

## Perceptions of Injustice in Family Work: The Role of Psychological Distress

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During the transition to parenthood, perceived imbalances in family work typically increase. Little is known, however, about which individuals are especially prone to perceive unfairness in the division of family work during this time. Using data from a longitudinal study of married couples expecting their first child and controlling for marital distress and other relevant variables, we observed that when husbands were psychologically distressed, both they and their wives were subsequently more likely to perceive unfairness to wives in the division of family work. No analogous significant and prospective effects of wives' levels of distress on their own or their husbands' perceptions of unfairness were found. We also found that once wives perceived the amount of child care they did as unfair, both they and their husbands were later more likely to experience psychological distress, controlling for marital distress and other relevant variables.

*keywords:* perceived unfairness, family work, individual distress, psychological distress, division of labor

The period following the birth of a couple's first child is very stressful for both husbands and wives (Cowan & Cowan, 1999). Child care is added to household responsibilities, sleep is interrupted, and the child draws each spouse's attention away from the other. On average, imbalances in the division of family work (i.e., housework and child care) increase, with the wife assuming greater responsibility, and marital satisfaction drops (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). Yet, little is known about which individuals will be especially prone to construe imbalances in family work as unfair and to experience a downturn in marital quality.

In an earlier paper (Grote & Clark, 2001), we examined a characteristic of relationships—specifically, the extent to which the relationship is characterized by distress (i.e., relationship conflict or dissatisfaction) as a potential predic-

tor of increases in perceived unfairness of the division of housework following the transition to parenthood. Using data from a longitudinal study of married couples becoming new parents, we found that wives' and husbands' reports of marital conflict and wives' reports of marital dissatisfaction before the birth led to increases in perceived unfairness in housework distribution after the birth (whereas unfairness did not increase conflict or dissatisfaction over this transition). Our original prediction (and finding) was that couples experiencing relationship conflict and dissatisfaction would be especially prone to scrutinizing who has contributed what to the relationship, would do so in a selective manner, and would find evidence of increasing unfairness in household responsibilities over the transition to parenthood. Non-distressed couples, we hypothesized, would be less likely to do so, which is what we found.

In the present article, we report on our examination of whether a different variable, individual differences in psychological distress, independently predicts increases in perceived unfairness in family work following the transition to parenthood. We use the same longitudinal data set as in the previous study (Grote & Clark, 2001). Before presenting our rationale, however, it is important to note that (a) individual differences in psychological distress are conceptually distinct from relationship distress and that (b) marital distress was controlled for when testing for the prospective effects of husbands' and wives' psychological distress on their perceptions of unfairness.

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### Why We Consider Individual Differences in Psychological Distress to Be Independent of Marital Distress

Marital distress is a characteristic of a relationship. Psychological distress, as conceptualized and measured in the present article, is a characteristic of an individual. Relationship distress cannot exist independently of the relationship; psychological distress can result from the relationship or from many nonrelationship sources, such as one's job, health, or social network. Conflict necessarily involves both members of a couple; individual distress can be present in one member and not the other. Although individual distress may give rise to conflict or dissatisfaction in a relationship, and relationship distress may give rise to individual distress, they are, in fact, distinct conceptual variables. The Grote and Clark (2001) article focused on differences in marital distress (i.e., conflict and dissatisfaction) as predictors of increased perceived unfairness across the transition to parenthood; the present research focuses on individual differences in psychological distress (both within the self and within the partner) as independent predictors of increased perceived unfairness across the transition to parenthood.

### Why Might Individual Differences in a Person's Own Level of Psychological Distress Influence That Person's Perceptions of Unfairness?

We assume that when persons are not feeling personally distressed, they rarely think about issues of unfairness in their marriages even if objective inequities exist. Other researchers have made a similar point (e.g. Holmes & Lvinger, 1994), and this view fits well with the recent findings of researchers who have examined the effects of moods and emotions on processing information. Such researchers have long noted that one of the functions of positive affective states is to signal to people that "all is well" and that one can proceed with life as usual (Bless, 2001; Frijda, 1988; Ruder & Bless, 2003). It also fits well with earlier reported findings that women who feel competent at and enjoy doing family work and feel appreciated by their husbands for their efforts do not view a disproportionate share of the work to be unfair (Grote, Naylor, & Clark, 2002; Major, 1993).

Things change, however, when people experience negative affective states, such as depression, anxiety, and hostility. Negative affect signals that all is not well (Schwarz, 2001) and triggers a careful consideration of the situation (Bless, 2001; Schwarz, 2001). The implications for understanding the effects of personal distress on judgments of whether the division of family work in one's marriage is fair are straightforward. Individual psychological distress involving depression, anxiety, and hostility should trigger a consideration of just who has been and is contributing what labor to the family. Particularly after the birth of a child, imbalances in which the wife does more family work are likely to be found (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). Both wives, who are distressed and typically doing more, and husbands,

who are distressed and typically doing less, are likely to perceive unfairness to the wife as a result.

Psychological distress may simultaneously prime and foster negative views of oneself, other people, the world, and the future (Beck, 1967). For example, distressed individuals with depressive symptoms pay more attention to negative information in their social environments (Matthews & Antes, 1992), are more likely to attend to and seek out negative information about themselves (Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992), are more rejected by important others (Hooley, Orley, & Teasdale, 1986), and engage in more conflictual or difficult interpersonal interactions (Hammen, 1999), which they are more likely to remember (Bower, 1981) and ruminate over (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Likewise, distressed individuals with symptoms of anxiety tend to view themselves negatively, as unable to cope, and tend to view other people and the world negatively, as threatening or dangerous (Salkovskis, 1996). Distressed individuals who are angry and hostile tend to perceive themselves as victims of injustice and perceive other people as threatening and unfair (Beck, 1999).

The bottom line is that distressed individuals would seem to be especially prone to search for and to find evidence of unfairness in the distribution of family labor. Thus, we predicted that, over and above marital distress, individual differences in psychological distress would predict increases in perceived unfairness of family work across the transition to parenthood.

### Why Might Individual Differences in a Partner's Levels of Psychological Distress Influence Perceptions of Unfairness?

We suspected that beyond a person's own distress, having a distressed partner might also predict increases in perceived unfairness over the transition to parenthood, albeit for distinct theoretical reasons. Spouses of depressed persons experience considerable psychological burden and, as a result, are themselves vulnerable to increased depressive symptoms (Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Fadden, Bebbington, & Kuipers, 1987; Jacob, Frank, Kupfer, & Carpenter, 1987; Kessler, McLeod, & Wethington, 1985). Spouses of depressed persons report restrictions in social and leisure activities, a drop in family income, and a strain on the marriage (Fadden et al., 1987). They also report more disruptions in their lives attributable to their worry about the depressed partner and the partner's feelings of worthlessness and loss of pleasure and interest in life (Jacob et al., 1987). Moreover, personally distressed spouses are likely to be more self-focused (Carver & Scheier, 1981) and, therefore, less attentive to their partners or to household chores.

