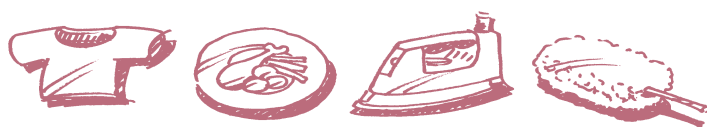


# Women's Perceptions of Fairness and the Persistence of an Unequal Division of Housework



In the continuing endeavour to find convincing explanations for the persistence of an unequal division of domestic work, researchers have been addressing this question:

**Do women who are doing most of the work believe they are being treated unjustly?**

**KEN DEMPSEY reports.**

The confident predictions made by a number of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s that the traditional unequal division of domestic tasks would soon be replaced by an equal division have not been realised (Benson 1968; Young and Wilmott 1973). Despite the consciousness-raising activities of feminists and the entry of most married women into the paid workforce, the great majority of wives still perform a disproportionate share of the household's unpaid workload.

It is true that there is possibly a greater proportion of men now than 30 years ago who are helping their wives with housework and child care. However, the latest Australian and overseas studies suggest that any change that may have been occurring is now stalling (Demo and Alcock 1993; DeMaris and Longmore 1996; Bittman 1995; Baxter and Western 1996).

Bittman (1991, 1995) reports that time budget studies show that upon marrying, the average Australian male transfers indoor housework to his wife. If wives are engaged in employed work they are probably putting in about 70 per cent of the time given to housework and child care, and around 80 per cent if they are unemployed wives. Estimates vary, but it seems that employed women complete somewhere between 65 and 70 per cent of the household's unpaid tasks (Demo and Alcock 1993; Lennon and Rosenfeld 1994). These figures underestimate women's contribution; women spend a great amount of time engaged in invisible work on behalf of the family – for example, thinking about and planning the preparation of meals (DeVault 1991; Walzer 1996).

Women are still carrying out tasks that are qualitatively different from those of men. They continue to take responsibility for most of the more regular, tedious and time consuming tasks, including those that interfere the most with pursuing a career in the paid workforce and engaging in outside leisure activities. Typically, a husband's level and form of participation remains optional. As a rule, they at most help with the less demanding of women's traditional tasks (Thompson and Walker 1989; Glezer 1991; Baxter and Western 1996).

No satisfactory explanations have been offered for the persistence of these forms of marital inequality. They have usually been attributed to structural and cultural forces, especially men's superior economic power and the pervasive influence of a gendered ideology which justifies a traditional division of labour. Because of a belief in the significance of such factors, many feminists argued that women would start pressing successfully for change once their consciousness-raising activities brought women to an awareness of the injustice of their situation and once women increased their economic power through participation in paid work (Wearing 1984; Thompson 1991; Delphy and Leonard 1992).

This conviction is plausible if we accept the assumption of relative deprivation theory, which is that individuals prefer equity over inequity in their relationships and that when they believe they are being treated unjustly they will be moved to try and achieve equity for themselves (Greenstein 1996).

Numerous studies show that women and men are much more likely now than a few decades ago to express the view that the load at home should be shared equitably (Glezer 1984; Thompson and Walker 1989; Bittman and Lovejoy 1993). Yet the division of labour occurring in most households remains unequal. It is also the case that probably only a small minority of women have been pressing their husbands for substantial change (Komter 1989). Most have been seeking help only with one or two jobs that they continue to view as their responsibility.

In the continuing endeavour to find convincing explanations for the persistence of an unequal division of domestic work researchers have been addressing this question: Do women who are doing most of the work believe they are being treated unjustly?

A number of overseas studies have shown that somewhere between two-thirds and three-quarters of women regard the division of housework in their marriages as fair (Benin and Agostinelli 1988; Lennon and Rosenfeld 1994; DeMaris and Longmore 1996). Even most women engaged in full-time paid employment and who have been shown to be carrying out most of the work at home state that existing arrangements are fair. Irrespective of how disproportionately great is their load, women who adopt this view are unlikely to press their husbands for change. As husbands are even more likely than wives to regard the prevailing division of housework as fair, then unless women perceive that their situation is unjust, it is difficult to see how any move to reduce this form of inequality will originate from within marriages (Sanchez 1994).

