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RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Not worth mentioning’: The implicit and explicit nature of decision-making about the division of paid and domestic work

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The aim of this qualitative study of 31 Dutch couples is to help us understand why the division of paid and unpaid work between women and men remains stubbornly unequal, despite women’s gains in the workplace and rising educational levels. This study expands on other research by documenting daily implicit and explicit decision-making about the division of paid and domestic work by couples during a unique period of their lives: the formative years of their relationship, until they are expecting their first child. Our findings indicate that in general, these Dutch couples do not look explicitly at their division of paid and domestic work, and that this often perpetuates a gendered division of work. More explicit decision-making occurs when couples have a very strong preference for equal sharing, or when the partners disagree or feel frustrated with their current situation. One important finding of this study is that even the couples who prefer to divide the work equally often end up following traditional patterns. This has to do with the decision-making strategies they apply, which seem to be grounded in ambivalent feelings about roles and responsibilities and often romanticizing relationships. Such ambivalence functions as a barrier to more effective decision-making processes. Data from this study seems to suggest that couples wanting to share household responsibilities should, as a minimum, engage in explicit decision-making until they have developed egalitarian routines.

Keywords: couple decision-making; gender; division of labour; transition to parenthood; couple interviews

L’objectif de cette étude qualitative de 31 couples néerlandais est de nous aider à comprendre pourquoi la division entre le travail rémunéré et non-rémunéré entre les femmes et les hommes reste obstinément inégale, malgré la progression des femmes dans le monde du travail et leurs niveaux éducatifs toujours plus élevés. Cette étude va plus loin que d’autres recherches en documentant la prise de décision quotidienne, implicite et explicite, sur la division entre le travail rémunéré et domestique par des couples pendant une période unique de leur vie: les années de formation de leur relation, jusqu’au moment où ils attendent leur premier enfant. Nos conclusions indiquent, qu’en général, ces couples néerlandais ne regardent pas leur division entre le travail rémunéré et domestique de manière explicite et que ceci perpétue souvent une division du travail selon le sexe. Une prise de décision plus explicite a lieu lorsque les couples ont une forte préférence pour un partage égal ou quand les partenaires sont en désaccord ou se sentent frustrés dans la situation actuelle. Une conclusion importante de cette étude est que même les couples qui préfèrent diviser le travail de manière égale finissent souvent par

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suivre des schémas traditionnels. Ceci est lié aux stratégies de prise de décision qu'ils appliquent. Celles-ci semblent être ancrées dans des sentiments ambivalents sur les rôles et les responsabilités et souvent basées sur une idéalisation des relations. De telles fonctions ambivalentes sont un obstacle aux processus de prise de décision plus efficaces. Les données de cette étude semblent suggérer que les couples qui veulent partager les responsabilités domestiques devraient, au moins, s'engager dans une prise de décision explicite jusqu'à ce qu'ils aient développé des routines égalitaires.

Mots-clés: prise de décision au sein du couple; genre; division du travail; transition vers la paternité/maternité; interviews de couples

Introduction

People in the Netherlands generally say they think it is fair to divide domestic tasks more or less equally between women and men (Portegijs, Hermans, & Lalta, 2006). This does not mean that they actually do so, however. Today, the general pattern is for young childless Dutch couples to often both work full time and share the housework more or less equally, and, after having their first child, to develop a more traditional division of domestic and paid work. More traditional in this case means that men often continue working full time and that women cut down on their working hours. One prevalent work–family strategy in the Netherlands is part-time employment – of women, to be specific. Two-thirds of Dutch working women have part-time jobs. Only 34% of all working women work full time, compared to 86% of men (Van der Valk & Boelens, 2004).

For Dutch women, part-time work is a fairly stable historical and biographical phenomenon. Historically, the number of women working full time scarcely increased between 1990 and 2003, whereas the number working part time doubled. Biographically, most women with children remain in part-time jobs, even after their children have left home. These employment patterns make the 'one-and-a-half-earner' the most popular model for Dutch couples: the male works full time and bears primary responsibility for the household income, while the female works part time and bears primary responsibility for the home and childcare. This division does not mean that domestic work is only done by women; on the contrary, in international comparative studies Dutch men come out fairly well in the division of domestic duties (e.g., den Dulk & Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007). Nevertheless, women in the Netherlands, like their counterparts elsewhere, still do most of the housework.

Although the large number of women working part time appears to be a specifically Dutch phenomenon, the pattern of dividing responsibilities between the male and female partners of a couple is widespread in many countries. Despite women's gains in the workplace and their rising educational level, the arrangement whereby they bear primary responsibility for childcare and the home has been slow to change (Biernat & Wortman, 1991; Blossfeld & Drobnic, 2001; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). Particularly striking is the general tendency of young couples with egalitarian attitudes – those who share paid and unpaid work more or less equally before having children – to divide the work more traditionally after the birth of their first child (Becker & Moen, 1999; Bittman & Pixley, 1997; Cowan et al., 1985; Kluwer, 1998; Thompson & Walker, 1989; van der Lippe, 2000).

Economic theories such as new home economics (Becker, 1981) and the resource-bargaining approach (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Hiller, 1984) explain the gender-based division of paid and domestic work by assuming it is based on rational and economic considerations. New home economics assumes that specialization in either paid or domestic work is the most efficient way to distribute labour within a family. The resource-bargaining theory assumes that domestic work is unattractive and that partners

will bring their resources to the bargaining table in order to ‘buy themselves out’ of domestic work.

What economic theories generally cannot explain is why the gender-based division of labour is so persistent, even when women have the same educational level and earning capacity as their spouses. Economic theories are primarily interested in how couples have actually divided paid work and domestic tasks, and they therefore focus on the outcomes of possible decision-making processes. Gender theories (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 1991; Hiller, 1984; West & Zimmerman, 1987) help to shed light not only on the outcomes, but also on the decision-making processes and their underlying mechanisms. Gender theories – including those which focus on roles, identities, norms, and a tendency to inertia – may therefore offer more promising explanations for the slow pace of change in the division of paid and domestic work. Researchers argue that to truly understand how men and women divide tasks and responsibilities between them, we must examine the processes (Schulz & Blossfeld, 2006) and the dynamics of decision-making between the partners (Lindenberg, 2004; Szinovacz, 2000).

