

Fairness Perceptions of the Division of Household Labor: Housework and Childcare

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Abstract

An unequal division of housework has been found to be often regarded as fair, which may explain why women still do most household labor. This study extends previous research by also investigating childcare—an increasingly important part of household labor, which is likely to have a different meaning than housework. It examines how perceptions of fairness for both housework and childcare are influenced by the division of housework, childcare, and paid labor, and whether patterns differ by gender. Data from the Netherlands (men: $N = 462$; women: $N = 638$) show that unequal divisions of housework, and especially childcare, are often perceived as fair. When it comes to how an increasingly unequal household labor division is related to unfairness, associations are stronger for women than for men. Fairness of the household labor division is evaluated in relation to total workload and not in isolation from other types of labor.

Keywords

fairness perceptions, gender, household labor division, housework, childcare

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Even though women's labor market participation has increased considerably, women continue to do most of the housework and childcare—in short, household labor or unpaid labor (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). This finding has resulted in a stream of research to explain the unequal division of household labor. Explanations have focused on time availability, partners' relative resources, and gender ideology (Coltrane, 2000). To better understand the unequal division of household labor and why this division is so resistant to change, research also looked at fairness perceptions. The assumption is that unequal divisions of household labor may not be perceived as unfair. Fairness research, indeed, has found that unequal divisions of household labor are often regarded as fair (Baxter, 2000; Braun et al., 2008; Young et al., 2015). Studying fairness perceptions is not only relevant to better understand the unequal household labor division, but also because studies have shown that it is not the actual division of household labor that explains well-being and relationship outcomes, but rather the perceived fairness of the division. People who perceive the household labor division as unfair show higher levels of depression (Glass & Fujimoto, 1994) and marital dissatisfaction (Dew & Wilcox, 2011).

This study examines fairness perceptions of household labor among men and women. We contribute to existing literature in three ways. First, fairness research so far has foremost focused on housework. Little research has investigated fairness perceptions in relation to childcare (for exceptions, see Baxter, 2000; Chong & Mickelson, 2016). We argue that it is important to look at both housework and childcare for several reasons. First, childcare has become a more important part of household labor over time. In recent years, both men and women have increased their time spent on childcare (Bianchi et al., 2012). Whereas men's contributions to housework have increased, yet to a lesser extent than for childcare, women's contributions have decreased. Second, as already suggested by these different trends, the meaning of childcare may differ from housework. People generally find childcare more enjoyable than housework (Poortman & Van der Lippe, 2009). Furthermore, there is a stronger rewarding component to childcare than housework: people invest in childcare for the benefit—that is, the development and well-being—of their child (Sullivan, 2013). The different meaning of childcare suggests that it may be less strongly related to unfairness perceptions than housework, and that unequal divisions of childcare may be less likely to be perceived as unfair than unequal divisions of housework. In the context of the actual division of labor, scholars have confirmed that housework and childcare are conceptually different, and argued that these types of household labor should be treated separately (Coltrane, 2000; Sullivan, 2013). When it comes to fairness research, however, studies sometimes combine childcare with housework tasks, but they often do not include childcare at all (but see Baxter, 2000; Chong & Mickelson, 2016).

Second, we contribute to the field by considering the total burden of labor—housework, childcare, and paid labor—and examine their interplay in explaining household labor fairness. Prior research mainly examined the main effects of housework, paid labor, and, to a lesser extent, childcare (Baxter, 2000; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003; Young et al., 2015). As argued by Braun et al. (2008), it may be more accurate to look at the interplay between different types of labor because partners may evaluate the household labor division in terms of their overall workload. Our study investigates whether time spent on one type of household labor is more strongly related to household labor unfairness, if time spent on paid labor or the other type of household labor is higher.

Third, by studying both men and women, we can compare their fairness perceptions of housework and childcare. Previous research has shown that women, regardless of the actual division of housework, are more likely than men to perceive the division of housework as unfair (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003). Gender differences may be less pronounced for childcare unfairness because of the more positive meaning of childcare (i.e., childcare is more enjoyable and rewarding than housework). We further test whether unequal divisions of housework, childcare, and paid labor are differently associated with household labor unfairness for men and women. Women's total work time is generally higher than men's (Sayer et al., 2009), and women are generally more relationship-oriented than men (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Women may thus be more likely than men to translate unequal divisions of labor into unfairness perceptions.

The research questions are to what extent men and women perceive the division of housework and childcare as fair; how the division of both paid and unpaid labor relates to housework and childcare fairness perceptions; and whether patterns are different depending upon people's gender. We use data from the New Families in the Netherlands survey (NFN; Poortman et al., 2014, 2018). The strength of the NFN is that both men and women reported on the division of housework, childcare, and paid labor, and on their fairness perceptions of housework and childcare.

Theoretical Background

First, we theorize how the division of unpaid and paid labor, and their interplay, are related to fairness perceptions of household labor. We further explain why the relationship between the division of household labor and fairness perceptions may differ for housework and childcare. Finally, we focus on gender differences, by theorizing how the division of (unpaid and paid) labor may be differently related to household labor fairness for men and women.

