

**Housework and divorce: the division of domestic labour and relationship breakdown in Australia****Lyn Craig and Pooja Sawrikar****Abstract**

This paper i) explores the relationship between husbands and wives' (relative and absolute) housework allocation and their perceptions of domestic fairness, and ii) tests whether actual or perceived domestic inequity increases the odds of divorce. It analyses data of 2500 married couples tracked over Waves 1-4 of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) and finds both husbands and wives form judgements about whether their share of housework is fair based on weekly hours *husbands* contribute. Wives take relative shares of couples' joint hours into consideration in assessing fairness but husbands do not. Logistic regression analyses finds that, net of other predictors, both husbands' and wives' perceived fairness and number of hours *men* contribute to domestic labour are significant predictors of divorce.

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## **1.1 Housework and divorce: the division of domestic labour and relationship breakdown in Australia**

### **Introduction**

Two important contemporary social issues are the divorce rate and the gender division of labour. First, divorce is increasingly common. Divorce in Australia is 22 per cent higher than twenty years ago, with 53,100 couples divorcing in 2003, and one in three marriages ending in divorce (ABS 2004; Hewitt et al. 2005). In the US, the risk of a marriage ending in divorce is even higher, at nearly 50 percent in 2004 (Whitehead and Popenoe 2005). In both countries, women are more likely than men to be the initiating party (Hewitt et al. 2006; Popenoe 2002).

Second, women are still responsible for the bulk of domestic labour, despite the enormous growth in their participation in the paid work force, and also despite a steady increase over the past three decades in the number of women and men who endorse egalitarian relationships (Rosenbluth et al. 1998). Studies of social attitudes consistently find strong support of equality in relationships (Dempsey 2001; McMahon 1999). There is general approval of more flexible and potentially more equal marital partnership and a widespread view that the ideal marriage is a partnership of two equals (Giddens 1991). However, while there has been a great deal of progress towards gender equality in workforce participation over the last twenty years, there has not been the same shift in the allocation of domestic labour.

In Australia, the proportion of 25-54 year old women who are employed increased from 55% in 1981 to 68% in 2001. In the US, the increase was from 65% to 76% over the same period (Jaumotte 2003). However, unequal shares of housework are still the norm, with married women continuing to do about double the amount of housework that married men do (Rosenbluth et al. 1998). This pertains cross nationally, and is largely independent of female education level, earnings or paid work hours (Baxter 2002; Baxter et al. 2005; Bianchi et al. 2006; Brines 1994; Coltrane 1994; Craig et al. 2006; Greenstein 2000; McMahon 1999; Widmalm 1998). Marrying has been found to bring a net increase in domestic work for women, and a net decrease for men (Couprie 2007; Craig 2005b; McMahon 1999).

We hypothesise that one of the reasons couples divorce, and why so many separations are initiated by wives, is the lack of domestic contribution by husbands. This paper will investigate whether there is an empirically supported link between inequity in domestic labour and divorce. However, investigating the effect of housework shares on divorce is not straightforward because it is common for couples to report finding the division of domestic labour fair, even when it is not equal (Baxter 2000; Baxter and Western 1998; Bittman and Pixley 1997; Dempsey 2001; Gager 1998). They describe the way they apportion housework as fair, even when wives do much more than husbands. Because the disparity between the objective distribution of housework and subjective perceptions of fairness means that the two factors should not be conflated, the paper will proceed in two stages. It will first explore the relationship between (relative and absolute) housework allocation and perceptions of domestic fairness, and second, use logistic regression analysis to test whether actual and/or perceived domestic inequity increases the odds of divorce.

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### Factors that influence perceptions of fairness in the distribution of domestic labour

There is a considerable literature investigating why wives, despite performing more housework than their husbands, fail to report that an unequal division of household labor is unfair. The research suggests that *objective* fairness is not of paramount importance. Subjective evaluation of the fairness of economic and socio-emotional outcomes varies with circumstance (Cropanzano and Ambrose 2001). Deutsch argues that people use three different norms or principles to evaluate fairness (equity, equality and need), each of which may take precedence in different situations (Deutsch 1975). Also, Duncan (2003) suggests that women may evaluate fairness more in terms of caring and need than equity, in what he terms ‘gendered moral rationalities’. Their decisions are rational, but the criteria on which they base their assessments are not those of exact equality of input and outcome. Thus their sense of fairness may be only tangentially related to the way housework is actually shared in objective terms.

Deleted: (Duncan 2003)

Much of the literature draws on the Distributive Justice Framework (DJF) applied to household labour by Linda Thompson. DJF suggests that how women perceive domestic fairness is shaped by three components – outcome values, comparison referents, and justifications (Thompson 1991). ‘Outcome values’ relate to the results of the domestic division of labour being what women themselves want. If they have what they value, such as a clean house, or do what they like doing, such as caring for young children, they may regard unequal distribution as fair. It is the attainment of desired economic and socio-emotional *outcomes* in close relationships that determine women’s sense of fairness (Cropanzano and Ambrose 2001; Dixon and Wetherell 2004; Duncan 2003). ‘Comparison referents’ are whom women compare themselves with when assessing domestic fairness. DJF suggests that women do not necessarily compare their domestic contributions with their marital partners, but rather with a comparison group such as her own peers. If she feels that she has a better deal than, for example, other women she knows, or than her mother did, a woman is likely to see her situation as fair. ‘Justifications’ refers to the idea that if men’s lower domestic contribution is seen as justifiable and appropriate, then it is assessed as fair. For example, their spouse could see them as having less time available, or to be less able to juggle multiple roles, or to be less suited to caring for children. Also, if the *process* of negotiation was open, women might think it fairer than if no discussion was held (Thompson 1991).