The challenge of living with a distressed spouse is likely to be exacerbated by new parenthood. The birth of a child not only increases family labor but also brings new parenting roles to be mastered and juggled with old roles. A distressed spouse may be especially unlikely to provide emotional support or to pick up family work. What had seemed manageable before may seem unmanageable and

unfair when one has both a child for whom to care and a spouse who is not only emotionally unsupportive or unhelpful but also demanding of care. For these reasons we expected that having a distressed spouse would increase perceived unfairness postpartum.

We further expected that any effects of having a distressed spouse on perceived unfairness might be exaggerated for wives relative to husbands for a number of reasons. First, Kessler, McLeod, and Wethington (1985) have proposed that women are more vulnerable than are men to distress experienced in their social environment. In developing this idea, these authors cite evidence that women are more sensitive than are men to the needs of others and feel a greater responsibility for meeting those needs. When faced with a new child and a distressed spouse, wives may feel particularly high pressure to meet the needs of both and, simultaneously, particularly unfairly burdened with household demands. Supporting this reasoning is recent evidence suggesting that the psychological burden of living with a distressed spouse by itself is greater for wives than for husbands. For example, wives of depressed husbands experience more psychological distress than do husbands of depressed wives. Wives also tend to feel more subjective burden in terms of the emotional and physical strain, their husband becoming upset and critical, and the financial strain (Benazon & Coyne, 2000). For these reasons we predicted that having a distressed spouse would predict greater increases in perceived unfairness across the transition to parenthood, more so for wives than for husbands.

### Why Might Perceived Unfairness, Once Activated, Increase Individual Distress?

As noted, we suspect that when people are happy and nondistressed, they rarely think about unfairness in their relationships. However, we do not entirely dismiss the traditional notion that perceptions of unfairness, in terms of feeling underbenefited or overbenefited, can lead to psychological distress (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Once perceptions of unfairness have been stimulated, those perceptions can subsequently lead to increased individual distress. Indeed, in previous research conducted with the same sample as in the present study (Grote & Clark, 2001), we found that marital distress in the form of conflict and dissatisfaction was a significant prospective predictor of subsequent perceptions of unfairness of housework, which, in turn, predicted more marital distress later. Similarly, we proposed that not only can individual distress in an individual or in that individual's spouse lead to perceptions of unfairness in family work but also perceptions of unfairness on the part of an individual and also that individual's spouse, once activated, can heighten distress. For example, when an individual feels unjustly burdened by the amount of family work he or she performs (or underbenefited according to equity theory), the perceived injustice is likely to further heighten distress. Moreover, when an individual's spouse feels unjustly burdened by family work responsibilities, the spouse may communicate this perception directly

or indirectly to that individual, causing distress. Further, we expected these processes to be heightened and more observable after the birth of a child, when housework and child care demands increase. In addition, inasmuch as wives typically do more family work than husbands after the birth of a first child, we expected that wives would be more likely than husbands to perceive underbenefiting inequity in family work. Thus, we predicted that perceived unfairness of family work to wives would predict wives' and husbands' later psychological distress.

## The Present Study

To test whether the evidence is consistent with our proposed distress → perceived unfairness → increased distress cycle for self and spouse, we used data from three panels of a longitudinal study of married couples across the transition to first parenthood. First panel data were collected while the wife was about 6 months pregnant. Panel 2 and Panel 3 data were collected at 6 months and 12 months following the birth of the child. A measure of depression, anxiety, and hostility symptomatology (for both wife and husband) served as our index of individual psychological distress at all points in time. Perceptions of unfairness were obtained at all points in time. We controlled for marital conflict and dissatisfaction, as well as for division of family work, in our main analyses.

## Method

### Participants

The data from this study were drawn from three waves of a longitudinal study of married couples across the transition to first parenthood.<sup>1</sup> Two hundred ten couples initially agreed to participate in the study. Ninety-five percent ( $N = 200$ ) of these couples returned the questionnaires and completed the phone interviews before the birth (Time 1). Of those couples, 92% ( $N = 185$ ) completed the first post-birth assessment when the baby was 6 months old (Time 2). Of the 12 couples that did not continue at Time 2, two experienced miscarriages, four separated, five declined to participate, and one moved out of the area and could not be reached. Of the couples who participated at Time 2, 98% ( $N = 181$ ) completed the final post-birth assessment when the baby was 12–15 months old (Time 3). Of the 4 couples that did not finish the study at Time 3, one separated and three declined to participate. The overall attrition rate in the study from Time 1 on was 9.5%.

We examined whether those who dropped out of the study after Time 1 differed significantly from those who remained at Time 2 and Time 3 with respect to age, length of marriage, work status, race/ethnicity, 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,  $\chi^2(3, N = 193) =$

<sup>1</sup> Other studies based on this data set include Clark and Grote (1998), Grote and Clark, (1998), Grote and Clark (2001), and Grote et al. (2002). Although some of these other studies have also focused on predictors of perceived unfairness of family work, this article is the first to examine the prospective relation between perceived unfairness and psychological distress.



23.6,  $p < .01$ , and more African American men,  $\chi^2(5, N = 193) = 23.5$ ,  $p < .01$ , did not continue in the study after Time 1. These results are consistent with evidence obtained from a recent review of the marital literature (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), suggesting that those who are from minority backgrounds are less likely to remain in longitudinal studies.

In sum, 181 married couples participated in the study at three time periods: once during the middle trimester of pregnancy ( $M =$  fifth month,  $SD = 1$  month; Time 1), once when their baby was 6–8 months old (Time 2), and once when their baby was 12–15 months old (Time 3). At Time 1, couples had been married an average of 3 years ( $SD = 3.2$  years), with a range of 0 to 17 years. The mean ages of women and men were 31 years and 32 years, respectively. Couple members were mostly Caucasian (171 women, 166 men), with a small percentage of the other ethnic groups (9 women, 16 men).

The participants were well-educated: 23% of the women and 25% of the men had concluded their education with several years of high school, had obtained a high school or vocational school degree, or had taken some college courses; 43% of the women and 35% of the men had concluded their education with a college degree; and 34% of the women and 40% of the men had achieved a graduate degree.

Participants were asked to report their employment status by selecting one of these options: 1 = full-time employed; 2 = part-time employed; or 3 = unemployed. Before the baby was born, 76% of the women and 91% 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. Six months after the birth, 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. For the women who worked, the mean salary range at Time 1 and Time 2 was \$26,000 to \$35,000. For the men who worked, the mean salary range at Time 1 was \$26,000 to \$35,000, and after the birth it ranged from \$36,000 to \$50,000.<sup>2</sup> The family income range stayed the same, on average, \$51,000 to \$75,000 for Time 1 to Time 2.

