

## Perceiving the Division of Family Work To Be Unfair: Do Social Comparisons, Enjoyment, and Competence Matter?

Nancy K. Grote  
University of Pittsburgh

Kristen E. Naylor  
Reed College

Margaret S. Clark  
Carnegie Mellon University

Past research has revealed that women, working or not, perform more family labor (i.e., housework and child care) than do men. Yet, women often do not perceive this as unfair. Drawing on the theoretical work of L. Thompson (1991) and B. Major (1993), the authors hypothesized that this paradox might be explained by women perceiving greater fairness in the lopsided division of family work (a) when they compare the amount of family work they do with other women (who perform similar amounts) rather than with the spouse; (b) when they enjoy performing family work; and/or (c) when they and their spouses believe that they are especially competent at family work. Data from a 3-panel, longitudinal study of married couples expecting their first child were consistent with the second and third predictions but not the first. Further, prospective analyses suggested that perceiving inequity in family work leads wives and husbands to make more frequent comparisons with the spouse and sometimes with same-sex others.

Many studies conducted in the 1980s clearly demonstrated the lopsided division of family labor (i.e., housework and childcare) between husbands and wives (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Hochschild, 1989; Rosen, 1987), with wives found to typically perform two to three times more family work than their husbands, whether or not they are employed outside the home (Atkinson & Huston, 1984; Ferree, 1991; Hochschild, 1989; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Although recent research from the Families and Work Institute (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998) shows a current decline in the inequity of family work, with wives now spending closer to twice as many hours at family work than husbands, the overall pattern of inequity still persists. Given this imbalance in the division of family work, it seems logical that wives would view the distribution as unfair and, as a result, would be less satisfied in their marriages.

A considerable number of studies, however, show that a

majority of wives, regardless of employment status, are not less satisfied with their relationships than husbands are, nor do they perceive the division of labor in the home as inequitable (Benin & Agostinelli, 1988; Biernat & Wortman, 1991; Blair, 1993; Crosby, 1982; Lennon & Rosenfeld, 1994; Robinson & Spitze, 1992). Most wives seem satisfied with the small amount of housework their husbands do (Pleck, 1985). Even those wives whose career status is relatively equal to that of their husbands seldom report that the disproportionate amount of family work they do relative to their husbands is unfair (Biernat & Wortman, 1991). Just as telling is evidence that most women will do up to two thirds (66%) of the family labor before they begin to feel that the allocation is unfair, whereas the threshold for men was found on average to be 36% of the domestic work, at which point they start to feel the burden falling unfairly on them (Lennon & Rosenfeld, 1994). Clearly, wives and husbands are accustomed to accepting an unequal division of family work as normal.

Why should this state of affairs exist? Why are women as a whole not perceiving unfairness and experiencing relationship distress as a result of the existence of inequities in family labor—inequities acknowledged by both men and women? These questions form the focus of the present article.

### The Distributive Justice Model of Perceived Fairness

According to Thompson (1991) and Major (1987, 1993), women's paradoxical contentment with an unequal division of family work can be understood by considering women's and men's differing sense of entitlement and fairness with respect to what is contributed and received in the family

---

Nancy K. Grote, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Kristen E. Naylor, Department of Psychology, Reed College; Margaret S. Clark, Department of Psychology, Carnegie Mellon University.

This research was supported by a National Institute of Mental Health B/Start Grant (1-R03 MH57914) and a Pittsburgh Child Guidance Foundation Grant awarded to Nancy K. Grote, as well as National Science Foundation Grants (SBR 9630898 and BCS 9983417), Margaret S. Clark, principal investigator). Kristen E. Naylor's senior thesis was also based on this research. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the granting agencies.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nancy K. Grote, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260.

work domain. The extent to which one feels entitled to more spouse participation and, therefore, perceives more unfairness in family work distribution is hypothesized to result from (a) justifications (i.e., rules or procedures) that legitimize an unequal division of family labor, (b) social comparison processes, and (c) outcome values, that is, social norms influencing what women and men want and value in their roles and relationships. According to Major (1993), entitlement (defined as the expectation that one should receive a valued outcome) is conjectured to mediate the relations among these three social-psychological components and perceived fairness—namely, the evaluation that one has been treated fairly in the allocation of family labor (Thompson, 1991). Through a complex interplay of the justice model's three components, as well as other factors, including economies of gratitude (Pyke & Coltrane, 1996) and latent power (Komter, 1989), husbands ultimately feel more entitled to their spouse's participation in family work than do wives, who feel less deserving of their husbands' contributions to housework and child care. Further, husbands' sense of entitlement is more likely to be honored in the allocation of family labor (Pyke & Coltrane, 1996). As a result, the lopsided division of family work is typically perceived as fair by wives and husbands.

To date, a few studies have examined some indicators of the first component of the distributive justice model, that is, various justice rules (Grote & Clark, 1998) or negotiation procedures (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, in press) used to justify an unequal division of family labor. In addition, several studies have simultaneously examined some indicators of the first, second, and third components of the model—justifications, social comparisons, and outcome values—in predicting women's and men's sense of fairness of the division of family labor (Freudenthaler & Mikula, 1998; Hawkins, Marshall, & Meiners, 1995). What the present study adds to the literature, we think, is a conceptually clearer examination of the role of both spousal comparisons and within-gender comparisons, as well as the role of some outcome values not previously considered, in predicting perceived unfairness of family work not only for wives but also for husbands. In addition, because of our three-panel longitudinal design, we were able to assess the causal nature of the prospective relations among social comparison processes and outcome values on the one hand and perceptions of fairness on the other, an important question seldom addressed in this literature.

Thus, we explored two possible explanations suggested by the distributive justice model for women perceiving a lopsided division of labor as fair. The first possibility (social comparisons) is that women may compare the amount of family work they do more frequently with other women who do similar amounts of work than with the spouse who performs less work. The second possibility (outcome values) is that (a) women enjoy and value family work and (b) women and their husbands perceive women to be especially competent at family work. Both of these outcome values buffer women from perceiving unfairness when they do more family work. We now consider each possibility in more detail.

### Might Social Comparisons Matter?

Thompson (1991) and Major (1993) conjectured that women and men may not perceive unfairness when the division of family labor is unequal because they make same-sex rather than spousal comparisons about the amount of family work they are performing. Major and her colleagues (Bylsma & Major, 1992; Major & Forcey, 1985; Major & Testa, 1989) addressed a similar paradox in the workplace, seeking to understand why women, who objectively are paid less than men for comparable work, often do not perceive their pay as unfair. They observed that when women in the workplace compare themselves to other women who are performing comparable work for comparable pay, they perceive their pay as fair and their job as satisfying, whereas when women compare themselves to men doing comparable work for higher pay, they judge their pay as less fair and are more dissatisfied with their jobs.

Applying these ideas to the domain of family labor, we, like Thompson (1991) and Major (1993), wondered whether making same-sex comparisons rather than spousal comparisons might serve a similar buffering function on perceptions of inequity. As Major (1993) conjectured, perhaps when wives compare the amount of family work they do with that of other women who do the same or more family labor, they should see their share as more fair, whereas when wives compare the typically greater amount of family work they do with the lesser amount their spouse does, they should perceive their share as less fair. Further, although husbands who compare themselves with their wives may view their share of family work as unfairly small, they may not see the situation as so unfair when they compare themselves with other men.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to test these types of predictions. At least two previous studies have assessed whether the types of comparisons wives make regarding family work influences how fair they perceive their own share to be (Freudenthaler & Mikula, 1998; Hawkins, Marshall, & Meiners, 1995). However, neither study looked at the type of within-sex comparison, in which wives compare their share of the family labor with that of other women and husbands compare their share with that of other men, as proposed by Major (1993) in the distributive justice model. In addition, we believe our definition of spousal comparisons ("How frequently do you think about the amount of housework you do and the amount done by your spouse?") is conceptually clearer than that used in previous work. In the Hawkins et al. (1995) study, a single-item measure of social comparison was used in which spousal comparison and within-gender comparison were defined as mutually exclusive: "When deciding if things are fair, I compare my husband's time with my time, not with other men." We think it possible, however, that an individual might compare both with the spouse and with others of the same sex as the spouse. Spousal comparison has also been operationalized as, "How much housework is your partner doing compared to you?" (Freudenthaler & Mikula, 1998). We suggest that reporting the amount of housework one does relative to the

spouse may be conceptually independent of the frequency of making comparisons about that division.