We define decision-making as the ongoing dynamic process in which couples with similar or dissimilar preferences arrive at certain outcomes, either implicitly or explicitly. Based on the work of Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989), explicit decision-making can be characterized as an organized, deliberative strategic and proactive style of decision-making. Implicit decision-making is an indirect, non-reflective, impulsive, and more incremental style of decision-making. Explicit decision-making includes prospective awareness of making decisions (e.g., sitting down to talk and decide), proactive planning, explicit agreements, conflict engagement, and engagement in constructive problem solving and negotiation. Implicit decision-making, on the other hand, includes retrospective awareness of having made decisions, incremental behaviour (ad hoc and stepwise decision-making), conflict avoidance, and silent agreements. The latter concept refers to agreements made without discussion, or simply spontaneously discovering consensus (Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980; Spiegel, 1960).

Scholars suggest that when roles shift in a modern direction and deviate from traditional and taken-for-granted notions, decision-making dynamics become increasingly important and pervasive (Knudson-Martin & Rankin Mahoney, 2005; Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980; Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989; Spiegel, 1960). Consequently, it is expected that the division of tasks increasingly becomes subject to explicit negotiation between partners (Buunk, Kluwer, Schuurman, & Siero, 2000; Hooghiemstra & Pool, 2003; Kaufmann, 1995; Rubin, 1983; van Lenning & Willemsen, 2000). However, a recent survey conducted among Dutch couples indicates that implicit decision-making is still fairly common, in particular regarding the division of domestic work (Hooghiemstra & Pool, 2003). In order to gain more insight in the decision-making processes of contemporary couples, this study applies individual and joint couple interviews to reconstruct decision-making patterns including ‘his, her, and their’ perspective.

Hence, this paper focuses on decision-making processes between couples and their underlying mechanisms. The aim of this study, which involved 31 Dutch couples and looked at how they divide paid and domestic work, is to help us understand how such patterns arise and change or remain the same under different conditions. One factor closely associated with such important and culturally embedded issues as the division of tasks between women and men is the extent to which decision-making is implicit or explicit. This paper considers the following related questions:

1. In terms of explicit and implicit strategies, what characterizes the decision-making of young couples with respect to the division of paid and domestic work?
2. How do couples deal with challenges in their division of paid and domestic work?
3. What categories of couples are linked with implicit and explicit decision-making characteristics and strategies in relation to the division of paid and domestic work?

This paper attempts to develop a dynamic view of the decision-making processes of couples. As stated earlier, the birth of children is an important event, influencing the way couples divide up tasks and the arguments used to legitimize their decisions. Relevant in this respect is the study by Walzer (1998), who identifies processes of gender differentiation between new parents and an increasing inequality in the way they behave with regard to their division of labour after the birth of a child. To articulate this dynamic approach, the present study includes couples expecting their first child. The timeframe covered by the research commences at the moment the partners move in together and concludes when the couple is expecting their first child. In the Netherlands, women postpone having children until they are 29.4 on average. Dutch couples therefore often live together for a relatively lengthy period before having children, giving them time to develop their work routines. By looking back on the formative period of a couple's relationship, we explore the nature of their decision-making and its impact on their division of work.

Methods

Sample

The 31 couples who participated in our qualitative interview study were selected from different sources: participants in the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) who expressed the wish to start a family, two midwife clinics, and two antenatal classes in a city in the Netherlands.

Men and women with a higher vocational or university degree are over-represented in our sample, whereas lower educated men and women are less well represented. However, the mean number of hours worked by men (40) and women (32) in the sample corresponds to the Dutch mean for childless couples: 33 hours for women and 38 hours for men (Portegijs, Cloin, Ooms, & Eggink, 2006). The mean age of the couples (women 31, men 34) was slightly higher than the Dutch mean would predict (women 29.4, men 31.5) at the time of the birth of their first child, a characteristic related to the high educational level of the participants.

The working arrangements of the couples in the sample varied greatly. This was one of the aims of the sampling strategy, as the dynamics of decision-making related to domestic and paid work are assumed to vary with the chosen arrangements. Before the birth of their first child, both spouses of 14 of the 31 couples worked full time (>35 hours). Nine couples had a 'one-and-a-half earners' arrangement, with the woman working part time (20–32 hours) and the man full time. This is the most common arrangement in the Netherlands. Four couples were breadwinner couples, two in the traditional sense (woman not working) and two non-traditional (woman as breadwinner, man studying or looking for work). In four of the couples, both spouses worked part time; in one of these, the man worked fewer hours than the woman. The average net household income was €3678 per month.

The couples came from throughout the Netherlands. Many of them lived in or close to cities, whereas others lived in smaller villages in the more rural northern and southern

parts of the country. The average length of cohabitation was 5.3 years, with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 10 years. Fourteen couples were either married or had a comparable legal partnership. Of the remainder, several married in the year prior to their child's birth.

Of the 31 couples interviewed, 17 were expecting their first child and 14 had recently had their firstborn (all the babies were less than a year old). Our analysis took the different stages of family formation into account. We explicitly asked the group of couples with a baby to reflect on the period before the birth of their first child. We believed they could give us fairly precise information about their lives before having children, as the transition to parenthood had been very recent. Moreover, during the interviews the couples showed great awareness of their previous situation and what they had then thought about their current division of labour. We believe that they were able to give us a fairly accurate picture, because they, for example, compared the situation before and after having children, using words like 'Then I thought that . . . , but now I know that . . .' However, we cannot be certain that their current, new situation has not influenced the way they remember and look back on the recent, pre-child past. While interpreting the data, we kept the couple's current situation foremost in our minds, whether pre-child or post-child.

Table 1 shows all participating couples with their occupations and working hours before they had their first child, classified according to working arrangement. The 14 couples who had already had their first child when interviewed are marked with an asterisk. The names of the couples have been changed.