## Procedure

The primary method of recruitment was from prenatal childbirth education classes in three urban hospitals in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Other participants were recruited through the electronic bulletin boards at two universities in Pittsburgh. Participating wives and husbands signed consent forms and received identical questionnaires at Times 1, 2, and 3 in the mail and were instructed not to discuss them with their spouse. Within a week after the mailed questionnaires were completed at Time 1 and Time 2, an interviewer called 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 prevent sample attrition.

**Psychological distress.** To assess psychological distress, we used the combination of the Depression, Anxiety, and Hostility subscales of the Symptom Checklist–90–Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1994). Participants rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*), the extent to which they experienced a symptom within the past 7 days, including the current day. The Depression, Anxiety, and Hostility subscales were highly correlated for husbands and wives at all three time periods ( $r$ s ranged from .62 to .93). The alpha coefficients for wives' and husbands' psychological distress, respectively, were

.91 and .90 at Time 1, .93 and .93 at Time 2, and .93 and .92 at Time 3.<sup>4</sup>

**Perceived fairness of the division of family work (i.e., household and child care tasks).** At both Time 1 and Time 2, participants were asked about the fairness of each of four routine household tasks (i.e., grocery shopping, cleaning the house, preparing the meals, and doing the laundry). At Time 2 they were asked about the fairness of the division 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).<sup>5</sup> At Time 3, we assessed perceived fairness of housework and child care tasks, each by a single-item measure because of the shorter survey. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not very*) to 5 (*very*). For wives and husbands, respectively, alpha coefficients for perceived fairness of housework were .63 and .67 at Time 1 and .70 and .72 at Time 2, and for perceived fairness of child care were .78 and .83 at Time 2.

**Control variables.** In the final regression analyses, we controlled for marital distress variables (conflict and dissatisfaction), which we had found to prospectively predict perceived unfairness in housework (Grote & Clark, 2001). We also controlled for division of housework and child care in all of the regression analyses.

**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 (if appropriate), 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 2 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, .63 and .63 for the Time 2 index of housework tasks, and .72 and .75 for the Time 2 index of child care tasks. We did not assess Time 3 division of housework or child care because of the shorter survey and the

<sup>2</sup> Although men's average annual salary increased in range across the transition to parenthood, this does not necessarily imply that men's average annual salary per se increased dramatically.

<sup>3</sup> Research procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Carnegie Mellon University, Magee Women's Hospital, Allegheny General Hospital, and Shadyside Hospital.

<sup>4</sup> We conducted principal-components factor analyses with varimax rotation on the items comprising the Depression, Anxiety, and Hostility subscales for wives and husbands at each time period. All items loaded at .40 or above on a large General Distress factor at Time 1 (with one exception for wives and five for husbands), at Time 2 (with two exceptions for both wives and husbands), and at Time 3 (with two exceptions for wives and three for husbands).

<sup>5</sup> Our measures of the division of family work and perceived fairness of that division are similar to those used in previous research (Ruble et al., 1988) in which participants typically rate the amount of various types of housework and child care tasks they do relative to their spouse and answer additional questions about each type of task (e.g., how fair they think their share is).

fact that division of family work after the birth of a first child typically stabilizes by 6 months postpartum and remains relatively stable up to 18 months postpartum (Cowan & Cowan, 1999).

**Marital conflict.** Marital conflict was measured by Braiker and Kelley's (1979) 5-item scale. The scale contains items reflecting recurrent, generalized conflict and negativity with respect to serious problems in the marital relationship. The scale items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not very often or not much*) to 5 (*very often or very much*). The alpha coefficients were .72 for wives and .67 for husbands at Time 1, .78 for wives and .75 for husbands at Time 2, and .79 for wives and .73 for husbands at Time 3.

**Marital satisfaction.** To measure marital satisfaction, we used the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale developed by Hendrick (1988). Items in this scale tap both positive and negative attitudes about the marriage. Items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not much*) to 5 (*very much*). The alpha coefficients for wives and husbands, respectively, were .75 and .74 at Time 1, .86 and .79 at Time 2, and .92 and .85 at Time 3.

## Results

Because the frequency distribution of the variable psychological distress showed a strong positive skew for husbands at Times 1, 2, and 3, we used an inverse transformation on this variable. Husbands' perceived fairness of housework distribution at Times 1, 2, and 3 was moderately and negatively skewed, so we reflected this variable and applied a log transformation. Husbands' perceived fairness of child care at Times 2 and 3 was strongly negatively skewed. We reflected this variable and applied an inverse transformation. Because the distribution of wives' psychological distress at Times 1, 2, and 3 revealed a moderate positive skew, we used a square-root transformation. Wives' perceived fairness of housework showed a mild to moderate negative skew; therefore, we reflected this variable and used a square-root transformation for Times 1 and 2 and a log transformation for Time 3. Wives' perceived fairness of child care at Times 2 and 3 revealed a moderate negative skew. Similarly, we reflected this variable and used

a log transformation. These transformed variables were used in all the analyses, except for Table 1 data.

### *Descriptive Statistics for the Variables of Interest in the Study*

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the variables (before transformation) in the study across the three time periods for the total sample. In general, couple members reported a moderate degree of perceived fairness of family work distribution and a moderate level of psychological distress over the course of the study. Using the scoring system for the SCL-90-R Depression, Anxiety, and Hostility subscales (Derogatis, 1994), we observed that across the three time periods the means for wives' and husbands' symptoms of distress were above the normative mean for a nondistressed sample, but not manifestly clinical in nature. Correlations between wives' and husbands' psychological distress at Times 1, 2, and 3, respectively, were .19 ( $p < .05$ ), .21 ( $p < .01$ ), and .25 ( $p < .01$ ). Correlations between wives' and husbands' perceived unfairness of housework at Times 1, 2, and 3, respectively, were .30 ( $p < .01$ ), .41 ( $p < .01$ ), and .28 ( $p < .01$ ). Correlations between wives' and husbands' perceived unfairness of child care at Times 2 and 3, respectively, were .35 ( $p < .01$ ) and .43 ( $p < .01$ ).