### Gender and Marriage Survey

In a recent small scale Australian study, the *Gender and Marriage Survey*, I examined women's perceptions of fairness of the division of housework and the links between these and the size of their domestic workload, their participation in paid work, and their gender ideology. I also collected from a sub-sample of the women their explanations for why they regarded the division of housework as fair or unfair.

The survey was conducted in Melbourne in 1994. Interviews were carried out by students participating in an undergraduate course on marriage at La Trobe University. The students selected their own respondents subject to their meeting certain demographic and employment criteria.

Respondents were drawn from 128 households. In 66 households both partners were interviewed separately. Altogether 114 women and 80 men were interviewed, making a total of one 194 respondents.<sup>1</sup> Students were free to choose cohabiting couples, although few did. All households contained at least one dependent child. The average age of both wives and husbands was 36 years.

The interviews consisted of both structured and open-ended questions. Interviews were taped and fully transcribed. I designed the interview schedule and took responsibility for the coding and analysis of the closed and open-ended data.

In almost two out of three households selected, the women were engaged in paid work. The majority of employed women held part-time jobs, and 35 per cent were engaged in full-time paid work.

The sample was deliberately biased in this way because I hypothesised that it was more likely that women engaged in paid work, especially full-time paid work, would receive more assistance from their husbands than full-time housewives with the

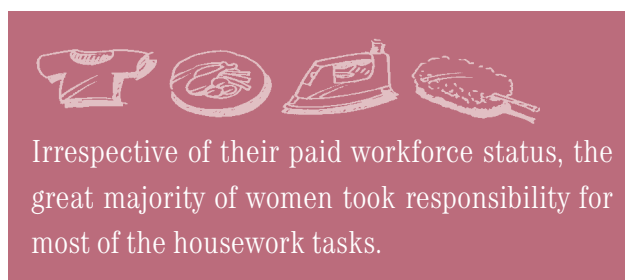
perceptions of who took overall responsibility for these two spheres of domestic labour.<sup>2</sup>

Irrespective of their paid workforce status, the great majority of women took responsibility for most of the housework tasks we enquired about – which included cooking the evening meal, cleaning the toilet, vacuuming the carpet. The husbands of full-time working wives were no more likely or only marginally more likely than the husbands of full-time housewives to take or share responsibility for such tasks.

Employed wives, like full-time housewives, were usually left with responsibility for the tasks commonly described by wives as tedious and unattractive, such as

washing the family's clothes. Consequently, employed wives were facing double duty.

Because the case for arguing that the division of housework is unfair is usually more clear-cut in those marriages in which the wife is employed, I am going to focus the rest of this



report on the responsibilities, perceptions and relationships of the 70 women with paying jobs we interviewed. Eighty-nine per cent of the women with a paying job said they took overall responsibility for housework. The extent of employed women's load was acknowledged by male respondents. For example, 94 per cent of the men whose wives were employed said that their wives were taking major responsibility for housework and they themselves were either playing mainly a helping role (86 per cent) or they had little or nothing to do with the housework (12 per cent).

As noted earlier, feminists had predicted that their consciousness-raising activities would lead women to adopt an egalitarian point of view and bring women to an awareness of the injustice of their situation. The great majority of women who had a paying job and who were also taking major responsibility for housework subscribed to beliefs and attitudes of a liberal character. For example, 94 per cent of them agreed with the statement: 'There should be satisfactory child care facilities so that women can take jobs outside the home'; and 83 per cent with the statement: 'A woman who works can be just as good a mother as one who does not'.

What is especially relevant as far as the main issues of this article are concerned is that 94 per cent of employed wives who were taking major responsibility for housework agreed with the statement: 'If both husband and wife work, they should share equally in the housework and child care'.

