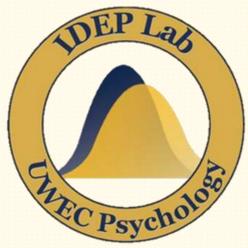


Sharing the Load: Men's and Women's Attitudes Toward Household and Childcare Tasks

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Overview & Method

Studies suggest that the division of household labor and childcare, even in dual-earner households, is imbalanced. Women spend more time than men do on household and childcare tasks.^{1,2}

Gender differences in childcare exist even in samples of men and women who are well-informed about gender egalitarian ideals. For example, among tenure-track faculty with small children, mothers report doing far more childcare than fathers do.³

However, mothers also report more enjoyment from many childcare tasks than fathers do.³ Perhaps gender differences in task distributions can be explained, in part, by differences in how men and women prefer to spend their time. In fact, gender differences in how men and women want to balance work and family show up in early adulthood. For example, male and female college students differ in their desire to take time off work to raise children, and this difference is strong at both the beginning and end of their college career.⁴ Further, gender differences in life priorities, even among highly able men and women, intensify during parenthood.⁵

In the current study, we predicted that male-female differences in enjoyment of household and childcare tasks would parallel male-female differences in their preferences for splitting household and childcare tasks with a partner.

Participants:

Study 1 participants were 18-23 year-old UWEC students without children (n=323; $M_{age} = 19.69 \pm 1.36$). Study 2 participants were 31-46 year-old UWEC alumni with children (n=113; $M_{age} = 39.90 \pm 3.65$).

Method:

All participants reviewed 58 household and 40 childcare tasks that included both common and often-neglected activities. Study 1 participants rated how they envisioned feeling about each task in the future. Study 2 participants rated how they felt about each task currently. All participants reported how they would prefer to split the various tasks with a partner.

After rating the household and childcare tasks, participants were presented with two final scenarios where they imagined (1) a household with absolutely no constraints and (2) a household with realistic constraints where they and their partner would have to compromise. In each scenario, participants reported the distribution of work and household responsibilities they would like to have with a partner (*I would be the Breadwinner to We would share all responsibilities equally to I would be the Homemaker*).

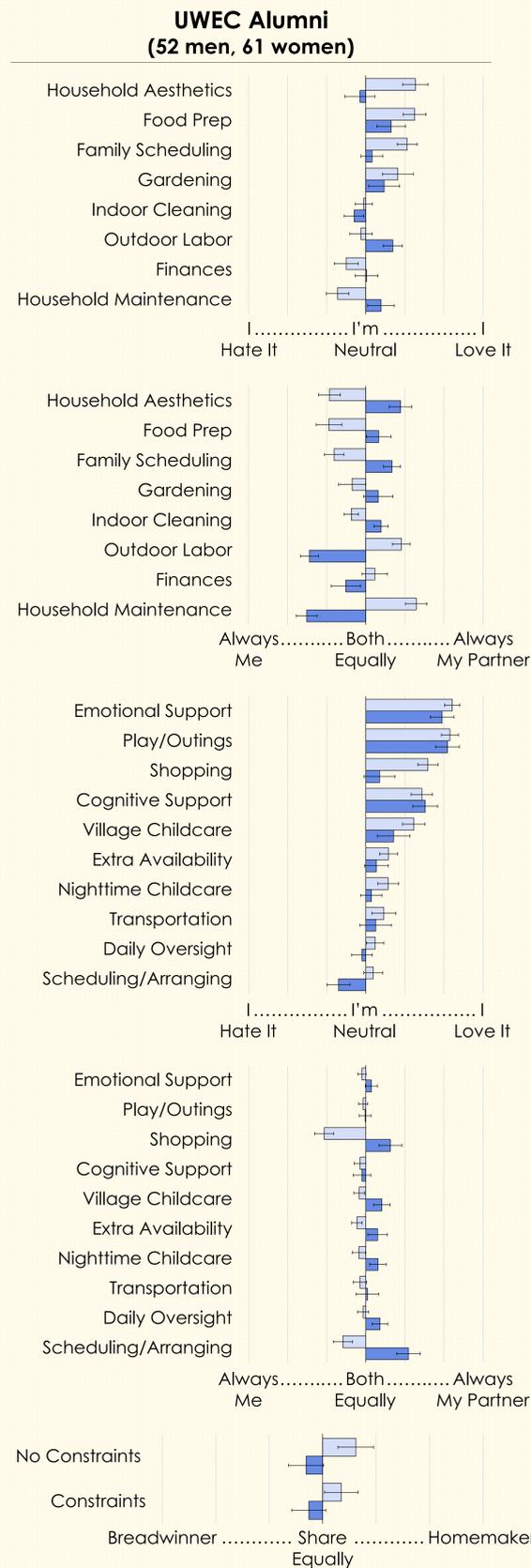
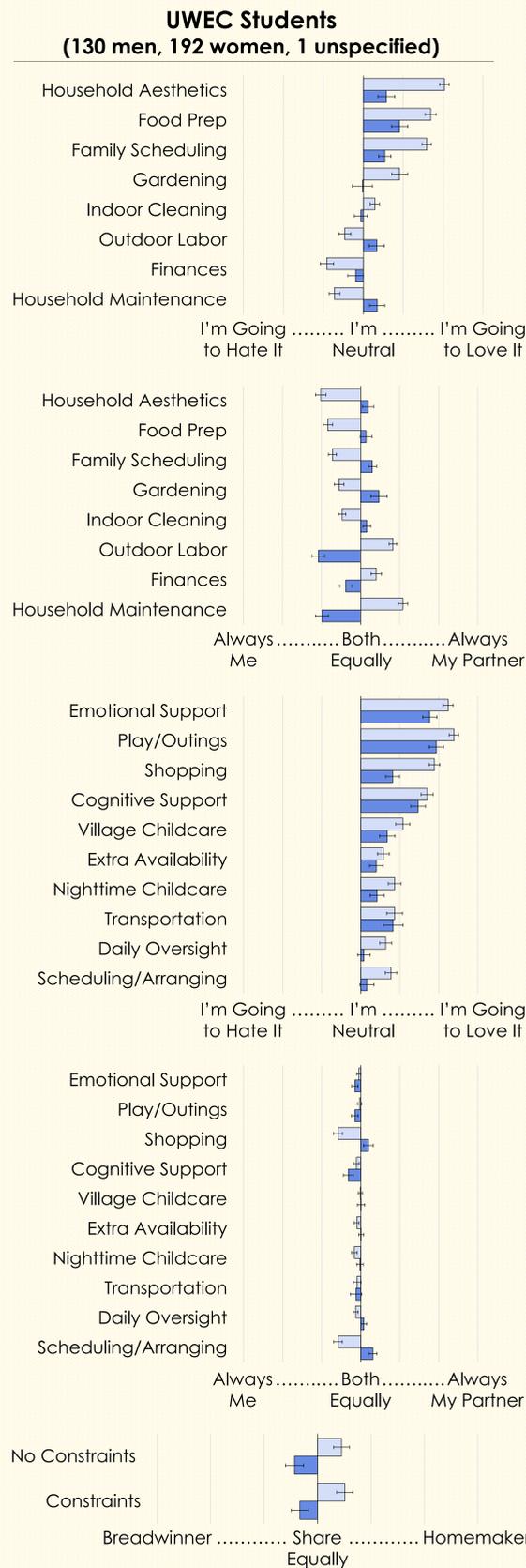
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Results