Using repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) with time and spouse as repeated measures (see Table 1), we observed that perceived fairness of housework distribution declined from Time 1 to Time 2,  $F(1, 176) = 4.6, p < .05$ , but the effect was significant only for wives,  $F(1, 176) = 6.1, p < .05$ . Perceived fairness of division of child care also declined from Time 2 to Time 3,  $F(1, 176) = 4.7, p < .05$ , and wives perceived this domain to be more fair than husbands did overall,  $F(1, 176) = 12.9, p < .01$ . We also examined whether wives' and husbands' perceived fairness varied as a function of their employment status (full-time, part-time, unemployed) at Times 1 and 2

Table 1  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables*

Variable	Women			Men		
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Perceived fairness, housework Time 1–Time 2 <sup>a,c</sup>	3.75 (0.76)	3.56 (0.81)	3.62 (1.08)	3.57 (0.85)	3.57 (0.79)	3.54 (0.98)
Perceived fairness, child care Time 2–Time 3 <sup>a,b</sup>		4.06 (0.63)	3.91 (1.00)		3.83 (0.74)	3.72 (1.03)
Psychological distress Time 1–Time 2 <sup>a,b,c</sup> Time 2–Time 3 <sup>a,b</sup>	0.82 (0.43)	0.97 (0.59)	0.57 (0.51)	0.67 (0.40)	0.70 (0.47)	0.39 (0.37)
Division of housework Time 1–Time 2 <sup>a,b</sup>	3.68 (0.87)	3.89 (0.81)		3.51 (0.86)	3.64 (0.77)	
Division of child care Time 2 <sup>b</sup>		4.01 (0.60)			3.90 (0.57)	

*Note.* Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.  $N_s = 177$ – $179$  wives and husbands with complete data. Time 1 = 2nd trimester of pregnancy; Time 2 = 6 months postpartum; Time 3 = 12–15 months postpartum. Division of housework and child care: 1 = husband does more; 3 = both equal; 5 = wife does more. Empty cells indicate the variable was not measured at Time 1 or Time 3.

<sup>a</sup> Significant overall effect for time at  $p < .05$ . <sup>b</sup> Significant overall effect for spouse at  $p < .01$ . <sup>c</sup> Significant Time  $\times$  Spouse interaction effect at  $p < .05$ .

Table 2  
*Within-Spouse Correlations Among Perceived Unfairness of Family Work Distribution, Division of Family Work, and Psychological Distress*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Time 1 Unfairness, housework	—	.01	.25**	<b>.49**</b>	.02	.31**	.03	.10	<b>.36**</b>	.17*	.05
2. Time 1 Division of housework	.28**	—	.11	.11	<b>.64**</b>	.02	.34**	.01	.22**	.16*	.03
3. Time 1 Psychological distress	.24**	.04	—	.18*	.10	.19**	.03	<b>.51**</b>	.12	.15*	<b>.41**</b>
4. Time 2 Unfairness, housework	<b>.53**</b>	.22**	.31**	—	.15*	.44**	.06	.16*	<b>.49**</b>	.42**	.13
5. Time 2 Division of housework	.22**	<b>.63**</b>	.04	.24**	—	.06	.42**	.01	.23**	.22**	.14
6. Time 2 Unfairness, child care	.33**	.04	.32**	.56**	.08	—	.15*	.16*	.35**	<b>.36**</b>	.02
7. Time 2 Division of child care	.07	.28**	.09	.09	.45**	.28**	—	.08	.11	.18*	.07
8. Time 2 Psychological distress	.22**	.00	<b>.65**</b>	.40**	.00	.31**	.03	—	.21**	.22**	<b>.65**</b>
9. Time 3 Unfairness, housework	<b>.33**</b>	.10	.19*	<b>.38**</b>	.17*	.30**	.20**	.25**	—	.72**	.28**
10. Time 3 Unfairness, child care	.29**	.16*	.22**	.33**	.18*	<b>.39**</b>	.23**	.28**	.68**	—	.32**
11. Time 3 Psychological distress	.20**	.02	<b>.52**</b>	.25**	.06	.23**	.07	<b>.61**</b>	.19*	.24**	—

Note. Values above the diagonal represent correlations for wives' perceived unfairness, wives' reports of the division of family work, and wives' psychological distress. Values below the diagonal represent correlations for husbands' perceived unfairness, husbands' reports of the division of family work, and husbands' psychological distress. Test-retest correlations are presented in boldface. *N*s = 179–180 wives and husbands with complete data. Division of housework and child care: 1 = husband does more; 3 = both equal; 5 = wife does more. Time 1 = 2nd trimester of pregnancy; Time 2 = 6 months postpartum; Time 3 = 12–15 months postpartum.  
 \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

but found only one instance of evidence for this. Unemployed wives ( $M = 4.1$ ), compared with wives employed full-time ( $M = 3.7$ ) or part-time ( $M = 3.7$ ) at Time 1, perceived the division of housework at Time 1 to be more fair,  $F(2, 176) = 3.7, p < .05$ .

Psychological distress increased from Time 1 to Time 2,  $F(1, 177) = 11.3, p < .01$ , particularly for wives,  $F(1, 177) = 8.3, p < .01$ , who reported more distress overall than husbands,  $F(1, 177) = 53.7, p < .01$ . Further, from Time 2 to Time 3, distress decreased for both wives and husbands over time,  $F(1, 177) = 108.7, p < .01$ , and overall, wives still reported more distress than husbands,  $F(1, 177) = 50.0, p < .01$ . Housework increased for wives from Time 1 to Time 2,  $F(1, 177) = 12.5, p < .01$ , with wives reporting that they did more housework than husbands reported wives did,  $F(1, 177) = 53.3, p < .01$ . Wives reported that they did more child care at Time 2 than husbands reported wives doing,  $F(1, 178) = 14.6, p < .01$ .

*Within-Spouse and Cross-Spouse Correlations Among Perceived Unfairness of Family Work, Division of Family Work, and Psychological Distress at and Across the Three Time Periods*

With respect to within-spouse correlations presented in Table 2, wives' and husbands' perceptions of unfairness of housework and child care distribution were significantly related to their own personal distress concurrently and across time in all cases but one. Similarly, cross-spouse correlations for wives in Table 3 showed that wives' perceptions of unfairness of the division of housework and child care were significantly linked with husbands' psychological distress concurrently and across time in 9 out of 11 cases. Husbands' perceptions of unfairness in family work were significantly associated with their wives' distress in only 2 out of 11 cases, however. In sum, wives' and husbands' within-spouse correlations and wives' cross-spouse correlations reveal a reliable connection between perceived

injustice and individual distress that is consistent with previous research. Table 2 shows that division of housework and child care were modestly related to perceived injustice in almost every case for wives and husbands.<sup>6</sup> As shown in