### Do Outcome Values, Such as Enjoyment and Competence, Make a Difference?

According to the distributive justice framework, a different, but not mutually exclusive, explanation as to why performing a disproportionate share of the family work may not lead wives to perceive unfairness is that doing so falls in line with what they expect, want, and value. As a result of being socialized to adhere to different gender role practices arising out of the traditional division of labor in society (Eagly, 1987), wives simply may expect to do more family work and may enjoy performing family tasks more than husbands. Even if wives do not enjoy family work for its own sake, some wives may enjoy the outcomes of performing these tasks because they are done in the service of the people they love (DeVault, 1987; Hochschild, 1989; Shelton & John, 1996; Thompson, 1991). In the present study, we examined whether enjoyment of family work buffers women against perceiving unfairness in the face of unequal division of family labor. To our knowledge, previous research has not looked at this question. We predicted that the more one enjoys performing family work tasks, the fairer one will perceive the division of family work.

Feeling competent at performing family work tasks might be another outcome value bearing on perceiving fairness in the division of family work. Such feelings may be prized in and of themselves and, therefore, may help to compensate for the fact that one has done more than one's share of family work. This idea is consistent with data from one study showing that wives and husbands who felt skilled at carrying out household tasks (combined with viewing these tasks as interesting, appreciated, and sociable) perceived more fairness of task distribution (Sanchez & Kane, 1996). We predicted that the more wives and husbands report being good at family work tasks, the fairer they will perceive the division of family work to be.

Still another outcome value that may buffer wives against perceptions of unfairness in the face of a lopsided division of labor is the sense that one's husband perceives one to be competent at performing family work. In effect, husbands' praise of and appreciation for their wives' domestic skills, along with their own claimed incompetence, may constitute a subtle form of resistance to sharing housework (Deutsch, 1999). Nevertheless, feeling sincere appreciation from one's spouse, like feeling competent, also might compensate for doing a disproportionately large share of the family labor. Consistent with this reasoning are several studies demonstrating that when wives feel valued or appreciated for performing family work tasks, they perceive greater fairness of the division of labor, even though they do more than their husbands (Blair & Johnson, 1992; Hawkins, Marshall, & Allen, 1998; Hawkins et al., 1995; Sanchez & Kane, 1996). In our study we predicted that the more participants report that their spouse thought they were good at family work tasks, the fairer they would perceive the division of family work.

### General Overview

We assessed our predictions using data from a longitudinal study of married couples crossing the transition to first parenthood. We assumed that we, like many before us, would find that wives, regardless of employment status, performed a disproportionately large share of the family labor and that this distribution would become even more skewed after the birth of a first child (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1999). We also expected that not all wives or husbands would perceive this situation to be unfair and we sought to identify factors that buffer against such perceptions. On the basis of Thompson's (1991) and Major's (1993) distributive justice framework, we hypothesized the existence of four such buffers: (a) a high frequency of same-sex comparisons combined with a relatively low frequency of comparisons with the spouse, (b) enjoying family work tasks, (c) feeling competent at family work tasks, and (d) feeling that one's spouse perceives one as competent at these tasks.

The focus of the present research is in line with that of several previous studies on couples making the transition to parenthood that examined the mechanisms by which an unequal division of family work may or may not adversely affect marital quality. Findings from this earlier literature showed that an asymmetrical division of labor was least debilitating to wives' marital quality when it did not violate their expectations regarding how much of the housework their husband would do after their baby was born (Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988). Further, these results held particularly for wives who were not strongly committed to those expectations and demonstrated a more traditional gender identity (Hackel & Ruble, 1992).

Using three panels of data from our longitudinal study—during the pregnancy, 6 months postpartum, and 12 months postpartum—permitted us not only to test our hypotheses twice cross-sectionally but also to examine links between variables prospectively. Our ability to test causal pathways in this study is another important contribution to the family work literature (see Coltrane, 2000). In particular, we were interested in examining the causal nature of the longitudinal relations between the frequency of making social comparisons or outcome values and perceived unfairness in family work inasmuch as the distributive justice model presents social comparisons and outcome values as two primary and ultimate determinants of perceived fairness of the division of family work (Major, 1993).

Although we were especially interested in factors potentially buffering wives from perceiving unfairness in family work, we included both wives and their husbands in our study. Most previous research on the issue of perceiving injustice in the family has not done this (see Mikula, 1998). Doing so allowed us to see whether husbands' perceptions of the division of family work matched that of their wives (suggesting objective inequities in family work) versus not matching (suggesting considerable distortion on at least one couple member's part). It also allowed us to ascertain the extent to which the hypothesized model of perceived fairness for wives is consistent with that for husbands.



## Method

### Participants

The data from this study were drawn from a three-panel longitudinal study of married couples across the transition to parenthood. Other studies based on this data set included Clark and Grote (1998), Grote and Clark (1998), and Grote and Clark (2001). One hundred eighty-one first-time expectant parents participated before the birth at Time 1, during wives' middle trimester of pregnancy ( $M = 5$ th month,  $SD = 1$  month), after the birth when the baby was about 6 to 7 months old (Time 2), and when the child was about 12 to 15 months old (Time 3).

The majority of parents were recruited from prenatal childbirth education classes in three local urban hospitals. Other participants were recruited through the electronic bulletin boards at two urban universities. Initially, 210 married couples agreed to participate in this study. Ninety-five percent ( $N = 200$ ) of these couples returned the questionnaires and completed the phone interviews before the birth of the first child (Time 1). Ninety-two percent ( $N = 185$ ) of those couples completed the Time 2 assessment when the baby was about 6 months old. Of these Time 2 couples, 98% ( $N = 181$ ) completed the final assessment when their baby was about 1 year old (Time 3). The overall attrition rate in the study from Time 1 to Time 3 was 9.5%.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, for this study, we used three panels of data for 181 married couples. At Time 1, couples had been married an average of 3 years ( $SD = 3.2$ ). The mean age of women was 31 years, and the mean age of men was 32 years. Couple members were mostly Caucasian (171 women and 166 men). A small percentage of ethnic groups made up the rest of the sample. Overall, the participants were well educated: 77% of the women and 75% of the men had obtained college or graduate degrees. The rest (except for one man) had concluded their education with a high school or vocational school degree.

At Time 1, 76% of the women and 92% of the men worked full-time, 13% of the women and 5% of the men worked part-time, and 11% of the women and 3% of the men were not employed. At Time 2, 40% of the women and 90% of the men worked full-time, 35% of the women and 6% of the men worked part-time, and 25% of the women and 4% of the men were not employed. Time 3 employment status was the same as that for Time 2.