Data collection

The data was collected between November 2004 and June 2005. The researcher scheduled an appointment with the couples, and the couples were asked to sign an informed consent form. The data collection method was the couple-interaction interview, consisting of individual interviews with the two spouses and a joint interview with both spouses. The joint interview proved to be necessary for recalling processes that spouses often do not consciously memorize but need to reconstruct together from remembered anecdotes and incidents (Allan, 1980). In the joint interview, the couples thought about and discussed how their division of paid and unpaid work came about, and which processes and types of communication had led to their current situation. It has been shown that spouses are less likely to reveal their own viewpoints in a joint interview (Boeije, 2004; Hertz, 1995; Zipp & Toth, 2002). In order to record less partner-biased accounts and to make each spouse aware of his or her individual ideas, roles, and processes in the division of paid and unpaid work, the couples were also interviewed individually (see also Pool & Lucassen, 2005). The interviews varied in length from 1.5 to around 4 hours, with a median length of 2.5 hours. All interviews were recorded electronically on minidisks and were fully transcribed verbatim.

The couple-interaction interview investigated the following aspects: (1) the processes and mechanisms that influenced the couples' division of work and domestic tasks when they moved in together; (2) the nature of their communication with each other; (3) the type of agreements the partners had made. Other topics were: (4) how and why their division of paid and unpaid work had evolved and changed in time, including (5) during their (recent) pregnancy; and (6) how the couple planned to divide paid and unpaid work when they became parents. In the individual face-to-face interview, the interviewer asked the participant to think and talk about his or her ideal division of paid work, domestic chores, and childcare.

Table 1. Participating couples by working arrangements before the birth of their first child.

No.	Pseudonyms	His working hours	Her working hours	His occupation	Her occupation
Full-time dual-earner couples (>35 hours)					
1	Bart & Babette	40	40	Self-employed website designer	Policy officer
2	George & Gabrielle	40	40	Senior developer	Technical writer
3	* Patrick & Peggy	40	40	ICT manager	Civil servant
4	Warren & Wanda	36	36	Manager	Primary school teacher
5	Xander & Xylona	40	40	Purchasing agent	Marketing communication manager
6	Yanis & Yamin	36	36	Sales manager	Project leader in publishing
7	Zachery & Zilia	40	38	Head of Finance Department	Product manager
8	Alexander & Beate	40	36	ICT consultant	Policy officer
9	Austin & Fiona	38	38	Veterinarian/researcher	Veterinarian/researcher
10	* Marc & Margaret	40	40	Entrepreneur	Waitress
11	* Robert & Rachel	36	36	Lawyer	Educational manager
12	* Valentin & Valerie	40	36	Business controller	Inside sales representative
13	* Jacob & Janet	40 (0)	38 (0)	Entrepreneur and student. Before the birth: unemployed	Secretary. During pregnancy: unemployed
14	* Edwin & Elise	40	38	ICT consultant	Bookkeeper
Part-time dual-earner couples (both work ≤32 hours)					
15	Adam & Camilla	32	30	Project leader	Statistical researcher
16	Arlen & Dana	30	32	Construction entrepreneur	Youth welfare researcher
17	Ulric & Ursula	20+	30+	Art historian, museum curator	Art historian
18	* Irvin & Ina	32	20	Student	Legal assistant
One-and-a-half earner couples (one partner works full time, one partner part time)					
19	Adrian & Anne	38	32	Assistant professor	Researcher
20	Axel & Eileen	40	28	Trainee supermarket manager	Reintegration consultant
21	* Frank & Frances	40	32	Clerk	Social worker
22	* Osbert & Olivia	36	32	Court registrar	Copywriter
23	Quentin & Quiana	32	40	ICT programmer	Trainee solicitor
24	Norman & Nancy	40	32	ICT specialist & project leader	Primary school teacher
25	Steven & Sebille	40	32	Veterinarian	Policy officer

Table 1 (Continued)

No.	Pseudonyms	His working hours	Her working hours	His occupation	Her occupation
26	* Herman & Hannah	36	24	Chemist	Librarian
27	* Kevin & Karen	40	32	Electrician	Housewife, unemployed
<i>Breadwinner couples</i>					
28	* Lance & Larissa	38	0	Sales representative	Educator, unemployed
29	* Ted & Tatyana	36	0	Clerk	Sales representative, long-term sick leave
30	* Calvin & Carla	0	24	Urban and rural planner	Social worker
31	Dennis & Debby	0	40	Student	Secondary school teacher

*The couple had already had their first child when interviewed; working hours refer to the period before the birth.

Data analysis

For the purposes of this paper, the research team restricted its analysis of the interviews to the period between the couple's moving in together and their expecting their first child; in other words, the study does not concern changes after their first child was born. The analysis focused on decision-making and communication about the division of paid and domestic work.

The analysis was carried out with the help of MAX.QDA, a software program for coding and retrieving qualitative data. The research team read and reread the interviews several times and wrote memos throughout the process. Once the couples' stories were broadly known and understood, the team wrote a summary presenting the key themes, such as 'no obvious communication', 'taken for granted', 'role of own parents', 'equal sharing', and 'areas of conflict'.

The team then began coding the couple interviews. Because theoretical concepts were used as sensitizing concepts during data collection and analysis, some of the codes were more theoretical in nature, such as 'implicit and explicit decision-making', 'making plans', 'agreements', and 'reflection or thinking (or lack of)'. Other codes arose during the interviews, such as 'taken for granted', 'fairness', 'equality', 'conflicts', and 'standard of cleanliness'. After the first open coding (resulting in a long list of codes), the team organized the coding scheme hierarchically, with overarching themes (codes) and subcodes (Boeije, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Matrices and visual representations were used for an outline of the results, leading to a typology of couples' decision-making. Analysis of the couple interviews was supplemented by an analysis of the individual interviews, which was less intensive due to time constraints.

Research team discussions (peer debriefing) during analysis supported the interpretations. Using different methods to collect information also helped the team gain an adequate impression of what was going on in the households. The subjects sometimes revealed delicate information in the individual interview. Some partners did

not try to make information more acceptable to their partners' ears, while others hid or changed information when their partners were listening.

Results

Silent agreements / disagreements

When asked how their division of labour had evolved since they began living together, all couples initially answered that they did not talk much about such issues and that it just happened naturally.

Adam: I think it came about more or less by itself. And then you gradually start to specialize. Take the shopping, for example. When we moved in together we both did it, but after a while I started doing the shopping more often. That's something which then becomes self-perpetuating: she assumes I've done all the shopping and then counts on it. I think that's how it came about. It's not something we really discussed. (Adam, works 32 hours, part-time dual-earner couple)

Couples used certain expressions that emphasized the automatic, taken-for-granted nature of their decision-making process. They said that the division of labour had 'grown', meaning they had not discussed it or made any agreements about it. Couples often divided tasks spontaneously and in an ad hoc way. For example, Saturday turned out to be 'cleaning day', which then became customary.

