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## The Division of Child Care, Sexual Intimacy, and Relationship Quality in Couples

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**Institutions:** Georgia State University

**Published on:** 02 Feb 2016 - Gender & Society (SAGE Publications)

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#### Recommended Citation

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## **The Division of Childcare, Sexual Intimacy, and Relationship Quality in Couples**

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This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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# **The Division of Childcare, Sexual Intimacy, and Relationship Quality in Low to Moderate Income Couples**

## **ABSTRACT**

Increasingly, both mothers and fathers are expected to play an equal role in child rearing. Nonetheless, we know little about how childcare arrangements affect couples' sexual intimacy and relationship quality. Research has focused on the effect of the division of paid labor and housework on couples' relationships - finding that egalitarianism is problematic for sexual intimacy, relationship quality, and relationship stability. These findings, nonetheless, come almost universally from studies utilizing decades old data and which fail to examine the division of childcare. In this study we update this work by utilizing data from the 2006 Marital and Relationship Study (MARS) (N = 974) to examine how the division of childcare affects the relationship quality and sexual intimacy of heterosexual couples in the United States. Results indicate that men's performance of childcare is generally associated with more satisfaction with the division of childcare, more satisfying sexual relationships, and higher quality relationships. Importantly, we find that egalitarian childcare arrangements have positive consequences for both men and women. These findings contribute to a growing body of research that challenges the costs of egalitarianism and indicates instead that egalitarianism is associated with higher quality, more intimate relationships than gender traditional arrangements.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that couples increasingly embrace egalitarian ideals for the division of labor (Gerson 2010), achieving such arrangements remains difficult given persistent cultural conventions for separate gender spheres and inadequate family-workplace policies. This has led many scholars to conclude that the revolution in gender equality has stalled (Hochschild 1989; England 2010). Indeed, despite steady increases in egalitarian attitudes over time in the United States women's labor force participation rates, shares of household earnings, and shares of housework have changed little since the early 1990s (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, and Robinson 2012).

Constructing equal partnerships can be challenging, given the dearth of role models as well as numerous structural and cultural barriers to equality (Coltrane 1996; Schwartz 1995). Research shows that sharing domestic labor and breadwinning responsibilities can be problematic for couples' happiness, stability, and sexual intimacy (Frisco and Williams 2003; Rogers 2004; Kornrich, Brines, and Leupp 2013; Schwartz 1995). Many of these findings, nonetheless, are based on data that are decades old. Moreover, research regarding the association between egalitarianism and couples' relationship quality has generally ignored the division of childcare. Yet, significant cultural and behavior changes in parenting attitudes and practices (Bianchi, et al. 2012; Hays, 1999; Dermott 2008; Sayer 2005), and the centrality of the division of childcare to gender inequality in the public and private spheres (Budig and England 2001; Hill 2005; Usdansky and Parker 2011) makes examining the consequences of the division of childcare in couples of paramount importance.

In this study we use data from the 2006 Marital and Relationship Survey (MARS) to examine how the division of childcare responsibilities and decision making is associated with the

quality of American heterosexual couples' relationships, including their sexual frequency and the quality of their sex lives. Additionally, we examine the possible pathways through which the division of childcare may affect couples' sexual intimacy, and ultimately their overall relationship quality. Our results show that the division of childcare is of significant consequence to the quality of couples' relationships. In general, increases in men's performance of childcare is associated for both partners with more satisfaction with the division of childcare, higher quality sexual relationships, lower levels of couple conflict, and higher overall relationship satisfaction.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Stalled Revolution**

From 1960s to the 1990s labor force participation among women, especially mothers with children, grew substantially in the United States. The percent of women working in the paid labor force increased from 38 to 58 percent while for mothers of children under age 18, rates rose from approximately 28 to 68 percent (Cohany and Sok 2007; Fullerton 1999). Concomitant with increases in paid labor, the percent of married mothers who made more than their husbands increased from 3 to 17 percent (Wang, Parker, and Taylor 2013). As the division of paid labor shifted, the division of unpaid labor in the home shifted as well. The number of hours women spent on housework, on average, decreased from 30 per week in 1965 to 17.5 in 1995, while the amount contributed by men grew from 5 to 10 hours (Bianchi et al. 2012). Finally, in conjunction with these changes in behaviors, men's and women's valuation of gender equality grew over time. In 1977, 31 percent of male and 37 percent of female respondents to the General Social Survey disagreed with the statement that it is better for the man to work and the

woman to tend to the home. By 1990, 57 and 60 percent of men and women respectively, disagreed.

Although attitudes have continued to liberalize since 1990 – by 2012, the percent disagreeing with the idea of separate spheres had increased further to 65 for men and 73 for women (Smith, Marsden, Hout, and Kim 2013) – the gendered division of labor has changed little. As of 2010, the percentage of mothers in the paid labor force had increased just 3 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014) and the percent earning more than their husbands had grown by only 5 percent (Wang, Parker, and Taylor 2013). Moreover, men did the same amount of housework in 2010 – 10 hours per week – as in 1995 (Bianchi et al. 2012).

There are several forces responsible for what Arlie Hochschild (1989) labeled “the stalled revolution” in gender equality. First, couples continue to find themselves fighting against a pervasive culture of male privilege and essential gender differences in abilities and proclivities that push women away from paid work and men away from housework and caregiving (Komter 1989; Miller and Carlson 2015; Williams 2010). This cultural environment not only places women in the impossible position of being devalued for their femininity and demeaned for ignoring their role of homemaker and mother when engaged in paid work (Hays 1999), but it also places pressure on men to keep their breadwinning responsibilities and thus eschew traditional feminine tasks like childcare and housework in order to maintain their masculinity and avoid the perception of weakness (Williams 2010).