The number of hours worked per week was measured as a categorical variable (e.g., 1 = 10 hr or less; 2 = 11–34 hr; 3 = 35–50 hr; 4 = 50 hr or more). On average at Times 1 and 2, respectively, working women worked fewer hours per week ( $M = 2.9$ ;  $M = 2.6$ ) than did working men ( $M = 3.3$ ;  $M = 3.2$ ),  $F(1, 150) = 38.7$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $F(1, 114) = 51.5$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Salary range and family income were measured as categorical variables (e.g., 1 = under \$10,000; 2 = \$11,000–\$25,000; 3 = \$26,000–\$35,000; 4 = \$36,000–\$50,000; 5 = \$51,000–\$75,000; 6 = \$76,000–\$100,000; and 7 = over \$100,000). At Times 1 and 2, working husbands ( $M = 3.4$ ;  $M = 3.7$ ) earned more than working wives ( $M = 3.1$ ;  $M = 3.0$ ), respectively,  $F(1, 148) = 13.5$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $F(1, 120) = 15.6$ ,  $p < .01$ . Across the transition to parenthood for both women and men, the family income range stayed the same, on average \$51,000 to \$75,000.

### Procedure

Participating wives and husbands received identical questionnaires in the mail at Times 1, 2, and 3 and were instructed not to discuss them with their spouse until they had completed them. Within a week after the mailed questionnaires were completed at

Time 1 and Time 2, an interviewer talked with each member of the couple by phone to encourage the couple's continued participation in the study and to collect further data. The mailed questionnaire at Time 3 was considerably shorter than those at Times 1 and 2 to minimize sample attrition.

### Measures

*Perceived fairness of the division of household and child care tasks.* In this study, as Coltrane (2000) has recommended, we focused on time-consuming, less optional, routine household tasks rather than on less frequent, more flexibly scheduled and/or more optional domestic tasks, such as paying the bills or doing minor household repairs. At both Time 1 and Time 2, participants were asked about how fair they thought the division was of each of four routine household tasks (i.e., grocery shopping, cleaning the house, preparing the meals, and doing the laundry). At Time 2, the participants were asked how fair the division was of each of eight child care tasks (i.e., feeding the baby during the day, night feeding, changing diapers, giving baths, taking the baby to the doctor, soothing the baby when fussy, staying or returning home to care for the baby when sick, and arranging child care). At Time 3, we assessed perceived fairness of housework and childcare tasks, each by a single-item measure (in the shorter survey at this time period). Responses were rated on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = *not very* to 5 = *very*). For wives and husbands, respectively, alpha coefficients were .63 and .67 at Time 1 and .70 and .72 at Time 2 for perceived fairness of the division of housework and .78 and .83 for perceived fairness of child care distribution at Time 2.

*What did perceived fairness of the division of family work mean to our participants?* To see what perceived fairness meant to wives and husbands, additional measures were included in the study that were expected to relate to perceptions of fairness. For each of the four household tasks at Time 1 and Time 2 and for each of the eight child care tasks at Time 2, the following three questions were asked: "If you could change the amount of this task you do, would you do less, more, or do you do about the right amount?"; "Would you like more or less of your spouse's participation in this task, or does he/she do about the right amount?"; and "Do you feel you deserve more or less of your spouse's participation in doing this task, or does he/she do the right amount?" A 5-point scale (1 = *much less*, 2 = *a little less*, 3 = *about right*, 4 = *a little more*, 5 = *much more*) was used to rate each question.

These three measures for housework at Time 1 and Time 2 and for child care at Time 2 were significantly intercorrelated ( $r$  values ranged from .44 to .85) for both wives and for husbands. In particular, "liking more spouse participation" was highly correlated ( $r$  values  $>.76$ ) with "deserving more spouse participation" for wives and husbands with respect to housework at Time 1 and Time 2 and to child care at Time 2. As a result, an 8-item scale was

<sup>1</sup> We examined whether those who dropped out of the study after Time 1 differed significantly from those who remained at Times 2 and 3, with respect to age, length of marriage, race/ethnicity, work status, salary, and family income. We found only 2 out of 12 possible differences for wives and husbands at Time 1. Proportionately more African American women,  $\chi^2(3, N = 179) = 23.6$ ,  $p < .01$ , and more African American men,  $\chi^2(5, N = 179) = 23.5$ ,  $p < .01$ , did not continue in the study after Time 1. These results are consistent with evidence obtained from a review of the marital literature (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) that those from minority backgrounds are less likely to remain in longitudinal studies.

formed by combining the four liking and four deserving household items. Similarly, a 16-item liking/deserving scale was formed for child care. For wives and husbands, respectively, alpha coefficients for the liking/deserving measures were .83 and .80 at Time 1 and .82 at Time 2 with respect to housework and .85 and .86 at Time 2 with respect to child care. We also combined the four items pertaining to changing the amount of housework tasks one does (Question 1) into a 4-item "change" scale. For wives and husbands, respectively, we found alpha coefficients of .67 and .71 at Time 1 and .57 and .72 at Time 2 for this change measure. Similarly, we created an 8-item change measure with respect to child care tasks at Time 2. Alpha coefficients for this change measure were .67 for wives and .71 for husbands.

*Division of household and child care tasks.* At both Time 1 and Time 2, but not at Time 3, participants were asked about the division of four routine household tasks: grocery shopping, cleaning the house, preparing the meals, and doing the laundry. At Time 2 participants were asked about the division of eight child care tasks: day feeding, night feeding, changing diapers, giving baths, going to the doctor, soothing when fussy, caring for the baby when sick, and organizing the child care arrangements. Participants rated the amount of each task they had performed relative to their spouse during the last two months using a 5-point scale (1 = spouse mostly, 2 = spouse more, 3 = both equally, 4 = self more, and 5 = self mostly). For wives and husbands, respectively, alpha coefficients were .64 and .60 at Time 1 and .63 and .63 at Time 2 for the index of housework tasks and .72 and .75 at Time 2 for the index of child care tasks.

*Frequency of making social comparisons about housework and child care.* At Times 1, 2, and 3, participants were asked about the frequency with which they made specific social comparisons about family work tasks. When we piloted this measure with a small group of married people, we found that the word "compare" evoked negative reactions. To elicit less reactance from respondents, we substituted the phrase "think about" for "compare." We asked, "When thinking about the total amount of household or child care tasks you currently do, how frequently do you think about the amount you do and the amount done by each of the following individuals (i.e., mother, father, male or female friend, spouse, sister, brother, male or female coworker, male or female neighbor, male or female relative)?" A 5-point frequency of comparison scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *not very often/a little*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *very often*) was used to rate each comparison referent.

To test whether frequency of making same-sex comparisons about housework and child care was linked with fairness judgments, we formed composite indices of the frequency of making comparisons at Times 1 and 2 with female referents (i.e., mother, female friend, sister, female coworker, female neighbor, and female relative) and with male referents (father, male friend, brother, male coworker, male neighbor, and male relative). At Time 3 (due to the shorter survey), we formed two-item indices of the frequency of making same-sex comparisons with one's same-sex parent and same-sex friend. The alpha coefficients for the index of same-sex comparisons where wives reported comparing with other women were .72 at both Times 1 and 2 and .66 at Time 3 for housework and .64 at Time 2 and .57 at Time 3 for child care. The alpha coefficients for the index where husbands compared with other men were .82 at Time 1, .76 at Time 2, and .81 at Time 3 for housework and .62 at Time 2 and .75 at Time 3 for child care. In general, the indices of same-sex comparisons about housework and child care were moderately and significantly correlated with spousal comparisons for wives and husbands at Times 1, 2, and 3 ( $r$  values ranged from .32 to .50).