Parties to such 'silent agreements' (Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980) never think or talk about the issue in question, have vague expectations, and silently accept their spouse's contribution. This is not to say that men and women are similarly involved in these implicit decision-making processes. In this section we look at what silent agreements mean in terms of gendered practices. One feature of implicit decision-making identified in the interviews was 'not thinking', not being conscious of the division of paid and domestic work. Moving in together did not tend to change the couples' jobs or career situations. Almost all the men and women interviewed had continued working or studying after cohabiting. At that point they had considered 'paid work' as each partner's individual choice. Many of the male subjects interviewed said they had never thought about the division of domestic work before cohabitation or marriage, as they had never been confronted with the need to do housework.

Quentin: Now, we were both still studying, so as far as that's concerned we didn't have a division of tasks. As for me: back then I'd never really thought about it. Or rather: I don't know if I'd never thought about it, but as I just said we had both just moved out of our parents' house and it evolved since then. We never actually discussed it, did we? (Quentin & Quiana, full-time dual-earner couple)

Some of the women interviewed were more conscious of such issues than their male partners and had thought about the division of housework before cohabiting. As Quentin's partner Quiana added:

Quiana: Now, I've always known that I would study and that I wanted to share everything equally. You're both studying and then both go on to work full time; then you should also share the housework equally. I've never found it logical that I should do more in the home just because I happen to be a woman. Certainly not in the beginning; back then I attached even more importance to dividing everything equally. (Quentin & Quiana, full-time dual-earner couple)

The interviews showed that couples did not talk about the division of paid and unpaid work. Paid work and household chores were taken for granted and couples did not see any reason to change. The couples did talk in a day-to-day sense about coordinating tasks, reminding each other to do something, or wanting to change jobs, but they did not regard these conversations as talking about their 'division of labour'.

Anne: We talk about things now and then, say while we're having dinner, like how is this or that going. They're casual chats though, no big discussions. (Anne, works 32 hours, one-and-a-half earner couple)

Before moving in together, the partners had rather broad ideas or vague expectations about how they would divide up paid and unpaid work. Such broad ideas function as guiding principles or motives, but they do not include clear-cut or prescriptive notions about how to share or divide paid and unpaid work on a daily basis. Couples claimed that they trusted that their division would work out well because both had already run their own household or because they took for granted that they would share the workload at home.

Fiona: No, I had no clear ideas about how I imagined dividing the chores before we moved in together. No definite ideas in any case. But I did imagine wanting some sort of equality. (Fiona, full-time dual-earner couple)

Others did have expectations about the division of labour but did not verbalize them, or thought they would deal with them later on. For example, before cohabiting Elise already expected that her husband's standard of cleanliness would not match hers, and that she would therefore have to do more than an equal share of the cleaning in an otherwise egalitarian household. She did not talk to her partner, Edwin, about her expectations. Unlike Elise, Edwin expected the division of domestic duties to work out fine, as they had each had their own homes before and now would have only one. During the interview he was surprised to hear that so much of the domestic work had become her responsibility, while before he had done all of it on his own.

Thus although it seems that female partners have a head start on their male partners in having considered the division of tasks, thinking ahead in fact leads to the female doing most of the household chores, and to her having to initiate any discussion of the issue in a non-reflective climate. We refer to this as 'silent disagreements', by which we mean that one partner disagrees but does not verbalize that disagreement (any longer). Silent disagreements suggest stoicism: accepting problems rather than mastering them (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989).

The couples' initial accounts suggested that they mainly engaged in implicit decision-making about their division of paid and domestic work, as described above. However, further probing revealed more explicit strategies.

Second glance: not so silent after all

What initially seemed to be fairly implicit decision-making appeared on closer examination not to be exclusively implicit after all. Whereas decision-making remained implicit for some couples, other couples became more explicit in the course of time. While they emphasized the naturalness of their division, they also revealed incidents or discussions, conflicts and arguments, and they sometimes reflected on their division of labour and weighed up different alternatives or attempted to change that division. The explicit characteristics they revealed are the approximate counterparts of the implicit characteristics already described.

What first stood out was that some couples gained prospective awareness (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989), meaning that they started talking about their ideas and expectations, sometimes in order to change an aspect of their division of labour. Some couples believed it was important to share their ideas about their ideal division of labour, and to verbalize their beliefs and reasons. One couple regularly examined their division of housework, which was fairly exceptional behaviour in the present sample. The woman checked from time to time whether her partner was still satisfied, conduct which may have been induced by their non-stereotypical, equal division of labour.

Many couples said that they had shared their opinions on paid work, future childcare, and (in some cases) housework early on in their relationship, but usually in a broad, general sense, as seen in the previous section. However, some women had very clear ideas about the division of paid and unpaid work, including childcare, even before they started thinking about having children with a particular partner. They explicitly demanded that their potential partners should be prepared to share paid work, domestic work, and childcare equally.

One couple did plan their division of paid work and housework before cohabiting without, however, communicating much about these plans. Before they actually married and moved in together, Nancy decided to reduce her working hours and have one day off a week to do housework. Her partner Norman took this decision for granted and agreed with it. Couples generally rarely made plans, but many talked about their paid work in terms of their ideal job and career plans. Sometimes they made plans for further education or talked about their desire to find another job. These discussions did not seem to be influenced by practical implications, that is, who would then run the household, but once the implications became clear, the couple would start talking about their division of labour.

Fiona: But it only started when we were actually living together in a house and we both worked at the same place as well, that's when we actually started talking about what we wanted in terms of the division of work and free time. Our ideas about it were pretty much the same. (Austin & Fiona, full-time dual-earner couple)

Once the couples started thinking of having children, all of them thought about and most also planned childcare arrangements, including the effect on paid work. The couples varied in the degree to which they dealt actively with these issues. Some couples quickly or spontaneously agreed, usually when they already had more traditional (specialized) arrangements, or when they both took the division of labour, including childcare, for granted, as illustrated by the following quote in which both partners express a preference for the woman as a full-time parent.