These cultural forces shape, and are shaped by, family and workplace policies that assume male breadwinning and female homemaking. Indeed, the absence or presence of supportive work-family policies shapes individuals’ preferences for egalitarian arrangements (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). Even if couples embrace egalitarian ideals and resist cultural

pressures to embrace gendered roles at home, they often face inflexible work schedules, a lack of paid family leave, patchwork childcare arrangements, wage and hiring discrimination for female partners, and a masculine workplace culture that assumes 24-7 availability (Gault et al. 2014; Capizzano, Adams, and Sonenstein 2000). All of this encourages women to leave the paid labor force in the face of family-work conflicts and limits men's abilities to engage at home.

Perhaps no factor pushes couples toward a gendered labor arrangement like parenthood. Unlike fathers, mothers' time with children is thought to be essential to their proper development (Hays 1999). Moreover, cultural shifts toward an ethos of intensive mothering have meant that women devote even more time to their children today than ever before (Bianchi et al. 2012). To be fair, cultural conceptions of fatherhood have also shifted to include more intimacy and emotional connection with children, but as Dermott (2008) notes, this has not necessarily meant that mothering and fathering have become synonymous and interchangeable. Indeed, despite increases in fathers' time with children, men continue to rate mothering as more important to children than fathering.

Mothers' actual or assumed primary responsibility for children means they face greater family-work conflict compared to fathers (Hill 2005; Usdansky and Parker 2011). With little structural support to manage competing demands, mothers, on average, decrease their time in paid work and increase their time in housework upon entering parenthood while fathers, especially those who are unmarried, increase their time in paid work (Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Stone 2007; Astone et al. 2010). This has consequences, both in the short- and long-term, for a mother's earnings, career advancement, and future attachment to the labor force, not to mention gender inequality and power in intimate relationships (Becker 1981; Budig and England 2001; Cha 2013).



Not only do cultural and socio-structural contexts negatively affect couples' abilities to share domestic and financial responsibilities, but it can also create a situation where egalitarian arrangements pose problems for relationship quality, intimacy, and stability. Indeed, research shows that couples who share housework and breadwinning responsibilities have lower levels of intimacy and are more likely to see their relationships dissolve than couples with a traditionally gendered division of labor (Kornrich, Brines, and Leupp 2013; Rogers 2004; Schwartz 1995). Nonetheless, much of this information about the consequences of egalitarianism fails to consider how the division of childcare affects couples' relationships.

### **The Strains of Egalitarianism? Relationship Stability and Sexual Intimacy**

Numerous studies using data from the 80s and 90s have intimated that egalitarianism has negative consequences for the quality of married couples' relationships and partners' well-being. Equal shares of paid labor and breadwinning responsibilities have been demonstrated to lower relationship quality, increase the probability of divorce, and undermine mental health, primarily through feelings of inequity or dissatisfaction regarding the division of labor (Frisco and Williams 2003; Rogers 2004; Stevens, Kiger, and Riley 2001). Such feelings of inequity and dissatisfaction are especially likely among working wives who retain responsibility for housework (Frisco and Williams 2003; Stevens, Kiger, and Riley 2001). In her 2004 study, Rogers demonstrated that sharing breadwinning responsibilities lowered married partners' dependency on one another and therefore increased the probability of marital dissolution – a finding consistent with a new home economics argument that role complementarity strengthens marriages (Becker 1981). Although equal shares of housework have been found to increase feelings of fairness and relationship quality among couples (Frisco and Williams 2003; Lavee

and Katz 2002; Stevens, Kiger, and Riley 2001) it has been found to undermine couples' sexual intimacy (Kornrich et al. 2013; Schwartz 1995). In their study, Kornrich and colleagues (2013) argued that a traditionally gendered division of labor was necessary to enact the sexual scripts that lead to sexual arousal. Consistent with this, they found that increases in husbands' and wives' performance of non-traditional housework tasks were associated with decreases in sexual frequency, and for wives, sexual satisfaction. Although the actual division of housework was not found to predict husband's sexual satisfaction, research suggests that men's subjective assessment of the division of labor is central to their sexual satisfaction (Traeen, Štulhofer, and Carvalheira 2013).

Although research suggests that egalitarian relationships are difficult to maintain and less intimate than gendered relationships, most of these results are based on data that are more than 20 years old. Recent research on the division of household labor shows no difference in sexual intimacy between egalitarian and gender traditional couples (Carlson, Miller, Sassler, and Hanson 2014) and indicates that gender equality in education leads to greater marital stability (Schwartz and Han 2014). Past research has also been limited by a singular focus on married individuals. Given that married couples are older, more educated, more gender traditional, and less sexually active than cohabiting couples (Call, Sprecher, and Schwartz 1995; Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman, 2011) our understanding of the effects of the division of labor on couples' relationships is possibly not generalizable to today's couples. Finally, research has largely ignored an important dimension of the division of labor and its consequences for couples relationship satisfaction and sexual intimacy – the division of childcare.

## The Division of Childcare and Couples' Relationship Quality

Although progress toward gender equality has stalled in the areas of paid employment, breadwinning, and housework, one area where significant progress has been made is the domain of childcare (Bianchi et al. 2012). In 1965 women spent 10.5 hours in childcare activities per week, on average, compared to 2.6 for men -- a difference of 8 hours. By 1995 women were performing 11.2 hours of childcare per week and men 4.5 hours, and by 2010 women were doing 13.7 hours while men had further increased their contribution to 7.2 hours. Therefore, unlike other aspects of the division of labor, the gender gap in childcare has continued to narrow. Whereas women used to do 4 times as much childcare as men, today they do less than twice as much. Moreover, couples today now do nearly twice as much childcare as they did 50 years ago. The increase, however, has occurred most especially in developmental tasks (i.e., reading; playing games) for women, while men have increased both their developmental and instrumental task (i.e., feeding, bathing, etc.) performance (Sayer 2014).

