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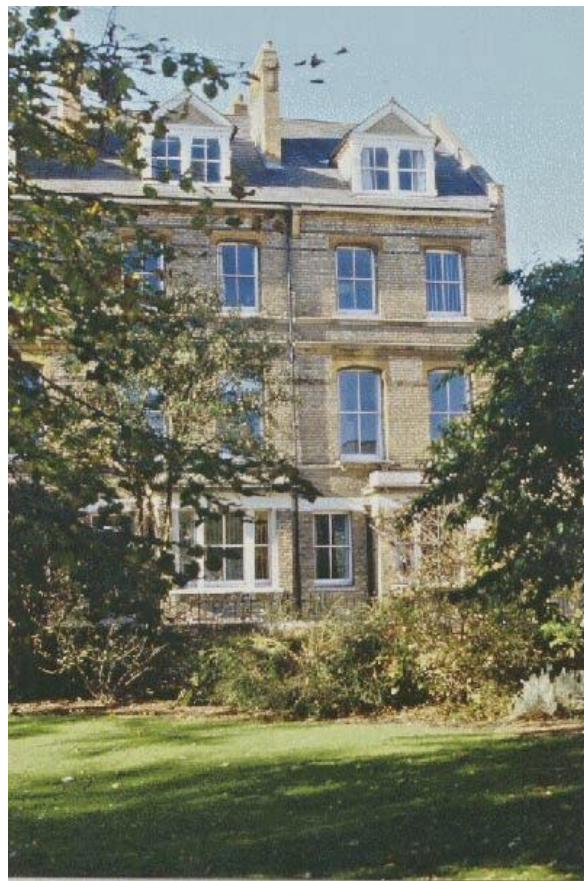
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**Unequal but ‘fair’? Housework and child care in a sample of low- to moderate-income British couples.**

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**Abstract:**

This paper first discusses the reported distribution and perceived 'fairness' of housework and child care in couple relationships from a gender perspective, and then uses this to inform a qualitative analysis of the same issues, drawing on interviews with men and women in low- to moderate-income British couples. As in previous studies, housework and child care were said to be performed disproportionately by women, but both men and women in most couples thought their arrangements were fair. A number of possible approaches are explored to explain this superficially paradoxical finding.

## Introduction

As previous research has shown, domestic work is highly gendered. Women continue to have disproportionate overall *responsibility* for domestic labour, including child care and housework, in couples and in aggregate, in many countries; and in addition, women actually *carry out* more unpaid work in the home than men. But they often see little or no unfairness in this distribution (Sanchez and Kane, 1996; Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994). This 'paradox' (Braun et al., 2008) motivates much research (for example, Grote, Naylor and Clark, 2002; Braun et al., 2008; Baxter, 2000).

This paper will review, and contribute to, theory and evidence on the reported division of domestic labour in male/female couple households. We begin by reviewing a number of theoretical explanations which have been offered for the gendered division of housework and child care. We then discuss the perceived gender division - and explanations for, and fairness of, this division - of housework and then child care, drawing on interview data from a sample of 60 men and women in Britain in (largely long-standing) male/female relationships. We find that several theoretical approaches contribute usefully to explaining the puzzle motivating this paper: why housework and child care are so often perceived to be unequally, yet fairly, divided. The paper finishes by drawing the findings together into conclusions and implications.

## Context

The literature on the gender division of labour repeatedly demonstrates the power and importance of this division for relations between the sexes. However, qualitative research in Sweden finds that men and women avoid explanations for the ways they divide housework that could be seen to indicate gender inequality, referring instead to financial rationales, personal qualities or special circumstances (Ahlberg, Roman and Duncan, 2008; Björnberg and Kollind, 2005; Nordenmark and Nyman, 2003). While this may be particularly the case in cultural contexts, such as that in Sweden, in which a high premium is placed on gender equality, the gender division of housework is closely related to sensitive issues around power, gender and money (through paid work) which members of male/female couples are often keen to minimise in the explanations they give to researchers (Ahlberg, Roman and Duncan, 2008). We therefore argue for an analysis which goes beyond these explanations by drawing upon theory from a gender perspective.

Some recent research shows the domestic division of labour becoming less unequal between men and women over time, in part through women doing less housework (Cooke and Baxter, 2010: 523), and in part because men as well as women now spend more time with their children (Craig, 2006). However, while 69 per cent of British couples said that the responsibility for housework should be shared, only 34 per cent reported that it was shared rather than mostly male or female (Crompton and Lyonette, 2009). Thus, attitudes are more egalitarian than (reported) behaviour in the population as a whole – as well as (reported) behaviour in our sample, as noted below.

The assumption that children affect only mothers' and not fathers' time use also remains largely true (Harkness, 2005; Craig, 2006). An Australian study found that  
'although childless men and women have a total workload that

is constituted by different proportions of paid to unpaid work, they do a similar amount of work in total. Parenthood ends this.' (Craig, 2006: 135).

In Britain, single women do a little more domestic work than single men; but it is on the birth of children that inequality between the sexes increases markedly (Kan and Ger-shuny, 2009). It is difficult to see this inequality, in which mothers work longer hours than fathers, as anything other than problematic, given the repercussions of this gendered division of labour both within the home and outside it.

## **The Sample**

Sixty interviews were conducted with individual members of 30 male/female couples (all but one of them married) in various locations in England, Scotland and Wales (Bennett, De Henau and Sung, 2008; Sung and Bennett, 2007; Bennett, 2009). The couples had been interviewed annually from 1997 to 2001 as members of a booster sample of low- to moderate-income households added to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) for inclusion in the European Community Household Panel. The couples had all at some point had a child or children and all but four lived with at least one child at the time of the interviews in 2006; some of these children were by then adults.

Mostly, both partners were of working age, though their employment status varied (see Table 2). The mean ages of men and women were 49 and 45 respectively. As far as could be ascertained, they were living on low to moderate incomes, with the vast majority in receipt of means-tested benefits or tax credits at the time of interview and/or in the past. The interviews were focused primarily on patterns of financial resources and entitlement; but questions were asked in addition about housework, childcare and other issues. The data were analysed with the help of NVivo software.