DJF has found some support in empirical research. Feelings of appreciation and deciding together how things would be divided are strong predictors of perceived fairness (Hawkins et al. 1995). Women who value equity, compare themselves to their husbands and are not convinced by available justifications are more likely to perceive their situation as unfair (Dempsey 1997). If women compare themselves favourably to their peers, they are less likely to feel that their own arrangements are unfair (Gager 1998; Himsel and Goldberg 2003). Also, actual shares seem to be less important than whether or not men participate, or are willing to participate, in tasks that are “traditionally” female such as the dishes or the laundry (Baxter 2000). Baxter found perceptions of fairness were more influenced by the gender distribution of *tasks* – that is, kinds of activity – than by the total amount of time devoted to housework. For both men and women, the amount and type of housework that men do influences perceptions of fairness but women’s contributions have less affect (Baxter 2000). In Baxter’s study, both husbands and wives thought that distribution was fair when women did about twice as much as men. Neither gender role ideology nor financial power had significant

effects. However, perceived fairness in the share of housework declines for women when they work longer hours in paid employment (Baxter 2000; Sanchez and Kane 1996).

However, the processes by which cognitions are developed are also important. Subjective meanings are constructed dynamically in an interactive process that involves *both* members of the couple: a relationship story is by definition a joint story (Dixon and Wetherell 2004: 182). Dixon and Wetherell (2004) argue that DJF has misconceived important aspects of the social psychology of distributive justice, because it has become fixed on the problem of women's misperceptions, and neglects the role of men in maintaining inequality. It does not address the dynamic interaction involved in domestic negotiation and how this contributes to the capacity of a household to act as a 'gender factory' (Berk, 1985), actively constructing gender roles through ongoing process and behaviour. The perceptions of both marital partners actively contribute to the joint understanding of fairness in the division of labour (Gager and Sanchez 2003). Acknowledging men's role in co-defining what counts as fair could allow analysis of how inequities may be rationalised, downplayed or concealed through oneness or partnership talk, for example, to create a 'myth of equality' (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 1998).

Gender roles are not simply socially assigned or fixed, but continually and actively created through 'performativity' or by 'doing gender' (Berk, 1985; Bittman et al, 2003; Butler, 1990; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998; South & Spitze, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1981). This process does not only occur within households, however. It is also influenced by social environment and gender attitudes. Social and workplace policies may make it practically difficult to deviate from traditional gender role allocation (Leira 2002; Lewis and Giullari 2005; Morehead 2005) but, importantly, also create and reflect social norms. Couples may adhere to standard gender roles, not because they wish to, but to avoid deviating from social norms. Over time, the disparity between their desire for gender equality and the social and institutional structures that support a traditional family structure may produce tensions that give rise to cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), the psychological phenomenon where individuals change their beliefs or behaviours and make them consistent to remove the tension ('dissonance') that occurs between conflicting beliefs and behaviours. The friction between the social ideal of marital equality and the ubiquity of social and organisational structures that militate against behavioural change is perhaps also resolved by judging fairness on other grounds than objective equity. Rosenbluth et al. (1998) found that to assess marital equality, women more frequently used relationship characteristics (such as mutual respect, commitment, reciprocity, and supportiveness) than assessments of objective behaviour.

### **Fairness in the distribution of domestic labour and divorce**

It may be important to marital survival that they do so. While they remain committed to their marriage, perceiving inequality may be psychologically uncomfortable and so women may be unwilling to admit that their lived reality falls short of a social ideal, which they think others experience, and which they see as definitive of a good partnership (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 1998). "Admitting the division of labour is unfair, or very unsatisfactory, may be tantamount to admitting that one's relationship as a whole is unfair or unsatisfactory" (Baxter 2000: 627). However, the 'pseudo-mutuality' (Bittman & Pixley, 1997) that results from describing the unfair as fair also

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carries a high psychic cost that may threaten mental health (Baxter et al. 2005; Strazdins and Broom 2004), so the 'myth of equality' may be hard to maintain over time. On this view, the unequal division of labour *is* likely to contribute to marital breakdown, even if the unfairness is not acknowledged while the relationship stands (England & Kilbourne, 1990). Also, since marital uncoupling occurs over time and problems may only be identified as such near to the termination of the relationship (Gager and Sanchez 2003), the joint relationship story about domestic fairness may dissolve when discord arises; partners may be more likely to perceive inequity when dissolution is close for other reasons.