Of course, instrumental and developmental tasks are just two dimensions of childcare. According to Craig (2006) childcare, much like housework, can be divided into various kinds of tasks. Instrumental physical tasks fall into a dimension Craig labels *physical/emotional care* that involves not only feeding and bathing, but also soothing and hugging children. Craig titles developmental tasks *interactive childcare* – face-to-face activities such as helping children with homework, reading with them, and playing games. *Travel and communication* involves transporting children to school and lessons and discussing the child with others. Finally, *passive childcare* involves supervising and monitoring children, maintaining a safe environment, and being there for the child to turn to. Like the various dimensions of housework, these activities are gendered. Mothers participate in all dimensions, spending the most time in physical/emotional

care, while fathers spend their time equally in interactive and physical/emotional care. Because physical/emotional care is more routine, parenting is thus more intensive for mothers, while for fathers it is a shared, recreational experience (Craig and Mullan 2011).

The movement toward gender equality in childcare has occurred under conditions of increasing expectations for parenting (Hays 1999) and limited changes in workplace policies. The consequence is that although both men and women have increased the amount of time they spend with their children, men and especially women have had to reduce their personal and leisure time to do so (Sayer 2014). Moreover, to balance work and family obligations many dual-earner couples engage in split-shift parenting, working separate shifts to ensure that one parent is available at all times for the children (Epstein and Kalleberg 2004; Acs 2003).

These arrangements, while good for children, may have costs for couples. Rotating shifts and working non-day shifts (i.e., 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> shift) are associated with higher levels of couple conflict and psychological distress among parents (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, and Sayer 2007) as well as less time together (Wight, Raley, and Bianchi 2008). Losing time with each other may be especially consequential to couples' relationships as time together is a primary predictor of sexual intimacy (Gager and Yabiku 2010; Kornrich, Brines, and Leupp 2013), and subsequently, overall relationship happiness and satisfaction as sexually content spouses have happier and more stable relationships than couples who are dissatisfied with their sex lives (for review see Sprecher et al. 2004). Although the division of childcare may negatively affect couples' relationship quality by reducing both time together and sexual intimacy, preliminary evidence suggests that equally sharing childcare is a net positive for couples. A recent study shows that British couples report higher levels of relationship quality when fathers are more involved in childcare (Schober 2012). Whether this is true of couples in other countries is

unclear. Another study indicates that father involvement in childcare in non-married cohabitating U.S. couples lowers the likelihood of separation (McClain 2011). As yet, no research exists on the links between father involvement in childcare and sexual intimacy.

An egalitarian division of childcare is likely associated with positive outcomes for couples because they are more satisfied with these arrangements. Rogers and White (1998) found a significant association between marital satisfaction and parenting satisfaction for both mothers and fathers. Those who report higher parenting satisfaction generally tend to report higher marital satisfaction. Though we are unaware of any research examining the association between parenting satisfaction and sexual intimacy, research shows that satisfaction with the division of routine housework tasks like cooking, cleaning, and laundry is positively associated with sexual intimacy (Carlson et al. 2014)

Given these findings, we develop the conceptual model displayed in Figure 1. As shown, egalitarian divisions of childcare may have both positive and negative effects on couples' relationships. On one hand, if an equal sharing of childcare is associated with less time together compared to an arrangement where mothers are largely responsible for childcare this will have negative consequences for couples' sexual intimacy and overall relationship quality. On the other hand, it's likely that an egalitarian division of childcare is positively associated with couples' satisfaction with their childcare arrangements compared to having mothers doing most of the childcare and thus positively associated with sexual intimacy and relationship quality.

#### FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Fathers' participation in childcare increases relationship quality, but perhaps only to a certain point. In couples where mothers work and the father is the sole caretaker of the child(ren), relationship quality has been found to decrease (Feldman 2000). This is consistent

with Carlson et al. (2014) who found that couples where the male partner was primarily responsible for routine housework were least satisfied with their division of labor and had the least frequent and least satisfying sex lives of all couples. Although these kinds of arrangements are rare, such findings are consistent with a gender deviance perspective that non-normative gender divisions of paid and unpaid labor threaten men's masculinity and pose problems for intimate relationships (Tichenor 2005). Although recent work indicates that this may no longer be the case (Schwartz and Han 2014), this nonetheless raises the possibility that men's share of childcare may be related to sexual intimacy and relationship quality in a non-linear fashion. Examining whether such a pattern exists regarding childcare is important given increases in stay-at-home fathers in recent decades (Kramer, Kelly, and McCulloch 2013).

Cultural shifts in couples' attitudes about the division of labor have continued to liberalize, suggesting changes in the consequences of egalitarianism (e.g., Carlson et al. 2014; Schwartz and Han 2014). Yet, one very important aspect of the division of labor – childrearing – has been relatively ignored. What research has been conducted has focused on non-U.S. couples or has been limited to specific groups (e.g., cohabitators). Moreover, it has lacked a focus on sexual intimacy. We address these issues by examining the association of childcare with couples' relationship quality and sexual intimacy from a sample of middle- to low-income U.S. couples with children collected in 2006.