<sup>6</sup> We wondered whether wives' work status at Time 2 (full-time, part-time, unemployed) might have moderated the Time 2 and Time 3 associations between wives' and husbands' reports of the division of family work and their perceived unfairness of that division. For wives, we conducted four regression analyses, examining the main effects of wives' work status and wives' division of housework and child care, as well as the interaction term (Work Status × Division), on wives' perceptions of unfairness of housework and childcare. In one instance, we found that the significant main effects of wives' Time 2 work status and wives' Time 2 division of child care on their perceived unfairness of child care at Time 3 were qualified by a significant interaction ( $\beta = -1.56, p < .05$ ),  $F(3, 175) = 4.50, p < .01$ . Specifically, full-time employed wives reported a stronger association between doing more child care and perceiving more injustice than did part-time employed wives or unemployed wives ( $r = .35, p < .01$ , vs.  $r = .17, ns$ , vs.  $r = -.13, ns$ , respectively). Because of this finding, we subsequently controlled for this moderation effect in the analysis predicting wives' perceived unfairness of child care at Time 3 (shown in Table 4) but found that the significant results remained unchanged. For husbands, we similarly conducted four regression analyses and observed in one instance that the significant main effects of wives' Time 2 work status and husbands' Time 2 reports of the division of housework on their perceived unfairness of housework at Time 3 were qualified by a significant interaction ( $\beta = -1.05, p < .05$ ),  $F(3, 174) = 4.00, p < .01$ . In other words, husbands of full-time employed wives reported a stronger association between their wives' doing more housework and their own perceptions of unfairness to wives in the division of housework at Time 3 than did husbands of part-time employed wives or husbands of unemployed wives ( $r = .31, p < .01$ , vs.  $r = .21, ns$ , vs.  $r = -.12, ns$ , respectively). Because of this finding, we subsequently controlled for this moderation effect in the regression predicting husbands' perceived unfairness of housework at Time 3 (shown in Table 4) but found that the significant results remained the same.

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Table 3  
*Cross-Spouse Correlations Among Perceived Unfairness of Family Work Distribution, Division of Family Work, and Spouse's Psychological Distress*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Time 1 unfairness, housework	—	.01	.14	.49**	.02	.31**	.03	.14	.36**	.17*	.09
2. Time 1 division of housework	.28**	—	.05	.11	.64**	.02	.34**	.05	.22**	.16*	.03
3. Time 1 spouse's psychological distress	.02	.25**	—	<b>.25**</b>	.05	<b>.20*</b>	.05	.65**	<b>.17*</b>	<b>.20**</b>	<b>.52**</b>
4. Time 2 unfairness, housework	.53**	.22**	.00	—	.15*	.44**	.06	.12	.49**	.42**	<b>.17*</b>
5. Time 2 division of housework	.22**	.63**	.08	.24**	—	.06	.42**	.05	.23**	.22**	.07
6. Time 2 unfairness, child care	.33**	.04	<b>.18*</b>	.56**	.08	—	.15*	.13	.35**	.36**	<b>.22*</b>
7. Time 2 division of child care	.07	.28**	.01	.09	.45**	.28**	—	.03	.11	.18*	.03
8. Time 2 spouse's psychological distress	.02	.09	.51**	.08	.07	.14	.05	—	<b>.20**</b>	<b>.25**</b>	.61**
9. Time 3 unfairness, housework	.33**	.10	<b>.18*</b>	.38**	.17*	.30**	.20**	.13	—	.72**	.14
10. Time 3 unfairness, child care	.29**	.16*	.04	.33**	.18*	.39**	.23**	.10	.68**	—	<b>.22**</b>
11. Time 3 spouse's psychological distress	.01	.03	.41**	.09	.07	.15	.05	.65**	.10	.10	—

Note. Values above the diagonal represent correlations for wives' perceived unfairness, wives' reports of the division of family work, and husbands' psychological distress. Values below the diagonal represent correlations for husbands' perceived unfairness, husbands' reports of the division of family work, and wives' psychological distress. Division of housework and child care: 1 = husband does more; 3 = both equal; 5 = wife does more. Correlations in boldface show the significant concurrent and prospective associations between perceived unfairness in family work and spouse's psychological distress. Time 1 = 2nd trimester of pregnancy; Time 2 = 6 months postpartum; Time 3 = 12–15 months postpartum.  
 \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Tables 2 and 3, we found only one instance of support for links between wives' and husband's psychological distress and their reports of the division of family work. Husbands reported at Time 1 that when their wives did more of the housework, their wives were more distressed (see Table 3).

*What Did Perceived Fairness of Division of Housework Mean to Our Participants?*

In previous results using this longitudinal data set (Grote & Clark, 2001; Grote et al., 2002), we found that 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 this division, the more participation they wanted and felt they deserved from their husbands at Time 1 and at Time 2. 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" meant to wives that they felt underbenefited and to husbands that they felt overbenefited. In other words, both wives and husbands seem to evaluate the division of family work similarly, that

Table 4  
*Regression Models for Previous Psychological Distress Predicting Time 2 and Time 3 Perceived Unfairness of Family Work*

Distress/other predictors	Wives			Husbands		
	Unfairness, housework		Unfairness, child care	Unfairness, housework		Unfairness, child care
	Time 2	Time 3	Time 3	Time 2	Time 3	Time 3
Previous perceived unfairness	.45**	.41**	.25**	.45**	.29**	.27**
Time 2 division of housework or child care	<b>.12†</b>	<b>.17**</b>	.10	<b>.13*</b>	.12	<b>.15*</b>
Previous marital conflict	<b>.14†</b>	-.03	-.02	<b>.14†</b>	.03	.03
Previous marital dissatisfaction	.02	<b>.17*</b>	<b>.17†</b>	.01	.12	.13
Previous psychological distress, self	.01	.07	.07	<b>.17*</b>	.07	<b>.16*</b>
Previous psychological distress, spouse	<b>.14*</b>	<b>.11†</b>	<b>.18*</b>	.06	.07	.00

Note. Standardized beta coefficients are presented. Boldface values represent marginally significant or significant effects. Previous predictors for Time 2 perceived unfairness take place at Time 1. Previous predictors of Time 3 perceived unfairness take place at Time 2. Time 3 division of housework and child care was not assessed. Division of housework and child care: 1 = husband does more; 3 = both equal; 5 = wife does more.  
 †  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

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is, that it was less fair to wives. This result fits with prior findings during the transition to parenthood (see Belsky & Pensky, 1988).

