



Gender Inequality: Perceptions of Fairness and Justice

8

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Introduction

Significant **gender inequality**, i.e., inequality in the treatment of individuals (e.g., in the division of tasks or resources) based on their gender and the under-appreciation of these tasks, exists in modern societies, particularly in relation to paid work, household work and care (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Yerkes, André, et al., 2020). This inequality is persistent and slow to change (England, 2010). A key barrier to reducing gender inequalities is the perception that inherently unequal or unjust situations are fair (Baxter, 2000; Thompson, 1991; Yerkes et al., 2017). In this chapter, we take a social justice approach to understanding the persistent gender inequality in paid

work, household work and care.¹ We highlight research that shows why the gender inequality inherent in care and household work is often perceived to be fair and apply it to the domain of paid work. We focus on mothers' perceptions of the fairness (and hence justice) of the flexibility of arrangements they commonly enter into upon returning to work following childbirth (Yerkes et al., 2017).

Gender Inequality in Housework, Care Work, and Paid Employment

Gender inequality is a persistent social problem across multiple domains. It is a problem that relates to historical ideals of men as primary earners and women (both with a without children) as secondary and/or less well-paid earners (Connell, 2005). More women participate in paid employment now than in previous decades, but women remain overrepresented in part-time work (O'Reilly & Fagan, 1998; Rose & Hewitt, 2019). Women spend more time caring for children (Craig & Mullan, 2011) and the elderly (Saraceno, 2008), and compared to men, have

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¹We acknowledge that while we approach gender in binary terms – male and female – gender is dynamic and not limited to these two categories.

less leisure time (Craig & Mullan, 2013) and lower quality of leisure (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000; Yerkes, Roeters, & Baxter, 2020). Persistent gender inequality is also evident across multiple domains for men. Men typically work longer hours than women (Moen & Sweet, 2003), which can be a barrier to spending more time on care (Rehel, 2014). Men may even be implicitly or explicitly discouraged from taking on caregiving tasks (Miller, 2011; Rose et al., 2015).

Gender inequality in paid work is particularly persistent. This inequality becomes acutely evident around the birth of a child. Following the birth of a child, many women enter into **flexibility arrangements** that often have negative long-term effects on their careers (e.g., Abendroth et al., 2014; Budig & England, 2001). These flexibility arrangements include things like part-time work (e.g., working less than 35 hours a week), flexible hours (e.g., flexibility in when you start or end work), or taking jobs that have fewer demands, particularly outside of regular employment hours (e.g., no evening work). This flexibility is seen to help (new) mothers combine work and care (Rose & Hewitt, 2019). Yet, flexibility arrangements like these are an important part of the explanation for women's continued disadvantage in earnings (Bardasi & Gornick, 2008; Budig & Hodges, 2010) and lower occupational status (Dex et al., 2008; Kauhanen & Nätti, 2015). They also are key to explaining other gender unequal career effects, such as slower career progression (e.g., not being promoted or moving up the career ladder more slowly), being assigned less interesting or less complex tasks at work, and fewer leadership and management opportunities (Wattis et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2013). In addition, by seeking increased flexibility in paid work, women ultimately take on arrangements that allow them to also take up the majority of housework and care responsibilities (Rose, 2017). One potential explanation for why mothers accept unequal flexibility arrangements, is because they accept the trade-off between gender inequality (evident in the effects on their career) and flexibility for combining paid work and family work, as fair.

A Social Justice Framework for Understanding Gender Inequality

As outlined in Chap. 4, a social justice framework addresses both distributive justice (i.e., who does what), as well as procedural justice (i.e., due consideration/fair process). An essential part of procedural justice is interactional justice (i.e., informal interactions; how one is treated). In line with many organizational scholars (including organizational sociologists), we applied a justice framework to women's sense of fairness in paid work (Yerkes et al., 2017), viewing interactional justice as a separate component of a justice framework.