## **METHOD**

### **Data**

For this study we utilize data from the Marital and Relationship Survey (MARS). The MARS is an internet-based, nationally representative survey of U.S. adults conducted in 2006 by *Knowledge Networks (KN)* using probability sampling with random digit dialing (data is

available upon request). Unlike other web-based surveys that recruit current internet users willing to participate in on-line surveys, *KN* provides on-going household panelists with an Internet appliance, Internet access, Web TV, and a cash payment for completing surveys. Panelists then receive unique log-in information for accessing surveys online and to ensure confidentiality. Surveys are sent emails three to four times a month inviting them to participate in research; they are also rotated in and out of the survey to assure up-to-date nationally representative samples. In this way, the survey did not exclude members of disadvantaged backgrounds, who are the least likely to have access to the internet (Fairlie 2004).

The MARS sample is an oversample of low to moderate income couples (income less than \$50,000) and was restricted to couples with co-resident minor children and female partner was under age 45. The survey was conducted in March and April of 2006, and took approximately 35 to 40 minutes to complete. Both married and cohabiting respondents were sampled and information was collected independently from both partners. The response rate for the MARS was 80.3% (Lichter and Carmalt 2009). A total of 1,095 individuals in 605 couples were interviewed. Because we are interested in controlling for several couple-level variables, such as the female partners' share of income, partner's work hours, and couples' total incomes, we limit our sample to those 487 couples where both partners completed the survey.

## **Measures**

### ***Dependent Variables***

The primary outcomes considered in this study are couples' relationship quality and sexual intimacy. Details on variable measurement can be found in Appendix A. Two measures assess relationship quality. *Relationship satisfaction* – a single item measure ranging from 0 to

10 – and *Relationship conflict* – a 3-item scale. Sexual intimacy is assessed with three measures of both the quantity and quality of couples' sex lives. *Sexual frequency per month*, *Satisfaction with sexual frequency* - an ordinal measure, and *Quality of sexual relationship* which is a 4-item scale.

Analyses of sexual frequency are conducted using negative binomial regression, given the positively skewed distribution of the count of sexual encounters per month and the over-dispersion of the distribution (i.e., variance is much greater than mean). Analyses of satisfaction with sexual frequency were conducted using ordered logistic regression, while analysis of the relationship satisfaction, relationship conflict, and quality of sexual relationship are conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. All analyses used clustered standard errors to account for non-independence of reports, since respondents are nested within couples.

### ***Independent Variables***

Our primary independent variable is the division of childcare. This measure taps three of the four dimensions of childcare noted by Craig (2006) – passive childcare (rule making), physical/emotional childcare (praising child), and interactive childcare (playing with child; rule enforcement). Although we acknowledge that these items are not an exhaustive list of childcare tasks, they were the only available in the data. Each item indicated who was responsible for the task and ranged from 0 (female partner only) to 2 (shared equally) to 4 (male partner only). We summed these 5 items and averaged the total to create a summary measure, indicating the *Male partners' share of childcare*. To assess possible non-linearity in the association of the division of childcare with sexual intimacy and relationship quality, we created 3 dummy variables -- *she does majority of childcare* (male partner does ~ < 40%; score on male partners' share of



childcare was less than 1.6), *childcare shared equally* (male partner does ~40-60%; score for male partners' share of childcare was between 1.6 and 2.4), and *he does majority of childcare* (male partner does ~ > 60%; male partners' share of childcare were equal to or greater than 2.4).

Two variables may intervene between the division of childcare and couples' sexual intimacy and overall relationship quality. These include satisfaction with childcare arrangement and couples' time alone together. *Satisfaction with childcare* is a 5-item summed scale, while *Time spent alone together* is a Likert item ranging from 1 to 6.

### ***Controls***

A number of variables were employed as controls. These include dummy variables for respondents' *gender*, *union status*, *division of routine housework*, respondents' *education*, *child with disability* in home, and *religious affiliation* as well as continuous measures for *his* and *her hours of housework per weekday*, respondent's *age*, *his* and *her hours spent in paid labor*, *number of children less than age two in household*, *number of children ages two to five in household*, *number of children ages six to 12 in household*, *age of youngest child in household*, *couples' total income*, and *female partner's share of couple's income*. Finally, we include ordinal measures for *self-rated health* (0 = poor health to 4 = excellent) and *religious attendance* (0 = never to 5 = more than once a week). We found missing values on more than 5% of cases for sexual frequency, male partners' share of childcare, satisfaction with division of childcare, age of youngest child, and couples' total income. We adjust by imputing missing values for all variables using the "mi impute" procedure in STATA 12. In total, data were imputed 10 times.

## **RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics for our sample are presented in Table 1. On average, both male and female partners were very satisfied in their relationships and reported little conflict. Men reported having sex on average 7.054 times a month and female partners reported 6.911 times a month. Both partners reported being satisfied with their sexual frequency. Men, however, were slightly less often satisfied with the amount of sex they were having than women. The mean for the quality of sexual relationship scale was 7.660 out of 12 for men and 7.658 out of 12 for women.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

We found that the vast majority of couples shared childcare tasks. Nonetheless, there were discrepancies in respondents' reports. Overall, women reported sharing the childcare with their partner 73.4% of the time compared to 80.0% for men. Women reported that they did most of the childcare 24.0% of time. Men reported that their female partners did the majority of childcare 7.2% of the time. Men reported they did the majority of childcare 10% of the time compared to 13.3% for their female partners. We ran supplemental analyses and found no evidence that discrepancies in partners' reports were related to relationship quality, satisfaction with childcare arrangements, and sexual intimacy. This gap in reports in the division of domestic labor is consistent with past findings (e.g., Lee and Waite 2005; Parker and Wang 2013). These discrepancies are attributable, in part, to the higher likelihood of women to report time spent on secondary activities than men. Moreover, while both men and women tend to inflate time spent in domestic activities, women are more likely to inflate their own time, but not their male partners' while men inflate equally for both themselves and their partner (Lee and Waite 2005).