Equity Theory and Fairness Perceptions

A prominent theory to understand fairness perceptions of the division of labor in intimate relationships has been equity theory. According to equity theory (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012; Walster et al., 1978), the division of labor is a key factor in explaining fairness perceptions. Equity theory assumes that partners evaluate what they invest in and receive from a relationship. A relationship is perceived as fair when a person's outcomes, relative to the investments made, are equal to the partner's outcomes, relative to the partner's investments. Assuming that outcomes of a romantic relationship are distributed equally, equity occurs if both partners invest as much in the relationship. If total investments are not equal, the relationship may be perceived as unfair. An unfair relationship might be unfair in two ways (Walster et al., 1978): a person who invests more in the relationship than the partner tends to feel unfairly disadvantaged (i.e., "underbenefit"). If a person's investments are lower than the partner's investments, this person may feel unfairly advantaged (i.e., "overbenefit"). Whereas underbenefit relates to unfairness to self, overbenefit relates to unfairness to the partner. Note that we do not distinguish between unfairness to self and to partner in our hypotheses, as we cannot test this (see the Method section).

Investments take many forms. Here, we focus on investments in both household labor and paid labor. Starting with household labor, equity theory thus implies that a situation in which a person's relative contributions to household labor are higher than the partner's contributions, may increase unfairness perceptions to self because this person invests more time and energy in the relationship. The partner tends to feel unfairly advantaged as he/she contributes less to household labor, which might increase unfairness perceptions to the other. Previous research found that the higher a person's relative contribution to housework, the more likely he/she was to see this distribution as unfair to self, whereas the opposite was found for the person's perceived unfairness to the partner (Young et al., 2015). Given that deviations from equal divisions of household labor generally go in the direction of women contributing more than men (Coltrane, 2000), we expect that: *The higher the relative household labor contribution of women, the stronger the unfairness perceptions of household labor.* Despite the positive association between unequal divisions of household labor and unfairness perceptions, this is not to say that unequal divisions of household labor are necessarily perceived to be unfair. On the contrary, unequal divisions of household labor are still regarded as fair, but the more unequal the divisions are, the less they are perceived as fair (Baxter, 2000; Braun et al., 2008; DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Young et al., 2015).

Equity theory further emphasizes the importance of including investments in other types of labor when studying household labor fairness. This is in line with the “time availability perspective,” an approach taken from the literature on the division of household labor (Shelton & John, 1996). The idea is that fairness perceptions toward a specific type of labor may not only depend on investments in that specific type of labor but also on how much time and energy is invested in other types of labor. For example, fairness perceptions of housework may also be associated with investments in paid labor and the other type of household labor, that is, childcare. The assumption is that the higher the investments in other types of labor, the stronger the unfairness perceptions. Prior studies on housework fairness did not include the division of childcare, but they did investigate the role of the division of paid labor. Findings of these studies have been mixed, with some finding support for the positive association between paid labor and perceived housework unfairness (Braun et al., 2008; Perales et al., 2015), whereas others did not or only a little (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003; Young et al., 2015). A study examining both housework and childcare fairness similarly included paid labor and only one type of household labor (depending on whether the dependent variable was housework or childcare fairness) and found that women’s own paid work hours were related to stronger unfairness perceptions of housework, not of childcare (Baxter, 2000). We hypothesize that: *The higher women’s relative contributions to the other types of labor, the stronger the unfairness perceptions of household labor.*

Braun et al. (2008) argued to look at the interplay between different types of labor, as partners may evaluate the division of household labor in terms of their overall workload. For example, if a person invests more in housework than the partner, but he/she is being compensated by lower investments in paid labor or childcare, this unequal housework division may be perceived as fair. If a person bears primary responsibility for different types of labor, this may be perceived as unfair. Research on whether investments in a specific type of labor are more strongly related to unfairness perceptions of this specific type of labor, if investments in other types of labor are higher, is scarce (but see Braun et al., 2008). Braun et al. (2008) studied fairness perceptions of housework among women and found that the more hours women worked for pay, the stronger their unfairness perceptions to an increasingly unequal division of housework. We expect that: *The positive relationship between women’s relative household labor contribution and unfairness perceptions of household labor is stronger if women’s relative contributions to the other types of labor are higher.*

Types of Household Labor and Fairness Perceptions

The actual division of housework may be more strongly related to unfairness perceptions than the actual division of childcare. A first reason is that people generally have more favorable attitudes toward childcare than housework (Poortman & Van der Lippe, 2009). Housework (e.g., cleaning) may be evaluated negatively because of its boring and isolated nature, whereas most aspects of childcare (e.g., playing with child) may be regarded as more enjoyable (Coltrane, 2000). Although both housework and childcare are performed daily, housework is more repetitive in a negative manner. Childcare tasks vary over time as children grow older (e.g., from bringing child to bed to going on outings with child), whereas housework tasks change less over time and may therefore feel as never-ending tasks (Sullivan, 2013). Also note the element of choice in the decision to have a child, whereas housework is a fact of life for everyone.