Tatyana: We've been talking about having children for years, and then at some point I said I've always wanted to be a stay-at-home mum, what do you think about it? How did you picture it?
Ted: I think that we're the parents so we should do the parenting, not the crèche. (Ted & Tatyana, male-as-breadwinner couple)

For other couples, the same issue gave rise to frequent communication. What to one couple is a wished-for stay-at-home mum is seen by another as being 'stuck at home'.

Austin: I can remember a few times when I started talking about having children and Fiona said she was afraid she'd end up having to do everything, and I would be happy with that, but she'd then be stuck at home with the baby. You've always been worried about that. I don't know if you still are.

Fiona: No.

Austin: But that was how it seemed at the time, and that's why we talked a bit about it like

we've thought about it now, that I work four days and she works four and a half. (Austin & Fiona, full-time dual-earner couple)

General, less specialized arrangements seemed to require more communication, and couples who wanted to share paid and unpaid work equally discussed future childcare and paid work more frequently. The couples found it hard to imagine their future with a child. Sometimes external pressure, either from employers or nurseries with waiting lists, forced them to make plans in advance. Whereas the partners generally did not discuss or plan their paid work arrangements when they moved in together, they all made plans when they started considering having children. Strikingly, while discussing and planning future paid work and childcare arrangements, most couples scarcely discussed the future division of domestic work (which could increase). They did not acknowledge the need to change their domestic work arrangements after the birth of a child. Some couples, however, did discuss this issue. Some of the women worried about the additional workload after birth, and a few wanted to hire a cleaner, an idea that the men tended to resist. Most of the men did not see the need to spend money on a cleaner. Some women used the birth of their child as an opportunity to convince their partners of the importance of a well-managed, clean household.

Nearly all couples had disagreements about domestic work at some point. However, many of them played down their disagreements and interpreted them for the interviewer as non-serious issues. When asked whether they ever disagreed about the division of paid or domestic work, the couples stated 'No, I can't remember' or 'No, not really.' However, more probing questions revealed that couples in fact did disagree. Regular discussions seemed to be a normal part of the decision-making process of some couples, who appeared to be inspired by a mastery approach, meaning that they tackled challenges and problems instead of accepting them.

Challenges in households: who is responsible?

What exactly are the challenges facing couples when dividing up domestic tasks, and how do they deal with these challenges in their decision-making? The challenges break down into three categories. The first is: who is responsible for seeing that domestic tasks are carried out and money is earned? The second is: who actually carries out which task (see also Hochschild, 1989; Mederer, 1993)? The third is: to which standard are tasks performed and how frequently? It turns out that couples deal differently with these issues. Different patterns emerged in how the couples communicated with each other, who was responsible for and who performed tasks, and how satisfied they were with the overall division of labour.

Women generally bore most of the responsibility for the majority of domestic tasks, something which they often found tiring and stressful when combined with paid work. The partners were often more equal in actually performing the tasks than in bearing responsibility for the household. One important difference between couples was whether (a) they tried to share responsibility for household tasks, or (b) one of the partners was responsible for certain tasks. How couples coped with the main challenges in their division of paid/unpaid work seemed to depend on their sense of entitlement to a certain division (see, for example, Major, 1987; Thompson, 1991). Entitlement, in turn, was closely related to their internalization of traditional gender roles.

According to tradition

Some couples divided paid work and housework responsibilities according to automatic and often rather traditional gender roles. In doing so, they overcame the three main challenges outlined above in one go. It is unnecessary to talk about who does what and to which standard and who is responsible for what when the partners automatically agree on who is responsible for which task. Traditional gender responsibilities tell men and women what they need to do. Gender responsibilities have changed somewhat in recent decades, with some former female household tasks becoming more gender neutral and paid work being taken for granted for women as well, although men seemingly still bear final responsibility as breadwinners. The couples in the present sample – even those who preferred to share all the responsibilities equally – had generally developed traditional gender-based routines: laundry was typically a female responsibility, and household repairs typically male.

Preferring to do it yourself

Another pattern was based on women preferring to do household chores themselves. These women avoided asking their husbands for help, although they may have resented them for not pitching in.

Edwin: Yes, you prefer to do it yourself. You find it difficult to ask me.

Elise: Yes, yes, then I'd rather do it myself than start on about it or ask you. I usually don't feel like it, then I think, I'll just do it myself . . . But sometimes reluctantly.

Edwin: Yes. And then it takes a while before I realize. And then I do realize and say: should I do it, and then it's: No, it doesn't matter anymore. (Edwin & Elise, full-time dual-earner couple)

This strategy meant that in most couples, women were responsible for the household work. To explain why they carried out household tasks themselves, without involving the men, many women mentioned differing standards or levels of expertise.

Interviewer: You said: in general I know a bit more about it. What do you mean?

Karen: Well for instance with the washing, he doesn't look at the label or which setting it's on.

Kevin: And I don't know what can go in the tumble dryer and what can't.

Karen: So if he had to do it for me, he should do it the way I want it done. Because if he ruins my washing it's no use to me. And the dishwasher can also be a bone of contention, because I want it to be loaded in a certain way because that's the most economical way. And his attitude is: just throw it in, if it's full it's full, and if it's clean it's clean. (Kevin & Karen, one-and-a-half-earner couple)

Preferring to do housework oneself may also help legitimize the status quo when the division of housework is skewed; couples 'construct a sense of fairness by claiming to prefer doing tasks themselves, citing either their enjoyment of their work or their greater skill' (Johnson & Huston, 1998, p. 202). Even when frustrated, some women stuck to their preference instead of trying to communicate about it and come to a decision.

One possible consequence of women preferring to do housework themselves was that they compensated the extra time spent on domestic chores by working fewer hours. Scaling back allowed them to retain responsibility for the household and manage the time squeeze of paid work and housework without becoming frustrated (Becker & Moen, 1999). This is a common option in the Netherlands, where it is both economically possible and culturally acceptable. Consequently, these women by and large end up with lower incomes, poorer career prospects, and a smaller sense of entitlement to an equal division of housework.

Interestingly, when the woman spent more time on domestic work than the man to begin with and later reduced her paid working hours, sometimes the couple applied reverse causal reasoning. After cutting her hours, she reasoned that she did more housework because she had more time, forgetting that she started off doing more and reduced her working hours because she had too much to do at home. The male partner of one couple forgot that his partner had been working full time for a couple of years, and that she cut her hours because of the unequal division of housework. This is a nice illustration of how inconsistencies crept into common-sense logic and were used by one or both spouses to legitimize the status quo.