However, the study failed to confirm the feminist prediction that if women experienced both the burden of a double load and exposure to a feminist point of

tasks traditionally carried out by women. I further assumed that the material resources employed women brought to the marriage would give them superior capacity to exercise interpersonal power in their relationships with their husbands. Finally, I also assumed that women engaged in paid work would be much more likely than full-time housewives to regard an inequitable division of unpaid labour as unfair. As I show in some detail in a recently published book, I was more wrong than right on all these counts (Dempsey 1997).

A disproportionately large number of middle class, well educated respondents was unintentionally chosen. According to the criteria of class I adopted, just over half Australian households belong to the middle class, whereas four out of five of those sampled in this study belonged to this class (Jones and Davis 1986). Less than 10 per cent of Australians have a tertiary education compared to roughly four out of five of respondents in the *Gender and Marriage Survey*.

While unintended, this bias had the advantage of allowing me to check out the widespread popular belief that educated members of the middle class are in the vanguard of a move to more egalitarian marriages.

The remainder of this article is given over to reporting the findings from the survey, and to considering some of the possible explanations for women viewing an inequitable division of labour as fair.

### Results

We collected information on the allocation of responsibility for specific household and child care tasks as well as respondents'

view they would come to see they were being treated unjustly by their husbands and press them to share responsibility for housework. Seventy-two per cent of the women who were employed and taking overall responsibility for housework reported that the division of housework was fair. Further, two-thirds of the women engaged in full-time paid employment said the division of housework was fair.

## Discussion

No commentator has offered a satisfactory explanation for the propensity of women working a double shift to declare that the arrangement is a fair one. Power, ideological, relative deprivation and cognitive dissonance theories have all been canvassed.

### Power perspective

Those adopting a power perspective argue that as the resources of a wife grow so is she more likely to declare the division of labour unfair. Hochschild (1989) points out that women whose earnings are inferior to their husband's, and who believe they have fewer alternatives than husbands to their marriage, have relatively less bargaining power and therefore lower their expectations. They settle for an unequal marriage (pp.251–253); they avoid cognitive dissonance by lowering their standards of fairness (ch.4).

Unfortunately, in the *Gender and Marriage Survey*, the number of wives whose incomes exceeded their partner's and who did most of the work at home were too few (only 6 per cent) to make any meaningful comparisons of the kind Hochschild suggests. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that many of the women, like the women Hochschild refers to, may have felt they had fewer alternatives than their partners. Almost all of them had dependent children and they made it clear in their interviews that securing a good family life and future for their children were high priorities. The fact that the average salary of employed wives was only slightly more than half that of their husband's (52 per cent), coupled with the presence of dependent children, may have encouraged many of them to be grateful for the material contribution of husbands and to view an unjust division of labour as fair.

Sanchez (1994), who also considers the usefulness of a power theory for predicting which women will view an unjust division of labour as unfair, found that as women's hours of paid employment rose, and presumably their bargaining power through their increased economic contribution to the family, so did their sense of injustice over the division of housework (p.535).

In the *Gender and Marriage Survey* the relationship between women's employment status and their perception of fairness was equivocal and inconclusive, especially when the small size of the sample of wives is borne in mind. Among women who had major responsibility for the housework, women employed on a part-time basis were marginally more likely than full-time housewives to declare the division of housework fair (74 per cent compared with 71 per cent).

It is true that those employed full-time were the most likely to say the division of housework was unfair (33 per cent). This still means, however, that the great majority of women with full-time paid work who were taking major responsibility for housework perceived an objectively inequitable load as fair. Despite their earnings, they may have had less bargaining power than their partners. It is also likely that their perceptions of fairness were influenced by factors other than evaluations of their relative bargaining power.

The findings from a number of studies have highlighted the limitations of a power theory. For example, some studies have shown that women who are contributing more money to the household than their husbands may have no complaints about doing most of the housework and may indeed resist their husband's participation (McRae 1987: ch.7).