In our study we also examined whether wives performed the bulk of the family work before and after the birth of their child, taking into account wives' employment status (full-time, part-time, not employed). A repeated measures MANOVA for Time 1, with one within-group variable (spouse) and one between-group variable (wife's employment status), revealed that before the birth wives assumed a larger share of the housework ( $M = 3.7$ ) than did husbands ( $M = 2.5$ ),  $F(1, 176) = 3.9$ ,  $p = .05$ . Similar repeated measures MANOVAs at Time 2 showed that at 6 to 8 months after the birth, wives compared with husbands performed a greater amount of the housework ( $M = 3.9$  vs.  $M = 2.4$ ),  $F(1, 177) = 185.7$ ,  $p < .01$ , and child care ( $M = 4.0$  vs.  $M = 2.1$ ),  $F(1, 178) = 699.8$ ,  $p < .01$ . The magnitude of this effect, however, was moderated by employment status for both housework,  $F(2, 176) = 4.9$ ,  $p < .01$ , and child care,  $F(2, 177) = 23.3$ ,  $p < .01$ . Not employed and part-time employed wives, respectively, assumed a greater share of the housework ( $M_s = 4.1, 4.2$ ) and child care ( $M_s = 4.2, 4.3$ ) relative to their husbands ( $M_s = 2.5, 2.4$  for housework;  $M_s = 1.9, 1.9$  for child care) than did full-time working wives ( $M = 3.6$  for housework;  $M = 3.7$  for child care), who, nonetheless, still performed significantly more of these tasks than their husbands ( $M = 2.6$  for housework;  $M = 2.4$  for child care). We did not measure division of housework and child care at Time 3.

### *Does Psychological Distress Uniquely Predict Perceived Unfairness of Family Work?*

*Analyses for distress and wives' perceived unfairness with the control variables.* We predicted that psychological distress in an individual or in that individual's spouse would be prospectively associated with the individual's later perceived unfairness of family work distribution. To determine whether wives' and husbands' distress uniquely predicted wives' perceived unfairness in family work, we used hierarchical regression analyses and controlled for other relevant predictors. Previous longitudinal work using the same sample has shown that perceived unfairness is prospectively predicted by increased marital conflict for wives and husbands and by increased marital dissatisfaction for wives (Grote & Clark, 2001). Perceiving inequity in family work is also related to wives' and husbands' reports of how much family work they actually do (Bird, 1999), as we found in the present study. Thus, the following set of variables were included in the regression analyses for wives' and husbands' previous distress predicting wives' Time 2 and Time 3 perceived unfairness of family work: wives' previous perceived unfairness, wives' reports of the Time 2 division of housework and childcare,<sup>7</sup> wives' previous marital conflict, and wives' previous marital dissatisfaction.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to Time 2 perceived unfairness of housework distribution, Table 4 shows that husbands' psychological distress and wives' reports of increased marital conflict

at Time 1 significantly predicted greater perceived inequity on the part of wives at Time 2, controlling for wives' perceived unfairness at Time 1 and other relevant predictors,  $F(6, 172) = 13.1$ ,  $p < .01$ . Husbands' psychological distress (marginally) and wives' marital dissatisfaction at Time 2 (significantly) predicted a rise in wives' perceived unfairness of housework at Time 3, controlling for Time 2 unfairness and other predictors,  $F(6, 172) = 13.2$ ,  $p < .01$ . Similarly, regarding wives' perceptions of inequity of child care at Time 3, husbands' psychological distress (significantly) and wives' marital dissatisfaction (marginally) at Time 2 were predictors, controlling for Time 2 unfairness and other predictors,  $F(6, 172) = 8.0$ ,  $p < .01$ . Note that in all of these analyses, husbands' psychological distress, rather than wives' psychological distress, was more salient in predicting wives' perceived unfairness in family work and that husbands' distress uniquely predicted wives' perceived unfairness, over and above the significant contributions of marital distress variables.

Inasmuch as we did not observe in Table 4 any significant effects of wives' distress on their later perceived unfairness in family work, we used regression analysis to examine whether the prospective association between wives' distress and perceived unfairness was mediated by the marital distress variables (conflict, dissatisfaction). In general, wives' distress was significantly correlated with marital conflict and marital dissatisfaction, respectively:  $r_s = .28$  and  $.20$  at Time 1;  $r_s = .41$  and  $.40$  at Time 2, respectively. In the first analysis, wives' Time 1 distress did not predict their Time 2 perceived unfairness of housework, controlling for Time 1 perceived unfairness; therefore, we did not proceed to examine mediational processes. In the second analysis, we found that wives' Time 2 distress marginally predicted their Time 3 perceived unfairness in housework ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .10$ ), controlling for their previous perceived unfairness ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p < .01$ ), division of housework ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and husbands' distress ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .10$ ). However, when marital conflict and marital dissatisfaction were added to the analysis, the effect of wives' distress on perceived unfairness of housework dropped to nonsignificance (see Table 4). In the third analysis, we found that wives' Time 2 distress marginally predicted their Time 3 perceived unfairness of child care ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .10$ ), controlling for their previous perceived unfairness ( $\beta = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ), division of child care ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .10$ ), and husbands' distress ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, when marital conflict and marital dissatisfaction were added to the analysis, the effect

<sup>7</sup> We did not assess division of housework or child care tasks at Time 3 because of the shorter survey and the fact that division of family work after the birth of a first child typically stabilizes by 6 months postpartum and remains relatively stable up to 18 months postpartum (Cowan & Cowan, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> We also examined whether certain demographic variables (i.e., age, employment status, race/ethnicity, income level) were associated with perceived unfairness in family work or with psychological distress. Because none of these associations reached significance, we did not control for these variables in the analyses.



Table 5  
*Regression Models for Previous Perceived Unfairness of Family Work Predicting Time 2 and Time 3 Psychological Distress*

Predictors	Wives' psychological distress		Husbands' psychological distress	
	Time 2	Time 3	Time 2	Time 3
Unfairness of housework/other predictors				
Previous psychological distress	.49**	.61**	.63**	.56**
Time 2 division of housework	.03	<b>.15*</b>	-.03	.06
Previous marital conflict	.04	.00	.06	.00
Previous marital dissatisfaction	.08	.09	<b>.11†</b>	<b>.14†</b>
Previous perceived unfairness, housework—self	.03	.00	-.06	.03
Previous perceived unfairness, housework—spouse	-.03	-.01	-.02	-.09
Unfairness of child care/other predictors				
Previous psychological distress		.61**		.55**
Time 2 division of child care		.01		-.11†
Previous marital conflict		.00		.01
Previous marital dissatisfaction		.13		<b>.13†</b>
Previous perceived unfairness, child care—self		<b>.16*</b>		-.01
Previous perceived unfairness, child care—spouse		-.09		<b>.13*</b>

Note. Standardized beta values are presented. Boldface values represent marginally significant or significant effects. Previous predictors for Time 2 psychological distress take place at Time 1. Previous predictors for Time 3 psychological distress take place at Time 2. Time 3 division of housework and childcare was not assessed. Division of housework and child care: 1 = husband does more; 3 = both equal; 5 = wife does more.