At the conclusion of the individual fieldwork interviews, respondents were given questionnaires to complete individually. These replicated questions asked of them from 1997 to 2001, including questions on gender role attitudes and satisfaction with personal and household income. The context for completing these questions in 2006 was somewhat different, as the questionnaires were completed following a discussion of family life and roles in the individual interviews, which may have influenced responses. Taking this into account, they are nonetheless used in this paper as an additional data source.

## **The gendered division of housework**

The time spent on housework by men and women in couple relationships, and the perceived fairness of such arrangements, have been linked to numerous causes and consequences. Various factors have been linked to perceptions of fairness in the division of housework and different directions of causality suggested. For example, Widmalm (1998) assumes that fairness preferences cause time allocations, while Blair and Johnson (1992) assume that the different ways in which household labour is divided result in different perceptions of fairness. Bryan and Sevilla Sanz (2007) investigate the impact of housework on wages, while other studies examine the impact of wages on housework. Clearly, selection effects and the direction of causality are at issue here.

A large number of explanations, not all mutually exclusive, have been suggested for the division of housework in a number of countries. These include a 'myth of male incompetence' (Crompton and Lyonette, 2009), the relative incomes of partners (Fernandez and Sevilla Sanz, 2006), gender role attitudes (Kan, 2008) and education and age relative to one's partner (Kalugina, Radtchenko and Sofer, 2008). Some of these and other themes are explored in the analysis below.

Three perspectives are seen as dominating analyses, particularly quantitative analyses, of the division of housework (Cooke, 2007; Nordenmark and Nyman, 2003). These are relative power or resources (resource theory), time availability and a gender perspective.

Resource theory assumes that the power of money, in the form of an income, or an income higher than that of a partner, is more important than gender in determining outcomes and meanings. Its supporters include Berthoud (1983), Blood and Wolfe (1960), Blumstein and Schwartz (1983), Nyman (2003), Rottman (1994), and Thomas (1990). For example, Lennon and Rosenfeld (1994), using a resource theory analysis, find that women with more alternatives to their marriage perceive unequal divisions of domestic tasks as unfair, whereas women with fewer alternatives report greater acceptance of the situation. Nordenmark and Nyman (2003) explain that resource theories look at housework in a pragmatic, instrumental way, and are concerned with time use and availability, and economically-based theories of power.

Many writers find this inadequate in the face of what they see as sexist ideologies which trivialise even high female earnings, instead developing an analysis informed by the sociology of gender. Women do more than an equal or proportionate share of housework even when time availability is taken into account. Among those adopting a gender-informed viewpoint are Brannen and Moss (1987), Burgoyne (1995), Elizabeth (2001), Goode, Callender and Lister (1998), Roman and Vogler (1999), Tichenor (1999), Vogler (1998), and Zelizer (1997). Given the different positioning of men and women in relation to power, income and time availability, it is difficult to avoid gender when analysing housework. Gender is a key theme and often a central substantive topic in the literature. Proponents of this theory argue that traditional gender roles and gender ideologies, not just differential resources, can play a central part in the allocation of domestic tasks (indeed, that these tasks may not be so much allocated by decision-making as 'naturally' fall to one or the other person, in unequal amounts). Thus a task may be seen differently, depending on whether it is usually performed by a man or a woman, just as an income may be viewed differently depending on whether it is earned by a man or a woman. In addition, gender relations are created and recreated in the actions of men and women ('doing gender') (Cooke, 2006), rather than being a fixed property of relations between them.

The following sections will describe the reported nature of, and explanations for, the ways in which housework was shared (or not shared) between members of couples in the sample. It will then go on to discuss the fairness of these divisions and arrangements as perceived by the individual men and women interviewed.

### **Reported distribution of housework in the sample and reasons given for it**

Overall, overwhelmingly, both women and men in the sample said that women did more housework than men. In only twelve couples did women not reportedly perform all or most housework at the time of the interviews, because housework was instead said to be shared or men were reported as doing more than half.

As in previous research findings, men often reported or were reported as 'helping' with housework, by 'giv[ing] her a hand' (Case 22, male) or 'chip[ping] in' (Case 10, male). Björnberg and Kollind (2005) discuss domestic work as part of women's field of responsibility, leading to disproportionate amounts of housework being performed by women; this was commonly the case in this sample, as reported by both women and men.

A number of themes were raised by respondents in discussing the division of housework. These have been distilled into seven categories: skill, preferences, ideology (traditional or egalitarian), history, practicalities and employment roles. No explanation was given by men and women in some of the couples. The participants in our research also did not tend to emphasise the more ideological explanations for their practices. The range of explanations given for the division of housework means that none of the main three theoretical approaches above (power resources, time availability and gender) is validated in full and without caveats.

It was rare for explicitly principled arguments to be raised in discussion. One couple (Case 4) was unusual in that both the woman and the man drew on traditional ideological themes of a wife and mother's role as homemaker, with the husband as head of the family. This appeared to derive from the couple's religious convictions and was expressed through statements including:

I'm not one of these equality people (Case 4, female).

I look on myself shall we say as the captain (Case 4, male).

Not surprisingly, the views of both the man and the woman about gender roles in the self-completion questionnaire, in 1997, 2001 and 2006, were on the traditional end of the spectrum.

A few other men and women mentioned 'old-fashioned values' (Case 18, female), or made similar allusions, without these being given as the definitive or only explanation for housework arrangements. But a more progressive theme of sharing or performing chores jointly was more common. For example: 'we try to be fair, yes [...] we try and share jobs out' (Case 15, male).

Social norms may be seen as external and more open to challenge from competing ideas than gendered moral rationalities, which Duncan and Edwards (1999) suggest form an integral part of identity. A pattern repeatedly found in male/female couples is that the less discussion there is, the more traditional the division of resources (Finch and Mason, 1992; Pahl, 1989; Singh, 1997; Wilson, 1987, 1991). Household divisions of money and labour rarely involve open discussion; and men usually try to influence the division of

household labour against women's will only indirectly rather than directly (Komter, 1989; Björnberg and Kollind, 2005). It could be argued that gender equality issues are more likely to be raised if there is open discussion and negotiation.

