



Articles

Mattering Moderates the Link between Gender Ideology and Perceived Fairness of the Division of Household Labor

Mylène Lachance-Grzela^{*a}

[a] School of Psychology, Université de Moncton, Moncton, Canada.

Abstract

This study examines the moderational role played by the feeling of mattering to the partner in the relationship between gender ideology and perceived fairness using a sample of 141 Canadian mothers with at least one child between the ages of two to five years old. Results support the moderator model and suggest that the emotional rewards mothers receive from their romantic partner influence the way they use gender ideology to evaluate the fairness of the division of family labor in their household. The results show that egalitarian gender ideology is associated with a greater sense of unfairness only when women feel that their partner demonstrates a low level of appreciation toward them. The findings are discussed in terms of the distributive justice theory.

Keywords: equity, fairness, gender ideology, household labor, romantic relationships

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*Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Université de Moncton, 18 avenue Antonine-Maillet, Moncton, New-Brunswick, E1A 3E9, Canada, email: mylene.lachance-grzela@umoncton.ca



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In recent decades, social psychologists have devoted growing attention to the causes and consequences of perceptions of equity regarding the allocation of household tasks among couples. During this period, a considerable amount of research has focused on how individual characteristics and national contexts influence partners' completion of household tasks (see Coltrane, 2000; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Shelton & John, 1996 for reviews). Particular interest in individuals' perceptions of fairness regarding the division of this unpaid labor also flourished. Research focusing on the impact of the actual inequality in the division of labor on the perceived fairness has led to an incomplete understanding of the processes that explain partners', and particularly women's, sense of justice (Coltrane, 2000). The use of the three approaches commonly used to explain the gendered allocation of labor – time availability, relative resources, and gender ideology – has led to a better understanding of what shapes an individual's sense of fairness (Braun, Lewin-Epstein, Stier, & Baumgärtner, 2008). Despite the progress made in recent decades, studies are still needed to fully grasp which conditions shape women's sense of fairness of the division of household labor. A growing number of researchers are calling for further exploration of the role of emotional factors in explaining women's perceptions of fairness and implication in household labor (Thompson, 1991; Kawamura & Brown, 2010; Lively, Steelman, & Powell, 2010). In this vein, the objective of this study was to verify whether mattering, that is how an individual perceives that she matters to a romantic partner, modifies the association between gender ideology and perceived fairness.

Background

Important changes relating to gender roles have occurred over the last few decades. Research in social psychology documents that women and men have moved toward a greater acceptance of husbands' and wives' shared participation in paid and unpaid work (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). Research indicates that, in spite of these more egalitarian attitudes and in spite of women's increased commitment to the labor force market, women's social advancements have not been met in the familial domain where household labor and childcare remain divided along traditionally gendered lines (Arrighi & Maume, 2000; Knudsen & Waerness, 2008; Lincoln, 2008). Over the past decades, women have somewhat reduced the amount of time spent on household tasks and men have increased their involvement (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Hook, 2010). However, despite this convergence, researchers have clearly documented that women continue to shoulder primary responsibility for the vast majority of unpaid labor to satisfy the needs of family members or to maintain the home (see Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010 for a review). Typically, research finds that women do about twice as much housework and family work as men, and this applies even to couples in which both partners hold a job (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Carriero, 2011; Schneider, 2011). Cross national studies indicate that, even in the most egalitarian countries, women tend to do more housework than men (Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Geist & Cohen, 2011; Hook, 2010; Knudsen & Waerness, 2008).

Family scholars have made a number of advancements in the understanding of the gendered division of household labor. However, one result remains particularly puzzling. Despite the well-documented discrepancy in housework allocation between men and women, when asked about the fairness of the division of labor with their romantic partner, the majority of women report considering it to be fair or satisfying (Bartley et al., 2005; Braun et al., 2008; Kawamura & Brown, 2010). Many couples are actually satisfied with a task allocation in which the woman performs the lion's share of the work (Baxter, 2000; Frisco and Williams, 2003; Gager & Hohmann-Marriott, 2006). As Carriero (2011) argues, this paradox helps explain why changes toward equality in the family sphere have been slow and why a traditional division remains prevalent. Considering that, as was argued previously (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Poeschl, 2008), inequalities in the private sphere help maintain inequalities in the public sphere by limiting women's career possibilities and other opportunities for advancement, a better understanding of what influences women's perceptions of equity is warranted.