Table 2 shows results of analyses examining the association of the division of childcare with couples' sexual intimacy and relationship quality. Panel 1 of Table 2 shows results from

analysis of our summary measure of male partner's share of childcare. Male partner's share of childcare is positively associated with respondent's relationship satisfaction ( $b = .624, p < .001$ ), satisfaction with sexual frequency ( $b = .294, p < .10$ ) and sexual relationship quality ( $b = .595, p < .001$ ) while it is negatively associated with relationship conflict ( $b = -.291; p < .001$ ). We find no evidence using this measure of the division of childcare that male partner's share of childcare is associated with reports of sexual frequency.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

We hypothesized that linear measures of the division of childcare may ignore important differences across childcare arrangements. We, therefore, separate the division of childcare into three categories in Panel 2 of Table 2 and examine their association with couples' sexual intimacy and relationship quality. Results indicate significant differences, and in some cases, the absence of difference, that are not apparent when a linear measure of the division of childcare is used. As expected, results indicate that couples where the female partner is primarily responsible for childcare have lower relationship quality ( $b = -1.073; p < .000$ ), more couple conflict ( $b = .460; p < .001$ ), less satisfaction with how often they have sex ( $b = -.481; p < .05$ ) and lower quality sexual relationships ( $b = -1.083; p < .000$ ) compared to couples who share childcare equally. We find only one difference between egalitarian couples and couples where the male partner is largely responsible for childcare. Couples with father-centered childcare have sex marginally less often than egalitarian couples, though the difference is substantive small and amounts to only one-quarter of a sexual encounter per month between the two groups.

We noted that two factors may mediate the relationship of the division of childcare with couples' sexual intimacy and relationship quality – time alone together and satisfaction with one's childcare arrangement. Results from Table 2 show that men's shares of childcare are

positively associated with satisfaction with the division of childcare ( $b = .321, p < .001$ ), however, in Panel 2 we see that although couples where the female partner is largely responsible for housework are significantly less satisfied with the division of childcare ( $b = -0.421; p < .000$ ) compared to those who share it equally, there is no difference between egalitarian couples and those where the male partner is largely responsible for childcare. We find no evidence that the division of childcare is associated with couples' time together.

Table 3 shows results from analyses of satisfaction with the division of childcare as a mediator of the association between couples' childcare arrangements, sexual intimacy, and relationship quality. Results of formal Sobel-Goodman tests of mediation are also presented. We find that satisfaction with the division of childcare mediates the effect of division of childcare on satisfaction with sexual frequency and sexual relationship quality. Satisfaction with the division of childcare is not associated with sexual frequency, and therefore does little to account for differences across childcare arrangements in sexual frequency. When satisfaction with the division of childcare is accounted for, the difference between female-centered arrangements and egalitarian arrangements in satisfaction with sexual frequency decreases 63.3% from  $-.501$  to  $-.184$  and to non-significance. The largest change across models is found in sexual relationship quality. When satisfaction with division of childcare is accounted for the difference between female-centered and egalitarian childcare arrangements is reduced by 86.2% from  $-1.088$  to  $-.150$  and to non-significance.

#### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Results indicate that satisfaction with the division of childcare is also a mediator of the association between the division of childcare and couples' relationship quality. Accounting for satisfaction with the division of childcare reduces differences in relationship satisfaction between

egalitarian couples and couples' where the female partner is responsible for childcare by 70.1% and to marginal significance. Satisfaction with the division of childcare is also an important mediator for relationship conflict. When included in the model it accounts for more than half of the effect of the division of childcare on relationship conflict. Our conceptual model indicated that sexual intimacy is likely an important factor linking satisfaction with childcare to relationship quality. When measures of sexual intimacy are included in Table 3 we see that they in fact account for a fair proportion of the effect of childcare satisfaction on relationship quality. These measures explain nearly one-third of the association of childcare satisfaction with relationship satisfaction and one-quarter of its association with relationship conflict.

Since research has found gender differences in the consequences of the gendered division of labor for couples (e.g., Kornrich, Brines, and Leupp 2013) we conducted analyses of possible gender interactions (results not shown; available upon request). We find little evidence that the effect of the division of childcare varies for men and women. Only one significant difference emerged. For men, being responsible for childcare results in significantly lower reports of sexual relationship quality ( $b = -.762$ ;  $p < .05$ ) compared to sharing it with one's partner. For women, having a male partner who is largely responsible for childcare results in reports of significantly higher sexual relationship quality compared to egalitarian arrangements ( $b = 2.117$ ;  $p < .01$ ). For women, the effect of the division of childcare appears linear, with increases in men's share of childcare resulting in an increasingly higher quality sex life. For men, sexual relationship quality appears lowest when he is primarily responsible for the children, and is highest when it is shared equally.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

## **DISCUSSION**

Today, the vast majority of individuals desire to share paid and unpaid labor with their partners. Past research has shown that equal shares of paid work threaten relationship quality and stability and that equal shares of unpaid housework undermine sexual intimacy. Nonetheless, more recent research suggests this may no longer be the case. Much of the research on the consequences of the division of labor, nevertheless, has ignored one very important dimension – the division of childcare. Indeed, it is generally unclear how the division of childcare is related to couples' feelings regarding the division of childcare, their sexual intimacy, and their relationship quality.