Only rarely was the idea of being a 'housewife' raised spontaneously by respondents - for example: 'It all stems back from when she was a housewife, she more or less did everything' (Case 18, male); or conversely: 'I can't say I'm an avid housewife' (Case 9, female). Once or twice the idea of the man as 'breadwinner' was raised; but more often this idea was conveyed using alternative, more practical language, as discussed below, rather than this perhaps more ideologically loaded term. Goode, Callender and Lister (1998) provide evidence of patterns of distribution of resources within the household according to the breadwinner ideal. This was seen less distinctly in this study.

Explanations given by individuals for the reported division and organisation of housework in their household varied and overlapped; and more often than not, more than one explanation was given by a couple. Mostly, employment was a common theme cited in a matter-of-fact way, with the terms 'housewife' and 'breadwinner' seemingly not salient to most, as noted above. The work-related reasons for the division of domestic labour were not problematised and explicit negotiation was not often apparent.

The two most commonly cited themes by both men and women were employment roles and reported skill levels (discussed below):

I went to work and she did the housework (Case 18, male).

Because I'm only doing a few hours [of paid work per week] I wouldn't expect him then to come home and do housework (Case 7, female).

These themes can be seen as linked to power resource, time availability and gender theories.

Practical considerations were described as important by both women and men. One woman (Case 28) explicitly rejected principled explanations in favour of pragmatics: 'he does help me when he's got time, it's not like he doesn't do it out of principle.' These practicalities varied from what was in effect convenience to constraints imposed by disability (see below). Fourteen individuals referred to practicalities among the reasons given for their division of housework. One man, Case 17, stated that 'it's got to be done' as a reason for him doing some housework. Similarly: 'if I'm perhaps home early or whatever, I'll cook dinner' (Case 7, male). Explanations of this nature were part of a wider discourse which minimised discussion and ideology by matter-of-fact allusions to employment or other practical factors. However, as gender roles and employment patterns are intimately interlinked, these references themselves could be seen as highly gendered. As we have seen in the discussion of theory above, practicalities and ideologies are inextricably intertwined.

Disability was a key consideration for some couples, whose division of housework was constrained by the disability of one partner. Certain conditions made specific housework tasks more difficult for some, so that, for example, one husband cleaned their pets' cages as his wife 'can't get on the floor' (Case 15, male). On the other hand, one woman



(Case 5) overcame the limitations imposed by her disability by washing dishes in batches sitting down, and said she felt guilty that she could not do more.

One research study suggests that women in the Netherlands enjoy cleaning, cooking and childcare more than men - although neither women nor men 'enjoy' cleaning in terms of evaluating it positively (Poortman and Van Der Lippe, 2009). Another study finds that women (in the United States) value washing dishes less than men do (Kroska, 2003); typically women set higher standards for the tasks, and feel more responsible for them, than men do (ibid). Thus, personal and specific attitudes seem to play a role, in addition to more general and abstract gender ideologies - though the two may of course be linked, and all are highly gendered. Björnberg and Kollind (2005) also found, in their qualitative research, that a pleasure principle was important in the division of tasks within couples; but task enjoyment may clearly also be determined at least in part by gender identity.

It has been suggested, notably by Hochschild (1990), Brines (1994) and Bittman et al. (2003), that men respond to threats to their masculinity by doing less domestic work, and/or that women compensate for their own typically 'masculine' behaviour by doing more. However, Gupta (2006) shows, for the United States, Sweden and Germany, that the volume of a woman's housework is much more closely associated with her own earnings than with her partner's. Thus, women's money is more important than men's money in determining mean housework hours - just as Poortman and Van Der Lippe (2009) showed that men's attitudes may be more influential than women's. While some authors (Becker, 1981; Hakim, 1991) imply that women's preferences determine their responsibility for domestic tasks, Cooke (2006) argues that men's preferences may determine the household division of labour in a patriarchal society. In our sample, although men more often cited preferences, these included not just their own likes and/or dislikes but also those of their partners.

A myth (or reality) of male incompetence (Crompton and Lyonette, 2009) was sometimes cited,<sup>1</sup> linked to claims of preferences about cleanliness, issues about skills and differential effort. One man reported, for example, that 'I can't clean' (Case 1). Another man said he stacked the dishwasher, 'but I'm told I don't stack it properly' (Case 20). Differential standards according to gender were being cited by one man when he claimed that 'my tidy ain't her tidy' (Case 6). It is difficult to disentangle the three strands of laziness, skill level and personal standards (or preferences) of tidiness and cleanliness, all of which may vary according to task and over time. Björnberg and Kollind (2005) also cited pleasure and competence among the explanations given by the couples in their sample for the way they divided housework; there were advantages in specialising in the division of labour, in enhancing mutual dependence. In our sample, tasks were often assigned through habit and/or preference, so that a daily activity such as making the bed or loading the dishwasher was done by the same person.

A few women reported trying to 'train' their partners to improve their housework skills (Case 18, female). Setting aside interaction within a couple, it is perhaps unlikely that couples will match exactly in terms of skills, preferences and standards. Different standards within (and between) couples may determine how many hours of housework are

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<sup>1</sup> By six respondents: four men (cases 1, 8, 9 and 20) and two women: cases 18 and 20.

thought necessary. One man said that his wife and he got on well in regard to housework because they shared the same approach: 'It's not as if one of us is really sort of frantic and house proud and the other one's not. It just sort of works quite well together' (Case 7, male).

By contrast, however, his wife said: 'I hate this room, this is his study, this is his mess. I tidy it up and it ends up like this again.' Clearly, where one partner sees mutual understanding and shared standards, the other may disagree. A number of women complained similarly about their partners:

He wouldn't wash up, he wouldn't Hoover, he wouldn't do anything [...] that's frustrating (Case 29, female).

One male respondent (Case 5) said 'I'm a better cook'. The reverse was also in evidence: in some cases, women emphasised male skill and competence. These comments made claims about relative talents within couples, as well as the presence or absence of absolute skills. For example, one female respondent (Case 1) explained that she was worse and her husband better at cleaning.