*Outcome values.* At both Time 1 and Time 2, participants were asked about enjoyment of and competence of self and spouse in performing the four routine household tasks and the eight child care tasks. Participants were asked the following questions separately for each of the housework and child care tasks: "How enjoyable do you find this task?" "How good are you at this task?" "How good does your spouse think you are at this task?" and "How good is your spouse at this task?" A 5-point rating scale (1 = *not very* to 5 = *very*) was used for this measure. Note that we assessed spouse appreciation in an indirect fashion by asking participants how good their spouse thought they were at family work tasks. A benefit of this indirect measure of appreciation is that it assesses not only how complimentary, but also how critical, participants thought their spouse was of their task performance. Again we formed composite 4- or 8-item indices for each of these variables pertaining to housework and child care, respectively.

With regard to enjoyment of tasks for wives and husbands, respectively, the alpha coefficients were .53 and .67 at Time 1 and .65 and .66 at Time 2 for housework and .76 and .78 at Time 2 for child care. The alpha coefficients for wives and husbands, respectively, regarding competence at tasks were .59 and .61 at Time 1 and .67 and .59 at Time 2 for housework and .81 and .76 at Time 2 for child care. The alpha coefficients for the perception that one's spouse thinks one is good at family work tasks were, for wives and husbands, respectively, .68 and .61 at Time 1 and .63 and .62 at Time 2 for housework and .80 and .78 at Time 2 for child care. The alpha coefficients for perceiving one's spouse to be good at family work tasks were, for wives and husbands, respectively, .60 and .68 at Time 1 and .54 and .68 at Time 2 for housework and .73 and .82 at Time 2 for child care.

All of the outcome values pertaining to housework and child care were significantly intercorrelated for wives and husbands at Time 1 and Time 2. In particular, "you are good at tasks" and "spouse thinks you are good at tasks" were highly associated ( $r$  values  $\geq$  .83) for wives and husbands with respect to housework and child care. Thus, we decided to combine these two variables into a single factor (2-item scale) which showed good alpha coefficients for wives and husbands, respectively: .82 and .80 at Time 1 and .83 and .80 at Time 2 for housework and .89 and .88 at Time 2 for childcare.

## Results

### *Descriptive Analyses*

Tables 1 and 2 show the means and standard deviations for the main variables in the study across the three time periods for the total sample. We performed Time 1 to Time 2 analyses regarding housework with time and spouse as repeated measures using mixed model multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) (see Table 1). For social comparisons about housework, results showed that overall, wives compared more frequently than did husbands with the spouse,  $F(1, 176) = 19.7, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.33, and with same-sex others,  $F(1, 178) = 136.7, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.87. The frequency of making same-sex comparisons declined over time,  $F(1, 178) = 48.0, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.52, with the decline being greater for husbands,  $F(1, 178) = 29.1, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.40.

With respect to outcome values regarding housework, enjoyment increased over time for wives and husbands,  $F(1, 177) = 26.5, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.39. Wives reported more competence in performing housework than did hus-

Table 1  
Means (and Standard Deviations) for the Study Variables Pertaining to Housework

Variable	Housework						Significant effects
	Wives			Husbands			
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	
Social comparisons							
With spouse	3.35 (0.99)	3.43 (0.97)	3.07 (1.07)	3.00 (1.04)	3.10 (0.99)	2.78 (1.16)	Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>b</sup> Time 2 to Time 3 <sup>a,b</sup>
With same-sex others	2.29 (0.68)	2.16 (0.63)	2.17 (0.86)	2.01 (0.75)	1.83 (0.63)	1.78 (0.90)	Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>a,b,c</sup> Time 2 to Time 3 <sup>b</sup>
Outcome values							
Enjoyment of tasks	2.82 (0.74)	2.95 (0.77)		2.71 (0.84)	2.93 (0.81)		Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>a</sup>
Self good at tasks	4.04 (0.63)	4.06 (0.67)		3.48 (0.79)	3.71 (0.70)		Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
Spouse thinks you are good at tasks	4.01 (0.67)	4.04 (0.65)		3.27 (0.77)	3.49 (0.76)		Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
Spouse good at tasks	3.54 (0.71)	3.51 (0.69)		4.23 (0.57)	4.24 (0.57)		Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>b</sup>
Perceived fairness	3.75 (0.76)	3.56 (0.81)	3.62 (1.08)	3.57 (0.85)	3.57 (0.79)	3.54 (0.98)	Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>a,c</sup>
Total division of tasks	3.68 (0.87)	3.89 (0.81)		2.49 (0.86)	2.36 (0.77)		Time 1 to Time 2 <sup>a,b,c</sup>

Note. *N* = 177 to 179 wives and husbands with complete data. Blank spaces refer to data not collected at Time 3.  
<sup>a</sup>Significant overall effect for time (*p* < .05). <sup>b</sup>Significant overall effect for spouse (*p* < .05). <sup>c</sup>Significant Time × Spouse interaction effect (*p* < .05).

bands,  $F(1, 177) = 47.3, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.52, and feeling competent in this area increased over time,  $F(1, 177) = 16.4, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.30, notably for husbands,  $F(1, 177) = 16.20, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.31. Similarly, wives to a greater extent than husbands reported that their spouse thought they were competent at housework,  $F(1, 177) = 81.9, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.68.

Perceiving that one's spouse thought one competent at housework increased from Time 1 to 2,  $F(1, 177) = 15.90, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.30, again particularly for husbands,  $F(1, 177) = 10.6, p < .01$ , effect size = 0.24. Husbands were more likely than wives to report overall that their spouse was competent at housework,  $F(1, 177) = 148.3, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.93.

Table 2  
Means (and Standard Deviations) for the Study Variables Pertaining to Child Care

Variable	Child care						Significant effects
	Wives			Husbands			
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	
Social comparisons							
With spouse		3.52 (1.00)	3.03 (1.08)		3.28 (1.07)	2.78 (1.17)	Time 2 to Time 3 <sup>a,b</sup>
With same-sex others		2.45 (0.68)	2.29 (0.88)		2.01 (0.63)	1.96 (0.95)	Time 2 to Time 3 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
Outcome values							
Enjoyment of tasks		3.72 (0.69)			3.51 (0.71)		Time 2 <sup>b</sup>
Self good at tasks		4.61 (0.46)			3.84 (0.63)		Time 2 <sup>b</sup>
Spouse thinks you are good at tasks		4.64 (0.42)			3.80 (0.65)		Time 2 <sup>b</sup>
Spouse good at tasks		4.05 (0.65)			4.68 (0.40)		Time 2 <sup>b</sup>
Perceived fairness		4.06 (0.64)	3.91 (1.00)		3.83 (0.74)	3.72 (1.03)	Time 2 to Time 3 <sup>a,b</sup>
Total division of tasks		4.02 (0.60)			2.10 (0.58)		Time 2 <sup>b</sup>

Note. *N* = 177 to 179 wives and husbands with complete data. Blank spaces refer to data not collected at Time 3.  
<sup>a</sup>Significant overall effect for time (*p* < .05). <sup>b</sup>Significant overall effect for spouse (*p* < .05). <sup>c</sup>Significant Time × Spouse interaction effect (*p* < .05).

This document is copyrighted by the American Psychological Association or one of its allied publishers. This article is intended solely for the personal use of the individual user and is not to be disseminated broadly.

Perceived fairness of housework distribution decreased from Time 1 to 2,  $F(1, 176) = 4.60, p < .05$ , effect size = 0.16, notably for wives,  $F(1, 176) = 6.1, p < .05$ ; effect size = 0.19, as the distribution of housework became more asymmetrical across time,  $F(1, 177) = 3.9, p < .05$ ; effect size = 0.15. Wives reported that they did more housework overall than did husbands,  $F(1, 177) = 156.41, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.94, and after the birth this disparity increased, with wives performing more housework and husbands doing less,  $F(1, 178) = 12.5, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.27.