We found that heterosexual couples are generally the worst off when female partners are primarily responsible for childcare. Individuals who note that the female partner does the majority of childcare were least satisfied with their childcare arrangement, the least satisfied with their sexual relationships, and subsequently had the lowest levels of relationship satisfaction and highest levels of relationship conflict. Although we expected that the division of childcare may lower relationship quality and sexual intimacy by negatively affecting couples' time together, we found no evidence of this. Indeed, the amount of time couples spent together was unrelated to their division of childcare. Nonetheless, we did find strong support for our hypothesis that the effect of childcare arrangements on sexual intimacy and relationship quality would be mediated by satisfaction with the division of childcare. Satisfaction with one's childcare arrangement accounted for more than 50% and as much as 86% of the variation in these relationships. This finding highlights the role of sentiment override in couples' relationships (Weiss 1980) by indicating that subjective assessments of one's relationship are just as important as actual arrangements and behaviors to overall relationship quality. This of course should not mask the

fact that satisfaction in all domains, on average, was most strongly related to egalitarian arrangements.

While female-centered care was associated with poor outcomes, we found few differences between egalitarian couples and those where men were largely responsible for childcare. The differences that did emerge were either small (sexual frequency) or conditional (quality of sexual relationship). Male-centered care arrangements resulted in the lowest sexual relationship quality for men, but the highest quality sex for women. This singular gender difference aside, the benefits of egalitarianism for relationship quality and sexual intimacy were similar for both men and women. This is a major finding which we think speaks to the state of hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal dividend in the United States (Connell 1998). Because a patriarchal gender structure – which includes female responsibility for unpaid labor at home – benefits men, one might expect men with a vested interest in maintaining their privilege to be most satisfied with their arrangements and relationships when their female partners are responsible for unpaid care work. Yet, this is not the case. Rather, egalitarian arrangements are most common (at least along the childcare dimensions we examine) and both men and women benefit maximally from an egalitarian division of childcare. This pattern departs from past findings showing that egalitarianism posed problems for couples' relationships. Whether this apparent shift stems from increases in the costs of patriarchy or the benefits of egalitarianism is unclear although both may be at play. Nevertheless, sharing certain aspects of childcare appears now to be centrally masculine.

As Connell (2014) notes one of the costs of patriarchy is men's loss of time and intimacy with children, which men greatly value as central to fatherhood (Dermott 2008). Although intimacy with children is not necessary for, nor does it entail, an equal sharing of childcare,

sharing childcare means closer relationships with one's children and also with one's partner. The interpersonal benefits of egalitarianism appear to outweigh any patriarchal privilege lost by sharing childcare. Still, while the benefits of men's childcare performance increase arithmetically for women, full responsibility for childcare has at least some negative consequences for men's sexual satisfaction, consistent with a gender deviance perspective – although, generally, egalitarian and male-centered childcare produce similar outcomes.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Consistent with recent research this study demonstrates that egalitarian arrangements result in higher quality relationships compared to conventional arrangements, suggesting a reversal in the consequences of egalitarianism over time from negative to positive (Carlson et al. 2014; Schwartz and Han 2014). Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare how the division of childcare affects couples' relationships today to the way it affected them in the past as there is no comparable data. Even the National Survey of Families and Households, one of the richest surveys of family life in past 30 years, provides no information on couples' childcare arrangements. It is therefore unclear if similar shifts in the consequences of paid work and housework are also indicative of childcare.

Although this study demonstrates that the majority of couples in the MARS share childcare responsibilities and that this has beneficial results, our measure of childcare is not a totally exhaustive assessment of childcare activities. Indeed, our measure accounts for only three dimensions of childcare – physical/emotional, interactive, and passive. Even then this study does not account for travel and communication tasks nor does it include numerous kinds of tasks within each dimension. Of significant importance are the non-existent instrumental tasks in the MARS data. It is therefore unclear how the inclusion of other dimensions and tasks may affect



our findings. Nonetheless, our inability to assess physical care may explain why so many of the couples report sharing childcare equally. Moreover, instrumental tasks are those most traditionally feminine. As such, performing these tasks may be more emasculating to men and thus egalitarian arrangements of instrumental care may be less satisfying and more conflictual than sharing in other domains. Future work should include these missing dimensions and tasks if possible.

An additional limitation is that the MARS is a sample of straight, lower middle-class, mostly white American couples. A more diverse sample that more closely represents couples with children would help us understand the nuances of how the division of childcare affects couples' relationships and sexual intimacy. Attention to possible differences across race, sexual orientation, and social class is recommended. We conducted supplemental interaction tests on potential differences by race and education but found no evidence the effect of the division of childcare varied along these lines. Nonetheless, sample limitations may affect these results.