Interestingly, some men and women in our sample included references to their children in their discussion of housework. This theme has been missing from much existing literature, in which children are seen as a contributing cause of, rather than part of the solution to, the problem of housework (but see Gill, 1997). Children were criticised by respondents if they failed to perform their fair share. Several men in particular criticised their children for not doing housework, or not doing enough housework.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, history was given as an explanation by some sample members for their division of housework, in whole or in part. Childhood patterns had established expectations; former relationships were cited; or parents were a positive or negative example to emulate or to avoid. One woman cited the precedent that was established when she took 18 months off from paid work for childcare responsibilities (Case 14, female). In one or two cases, habits were established from former working patterns, notably from the period following the birth of children when women ceased paid work: 'I think [my husband] found it quite hard to slot back into that' (Case 14, female). Equally, some respondents drew a line between their current and former arrangements, to show that their new partner did more or less housework than their former partner. Thus, there was evidence of change, as well as consolidation, of attitudes and behaviour over time.

Many respondents had experience of an earlier relationship, and 17 (out of 60) were re-married (see Table 2). Around half felt there was little or no change between their current and past relationships in terms of housework. For others, changes were reported in the direction of women decreasing, and men increasing, the housework they did. For the women involved, this was reported or implied to be an improvement over the past.

In sum, a combination of factors appeared to influence the division of housework in the families interviewed. As in Nordenmark and Nyman (2003: 203), a number of explanations were given, including traditional and egalitarian ideologies, and the 'specific and

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<sup>2</sup> Cases 10, 21 and 31

entire life situation faced by the individual couples'. One man illustrated this mix by drawing on different strands of explanation:

(Interviewer): how do you organise [housework]?

(Case 6, male): Well the wife does the housework as such, I do help with the drying up and that kind of thing but that's all [...] And we share the gardening together and then I do the decorating and the DIY.

(Interviewer): Right ... and how does that come about?

(Case 6, male): Well it's always been, my wife's always been a housey person, motherly person, and I work outdoors so we do that together. She likes the garden to look nice and I like practical things, doing things with my hands, so the DIY you can't afford to get anyone in so you've got to have a go at doing it yourself.

The above explanation and discussion summarise the findings of this section: the woman mostly does the housework, with the man 'helping'; they might share some tasks, or feel that they ought to; they cite practical reasons for their arrangements; and spouses also have different preferences, which influence their (constrained) choices. This man, however, also draws explicitly on a gendered discourse in describing his wife as 'a housey person, motherly person'.

### **Perceptions of fairness in the division of housework**

'Fairness' can be defined in many ways (Nordenmark and Nyman, 2003), and is a more important theme in the literature than it was in the interviews. The division of housework was largely seen as fair by the interviewees. Most respondents said they felt that it was fair, with no caveats;<sup>3</sup> among these, there were more men than women.<sup>4</sup> One joked 'I think it's very fair ... if I can get out of it' (Case 11, male).

A few interviewees added caveats, such as 'pretty fair' or 'fairly fair'. One woman who said that the division was fair added 'I probably do a little bit more' (Case 10, female); and another woman said she 'got a bit cross sometimes' (Case 20, female).

A significant minority of respondents felt that housework was organised unfairly in their households. Of these, some felt they themselves should do more; but the rest - six women - reported that they did too much, or their husbands too little. Examples included: 'I do all the dishes' (Case 30, female); and 'I end up doing more than anyone else' (Case 21, female). One respondent said that she felt tired because of her 'second shift' of housework following her part-time paid work (Hochschild, 1990); there were tensions in this couple over housework, and both felt that it was unfair to her disadvantage. This placed them among a small number of couples in which both the man and woman agreed that housework was unfair to the woman. Slightly differently, one woman complained of unfairness not through an unequal division of work but because

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<sup>3</sup> 31 respondents from 21 different couples.

<sup>4</sup> 18 men compared to 13 women.

she had to organise housework herself (Case 29, female). She resented having sole responsibility for housework more than the fact of doing most of it. Another case touched on this in saying that because 'I sort everything out', 'I'm just [the] dogsbody' (Case 3, female).

Couples in the sample were asked in 1997 about the fairness of who does the housework (grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning/hovering, and washing and ironing).<sup>5</sup> One couple agreed that the division of housework was unfair, and 16 agreed that it was somewhat or very fair. Thus, over a sustained period, in questionnaires and in interviews, the members of this sample largely said as individuals that the division of housework in their household was fair. As in other studies, the challenge of the following section is therefore to explain this.

### **Consistency of attitudes and behaviour in the sample**

Given the importance of attitudes vis-à-vis behaviour in the literature, the extent of this congruence (or incongruence) in the sample is now reviewed. Of course, practice and ideology need not match; Björnberg and Kollind (2005) found examples among Swedish couples of an equality orientation coexisting in practice with very traditional patterns of household labour, and vice versa. A mismatch between attitudes and practices is not generally associated with disagreements within couples over housework, for British men and women (Crompton and Lyonette, 2007).

Some examples will illustrate how attitudes and behaviour conflicted in the sample. One female respondent said that she hated housework, but did not appear to resent doing all of it, and both partners considered the division of housework fair (Case 28). This may be interpreted as implying that she had internalised the idea that housework is the proper thing for a woman to do (see Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Alternatively, the idea of 'cognitive dissonance' might be used to explain this case. This is the psychological discomfort that arises from two incompatible viewpoints (Cooper, 2007). If a discrepancy between behaviours and beliefs is experienced, the undesirable state produced encourages individuals to change one or the other (Teschl and Comim, 2005). Lennon and Rosenfield (1994) argue that women with few alternatives to their marriage need ways to maintain a sense of cognitive consistency between what they think and what they do, such as by denying unfairness in housework; those with little power over their situations retain power over their own attitudes. Similarly, it might be argued that it is advantageous to avoid seeing injustice in one's marriage. Sen's work on adaptive preferences (1990) was shaped by his work on the division of labour, in which 'adapted perceptions' and the acceptance of 'the legitimacy of the unequal order' induce people to adhere to an unjust order (Teschl and Comim, 2005: 234). In explaining individual accounts, one of these ideas may be more helpful than another, or it may be that a combination of mechanisms is in operation.

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<sup>5</sup> Following questions on responsibility for four housework tasks, the question reads: 'How fair do you think that is? Is it... very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair?' These were combined to form two categories: unfair and fair. Data is available for 26 couples. In 9 couples, the man and woman had different views.

