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De-gendered Processes, Gendered Outcomes: How Egalitarian Couples Make Sense of Non-egalitarian Household Practices

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Abstract

Despite widespread support for gender-egalitarianism, men's and women's household labor contributions remain strikingly unequal. This article extends prior research on barriers to equality by closely examining how couples negotiate contradictions between their egalitarian ideals and admittedly non-egalitarian practices. Data from 64 in-depth interviews with members of 32 different-sex, college-educated couples show that respondents distinguish between labor allocation processes and outcomes. When they understand the processes as gender-neutral, they can write off gendered outcomes as the incidental result of necessary compromises made among competing values. Respondents "de-gender" their allocation process, or decouple it from gender ideology and gendered social forces, by narrowing their temporal horizon to the present moment and deploying an adaptable understanding of constraint that obscures alternative paths. This de-gendering helps prevent spousal conflict, but it may also facilitate behavioral stasis by directing attention away from the inequalities that continue to shape domestic life.

Keywords

gender, family, household labor, egalitarianism

Heather and Jeremy, married parents of two toddlers, are a proudly egalitarian couple. In separate interviews, Jeremy reported that "[we] don't believe in a lot of traditional gender norms. . . . We think a lot of that stuff is nonsense," and Heather argued that "obviously ideally [our division of household labor] is 50/50." The couple's endorsement of gender equality was unsurprising based on their demographic characteristics: they are young (mid-30s), upper-middle-class, college-educated, and live in a progressive Northeastern city (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009). However, given that the average married mother still performs nearly two hours of housework for every hour her male counterpart contributes (Bianchi et al. 2012), it is also unsurprising that Heather and Jeremy admitted they fall short of their stated ideals. "It turns out when you talk

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through it that we adhere to very traditional norms," said Jeremy. "We're sort of loath to admit this, but we do fall into the very typical gender stereotypes," concurred Heather. Despite the acknowledged gap between their ideal and their reality, however, neither Heather nor Jeremy reported efforts to reallocate labor or conflicts over who does what in their household.

In this article, I examine the experience of cisgender, college-educated, different-sex couples like Heather and Jeremy who aspire to equality, admit they have not achieved it, yet coexist in a state of apparent equilibrium. How do such couples maintain the status quo in their households despite acknowledged discrepancies between their beliefs and behaviors vis-à-vis household labor? This micro-level puzzle mirrors macro-level questions about why and how the gender revolution has "stalled" (England 2010). In recent decades, support for gender egalitarianism rose considerably (Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019); today, younger generations endorse women's advancement in the public sphere and equality in romantic relationships at high rates (Gerson 2011). Behaviors, too, have changed, as women have entered the workforce in greater numbers and now equal or exceed men in their educational attainment (Aud et al. 2010; Juhn and Potter 2006). Despite these gains, full-time female workers earn only 79 percent as much as comparable men on an annual basis (Blau and Kahn 2017). On the domestic front, the ratio of women's to men's household labor hours is well below mid-twentieth-century levels but plateaued several decades ago and still hovers around 2:1 (Bianchi et al. 2012).

Prior scholarship documents a constellation of structural and cultural factors hindering further progress toward gender equality in household labor, including occupational segregation, a culture of overwork, inadequate family leave and childcare policies, and gendered socialization patterns (Fuwa 2004; Horne et al. 2018; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). However, we know less about how individuals and couples understand these societal forces in the context of their own experiences. Specifically, how do people living their own version of the stalled revolution—that is, couples who combine progressive ideals with admittedly traditional practices—make sense of their domestic activities? What mechanisms enable aspiring egalitarians to tolerate a persistent mismatch between their stated ideals and acknowledged practices vis-à-vis household labor? Answers to these questions could illuminate how micro-level processes help maintain gender inequality in the face of ideological change.

Based on 64 in-depth interviews with members of 32 different-sex, college-educated couples, I argue that egalitarian couples practice a form of "de-gendering" that obscures the gendered forces shaping their household labor practices. In contrast to Lorber's (2000) vision of a "feminist degendering movement" in which gender differences cease to operate as a heuristic for allocating labor, this shallow version of de-gendering recasts gender inequality as personal inequality without disturbing the underlying gender hierarchy. Couples accomplish this by distinguishing household labor allocation *processes*, which they see as gender-neutral, from allocation *outcomes*, which they see as only incidentally gender-traditional.

De-gendered accounts are often plausible at the level of an individual household operating on a daily basis. However, when the data are viewed in the aggregate and choices over a longer timespan are taken into account, gender is harder to ignore. Despite considerable variation in life circumstances, most respondents acknowledge the female partner completes more household labor. Simultaneously, they deny or downplay any connection between this unequal labor division and gender ideology. Instead, they understand their behavior in individualistic terms. While this de-gendered understanding may reduce cognitive dissonance and improve marital harmony, it also allows gender to operate as an unseen and uncontested force shaping household labor patterns outside couples' conscious awareness. Further movement toward household labor equality—and, likely, gender equality more

broadly—will require greater acknowledgment of gender's role in structuring apparently personal circumstances.

HOUSEHOLD LABOR IN THE STALLED REVOLUTION

Many sociologists understand gender as a social structure, institution, or system inscribed in individual, interactional, and institutional dynamics (Martin 2004; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004). The past half-century brought extensive change to this structure, particularly in the realm of beliefs and attitudes. In 1977 in the United States, for instance, 68 percent of men and 62 percent of women agreed it was better that men work for pay and women handle domestic matters (Smith et al. 2018). Four decades later, only 27 and 22 percent of men and women, respectively, endorsed this gender-traditional division (Smith et al. 2018). Over the same period, individuals with traditional or strongly traditional gender attitudes went from comprising the bulk of General Social Survey respondents (59 percent) to all but disappearing (7 percent) (Scarborough et al. 2019).

Behavioral change is also evident, although it has been uneven and stalled well short of gender equality (England 2010). Different-sex romantic relationships have proven particularly resistant to change. Young adults idealize long-term partnerships where paid work and caregiving responsibilities are shared (Gerson 2011). They believe gender should not dictate familial roles, although they may modify their position in light of perceived institutional constraints (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). Nevertheless, gender-traditional patterns of dating, parenting, and breadwinning remain widespread (Bass 2015; Lamont 2014; Milkie et al. 2002).

Gender remains a key predictor of the amount and kind of labor an individual completes on the family's behalf, although by some measures the association has weakened (Bianchi et al. 2012; Sayer 2005). The gender gap in physical housework, which encompasses chores related to cleaning, cooking, shopping, childcare, and other household domains, narrowed considerably in the second half of the twentieth century (Sayer 2005). Yet men still spend approximately half as many weekly hours on physical housework as women—a gap that has remained relatively stable since the mid-1990s (Bianchi et al. 2012).[1] Furthermore, men's housework hours are disproportionately allocated toward relatively infrequent and flexible tasks (e.g., home repairs or yard work), while women shoulder many of the recurring daily tasks (e.g., cooking and childcare) that cannot be put off to a convenient time (Bianchi et al. 2000).

Physical work remains the focus of most research on household labor, but sociologists have also drawn attention to "hidden" or "invisible" forms of labor, including cognitive and emotional labor (Daminger 2019; Daniels 1987; DeVault 1999). Cognitive labor, sometimes described as mental labor (Lee and Waite 2005; Offer 2014), comprises the work of anticipating household needs, identifying options for filling them, choosing among these options, and monitoring the results (Daminger 2019). Although the internal nature of such tasks makes cognitive labor difficult to measure, the available indicators suggest it, too, is highly gendered, with women often serving as household managers who delegate tasks to their male "helpers" (Coltrane 1996; Daminger 2019).