In addition, we performed Time 2 to Time 3 analyses regarding family work, with time and spouse as repeated measures, using mixed model MANOVAS. The frequency of making spousal comparisons about housework declined over time,  $F(1, 176) = 32.7, p < .001$ ; effect size = 0.43, but wives still compared more frequently than did husbands both with the spouse,  $F(1, 177) = 14.7, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.29, and with same-sex others,  $F(1, 176) = 34.8, p < .001$ ; effect size = 0.44. In Table 2 we see that the frequency of making spousal comparisons about child care dropped from Time 2 to Time 3,  $F(1, 176) = 67.3, p < .001$ ; effect size = 0.62, as did the frequency of making same-sex comparisons about child care,  $F(1, 176) = 11.4, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.25, particularly for husbands,  $F(1, 176) = 8.1, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.21. In this domain as well, wives compared more frequently than husbands both with the spouse,  $F(1, 176) = 8.2, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.21, and with same-sex others,  $F(1, 176) = 55.9, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.56. Compared with husbands, wives were more likely to report enjoying child care,  $F(1, 178) = 11.1, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.25, being good at it,  $F(1, 178) = 195.1, p < .01$ ; effect size = 1.0, feeling that their spouse thought they were good at it,  $F(1, 178) = 226.8, p < .01$ ;

effect size = 1.10, and perceiving their spouse as less good at child care,  $F(1, 178) = 149.0, p < .01$ ; effect size = 0.91. Finally, perceived fairness of the division of child care declined over time,  $F(1, 176) = 4.7, p < .05$ ; effect size = 0.16, with husbands perceiving less fairness than wives overall,  $F(1, 176) = 12.9, p < .001$ ; effect size = 0.27.

In sum, most of the observed differences in Table 1 and 2 showed moderate to large effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). The effect sizes were small, however, for the decreases over time in perceived fairness of the division of housework and child care and for the increase over time in wives performing more of the housework than husbands.

### *What Did Perceived Fairness of the Division of Family Work Mean to Our Participants?*

We conducted zero-order correlations to examine what perceived fairness of division of family work meant to wives and husbands (see Table 3). For wives at Time 2, the less fair they perceived the division of family labor, the less work they wanted to do. Further, the less fair wives perceived the division of family work, the more participation they wanted and felt they deserved from their husbands at Time 1 and at Time 2. These results for wives are consistent with evidence from a previous study that when women perceive injustice in the division of household labor, they want and feel entitled to larger contributions to housework from their partners (Freudenthaler & Mikula, 1998). By contrast, the less fair husbands thought the division of family labor was, the more they wanted to do at Times 1 and 2 and the less participation they wanted and felt they deserved from their wives at Times 1 and 2. Thus, it appears that "perceived unfairness" means different things to wives and husbands. On a meta-level, however, each set of mean-

Table 3  
*Concurrent Correlations of Variables with Perceived Fairness of the Division of Family Work*

Variable	Wives					Husbands				
	Housework			Child care		Housework			Child care	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 2	Time 3	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 2	Time 3
Social comparisons										
With spouse	-.42**	-.32**	-.49**	-.24**	-.43**	-.24**	-.24**	-.23**	-.17*	-.26**
With same-sex others	-.14†	-.18*	-.24**	-.18*	-.18**	-.26**	-.20**	-.05	-.05	-.08
Outcome values										
Enjoyment of tasks	.30**	.40**		.38**		.28**	.28**		.32**	
Self good at tasks	.26**	.31**		.36**		.49**	.43**		.63**	
Spouse thinks you are good at tasks	.27**	.27**		.38**		.45**	.39**		.67**	
Spouse good at tasks	.38**	.43**		.59**		.04	.22**		.30**	
Fairness variables										
You would do less, the same, or more family work	-.08	.36**		.42**		-.30**	-.34**		-.35*	
You want/deserve your spouse to do less, the same, or more family work	-.28**	-.54**		-.66**		.14*	.34**		.40**	
Total division of tasks	.00	-.16*		-.15*		.33**	.30**		.32**	

Note.  $N = 177$  to  $181$  wives and husbands with complete data. Blank spaces refer to data not collected at Time 3. † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



Table 4  
*Regression Models Predicting Time 1 and Time 2 Perceived Fairness in Family Work From Respective Time 1 and Time 2 Social Comparisons and Outcome Values*

Variable	Wives			Husbands		
	Housework		Child care	Housework		Child care
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2	Time 2
Social comparisons						
Spouse	-.33**	-.25**	-.19**	-.13†	-.13†	-.08
Other women	-.00	-.02	-.09			
Other men				-.15*	-.10	-.01
Outcome values						
Enjoyment of tasks	.16*	.24**	.22**	-.01	.07	-.04
Self good at tasks and spouse thinks you are good	.09	.12†	.10	.47**	.33**	.65**
Spouse good at tasks	.32**	.31**	.52**	-.05	.09	.07

Note. Numbers represent beta values.  $N = 177$  to 181 wives and husbands with complete data. † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

ings implies a similar idea—that wives are doing too much family work, that the division of family work is less fair to wives than to husbands. This conclusion makes sense in light of the fact that the division of family work in this study favored husbands before and after the birth.

#### *Concurrent Links Between Social Comparisons or Outcome Values and Perceived Fairness of the Division of Family Work*

Zero-order correlations between types of social comparisons (spouse vs. same-sex) and perceived fairness of family work distribution, as well as between outcome values and perceived fairness, were examined (see Table 3). Results for wives and husbands were consistent with the prediction that spousal comparisons would be linked with lower perceptions of fairness before and after the birth. The prediction that same-sex comparisons would be associated with greater perceived fairness of the division of family labor was not supported for wives or husbands. Analyses revealed that the frequency of making same-sex comparisons was correlated with less perceived fairness for wives and husbands across the three time periods. Thus, the frequency of making same-sex comparisons did not buffer the effects of making spousal comparisons on perceived fairness of the division of family work, contrary to prediction. Results were consistent with the prediction that the more one enjoys family work tasks, the more one thinks one is good at these tasks, the more one's spouse thinks one is good at these tasks, and the more the spouse is seen to be good at these tasks, the more fair one perceives the division of family work.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Integrating the Evidence Pertaining to Perceiving Fairness in the Division of Family Work*

To determine the most consistent predictors of perceived fairness in family work, we conducted multiple regression analyses in which perceived fairness of housework or child care distribution was regressed onto both the social com-

parisons and outcome values at Time 1 and Time 2 (see Table 4). For wives before the birth, frequently comparing with the spouse predicted perceiving less fairness in housework distribution, whereas enjoyment of tasks and viewing the spouse as competent predicted perceiving greater fairness,  $F(5, 173) = 17.4, p < .01; R^2 = .33$ . Similarly, for husbands before the birth, frequently comparing with the spouse (marginally) and with other men was linked with perceiving less fairness of housework, whereas perceiving the self to be competent, along with the wife sharing this view, was related to perceiving more fairness,  $F(5, 173) = 14.6, p < .01; R^2 = .30$ .

After the birth, the models for wives' perceived fairness of the division of housework,  $F(5, 173) = 19.0, p < .01; R^2 = .35$ , and of child care,  $F(5, 173) = 28.2, p < .01; R^2 = .45$ , showed that frequently comparing their share with that of the spouse was once again a negative predictor, whereas enjoyment of tasks and perceiving the spouse to be competent at housework and child care were positive predictors of perceived fairness. For husbands, frequently comparing with the spouse was marginally linked with less perceived fairness of housework, whereas feeling competent at housework with the wife sharing this view was related to more perceived fairness,  $F(5, 169) = 9.9, p < .01; R^2 = .23$ . With respect to perceived fairness of child care, feeling competent at child care along with perceiving that one's wife

<sup>2</sup> When we controlled for division of housework or division of child care in the analyses, all the abovementioned correlations (with one exception) in Table 3 were still significant. In addition, we did not find any significant evidence indicating that the associations between social comparisons and perceived fairness of family work distribution, or outcome values and perceived fairness, were moderated by the work status of wives or husbands. Given that husbands' annual salary and weekly work hours at Times 1 and 2 were greater than that of wives, even when both worked full-time, we also examined whether these types of spousal differences predicted fairness of family work. We did not find any significant effects.