Involving the spouse

Other women wanted to involve their spouses in doing the housework or actually delegated tasks to them. Women usually asked their partner for help, delegated tasks to their partners, used nonverbal tactics, or taught their husbands general rules to get them to contribute. Some men reacted ambiguously to these requests. On the one hand, they resented taking orders from their wives; on the other, they saw it as a working strategy and assured they did not see what needed to be done in the household. Other men unambiguously affirmed the woman's role as household manager or even demanded it of her, and did not mind receiving orders.

Valentin: I'm prepared to do any housework, I'm always telling Valerie that, but you'll have to tell me to do this or do that. I'm not someone who'd do it off his own bat. Apart from tidying up a bit, but I wouldn't suddenly go and clean the toilet or empty the washing machine. Not because I'm lazy. I see Valerie as the one more in charge and I always say, you know, I'll do anything, just say the word and I'll do it. And then I do it. But Valerie is the facilities manager (laughs), sort of. (Valentin, full-time dual-earner couple)

When women corrected a man's work by doing it over or told him precisely how a specific task should be done, however, they were often perceived as meddling. Male spouses responded differently to this. Some men completely withdrew from certain tasks in response to their wives' 'meddling'. In doing so, they fostered a pattern in which the wife did most of the household chores herself. In previous research, the wife-demand/husband-withdraw interaction was found to be a typical response to asymmetrically structured conflict situations in which women were discontent with their spouse's contribution to housework, while the spouse wanted to maintain the status quo (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 1997; Kluwer, Heesink & Van de Vliert, 2000).

Marc: Now, I've attempted to do the washing a few times, but I didn't do it quite right or I should have thrown this or that in as well. Or she starts moaning and nitpicking. So she automatically ends up doing it herself. So that's gone automatically. (Marc, full-time dual-earner couple)

Other men became irritated and resisted their wives' interference, fighting back in order to claim their responsibilities:

Dennis: I'm a good cook, but she does it a bit differently, in a different order and then she says: 'No, you should do it like this.' Then I kick her out of the kitchen and shut the door. Then she goes and sulks in front of the TV. And then later she says: 'Oh it's delicious, oh.'

Debby: I can't look, as soon as I start interfering I think I can point out details to him. (Dennis & Debby, female-as-breadwinner couple)

Here the man's behaviour or response determined the further course of the decision-making process (see also Johnson & Huston, 1998; Pool & Lucassen, 2005). When the men were able to assert themselves, the women did indeed withdraw. When they did not, the women were often left shouldering responsibility for the work alone or even ended up doing all the work themselves.

Women who employed the 'meddling' strategy remained responsible for household management and continued to have a say in who did what and to what standard. They avoided explicit discussion of who was generally responsible for the household. Asking the partner to perform a specific task at a certain moment was an ad hoc 'decision-making' method. Women also taught their spouses general rules or standards for performing household tasks, for example, to clean and dry the draining board after doing dishes. The men had to apply these rules each time the situation arose so that their wives had less need to intervene. Teaching general rules can be a long-term strategy and can ultimately also change the division of domestic work, provided that one's partner internalizes the rules and accepts and uses them without being asked.

Dealing with conflict

When one of the partners was dissatisfied with how things were going, he or she communicated that frustration either implicitly or explicitly. In other words, the couples either silently disagreed and avoided conflict, or they engaged in conflict. One common pattern was that women occasionally became frustrated about the skewed division of housework but nevertheless accepted the status quo (cf. stoicism) without explicitly trying to change it. They implicitly communicated frustration or silently disagreed. Valerie, for example, showed her frustration occasionally while simultaneously downplaying the importance of any conflicts. She sent out ambiguous signals to her partner, since she avoided explicit and general discussion of their division of labour even when he tried to initiate it.

Valerie: Every few months or so I erupt again, I've just had enough. Once in a while I just get fed up that I have to do so much in the house and then I say to him for God's sake can you just do something every now and then or you can see that the washing machine needs emptying sometimes, can't you? And then the next day I've forgotten about it again. But really it's OK as it is.

Valentin: Yes, no, she's right actually. I could do something too. But then I ask her, what do you want me to do? Just tell me what I should do. And then she says 'You don't have to do anything, forget it.'

Valerie: Then just that sentence 'I know you have to do everything and that I don't do anything.' That on its own is enough. Then I know enough. Then I think to myself OK. You want to do it, but you just don't notice it. You know what, I just didn't feel appreciated. That sometimes when I'm doing the housework and I see Valentin doing nice things, and I think hey I'm not a skivvy. And then when I got a bit of appreciation I thought yes, it's OK after all. I feel alright again. (Valentin & Valerie, full-time dual-earner couple)

This couple did not discuss the fairness of their division of labour explicitly, and Valentin legitimized the status quo of their arrangement by interpreting Valerie's outburst as a symptom of something else: a lack of appreciation for what she did in the household. Valerie seemed to agree, and seemed to be satisfied with the little appreciation, at least until her next outburst a few months later, as she explained. Like Valerie, some women concealed their frustration and preferred to maintain the status quo. Many contemporary couples implicitly expected to share household tasks and responsibility, and spouses who

felt their time investment was disproportional became frustrated when the expectation of fair sharing was not met.

Other couples, however, did communicate their frustration explicitly: they deliberately monitored and dealt with issues of fairness and the division of housework. It was usually the women, not the men, who raised the alarm when they had to shoulder too much of the burden. These women first became frustrated or dissatisfied with their workload, and then discussed and evaluated the status quo. Frustration had an activating or empowering effect on these women, and this often stimulated the couple to start talking constructively and find an alternative, more satisfying arrangement. Communicating frustration was thus the first step towards profound change. For example, Fiona and Austin agreed on a more specialized division of household chores.

Fiona: I said at one point now I've had enough, I don't think it's fair, I think I do more than my fair share of the shopping and I do all the cooking, and I don't want to anymore. So first I screamed a bit and then we looked at how you can organize these things so that you're both happy with the situation.