Social scientists explain the persistence of gendered family labor patterns using some combination of three major theories: time availability, relative resources, and gender (Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). In combination with key features of the current gender structure, all three proposed mechanisms facilitate a division of labor in which women take on more unpaid labor and men more paid labor. Yet the question of why, in a causal sense, certain family labor patterns persist is distinct from questions about how couples experience and understand those patterns. Couples whose conscious beliefs about gender contradict the persistence of gendered labor patterns in their household face "moral dilemmas" as they

attempt to reconcile ideology and behavior in the absence of more widespread changes to the gender structure (Gerson 2002). Deeper understanding of this reconciliation process may suggest a path toward restarting the stalled gender revolution. Assuming structural conditions shape but do not determine individual actions, individuals and couples can make choices that challenge existing norms (Coleman 1990). Figuring out why cisgender, different-sex couples more often reproduce than subvert such norms requires deeper understanding of the meanings couples ascribe to their actions and the processes by which they jointly create such meanings.

DE-GENDERING HOUSEHOLD LABOR

The persistence of gendered labor patterns despite widespread ideological change raises questions about how egalitarian couples experience the disjuncture between their beliefs and behaviors.[2] This disjuncture likely generates cognitive dissonance, a state of tension resolved by changing beliefs, changing behaviors, or reframing the situation to remove the appearance of conflict between the two (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, and Levy 2015). Prior research demonstrates all three tactics are at work in the realm of household labor. For instance, the transition to parenthood is sometimes associated with a change in gender beliefs, as new parents respond to their altered circumstances (Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde 2010). Deliberate efforts to change behaviors are also evident: in response to dissatisfaction with or conflict over household labor allocation, for example, individuals or couples may actively pursue a more equal division of labor (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Mannino and Deutsch 2007).

The third option, reframing family labor patterns as consistent with egalitarian principles, is most commonly discussed in the existing literature. Hochschild and Machung (2012) coined the term "family myths" to describe this reframing process, nodding to the fact that from an outsider's vantage point, couples' narratives often seem closer to fiction than fact. Their respondents Nancy and Evan Holt exemplify the myth-making phenomenon: although Nancy completes the majority of housework and childcare for the family, she reframes her responsibilities as encompassing only the "upstairs" activities (Hochschild and Machung 2012). In the researchers' estimation, Nancy's responsibilities clearly exceed her husband's, yet Nancy frames his work as parallel to her own. Evan, she says, completes the "downstairs" tasks of pet care, car maintenance, and lawn work. Creative reframing of each spouse's contributions as distinct but equivalent effectively resolves Nancy's cognitive dissonance: she retains her feminist commitment to sharing the household load but avoids conflict with her husband, who resisted her prior efforts to change his behavior.

The precise details of such myths may be idiosyncratic, but many fall into one of two categories: *erasure* of unpaid labor inequality or *justification* of that inequality. Nancy Holt's upstairs/downstairs myth exemplifies the former strategy. Tired of fighting with her husband about his minimal contributions but unwilling to end the relationship, Nancy opts to "see" the situation differently, recasting it as equal. Similarly, sociologists attempting to recruit egalitarian couples report that many self-identified egalitarians fail to meet even lenient criteria for equality (Deutsch 2000; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). Their identity as egalitarians may lead such couples to interpret their household activities through a particular lens.

More commonly, however, couples acknowledge inequality in their household labor contributions but subsequently justify it. Consistent with time availability and specialization theories, for instance, some couples justify an unequal allocation of unpaid labor as fair by arguing that each partner's overall contributions to the household are similar (Becker 1993; Deutsch 2000). For instance, if one partner works longer hours outside the home, a couple may consider it appropriate for the other partner to complete the majority of the domestic labor (van Hooff 2011). Yet

commensurating contributions made across multiple domains (physical housework, cognitive housework, paid work) and measured in multiple forms (time, money, effort) is a difficult and subjective process. Prior research demonstrates that fairness assessments hinge on factors well beyond the actual contributions each partner makes, including comparison referents, overall relationship satisfaction, and the portion of appropriately gender-typed tasks each partner completes (DeMaris and Longmore 1996; Gager 2008; Smith, Gager, and Morgan 1998).

Couples may also justify their unpaid labor inequality as the result of forces outside their conscious control (van Hooff 2011; Nyman, Reinikainen, and Eriksson 2018). Even if partners' paid hours are similar, couples may cite the inflexible or stressful nature of those hours as an obstacle to one partner's greater participation in household affairs (Beagan et al. 2008). Similarly, couples may offer their personal preferences or skills—for instance, one partner's higher tolerance for disorder or limited facility with a mop—as the reason one partner performs certain chores (Lamont 2020; Nyman et al. 2018). Whether they point to differences in skills, preferences, or employment circumstances, couples who recognize a disjuncture between their ideological commitments and daily practices clearly have a broad repertoire of justifications from which to draw.

Less clear is the extent to which the justifications given for physical labor inequalities—the main focus of prior research—apply to the cognitive dimension of housework. For instance, work outside the home clearly interferes with one's ability to cook, clean, and care for a child, as these activities require the laborer to be in the home or in the presence of children. The same cannot necessarily be said of cognitive tasks such as meal planning, emailing a child's teacher about a recent issue, or booking flights for an upcoming family vacation. Such labor is less tied to location and can often be performed in parallel with other tasks (e.g., commuting can be combined with dinner planning) (Bittman and Wajcman 2000; Daminger 2019; Emens 2019).

Also unclear is *how* justifications for physical or cognitive labor patterns work to resolve or prevent interpersonal conflict and feelings of cognitive dissonance regarding household labor. What "work" do these justifications accomplish for couples who have an ideological commitment to gender equality but recognize their failure to fully enact that ideology? I argue that successful justifications "de-gender" labor allocation processes: they obscure the gendered component of a fundamentally gendered process, often by replacing gendered explanations with appeals to other agreed-upon values.[3]

Sociologists describe a social process as "gendered" when the gender of the individuals involved shapes their outcomes. In quantitative terms, this means gender acts as an explanatory variable that patterns behavior at a supra-individual level. Many of the processes sociologists view as gendered, however, are understood in different terms by the individuals experiencing them. For instance, occupational gender segregation persists in part because at an aggregate level men and women make different decisions about which college majors and jobs to pursue (Charles and Bradley 2009; Charles and Grusky 2004). Similarly, many more women than men leave the paid workforce to care for children (Stone 2007). The individuals making such decisions, however, experience their career choices as personal. They attribute their outcomes to individual preferences, traits, or circumstances without acknowledging that these apparently individual-level factors are strongly gendered (Cech 2013; Stone 2007).

In what follows, I demonstrate a similar process at work in the context of unpaid household labor. By narrowing their temporal horizon to the present moment and deploying an adaptable understanding of constraint, respondents de-gender their labor allocation processes even as they acknowledge the gendered nature of their allocation outcomes. Such de-gendering appears to facilitate marital harmony: when an egalitarian couple deviates from the narrative of gender-neutral allocation processes, the threat of conflict

looms. However, this superficial form of de-gendering—relabeling rather than reforming—likely entrenches the gender inequality that has long characterized different-sex couples' unpaid labor practices.

DATA AND METHODS

Data come from 64 semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews conducted between June and December 2017 with members of 32 cisgender, different-sex couples living in the Boston area. I advertised the study on listservs and Facebook groups directed at parents, most of which targeted mothers or caregivers in a particular geographic area (e.g., "Somerville Moms"). Seventy-five percent of couples ($N = 24$) in the sample entered via this channel, and the remainder were referred by prior study participants or by contacts in my extended social network. To reduce the likelihood that only people with strong opinions or unusual practices regarding gender and household labor would volunteer, I avoided gender- and housework-related language in all recruitment materials. Instead, I advertised a study about "how parents make decisions," which was appropriate given that my primary research questions when the study began centered on couples' division of cognitive tasks (including decision-making).