### *Conclusion*

Its limitations aside, this study is one of the first to consider how the division of childcare in couples affects relationship quality and sexual intimacy. It adds to a growing body of research that challenges the costs of egalitarianism. Unlike the past, egalitarianism today is associated with better, more intimate relationships than gender traditional arrangements. Importantly, this aligns with the desires of the majority of Americans who strive for equality within their partnerships. Although couples still face unresponsive workplaces and unwilling political structures that stalled the gender revolution, these results suggest that the promise of the revolution may be reinvigorated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Men (n = 487)		Women (n = 487)	
	M/Prop.	SD	M/Prop.	SD
<b>Individual Measures</b>				
<i>Relationship Quality Measures</i>				
Relationship satisfaction	8.435	1.707	8.194	1.952
Relationship conflict	1.700	.737	1.709	.774
<i>Sexual Intimacy Measures</i>				
Sexual frequency per month	7.054		6.911	7.071
Proportion satisfied with sexual frequency	.619		.671	
Quality of sexual relationship	7.660	2.777	7.658	2.921
<i>Childcare Measures</i>				
He does most of the childcare	.128		.026	
She does most of the childcare	.072		.240	
Childcare done equally	.800		.734	
<i>Individual-level Mediators</i>				
Satisfaction with division of childcare	3.392	.449	3.221	.613
How often spend time together alone	2.981	1.752	2.916	1.775
<i>Individual-level Controls</i>				
Hours spent in paid labor per week	36.926	21.229	15.308	18.500
Protestant	.370		.395	
Catholic	.183		.205	
Other religion	.217		.236	
No religion	.231		.164	
Religious attendance <sup>a</sup>	4.089	1.900	3.809	1.970
Age	37.880	7.884	34.602	6.191
Self-reported health <sup>b</sup>	2.517	.985	2.462	.963
Number of children less than age 2 in household	.107	.316	.107	.316
Number of children age 2 to 5 in household	.572	.729	.569	.728
Number of children age 6 to 12 in household	.860	.946	.860	.946
Less than High School	.096		.092	
High School	.349		.324	
Some College	.370		.400	
Bachelor's Degree or more	.185		.183	
He does most of the routine housework	.063		.045	
She does most of the routine housework	.560		.692	
Routine housework shared equally	.377		.263	
Hours of housework per weekday	2.206	3.171	3.818	3.386
Black	.057		.037	
Hispanic	.080		.074	
Other Race/ethnicity	.039		.041	
<b>Couple-level Controls</b>				
Currently cohabiting		M		SD
	.108			
Cohabited prior to marriage	.488			
Married directly	.403			
Couples' total income	40,937.46		20,997.82	
Her share of income	.290		.285	
Age of youngest child	5.958		4.786	

Note: <sup>a</sup> Ranges from (0) never to (5) more than once a week; <sup>b</sup> Ranges from (0) poor to (4) excellent

Table 2: Negative Binomial, Ordered Logistic, and OLS Regression of Division of Childcare on Relationship Quality and Sexual Intimacy (N = 974)

	Relationship satisfaction	Relationship conflict	Sexual frequency per month	Satisfaction with sexual frequency	Quality of sexual relationship	Satisfaction with division of childcare	Time spent alone together
	<b>B</b> (se)	<b>B</b> (se)	<b>B</b> (se)	<b>B</b> (se)	<b>B</b> (se)	<b>B</b> (se)	<b>B</b> (se)
<b><i>Panel 1: Ordinal Measure of Childcare</i></b>							
Male Partners' Share of Childcare	.621*** (.157)	-.291*** (.064)	.003 (.076)	.296† (.168)	.602** (.186)	.320*** (.046)	.086 (.118)
Intercept <sup>a</sup>	7.709*** (.915)	2.755*** (.490)	2.678** (.932)	-.989 (1.092)	6.569*** (1.502)	2.843*** (.334)	3.854** (1.273)
<b><i>Panel 2: Dummy Variables for Division of Childcare</i></b>							
<i>Division of Childcare (ref = Shared Equally)</i>							
She Does Majority of Childcare	-1.055*** (.190)	.460*** (.083)	-.128 (.096)	-.501** (.194)	-1.088*** (.271)	-.419*** (.061)	-.178 (.171)
He Does Majority of Childcare	-.225 (.220)	.034 (.086)	-.246† (.133)	-.215 (.264)	-.459 (.367)	-.028 (.059)	.014 (.228)
Intercept <sup>b</sup>	9.133*** (.812)	2.098*** (.463)	2.749** (.899)	-1.687† (1.019)	7.534*** (1.397)	3.565*** (.326)	4.033*** (1.193)

Note: \*\*\*p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05; † p < .10; all models include controls. <sup>a</sup> intercept for satisfaction with sexual frequency is first cut point for ordered logistic regression.

Table 3: Mediating Effects of Time Alone Spent Together, Satisfaction with the Division of Childcare, and Relationship Quality for Association of Division of Childcare with Sexual Frequency and Satisfaction

	Sexual Frequency per Month		Satisfaction with Sexual Frequency		Quality of Sexual Relationship		Relationship Satisfaction			Relationship Conflict		
	Model 1 B (se)	Model 2 B (se)	Model 3 B (se)	Model 4 B (se)	Model 5 B (se)	Model 6 B (se)	Model 7 B (se)	Model 8 B (se)	Model 9 B (se)	Model 10 B (se)	Model 11 B (se)	Model 12 B (se)
Division of Childcare (ref = Shared Equally)												
She Does Majority of Childcare	-.128 (.076)	.076 (.095)	-.501** (.194)	-.184 (.198)	-1.088*** (.271)	-.150 (.244)	-1.055*** (.190)	-.351† (.181)	-.313† (.169)	.460*** (.083)	.198** (.072)	.191** (.072)
He Does Majority of Childcare	-.246† (.133)	-.231† (.132)	-.215 (.264)	-.181 (.262)	-.459 (.367)	-.364 (.357)	-.225 (.220)	-.177 (.203)	-.089 (.188)	.034 (.086)	.016 (.079)	.002 (.076)
Satisfaction with Division of Childcare		.115 (.102)		.830*** (.146)		2.227*** (.180)		1.679*** (.136)	1.152*** (.133)		-.625*** (.054)	-.471*** (.058)
Sexual Frequency									-.002 (.008)			.011** (.003)
Satisfaction with Sexual Frequency									.020 (.044)			-.024 (.021)
Quality of Sexual Relationship									.233*** (.026)			-.067*** (.012)
Intercept <sup>a</sup>	2.749** (.889)	2.338 (.980)	-1.687 (1.019)	1.192 (1.209)	7.534*** (1.397)	.039 (1.525)	9.133*** (.812)	3.145** (1.057)	3.143** (1.047)	2.098*** (.463)	4.325*** (.474)	4.202*** (.442)
Sobel-Goodman Test of Mediation		-.089 (.091)		-.348*** (.059)		-1.330*** (.153)		-1.003*** (.105)	.594*** (.058)		.376*** (.042)	-.163*** (.023)

Note: \*\*\*p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05; † p < .10; all models include controls. <sup>a</sup> intercept for satisfaction with sexual frequency is first cut point for ordered logistic regression.