### Ideological factors

The empirical literature lends support to the view that ideological factors play a part



Women possess an innate ability to perform the tasks; men lack domestic child care skills; women have a greater need to have the tasks performed, or to have them carried out to a high standard.

in shaping people's views of the fairness of the division of housework. For example, it has been found that women who hold traditional gendered beliefs are more likely than other women to perceive the division of housework as fair (DeMaris and Longmore 1996; Greenstein 1996).

In the *Gender and Marriage Survey*, among the explanations frequently advanced by wives for husbands not doing more housework or sharing more of the child care were traditional beliefs about fundamental differences in men's and women's nature and capacities. These included the following beliefs: women possess an innate ability to perform the tasks; men lack domestic child care skills; women have a greater need to have the tasks performed, or to have them carried out to a high standard.

When women were asked to explain why they viewed the division of housework as fair they sometimes made statements of this kind:

*'Housework is women's work even if a man doesn't have a job.'*

*'I wouldn't let him do it, he's a man, he'd wreck it.'*

The impact that personal ideology has on women's perceptions of fairness is far from clear-cut. For example, the great majority of the women who cited traditional beliefs to justify an inequitable arrangement in their marriages also agreed with the statement: 'If both husband and wife work, they should share equally in the housework and child care'.

How do we make sense of these contradictions in viewpoint and relate them to our finding that the majority of women bearing an inordinate load at home declared the division of housework to be fair?

Hochschild's (1989) study of American marriages, in which all of the wives were working a second shift, offers a great deal of help, as it shows that an individual's ideology, rather than 'cohere as a cognitive "piece"', is fragmented and often contains conflicting elements (p.190). Consequently, husbands and wives can, at the one time, hold egalitarian and traditional beliefs. Rather than their behaviour being a manifestation of a coherent belief system, they often flip flop between an egalitarian and a traditional position. A wife may, on the one hand, believe that husbands should share equitably the task of raising children, and, on the other, that only women have the patience and nurturing skills to give children the care they require to develop to their full potential (pp.190–191).

Hochschild (1989) also stresses that we are going to better comprehend women's and men's attitudes, perceptions and action if we bear in mind that strong emotions as well as ideologies play a critical role. Some beliefs will be associated with much stronger feelings than others. Hochschild distinguishes between shallow and deep ideologies. Shallow ideologies are ones which are contradicted by deeper feelings, whereas deep ideologies are those which are reinforced by such feelings (pp.190–192).

It is highly likely that for many of the women in the *Gender and Marriage Survey* who described the division of housework as fair there were deeper emotions associated with traditional beliefs (such as women are better able than men to run a household properly) than egalitarian beliefs (such as when both husband and wife have a paying job the tasks at home should be shared equally).

For example, about half the women in survey who had tried to get their husbands to share more of their load but failed had, by the time we interviewed them, given up trying to change things. Almost all of them

agreed with the statement: 'When a wife and husband both work the housework should be shared equally'. However, when they explained why they declared what they had recognised as a big housework load for them as fair, or why they were no longer trying to get their husbands to do more, they usually enunciated traditional beliefs and values. They would say something like this:

*'Well, I would like some more help but it is not the be-all and end-all if I can't get it.'*

*'Having a harmonious relationship is more important.'*

*'I can manage the work myself.'*

It is likely that the egalitarian beliefs of these women constituted a 'shallow' ideology and their traditional beliefs a 'deep' ideology.

### **Comparisons and sense of entitlement**

Some researchers have explored the usefulness of relative deprivation theory for comprehending why women who are bearing an excessive load do not perceive they are being treated unjustly (Thompson 1991; Sanchez 1994). Women will only feel deprived if they are faring worse than those with whom they compare themselves (Crosby 1976).

Women in *Gender and Marriage Survey* who declared that the division of domestic load was fair when they bore an inequitable load were more likely to compare themselves with other women, and their husbands with other men, rather than make inter-gender comparisons.