Respondents were required to be married,[4] age 25 to 50, hold a bachelor's degree,[5] and live with at least one child under age 5. Toward the end of the study period, I deliberately recruited couples with a female partner working full-time and a male partner working part-time or not at all, to achieve rough parity in the employment status of male and female respondents. Because the transition to parenthood has been associated with an increase in gendered labor patterns (Katz-Wise et al. 2010), I was particularly interested in how members of a highly-educated, relatively progressive demographic would experience this shift (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Scarborough et al. 2019). These eligibility criteria were intended to ensure comparability on the dimensions of class and family structure within a small sample, although they necessarily limit the generalizability of the findings presented here.

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the resulting sample. The average participant was in their mid-30s (35 for women and 36 for men), had 1.5 children, and had been married for 6.6 years. Participants had considerably more education and income than the average American: 69 percent of men and 91 percent of women held an advanced degree, and median annual household income was $170,000. Six women and four men were out of the workforce altogether at the time of our interview, although a few of the women planned to return to work after maternity leave. Among the employed respondents, women worked a median of 40 hours and earned $70,000 per year; men worked a median of 46 hours and earned $107,500 annually. Although no racial exclusion criteria were advertised, the majority of participants (81 percent of men and 78 percent of women) identified as white. I also refrained from specifying any sexual orientation criteria; however, the vast majority of couples consisted of a cisgender man and woman. I interviewed three couples with different gender configurations, but I exclude them from the analysis presented here due to the small sample size.

In most cases, an individual responded to the advertisement and then, at my request, recruited their partner to participate. I interviewed each participant individually at their home, workplace, or a local café. Interviews lasted approximately 60 to 80 minutes and were audio-recorded with respondents' permission. All partners were interviewed within a few days of one another—the majority on the same day—and asked not to discuss the study with their spouse until they had also been interviewed.

Approximately two days prior to each interview, I asked each respondent to track family- and household-related decisions they made or contemplated over the course of a 24-hour period. I provided a simple spreadsheet template with fields for the nature of the issue or decision in question, the outcome, the

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Individual-Level			
Men		**Women**	
Mean age	36	Mean age	35
Race		Race	
White	81%	White	78%
Asian	9%	Asian	16%
Other	9%	Other	6%
Median income[a]	$107,500	Median income[a]	$70,000
Median work hours[a]	46	Median work hours[a]	40
Work status at time of intvw.		Work status at time of intvw.	
Full-time (34+ hrs.)	78%	Full-time (34+ hrs.)	66%
Part-time	9%	Part-time	16%
Unemployed	13%	Unemployed	18%
Education level		Education level	
Some college	3%	Some college	0%
Bachelor's	28%	Bachelor's	9%
Graduate degree	69%	Graduate degree	91%
Couple-Level			
Number of children	1.5	Years married	6.6
Youngest child's age	2.0	Median income	$170,000
Relative income		Relative paid work hours	
Wife $5k+ more	22%	Wife 4+ more	28%
Equal earnings	13%	Equal	13%
Husband $5k+ more	65%	Husband 4+ more	60%

Note: Data come from participants' responses to a series of demographic questions posed at the end of their interviews. $N = 64$ (32 women, 32 men).
[a]Conditional on paid employment.

setting, whether others were consulted or involved, and the start and end time. These "decision logs" structured the first portion of each interview, in which I asked participants to provide more detail about a subset of logged decisions and to contextualize the recorded day's events in terms of what typically happens in their household. I also asked each respondent to describe the most recent occurrence of a standard set of irregular activities (e.g., planning a vacation or making a home repair) and to tell me about a recent spousal conflict or disagreement sparked by a household matter.

The decision logs and related interview questions were important for assessing each couple's division of labor (see Daminger 2019), but this article centers on couples' perceptions of and explanations for their labor practices. As such, these findings largely draw on data from the final component of the interview, in which I asked participants a series of more general questions about physical and cognitive labor. After defining cognitive labor as the set of research, planning, decision-making, and coordination tasks involved in running a household, I offered respondents two examples to illustrate the distinction between cognitive and physical labor, including making a weekly meal plan (cognitive) and chopping vegetables (physical). I then asked respondents to characterize their ideal and actual allocation of cognitive and physical labor (i.e., "I (would) do X percent and my partner Y percent"). Often, respondents spontaneously reflected on the reasons they allocated labor as they did. I asked interviewees who were not

forthcoming with this information to explain what prevented them from achieving their desired allocation (if applicable), describe past or ongoing efforts to adjust their division of labor, and imagine what would happen if they stopped performing their portion of household tasks.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and paired with ethnographic notes taken shortly following the conversation. Initially, data analysis centered on the research questions that inspired the study: what is cognitive labor, and how does gender shape the amount and kind of this labor individuals in different-sex couples complete? In the process of reviewing and open-coding transcripts, however, I was increasingly puzzled by what was *not* mentioned. Despite acknowledging their unequal labor allocations, few respondents reported conflict over or attempts to alter their division of labor. In subsequent rounds of reading, memo-writing, and coding, I focused on respondents' efforts to justify discrepancies between their beliefs and behaviors, their (relatively rare) descriptions of conflict or dissatisfaction regarding household labor, and, more broadly, their explanations of why they behaved as they did. This data analysis generated themes such as "efficiency" and "self-expression," which I explore in depth in subsequent sections.

FINDINGS

Egalitarian Ideal, Non-egalitarian Reality

Consistent with prior research documenting widespread egalitarianism among the demographic studied here (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009), most respondents described their "ideal world" division of labor as something close to a 50/50 split.[6] "I want it to be an equal partnership," said Kristen, echoing many respondents' sentiments. Other respondents added more nuance to their answers, but the underlying ideal remained consistent. Miranda, for instance, argued that she wanted a "horizontal" rather than vertical split: "[My partner should] take half the things in our life and think about them, and I'll take half the things in our life and think about them, but I don't want to think about half the finances *and* [my partner] think about half the finances." Similarly, Kendra was okay with task-by-task variation so long as it "washes out to a good 50/50."

Among respondents reporting an ideal other than 50/50, most nevertheless aspired to a more equal division than they currently had. Nina estimated that she completes 90 percent of the physical labor in her household but would ideally complete only 70 percent: "I guess probably like realistically, I would hope that [my husband] could do 30 percent of [the physical labor]. You know, idealistically, I would say 50/50, but that's just not the reality on the ground." Like other respondents, Nina endorsed an equal division of labor as a general principle but seemed unable even to imagine a world in which such equality would be attainable.

Widespread egalitarian or near-egalitarian aspirations coincided with widespread admission of current inequality. No spouses agreed they have a 50/50 allocation (or the qualitative equivalent) in both the physical and cognitive labor dimensions, although two indicated that imbalances in these dimensions were perfectly offset (e.g., a 75/25 split in one dimension and a 25/75 split in the other), and in another two couples the female partner alone reported equality. Although spouses rarely concurred on the precise magnitude of the imbalance, the majority (27 of 32) agreed on the direction (i.e., which partner completed a greater proportion of the labor). Gender-traditionalism was the norm: 22 men and 23 women indicated that the female partner does more overall household labor. Some couples described extreme gaps, with one partner completing 90 percent or more of the labor, but a slight or moderate skew toward one partner was more commonly reported.

Despite widespread acknowledgment of a discrepancy between the labor allocation they desired and the one they experienced, the

majority of couples (28 of 32) referenced only infrequent and mild, if any, disagreements regarding labor allocation, either in response to a question about a recent disagreement or when asked to compare their actual labor allocation to their ideal. To account for the unexpected absence of such conflict in the sample, I first examined the possibility that participants experienced labor-related conflict but were unwilling to disclose relationship imperfections to an outsider. However, couples described numerous relationship challenges unrelated to household labor. These disagreements largely centered on parenting (e.g., how best to discipline a child), finances (e.g., whether to make a big purchase), and leisure time (e.g., where to go on vacation). Some used blunt language and revealed potentially embarrassing facts as they recollected recent conflict. Garrett, for instance, reported that his family is $250,000 in debt to his parents, although his wife "doesn't deal with" their debt because it threatens "her fragile self-image," and Chelsea described a "constant battle" over how often to visit her husband Phil's family, who she does not enjoy spending time with. Unwillingness to disclose disagreement, it seems, was not the primary reason for the absence of labor-related disputes from the data.

