

Differences in the Perception of the Division of Care in Couples

Tabea Naujoks (Hertie School & Humboldt University Berlin)

While the body of literature about the determinants of the division of childcare in couples has increased in recent years, little attention has been paid to the differences in the perceptions of the division of childcare within a couple (perception gap). The discrepancy in the evaluation of one's own contributions and also the estimation of the contribution of the partner's share of housework is a well-known problem (Granbois & Willett 1970). Most research examining measurements of care work or relatedly housework focuses on evaluating different measurement types such as time-use diaries, stylized questions, or relative measures of the division of labor (Bonke 2005; Kan 2008). A study by Kamo (2000) observes drivers of the interspousal response discrepancy in time spent on housework and finds that social desirability as well as the length of the marriage influence the different perceptions. However, Kamo's study focuses on housework only and leaves childcare out of the picture. One reason childcare differs from housework is that men and women enjoy doing childcare compared to other household tasks like cleaning (Bianchi et al. 2006; Sullivan 2013). Furthermore, governments incentivize fathers to invest time in childcare by implementing paternity leaves (for the German context, see Bünning 2015). Therefore, it could be argued that the division of childcare is more subject to structural change and norms.

Mechanisms

One possible driver of the perception gap is the level of communication within the couple. If partners frequently talk to each other, they better know about the partner's contribution to childcare (Kamo 2000). Sharing daily activities and mentioning thoughts and worries increases the knowledge of who does what physically and mentally. Therefore, I hypothesize that the higher the level of communication in a couple is, the less likely a couple is to perceive the division of care work differently.

A second proposed mechanism is social desirability, and in the case of the division of childcare, this can be reflected in gender ideology. Individuals are shaped by the social structure and the existing norms and thus answer according to those norms (Gupta 2007). For example, if both partners have an egalitarian view but follow a more traditional division of labor, they both

might correct their answers towards an equal division. However, when partners have divergent gender ideologies, I expect they are more prone to perceive the division of care work differently.

Data & Methods

This study draws on data from the annually collected Panel Study of Intimate Relationship and Family Dynamics (pairfam), launched in Germany in 2008. The dyadic structure of the data allows determining if anchor and partner report the same division of care work or not. I restrict my sample is restricted to cohabiting couples living with children under the age of 14 or younger in the same household and where both anchors' and partners' interviews are available. Since one of the independent variables is only surveyed biannually, the data set contains waves 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11. The analytical sample consists of 2140 couples resulting in 6350 observations.

The dependent variable is the gap in the perception of the division of childcare. The perception gap is built upon the question of whether caring for children is done by (1) (almost) completely by their partner, (2) mostly by the partner, (3) split about 50/50, (4) mostly by the respondent or (5) (almost) completely by the respondent. If the answers from anchor and respondent correspond, the couple does not exhibit a perception gap. If anchor and partner deviate in their responses, the dummy variable indicates a value of 1 for a perception gap.

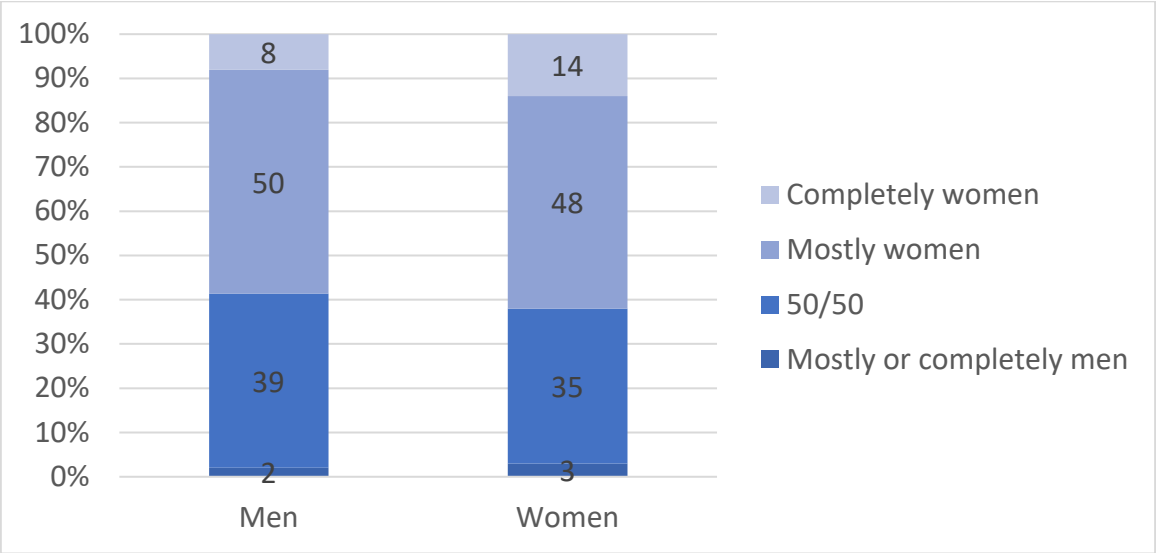
Pairfam provides a set of questions addressing gender ideologies around the sphere of family and work. For example, one item states that a child aged under six will suffer from having a working mother. Respondents are asked to indicate their agreement to the statement on a 5-point scale ranging from "disagree completely" to "agree completely". Since the gender ideology of both partners is measured, it is possible to create a variable that captures the couples' gender ideology by differentiating between couples with matching gender ideologies (egalitarian, moderate, and traditional) and mismatching gender ideology. Another interesting set of explanatory variables are questions capturing the level of communication and intimacy in the couple. The first part of my research question asks for a descriptive analysis of the share of couples exhibiting a perception gap and how the size of this gap is. In the next step, logistic regression models are used to examine the determinants of the perception gap in couples.