†  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

of wives' distress on perceived unfairness of child care dropped to nonsignificance (see Table 4). In sum, we found good evidence in support of the idea that the effects of wives' distress on their perceptions of inequity in family work were mediated by their marital distress.

*Analyses for distress and husbands' perceived unfairness with the control variables.* To determine whether husbands' and wives' previous distress uniquely predicted husbands' perceived unfairness in family work, we controlled for husbands' previous unfairness, husbands' report of the Time 2 division of family work, and husbands' previous marital distress in the hierarchical regression analyses (see Footnote 8). With respect to Time 2 perceived unfairness of housework distribution, Table 4 shows that husbands' psychological distress (significantly) and their reports of marital conflict (marginally) at Time 1 predicted greater perceived inequity on the part of husbands at Time 2, controlling for husbands' perceived unfairness at Time 1 and other predictors,  $F(6, 170) = 15.6, p < .01$ . Finally, husbands' psychological distress at Time 2 significantly predicted an increase in husbands' perceived unfairness in the child care domain at Time 3, controlling for husbands' perceived unfairness at Time 2 and other predictors,  $F(6, 169) = 7.9, p < .01$ . Thus, over and above the contributions of marital distress variables, husbands' own psychological distress uniquely predicted their perceived unfairness to wives in Time 2 housework and Time 3 child care.

We also examined whether the relevant marital distress variables mediated the significant prospective associations observed in Table 4 between husbands' psychological distress and husbands' perceived unfairness in family work. In general, husbands' distress was significantly correlated with marital conflict and marital dissatisfaction, respectively:

$r_s = .30$  and  $.24$  at Time 1;  $r_s = .38$  and  $.33$  at Time 2. We did not find any evidence, however, that is consistent with a mediational process.

In sum, in five out of six regression analyses in Table 4, both wives' and husbands' evaluations of unfairness to wives in family work were prospectively predicted by husbands' previous reports of psychological distress, controlling for previous marital distress variables and Time 2 division of family work.<sup>9</sup> Further, this pattern is observable across two distinct time periods, from before birth to 6 months postpartum (Times 1–2) and from 6 to 12 months after the birth (Times 2–3). It is also important to note that wives' and husbands' marital conflict at Time 1 (over and above husbands' distress) still significantly predicted or tended to predict their perceived unfairness of housework distribution at Time 2, as we had found in previous research with the same sample (Grote & Clark, 2001).

#### *Does Perceived Unfairness of Family Work Uniquely Predict Psychological Distress?*

*Analyses for perceived unfairness and wives' distress with the control variables.* In line with equity theory (Walster et al., 1978), we also predicted that perceived unfairness of family work in an individual or in that individual's spouse would be prospectively associated with that

<sup>9</sup> We also conducted within-spouse and cross-spouse hierarchical regression analyses testing the effects of Time 1 and Time 2 perceived unfairness of family work and psychological distress on Time 3 distress and perceived unfairness, respectively. We found that including both the Time 1 and Time 2 variables did not alter the Time 3 results shown in Tables 4 and 5.

individual's later psychological distress. To determine whether wives' and husbands' previous perceived unfairness uniquely predicted wives' increased distress at Time 2 and Time 3, we used hierarchical regression analyses and controlled for wives' previous distress, wives' reports of the Time 2 division of family work, and wives' previous marital conflict and dissatisfaction (see Footnote 8). Results in Table 5 show that wives' perceptions of unfairness in the division of child care at Time 2 predicted their increased distress at Time 3,  $F(6, 171) = 22.7, p < .01$ , controlling for their previous distress and other predictors.

*Analyses for perceived unfairness and husbands' distress with the control variables.* To determine whether husbands' and wives' previous perceived unfairness uniquely predicted husbands' distress, we used hierarchical regression analyses and controlled for husbands' previous distress, husbands' reports of Time 2 division of family work, and husbands' previous marital conflict and dissatisfaction (see Footnote 8). We found that when husbands had wives who reported at Time 2 that the amount of child care they did was unfair, husbands subsequently experienced more distress at Time 3,  $F(6, 170) = 20.8, p < .01$ , controlling for their previous distress and other predictors. In sum, Table 5 shows that in two out of six analyses, wives' perceptions of unfairness in child care predicted their and their husbands' distress later.

## Discussion

We began this article by suggesting that when they are happy, people rarely think about issues of unfairness, although when asked by a researcher, they may acknowledge imbalances in their relationships. For example, when we inquired, wives and husbands in our study did report that wives did more of the family work, regardless of the wife's level of employment. Strikingly, at the same time, these wives and husbands reported, on average, that this division of labor was fair to wives. Given our prediction that individual-level distress, over and above couple-level distress, would stimulate couple members to keep track of who is doing what in the relationship and to calculate fairness (Grote & Clark, 2001; Sprecher, 2001), we proposed that psychological distress in a couple member or in that member's spouse could initiate perceptions of unfairness to wives in family work, which in turn would prolong or even increase the original distress.

Observations of the simple within- and across-partner correlations between individual distress at Time 1 and perceived unfairness at Time 2 and the analogous correlations at Time 2 and Time 3 reveal many findings consistent with the first causal process (psychological distress to perceived unfairness). However, regression analyses that controlled for previous marital distress, division of family work, and previous perceived unfairness revealed that only husbands' distress remained capable of significantly predicting increases in perceptions of unfairness in family work across time. Interestingly, husbands' distress predicted rises in their own perceived unfairness to their wives and in their wives' own perceptions that they were unfairly burdened.

The simple correlations presented in Tables 2 and 3 suggested some, but less consistent, support for the second causal process (perceived unfairness to psychological distress). In addition, the regression analyses, controlling for previous marital distress, division of family work, and previous individual distress, provide only limited support for this second process. Specifically, only perceived unfairness to the wife in child care reported by the wife herself and by her husband predicted increases in distress across time, interestingly in both herself and her husband.

It seems evident that our most important new finding is that when husbands were distressed, they and their wives were subsequently more likely to perceive unfairness to wives in the division of family work. We observed that the impact of husbands' psychological distress on perceptions of inequity was the same for both wives and husbands across two time periods during the transition to parenthood. In addition, our previous work with the same sample (Grote & Clark, 2001) revealed that marital distress can stimulate perceptions of unfairness. Thus, the combined evidence from our previous and present studies suggests that marital distress in the couple and individual distress in the husband can generate perceptions of unfairness to wives in family work.

### *Why Are Distressed Husbands More Likely to Perceive Unfairness to Wives?*

Distressed husbands are likely to be more self-focused (Carver & Scheier, 1981) and to have more negative self-perceptions (Beck, 1967) than nondistressed husbands. Husbands, in general, across the transition to parenthood may feel they are not doing enough for their wives, but distressed husbands may feel excessively guilty and look for self-verification of their negative self-image (Swann et al., 1992). Finding evidence to support distressed husbands' guilt in the domain of family labor is easy because they typically were doing less than their wives.