Alternatively, individual respondents might internally experience dissatisfaction with their division of labor without regularly channeling it into interpersonal conflict. The data support this hypothesis for a subset of couples who reported a desire to reallocate labor in their household. Stacey, for example, seemed torn between bemusement and exasperation as she recounted her attempts to increase her husband William's involvement in caring for their toddler. She recently asked him to take responsibility for restocking their daughter's diaper bag: "The day after I said that, he stuck an extra five diapers in the bag, but he didn't check to see if there were already diapers in the bag. So I had to go in and take them out, and I just didn't tell him about it because I was glad that he made the effort." Although Stacey was dissatisfied with William's household contributions, she pursued change somewhat halfheartedly, via non-combative channels. Similarly, Jackie and Matthew independently reported seeking to transfer some of Jackie's cognitive labor load to Matthew, thus far with limited success. "I know that [Jackie] carries a lot of load that I don't," Matthew told me, "so I've been trying to get more involved in her process. . . . I feel a duty to try to rectify this sort of unspoken disparity that we have."

Yet Stacey, Jackie, and Matthew were in the minority in describing deliberate attempts at reallocation. Instead, most couples presented as stably unequal: one or both partners acknowledged that, contrary to their ideals, their household labor allocation was imbalanced—typically in the direction of gender-traditionalism—but relatively fixed, sparking neither serious conflict nor concerted efforts to change.[7] Understanding this stability requires closer examination of the meanings respondents ascribed to their labor practices. In the following sections, I first show that couples understand their current practices as the result of compromises made among competing objectives, and second, that although respondents depict these trade-offs as gender-neutral, they are better understood as de-gendered: gender's influence is elided but not absent.

Labor Allocation as Compromise

Like Heather, who was "loath to admit"—but still admitted—that she and her husband fall into traditional roles, respondents often acknowledged the resemblance between their labor allocation and the gender norms of an earlier era. However, they denied any connection between their ideology and behavior. Instead, respondents described their labor allocation as the product of gender-neutral trade-offs made among their competing desires for household efficiency, personal expression, and spousal equality. In their ideal world, these three imperatives would perfectly align. In their actual world, respondents described them as routinely at odds.

The majority demonstrated a commitment to domestic efficiency: they sought to optimize household operations by minimizing the time, effort, or money expended in pursuit of a desired outcome. Todd noted that both he and his wife are "very good at identifying if [we're] capable of doing something that will make a process more efficient," and Troy recalled a conversation about how he and his wife could "maximize" their limited childfree hours to unpack and settle into their new home. Natalie and Jay independently referenced their "non-overlapping skill sets": hers in cooking and childcare, his in finances and logistics. Jay elaborated that the couple determined which partner had a "comparative advantage" in a given domain and, where possible, endeavored to "specialize" in accordance with this assessment. Craig used his skills as an IT professional to design a dynamic household inventory system he hoped would minimize waste in the form of spoiled food and unnecessary grocery trips.

Couples perceived equality- and efficiency-maximizing options to be routinely at odds. Most often, the relative timing, location, and flexibility of each partner's paid work shaped the couple's perceptions of the most efficient allocation of labor. Holly's workday typically ends earlier than her husband's, so she is responsible for starting dinner. Jason, a financial services analyst, can work remotely, whereas his wife, a teacher, cannot; thus, Jason is more likely to pick up a sick child from school. Because Joanna is taking an extended maternity leave and her husband is working from an office full-time, Joanna handles all preschool pick-ups and drop-offs.

Secondarily, respondents cited partners' different skill levels as drivers of conflicts between efficiency and equality: if one person could complete a household task faster without compromising the outcome, that person should do so—even if that meant the "skilled" partner completed more housework overall. Both Bridget and her husband Jimmy acknowledged Bridget's superior internet research skills: "There's nothing about [researching extracurricular activities] that I'm uniquely qualified for," she told me, "but it will just be much faster if I do it." Jenna has a knack for finding deals on plane tickets, so she books most travel for the family. Gina is better at anticipating upcoming needs and tracking household inventory, so she monitors the children's clothing supply and manages the family's ongoing shopping list.

Alongside their concern for efficiency, most respondents referenced a commitment to self-expression, citing personality traits and ingrained preferences that shaped partners' distinct approaches to household activities. They framed household labor—both what they did or did not do, and how—as not only a set of tasks but also a reflection of one's nature. Inequalities were tolerable if they were driven by partners' distinct personalities. Such expressive concerns were primarily cited in relation to cognitive activities. The partners acknowledged to do a greater share of such work were labeled (or labeled themselves) "type-A," "detail-oriented," or "planful"—or, less charitably, "uptight," "OCD," and "anxious." The secondary cognitive laborers, in contrast, were understood (or understood themselves) to be "laid-back," "relaxed," and "really present in the moment," particularly in comparison to their spouse. Put in a more negative light, these partners were depicted as the more "passive," "disorganized," or prone to "make stuff up on the fly" of the two.

Notably, respondents expressed their commitment to self-expression in individual rather than gendered terms, focusing on personal qualities rather than masculine or feminine traits. Jeremy attributed his wife's greater share of the family's cognitive load to the partners' differing "personality styles": "Heather's a planner and is just constantly thinking about this stuff. And I—I wouldn't say I'm a doer, necessarily, but I'm just more disorganized." Heather agreed that although a 50/50 split would be ideal, "That just doesn't lend itself to our personalities. I'm so much more uptight than he is." When asked to imagine what would need to change for her partner to take on more cognitive labor, Bridget laughed: "I think his brain would have to be

different. Which is not a thing I'm committed to trying to change." Carla speculated that a similarly dramatic transformation would be required for her to reach equality with her husband. When it came to tasks like managing their kindergartener's wardrobe, she said, "I don't think he's capable of thinking about things like [that]—I just don't think that he works that way." None of these respondents generalized about men's brains or cited a masculine inability to plan; instead, they spoke about the characteristics of a specific man and how these compared to his partner's.

Even couples who described an atypically gendered labor allocation (i.e., with the male partner dominant in the cognitive or physical dimensions) cited expressive concerns. Antoni, for instance, described a year-long quest to establish new routines for his household after his daughter's birth, admitting he could be "a little OCD" about certain activities: "Being the planful person that I am, it's just nature. It just comes naturally to me." Jay, who shared the overall cognitive load roughly equally with his wife but conducted the bulk of scheduling and logistical work, also attributed the couple's dynamic to temperamental differences: "I would love for [planning and logistics] to be more 50/50, frankly. I just doubt we'll ever get there just because of the way we're both wired." Although Antoni and Jay cited a commitment to self-expression to justify a nontraditional division of labor, the result was similar. By framing household labor in terms of "who we are" rather than merely "what we do," they implied a belief that reallocation toward equality would be costly at best and impossible at worst.

Respondents accounted for the conflict between their egalitarian ideals and nonegalitarian actions by contextualizing equality as one among several goals. For many, the ideal division of labor was not only equal between partners but also maximized the couple's collective efficiency and allowed each partner to act in accordance with their individual nature. These goals were often at odds, however, prompting couples to make tradeoffs that, from their perspective, had little to do with gender. Gendered outcomes were acceptable to the extent they facilitated greater efficiency or accommodated partners' personality differences, rather than as an end in themselves. However, as the following section shows, gender's role was obscured but not eliminated.

De-gendering the Compromise

Although respondents presented the tradeoffs they made among efficiency, expression, and equality as gender-neutral, these compromises drove the majority of couples toward a gender-traditional division of household labor. Female respondents were more often described, by both men and women, as the "Type-A" partner who naturally gravitated toward cognitive labor, whereas male respondents were more often labeled disorganized or laid-back. Men's job requirements more often interfered with their domestic contributions, and women's paid work was more amenable to household needs. Yet respondents insisted any resemblance between their behaviors and traditional norms was coincidental. "I know the large gender blah blah blah structure," said Levi dismissively as he described his wife's long-standing tendency to do more of the housework and childcare, "but I don't know why we specifically do this the way we [do]." Likewise, Jay acknowledged he and his wife "fall into traditional gender roles" before clarifying that it was "not because we subscribe to them."