Second, performing childcare may be more rewarding than housework (Connelly & Kimmel, 2010; Sullivan, 2013), particularly because relationships with children are irreplaceable and lifelong (Nelson, 2010). Investing in both housework and childcare may be rewarding as people may enjoy keeping the home and family running. For childcare, there is also a stronger rewarding component: to care for the well-being and development of children (Connelly & Kimmel, 2010). Parents enjoy investing in childcare because they value the development of their children (Van Lenning & Willemsen, 2001). As people are likely to attach greater weight to negative entities than positive entities (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), a negative entity, such as performing unenjoyable and less rewarding tasks, is subjectively more potent and of higher salience. People may thus be more critical about an unequal division of housework than an unequal division of childcare, suggesting that the actual division of housework may be more strongly related to unfairness perceptions than the actual division of childcare. One might even argue that childcare is a return instead of an investment. If people perceive childcare as enjoyable and rewarding, performing more childcare may increase perceived fairness instead of unfairness. The few studies on childcare fairness found that an increase in women's childcare contribution (slightly) increased their unfairness perceptions (Baxter, 2000; Chong & Mickelson, 2016). Based on these findings, it is more likely to assume that people see childcare as an investment than a return, which may thus be related to unfairness perceptions when investments are higher.

Third, studies suggest that partners are more likely to deliberate about the division of childcare than housework (Hooghiemstra & Pool, 2003; Van Lenning & Willemsen, 2001; Wiesmann et al., 2008). Van Lenning and

Willemsen (2001) found that people explicitly agree on the division of child-care but neglect housework tasks from their explicit deliberations. This is not striking, as it is more relevant to deliberate which partner will pick up the child from school than who will empty the dishwasher. If partners explicitly discuss and agree upon their unequal investments in childcare, unequal divisions of childcare might be less strongly related to unfairness perceptions. Unfairness perceptions might be stronger for housework, as not dealing explicitly with who does which housework chores might mean that partners do not agree and feel dissatisfied with the unequal division of housework. Given the above arguments, we expect that: *The positive relationship between women's relative housework contribution and housework unfairness perceptions is stronger than the positive relationship between women's relative childcare contribution and childcare unfairness perceptions.*

Gender and Fairness Perceptions

Women's relative (household and paid) labor contributions may be stronger related to household labor unfairness perceptions for women than for men because of the difference between under- and overbenefit. Equity theory assumes that unfairness perceptions are stronger for the person who invests more in the relationship (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012). Strictly speaking, this argument is not about gender differences, but about time availability. Women's total work time, including both unpaid and paid labor, is often higher than men's (Sayer et al., 2009). Women may thus feel that they receive less than they deserve, which may be strongly related to unfairness perceptions. Men are in an advantaged position, as their total work time is lower. Men's unfairness perceptions may therefore be less strong and are related to feeling guilty or sympathy toward their partner whose total work time is higher.

A second argument focuses on the gendered nature of intimate relationships. Women are generally socialized giving greater importance to intimate relationships than men (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Grote et al., 2002). This socialization allows for more complex thinking about their romantic relationship (Martin, 1991) and may make them more aware of relational issues (Acitelli, 1992). Women being more socially embedded in romantic relationships than men, may thus result in women being more critical about unequal divisions of labor, and unfairness perceptions may therefore be stronger. As men are less relationship-oriented than women (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997), they may be less likely to translate unequal divisions of labor into unfairness perceptions. We thus hypothesize that: *The positive relationship between women's relative (household and paid) labor contribution and unfairness perceptions of household labor is stronger for women than for men.*

Method

We analyzed data of the NFN survey (Poortman et al., 2014, 2018; Poortman & Van Gaalen, 2019a, 2019b). Although NFN aimed at a main group of divorced or separated parents, data were also gathered among a control group consisting of married or cohabiting parents, which we used here. Because questions about the division of housework tasks between partners were not included in Wave 1 (2012–2013), we only used data of Wave 2 (2015–2016) and applied a cross-sectional design. In collaboration with Statistics Netherlands, a random sample for the first wave was drawn from the population of married or cohabiting heterosexual parents with minor children who were in these unions before 2010. Both parents were asked to participate in an online survey. The final reminder also included a written questionnaire. Both partners participated for about two-thirds of the contacted households. The response rate in Wave 1 was 45% on the individual level and 56% on the household level. Overall, 2,173 parents participated in the first wave. Men, people of non-Western descent, and people on low incomes were underrepresented. Parents who agreed to be recontacted for follow-up research were invited to complete the online survey or written questionnaire for the second wave. For about half of the households, both parents participated. The response rate was 70% among persons and 74% among households, with a total of 1,336 participating parents. The sample of Wave 2 was, as in Wave 1, selective on gender, ethnicity, and income. Additional analyses showed that especially the lower educated and younger persons were more likely to drop out after Wave 1.

We excluded respondents who reported to have the same sex as their partner ($n = 10$). We also excluded cases in which the youngest child of the respondent was 18 years or older ($n = 206$) because the measures for the division of childcare tasks were less relevant for parents with older children. We further excluded cases with missing data on the variables used in the analyses ($n = 20$). The final sample consisted of 1,100 respondents from 756 households. Analyses were performed separately for men ($n = 462$) and women ($n = 638$).