There is an extremely large body of research into the determinants of marital breakdown<sup>1</sup>, which suggests that the picture is complicated and multi-faceted, and that the contributing factors may have different effects in combination, and be more strongly felt by those from different social groups, including race and class. Some causal factors are static and cannot be changed during the course of the marriage whereas others are dynamic. Further, the research indicates the importance of subjective perceptions when predicting divorce. For example, a great deal of research attention has been directed at exploring the association between female employment and divorce (Clarke and Berrington 1999; Gottman 1994; Greenstein 1990; Hewitt et al. 2005; Spitze and South 1985; Stanley and Markman 2005; Wolcott and Hughes 1999). A strong hypothesis was that by giving women financial alternatives, female employment is a causal factor in relationship breakdown. However, no consistent relationship between economic independence and breakdown has been established (Cooke in press; Hewitt et al. 2005), and the weight of evidence suggests that women's employment and the 'independence effect' does not actually cause marriage breakdown, but rather that personal earnings allow women who are already unhappy to leave (Greenstein 1990). Marital quality, commitment, relationship satisfaction and gender ideology are better predictors of

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<sup>1</sup> Wives' employment and income, low or differing levels of education, poor economic circumstances, race, urban residence, parental divorce, religious dissimilarity, relationship satisfaction, gender ideology, marrying young, premarital births, premarital conceptions/short first birth intervals, having older children, premarital cohabitation, previous cohabitation with someone else prior to marriage, previous partnership breakdown, previous divorce of husbands, premarital cohabitation difficulties in the areas of leisure activities and sexual relations, knowing the partner a short time before marriage, difficulties in communication and problem solving, communication (positivity/negativity), communication withdrawal and invalidation, defensiveness and withdrawal, higher ratios of hostility to warmth, having dissimilar attitudes and personal interactional styles which involve contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness, dissatisfaction with partner's personality and habits, neuroticism, being less conscientious, problems relating to friends and family, maintaining separate finances, work scheduling and employment hours and attitudes to gender roles Clarke, Lynda, and Ann Berrington. 1999. "Socio-Demographic Predictors of Divorce." in *High Divorce Rates: The State of the Evidence On Reasons and Remedies Volume 1*: Lord Chancellor's Department, Gottman, John. 1994. *Why marriages succeed or fail . . . and how you can make yours last*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Hewitt, Belinda , Janeen Baxter, and Mark Western. 2005. "Marriage breakdown in Australia: The social correlates of separation and divorce." *Journal of Sociology* 41: 163-183, Presser, Harriet B. 2000. "Nonstandard work schedules and marital instability." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 93-111, Sayer, Liana, and Suzanne Bianchi. 2000. "Women's Economic Independence and the Probability of Divorce: A Review and Reexamination." *Journal of Family Issues* 21: 906-943, Stanley, Scott , and Howard Markman. 2005. "What Factors are Associated with Divorce and/or Marital Unhappiness?" PREP, Wolcott, Ilene , and Jody Hughes. 1999. "Towards understanding the reasons for divorce." Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies..

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marital dissolution than wives' employment (Greenstein 1990; Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Schoen et al. 2006).

The possibility that inequity in the division of domestic labour is an independent determinant of divorce has only recently attracted direct research attention. However, there is an established relationship between the household division of labour and marital conflict, satisfaction and happiness which shows that the more equitable the arrangements, the higher happiness and satisfaction, and the lower marital conflict (Frisco and Williams 2003; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Strazdins and Broom 2004). Frisco and Williams (2003) examined the relationship between perceived fairness of housework completion, marital happiness, and divorce, speculating that dissatisfaction with household labour arrangements may diminish marital satisfaction and increase odds of divorce. They found that perceived inequity in the division of household labour to be negatively associated with both husbands and wives reported marital happiness but positively associated with the odds of divorce among wives only. They did not find evidence that marital happiness mediated the relationship. (Frisco & Williams, 2003). Gager and Sanchez (2003) examined the issue from a slightly different perspective, matching data from actual married couples to compare the perceptions of husbands and wives. Controlling (inter alia) for actual time spent in housework, and relative shares of housework, they found no evidence that perceptions of domestic fairness by either men or women increased the risk of divorce. However, their findings confirmed that marital happiness matters, but interestingly they found that male unhappiness is more likely to lead to divorce than female unhappiness. Cooke (2004) looked at whether fairness (in actual housework shares) relates to marital breakdown with reference to the policy context, finding that a non-traditional allocation of labour is associated with lower divorce risk in the US but with a higher divorce risk in Germany (Cooke, 2004). Speculating that individual behaviour, and its effect on spouses, varies with the policy paradigm and the prevalent cultural attitudes, she argues that the active process of 'doing gender' involves not only individual agency, and joint couple understandings, but also interacts with institutional setting and policy environment.

### **Research focus**

The literature suggests that there is a relationship between the gendered division of labour and the risk of divorce, but that the association is complex and requires further investigation. This paper aims to add to knowledge of whether (and how) domestic fairness 'matters' to relationship survival. First, using data from actual couples it investigates whether and how men's and women's perceptions of fairness equate with actual housework shares or with actual hours their partners spend doing housework. Second, it will test the hypothesis that, net of other predictors of divorce identified in the literature (and that are assessed in the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data set used in this study), perceived unfairness in the share of housework by women and/or men, will significantly predict the likelihood of divorce.

### **1.2 Data and Method**

#### *Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)*

This study uses data from Waves 1 to 4 of the HILDA – a large-scale nationwide longitudinal survey of Australian households. The HILDA sample is comprised of 7,682 households, first interviewed in 2000 and each year since. The reference population is all members of private dwellings, and a multi-stage cluster sample of

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households was used. For a full overview of the survey method see (Watson & Wooden, 2004).