To take another example, in Case 20 the couple shared somewhat traditional views on the gender ideology scale in the 1997 BHPS; but in his interview, the husband thought that the division of housework was 'probably not' fair, as he probably did not do enough. More distinct differences within a couple are seen in Case 18, where the female partner was among the most egalitarian in her attitudes and her husband among the minority with traditional attitudes (see Table 1). The unfairness she felt at having responsibility for organising and performing most of the child care and housework was because both did full-time paid work. According to her, rather than reacting with anger or frustration, she put her energies into trying to 'train him in a way'. Her husband, though traditional in attitudes, appreciated that it was unfair on his partner for her to perform most of the housework. Therefore, in some couples, conflicts could be identified between competing ideas. These conflicts were between more traditional and more egalitarian views and practices, whether in relation to domestic work or to wider gender roles.

Research on couples consistently demonstrates conflicts between reality, perceptions and ideologies (see Hutton, 1994, for example). Researchers have described and suggested a number of ways in which couples resolve the tension between conflicting ideologies. The idea of sharing allows women to feel that their inequitable financial position is less unjust than it otherwise would seem. This is because they can appeal to the sharing ideal to 'gloss over the more unpleasant aspects' of the unequal division of money and power in their relationships (Wilson, 1987). So long as nominal rights or access coexist with self-denial, conflict may be avoided. Thus, the literature shows how competing discourses can coexist in individual and couple accounts. Silence, avoidance and denial are popular approaches. Formal access to resources, as with a joint current or savings account, can and does coexist with self-denial and self-control for many women. This may constitute guilt over spending (Fleming, 1997; Hertz, 1995; Laurie, 1992), which sometimes translates into efforts to conceal or misrepresent the price of items bought when partners enquire after the cost (Laurie, 1992).

In this study, the men and women in four couples expressed contradictory and/or competing ideas, and in a further two these were implicit.<sup>6</sup> For example, in Case 31 the husband thought that it was unfair on his wife that he did not do more housework, yet also said 'I'm number one, the wife is number two, there's a pecking order in the house.' (This was a couple in which the man was the partner at home, whilst the woman had a paid job.) Despite these examples of conflicting discourses in the sample, there was more commonly a seemingly unproblematic but paradoxical coexistence of unequal sharing with perceived fairness.

Generally, couples seemed to internalise and view as fair unequal patterns in which women performed all, almost all, or a disproportionate share of housework. Thus, there was evidence in favour of an explanation of housework and childcare patterns drawing on social norms as well as a more internalised explanation of gendered moral rationalities, which are collective and gendered understandings about proper social behaviour (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Housework and child care are not solely determined by power relations or the equality or quality of couple relationships. Duncan and Irwin (2004) show that mothers' choices in combining mothering with paid work, allocating

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<sup>6</sup> Couples with competing values: 14, 18, 20, 31, and 21 and 28 to a lesser extent.

tasks to partners, and choosing child care take place within socially negotiated accounts of what is morally adequate. Similarly, Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) use the notion of 'identity' to capture how mothers' views on child care were personal and self-defining, rather than reflecting what was felt to be 'the right thing to do' in general or for others. Researchers may choose to take respondents at their word when they draw on time availability discourse in explaining their arrangements, while also seeing gender at work on different levels from the level at which questions are answered.

Goode, Callender and Lister (1998) developed a typology of the couples in their qualitative sample, from egalitarian to traditional. One can be consistently traditional, in behaviour and attitudes, though this leads to unequal outcomes. Baxter (2000) notes that fairness and satisfaction are different in relation to housework, in that it may be worth doing more than one's fair share in exchange for a quiet life and clean home, if equal task sharing requires coaxing, cajoling and coercing one's partner into performing tasks. However, women who perceive an unequal situation as unfair experience lower psychological well-being (Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994). Baxter's point also does not explain why inequality in housework was often seen as fair, in this sample and in other research. The choice for women can be between defining an unequal situation as just, or seeing it as unjust and experiencing lower well-being (Lennon and Rosenfield, 1994).

In the sample, egalitarian attitudes commonly coincided with traditional behaviour. For these purposes, attitudes are derived from items on gender role attitudes in the questionnaire completed in 2006. Egalitarian attitudes are defined as agreement with statements such as 'Single parents can bring up children as well as a couple' (see Table 1). Traditional behaviour is defined as the female partner performing all or most housework (assessed from the balance of responses given by the couple). There was little difference between men and women; no strong pattern linked those finding housework unfair in terms of employment status; and most couples shared the same attitudes and behaviour. There was only one couple in which egalitarian attitudes combined with traditional behaviour, where both did paid full-time work, to produce feelings of unfairness for the woman (Case 18). A few other women who worked part time, with partners employed full time, felt some degree of this unfairness, which their partners shared in two cases. Strong conclusions cannot be formulated on views expressed about unfairness, as these were not only varied but also rare.

### **The gendered division of child care**

Gender relations also operate in the field of child care. British attitudes have 'improved' in terms of views about gender roles; but attitudes towards working mothers are less progressive (Crompton, Brockmann and Wiggins, 2003). There is more literature on the division of housework than child care in couples (Sundström and Duvander, 2002). This is reflected in the four BHPS questions on housework asked of respondents annually since wave D (1994), compared to a single question on child care.<sup>7</sup> It may be important, for example, to distinguish 'child care' from 'spending time with children'; but this is not possible using the limited BHPS data.

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<sup>7</sup> Housework questions ask who does the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and washing and drying.

Child care takes different forms, and may have different associated levels of enjoyment and skills. Some of these differences may be important in cases in which skills differ - for example, where only one partner holds a driving licence. (Child care is also often performed as a secondary activity while doing something else (Craig, 2006).) The first wave of the Australian panel survey 'Negotiating the Lifecourse' distinguished between helping with homework, listening to problems, taking children to activities and appointments, playing with them, bathing and dressing them and getting them to bed (Baxter, 2000).

In our sample of couples, there was some differentiation, in discussion, between who performed child care itself, and who took responsibility for it. Responsibility cannot be measured effectively in time-use diaries, a common method used in studying unpaid work, because it is over-arching and not time-limited. But responsibility is an important topic in researching and theorising domestic work: 'As long as the blame is laid on the woman's head for an empty larder or a dirty house it is not meaningful to talk about marriage as a "joint" or "equal" partnership' (Oakley, 1974: 160). Equally, 'so long as mothers not fathers are judged by their children's appearances and behaviour [...] symmetry remains a myth' (ibid, 160-1). Thirty-five years after Oakley's 1971 interviews, it remained the case in the sample that the responsibility for seeing that tasks were completed generally rested with women.