Preliminary Findings

Figure 1 displays the distribution of childcare in couples separately for men and women and shows that childcare patterns are gendered: in over 58% of the couples, the mother does more childcare

than the father, while around 35% share care work equally, and only a small fraction of couples report that the father does more care work than the mother. Further, men and women in couples perceive care work differently, with women being more likely than men to report that they are doing the care work completely. In contrast, men are more likely to say that the mother is "mostly" responsible for childcare.

Figure 1: Division of childcare



Note: Due to very small shares of couples where men do care work completely or mostly, the two categories are summarized in this graph.

Source: Pairfam 2021, own estimations.

The intra-couple measurement, the perception gap, reveals that 61% of the couples perceive the division of care work the same way. In total, 39% of the couples exhibit a perception gap, with most of them deviating in their answers only by one category.

Table1 shows the main variables of interest from a first pooled logistic regression. The relationship satisfaction and the level of communication in the couple have a negative influence on the perception gap. The higher the level of communication the lower, the less likely is a couple to perceive the division of childcare differently. Gender ideology affects if partners perceive the same division of care work. Couples with matching moderate gender ideology are more likely to exhibit a perception gap than couples where both partners share gender egalitarian attitudes. Also, mismatching gender attitudes increase the likelihood of reporting different care arrangements. The first results point to the direction that a sizeable share of couples report care

work arrangement differently, which underlines the necessity to investigate further what determinants drive this gap.

Table 1: Logistic regression results, z-statistic in parenthesis. Dependent variable: Perception gap (yes/no)

	Model1
Frequency of communication	-0.29** (-2.23)
Gender ideology	
Both egalitarian	Ref.
Both moderate	0.18** (2.31)
Both traditional	0.41*** (5.27)
She egalitarian, he traditional	0.33**** (3.91)
She traditional, he egalitarian	0.178 (1.43)

Note: further control variables are cohort, wave, sex of anchor, region (East/West Germany), paid work arrangement, married (yes/no), number of children. Source: Pairfam 2021, own estimations.

References

- Bianchi, S. M., Robinson, J. P., & Milke, M. A. (2006). *The changing rhythms of American family life*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bonke, J. (2005). Paid work and unpaid work: Diary information versus questionnaire information. *Social Indicators Research*, 70(3), 349-368.
- Bünning, M. (2015). What happens after the 'daddy months'? Fathers' involvement in paid work, childcare, and housework after taking parental leave in Germany. *European Sociological Review*, 31(6), 738-748.
- Kamo, Y. (2000). "He said, she said": Assessing discrepancies in husbands' and wives' reports on the division of household labor. *Social Science Research*, 29(4), 459-476.
- Kan, M. Y. (2008). Measuring housework participation: the gap between "stylised" questionnaire estimates and diary-based estimates. *Social Indicators Research*, 86(3), 381-400.
- Gupta, S. (2007). Autonomy, dependence, or display? The relationship between married women's earnings and housework. *Journal of Marriage and family*, 69(2), 399-417.
- Granbois, D. H., & Willett, R. P. (1970). Equivalence of family role measures based on husband and wife data. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 68-72.
- Greenstein, T. N. (1996). Husbands' participation in domestic labor: Interactive effects of wives' and husbands' gender ideologies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 585-595.
- Sullivan, O. (2013). What do we learn about gender by analyzing housework separately from child care? Some considerations from time-use evidence. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 5(2), 72-84.