Respondents relied on syllogistic logic to explain their allocation compromises: given partners' job characteristics, skills, or personality, only one labor outcome was reasonable. From this perspective, beliefs about gender were irrelevant; gendered outcomes were the coincidental result of unrelated allocation processes. Yet closer examination suggests gender was in fact baked into respondents' conceptions of what was optimal or even possible and that gendered life trajectories shaped the conditions respondents faced, largely outside their conscious awareness. Respondents, however, "de-gendered" their allocation processes by adopting a flexible understanding

of constraint and narrowing their temporal horizon to the present. Their elision of gender as a causal force facilitated their acceptance of gender-traditional labor outcomes.

An adaptable understanding of constraint. The language of constraint dominated respondents' accounts of their labor allocation: certain behaviors "made more sense" or "just came more naturally" or were "a function of how we are wired as people." For instance, when respondents offered personality-based explanations for their labor allocation, they emphasized the immutability of these traits. "It's just the way [my husband] works, it's just not the same as me," mused Jackie when asked what she thought prevented the couple from sharing the cognitive load more equally. "[Our inequality] is sort of a function of how we are wired as people," Sharon explained. Yet comparisons within and across couples suggest apparent constraints were in fact context-dependent and selectively overcome.

For example, the same male respondents noted for their reactivity, passivity, or laid-back nature at home held demanding jobs as management consultants, project managers, and physicians, among other occupations requiring high levels of executive function and proactive leadership. The traits that likely facilitate their professional success were somehow invisible—or not deployed—after-hours. Several respondents seemed to stumble on this irony in the course of our conversation. Julian, a surgeon, noted that he can "go a very long time before it hits me that now is the time to deal with [a problem]," such as a lightbulb in need of replacing. Then he immediately clarified his statement: "I mean, in the home life—not, like, work." Alan noted a similar paradox in his own relationship. "I'm the ideas guy," he told me, and his wife is the "project manager" and the one to ask "what are we going to do and how [would] that actually work, and like, the nitty-gritty." Their arrangement is "funny," he admitted, because Alan works full-time as a project manager for a large insurance company: "That's partly what I need to do in my job, is get into the nitty-gritty." Describing his wife's tendency to plan the family's weekends, Steve pointed out a similar irony: "Oddly, I'm a project manager by trade . . . [but] sometimes I don't want to plan for the weekend." These men, and their wives, saw themselves as constrained by their "personality," "nature," or "character." Yet these allegedly fixed traits appeared situational, with men in particular varying in proactivity and attention to detail between work and home. Few respondents were willing to dwell on such contradictions, however, perhaps because doing so might call the gender-neutrality of their expressive considerations into question.

Similarly, although respondents often described their prioritization of efficiency as obvious or unavoidable when explaining why their labor practices fell short of equality, examples abounded of inefficiencies tolerated in service of goals other than equality. Several couples, for instance, reported that the family calendar lived in one (typically female) partner's head. Desiree, for instance, explained that "[my husband] comes to me all the time about making plans . . . to make sure nothing else is going on." Repeated conversations about the schedule seemed less efficient than maintaining a shared external calendar, but Desiree tolerated this suboptimal system because she believed her husband was forgetful by nature. Other couples acknowledged behaving inefficiently in the service of strengthening the spousal relationship, better supporting a child's needs, or even managing their own emotions. Jackie reported she "feel[s] weird even spending a couple bucks" without first checking with her husband, even though he would rather she "just make the decision myself," because getting a second opinion helps calm her financial anxiety. Isaac admitted he and his wife "probably consult each other more than we need to," which "definitely takes more time," because he felt joint decision-making was key to building a shared life with a partner. Their ability to selectively override the efficiency or expression constraints suggests other forces, likely

including gender, shaped couples' perceptions of their own agency.

In addition to a given couple's selective adherence to constraints, comparison across couples revealed varied perceptions of what counted as a constraint in the first place. These perceptions differed based on the gender of the party in question. For instance, women who were out of the workforce, worked fewer paid labor hours than their partner, or worked from home often described their greater domestic burden as an inevitable consequence of their increased time in the home. If the female partner's job was more demanding than her husband's on one or more dimensions, however, respondents did not necessarily reach the same conclusions.

Joanna, for instance, was on an extended maternity leave, caring for her two children while her husband Isaac worked 40 hours per week in marketing. Joanna argued that many childcare responsibilities fell to her "by default, because I've taken on the role of being with the kids" and that the correlation between time at home and domestic responsibility was "natural . . . and it shouldn't be any other way." Isaac implied a similar perspective when he complained about Joanna's tendency to delay dinner preparations until he returned from work: "That's frustrating. It's not that I mind cooking dinner, it's more that because dinner is not underway, then I feel like I should start helping with it. . . . Then I'm not going to spend much time with the kids in the evening because I'm making dinner." Lisa, a stay-at-home mom, shared Isaac's sense that the primary breadwinner's limited time at home should not be wasted on routine chores: "It seems ridiculous to me to have [my husband] put in a 10- or 12-hour [work] day, and then say, 'Hey, please, now make the dinner.'"

However, in keeping with prior research on female breadwinner households, women married to stay-at-home fathers feared putting too much on their partner's plate (Tichenor 2005). Meg, who works full-time from an office while her husband cares for their children at home, reported that whenever she is present she tries to do more than 50 percent of whatever needs doing, "just to give [my husband] that break." She also pointed out that being home less than her husband was not an excuse for slacking: "There's a lot of that [cognitive labor] I can do while I'm not at home. . . . I can think about stuff while I'm [commuting] on my bike, and during my lunch break or whatever." Kelli, a software engineer, was similarly reluctant to force her husband, who cares full-time for their children, to do tasks he does not enjoy just because he is around to do them. "Roger hates cooking, and I don't mind it," she told me. "So when we end up at home, I usually cook. . . . When I'm not home and Roger won't cook, [our children] learned to cook for themselves, so they will make pasta or whatever." Roger's greater availability during the pre-dinner hours did not constrain the couple to one allocation of labor; instead, everyone in the family adapted.

In some couples, one partner worked entirely or partially from home while the other partner cared full-time for the couple's children. Here, too, the gender configuration shaped perceptions of constraint. For instance, Frank, a financial consultant, works from a home office. Although he has considerable ability to shape his schedule—"If I want to [get a haircut during the traditional workday], I just have to clear my calendar at work and get it"—he argues he must maintain a strict barrier between job and family to keep his work-from-home setup viable. He cited a recent morning as an example:

> I said goodbye to everyone and went up to work. Then I could hear the kids raising hell downstairs and [my wife] trying to clean the house because we have a cleaning lady coming over. . . . So I knew it's not going well. I just felt like I made this decision, and I'm just going to have to talk to [my wife] about it later. I'm not going to stop working and go down there. I have a noise machine, I put it on, and I put some music on and just ignored [the noise].

Gina works as a postdoc at an academic research center, where she also has considerable latitude in determining where and when

she works. Unlike Frank, who feels obligated to detach himself from domestic life while he is on the clock as the primary breadwinner, Gina believes she must remain connected to family life, or chaos descends: "I tend to do the planning when [all three kids] are at home, and I tend to try to be around when they are all at home. . . . Now that there are many more moving parts, I tend to take over a lot of the planning, because it is complicated." She looked forward to leaving academia and starting a "required 9:00 to 5:00 office position" with some trepidation: how would her husband manage without her continual oversight?