Social justice frameworks have played a key role in explaining gender inequalities (e.g., Baxter, 2000; Fraser, 1994; Thompson, 1991). Moreover, the ways in which workers perceive justice (e.g., what is fair or unfair) is gendered and may differ for women compared to men. A seminal article drawing attention to the importance of gender in social justice frameworks as they apply to divisions of labour comes from American sociologist Linda Thompson (1991). Thompson starts from the premise that questions about gender inequality in the division of care and household work are inherently about distributive justice but critiqued previous work for paying insufficient attention to women's **perceptions of fairness**. Thompson thus shifts thinking about gender inequalities towards why women view their situation as fair – even when the situation is unequal. She demonstrates the contested nature of justice (Chap. 4), showing how while we might value justice, that our perceptions of what is fair or unfair are based on gendered understandings, i.e., shaped by our experiences as men, women, non-binary gender, etc.

Gendered Understandings of Outcome Values, Comparison Referents, and Justifications

Thompson (1991) shows that when we judge whether outcomes are fair or unfair, there first needs to be agreement on what outcomes are

being compared. But agreement on what people value as an outcome is absent. For example, many gender scholars study the division of housework and care work focused solely on which tasks men and women do (e.g., vacuuming, doing the dishes) or the time they spend doing it (e.g., how many hours men or women spend on cleaning or childcare). Yet other outcome values may matter more. Thompson (1991) found that mothers place greater value on outcomes such as interpersonal relationships, such as fathers interacting with their children, than on the actual amount of time fathers spend on care tasks. Similarly, Baxter and Western (1998) have shown that women value men taking up non-traditional tasks and roles in the home, i.e., helping with chores traditionally done by women such as preparing and cleaning up after meals, more than an equal division of labour.

Applying Thompson's framework to paid work, we investigate the extent to which women value flexibility upon return to work as an outcome more than gender equal outcomes related to career progression (Yerkes et al., 2017). We will show that these outcome values differ depending on mothers' employment situation. Less-educated mothers (without university degrees) who work in female-dominated occupations (e.g., administrative, sales or caring occupations) that are lower paid, can view themselves as having limited career possibilities. They tend to view paid work from a more practical perspective, valuing flexibility or other convenience aspects of employment, such as where their jobs are located. In other words, for some women, trade-offs between gender unequal career outcomes and flexibility at work are often already built into their occupational trajectories (Hook, 2015). This situation differs from highly educated mothers, who often work in occupations with clear career opportunities and greater earnings capacity. They tend to value flexibility arrangements that help maintain these longer-term career prospects. They are therefore more ambivalent about making trade-offs necessary to achieve flexibility, or they view these trade-offs and loss of career prospects as unfair.

The sense of fairness we experience also differs depending upon our *comparison referents* (Chap. 4, this volume): to what standards do we judge or with whom do we judge our situation? Or as Thompson (1991, p. 186) explains, "Outcome values define what people desire; comparison referents define what people deserve." Thompson (1991) critiques the assumption that women rely on their partner for making judgments about what is fair. Her critique is well-founded, as research on social justice suggests our choice of comparison referents is both complex and gendered (Tyler et al., 1997), i.e., takes on different forms and meaning for men and women. Empirical research suggests that women more often make **within-gender comparisons** (i.e., comparing themselves with other women) than **between-gender comparisons** (i.e., comparing themselves with men), most generally, their partner. For example, Hochschild and Machung (1989) show that as women re-entered paid employment, they often attempted to 'do it all' – working a paid job while continuing to do the same amount of housework and care work. In judging their ability to manage the combined tasks of paid work, housework and care, they compared themselves to other women. Within-gender comparisons can also be made in relation to what husbands or partners do (or don't do). For example, women may reason that the situation at home is fair because their husband/partner does more than their friend or sister's husband/partner – or more than their own father did. Research on men's perceptions of fairness is less common, but a psychological study comparing men and women's perceptions of fairness in housework and income differences and their impact on relationship satisfaction suggests that men and women employ different standards of fairness in determining what is fair or unfair, with men potentially basing their perceptions on equity and women on equality (Gillespie et al., 2019). Moreover, cross-national research suggests men distinctly respond to social policy contexts supporting gender equality; in countries with stronger policy support for gender equality, men are less likely to regard unequal contributions at home as fair (Öun, 2013).

Differences in men and women's work situation may explain variation in comparison referents. If women work in female-dominated jobs or organizations, with few men in jobs similar to their own, women may be more likely to make within-gender comparisons. For women working in male-dominated jobs or workplaces, the process of making comparisons is less straightforward. In such situations, women might make between-gender comparisons, comparing themselves to men in jobs similar to their own, or they may make comparisons within their networks of friends and family. We investigate these differences below.