Housework and child care are not activities of fixed dimensions in time and space to be divided between couples equally or unequally; they may be divided between any number of people, or not divided at all. Neither are they independent: having children causes more housework (Craig, 2006); and performing housework can interfere with performing child care and vice versa (Oakley, 1974). There are also, however, important differences between housework and child care: they have different rewards, there are different costs of neglecting the tasks, and the outputs differ (Sundström and Duvander, 2002).

There is much evidence that child care is treated differently from housework within couples. In the United States, men with egalitarian gender attitudes decrease their hours of paid work on becoming fathers, while men with traditional gender attitudes increase them (Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000, cited in Sundström and Duvander, 2002). In Britain, the average man in a couple increases his domestic work significantly on the birth of a child, but this consists mainly of child care rather than housework (Kan and Gershuny, 2009).

### **Reported division of child care in the sample, reasons given for this and perceptions of fairness**

The degree to which child care remains more women's prerogative than men's varies across national contexts (Cooke and Baxter, 2010: 524). This section will discuss the arrangements which individuals in the low- to moderate-income couples in the sample said they made in terms of child care and the reasons they gave for making these arrangements. Mostly, both men and women said that women did more child care than

men. For child care, as for housework, gender influences assumptions and common understandings of who is the appropriate person to perform tasks.<sup>8</sup>

Although women were generally said to perform more child care, this is a simplification of a more complex picture. For example, in Case 10 both spouses said the wife did more; but the burden was, they both reported, relatively evenly shared, and the husband had also had experience of a period of full-time family care.

Some degree of disagreement emerged on the question of who performed most child care in the present or past. Taking the balance of opinion in couples, in more than half the female partner was said to perform all or most of the childcare. A greater likelihood of women taking on the primary *responsibility* for child care was matched by a disproportionate tendency for women to actually *carry out* childcare tasks, though the two ideas were not always systematically distinguished in interviews.

Two key findings emerged on the division of child care. First, employment was a major theme among the reasons given for the ways in which child care was divided in the sample. Sixteen couples explained that the mother did most or all of the childcare, in general or when children were young, because the father was working. This employment theme came out more strongly than in discussions of housework. Men's paid work was also used to explain why they did less child care in Himmelweit and Sigala (2004). Clearly, many complexities underlie this superficially simple 'explanation' for gender roles within couples.

A second key finding was that, other than nurseries, very little use of third-party childcare was reported by more than half of the sample. Children, and by extension child care, were seen by some as the family's responsibility, rather than child care being discussed as part of mothers' role. In practice, however, this entailed additional female childcare work. Some considered it unacceptable to contract child care to others, especially in terms of taking up opportunities for formal child care:

If you have kids you can't go out at night and expect someone to look after [...] we've always made it that we keep them ourselves, it's the way that we work (Case 12, male).

No never, never, wouldn't have [a childminder]. I want my kids to understand their mother and father, not somebody else as like a mother and father (Case 29, male).

This corresponds to the findings of Duncan and Irwin (2004), who found that their sample of English mothers were often dismissive of friends, neighbours and relatives for regular childcare; in addition: 'childminders were distrusted and nurseries were seen as too formal and communal' (ibid, 393; Duncan et al, 2004). Himmelweit and Sigala (2004: 461) also found that some mothers rejected the idea of outside help with child-

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<sup>8</sup> For some (though not all) couples, control and management of money are considered part of women's responsibility for the domestic sphere (Snape, Molloy and Kumar, 1999; Sung and Bennett, 2007).



care; but others in their sample gave alternative views - for example: 'I love her to death but couldn't be with her all the time.'

It was more common than not in the sample to report 'not much' child care from anyone outside the couple. In some couples, reasons for having certain childcare arrangements were given along the lines of 'we had children because we wanted children' (Case 28, female).<sup>9</sup> These couples believed positively that they should look after their children themselves, and rejected the idea of childminders and sometimes even babysitters. Hints of this line of thinking could be seen among a larger group of couples who said that they had no outside child care for unspecified or more neutral reasons.<sup>10</sup> The extent of this distancing from externally-provided child care is notable. Where a reason was provided, it was more often a positive rejection than a practical reason. Sentiments such as 'we couldn't find a babysitter' (Case 24, male) were uncommon.

In short, 'I think that bringing up your own children is very important' (Case 16, female). A key implication of this finding is that gender relations within the couple cannot be avoided in respect of child care, as when a third party takes over the performance and/or responsibility. Gender must be continually 'lived' in this scenario. Although the link was not made directly by respondents, the sample were on low to moderate incomes, and were thus less able to afford some forms of child care. It is possible that rhetorically assuming personal responsibility for one's children as a matter of pride, rather than economics, is a more positive presentation of the child care situation for these couples.

External child care may be unpaid when performed by grandparents, for example, although Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) – like authors before them - note that informal care can have associated costs. Some couples opt out of these negotiations in whole or in part by paying for a third party to perform some housework and/or child care. There is some suggestion that the cost of such third-party help may come from female earnings, rather than male or joint earnings, making for 'a peculiar kind of freedom' (Gupta, 2006: 999). However, outsourcing all child care is unusual in Britain (Crompton and Lyonette, 2007), and was uncommon in the sample.

A minority of eight couples<sup>11</sup> reported that they had received help and were neutral or positive towards help with childcare, which mostly came from friends and family. One couple thought they were 'lucky' (Case 26, female) that the grandparents did so much, and it was 'great' (Case 26, male) when they took the children away for holidays. Others were more neutral.

In general across the sample, as for housework, arrangements for child care were described matter-of-factly rather than ideologically. With the exception of discussion of

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<sup>9</sup> Couples who were negative towards external help with childcare: 12, 13, 16, 28, 29, 31.

<sup>10</sup> One couple disagreed and in three couples the topic was not addressed in sufficient depth to determine their views. Couples with more 'neutral' or practical reasons for having no help with childcare: 3, 6, 8, 10, 15, 18, 21, 22, 24, 25, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Couples who were neutral or positive towards help with childcare: 2, 4, 7, 14, 19, 20, 26, 27.

the use of third-party child care, in which opinions and attitudes were to the fore, child care was a practical arrangement. Considered thought and discussion were rare in accounts of how 'decisions' came about: 'it wasn't really decided' (Case 29, female). Two cases were exceptions:

In general men are not as responsible as women for the children, I think it's a gene thing (Case 10, female).