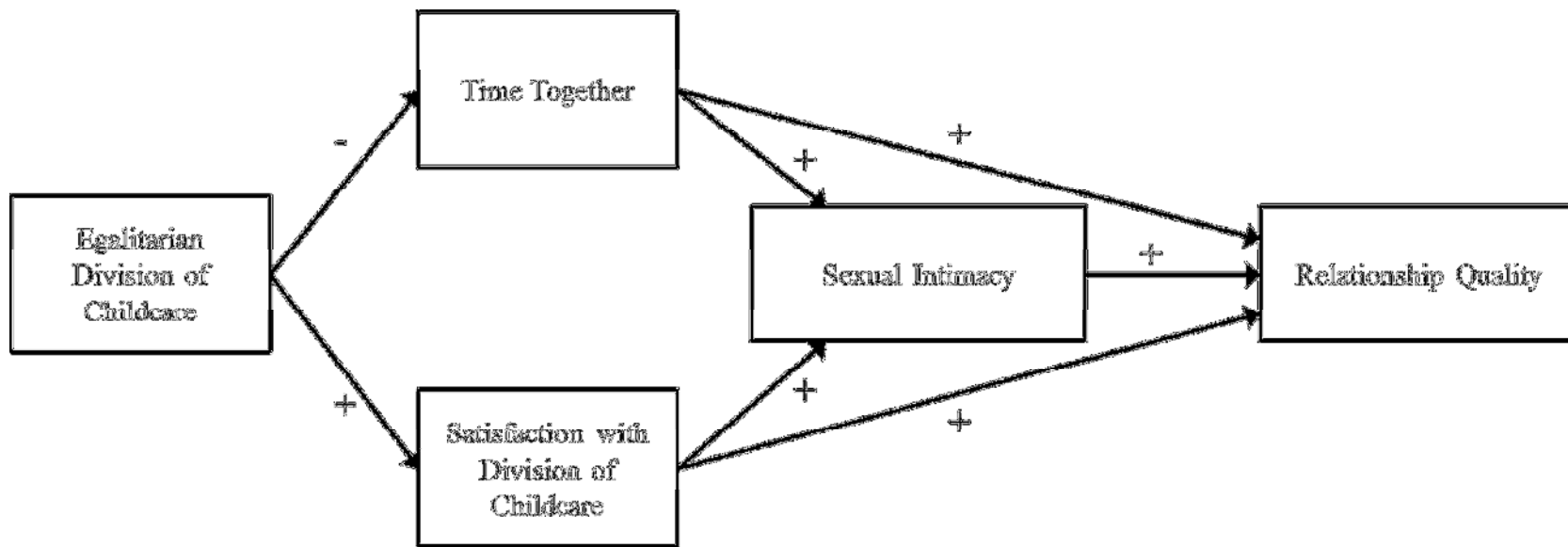


Figure 1: Conceptual Path Model of Egalitarian Division of Childcare, Sexual Intimacy, and Relationship Quality

## APPENDIX A

Variable	Question(s)	Measurement	Reliability; Range
Relationship satisfaction		Continuous	0-10
Relationship conflict	In the past year, how often has your partner – (a) yelled or screamed at you, (b) treated you like an inferior, and (c) blamed you for his/her problems.	(0) Never - (3) a few times a week or more  Mean Scale	Alpha = .83; 0-3
Sexual frequency per month		Continuous	0-124
Satisfaction with sexual frequency		(0) very dissatisfied - (4) very satisfied	0-4
Quality of sexual relationship	For each of the following statements, please tell us how much you agree or disagree: (a) I feel our sex life really adds a lot to our relationship; (b) we have problems in our relationship because one of us has become less interested in sex; and (c) I am satisfied with our sexual relationship  (d) how often do you and your partner have arguments about sex?	(0) strongly disagree, (1) disagree, (2) agree, and (3) strongly agree    (0) never - (3) a few times a week or more.  Summed Scale	Alpha= .78; 0-12
Male partners' share of childcare	Each parent may have different responsibilities for each child in the household. How do you and your [spouse / partner] divide up the childcare and parenting responsibilities for this child? (a) who is responsible for making rules for the child? (b) who enforces the rules for this child or punishes child when rules are broken?, (c) who praises child for his/her accomplishments?, (d) who plays with the child, including sports and games?	(0) female partner only, (1) mostly female partner, (2) both equally, (3) mostly male partner, (4) male partner only  Mean Scale	Alpha = .72; 0-4
She does majority of childcare		Male partners' share of childcare < 1.6 (~ < 40%) (0) no; (1) yes	
Shared Equally		Male partners' share of childcare => 1.6 and <=2.4 (~40-60%) (0) no; (1) yes	
He does majority of childcare		Male partners' share of childcare > 2.4 (~ > 60%) (0) no; (1) yes	

Satisfaction with childcare	<p>For each of the following statements, please tell us how much you agree or disagree: (a) my spouse/partner is the type of parent I want for my child(ren); (b) having child(ren) has brought us closer together; (c) my spouse/partner is completely committed to being there for the child(ren); (d) the importance my spouse/partner place on the children bothers me (reverse coded)</p> <p>(e) how often do you and your partner have arguments about raising the children?</p>	<p>(0) strongly disagree - (3) strongly agree</p> <p>(0) never - (3) a few times a week or more.</p> <p>Summed Scale</p>	Alpha = .74; 0-15
Time spent alone together		(1) almost never - (5) almost every day	1-5