Lastly, the work of Thompson and other scholars applying a justice framework suggests men and women differ in the *justifications* they give for unequal distributions of housework, care and paid work. In some contexts, it might be easy to suggest that women do more housework and care work because they participate less in paid employment. This would be in line with the so-called time constraints theory. The time constraints theory posits that the more time men and women spend in paid employment, the less time they have to contribute to housework and care tasks (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2000). However, empirical evidence to support this theory is mixed. Where some studies, like those of Bianchi and colleagues confirm this theory, other studies (e.g., Craig & Mullan, 2011; Rose & Hewitt, 2019), demonstrate that even in households where women and men spend an equal amount of time on paid work, women spend more time on household and care tasks. Such unequal distributions can be justified as fair because the contributions of men and women in household work are justified in gendered ways, i.e., evaluated differently for men and women (Baxter, 2000). For example, Rose and colleagues (Rose et al., 2015) find that men justify smaller amounts of care work following childbirth by highlighting mother-specific roles such as breastfeeding (e.g., I'd do more, but I can't, because when the baby cries, it's crying for its (breastfeeding) mother). A father from the same study recounted how he helped to change the nappy before or after breastfeeding, as a way of taking part in newborn care (Rose et al., 2015).

In other words, men's and women's assessments of fairness (in this example, related to care) are seemingly based on biological differences, but often reflect gender norms and stereotypes as well, prescribing which roles men and women should and shouldn't take on in society (Chap. 7, this volume).

Building on gender inequality research stemming from a primarily distributive justice framework, a growing group of organizational sociologists considers the role of other justice principles, such as procedural justice (Leventhal, 1980) and/or interactional justice (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Major, 1993; see also Chap. 4, this volume). For mothers returning to work following childbirth, if flexibility arrangements are made without procedural justice, mothers may view these arrangements as unfair. Whether issues of procedural justice arise is likely dependent upon whether procedures for negotiating flexible work arrangements are established within the workplace, for example in formal organizational policies. In the absence of established procedures, procedural justice issues are more likely to arise. Interactional justice has been shown to matter for perceptions of fairness in the division of household work (Major, 1993) as well as perceptions of fairness in the work setting (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2007). Mothers' perceptions of the fairness of flexibility arrangements entered into upon their return to work may depend on whether they feel they are treated respectfully, honestly and with dignity by managers and supervisors. In particular, if distributive norms are absent in the workplace, an interactional justice frame may be crucial, for example, whether mothers feel their concerns are seen to be legitimate and heard by employers. Managers and employers play a key role in the realization of work-family arrangements in the workplace (den Dulk et al., 2017). As such, mothers' perceptions of fairness may depend on the extent to which managers and employers are sensitive to the challenges they encounter in attempting to combine paid work with care responsibilities outside of work, seeing these claims as legitimate (Daverth et al., 2015).

Empirical Example: Accepting Unfair Arrangements at Work

Between 2010 and 2011, we conducted in-depth interviews with 109 Australian mothers, with babies aged 11 to 15 months, about their time off from paid work, their return to work, and the division of work and care at home and in paid work. This diverse group included both first-time mothers (58%) and mothers who already had one or more children (42%). They ranged from 19 to 46 years of age, with 25% of mothers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and 15% Indigenous Australians. The majority of women (87%) were living in partnered (married or cohabiting) relationships. Three-fourths (75%) of mothers had returned to paid work with close to a third of mothers (29%) employed in precarious forms of employment (e.g., temporary, fixed-term or casual jobs). Using the justice framework outlined above (Major, 1987; Thompson, 1991), we consider what mothers value upon return to work (outcome values), who they compare themselves with (the comparison referent), and which justice principles (distributive, process, interactional) they use when justifying these arrangements. We provide relevant quotes to illustrate mothers' experiences (for a full discussion, see Yerkes et al., 2017).

Outcome Values: Flexibility upon Return to Work

We found what mothers value upon return to work to be gendered. For example, one mother shared how she valued the flexibility of her private company job as it allowed her to perform household or care tasks in between her paid work hours, such as looking after her sick child or grocery shopping.