Measures of Dependent Variables

Housework unfairness. Respondents were asked: “How fair (0 = *very unfair for me*; 3 = *fair for both*; 6 = *very unfair for my partner*) do you find the way you and your partner have arranged the division of housework tasks?” A similar measure has been used by Kluwer et al. (2002), which in turn was based on the measure in the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH; Sweet et al., 1988). We

collapsed the seven response options into four categories: 0 “fair for both,” 1 “somewhat unfair (for me/partner),” 2 “unfair (for me/partner),” and 3 “very unfair (for me/partner).” A higher score on the scale indicated stronger unfairness perceptions of housework.

Childcare unfairness. Respondents indicated how fair (0 = *very unfair for me*; 3 = *fair for both*; 6 = *very unfair for my partner*) they find the way the division of the care and supervision of the child(ren) was arranged between them and their partner. Responses were recoded into: 0 “fair for both,” 1 “somewhat unfair (for me/partner),” 2 “unfair (for me/partner),” and 3 “very unfair (for me/partner)” (see Kluwer et al., 2002). A higher score on the scale indicated stronger unfairness perceptions of childcare.

Note that although the dependent variables’ response categories allowed for examining unfairness to self or to partner separately compared with fairness to both, we could not perform reliable analyses because of the small number of cases in some response categories (e.g., men experiencing the childcare division to be unfair for partner: $n = 69$).

Measures of Independent Variables

Women’s relative housework contribution. Respondents indicated who did six housework tasks more often (1 = *you much more often than your partner*, 3 = *equally*, 5 = *your partner much more often than you*): “preparing dinner,” “grocery shopping,” “cleaning,” “doing the laundry,” “chores in and around the house,” and “administration, arranging finances” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.61$). As conventional research argues in favor of focusing on routine housework tasks instead of combining all forms of housework tasks (Braun et al., 2008; Demaris & Longmore, 1996), we only included the first four tasks in the scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$). Responses were made gender-specific and recoded in the direction of women’s contribution. Subsequently, responses were coded as proportions. For women, responses were coded as follows: *you much more often than your partner* = 1, *you more often than your partner* = 0.75, *equally* = 0.50, *your partner more often than you* = 0.25, and *your partner much more often than you* = 0. Responses were reverse coded for men (e.g., *you much more often than your partner* = 0). A mean scale was created, ranging from 0 (0%) to 1 (100%), reflecting the relative contribution of women. A score of 0 indicates that women take almost no responsibility for housework tasks, whereas a score of 1 indicates that women take most responsibility for these tasks.

Women’s relative childcare contribution. Respondents reported who did the following five care tasks more often (1 = *you much more often than your*

partner, 3 = equally, 5 = your partner much more often than you): “washing and bathing the child,” “putting the child to bed,” “playing games at home, crafts,” “talking with your child about issues in the child’s life,” and “outings with the child (such as to the playground, zoo, cinema)” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$). As for housework, responses were made gender-specific and recoded in the direction of women’s contribution. Responses were then coded as proportions, and a mean scale was created, ranging from 0 (0%) to 1 (100%), reflecting women’s relative contribution. Note that for all items involved in the two scales, measuring women’s relative housework or childcare contribution, respondents could also choose the response category “Not applicable.” We treated these respondents as having a missing value on these particular items. Respondents were included when they had a non-missing value on at least one of the items included in the scale.

Women’s relative paid labor contribution. Respondents reported the number of actual hours that they and their partner worked per week. If respondents or their partners were not employed, they were assigned zero hours. If respondents or their partners worked over 80 hours per week, they were assigned a score of 80. We made the responses gender-specific and divided women’s work hours by total work hours. The scale ranged from 0 (0%) to 1 (100%), reflecting women’s relative contribution. In case both respondent and partner scored 0 on paid work hours ($n = 21$), these cases received a score of 0.50 on the created variable.

Measures of Control Variables

As is usually done in fairness research, we controlled for relative resources (i.e., education) and gender ideology—factors that have commonly been used to explain the unequal division of household labor, but that may also affect fairness perceptions (Braun et al., 2008). Basic sociodemographic characteristics are also controlled for. Note that we used information from Wave 1 for three control variables, as this information was no longer asked in Wave 2 (i.e., respondent’s and partner’s education, and respondent’s gender ideology). *Respondent’s and partner’s education* measure highest obtained education (1 = *primary school not finished* to 10 = *postgraduate*). To measure *respondent’s gender ideology*, respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed (1 = *completely agree* to 5 = *completely disagree*) with the following four statements: “A woman is more suitable for bringing up small children than a man,” “It is more important for men than for women to have a job,” “Mothers are just as responsible as fathers for earning a decent family income,” and “Fathers are just as responsible as mothers for the upbringing

of children.” The latter two statements were reverse coded so that a higher score indicated a more egalitarian gender ideology. A scale was created by taking the mean (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.66$). *Union type* is a dummy for whether the respondent’s relationship with the partner is 0 “cohabitation” or 1 “marriage/registered partnership.” A registered partnership is a form of legal cohabitation offering almost the same rights as marriage (7% in the sample). *Number of children* includes the number of children that respondents had or adopted with their partner. We used information from Wave 1 for respondents who had a missing or invalid value on this variable ($n = 15$). *Respondent’s age* is measured in years. Descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analyses are presented in Table 1, for men and women separately.