Austin: Yes, so we thought up a rota in which each of us cleaned one floor at the weekend, and Fiona wrote the shopping list. And that's worked well for years. (Fiona & Austin, full-time dual-earner couple)

Conflicts seemed to play an important role in decision-making about the division of paid and unpaid work. Although decision-making generally remained implicit for a long time and conflicts were infrequent, frustration did boil over in some couples eventually and became overt, and it was then that explicit discussion would arise. Couples often became aware of the bulk of tasks they needed to do, and they sometimes decided to outsource housework, paying a cleaner to take care of it. They left the discussion of standards and who needed to do or initiate cleaning to a professional, thereby avoiding potential frustrations.

Some of the patterns described above inherently sustain the status quo, which in daily life often means a gendered approach and practices. Specialization, for instance, is not based on preferences, opportunities, or fit, but often on a traditional gendered notion that women are responsible for and do the household chores. Women who prefer to do the housework themselves in order to maintain certain standards also end up in a traditional division of labour, especially when they simultaneously cut their paid working hours.

Other divisions are possible, however. For instance, when men concede that their wives are the 'facilities managers', there is a shift in who actually performs the tasks, although the responsibility is still borne by the women. The same goes for men who apply their own standards and claim responsibility by ignoring their wives' 'meddling'. But it seems that the most powerful driver for changing the division of labour is explicit communication. Dissatisfaction and the desire to share can be stepping stones to initiating such conversations, but the partners also need to touch on a more abstract level of task division and look at their ideologies and what 'men and women want in life'.

The nature of decision-making and the division of paid and domestic work: a typology

The study uncovered typical patterns of implicit and explicit decision-making as well as strategies leading to or coexisting with traditional or more egalitarian divisions of paid and

unpaid work. These patterns of decision-making are illustrated in Table 2 by a typology of traditional, egalitarian, and transitional couples.

Traditional couples prefer the traditional domains of breadwinning and homemaking. Male partners are typically seen as the main breadwinners and are not necessarily involved much in homemaking. Women are generally responsible for homemaking and prefer to do household tasks themselves, and they also work fewer paid hours than their partners. Their decision-making is generally implicit and automatic. Each spouse knows and agrees with what his or her responsibility is, and there is little need for discussion. Conflict or frustration is uncommon and both partners are satisfied when both have workable schedules and their circumstances allow them to follow their preferences.

Equal sharing of paid and unpaid work is a key theme in egalitarian couples' relationships. Both partners typically start the relationship with the idea of sharing paid and unpaid work. It is usually, but not exclusively, the women who monitor equal sharing, and both partners explicitly discuss expectations and preferences early on in their relationship. Later, they communicate any frustration about a skewed division of labour and seek mutually satisfying arrangements. Egalitarian couples must also face the challenge of tradition, however; for example, women may interfere when their spouses

Table 2. Patterns of decision-making and the division of work.

	Traditional	Egalitarian	Transitional
Orientation towards division of paid and unpaid work	Traditional gender roles	Gender equality and mastery	Equality and stoicism
Implicit or explicit decision-making	Implicit: Silent agreements Taken for granted and automatic Non-reflective interaction	Explicit: Prospective awareness Proactive planning Making agreements Engaging in disagreements: mastery	Implicit & explicit: Vague expectations Retrospective awareness Silent disagreements (stoicism)
Strategies	Specialization of responsibilities	Explicitly communicating frustration Outsourcing	Involving men in housework Meddling Implicitly communicating frustration: stoicism Scaling back working hours
Preferred division of paid and unpaid work	Yes Traditional responsibilities	Yes Equal division	No Transitional state, partly equal but tending towards traditional division

do the housework, or may have different standards of cleanliness than their husbands. However, they live up to their egalitarian ideals by being explicit, discussing, compromising, and outsourcing work. Where necessary, the couples plan and reach specific agreements. Essentially, the responsibility for paid and unpaid work is shared by these couples, and both spouses are generally satisfied with the division of labour.

Many couples do not fit into either the egalitarian or traditional category. While these couples agree with the notion of gender equality, they also feel ambivalent about their roles and responsibilities, and so we refer to them as transitional couples. They often engage in implicit decision-making; they silently agree or disagree. Certain aspects of the decision-making are explicit, mainly when women communicate their frustration about a skewed division of labour and try to involve their spouses in the housework. Men do not appreciate women interfering when they do housework and respond by withdrawing. Frustration is rarely followed by any discussion of alternative arrangements, and outsourcing is typically not considered a realistic option.

Women's demands with respect to household standards, both spouses' ambivalent feelings about who is responsible, and women's meddling and preferring to do chores themselves typically lead women to compensate the time they spend on housework by cutting back on paid working hours. Consequently, these couples often divide paid work traditionally. Transitional men carry out household chores but bear less responsibility for the household than their spouses. Transitional women typically work close to full time. These couples live in a transitional state between traditional divisions and egalitarian ideas. There were various transitional couples in this Dutch sample, and they seem to exist in other Western countries as well. They often face the typical dilemma of modern households: wanting to share the work equally but not achieving their ideal division (Knudson-Martin & Rankin Mahoney, 1996; Knudson-Martin & Rankin Mahoney, 1998; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiede, & Hall, 1996), seemingly because of their stoic attitudes and implicit decision-making.

Discussion

The results of this study lead us to conclude that these Dutch couples generally do not deal explicitly with their division of paid and domestic work. When they move in together, couples usually discuss their division of paid and unpaid work in vague terms, and both spouses know approximately how the other feels about the issue. Couples generally only start talking plainly about paid work when they face a new situation, such as when they are expecting a child. The division of housework is only discussed explicitly when one of the partners – usually the woman – feels frustrated about what she perceives as an unequal division. These findings expand on other research by documenting everyday implicit and explicit decision-making in couples during a unique period of their lives: the formative years of their relationship, until they are expecting their firstborn. The suggestion is that couples who wish to achieve equality need to engage in explicit decision-making, at least until they have developed an egalitarian routine.

Several of the women participating in this study, and most of their partners, felt that being interviewed about the division of paid work, domestic work, and childcare would be good preparation for a more equal and satisfying division of labour once they had become parents. Self-selection influenced the composition of the sample, as more highly educated couples saw the point of academic research and were therefore more likely to participate.