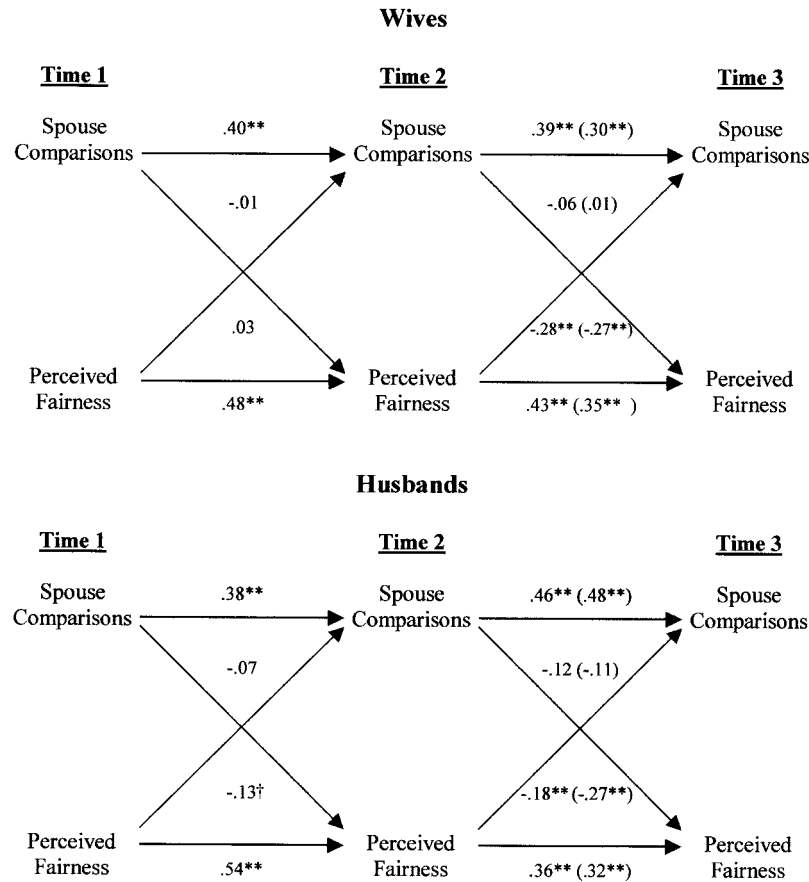


Figure 1. Standardized beta coefficients from models predicting Times 2 and 3 perceived fairness of family work distribution and Times 2 and 3 spousal comparisons. Coefficients not in parentheses pertain to perceived fairness in housework and spousal comparisons. Coefficients in parentheses pertain to perceived fairness in child care and spousal comparisons. † $p < .06$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

thought one was competent positively predicted perceived fairness for husbands,  $F(5, 170) = 29.0, p < .01; R^2 = .46$ . In sum, the regression results presented in Table 4 suggest that outcome values often buffer spouses from perceiving unfairness in household work, whereas making frequent comparisons often predicts perceiving unfairness.

#### *Examining the Prospective Links Between Social Comparisons or Outcome Values and Perceived Fairness of Family Work*

Using hierarchical regression analyses (Cohen & Cohen, 1983), we examined the nature of the longitudinal associations between perceived unfairness and social comparisons (or outcome values) from Times 1–2, controlling for the appropriate Time 1 variables, and from Times 2–3, controlling for the relevant Time 2 variables. Standardized beta coefficients are shown in Figure 1.

*Spousal comparisons and fairness.* For wives, the frequency of making spousal comparisons at Time 1 did not predict perceived fairness of housework distribution at Time 2, nor did perceived fairness of housework dis-

tribution at Time 1 predict the frequency of making spousal comparisons at Time 2. However, when wives perceived more unfairness in dividing housework and child care tasks at Time 2, they more frequently compared with their husband about housework and child care, respectively, at Time 3,  $F(2, 176) = 38.3, p < .01; F(2, 176) = 23.1, p < .01$ . On the other hand, the frequency of making spousal comparisons about family work at Time 2 did not reach significance in predicting perceived fairness at Time 3 for wives.

When husbands perceived more unfairness in housework distribution at Time 1, they were marginally more likely to compare with their wives about housework distribution at Time 2,  $F(2, 172) = 20.5, p < .01$ . Further, when husbands perceived more unfairness in dividing housework and child care tasks at Time 2, they were more likely to frequently compare their share of the housework and child care, respectively, with that of their wives,  $F(2, 172) = 33.7, p < .01; F(2, 172) = 45.4, p < .01$ . Conversely, making spousal comparisons at Time 1 and Time 2 did not yield significant links with perceived fairness at Time 2 or Time 3, respectively.

*Same-sex comparisons and fairness.* We also observed some prospective links between perceived fairness and making same-sex comparisons. Because the distributions of husbands' same-sex comparison variables were strongly skewed to the right, we performed a logarithmic transformation on these variables before performing the regression analyses. We found that when husbands perceived inequity in housework distribution at Time 1, they more frequently compared the amount they did with that of other men at Time 2 ( $\beta = -.12, p < .08$ ), controlling for earlier same-sex comparisons ( $\beta = .53, p < .01$ ),  $F(2, 172) = 42.18, p < .01$ . Similarly, when husbands perceived inequity in child care at Time 2, they made more frequent comparisons about child care with other men at Time 3 ( $\beta = -.14, p < .05$ ), controlling for Time 3 same-sex comparisons ( $\beta = .49, p < .001$ ),  $F(2, 172) = 30.7, p < .01$ . Likewise, when wives viewed their share of the child care at Time 2 as less fair, they more frequently compared the amount they did with that of other women at Time 3 ( $\beta = -.13, p < .07$ ), controlling for earlier same-sex comparisons ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ),  $F(2, 176) = 18.3, p < .01$ . None of the predictions regarding same-sex comparisons leading to subsequent perceptions of fairness of family work reached significance for wives or husbands. Finally, we did not find any significant prospective links between outcome values and perceived fairness, with one exception.<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

This study tested the viability of a two-factor model (e.g., social comparisons and outcome values) of perceived fairness of family work, derived from Thompson's (1991) and Major's (1987, 1993) distributive justice framework. Past literature reveals that women, working or not, perform a disproportionately high percentage of the family labor. They usually do not perceive this as unfair, however. In seeking to identify the factors that buffer wives and husbands against such perceptions of unfairness, we predicted that making same-sex comparisons (in contrast to making spousal comparisons), enjoyment of performing family work tasks, perceiving that one is competent at family tasks, and perceiving that one's spouse appreciated one's competence at family work, would be linked with more perceived fairness. In addition, we also tested whether social comparisons and outcome values prospectively predicted perceived fairness in family work, as had been hypothesized by Major (1993) in her distributive justice model.

### *Social Comparisons About Family Labor Matter, but Not as Expected*

First, as predicted, we observed that the more frequently wives compared their share of the family work with that of their husbands, both before and after the birth, the less fair they perceived the division of family labor to be. This finding is consistent with previous evidence for wives that making spousal comparisons is linked with less perceived fairness in housework (Hawkins et al., 1995) and with data from laboratory and field studies (Bylsma & Major, 1992;

Crosby, 1982), showing that the more women compare their pay with that of other men, who are receiving higher pay for performing comparable work, the less pay equity they perceive. We also found new evidence that when husbands frequently compared their family work participation with that of their wives, they, too, perceived the division of labor as less fair, before and after the birth.