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Range of the Variables in the Analyses.

	Men			Women		
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
<i>Dependent variables</i>						
Housework unfairness	0.47	0.72	0–3	0.63	0.83	0–3
Childcare unfairness	0.20	0.47	0–3	0.28	0.58	0–3
<i>Independent variables</i>						
Women’s relative housework contribution	0.74	0.23	0–1	0.80	0.20	0–1
Women’s relative childcare contribution	0.62	0.16	0–1	0.64	0.14	0.2–1
Women’s relative paid labor contribution	0.34	0.21	0–1	0.34	0.20	0–1
<i>Controls</i>						
Respondent’s education	7.08	1.84	1–10	7.07	1.73	1–10
Partner’s education	7.01	1.82	1–10	6.87	1.98	1–10
Respondent’s gender ideology	3.54	0.67	1–5	3.66	0.68	1–5
Respondent’s age (years)	47.18	6.31	28–73	44.30	5.41	29–58
<i>Union type</i>						
Cohabitation	0.26	^a	0–1	0.29	^a	0–1
Marriage	0.74	^a	0–1	0.71	^a	0–1
Number of children	2.12	0.85	1–8	2.15	0.88	1–9
No. of respondents	462			638		

Source: New Families in the Netherlands, Wave 1, 2.

Note. ^aStandard deviation (SD) not presented for discrete variables.

Analytical Strategy

Our analyses began with a description of the division of housework and childcare between men and women, and their fairness perceptions of housework and childcare (Tables 2 and 3). Next, we performed linear regression analyses for men and women separately. For both housework unfairness and childcare unfairness, we estimated two models. Model 1 included women's relative contributions to housework, childcare, and paid labor, and the controls, to test to what extent women's relative labor contributions were related to housework unfairness and childcare unfairness. In addition, to examine whether the effects of the division of household labor on unfairness perceptions were stronger for housework than for childcare, a Wald test assessed for the equality of coefficients between equations (using command "Suest" in Stata). Using the same test and taking into account that in our analytic sample both partners participated for 46% of the households (i.e., using command "vce(cluster)" in Stata to cluster the standard errors on the level of the household), we examined whether the effects of women's relative contributions to housework, childcare, and paid labor on unfairness perceptions differed depending upon respondent's gender. In Model 2, we added two-way interactions between women's relative labor contributions to test whether the role of contributions to one type of labor depended on contributions to the other types of labor. Wald tests assessed whether interactions improved the model. As correlations between the different types of labor were significant but weak or modest ($r = 0.32$ for men and 0.26 for women between housework and childcare; $r = -0.36$ for men and -0.34 for women between housework and paid labor; $r = -0.15$ for men and -0.09 for women between childcare and paid labor), we included the interactions simultaneously. In the case of a significant interaction variable, in additional analyses, we changed this variable from minimum to maximum levels, to see how this influenced the estimates.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Table 2, first, shows whether women's relative contributions to housework and childcare were lower, equal, or higher than men's contributions. Women took more responsibility for both housework and childcare than men, which is in line with findings from previous studies (Bianchi et al., 2012; Sayer, 2005). About 82% of men reported that their partner's housework contributions were higher than their own contributions, and this percentage was 63% for childcare. Women more often reported that their relative contributions were higher than their partner's contributions (90% for housework and 66% for childcare).

In addition, the contributions of partners were more often reported to be equal for childcare (29% and 31% as reported by men and women, respectively) than housework (men: 5%; women: 4%). Despite the unequal division of household labor, Table 2 shows that the majority of men and women perceived that housework, and especially childcare, were distributed fairly. The division of housework was perceived as fair by 64% of men and 56% of women, and 83% of men and 77% of women reported that the division of childcare was fair. Gender differences in fairness perceptions were somewhat smaller for childcare than housework. In line with prior research, these findings illustrate that women were less likely than men to perceive the division of household labor to be fair (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003).

Table 2. Frequency Distributions for Women’s Relative Household Labor Contributions and Fairness Perceptions, by Gender.

	Men	Women	Men	Women
	Housework (%)		Childcare (%)	
Women’s relative contribution^a				
Lower than partner	12.3	6.6	8.9	3.6
Equal	5.4	3.9	28.6	30.7
Higher than partner	82.3	89.5	62.6	65.7
(Un)fairness perceptions^b				
Fair	64.3	56.4	83.1	77.3
Unfair	35.7	43.6	16.9	22.7

Source: New Families in the Netherlands, Wave 2.

Note. ^aLower = 0%–44%; equal = 45%–55%; and higher = 56%–100%.

^bFor ease of interpretation, we collapsed “somewhat unfair (for me/partner),” “unfair (for me/partner),” and “very unfair (for me/partner)” in one category “unfair”.