(Interviewer): So how did it come about that it was her mainly responsible?  
(Case 17, male): Well, I always believed that that's part of a woman's role in life.

It is questionable how often childcare decisions are made consciously, or how often these decisions, where made, are explicitly negotiated. The scope for decision-making in regard to child care is also inherently limited for those living on low or moderate incomes. Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) argue that these constraints may be external as well as internal for mothers in the UK; 'choice' is not a straightforward term to apply.

Respondents more typically reported instead that the female partner had done all or most of the child care through the fact, or long hours, of the male partner's job: 'he worked long hours, very rarely here' (Case 18, female); 'because I go to work and she stops at home' (Case 12, male). Three men with experience of significant periods of full-time family care reported the same employment explanation in reverse: they looked after the children because their wives were working. These comments may be seen as versions of theoretical rationales, stripped of their ideological labelling and presented as matters of fact. Alternatively, these accounts could reflect the logic that the lower-earning partner, likely to be female, would rationally cease some or all paid work temporarily to look after children (reflecting the resource theory described earlier). However, gender norms provide this as a default option.

A large minority of nine couples both reported that they shared child care and/or took joint responsibility for it. Here there was a mix of practical and perhaps ideological explanations, even within the same couple. In couple 13, the wife gave practical reasons about working hours, while her husband remarked that 'they're our children.' Another man reported that 'we both muck in together, we both share everything, we both do everything together, so there's no one [in charge]' (Case 29, male). In contrast, his wife drew on an alternative discourse to explain why, although child care was shared, she would ideally do more than half: 'I'm not one of these career... I'd rather be here for the family' (Case 29, female). These competing discourses were also seen within couples in relation to housework, as noted above, and demonstrate that neither social norms nor gendered moral rationalities (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) are singular; couples draw on a range of ideas to explain their childcare arrangements.

Egalitarian attitudes to gender roles did not coincide with egalitarian childcare arrangements for most sample members. Most commonly, traditional behaviour, where the wife performed all or most of the child care, coincided with expressed egalitarian attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In one case a couple disagreed over the division of child care and in nine couples attitudes varied.

Men and women differed very little in the sample in these positions. Though the patterns of attitudes and behaviour are similar overall in regard to childcare and housework, many individuals have different positions on the two issues. As Oakley (1974) noted, the performance of child care within couples cannot be read off from the performance of housework, despite the way the two activities are linked through the idea of the housewife.

As with housework, egalitarian attitudes towards child care are more common than traditional ones. The mean attitude scores of men and women in the sample who had completed questionnaires in 1997, 2001 and 2006 were similar.<sup>13</sup> Scores were slightly more egalitarian than traditional; but scores were often low, indicating mixed views or only very mildly progressive views<sup>14</sup> (see Table 1).

As the topic of the fairness of childcare arrangements was not explicitly addressed during interviews in 2006, the data on this topic is inadequate to provide a full analysis, as provided in relation to housework, above. Of the 17 couples in the sample with valid information, who were looking after children in 1997 and responded to the BHPS questionnaire, 15 agreed that the division of responsibility for looking after the child(ren) was fair. Two couples had differing views: one man and one woman thought the arrangements were not fair, while their partners thought that they were. This suggests that the division of child care was seen as fairer than that of housework by those of the sample with valid data on this.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Gender equality in both housework and child care has increased since the 1960s in many western societies (Cooke and Baxter, 2010: 522, citing Sullivan, 2006). Nonetheless, we have seen that the reported division of housework and child care in the low- to moderate-income couples interviewed for this research was seen to be generally still unequal - but was also often considered 'fair'. Gender role attitudes, assessed from self-completion questionnaires and interview transcripts, were mildly egalitarian; but this did not translate to a feeling that the reported disproportionate share of housework and childcare work and responsibility taken on by women was unfair. The sample gave a range of explanations for the division and organisation of housework and child care in their families, most of which were superficially non-ideological. As in previous research, it was more common than not for attitudes and behaviour to diverge, which could only partly be explained through practical restrictions constraining the preferences of sample members. Several theoretical interpretations of this mismatch were discussed. Given data limitations and the usefulness of elements of many theoretical approaches, it is concluded that any one explanation is insufficient by itself. However, an understanding of gender is key to understanding the reported extent, nature and perceptions of the division of housework and child care between men and women.

Different theories are useful at different levels, because housework and childcare arrangements may have different proximate, ultimate and intermediate causes. One expla-

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<sup>13</sup> Scores varied between 2.4 and 3.7 in 1997, 2001 and 2006.

<sup>14</sup> The higher the score, the more egalitarian the attitude. The maximum possible score, indicating highly egalitarian views, was 18.

nation may help to explain an individual's account but be inadequate to explain overall patterns. Gender theory was drawn on to show how women act to their own disadvantage. Women's perceptions of unequal domestic work as fair, in contrast, may be in their own interests as a strategy to maintain well-being. Respondents had an egalitarian discourse available to them, though most did not make use of it. Thus, gendered moral rationalities (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) about housework and child care as the 'proper thing to do' for women cannot fully explain how ideologies competed within the accounts of individuals and couples.

Ideas about adaptive preferences were helpful in explaining the disconnection between behaviour and attitudes. It may be concluded that it is necessary to go beyond respondents' accounts in explaining their domestic work patterns. There have been efforts to bridge this gap with different but connected theoretical explanations. These include gendered moral rationalities, latent or invisible power, adaptive preferences and cognitive dissonance. In interpreting respondents' remarks, the aim is not to challenge or disrespect their truth. Some fathers may do a minority of the housework and/or child care, and they and their partners may attribute this unproblematically to their long hours in paid work. It is for the analyst to link these responses to the long hours culture in the UK and in turn relate this to gendered working norms (Oakley, 1974). Researchers have called for shorter working hours for parents to allow more equal sharing (Crompton and Lyonette, 2007) - though it has been argued that policies which reduce work-family conflict may in fact hinder the achievement of sex equality in household responsibility (Stier and Lewin-Epstein, 2007).