At the moment, I'm doing a couple of days in the office and a couple of days at home. [Company] are really supportive and they're so flexible. I can duck out, especially if I'm here all day, duck out during my lunch break and go and do a grocery shop. (Mother 050)

However, this same outcome value (flexibility at work) was not expected of her husband's job as a hotel manager.

He does [get carer's leave] but [...] he's responsible; he's got so much pressure on him. It's not like he can just – you go on holidays and he's on his BlackBerry [...] If something happens at the hotel, he's ultimately responsible and he's got people he's got to report to. (Mother 050)

Although this mother expressed some dissatisfaction with her husband's job, she also seemed to accept that his lack of access to flexibility was fair due to his role and responsibilities. This mother's flexibility (and the absence of it for her husband) aligns with typical gender norms valuing men's employment over women's, particularly in countries where part-time employment is common among mothers. Flexibility is valued as an outcome as it allows mothers to manage their paid work and care responsibilities. Thus, mothers' perceptions of fairness were closely tied to gender-specific expectations around flexibility and gender roles, which led some women to seek work where flexibility is widely available more secure, and formalized (e.g., in organizational policies). This generally meant women sought employment in public sector, rather than private sector organisations:

I purposely chose government work so that I would have that flexibility.... If I need to leave, if he's sick, I can just go. There's never any question about that. (Mother 004)

Comparison Referents

We found that mothers most often compared themselves to other women in the workplace to determine whether their flexibility arrangements were fair. One mother spoke about how she did not expect her workplace to pay for her maternity leave, explaining that this was different from what many other women might expect (and also went against policies in place providing paid leave):

I never expected my firm to pay for me to have a child. I know women all think differently, but I thought it was my decision to have a child and I didn't expect them to pay, so I wasn't disappointed that I didn't have [paid] maternity leave. (Mother 046)

Women in workplaces expected to get the same conditions as other mothers, irrespective of the

kind of job they held. Thus, women compared their working conditions against those of other mothers, not fathers or other men in the workplace. Women reported their managers also made within-gender comparisons. For example, one mother in a workplace where there were several others who became pregnant, clearly thought it was inappropriate that her female manager was resisting her request for flexibility, based on the within-gender comparison her manager made:

I asked for unpaid leave and I was met with a little bit of resistance [...] Her comment to me was: "Well, I did my master's with my two-year-old on my knee and I was in the first trimester" [...] I remember thinking, "Well that's not fair that you had to do that; no one else should have to do that." (Mother 029)

For women working in male-dominated workplaces, making within-gender comparisons was not possible. The absence of similar comparison referents led mothers to expect more of themselves in the workplace:

At that time, working part-time, especially in the investment banking industry even in HR, was unheard of, and if people worked part-time it would typically be four days, three minimum. [...] I sort of felt like I had to make inroads on my days off so I could hit the ground running [...] that initial period I wanted to prove myself. I wanted to [...] have a bit of an impact [...] so I went the extra mile. (Mother 032)

Justifications from a Justice Perspective

Mothers' justifications for accepting flexibility arrangements that disadvantaged them in their career varied, dependent upon education level and occupation. Distributive justice principles were highlighted by the interviews with many mothers, who assessed the fairness of their situation based on what they traded to have the flexibility they desired. Highly educated mothers in occupations with clear career trajectories were generally aware of the long-term consequences of working flexibly, and felt these consequences were a fair exchange. Despite accepting that some type of trade-off was inevitable, the

experiences of this same group of mothers highlights the uncertainty many of them face in practice. The terms of their flexible arrangements and the fairness of these arrangements were much less settled and clear, as highlighted by a mother in a position with a clear path for advancement. Upon returning to work, she accepted a part-time position which involved a loss of career prospects, accepting the same pay she had before she took leave:

They wouldn't let me go back to my Team Co-ordinator position, which was a bit of a shock to me. But [...] my manager was good in that she managed to negotiate with our HR section to get me at least the same pay and sort of create a new position for me. (Mother, 031)