*'When I think how much more helpful my husband is to me than my father was to my mum I reckon I'm pretty well off.'*

One's sense of justice is an expression of one's sense of deservedness (Crosby 1976). It has been established repeatedly that women tend to have a lesser sense of entitlement than men and so take less for themselves even when in objective terms they have made the same contribution as males (Major 1987). Wives frequently value their time, their work (paid and unpaid) and their leisure activities less than their husband's (Sanchez 1994:543).

In the *Gender and Marriage Survey*, the amount of time a husband gave to paid work or the demanding nature of his job was one of the commonest explanations advanced for justifying an inequitable division of labour. A husband's paid job was mentioned by 40 per cent of the women participating in this study. Sometimes there was an acknowledgment that husbands were bringing greater resources and therefore were able to exercise more power. Often, however, the message given out was that men's work was more valuable than women's.

It was the case that husbands usually worked longer hours at their paid jobs than did their wives. However, when the total hours of paid and unpaid work were compared, then in most marriages women were working longer hours than their husbands. Many of the women who declared the division of housework was unfair did stress that they too had a paying job and/or that they worked hard at home whilst their husband engaged in leisure activities. But most employed wives did not make these arguments. Rather, they emphasised their husband's load and played down or ignored their even greater load.

Major (1987) argues that the practice of women declaring that they are being treated fairly when they do most of the work is consistent with a general pattern of women allocating themselves lesser rewards. When asked to split rewards between themselves and partners, 'women

Replies of this kind account for just over half the explanations offered by a sub-sample of 23 employed wives who acknowledged they took overall responsibility for housework. These findings were consistent with those of Hochschild (1989), Blair and Johnson (1992) and those of Sanchez (1994), who established that a man's unpaid work had symbolic meaning for women.

Blair and Johnson (1992) found that one of the two best predictors of whether or not a wife would judge the division of labour as fair was her perception that her labour was appreciated by her husband. This appreciation could be demonstrated by men helping with a woman's task. This symbolised for wives that husbands appreciated what they did for them day in and day out (1992).

Smaller contributions by men are valued more highly than women's contributions

because men and their time tend to be valued more highly in this society. For similar reasons, employed wives may place less value in their paid work time than in their husband's, especially when, as was



tend to take less for themselves and give more to their partners than men do' (p.126). When the contribution of a partner is inferior, men allocate rewards equitably – that is, according to inputs or performance – whereas women allocate rewards equally, ignoring that the partner has contributed less than they.

The practice of women declaring the unfair as fair is also consistent with the standard finding in the psychological literature of women denigrating their own gender group and its member's actions and attributes (Breakwell 1990; Hill and Augoustinos 1997). Women, it is argued, are inclined to accept the ingroup's negative stereotyping of women as less competent, able and worthy of success, and therefore generally less valuable than men and their contributions. By so doing they too relegate women to the status of an outgroup (Hill and Augoustinos 1997:86).

In a previous study of gender inequality, I collected an abundance of evidence of women derogating members of their own gender whilst praising men (Dempsey 1992). Frequently women in the *Gender and Marriage Survey* gave indications by comments they offered that they valued their time and activities less than those of their menfolk. Employed women who took overall responsibility for housework said the arrangement was fair because husbands also carried out unpaid work or would help if the woman was tired and she asked for his assistance. The type of comment such respondents offered repeatedly was:

*'It is fair because we both do [unpaid] jobs and in the long run it balances out.'*

usually the case in this survey, they earn less than their partners and are engaged in jobs of lower status.

### **Achieving valued outcomes**

Thompson (1991) has argued that a person will not declare a relationship unfair if she is gaining from it outcomes she values. Here, there is only space to illustrate the usefulness of this approach.<sup>3</sup>

The following are among the outcomes that women in the *Gender and Marriage Survey* valued sufficiently to offset any sense of injustice from doing most of the work:

- Gaining intrinsic satisfaction from carrying out at least some household tasks – *'I enjoy hanging out the clothes'*;
- Having the opportunity to look after a husband and/or children – *'It provides me with great satisfaction to be there for him and to help him'*;
- Valuing the power they exercised over physical space and people in carrying out housework – *'I need to run this household and do things to my standard'*;
- Gaining companionship and emotional fulfilment from a relationship.