More research is needed on child care because of its policy importance; and more policy thinking is needed on housework because of the policy implications of existing research on the topic. The literature focuses on housework, despite the fact that more time is spent on child care in families with children (Sundström and Duvander, 2002; Kan and Gershuny, 2009). In contrast, in comparison with child care, housework is virtually absent from UK policy discourse. Social policy has kept the domestic division of labour at home (Oakley, 2002). Yet, as Cooke and Baxter (2010: 517) argue, 'together a country's slate of policies influences the ways individuals divide their time among employment, housework, and care'.

For couples on low to moderate incomes, who may not have the resources to contract out child care and housework, policies in these areas are especially important. For more affluent couples, paying for somebody else to perform domestic work removes pressure for change in gender relations and has been argued to perpetuate gender traditionalism (Crompton and Lyonette, 2009). Others have argued that more affluent couples can achieve greater gender equality in unpaid work by 'buying out' some tasks - although this represents a renegotiation between women and the market, rather than between women and their partners (Cooke and Baxter, 2010: 523). For couples in this sample, however, such considerations were not relevant, as externally provided paid-for child care was often seen as not only unaffordable but also undesirable.

Reportedly practical arrangements were analysed and found to be saturated with gender. This was the case for both child care and housework; but, as the sample was composed of parents, these are difficult to separate. The findings of this paper might imply the need for policy measures to encourage fathers to care for children, at the possible cost of

denying mothers this time, or they might imply supporting the options of both parents by financing formal child care more adequately (Orloff, 2008). Policies that offer genuine choice for parents' work-family balance are difficult to achieve (Lewis, 2007). And Cooke and Baxter (2010: 529) argue that neither the market nor policy has managed to close the gender gap in (paid or) unpaid work across developed countries. However, despite the many obstacles, the competing discourses and the inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviour seen in research, findings about the men and women sampled for this study do suggest the potential for progressive change in future.

**Wordcount: c. 8880**

## Annex

Nine gender role attitude variables, provided by sample members in 2006 self-completion questionnaires, were combined into a single score. These questions replicated questions asked of the full BHPS sample in 1997, 1999 and 2001 (Table 1). Sample members received a score from a most-egalitarian maximum of 18 to a most-traditional minimum of -18, with three scores reversed. The attitudes of respondents with a neutral score or missing data (nine individuals) were determined from interview transcripts.

Table 1: Gender role attitudes questions

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works (reversed)</li><li>2. All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job (reversed)</li><li>3. A woman and her family would all be happier if she goes out to work</li><li>4. Both the husband and wife should contribute to the household income</li><li>5. Having a full-time job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person</li><li>6. A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family (reversed)</li><li>7. Children need a father to be as closely involved in their upbringing as the mother</li><li>8. Employers should make special arrangements to help mothers combine jobs and childcare</li><li>9. Single parents can bring up children as well as a couple</li></ol> |
|---|

Source: BHPS questionnaire, 1997, 1999 and 2001 (University of Essex, 2008).

Table 2: Interviewee characteristics

Interview number	Sex	Education	Employment	Housing	Age group
1	m	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	41-50
	f	A Level	Employed	Mortgage	31-40
2	m	No quals	Retired	Mortgage	over 70
	f	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	51-60
3	m	No quals	Disabled	Rented Private	41-50
	f	CSE	Family care	Rented Private	41-50
4	m	Other higher quals	Employed	Owned outright	51-60
	f	Other higher quals	Family care	Owned outright	41-50
5	m	Other higher quals	Retired	Council rent	61-70
	f	No quals	Disabled	Council rent	51-60
6	m	CSE	Employed	Council rent	41-50
	f	O Level	Employed	Council rent	31-40
7	m	CSE	Self-employed	Mortgage	31-40
	f	CSE	Employed	Mortgage	41-50
8	m	A Level	Employed	Rented Private	41-50
	f	O Level	Unemployed	Rented Private	41-50
9	m	A Level	Unemployed	Mortgage	61-70
	f	CSE	Employed	Mortgage	51-60
10	m	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	51-60
	f	CSE	Employed	Mortgage	51-60
11	m	CSE	Employed	Rented Private	31-40
	f	O Level	Employed	Rented Private	41-50
12	m	O Level	Employed	Rented Private	31-40
	f	No quals	Family care	Rented Private	31-40
13	m	CSE	Employed	Mortgage	41-50
	f	CSE	Employed	Mortgage	41-50
14	m	CSE	Employed	Mortgage	31-40

	f	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	20–30
15	m	No quals	Employed	Rented	41–50
	f	Other higher quals	Employed	Rented	41–50
16	m	O Level	Employed	Rented	41–50
	f	Missing	Employed	Rented	31–40
17	m	No quals	Employed	Rented	61–70
	f	No quals	Employed	Rented	51–60
18	m	A Level	Employed	Mortgage	31–40
	f	Other higher quals	Employed	Mortgage	31–40
19	m	A Level	Employed	Owned outright	41–50
	f	O Level	Family care	Owned outright	41–50
20	m	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	51–60
	f	A Level	Employed	Mortgage	51–60
21	m	A Level	Disabled	Mortgage	51–60
	f	No quals	Disabled	Mortgage	41–50
22	m	Other higher quals	Employed	Mortgage	61–70
	f	No quals	Employed	Mortgage	51–60
24	m	No quals	Employed	Mortgage	51–60
	f	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	41–50
25	m	Other higher quals	Employed	Mortgage	41–50
	f	Other higher quals	Employed	Mortgage	41–50
26	m	Other higher quals	Unemployed	Mortgage	41–50
	f	First Degree	Employed	Mortgage	31–40
27	m	O Level	Employed	Mortgage	51–60
	f	O Level	Not employed	Mortgage	41–50
28	m	A Level	Self-employed	Rented	41–50
	f	First Degree	Self-employed	Rented	31–40
29	m	O Level	Disabled	Rented Private	51–60
	f	Other higher q	Not employed	Rented Private	41–50
30	m	Apprenticeship	Disabled	Council rent	61–70



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	f	No qual	Retired	Council rent	61-70
31	m	O Level	Not employed	Rented	41-50
	f	A Level	Disabled	Rented	41-50

Source: adapted from Bennett, De Henau and Sung (2008). Note: case 23 is intentionally absent. All couples are married except couple 8, who cohabit.

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