In Table 3, we more directly linked the actual division of household labor with fairness perceptions. Generally, we see that fairness perceptions were highest when men and women contributed equally to housework and childcare. Even in situations in which household labor was unequally divided, both men and women often perceived this to be fair—a finding consistent with prior research (Baxter, 2000; Carriero, 2011). For example, if women’s relative housework contributions were higher than men’s, about 61% of men and slightly more than half of women (54%) reported this division as fair. Unequal divisions of childcare were even more often perceived as fair when women contributed more: 79% of men and 70% of women reported the division as

Table 3. Fairness Perceptions by Women's Relative Household Labor Contributions, by Gender.

	Men		Women	
	Fair	Unfair	Fair	Unfair
Women's relative contribution to housework (%)				
Lower than partner	80.7	19.3	85.7	14.3
Equal	80.0	20.0	72.0	28.0
Higher than partner	60.8	39.2	53.6	46.4
Women's relative contribution to childcare (%)				
Lower than partner	87.8	12.2	82.6	17.4
Equal	90.9	9.1	92.3	7.7
Higher than partner	78.9	21.1	69.9	30.1

Source: New families in the Netherlands, wave 2.

fair. Note that if men's contributions to housework or childcare were higher than women's, this was more often perceived to be fair than if women's contributions were higher than men's contributions. The group of men contributing more than women is likely to be selective in a way that the division may be explicitly deliberated between the partners, or that the woman may be highly involved in paid labor, resulting in fairness perceptions.

Linear Regression Analyses

Model 1 in Table 4 shows the main effects of women's relative housework, childcare, and paid labor contributions. Recall that higher scores on the two dependent variables—housework unfairness and childcare unfairness—indicate stronger unfairness perceptions. Starting with the results for housework unfairness, the higher women's relative housework contribution, the stronger men's and women's unfairness perceptions of housework. Effect sizes were large. On the unfairness scale from 0 to 3, the effect was 0.6 points for men and 1.1 points for women, equivalent to a large effect size of 0.83 for men ($0.6/SD(Y)$, with $SD(Y) = 0.72$) and 1.33 for women ($1.1/0.83$). Contributions to the other two types of labor were only relevant for explaining women's housework unfairness perceptions. If women's relative contributions to childcare and paid labor increased, the more that women perceived the division of housework to be unfair. Effect sizes (calculated in the same way as earlier) amounted to 0.96 for women's relative childcare contribution and 1.08 for women's relative paid labor contribution. These effects were smaller

Table 4. Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Housework and Childcare Unfairness: Regression Coefficients and SE between Brackets.

	Housework Unfairness		Childcare Unfairness		Housework Unfairness		Childcare Unfairness	
	Model 1		Model 1		Model 2		Model 2	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Women's relative housework contribution	0.64** (0.17)	1.11** (0.17)	0.21~ (0.11)	0.38** (0.12)	-1.22* (0.60)	-0.70 (0.79)	-0.91* (0.36)	-1.33* (0.51)
Women's relative childcare contribution	0.28 (0.22)	0.95** (0.22)	0.57** (0.14)	1.24** (0.16)	-2.00** (0.66)	-0.68 (0.96)	-1.59** (0.60)	-1.20 (0.78)
Women's relative paid labor contribution	0.28 (0.18)	0.93** (0.17)	0.07 (0.12)	0.21~ (0.12)	-0.05 (0.48)	-0.14** (0.54)	-1.32** (0.43)	-0.13 (0.54)
Interaction of women's relative housework contribution with Women's relative childcare contribution					2.94** (0.81)	2.00~ (1.13)	1.88** (0.58)	2.76** (0.81)
Interaction of women's relative paid labor contribution with Women's relative housework contribution					0.44 (0.61)	1.41* (0.67)		
Women's relative childcare contribution							2.23** (0.66)	0.52 (0.78)

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

	Housework Unfairness		Childcare Unfairness		Housework Unfairness		Childcare Unfairness	
	Model 1		Model 1		Model 2		Model 2	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Controls</i>								
Respondent's education	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Partner's education	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Respondent's gender ideology	0.03 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)
Union type (ref. = cohabitation)	0.02 (0.08)	-0.12~ (0.07)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.10* (0.05)	0.04 (0.08)	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.10* (0.05)
Number of children	0.05 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Respondent's age	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01~ (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
R ²	0.047	0.134	0.065	0.139	0.074	0.143	0.094	0.155
Adjusted R ²	0.028	0.122	0.046	0.127	0.051	0.128	0.072	0.140
No. of respondents	462	638	462	638	462	638	462	638

Source: New Families in the Netherlands, Wave 1, 2.

Note. ~ Two-sided $p < 0.10$; *two-sided $p < 0.05$; and ***two-sided $p < 0.01$.

than the effect size for women's relative housework contribution, but they were still large in magnitude.