### **Cognitive consistency**

Women who want change and believe they are entitled to it but who are unable to bring it about may overcome the gap between belief and behaviour by defining the unacceptable as acceptable. Adopting this strategy excuses a wife from the stress and guilt associated with believing things

ought to change when, in practice, she is unable to change them (DeMaris and Longmore 1996:1046).

There are several ways wives go about re-evaluating their situation. Some women abandon or give lesser status to their egalitarian beliefs. Several wives in the survey told us they were not the feminists they used to be, and sought to justify to the interviewer why they were saying the division of housework or the decision-making arrangements were fair when they had probably previously viewed them as unfair.

There are women who have not given up their egalitarian ideals, but who, having found that their pursuit jeopardised a goal of greater significance to them than the goal of achieving equality with their husbands – such as maintaining a harmonious marriage – changed the criteria by which they judged fairness (Hochschild 1989:56–57).

Wives who wish to avoid tension and conflict often adopt the strategy of making light of the load they have to bear. Where previously such a wife thought her situation could only be fair if her husband shared a good deal of her domestic load, she now says it is fair because: 'I can do it more easily than he can'. Wives may come to terms with their situation by replacing inter-gender comparisons with intra-gender ones (Thompson 1991; Sanchez 1994): 'He's not so bad compared with the other husbands I know'.

Several of the women in the *Gender and Marriage Survey* who had attempted unsuccessfully to get their husbands to do more at home and who wanted to have good relationships with their husbands justified saying their situation was fair by making light of their load. Often wives used several of the strategies I have outlined.

## Conclusion

We have seen that the predictions of feminists that their consciousness-raising activities, coupled with the entry of most wives into the paid workforce, would result in wives recognising that they were being exploited by their husbands have not been fulfilled.

The majority of employed wives who are carrying by far the greater load of unpaid work declare that they were being treated fairly by their partners. Their positive judgement of their situation may be brought about by such things as the following: a stronger attachment to traditional ideals than egalitarian ones; the greater power of a husband which encourages a wife to be thankful for any contribution he makes; the gaining of highly valued outcomes such as a companionate marriage, or a good father for her children.

Defining the unfair as fair may follow from making in-gender rather than inter-gender comparisons, or from overvaluing a husband's contribution. Defining the

unfair as fair may serve as a way of overcoming cognitive dissonance. Whatever the motivating factors, the practice is going to serve as a major impediment to marriages becoming more equitable.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that employed women often pay a high price physically and psychologically for the persistence of an inequitable division of housework. They have higher rates of depressive illness than employed husbands (Lennon and Rosenfeld 1994). As found by Hochschild (1989) and Ferree (1990), many employed women are perpetually tired, and often feelings of ambivalence and resentment recur despite the efforts of some women to achieve cognitive consistency by defining the unacceptable as acceptable.

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## Notes:

1 In those instances where both partners had been interviewed, we created a sub-sample of 128 cases which included only one representative from each of the households where both partners had been interviewed. A female was chosen from households 1, 3, 5 etc., and a male from household 2, 4, 6 etc. This sample is used for presenting data on, among other things, the division of tasks.

2 See Dempsey 1997 (chapters 3, 4 and 8) for a presentation of findings on child care, women's workforce status, and perceptions of fairness.

3 I show elsewhere in some detail how useful Thompson's approach is for making sense of why women in this study and two other Australian studies viewed what was objectively an unjust division of domestic labour as fair (Dempsey 1997: chapter 8).

**Ken Dempsey** is a Reader in Sociology at La Trobe University. He has published a number of books on community studies and his latest book entitled *Inequalities in Marriage: Australia and Beyond* has just been published by Oxford University Press.