When it came to procedural justice principles, thinking about formal procedures and due process, most of the women we interviewed suggested these principles were generally observed in their workplaces, and breaches of procedural justice in negotiating flexible arrangements were infrequent among mothers. Interactional justice, however, is a crucial aspect of return-to-work negotiations by mothers. For example, mothers expressed having 'such an understanding employer'. Many mothers placed great importance on this form of justice, particularly in their experiences of negotiating time off from work to deal with urgent situations such as a sick child. One mother described such positive interactions with her supervisors:

They've been really good. I think occasionally I've had to ring in sick to say I can't come in because he's got conjunctivitis or whatever, and I've said, "Do I need a doctor's certificate?" They've said, "No that's fine, don't worry." (Mother, 021)

Another mother sought flexibility in her work hours and was pleased with the outcome of negotiations with her employer:

They've been really good actually [...] I asked if I could do [...] eight till four which means then I can [...] get home and be back by about a quarter to five and [...] she said yes to that... so she's very supportive and understanding. (Mother, 053)

This empirical example from Australia highlights the multiple and varied ways in which gender shapes our perceptions of what is fair and unfair.

While the quotes presented here might appear to be quite specific, they are illustrative of the experiences of a large and diverse sample of mothers returning to work and confirm findings about the gendered nature of perceptions of fairness in other domains, such as household and care work.

Conclusion

There are clearly significant and persistent gender inequalities between men and women in relation to paid work, housework, and care. Applying a social justice framework to these inequalities can be useful to understand their tenacity. Using an empirical example of the perceived fairness of flexibility arrangements mothers enter into upon return to work, we highlighted multiple aspects of a social justice framework to be considered. First, outcome values may differ between men and women; individuals may have reason to value differing outcomes in life (Sen, 1992; Chap. 5, this volume). What people value is embedded in gendered notions of what we expect from mothers and fathers around the birth of a child (Pfau-Effinger, 2016). Second, our sense of fairness varies by the gendered ways in which we use comparison referents. Within-gender comparisons in highly feminized occupations can lead to a sense of fairness, whereas between-gender comparisons or an absence of comparison referents in male-dominated occupations can lead to a sense of unfairness or uncertainty about fairness. Third, while distributive justice frameworks may be useful for explaining the persistence of inequality in care and household tasks, we find that interactional justice principles, alongside distributive justice principles, are crucial for explaining the persistence of inequality in paid work.

A key limitation to this chapter is an absence of data on men's perceptions of fairness of flexibility arrangements at work. As highlighted in the

literature discussed here, research comparing men and women's varying perceptions of fairness in the home is widely available, but research on perceptions of fairness in paid work is more limited. Despite these limitations, the study provides key insights into why women accept gender unequal situations as fair. In modern societies, where gender norms are slowly shifting in some countries, e.g., with new ideals of fathers who are more involved in care, research into perceptions of fairness for fathers entering into flexibility arrangements is also needed. Greater knowledge on how gendered perceptions of fairness function as a potential barrier to achieving greater gender equality in paid work is crucial. If women and men continue to view the unequal situations they are in as fair, then there is little reason to challenge the status quo, helping to maintain gender inequality in society.

Glossary

Between-gender comparisons: comparisons between two or more genders.

Flexibility arrangements: agreements between workers and employers regarding flexibility at work, such as part-time work, or flexibility in start or end times at work.

Gender inequality: inequality in the treatment of individuals (e.g., in the division of tasks or resources) based on their gender and the under-appreciation of these tasks.

Justifications: the reasoning behind a given outcome, generally related to the procedures leading up to that outcome.

Perceptions of fairness: what we view as fair or unfair, which is based on gendered understandings of outcome values, comparison referents, and justifications for outcomes.

Within-gender comparisons: comparisons within one's own gender.

Comprehension Questions

1. What are comparison referents and why do they matter in relation to mothers' perceptions of justice?
2. What is the key outcome value for mothers when returning to work and how is this outcome gendered?
3. We show how mothers' perceptions of fairness are embedded in gender-specific expectations of flexibility. What is meant by this?

Discussion Questions

1. Thinking about your own country, how might valued outcomes in paid work, housework, and care work be shifting in today's society in relation to gender? Do you think men and women will continue to value these things in different ways? Why or why not?
2. Do gendered perceptions of fairness always lead to inequality? Why or why not?

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