### *Sample*

This study used a sub-sample of the HILDA data. Firstly, the Waves 1 to 4 datasets were merged across all respondents. Those who were in a de facto relationship, separated, divorced, widowed, or never married and not in de facto relationship at Wave 1 were excluded, leaving a sample of 7529 married respondents. Those who were widowed at Wave 2 or for whom there was missing data on their current marital status were deleted. This was sequentially repeated for the remaining sample at Waves 3 and 4, leaving a sample of 5458 respondents, of which 2826 (51.78%) were females. This sample was then cleaned to produce a data set that contained data from the female respondent at Wave 1 merged with the corresponding data from her husband at Wave 1. That is, respondents without a matched partner identification code at Wave 1 were removed, leaving a sample of 2500 married couples on which to base the analyses. The average age of wives at Wave 1 was 46.69 years (SD = 13.80, range 19 - 92 years), and of husbands was 49.25 years (SD = 14.06, range 20 - 88 years). From Wave 1 to 2, 1.56% (n = 39) of the wives, from Wave 1 to 3, 2.48% (n = 62) of the wives, and from Wave 1 to 4, 3.44% (n = 86) of the wives did not remain married.

As the cognitive processes underlying people's evaluations of fairness and the types of housework activities men and women perform, have not been assessed in HILDA we use two other variables that are known to influence perceived fairness – absolute and relative shares in housework. Consistent with the approach of Dixon and Wetherell (2004) and Gagen and Sanchez (2003), this study has included both men's and women's scores on the variables of interest. Finally, by using data across all waves, this project can tease out if and when these variables become significant predictors of marital status.

Logistic regression was used to establish whether perceptions of, and actual fairness, in the distribution of domestic labour uniquely predicts marital stability at Wave 4, over and above other known predictors of marital stability. As a preliminary step, bivariate analyses (t-tests and  $\chi^2$  (chi-square) analyses) between all possible explanatory variables and marital status at Wave 4 were conducted. This provided an initial screening process to determine which of these to include in the logistic regression. Thus, the set of explanatory variables used in this study do not represent an exhaustive list of factors that can contribute to marital in/stability; they only those that are statistically significant in this sample. Interaction terms were not included because they were not significant in the bivariate regressions.

### *Dependent variable*

Binary logistic regression has been used to estimate the odds of occurrence for marital breakdown at Wave 4. It is appropriate when the dependent variable is categorical with two levels. The explanatory variables can be either categorical or continuous. In this study, the dependent variable is marital status at Wave 4 and the two levels are:

- 0 = *no marital dissolution* (marital status of women at Wave 4 = married)

- 1 = *marital dissolution* (marital status of women at Wave 4 = de facto, separated, or divorced)

### *Independent variables*

There are three independent variables of interest: (a) (men's and women's) perceived fairness in the share of housework, (b) (men's and women's) number of housework hours per week, and (c) (women's) actual share of housework per week. Each of these was significantly related to women's marital status at Wave 4 in the bivariate analysis. We expect that the odds of divorce increase as women's perceived unfairness, number of housework hours, and women's actual shares of housework increase. The effect of men's scores on these variables will be explored.

Perceived fairness in the share of housework is a subjective measure of the distribution of domestic labour, scored on a continuum from 1 = *I do much more than my fair share*, 2 = *I do more than my fair share*, 3 = *I do my fair share*, 4 = *I do less than my fair share*, to 5 = *I do much less than my fair share*. Absolute time per week in housework is also assessed in the HILDA and is based on self-reported estimates. This is less accurate than time-diary estimates, because such variables may be affected by social desirability factors and respondents' ability to accurately recall, calculate and/or estimate the number of hours they spend in activities. However, retrospective self-reporting has been found to be broadly commensurate with diary measures (Robinson and Gershuny 1994). Women's actual share of housework has been calculated by deriving the percentage of hours that the female respondent spends on housework from the couple's total hours spent on housework per week.

Note that data collected at Wave 4 have been included as predictors because logistic regression estimates the odds of an event occurring (in this case, marital dissolution), rather than whether it occurred. Thus, the item regarding perceived fairness (as is the case for all other items) does not ask the respondent to respond in relation to a particular time span (e.g. over the last 12 months). Thus, respondents may answer this question in relation to an unknowable time span (such as the last ten years) and so data collected at Wave 4 can be used in this longitudinal analysis.

### *Control variables*

Our bivariate analysis assessed whether a number of variables (based on previous research) was related to marital status at Wave 4. These included: gender ideology, relationship satisfaction, satisfaction with work-family balance, satisfaction with flexibility to balance work and non-work commitments, hours per week in house errands, how often they feel rushed or pressed for time, whether their father and/or mother was in paid employment at age 14, and number of resident and non-resident children. Of these, only gender ideology, relationship satisfaction, and number of non-resident children were significant.

Note that questions about the relationship were not included because the sample size was too small in the univariate analysis. Only 37 not-married women answered the questions on relationship quality, frequency of regret, frequency of meeting expectations, amount of love, amount of relationship problems, and quality of spouse meeting needs.

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### *Demographic and life course controls*

Bivariate analyses tested the relationship between several demographic and life course control variables with women's marital status at Wave 4. Those that were not significant included the number of years that the couple cohabited prior to marriage, ethnicity, SEIFA decile of relative socio-economic advantage/disadvantage, education and wife's share of income (income was calculated conservatively as the sum of the imputed financial year wages and salary and benefits and pensions only). The non-significance between marital status and ethnicity and socio-economic status replicates the finding of Hewitt et al (2005) who also drew on the HILDA dataset, but is contrary to the research in the US (Bianchi et al, 2000; South & Spitze, 1986; Teachman, 2002). However, consistent with the research in the US by (Sayer and Bianchi 2000) and (Bianchi et al, 2006), cohabitation history, education, and wife's share of couple's income did not significantly relate to marital status at Wave 4. These findings seem to suggest that demographic factors play a comparatively smaller role in predicting marital breakdown in Australia.