One function of negative emotions, such as sadness or guilt, may be to alert the person experiencing them that something is wrong so that the person can correct the situation and improve his or her emotional state. The positive side of this picture is that husbands' distress can help them recognize inequities or problems in their marriages that need attention. The negative side is that psychological distress in husbands can impair the abilities of both spouses to communicate clearly, problem solve effectively, and take constructive action to resolve the inequity (Benazon & Coyne, 2000; Johnson & Jacob, 2000).

### *Why Are Wives With Distressed Husbands More Likely to Perceive Unfairness to Themselves?*

Perhaps the most surprising and interesting result of our study was our finding that having a distressed husband seemed to be a more potent contributor to a wife's later sense of injustice than her own level of psychological distress. The most straightforward explanation is that wives

with distressed husbands are burdened because their husbands are simply doing a lot less family work than they are. We were able to examine this possibility, but did not find that the amount of family work husbands did was associated with husbands' psychological distress (see Tables 2 and 3).

Alternatively, it may be that performing child care and household chores during the postpartum year becomes psychologically onerous when wives feel unappreciated by their distressed husbands for their family work efforts. Or wives may feel an increased psychological burden when they have difficulty communicating with their distressed husbands (Johnson & Jacob, 2000) about the changes in their role responsibilities, violated expectations regarding family work (Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988), and the inevitable disappointments that emerge in their marriages after the birth of a first child (Cowan & Cowan, 1999; Grote & Clark, 2001). In effect, self-focused, distressed husbands may fail to provide the emotional support and empathic attention their wives need to effectively juggle their new motherhood role and other roles. Future research is needed to examine the role that emotional support plays in the prospective link between psychological distress and perceived inequity in family work. Further, at the very time wives with distressed husbands are attending to the demands of a new baby, they may feel inclined or called upon to undertake the challenging task of caring for their unhappy partner (Kessler et al., 1985). Suppressing their anger or discontent toward their husband for not meeting their emotional needs (Hooley et al., 1986) while sustaining empathy for his distress and trying to help may add to wives' psychological burden. Upon experiencing this burden, wives of distressed husbands may be especially prone to perceiving the imbalances in family work as unfair to themselves.

In this research we did not examine other areas of perceived inequity in the marriage, such as paid labor outside the home. Perhaps husbands with distressed wives might feel more psychologically burdened in their breadwinning role and might perceive this responsibility as more unfair to themselves. Because we assessed perceptions of unfairness only in the domain of family work, we do not wish to imply that husbands with distressed wives felt less psychologically burdened in the marriage, in general, than wives with distressed husbands.

#### *Why Did Individual Distress in Wives Not Predict Their Subsequent Perceived Unfairness?*

Although wives' levels of individual distress were correlated with their own and their husbands' concurrent and subsequent perceptions of unfairness in family work, our regression analyses controlling for wives' marital distress, wives' reports of the division of family work, wives' previous perceived unfairness, and husbands' distress did not yield any evidence for wives' distress uniquely predicting their future perceptions of unfairness. Although we cannot be sure why this occurred, we did find evidence to suggest that the effects of wives' psychological distress on perceived inequity were mediated by their marital dissatisfac-

tion. When wives were more psychologically distressed, they were more likely to report dissatisfaction in their marriages (and with their husbands). This type of marital distress, in turn, appears to have been a more potent trigger than individual distress in stimulating them to keep track of who was doing what in the home, to calculate equity and, as a result, to perceive themselves to be underbenefited in the domains of housework and child care. Indeed, wives were typically doing more of the family work than husbands before and after the birth of their first child. On the other hand, we did not find that marital distress mediated the effect of husbands' individual distress on their perceptions of inequity. Even though their individual distress was linked with their marital distress, husbands' individual distress by itself was sufficient in activating their concerns about inequity to wives in the division of family work.

#### *Why Did Perceived Unfairness Sometimes Predict Subsequent Psychological Distress?*

In line with equity theory (Walster et al., 1978), we also found that when wives perceived the division of child care to be unfair to them, they and their husbands were subsequently more likely to be distressed. The father's involvement in child care seems to be an especially sensitive issue after the birth of a child (Cowan & Cowan, 1999), perhaps more so than his participation in housework. When a wife finds that her husband is less involved in taking care of the baby than she had expected him to be, her violated expectations in this area may lead her to experience more distress (Ruble et al., 1988). Further, we suspect that when wives' perceptions of unfairness in childcare are activated, they call their husbands' attention to this imbalance, thereby generating increased psychological distress in husbands. Why might husbands feel distressed as a result? Future research might examine several possibilities. Upon becoming aware that wives feel shortchanged in the child care domain, husbands might feel guilty for not doing enough. Alternatively, husbands might feel upset because their wives are not noticing or appreciating their efforts in participating in child care.

We did not find that perceived unfairness of the division of housework on the part of an individual or that individual's spouse subsequently generated more distress for that individual. Perhaps perceiving unfairness in the division of housework by itself is not as potent a trigger of psychological distress after the transition to parenthood as are (a) child care issues, (b) stressors in the marriage, such as dissatisfaction or lack of emotional support or appreciation from the spouse (O'Hara & Swain, 1996), or (c) other nonmarital stressors, such as a temperamental baby, stressful life events in the larger family, job stress, or financial stress.

#### Conclusions

In closing, we must bear in mind that our study may be limited by the biases inherent in self-report measures, the two one-item measures of unfairness at Time 3, and the



possibly restricted generalizability of our findings beyond middle- to upper-middle-class, White, North American couples and beyond the transition to parenthood stage of family life.

Despite these potential limitations, this study provides useful information about the neglected, yet important role played by psychological distress in husbands during a stressful, normative transition in family life. In effect, we observed that husbands' psychological distress prior to the birth of a first child and at 6 months after the birth appears to lead wives and husbands to perceive the division of family work as unfair to wives. We hope that greater awareness of how husbands' psychological distress initiates this process across the transition to parenthood will enable couple members, primary care practitioners, and other professionals to better recognize and manage not only wives' but also husbands' symptoms of distress as couples attempt to deal with the role and family work changes occurring during the first postpartum year. Although psychological distress in a husband may alert both him and his wife to inequities in family work that may need to be addressed, the impairment caused by the psychological distress may impede both spouses' abilities to communicate about or resolve this problem (Benazon & Coyne, 2000). Thus, in working with such couples, it may be judicious to first identify and ameliorate the specific stressors that originally precipitated the husband's psychological distress. When distress decreases, communication skills may return more naturally or may be more easily learned and, as a result, inequities in family work may be more effectively discussed and corrected.

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