The idea that circumstances or personality differences dictated labor allocations facilitated respondents' belief that gendered outcomes could result from gender-neutral processes. Yet couples typically had more discretion than they recognized or acknowledged. Whether and how they exercised that discretion, however, depended in part on whether their circumstances were nudging them in a gender-traditional or nontraditional direction. Constraints were more or less constraining across contexts (home or work?), goals (equality or efficiency?), and employment configurations (was the female or male partner's job more demanding?). Reframing gendered choices as constraints facilitated the status quo by absolving couples of full responsibility for their nonegalitarian labor practices.

Narrowing temporal horizons. Much as gender shaped the options respondents perceived as viable in light of their current circumstances, gender shaped the circumstances in which they found themselves in the first place. Respondents, however, treated their circumstances as given, de-gendering their labor patterns by obscuring the relationship between present conditions and prior choices. In most cases, those prior choices—where to purchase a home, which job to take, whether to invest in learning a particular skill—nudged couples down gender-traditional paths.

Kristen, for instance, works from home, whereas her husband Alan commutes over an hour each way. Working from home "sort of requires me to do more" household labor, Kristen explained. She handles the majority of daycare drop-offs and pick-ups, cares for their toddler when he is sick and needs to come home early, and folds loads of laundry on conference calls. Alan told a similar story: "Kristen does almost all the housework. . . . Partly because, 99 percent because, she's home [and] she just does it." The couple did not intend to pursue a gender-traditional division of labor: both Kristen and Alan said their ideal allocation would be closer to 50/50. Given their respective commutes and time at home, however, they both saw Kristen's greater domestic workload as all but inevitable.

Yet the couple had considerable agency in shaping their circumstances. They moved to the suburbs to be closer to family, knowing Alan's commute time would increase; now, they were in the process of buying a home even further from his office. Alan's company allows employees to work part-time from home, but he did not report regularly taking advantage of this option. The couple had not forgotten their history; indeed, Kristen reminisced about a time when "things were more equal around the house . . . because we commuted together" and "took turns with everything." Rather, they dissociated that history from their current circumstances, as if the couple making choices about where to live and work was separate from the couple optimizing for a particular set of constraints.

Other respondents showed a similar decoupling when they asserted that one partner's more demanding profession limited his or her ability to contribute at home. Although true in some sense, this telling obscured the reality that respondents were highly-educated, middle- to upper-middle-class, and privileged with some degree of occupational choice. Furthermore, it overlooked the fact that women often adapted their career trajectories to accommodate their husband's needs, ramping their own work down to allow their husband's to ramp up. Kara, for instance, consistently works 36 hours per week outside the home, while her husband Joel works long and unpredictable hours as a management

consultant. "Realistically," Joel argued, Kara's shorter hours and greater flexibility required her to manage tasks like their childcare search and, later, communication with the nanny they selected. Joel's narrative, however, deemphasizes the fact that Kara requested and was granted a reduction in her work hours following their son's birth.

Similarly, Julian attributed his limited household contributions to his long hours at the hospital where he works as a physician. At the end of each day, he's "fairly intellectually exhausted—I don't come home and think about what needs to be arranged for childcare." Julian's wife Nina left a job in finance to pursue a PhD, in part because she wanted children and anticipated the challenges that would come with having two parents working demanding jobs. Now, she told me, her work is much more "bendy" (i.e., flexible) than her husband's: she can set her own hours and stack her meetings and teaching commitments to work from home several days per week. Although Nina sometimes gets frustrated with their unequal workload, "The reality is his job requires more hours than mine, and less flexible hours."

Joel's and Julian's professional demands indeed outstripped their wives' on some dimensions, but the two men presumably selected the grueling fields of management consulting and medicine with at least some knowledge of their demands. For their part, Kara and Nina returned to work only part-time after giving birth (Kara) and switched professions (Nina) with some expectation that they would need greater flexibility to compensate for their husbands' sporadic availability. Both couples' accounts emphasized making the best of the hand they were dealt, but they had in part dealt that hand to themselves, through a series of decisions that implicitly treated the male partner's career as a fixed point.

More subtly, some "given" circumstances were produced via a series of small investments that accumulated over time. For example, respondents commonly asserted that the female partner managed elements of childcare because she had greater knowledge of best practices or available options. Matteo marveled at his wife's ability to track their 1-year-old's evolving diet: "I know the basics," he told me, "but in terms of progress, like each month [our daughter] kind of changes in terms of what she can eat and can't eat and how you prepare it—I think [my wife] Leah has all the knowledge. I'm always surprised with what she came up with . . . because I would have never thought about it." More broadly, Mateo believed Leah "will always be better at sensing what our daughter needs as a next developmental step. . . . She will always be ahead of me."

Phil explained that his wife was in charge of identifying formal childcare and extracurricular activities for their son because she was more plugged into the Facebook groups and community listservs where parenting issues were discussed. Asked what he would do if his wife stopped performing this work, Phil joked that he would "steal her iPad" to gain access to her social media contacts. Such explanations focused on an existing knowledge gap without considering its origin; often, one partner invested in reading parenting books and joining online communities where information about local events circulated. What began as a small discrepancy snowballed over time as one partner took on a specialist role and the other increasingly deferred to their judgment.

Women were more commonly depicted as skilled in the feminized realm of childcare, but couples used similar logic to explain why the male partner handled car maintenance, long-term investing, or home repairs. "Mechanically," said Steve, "I think I have a better sense of what needs to be done"; thus, he is the one to fix whatever breaks and to operate machinery such as lawn mowers and snow blowers. Heather described her husband Jeremy as "the fixer": when their microwave malfunctions or car battery dies, Jeremy either fixes it or finds someone else to do the job. "I typically take the lead on [repair] things," he told me. "I guess it's [because] I know more?" Respondents' accounts focused on knowledge or skill gaps in the present

moment, but those gaps were likely driven by years of investment—or lack thereof—in learning about and practicing basic maintenance tasks.

The labor implications of certain choices often appear predictable in hindsight: when a couple selected a childcare center across the street from one partner's office, for instance, it could not be a surprise when this partner subsequently managed pick-ups and drop-offs. If one partner read every parenting book and blog she could find or spent her free time watching DIY home maintenance videos, that partner's greater expertise—and likely greater responsibility for related household work—was almost a foregone conclusion. Respondents seldom referenced such foresight, however. Instead, many described their labor allocation as unplanned. Describing the tasks she and her husband gravitate toward, Brooke told me, "It's not like we've said, 'Oh, you have to do this, and you have to do that.' It's just naturally, over time . . . that's how it's worked. . . . I just happen to be more with the kids while he does the lawn." Referring to a recent shift in his and his wife's respective childcare responsibilities, Douglas argued, "It wasn't anything explicit. You just go through a relationship and in life with some ebbs and flows. . . . I don't think we talk about it as much." "Once we became parents, it just was natural to us, like responsibilities," explained Antoni. "We never talked about it; [our labor allocation] just happened."

However, among the handful of couples with a nontraditional labor allocation in which the woman's career took precedence, temporal horizons were often broader, and respondents' personal agency was foregrounded. These couples more often described their current situation in contingent terms and recalled critical junctures when they could have made a different choice. Soon after their twins were born, for instance, Jonathan left his job as a lawyer to care for the children full-time. His wife Rebecca, a surgeon, described this arrangement as an experiment subject to ongoing evaluation: "We decided during [my maternity leave] that Jonathan would try [staying] at home. And so, he tried a couple months, then decided to try until [the twins turned] 2 years old, and then decided to keep going. . . . . If [a career opportunity] comes back up again [for Jonathan], then we'll just rearrange stuff."

Gina, a social scientist whose husband Garrett stays at home with their three children, was especially clear about the foresight and determination required to stick to the couple's atypical path. When Gina entered a PhD program years earlier, she and Garrett agreed that her success in academia would depend on her ability to be "all-in" as a graduate student, rather than constantly pulled between research and caring for their toddler. Garrett's part-time, work-from-home job enabled him to serve as primary parent, but finances were tight. When he received a full-time job offer, the economically prudent choice was obvious. Yet Gina remembered anticipating the hidden costs of this extra income:

> He would have to leave [for the office] at 7 in the morning, because this was LA, and he would be home at 7pm—7:00-7:00. A nanny would cost more than his salary. So what's going to happen then? What's going to happen then is my time is going to be considered more flexible. I'm going to be the one who has to be at home when my son is sick. I'm going to be the one who has to pick him up when he needs to be picked up early.