Findings were largely similar for childcare unfairness. The higher women's relative contribution to childcare, the more that both men and women experienced the childcare division as unfair. Effect sizes were large: 1.28 for men and 1.66 for women. The division of the other types of labor only mattered for women. When women's relative housework contribution increased, women perceived stronger childcare unfairness. Although not significant at the conventional level of 5% ($b = 0.21$; $p = 0.070$), results also suggest that the higher women's relative contributions to paid labor, the stronger their unfairness perceptions of childcare. Effect sizes were large (0.69 for women's relative housework contribution) to small (0.34 for women's relative paid labor contribution). In additional analyses (not shown), we included paid labor as two separate variables, indicating paid work hours by self and partner. Findings showed that when women's own paid work hours increased, the more they perceived the division of both housework and childcare as unfair, whereas an increase in their partner's paid work hours only resulted in women experiencing less housework unfairness.

We also tested whether the effects of the division of household labor on unfairness perceptions were stronger for housework than for childcare. Starting with men, the effect of women's relative housework contribution on housework unfairness ($b = 0.64$) was somewhat higher, but it was close to the effect of women's relative childcare contribution on childcare unfairness ($b = 0.57$; Model 1). A Wald test showed that the divisions of housework and childcare were not differently related to unfairness perceptions ($\chi^2(1) = 0.07$; $p = 0.792$). When comparing the effects for women ($b = 1.11$ for housework; $b = 1.24$ for childcare), results of the Wald test also illustrated that the difference was statistically insignificant ($\chi^2(1) = 0.26$; $p = 0.609$). Contrary to our expectations, the divisions of housework and childcare were not differently related to fairness perceptions.

Furthermore, we examined gender differences in the effects of women's relative contributions to housework, childcare, and paid labor. For housework unfairness, the effect of women's relative housework contribution was stronger for women ($b = 1.11$) than for men ($b = 0.64$; Model 1), and this difference was statistically significant according to a Wald test ($\chi^2(1) = 5.16$; $p = 0.023$). Women's relative contributions to childcare and paid labor also had a stronger effect on housework unfairness for women than for men (childcare: $\chi^2(1) = 4.08$; $p = 0.043$; paid labor: $\chi^2(1) = 6.59$; $p = 0.010$). For childcare unfairness, a Wald test ($\chi^2(1) = 6.21$; $p = 0.013$) showed that the positive effect of women's relative childcare contribution was stronger for women ($b = 1.24$) than for men ($b = 0.57$). No statistically significant

gender differences were found in the effects of women's relative contributions to housework and paid labor.

None of the controls had a statistically significant impact on housework unfairness for men and women (Model 1). Results were similar for childcare unfairness, except that married women experienced less unfairness than cohabiting women. These results corroborate findings from prior research—that there is little evidence that perceptions of household labor unfairness are influenced by factors other than the division of labor (Baxter, 2000).

Model 2 in Table 4 includes interactions between the different types of labor. For both housework unfairness and childcare unfairness, interactions improved model fit as Wald tests were statistically significant (results not shown). The findings for housework unfairness showed that, for men, the association between women's relative housework contribution and housework unfairness, depended on women's relative childcare contribution, as the interaction between housework and childcare was significant. The main effect illustrated that there was a negative effect of women's relative housework contribution on unfairness in the case of women's minimal contributions to childcare and paid labor (value of 0), but this effect became increasingly positive if women's childcare contribution increased. At the maximum level of childcare (value of 1), the effect of women's relative housework contribution was significant and positive ($b = 1.72$; $p < 0.001$, results not shown). For women, we see two significant interactions, although the interaction with childcare was not significant at conventional levels (5%). The main effect showed no significant effect of women's relative housework contribution when the other types of labor were 0 (woman does minimum). The effect became positive when women's childcare or paid labor contribution was at maximum levels, but it only reached statistical significance in the former case ($b = 1.70$; $p = 0.018$ for maximum childcare; $b = 0.71$; $p = 0.368$ for maximum paid labor, results not shown).

For childcare unfairness, the results for men showed that both interactions played a role. As shown by the main effect, women's relative childcare contribution was negatively associated with unfairness when women's contributions to housework and paid labor were minimal. When women performed more housework or paid labor, childcare was more positively associated with unfairness. Additional analyses showed that the positive effect of women's relative childcare contribution on unfairness did not reach statistical significance at maximum levels of housework or paid labor. For women, we see a significant interaction between housework and childcare. The main effect showed that women's relative childcare contribution did not affect unfairness perceptions when women contributed only

minimally to the other types of labor, but it became increasingly positive if women's housework contribution increased. At the maximum, the effect of women's relative childcare contribution was statistically significant and positive ($b = 1.56$; $p = 0.001$, results not shown).

Discussion

Fairness research has primarily focused on housework and found that unequal divisions of housework are often regarded as fair. Because childcare has become an increasingly important part of household labor, and the meaning of childcare may be more positive than that of housework (i.e., more enjoyable and rewarding), an unequal division of childcare may be differently related to fairness perceptions than housework. Contrary to most previous studies, we examined how perceptions of fairness for both housework and childcare were influenced by the division of housework, childcare, and paid labor. We furthermore examined whether patterns differed by gender.