The significant variables to be included in the logistic regression are age of wife (at Wave 1), the number of wife's previous marriages (at Wave 1), number of hours in paid employment (this was only assessed across Waves 2 – 4 in HILDA), whether each member of the couple's parents were divorced or separated at Wave 4, and their importance of religion.

### **1.3 Results**

There are two parts to the investigation in this study: (a) to explore the relationship between perceived and actual inequity in the share of domestic labour for men and women, and (b) to see if these predict the odds of divorce.

#### **Bivariate analysis**

##### *The relationship between actual and perceived housework shares for men and women*

Less than 15.7% of the women at Wave 1 did less than 50% of the share of housework (n = 2288). Similarly, about 14% of the women across Waves 2 to 4 did less than 50% of the share of weekly housework hours. These results indicate that actual inequity in the share of housework is high. In stark contrast to this highly gendered differentiation between men and women in actual share of weekly housework hours, 40.9% of women and 61.0% of men perceived that their share of the housework was fair at Wave 1. Similar proportions were reported across the waves (see Table 1 for more details).

**Table 1** *Proportion of Women and Men Reporting Each Category of Perceived Fairness in the Share of Housework at Wave 1.*

	% Women (n = 2418)	% Men (n = 2409)
I do much more than my fair share	30.2	6.4
I do a bit more than my fair share	24.9	9.6
I do my fair share	40.9	61.0
I do a bit less than my fair share	2.8	18.9
I do much less than my fair share	1.2	4.1

*Correlations between the subjective (perceived fairness) and objective (number and share of housework hours) measures of share of housework*

The results in Table 2 show, as expected, that as men and women do more housework hours per week, the more they perceive they do their fair share, though the correlation is stronger for men ( $r = -0.26$ ) than women ( $r = -0.17$ ). That is, men seem more likely to rely on the number of hours they contribute to domestic labour to inform whether they think they do their fair share.

Also, as women's actual share of housework increases, the more they perceive they do their fair share ( $r = -0.33$ ) and the less that men perceive they do their fair share ( $r = 0.31$ ). That the correlations here are relatively equal in magnitude (and opposite in direction) suggest that there is little discrepancy between men and women in the way they use women's actual share of housework to form perceptions of fairness of their own contributions to domestic labour.

Women's perceptions of fairness are also influenced the number of hours their husbands contribute; the more hours men contribute each week, the less they perceive they do their fair share ( $r = 0.22$ ). This is not the case for men; the number of hours women do each week has little to do with whether or not they think they do their fair share ( $r = 0.08$ ). This is consistent with the finding that the number of hours women do has little to do with the number of hours men contribute ( $r = -0.10$ ).

Finally, women's perceived fairness in housework shares decreases as men's perceived fairness increases ( $r = -0.25$ ). This result is important in highlighting how men and women create a joint relationship story in which their perceptions are constructed through a dynamic interaction and are responsive to one another.

In summary, both men's and women's perceptions of fairness seem to be influenced by the number of hours they do each week (though this is less than for men), women's share of housework each week, and their partner's perceptions of fairness. However, women's perceptions of fairness are also influenced by the number of hours men do each week. It also seems from these results that men notice the share that women do, but not the amount they do, and so the latter plays little role in informing their perceptions of fairness in the share of housework. Importantly, the correlations obtained at Wave 1 were similar in strength as those obtained at Wave 4, indicating that the associations between these three independent variables are relatively stable over a short (three-year) time period.

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**Table 2** *Correlations (and Descriptives of) between Perceived Fairness in share of Housework, Women's Share of Housework Hours per Week, and Number of Housework Hours per Week at Waves 1 and 4*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. W1: Perc_f										
2. W4: Perc_f										
3. W1: Hrs_f	-0.17									
4. W4: Hrs_f		-0.16								
5. W1: Perc_m	-0.25		0.08							
6. W4: Perc_m		-0.26		0.11						
7. W1: Hrs_m	0.22		-0.10		-0.26					
8. W4: Hrs_m		0.22		-0.07		-0.28				
9. W1: Share_f	-0.33		0.52		0.31		-0.69			
10. W4: Share_f		-0.29		0.50		0.32		-0.71		
M	2.20	2.16	21.54	20.97	3.05	3.09	6.07	5.54	75.80	76.83
SD	0.94	0.94	15.45	14.68	0.84	0.86	7.87	6.32	22.81	21.78
n	2418	2388	2372	2346	2409	2361	2360	6302	2288	2228
Range	1 - 5	1 - 5			1 - 5	1 - 5			0 - 100	0 - 100

Note: perc\_f (m): women's (men's) perceived fairness in the share of housework; hrs\_f (m): women's (men's) number of hours spent on housework each week; share\_f: women's share of the couple's hours spent on housework each week; W1: Wave 1; W4: Wave 4. All correlations significant at  $p < .001$ .