Although Garrett's earnings would have outstripped Gina's graduate school stipend, he ultimately declined the job to avoid shifting more of the childcare burden onto his wife. However, Gina's and Rebecca's clear-eyed assessment of how their prior choices contributed to current circumstances, and how future choices might create new circumstances, set them apart from the majority of the sample in much the same way their employment configurations did.

Narrative Failure

The combination of narrow temporal horizons and a flexible understanding of constraint facilitated the de-gendering process: it allowed couples to acknowledge inequalities

in their labor arrangements without attributing them to the gender-traditional ideology they disavowed. Because their inequality was not "about" gender, and thus not in conflict with their egalitarian identities, de-gendering helped preserve marital harmony. This relationship is perhaps best illustrated by its absence: when one partner veered off-script and insisted on connecting inequality to gender, conflict loomed.

Stephanie, for example, told me she'd recently read about "how, in the U.S., even if both husband and wife work equal time, the wife still does more than 50 percent of the household work. I just think that's really unfair. And so I definitely want our family to be—to not contribute to that statistic. I've worked really hard to make sure that we're equitable." Even though, as a graduate student, Stephanie's schedule was more flexible than her software engineer husband's, she insisted they split pickups and drop-offs equally and that Carl handle most of the cooking. Stephanie was proud of this arrangement: "We're equitable," she argued, "because I put in all this work to get that way." Yet Carl seemed frustrated by his wife's vigilance, which he implied was a waste of time. Stephanie "will often accuse me of not doing as much," he said. "If I neglect my portion [of the chores], or kind of either on purpose or inadvertently neglect starting laundry . . . then she'll either do it or she often reminds me to do it." Stephanie's insistence on gendering the couple's actions despite her husband's contrasting perspective set them up for ongoing tension, and occasional conflict, over their labor allocation.

Similarly, Robert described his wife Carla as "particularly conscious of [the division of labor], in not wanting to sort of fall into the stereotyped gender roles." She did not want to be solely responsible for transporting their daughter to and from daycare "even though she could do that," he said, because she wanted it to be "a shared responsibility." Robert seemed willing to humor his wife's request—he managed to configure his work schedule to allow him to do 30 to 40 percent of the weekly pickups and drop-offs—but suggested limits to how far he would go. Getting to 50/50 on this particular task would "require a significant overhaul" of their lives, he argued, and potentially hurt them financially. For these two couples, the problem was not the magnitude of their perceived inequality—indeed, they were far from the most extreme in the sample on that dimension. Rather, the suggestion that the inequality they did experience was gendered, or would be if Carla and Stephanie dropped their guard, was a larger threat to marital harmony.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of the Argument and Findings

This article examined the stalled and uneven gender revolution from the vantage point of individual couples. It asked how a couple might acknowledge that their unequal household labor practices fall short of their egalitarian ideals yet experience little conflict over their labor allocation. I argue that egalitarian couples come to terms with gendered allocation outcomes by "de-gendering" allocation processes. They explain their labor allocation as the result of inevitable, gender-neutral compromises made among competing imperatives. For cognitive labor tasks, equality largely competes with self-expression, as many respondents argue that the cognitive work they do and the way they do it is inextricably tied to who they are as individuals. In the realm of physical labor, equality is in competition with both expression and efficiency, as current circumstances are said to render a particular division of labor the most practical. Regardless of the specific explanation offered, the net effect is to reassure couples that they are not necessarily enacting societal gender norms or revealing their own hidden sexism if they happen to behave in gender-traditional ways.

Viewed narrowly, at the level of an individual couple operating at a single point in

time, these compromise narratives are compelling: it may well be more efficient for the partner whose office is closer to the daycare center to do most pick-ups, or for the more organized partner to manage the family calendar, regardless of their gender. However, when we expand the aperture to include each couple's past alongside their present and to compare the experiences of couples facing similar circumstances, gender comes back into view. Respondents treat the broad outlines of their life as given, but their current circumstances are the product of a long line of choices about what to study, where to live, what work to do, and which childcare option to pursue. Intentionally or not, these prior choices tend to render gender-traditional routines the most comfortable and efficient.

Implications

Respondents often use the language of constraint to account for their behavior, at first glance contradicting findings from earlier research. Stone (2007), for instance, demonstrates that high-achieving women rely heavily on "choice rhetoric" to explain why they left the workforce to care for children full-time. Similarly, Lamont (2020) finds that heterosexual men and women accept some degree of gender-traditionalism when they can recast it as a matter of personal preference. My work builds on these findings to show how choice and constraint are two sides of the same coin: the "constraints" posed by a husband's job, for instance, may lead a wife to "choose" to take on more household labor or decelerate her career (see also Gerson 1985). Personal agency and circumstantial imperative are narratives that can be mixed and matched to obscure the role of gender in shaping paid and unpaid labor patterns. These respondents appealed to personal agency, for instance, when they described their commitment to self-expression: their preferences and personality traits, they said, led them to take on certain chores. At the same time, they implied that because these characteristics were core to who they were, they were effectively constrained to act in accordance with these tendencies.

My data suggest that what is seen as choice and as constraint depends in part on the interaction of context and gender, consistent with prior research suggesting men's paid work is often perceived as non-negotiable and women's as supplementary or voluntary—and vice versa for their unpaid labor (Damaske 2011; Killewald and García-Manglano 2016). The demands of paid work, for instance, appear to constrain male and female respondents to different degrees: at-home mothers are expected to do more domestic work than comparable at-home fathers. And men whose organizational skills are deemed subpar in the domestic setting nevertheless manage large teams and oversee sizable budgets at the office. When pressed, a few of these men admit they turn off or tone down the relevant aspects of their personality and skill set when they arrive home. Women, it seems, do not have—or do not perceive they have—such a choice.

Adaptable understandings of choice and constraint prevent respondents from viewing their experiences through a gender lens. They may acknowledge their unequal labor outcomes, but they erase any connection to gender ideology. This "de-gendering" likely contributes to the noted intractability of gender inequality in different-sex romantic relationships (England 2010). In previous eras, gender was more widely acknowledged as a heuristic for labor allocation (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Scarborough et al. 2019). This ideology has eroded in recent years, as younger generations aspire to a new, more involved fatherhood and a romantic partnership in which breadwinning and homemaking are shared by both partners (Cooper 2000; Gerson 2011; LaRossa 1988). Nevertheless, behaviors have remained relatively stagnant (Bianchi et al. 2000, 2012). An optimistic assessment of this disjuncture is that behavioral change lags behind attitudinal change; progress in the former augurs eventual progress in the latter (Gershuny, Godwin, and Jones 1994). However, my findings remind us that attitudinal change alone is insufficient.

When couples reduce cognitive dissonance by reframing rather than reforming their behavior, they may inadvertently send gender "underground," where it can operate unchecked (Beagan et al. 2008). Household labor imbalances that are "about" efficiency or personality or an "inevitable" result of circumstantial constraints are more difficult for egalitarians to contest than imbalances attributed to sexist ideas about men's and women's roles.

My analysis of the aggregate data shows the couples sampled here were not, as their narratives implied, operating independently of the gender structure (Risman 2004). They were neither "undoing" gender, in the sense of challenging or dismantling gender inequality (Deutsch 2007), nor enacting Lorber's (2000) vision of a "feminist degendering movement." Lorber envisioned what we might call a "deep" de-gendering, in which gender difference is no longer the axis around which patterns of caregiving and breadwinning turn. In contrast, my respondents practice a "shallow" de-gendering, in which long-standing behaviors are simply relabeled while the underlying gendered patterns remain intact.