Discussion

Previous studies of household and childcare tasks have focused on the division of labor between men and women, but have not taken into account men's and women's preferences for such tasks. Therefore, we asked adults to report their enjoyment of various household and childcare tasks and how, in their ideal world, they would prefer to share these tasks with a partner. The data revealed multiple patterns:

First, men and women differed predictably in their enjoyment of household tasks. Women enjoyed some tasks more than men did (e.g., household aesthetics, food prep), while men enjoyed other tasks more than women did (e.g., outdoor labor, household maintenance). These differences were quite large and pronounced in both age groups. Given the magnitude of those differences, pushing gender egalitarianism for all household tasks may work against both partners' happiness.

Second, as predicted, these gender differences in enjoyment paralleled differences in how men and women preferred to split household tasks with a partner. For example, women not only enjoyed household aesthetics and food prep more than men did, but also preferred to have more responsibility for those tasks than their partner would.

Third, men and women differed predictably in how they preferred to split household tasks. The tasks that women wanted to do less of were the same tasks that men wanted to do more of (e.g., outdoor labor, household maintenance), and vice versa.

Fourth, although both men and women reported enjoying a variety of childcare tasks, women did not want their partner to have more responsibility than they would have for any task. In contrast, even though men reported enjoying most childcare tasks, they often wanted their partner to have more responsibility than they would have.

Finally, previous studies have found that most men and women prefer an egalitarian role in the home;⁶ however, those studies used forced choice methods (e.g., homemaker, breadwinner, egalitarian). When participants selected their role on a sliding scale, just half of men and women chose to split responsibilities equally. Across age and stated level of constraint, 36% of men and only 10% of women leaned toward the breadwinner role, whereas 39% of women and only 12% of men leaned toward the homemaker role.

Our data relate to other gender differences. Across cultures, men and women differ in personality traits⁷ (e.g., women score higher in warmth), vocational interests⁸ (e.g., women more strongly prefer working with people over things), and values^{5,9} (e.g., women place more value on nurturing close relationships). Given the magnitude of some of these differences, perhaps it is not so surprising that men and women also differ in their attitudes toward household and childcare tasks. These attitude differences may partially account for discrepancies in how men and women spend their time.

Acknowledgments

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