### Multivariate analysis

#### *Predicting the odds of divorce by perceived and actual inequity in domestic labour*

Four models were tested to see (a) how the predictive power of perceived fairness in housework shares on marital status at Wave 4 (Model 1) is affected by (b) the other independent variables (Models 2 and 3) and (c) other predictors of divorce (Model 4). See Table 3 for a full list of explanatory variables included in the models.

**Table 3** *Models Compared in the Logistic Regression*

Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Perceived fairness share housework	Perceived fairness share housework	Perceived fairness share housework	Perceived fairness share housework
	Wife's share of housework	Wife's share of housework	Wife's share of housework
		Hours in housework	Hours in housework
			Gender ideology
			Relationship satisfaction
			Non-resident children (0-4 yrs)
			Non-resident children (5-14 yrs)
			Non-resident children (15-24 yrs)
			Wife's age
			Number of times women married
			Hours in paid work
			Parents divorced/separated
			Importance of religion

Table 4 contains the results of the logistic regression. Model 1 indicates that men's perceived fairness at Waves 2 and 4 predicts the odds of divorce for women at Wave 4. Specifically, as men perceive they do less than their fair share, the odds of divorce decrease by 38% ( $e^B = 0.62$ ) and 53% ( $e^B = 0.47$ ) respectively. In other words, women are about twice ( $1/0.62 = 1.61$  and  $1/0.47 = 2.13$ ) as likely to divorce if their husbands perceive they do more than their fair share. Thus, men's realistic perceptions of fairness seem to act as a protective factor in marital longevity.

Model 2 indicates that men's perceptions of fairness at Wave 2 ( $e^B = 0.57$ ) and Wave 4 ( $e^B = 0.51$ ) still predict the odds of divorce, after accounting for women's share in housework hours. However, the importance of women's perceptions of fairness in predicting the odds of divorce emerges at Wave 3; as women perceive they do less than their fair share the odds of divorce decrease by 41% ( $e^B = 0.59$ ). In other words, women are 1.7 times more likely ( $1/0.59 = 1.69$ ) to divorce if they perceive they do more than their fair share. Thus, women's acknowledgement of the unequal distribution of housework seems to increase the risk of divorce.

Model 3 indicates that men's perceptions of fairness at Wave 2 ( $e^B = 0.54$ ) and Wave 4 ( $e^B = 0.52$ ) and that women's perceptions of fairness at Wave 3 ( $e^B = 0.59$ ), continue to decrease the odds of divorce, after accounting for women's share in housework hours and the number of housework hours men and women do. However, the number of housework hours men do each week at Wave 2 also becomes a significant predictor; for each hour extra men contribute to housework each week, the odds of divorce decrease by a factor of 0.90. That women's share of housework at Wave 2 became a significant predictor is likely to be spurious, especially since the odds of divorce are close to 1 ( $e^B = 0.97$ ). The results of Models 2 and 3 indicate that women's relative share in housework hours and their actual number of housework hours has little to do with predicting the odds of divorce compared to the actual number of hours men do.

Model 4 indicates that, net of all other predictors of divorce (that were significant in the bivariate analyses), men's and women's perceived fairness in housework shares at Wave 4 still significantly predict the odds of divorce for women at Wave 4. Women are 50 times ( $1/0.02 = 50$ ) more likely to divorce if their husbands think their contribution to the housework is more than fair and 16.7 ( $1/0.06 = 16.67$ ) times more likely to divorce if they think their contribution to the housework is more than fair. These odds are very large, indicating that they should be interpreted with caution; these odds have been estimated on only a sample of 86 no longer married women. Further longitudinal research over a longer time period, which will capture more marital transitions and a larger sample, is warranted before the findings can be considered valid. However, Model 4 does indicate the importance of perceptions in predicting the odds of divorce.

We also found that the number of housework hours men do each week is a significant predictor of the likelihood of divorce; the odds of divorce decrease by a factor of 0.49 for every hour extra men contribute to domestic labour each week. This further supports the inference that *absolute* number of housework hours is a good measure of actual domestic inequity (as compared to the *relative* share between men and women). In summary, the results of the logistic regression show that both perceived and actual inequity in domestic labour matters to relationship survival, but that perceptions matter more.

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**Table 4** *Logistic Regression*