Given the characteristics of our sample, the prevalence of implicit decision-making is surprising. We expected these young, modern couples to deal explicitly and consciously

with the division of paid and unpaid work. Becker and Moen (1999), for example, found that couples who decided to reduce paid work did so reflexively and consciously. However, their research only considered decisions related to paid work, and not those related to housework or childcare. Furthermore, unlike the USA, part-time work is very common and acceptable in Dutch society and does not imply a lower standard of health care or other social security entitlements. In addition, most of the couples in Becker and Moen's sample already had children. In the present study, the couples only discussed paid work explicitly when they were planning to have children; the division of housework was only an explicit issue for the very few couples who actively pursued an equal division of tasks. A recent Dutch survey (Portegijs, Boelens, & Olsthoorn, 2004), however, found that explicit decision-making is only successful when both partners want to change the division of labour.

Viewed in the light of decision-making studies in other domains, however, the general implicitness of decision-making found in the present study is not so surprising. It has been shown that 'muddling through' is an important decision-making strategy for couples, for example, when they make joint purchase decisions such as a new car or a new home (Kirchler, 1993; Park, 1982). Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) describe 'muddling through' as incremental and spontaneous decision-making by couples owing to the huge demands made on their time, energy, and other resources. They suggest that spouses muddle through decision-making implicitly unless something out of the ordinary prompts them to act differently (see also Lindblom, 1959). Our data confirms this for decision-making about the division of paid and unpaid work.

We also conclude that gender still plays an important role in couples' division of labour. The women we interviewed were more actively and consciously involved in decision-making about the division of labour than their male partners, as evidenced by their various strategies for involving their partners in housework. As Reimann (1997) showed in a study of lesbian couples, when behaviour is not dictated by gender and when equality plays a key role, couples negotiate their division of labour much more explicitly and conflicts erupt whenever one partner perceives the other as not doing her fair share of the housework.

The present study confirms previous findings that women often try to avoid conflict and prefer to accept a larger share of the housework (Johnson & Huston, 1998; Kluwer et al., 1997; Komter, 1989; van Doorne-Huiskes, 1992; Zvonkovic, Schmiede, & Hall, 1994). The suggestion is that women often perceive the cost of an unequal division of labour as lower than the cost of confronting their partner explicitly with their ideas of equality in domestic work (e.g., van Doorne-Huiskes, 1992). Couples' general tendency to say that the division of domestic work is 'not worth mentioning' and to avoid explicit discussion can be interpreted as the 'myth of a good relationship'. Spouses may avoid bringing up the issue because they feel that rational bargaining about who spends how much time on which task is incompatible with a romantic relationship. In addition, doing housework for one's spouse might be seen as a sign of love (Johnson & Huston, 1998; Thompson, 1993). Our conclusion, however, is that romanticizing relationships and refraining from rational bargaining often leads to traditional and gendered divisions of work. The same could be said of using implicit strategies and involving spouses ad hoc in performing certain tasks, instead of initiating a general discussion on how to divide up housework. Many of those interviewed said that they found such discussions 'not worth mentioning' to their partner.

Zvonkovic et al. (1994) found that traditional gender role ideology and indirect influence strategies are positively correlated with marital satisfaction. Continuing this line of argument, others see the emergence of explicit rules as an initial stage in family

disorganization, whereas the ability to function implicitly is an indicator of family organization (Reiss, 1981; Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The suggestion is that women's first priority is the overall well-being of her marriage. In rational terms, couples who do not engage in explicit decision-making, and silently disagree, could be considered right from this perspective.

Other scholars, however, emphasize the importance of equal sharing of power to relationship success and satisfaction for both sexes (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Steil, 1997; Zvonkovic et al., 1994). Some of the couples in the present study – those who were indeed monitoring the division of unpaid and paid work and who expressed their preferences and searched for the most ideal arrangements – seemed to be happy with their 'final' arrangement, which they had often reached by a process of trial and error. They hoped that the birth of their first child would not force them to change their current division of housework. One couple seemed to engage in constant conflict about the male partner's need to do more housework, in which he was not consistent. The interview appeared to have helped both partners explain their thoughts and preferences and, as they reported in a second interview some months later, had led to a different decision-making dynamic with which both spouses were more satisfied.

If the research team had not interviewed the spouses both individually and as a couple, the aforementioned results would not have been revealed. Merely asking couples 'Do you have disagreements about the division of work?' or 'Do you explicitly divide tasks with your partner?' would have resulted in answers such as those described in the section on implicit decision-making. Qualitative, in-depth research has therefore proved indispensable in gaining a better understanding of the daily dynamics of decision-making in couples.

Our findings suggest that implicit decision-making dynamics and strategies constitute a serious obstacle to changing gender roles and responsibilities in couples. This finding is supported by other studies showing that expressing feelings openly and directly and actively negotiating conflicts can promote equality in day-to-day interactions (Knudson-Martin & Rankin Mahoney, 1998; Mui-Teng Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2006; Zvonkovic et al., 1996). Decision-making processes in intimate relationships are changing, but only slowly. Recent studies showed that men take a more active role in the domestic arena than in the past, but they often 'help out' rather than share household tasks (Mederer, 1993). Women respond to this by asking their partner for help or by instructing and explaining tasks to him; in doing so, they confirm their partner's role as ad hoc helper. The division of household work and, in particular, the responsibility for household management have been stubbornly resistant to major change. The slow rate of change suggests that gender divisions in intimate relationships are deeply embedded in the culture of Dutch society and in the way couples interact.

To conclude, we have extended existing research by focusing on the formative years of a couple's relationship, by applying joint couple interviews as well as individual interviews with spouses and by focusing on decision-making processes with respect to the division of paid and unpaid work between (heterosexual) couples. By doing so, we increased knowledge on the persistence of gender inequality among couples in the Netherlands. We have analysed the decision-making patterns of a relatively small sample of couples in a specific national context. In order to generalize our findings a large-scale study is needed. However, this study has shown that a survey design runs the risk of not fully revealing decision-making processes within couples. Hence, it would also be valuable to aim for a cross-national qualitative study that investigates couple's decision-making in-depth within different national contexts. Within a qualitative cross-national study it is possible to examine whether mechanisms and patterns found are relevant across countries and to

examine the impact of societal culture on decision-making dynamics. Moreover, a longitudinal study that follows young couples across various life stages would enhance our findings and could answer questions such as whether specific life events, such as the transition to parenthood, increase the likelihood of explicit decision-making.

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