One of the goals of our research was to examine whether women who are more likely to compare the amount of family work they do with that of other women are buffered from perceiving unfairness in family work. In assessing this possibility, we first found that the spouse, rather than same-sex others, was the comparison referent of choice for both wives and husbands. Next, we were surprised to observe that the frequency of making same-sex comparisons was related to less perceived fairness of the division of family work for wives and husbands. In other words, making any type of comparison was associated with lower perceptions of equity. Further, the frequency of making spousal comparisons was a generally more consistent predictor of less perceived fairness than was the frequency of making same-sex comparisons.

Why would members of a couple more frequently think about the amount of family work their spouses were doing than about what their same-sex referents were doing? Within the home, there is typically just one comparison person—one's spouse. Further, the relative amount of family work done by oneself and one's spouse may simply be so visible and salient that one cannot avoid making comparisons with the spouse, even if to do so is painful. (On the other hand, pay comparisons in most work situations are not forced on one—they must be sought out actively. Given their more covert nature, one may choose to compare to those with whom one feels most comfortable asking for such information and/or to those who seem likely to provide the least painful information.)

Why might the practice of women and men comparing their levels of pay with others of the same sex buffer perceptions of inequity in the workplace, whereas when they compare with same-sex others on the amount of family labor performed, this did not provide a similar buffer? We can only speculate. One explanation as to why making same-sex comparisons might be linked with less perceived fairness in family work addresses the question of motivation—that is, why wives and husbands might be motivated to make comparisons in the first place. We suspect that it is when wives feel distressed about unfairness regarding the division of family work they are motivated to make comparisons, whether spousal or same sex. We suspect, further, that wives who feel overburdened find evidence of unequal family work to support their feeling and perceptions—evidence that is not difficult to find (see Bel-

<sup>3</sup> For husbands, perceiving oneself to be competent at housework at Time 1 (along with the sense that the wife shares this view), predicted greater perceived fairness of housework distribution at Time 2 ( $\beta = .16, p < .05$ ), controlling for earlier perceived fairness ( $\beta = .47, p < .01$ ),  $F(2, 174) = 40.1, p < .01$ .

sky & Pensky, 1988) and that is then brought to the attention of their husbands. Their husbands may then compare with their wives, feel guilty and acknowledge the unfairness, but do little to redress the problem.

In other words, we suggest the distress about perceived inequity in family work (from oneself or from one's spouse) comes first and prompts the comparisons. This explanation has been neglected in the literature and is inconsistent with the hypothesized relations between social comparisons and perceived fairness of family work distribution in the distributive justice model (Major, 1993). We find considerable support for it, however, in our prospective analyses where we observe a consistent pattern of perceived inequity driving spousal comparisons (and sometimes same-sex comparisons).

### *Outcome Values With Respect to Family Labor Make a Difference*

*Enjoyment of family work.* As predicted, we found that wives' enjoyment of performing family work tasks was a consistent predictor of their perceived fairness at both time periods, controlling for other factors as well. This finding is in line with prior evidence that acting in accord with the traditional female sex role, rather than not acting this way, is linked with greater satisfaction for professionally employed wives (Biernat & Wortman, 1991). Wives may enjoy family work for its own sake because of gender-role socialization experiences (Eagly, 1987) or because performing family work is a way of showing care for loved ones (Thompson, 1991). Men's enjoyment, controlling for other factors, was not a consistent predictor of perceived fairness. This makes sense, inasmuch as many men have been socialized to view their provider function as the primary way they show care for their families (Simon, 1995).

*Competence and spousal appreciation.* Another outcome value, in addition to enjoyment, was the perception that one is competent at family work tasks along with the sense that one's spouse thought one was competent. This combination, however, did not significantly predict wives' perceived fairness after the birth, controlling for other seemingly more important predictors, such as enjoyment of family tasks and feeling that one's spouse is competent at such tasks. Perhaps when wives are praised for their domestic competence they sense that their husbands' appreciation is as self-interested as it is sincere (Deutsch, 1999) and this awareness may dilute the effect of spousal appreciation on wives' perceptions of fairness. Of interest, in contrast to wives, the husbands' sense of competency at family work, along with the wives' sharing this view, was the most consistent predictor of husbands' perceived fairness before and after the birth, controlling for other variables. Perhaps when husbands felt a sense of spousal appreciation for their family work rather than criticism, they simply did more, thereby perceiving their contributions to be fairer. We empirically tested this notion and observed that the more husbands thought their wives viewed them as competent, the more husbands contributed to housework ( $r = .16, p < .05$ ) and child care ( $r = .33, p < .01$ ).<sup>4</sup> This result is

consistent with prior evidence that when wives had less critical attitudes about the quality of their husbands' involvement in child care, their husbands participated to a greater degree (Beitel & Parke, 1998).

*Perceived competence of the spouse at family labor.* Although we did not make this prediction at the outset, our results also showed that perceiving the spouse to be competent at carrying out family work tasks was one of the strongest predictors of perceived fairness of division of family work for wives, before and after the birth. When husbands do a good job in the housework and child care domains, wives not only may feel relieved of this burden, but also may feel that their husbands care for them and are responsive to their personal needs (Rosen, 1987). Further, when wives report that their husbands are good at family work tasks, husbands may also be making greater contributions to these tasks that, in turn, should enhance perceived fairness for wives. Again, when we empirically tested this notion, we observed that wives' perceptions that their husbands were good at family work tasks were linked with wives' reports that their husband did more of these tasks—housework ( $r = -.36, p < .01$ ) and child care ( $r = -.39, p < .01$ ). This finding fits with prior evidence that when the husband is skilled at certain housework tasks (Atkinson & Huston, 1984) or when his wife thinks he is competent at child care responsibilities (Beitel & Parke, 1998), he is more likely to participate in family work.

### Study Limitations and Conclusions

The strength of our study is limited by several factors: the biases inherent in self-report measures, the categorical versus continuous measures of hours worked and family income, the two one-item fairness measures used at Time 3, the subjective measures of division of family work instead of an estimation of raw hours or proportion of time spent on tasks, the fairness measure that did not directly specify fair to whom, and the possibly restricted generalizability of our findings beyond middle-to upper-middle class couples and beyond the transition to parenthood stage of family life. The couples in our study were moving from a normatively less stressful period of family life to the stage of becoming new parents, a more challenging and demanding time. The findings from this study also may be pertinent to engaged couples traversing the transition to marriage or to long-time parents crossing into the empty nest, when familiar modes of interacting are disrupted, new stressors encountered, and gender roles reexamined. The issue of generalizability of our results to other family life stages is a fruitful area for future research.

We believe, nevertheless, that this study makes a number of contributions to the literature. First, our results provide a viable explanation (based on previously untested hypotheses from the distributive justice framework) as to why wives

<sup>4</sup> We should acknowledge the very reasonable alternative that when husbands participate more in housework and childcare, the wives view them as more competent.



as a whole do not perceive unfairness in the lopsided distribution of family labor. In sum, we observed that outcome values, though different for each gender, buffered the perceptions of inequity associated with comparing with the spouse for both wives and husbands at two different stages of family life—before and after the birth of the first child. Both wives and husbands are prone to see inequities in this domain (a) when they frequently compare the amount of family work they do with the amount their spouse does but not when (b) wives enjoy performing family work tasks or perceive their husbands as competent in family work, or (c) when husbands see themselves as competent at family work and feel appreciated by their wives in carrying out these tasks. Further, our prospective analyses revealed that once an individual perceives inequity in family work distribution, this leads him or her to make frequent spousal comparisons about the relative amounts of family work performed, thereby triggering a cycle that may not be easily resolved unless the issue of the lopsided division of family labor is seriously addressed by the couple.