Predictors	MODEL 1 (n = 2017)						MODEL 2 (n = 1767)						MODEL 3 (n = 1767)						MODEL 4 (n = 1156)					
	Women			Men			Women			Men			Women			Men			Women			Men		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
W1: Perc	-0.06	0.20	0.95	0.34	0.21	1.41	-0.02	0.21	0.98	0.36	0.23	1.44	-0.10	0.22	0.91	0.38	0.24	1.46	-1.61	1.32	0.20	2.40	1.35	11.08
W2: Perc	0.13	0.21	1.14	-0.48	0.21	<b>0.62*</b>	0.19	0.24	1.20	-0.57	0.24	<b>0.57*</b>	0.14	0.25	1.15	-0.62	0.24	<b>0.54*</b>	1.25	1.30	3.51	-1.29	1.27	0.27
W3: Perc	-0.41	0.21	0.66	-0.28	0.22	0.76	-0.53	0.23	<b>0.59*</b>	-0.05	0.24	0.95	-0.53	0.24	<b>0.59*</b>	-0.09	0.24	0.91	-0.82	0.88	0.44	-1.77	1.29	0.17
W4: Perc	-0.18	0.20	0.83	-0.76	0.20	<b>0.47***</b>	-0.41	0.22	0.66	-0.68	0.22	<b>0.51**</b>	-0.40	0.23	0.67	-0.65	0.22	<b>0.52**</b>	-2.81	1.32	<b>0.06*</b>	-3.99	1.79	<b>0.02*</b>
W1: Share							0.01	0.01	1.02				0.01	0.02	1.01				-0.03	0.06	0.97			
W2: Share							-0.01	0.01	0.99				-0.04	0.01	<b>0.97**</b>				-0.07	0.08	0.93			
W3: Share							-0.01	0.01	0.99				-0.02	0.01	0.98				-0.04	0.08	0.96			
W4: Share							-0.02	0.01	0.98				0.00	0.02	1.00				0.04	0.08	1.04			
W1: Hrs													0.01	0.02	1.01	-0.01	0.05	0.99	0.16	0.11	1.17	0.05	0.07	1.05
W2: Hrs													0.02	0.02	1.02	-0.10	0.05	<b>0.90*</b>	-0.06	0.10	0.94	-0.72	0.34	<b>0.49*</b>
W3: Hrs													0.01	0.02	1.01	-0.05	0.04	0.95	-0.13	0.11	0.88	0.01	0.24	1.01
W4: Hrs													-0.04	0.03	0.96	0.04	0.05	1.04	0.01	0.11	1.01	0.22	0.27	1.25
Constant			0.70						2.19						5.29						32.68			
$\chi^2$			57.85						70.12						84.45						238.00			
<i>df</i>			8						12						20						67			

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Perc: Perceived fairness in the share of housework; Share: Women's share of housework in hours per week; Hrs: Number of hours in paid work per week; W1 (2,3,4): Wave 1 (2,3,4). *Note:* Control variables have not been reported in this table. Controls are: wife and husband's gender ideology and relationship satisfaction at Wave 1, wife and husband's number of non-resident children (aged either 0 – 4, 5 – 14, or 16 – 24) at Wave 4, wife's number of previous marriages at Wave 4, wife's age at Wave 1, wife and husband's number of hours in paid work per week across each of Waves 1 to 4, whether husband or wife's parents divorced or separated at Wave 4, and wife's and husband's importance of religion at Wave 1. Negative B values indicate that an increase in the explanatory variable decreases the probability of divorce; positive B values increase the probability of divorce. An  $e^B$  or odds ratio greater than 1 indicates the increase in the odds of divorce when the explanatory variable increases by one unit; values less than one indicate the decrease in odds (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

Tying the result of the correlation, which showed that women's perceptions of fairness are related to the number of hours men do, with the results of Model 4, that the number of hours men do at Wave 2 significantly predicts the odds of divorce, but women's perceptions of fairness only matter at Wave 4, it may be inferred that the number of hours men do is an important predictor of divorce, in and of itself, but women may not realise or acknowledge that it is important in the way they make perceptions of fairness until divorce is near anyway. That is, the extent to which domestic inequity contributes to relationship dissatisfaction, may surface only when relationship dissatisfaction is already sufficient to cause dissolution of the marriage.

#### **1.4 Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to find out whether domestic fairness 'matters' to relationship survival. It was motivated by some puzzling findings in previous research. These are that despite the movement of women into paid work, there has not been much increase in men doing domestic labour, but that marital partners most often describe objectively unequal shares of domestic labour as "fair". At the same time, divorce rates are high, and the unequal share of domestic labour has been credited with contributing to relationship breakdown.

This study found, net of other predictors of divorce, strong predictive power for the likelihood of divorce at Wave 4 by men's and women's perceptions of fairness at Wave 4, and a less strong prediction by the number of hours men contribute to housework per week at Wave 2.

Given that women in this sample do about 75% of the housework, the actual gender inequity is stark. However, our results suggest that when men are at least aware of this unequal distribution and acknowledge that they do less than their fair share, women will tolerate the inequity and thus marriages are more likely to survive. It is when men inflate the extent to which they think their contribution is fair, and so have unrealistic perceptions of the real extent of inequity, that women become more likely to divorce them.

We also propose from these findings that women may or may not acknowledge that they carry the greater responsibility for housework before their marriage is about dissolve, but the perception that they do more than their fair share at least becomes significant just before the marriage dissolves. As Gager and Sanchez (2003) point out, marital uncoupling occurs over time and problems may only be identified as such near to the termination of the relationship. Thus, we have found empirical support for the notion that domestic fairness matters to relationship survival, and by exploiting the longitudinal HILDA dataset, we were able to ascertain a temporal relationship between domestic inequity and relationship survival.

That the subjective measure of perceived fairness was significant at Wave 4 and that the number of hours men contribute each week was significant at Wave 2, may suggest that the latter only begins to contribute to perceived unfairness when the relationship is close to divorce anyway. That is, if there is a long-standing systematic difference between the housework hours men and women do, the difference may only become apparent to women and used in the way they form perceptions of fairness, when other proximal predictors of divorce (such as relationship dissatisfaction) occur. This supports the idea that while marriages are viable, perceptions of unfairness are either

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not held or not admitted. The hypothesis that while the relationship is going along, perceptions of unfairness are suppressed, but that when things start to unravel, then dissatisfaction with housework shares also rises to the surface, can be tested further and more reliably with the merging of future HILDA waves on a larger sample size.