Using Dutch data, this study first showed that an unequal division of household labor was often perceived as fair, especially by men and for childcare. When looking at the most common scenario of women doing more than men, a small majority of women and two-thirds of men perceived the division of housework to be fair. For childcare, these figures even amounted to 80% for men and 70% for women. These findings were also found in previous research (Baxter, 2000; Carriero, 2011; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003) and may explain why the household labor division is so resistant to change: if an unequal division is not perceived as unfair, partners likely feel that there is no need to divide household labor more equally.

Second, this study found no support for the idea that the actual division of childcare was less strongly related to unfairness perceptions than the actual division of housework. For both housework and childcare, we found that the division of housework and childcare was a key factor in explaining men's and women's unfairness perceptions: the more the women contributed, the stronger the unfairness perceptions. These findings corroborate findings from previous research (Baxter, 2000; Braun et al., 2008; Young et al., 2015). The associations, however, did not differ between housework and childcare. Although, from a theoretical perspective, the greater enjoyment and rewards to perform childcare than housework (Nelson, 2010; Poortman & Van der Lippe, 2009; Van Lenning & Willemsen, 2001) would suggest a weaker association for childcare, divisions of housework and childcare were evaluated in a similar way. Perhaps the investments of time and energy when taking care of the children are more important than the rewarding aspects of childcare when evaluating the fairness of the division

of childcare tasks—making these investments comparable to housework contributions. It might also be relevant here to distinguish between unfairness to self and to partner (not possible in this study), which we explain later when discussing limitations of the study.

Third, fairness perceptions of household labor were not evaluated solely in relation to the division of household labor, but they depended on investments in other types of labor as well. For women, we found that not only the division of one type of household labor was associated with unfairness perceptions, but the actual division of paid labor and the other type of household labor also directly influenced their unfairness perceptions. These findings support the “time availability perspective” (Shelton & John, 1996), that implies that fairness perceptions of household labor are evaluated in relation to how much time and energy are invested in other types of labor as well. Furthermore, both men and women evaluated the household labor division in terms of total workload. When contributions to the other types of labor were low, the unequal household labor division was not or even negatively associated with household labor unfairness, but this association became increasingly positive if contributions to the other types of labor increased. Results are in line with the view of Braun et al. (2008), that the more a person is involved in different types of labor, the stronger the actual household labor division is evaluated as unfair.

Finally, this study found that unequal divisions of both household labor and paid labor were more strongly related to unfairness perceptions for women than men. As women are generally more focused on romantic relationships than men (Amato & Rogers, 1997), women may be more sensitive to injustices like unequal divisions of labor, resulting in stronger unfairness perceptions. Also, equity theory might be relevant here, as this theory assumes that unfairness perceptions are stronger for the underbenefitting person and less strong for the overbenefitting person (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012). Women’s total workload is often higher than men’s workload (Sayer et al., 2009), so women may feel under-rewarded, which may be reflected in strong feelings of unfairness. Overbenefitting men also perceive unfairness, but this is less strong and related to feeling guilty or sympathy toward their partner.

We also acknowledge some shortcomings. Our study was cross-sectional and the sample was limited to parents who were in a long-term relationship (i.e., married or cohabiting before 2010). Fairness perceptions likely change over time. In the beginning of a relationship, investing more in labor than the partner may be perceived as fair, but if the unequal labor division carries on for too long, it may lead to feelings of unfairness. In contrast, an unequal labor division, that was perceived as unfair in the beginning, may

become a norm as the relationship progresses, and may not feel as unfair anymore. Future research should use panel data to see how fairness perceptions change as time passes. Furthermore, some groups, including people of non-Western descent and people on low incomes, were underrepresented in our sample. As people of non-Western descent and people on low incomes are less likely to value an equal sharing of household labor (John et al., 1995; Shows & Gerstel, 2009), unequal divisions may be less associated with unfairness perceptions—indicating a possible overestimation of our effects. Also, due to power issues, we could not disentangle unfairness perceptions to self or to partner. A previous study showed that respondents performing more housework than their partner were more likely to see the division of housework as unfair to themselves and less likely to perceive unfairness to the partner (Young et al., 2015). Perhaps for childcare, higher investments than the partner may be related to unfairness to the partner instead of unfairness to self, as one may feel sorry for the partner that he/she is not equally involved in childcare tasks, which are generally evaluated as enjoyable and rewarding. Finally, our measures for the division of housework and childcare between partners were in terms of relative contributions. Research would ideally include absolute measures because they enable to examine whether fairness perceptions are more influenced by own or partner's time spent on household labor tasks. Some research suggests that for both men and women, men's time spent on household labor is more relevant in explaining fairness perceptions (Baxter, 2000).

Overall, our study suggests that unequal divisions of household labor are not necessarily seen as unfair. Unequal divisions of household labor, especially childcare, are often regarded as fair—but the more unequal the divisions are, the more they are perceived to be unfair. When it comes to how an increase in the unequal household labor division is related to unfairness, it is not so much about the type of labor (i.e., housework or childcare), but more about gender. Fairness of the division of housework or childcare is evaluated in relation to the total workload and not (only) in isolation from other types of labor.

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