The fact that gender continued to shape respondents' practices despite their disavowal of its influence does not mean couples were deluded or oblivious. Rather, gender's effects were clearest at the aggregate level. Individual couples cited differences in each partner's employment circumstances (hours worked, distance from home, level of flexibility) or personality traits to explain why one of them shouldered a heavier domestic load or took on particular tasks. When those factors pointed a couple toward a traditional labor allocation, it was easy to write off as a coincidentally-gendered consequence of gender-neutral processes. Only when those factors consistently align with gender-traditionalism, as was the case across these respondents, does their gender-neutrality come into question.

Couples' eagerness to de-gender their labor allocation process may be better understood as a form of adaptation than of self-deception. Although ideals have changed considerably in recent years, many other elements of the gender structure remain intact: men still choose different college majors, enter more lucrative and less flexible occupations, and face strong societal pressures to provide for their families (Cha 2013; Charles and Bradley 2009; Riggs 1997). Women are still trained from a young age to attend to others' needs and feelings; held more accountable for domestic outcomes; and concentrated in family-friendly—and less remunerative—occupations (Charles and Grusky 2004; Erickson 1993; Harman and Cappellini 2014; Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppanner 2019). Cultural imperatives to "intensively" parent clash with employers' expectations of their "ideal workers," making it difficult for one person to compete in both arenas (Becker and Moen 1999; Blair-Loy 2005; Hays 1998; Reid 2015). By de-gendering their labor allocation, couples open a path through the contradictions of our incomplete gender revolution, exerting control at the narrative level even as more fundamental changes remain unrealized.

De-gendering also appears to preserve marital harmony, perhaps serving as a twenty-first-century form of family myth-making (Hochschild and Machung 2012). The story that keeps the peace is not one about overlooking inequality, as Hochschild and Machung found in the 1980s; instead, it is about acknowledging inequality and denying its connection to gendered forces. Stephanie's and Carla's insistence on gendering household labor allocation processes may serve as a cautionary tale. Their husbands bristled at the implication they were less than egalitarian and appeared to resent the occasions when they were asked to practice equality for its own sake. A gendered understanding risked pitting husband against wife, and a de-gendered understanding pitted the couple against their circumstances or natures. Neither approach facilitated true equality, but the de-gendered version at least promoted peaceful cohabitation.

In place of gender, I show that the majority of couples understand their labor allocation processes as a series of tradeoffs, including between personal expression and spousal equality. These findings connect to prior

research on the relationship between gender inequality and personal identity: because self-concepts are highly gendered, women and men often express themselves in distinct ways, exacerbating gender segregation as they self-select into different majors and occupational fields (Cech 2013). My research extends this theory into the domestic sphere by connecting household labor patterns—particularly cognitive tasks—to individuals' attempts to act in accordance with their invisibly gendered identities. It also hints at the interaction between self-concept and context: particularly for men in the sample, paid and unpaid work appeared to activate different sets of skills or traits. In the feminized space of domestic life, male respondents were commonly depicted as laid-back, reactive, and disorganized. Yet these same men worked in occupations that reward assertiveness, proactivity, and organization. These findings suggest gender shapes both one's sense of self and the particular aspects of that self deemed relevant in a given context.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite these important results, several study limitations and unanswered questions suggest avenues for future research. For instance, the recruitment method and exclusion criteria used here affect the generalizability of the results. First, I required both members of a couple to participate in individual interviews. This requirement may have screened out people experiencing significant marital conflict, as such couples would presumably be more reluctant to volunteer information about co-parenting and household affairs. Because this article examines the processes that enable couples to avoid conflict, this limitation should not diminish the argument presented here. However, comparative research on couples with a wider range of satisfaction levels could establish how these respondents fit into the larger population of U.S. couples. Longitudinal data tracking couples over a period of years could help disentangle cause and effect, in addition to assessing the stability of respondents' narratives over time and through distinct life stages.

Another important limitation is the homogeneity of the sample. By design, the couples interviewed were highly educated; unintentionally, the majority were also white and well-off. Thus, the results presented here should not be interpreted as representative of U.S. couples' experiences. Class in particular is associated with gender ideology; educational attainment is positively correlated with egalitarian beliefs (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009; Scarborough et al. 2019). Social class also shapes the range of behavioral possibilities open to a couple. For instance, in describing the connections between respondents' prior choices and current circumstances, I assume they enjoyed considerable agency in their choices of occupation and employer, whether both partners would work full-time, and whether they would allocate extra money toward paid service-providers (e.g., a nanny or house-cleaner) or perform all housework themselves. Couples with fewer resources are likely more constrained in their decision-making. It is notable, then, that although these respondents are arguably among the *least* constrained in their paid work options and the *most* ideologically committed to equality, they nevertheless struggle to enact egalitarian ideals, and they explain that struggle in terms of constraint.

Finally, future studies should take a closer look at couples with a nontraditional labor allocation. Consistent with data showing the persistence of gender gaps in household labor performance (Bianchi et al. 2012), the majority of couples in this study reported that the female partner, to varying degrees, takes on a greater share of physical and cognitive labor, even though I oversampled for couples in which the wife was employed full-time and the husband was not. Throughout the article, I highlighted distinctions between the traditional and nontraditional groups, including the latter's increased tendency to describe their arrangements as contingent and connected to deliberate choices. However, the narratives of traditional and nontraditional couples had much in common, including a

tendency to seek efficiency in household operations and to take personality into account as they divvied up labor. This resemblance raises questions about the circumstances in which similar desires and demographics lead couples down very different pathways. The patterns identified here should be verified in a larger, more diverse sample of couples.

Continuing to close the gap between egalitarian ideals and non-egalitarian behaviors will likely require change at multiple levels. For couples, change may mean critically examining assumptions and imagining new possibilities. In the short term, such a reckoning might prompt a "re-gendering" of allocation processes and generate dissatisfaction and conflict of the sort the stably unequal couples in this sample largely avoided. Over time, however, one would hope the benefits of improved alignment between beliefs and behaviors would outweigh the transition costs. Significant change is also needed at the societal level: in how we raise boys and girls and cultivate their sense of self; in continued efforts to reduce occupational segregation and wage discrimination; in the supports provided working parents; and in checks on the continued expansion of work hours. Only via concerted effort on multiple fronts will we restart the stalled gender revolution.

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Notes

1. The cited figures represent average gender gaps and undoubtedly mask variation in couples' practices. For instance, recent research on dual-earner couples with children indicates that approximately 9 percent of couples fall into a "parallel" group in which men and women contribute approximately equally to paid and unpaid labor (Hall and MacDermid 2009).
2. Gender ideology is a multifaceted construct (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Knight and Brinton 2017; Scarborough et al. 2019). In this article, I define an egalitarian as someone who supports gender equality in both the public and private sphere and disavows the idea that men and women are equal but fundamentally distinct in their preferences and skills.
3. My usage of "de-gendering" closely resembles Berns's (2001). Berns (2001:265) describes a "patriarchal resistance discourse" surrounding domestic violence that "degenders" the issue "by removing gender from the framing of the problem."
4. One couple was unmarried but had been cohabiting for four years.
5. One participant completed 3.5 years of college but did not receive a degree.
6. I asked participants to express their ideal and actual allocations in percentage terms, but some offered a qualitative rather than numeric assessment (e.g., things are "pretty even" or "she does most [of the cognitive labor]") or reported a domain-by-domain breakdown rather than an overall assessment. Despite variation in the form of their responses, most participants made clear the direction and relative size of their perceived labor imbalance.
7. I did not directly ask respondents about their relationship satisfaction, in part because I was concerned I would be unlikely to get an accurate response and in part because relationship satisfaction was not central to the questions that originally animated this research. Instead, I infer relationship satisfaction via indirect clues, including respondents' answers to questions about recent conflict, previous attempts to change their division of labor, and the factors (if any) they believe prevent them from achieving their ideal labor allocation.

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