The correlational analyses indicated that whether men think they do their fair share is influenced by the number of housework hours they do each week, whereas women use the amount they do, as well as the amount men do, to form perceptions of fairness on their contribution. Thus, it is not surprising that men's housework hours was a significant predictor of the odds of divorce. However, previous research suggests there are a whole gamut of cognitive processes that underlie the way in which people process and evaluate fairness, which have not been assessed in HILDA. As such, further (qualitative and) quantitative research is warranted to explore how dynamic dialogues between couples can produce a 'myth of equality', or the ways in which they use outcome values, comparison referents, and justifications, to inform their perceptions of fairness. Through the use of precise measurement into these factors, the predictive power of perceived fairness may increase. Also, the use of future Waves of HILDA data will increase the sample size on which to base the analyses. However, that a significant association was obtained indicates that it can be observed even in a small sample and across a relatively short time lag.

Our correlational results also demonstrated that the factors that influence men and women's perceptions of fairness are similar – both are associated with the number of hours they do each week (though the influence is stronger for men than women), women's share of housework each week, and their partner's perceptions of fairness. The only notable difference was the number of housework hours men contribute. The more men did, the more fair women thought the division of labour was, but men judged the fairness of their contribution by reference to their own behaviour more than to that of their partners'. If a man does more, he thinks that a fairer arrangement, regardless of how much (more) she may be doing. In contrast, women judge the fairness with regard to both their own *and* their partner's behaviour.

This is intriguing, because many of the attempts to explain why domestic inequity is described as fair have centred on women and their referent groups. In particular, according to the DJF, women are more likely to see their situation as fair if they do not compare themselves to their husbands. Our findings suggest that men do not compare themselves with their wives and so men's referent is their own behaviour. For example, men may make judgements of whether their contribution to domestic labour is fair based on how they allocate their time to other commitments (most likely, paid work). This suggests that men's domestic contribution will more closely reflect what he thinks is adequate than what his partner thinks is adequate. If in their judgement they are doing enough, then that women are doing more does not seem to suggest to them that this is unfair. That this is men's opinion, and objective inequity is described as fair, may also offer support for the view of Dixon and Wetherell (2004), that the perceptions of both partners must be accommodated within a joint story of every relationship, even if one view is more objectively true than the other.

Interestingly, actual housework shares did not significantly predict the likelihood of divorce, regardless of whether other predictors were accounted for (except for the spuriously significant association). This result is consistent with Baxter (2000) and Frisco and Williams (2003), who also found that women's overall share of housework

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plays a less informative role than other more nuanced factors such as the tasks each member of the couple actually complete. That this absolute measure of domestic inequity has little predictive power, in and of itself, could reflect that women normalise the disparity in housework shares because of socialisation processes. Moreover, that actual shares in housework does not predict marital longevity provides tentative support for DJF, in that objective equity and equality based on need in the home are differentially related to sex.

We also found that the number of hours women spend in domestic labour does not greatly influence the number of hours men contribute. This finding supports the results of previous research, which has consistently shown that men's domestic participation is largely unresponsive to women's workloads, barely increasing as women have taken up paid employment and increased their earnings (Baxter et al. 2005; Bianchi et al. 2006; McMahon 1999; Widmalm 1998). It also raises an important question about how current social policies might be making norms of masculinity so much more intractable than norms of femininity. More research is required on men's experiences of the division of domestic labour to tease out whether couples rely on gender stereotypes because they internally endorse such values or because it is imposed on them through socially constructed gender norms. This is especially important given that the gendered division of labour is so impervious to variation, and that researchers have identified that the greater challenge in fact may be not to identify the factors that result in more domestic equity, but to explain why these factors have such minor impact (Coltrane, 2000; Dempsey, 2001).

Unusually, this study does yield an insight that could inform social policies aimed at greater gender equity; men's behaviour influences wives perceptions of domestic fairness, but the major effect on men's perceptions of domestic fairness is their own behaviour. The implication is that men will not do half of whatever total joint paid and unpaid workload the couple has; rather, they will do what they regard as a fair individual amount. This suggests that to address the comparative intractability of male gender roles will require attention to men's own experiences. Therefore it may be more fruitful to address men's employment conditions (especially hours worked) and to minimise the demands upon them personally, than to expect couples to share their overall paid and unpaid workload equitably between the two of them, no matter how large it is. Socio-cultural policies that normalise, value and make necessary men's contribution to domestic labour could displace the strength of the traditional family structure and ideology which households are expected to strive for. Though perhaps more likely to be more effective in certain policy and cultural contexts than others (Cooke in press), this could support gender equality and increase the chances of the marriage surviving.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This study addressed the question of whether there is a relationship between the division of domestic labour and marital survival in Australia. Using the longitudinal dataset HILDA to analyse behaviour, attitudes, and outcomes within households, we found that subjective reports on the perceived fairness in the distribution of domestic labour by both men and women, and the number of hours *men* contribute to domestic labour, are significant predictors of marital longevity. While perceived and actual inequity are likely to be long-term or on-going issues in a relationship, it appears that immediate perceptions of unfairness can act as catalysts for relationship breakdowns.

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Actual inequity may be problematic but unacknowledged until other dissatisfactions have also surfaced. This study has demonstrated the importance of subjective and objective measures of domestic inequity and the temporal relationship between inequity and relationship survival. The results can be used to inform social policies that aim to promote the contribution that men make, equalise the division of domestic labour to make men's perceptions of their contribution more realistic, and thus strengthen the chances of marriages surviving.

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