### Implications for Application and Public Policy

Existing childbirth education classes in hospitals and clinics do little to address potential difficulties in the couple relationship that are likely to become exacerbated after first childbirth and negatively affect favorable infant development. Given the findings from this study, it is important for couples to deal with the implications of perceived inequities early on in the marriage before permanent damage develops (Markman, 1981). Anticipatory steps can be taken to help couples deliberately (a) examine their expectations regarding the division of family work; (b) plan to divide the family work according to their levels of enjoyment, perceptions of competence, and sense of fairness; and (c) learn constructive ways of dealing with conflict without wives' suppressing it (Deutsch, 1999). For example, when perceptions of unfairness arise, husbands can assume more responsibility for housework and child care, whereas wives can learn to reduce criticism of their partner's efforts and offer reinforcement for less than perfect task completion (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Starting out in the first year of family life with painstaking, but worthwhile work on achieving gender equality in task sharing will lay the foundation for how gender roles can be revised in the broader spectrum of society (Okin, 1989).

### References

- Allen, S. M., & Hawkins, A. J. (1999). Maternal gatekeeping: Mother's beliefs and behaviors that inhibit greater father involvement in family work. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *61*, 199–212.
- Atkinson, J., & Huston, T. L. (1984). Sex role orientation and division of labor in early marriage. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *46*, 330–345.
- Barnett, R. C., & Baruch, G. K. (1987). Mother's participation in childcare: Patterns and consequences. In F. J. Crosby (Ed.), *Spouse, parent, worker: On gender and multiple roles* (pp. 91–108). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Beitel, A., & Parke, R. D. (1998). Paternal involvement in infancy: The role of maternal and paternal attitudes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *12*, 268–288.
- Belsky, J., & Pensky, E. (1988). Marital change across the transition to parenthood. *Marriage and Family Review*, *12*, 133–156.
- Benin, M. H., & Agostinelli, J. (1988). Husbands' and wives' satisfaction with the division of labor. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *50*, 349–361.
- Biernat, M., & Wortman, C. B. (1991). Sharing of home responsibilities between professionally employed women and their husbands. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 844–860.
- Blair, S. L. (1993). Employment, family, and perceptions of marital quality among husbands and wives. *Journal of Family Issues*, *14*, 189–212.
- Blair, S. L., & Johnson, M. P. (1992). Wives' perceptions of the fairness of the division of household labor: The intersection of housework and ideology. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *54*, 570–581.
- Bond, J., Galinsky, E., & Swanberg, J. (1998). *The National Study of the Changing Workforce*. New York: Families and Work Institute.
- Bylsma, W. H., & Major, B. (1992). Two routes to eliminating gender differences in personal entitlement. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *16*, 193–200.
- Clark, M. S., & Grote, N. K. (1998). Why aren't indices of relationship costs always negatively related to indices of relationship quality? *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *1*, 2–17.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Cohen, J., & Cohen, P. (1983). *Applied multiple regression/correlation analysis for the behavioral sciences*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Coltrane, S. (2000). Research on household labor: Modeling and measuring the social embeddedness of routine family work. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 1208–1233.
- Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. (1999). *When partners become parents: The big life change for couples*. New York: Basic Books.
- Crosby, F. (1982). *Relative deprivation and working women*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deutsch, F. (1999). *Halving it all: How equally shared parenting works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- DeVault, M. L. (1987). Doing housework: Feeding and family life. In N. Gerstel & H. Gross (Eds.), *Families and work* (pp. 178–191). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ferree, M. M. (1991). The gender division of labor in two-earner marriages: Dimensions of variability and change. *Journal of Family Issues*, *12*, 158–180.
- Freudenthaler, H. H., & Mikula, G. (1998). From unfulfilled wants to the experience of injustice: Women's sense of injustice regarding the lopsided division of household labor. *Social Justice Research*, *11*, 289–312.
- Grote, N. K., & Clark, M. S. (1998). Distributive justice norms and family work: What is perceived as ideal, what is applied, and what predicts perceived fairness? *Social Justice Research*, *11*, 243–269.
- Grote, N. K., & Clark, M. S. (2001). Perceiving unfairness in the family: Cause or consequence of marital distress? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *80*, 281–293.
- Hackle, L., & Ruble, D. (1992). Changes in the marital relationship after the first baby is born: Predicting the impact of expect-

- tancy disconfirmation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62, 944–957.
- Hawkins, A., Marshall, C., & Allen, S. (1998). The Orientation Toward Domestic Labor questionnaire: Exploring dual-earner wives' sense of fairness about family work. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12, 144–258.
- Hawkins, A. J., Marshall, C. M., & Meiners, K. M. (1995). Exploring wives' sense of fairness about family work: An initial test of the distributive justice framework. *Journal of Family Issues*, 16, 693–721.
- Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. New York: Viking.
- Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method, and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 3–34.
- Kluwer, E. S., Heesink, J. A. M., & Van de Vliert, E. (in press). The division of family work across the transition to parenthood: A (longitudinal) test of the distributive justice framework. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.
- Komter, A. (1989). Hidden power in marriage. *Gender and Society*, 3, 187–216.
- Lennon, M. C., & Rosenfeld, S. (1994). Relative fairness and the division of housework: The importance of options. *American Journal of Sociology*, 100, 506–531.
- Major, B. (1987). Gender, justice, and the psychology of entitlement. *Review of Personality and Social Psychology*, 7, 124–148.
- Major, B. (1993). Gender, entitlement, and the distribution of family labor. *Journal of Social Issues*, 49, 141–159.
- Major, B., & Forcey, B. (1985). Social comparisons and pay evaluations: Preferences for same-sex and same-job wage comparisons. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 393–405.
- Major, B., & Testa, M. (1989). Social comparison processes and judgments of entitlement and satisfaction. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 25, 101–120.
- Markman, H. J. (1981). Prediction of marital distress: A 5-year follow-up. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 49, 760–762.
- Mikula, G. (1998). Division of household labor and perceived injustice: A growing field of research. *Social Justice Research*, 11, 215–241.
- Okin, S. (1989). *Justice, gender, and the family*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pleck, J. (1985). *Working wives/working husbands*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Pyke, K., & Coltrane, S. (1996). Entitlement, obligation, and gratitude in family work. *Journal of Family Issues*, 17, 60–82.
- Robinson, J., & Spitze, G. (1992). Whistle while you work? The effect of household task performance on women's and men's well-being. *Social Science Quarterly*, 73, 844–861.
- Rosen, E. I. (1987). *Bitter choices: Blue-collar women in and out of work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ruble, D. N., Fleming, A. S., Hackel, L. S., & Stangor, C. (1988). Changes in the marital relationship during the transition to first time motherhood: Effects of violated expectation concerning division of household labor. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 55, 78–87.
- Sanchez, L., & Kane, E. W. (1996). Women's and men's constructions of perceptions of housework fairness. *Journal of Family Issues*, 17, 358–387.
- Shelton, B., & John, D. (1996). The division of household labor. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 299–322.
- Simon, R. W. (1995). Gender, multiple roles, role meaning, and mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 36, 182–184.
- Thompson, L. (1991). Family work: Women's sense of fairness. *Journal of Family Issues*, 12, 181–196.
- Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1989). Gender in families; Women and men in marriage, work, and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 845–871.

Received February 14, 2001

Revision received November 1, 2001

Accepted November 7, 2001 ■

### E-Mail Notification of Your Latest Issue Online!

Would you like to know when the next issue of your favorite APA journal will be available online? This service is now available to you. Sign up at <http://watson.apa.org/notify/> and you will be notified by e-mail when issues of interest to you become available!