making it difficult to account for time (Schulte, 2014). However, the number and age of children likely influences perceptions of equity and division of labor in the private sphere. Including children and tasks relating to childcare in future studies would enhance understanding of equity perceptions and the ways individuals work to restore and resist equity in complex family systems.

Although the findings in this study indicate that inequity in perceptions of domestic labor continues, further research on this topic is warranted. In terms of time, with women perceiving that they are completing more than four times the amount of household tasks compared to men, it is not surprising that domestic labor is the third leading cause of couple conflict (Bartley et al., 2011; Chethik, 2006), deserving attention. Continued identification of how couples use communication strategies to restore or resist equity may offer insight into changing allocations of domestic tasks and restoring overall relational equity. Interestingly, our post-hoc analysis determined that the active equity-restoration and passive equity-resistant strategies were most common across sex, equity, and marriage years. Although very preliminary, we believe that future researchers should explore the impact of the different types of strategies on other outcome variables. Furthermore, the development of a path or mediation model using the variables that we evaluated here may also make sense, given the implications for theory that we explored in this study.

### **Conclusions**

This study raises important questions about communication strategies used to restore equity related to the division of domestic labor. Inequities specific to domestic labor might be perpetuated by low use of communication to change task allocations through equity-restoring or equity-resistance strategies. The translation of qualitative data into two unidimensional scales for

equity-restoration and equity-resistance offers an important tool for future communication research. Further, this study contributes methodological implications, calling into question the appropriate treatment of equity as a continuous versus a categorical variable, noting that caution should be used when interpreting equity as a categorical variable.

Perceptions of household labor performance by both men and women indicated that women remain primarily responsible for household tasks. Men also reported greater use of equity-resistance strategies than did women. However, the current findings, particularly that biological sex and equity category did not interact on either use of equity-restoring or equity-resistance strategies, require further exploration. In addition, marriage length is associated with equity-restoring and equity-resistance strategies, where individuals who have been married fewer years use more strategies than those in longer relationships. These results indicate a need to better understand the complexity of communication strategies. For married couples, these findings start to paint an interesting picture of communication strategies used to determine divisions of household labor.

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