Perceptions of Fairness About the Division of Household Labor

The distributive justice theory is one of the leading theoretical explanations of how individuals interpret the fairness of the allocation of household labor in their home (Davis, 2010; Gager & Hohmann-Marriott, 2006). The distributive justice theory posits that three dimensions form the basis on which romantic partners evaluate the fairness of the division of household labor: *comparison referents*, *outcome values*, and *justifications* (Major, 1987).

The *comparison referents* refer to the standards or frame of reference that individuals use when evaluating the level of fairness of their situation (Thompson, 1991). The comparison referents help set an individual's expectations regarding the allocation of family labor. Multiple comparison referents exist and one's sense of fairness depends on the one that is employed. Evaluations of fairness are shaped by individual-level comparative referents, whereby individuals compare their situation to prior experiences or to others they know (e.g., Dempsey, 1999; Gager, 1998). Recent research suggests that national-level comparative referents also exist where individuals use characteristics of their nation, such as gender equity or gender wage ratio, as frames of reference (Braun et al., 2008;

Greenstein, 2009). Comparative referents help explain why women tend to evaluate the division of household labor in their home favorably. For instance, research indicates that women are inclined to make same-sex comparisons and, because they don't have to look too far to find a peer in unequal circumstances, they are inclined to perceive their own division of household labor as fair (Gager, 1998).

The *justifications* refer to the grounds on which individuals evaluate the pertinence of the processes that explain their circumstances (Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991). Women who find that imbalances in the allocation of household labor are unjustified would be more likely to consider them unfair. Braun and his colleagues (2008) argued that the three approaches commonly used to explain the gendered allocation of labor – time availability, relative resources, and gender ideology – serve as what they label “legitimizing principles” that shape perceptions of fairness. In brief, they argued that inequality can appear legitimate to women under certain circumstances.

The *outcome values* refer to aspirations, expectations, and rewards that encompass what people want from a situation and which influence the perceived justice in a relationship. As Thompson (1991) puts it, in order to understand the perceived fairness in the division of household labor, we should be interested in finding the valued outcomes of family work arrangements. The interpersonal outcome values, or emotional rewards, have proved to be relevant in understanding women's perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Examples of relational outcomes include relationship satisfaction, family harmony, providing care, and mattering to one's spouse (Gager, 1998; Kawamura & Brown, 2010). Kawamura & Brown (2010) found that the more wives perceived that they mattered to their husbands, the more likely they were to consider that the allocation of household labor in their home was fair.

The Current Study

The current study aims to verify whether outcome values and justifications can interact to predict women's perceived fairness. More precisely, the goal is to examine the moderational role played by an outcome value (here, the feeling of mattering to the partner) in the relationship between a justification principle (here, gender ideology) and perceived fairness among mothers of young children. One of the assumptions underlying the current study is that emotional rewards are sufficiently important to influence women's desire to change their situation and, consequently, the way they use their gender attitudes to justify and evaluate the fairness of the allocation of household labor. In accordance with this assumption, women would analyze the fairness of their personal implication in household labor only when they do not receive sufficient rewards, such as the feeling of mattering to their partner.

The current study is based on a sample of Canadian mothers of young children between 2 to 5 years of age. The decision to focus on this particular population was motivated by the fact that the fairness of the division of household labor was hypothesized as being particularly relevant to them because of the high level of pressure of raising a young family (see Carriero, 2011; Claffey & Mickelson, 2009 for similar argumentations). The transition to parenthood and the first years of parenting young children are generally recognized as particularly salient periods for the organization of household labor and for the formation of gendered roles among romantic partners (Coltrane, 2000; Hook, 2010; Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010).

Hypotheses

Perceptions of fairness are often hypothesized as being dependent on gender ideology in the sense that women consider family work an integral portion of the "proper" mother's role. They would consider the gendered division

of labor to be fair when it corresponds to what they have been socialized to value. However, the results of research investigating the relationship between gender ideology and perceived fairness have been inconsistent. A number of studies have supported the postulated effect (Greenstein, 1996; Layte, 1998; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003), others have found no effect or a small one (Baxter, 2000; Blair & Johnson, 1992) and a cross-national study found an effect with data from the Netherlands, but no effect with data from Sweden and Hungary (Ruppner, 2008). As was argued by Baron and Kenny (1986), moderator variables are useful to understand unexpectedly inconsistent relationships between a predictor and a criterion variable. This led me to believe that emotional rewards could play a moderational role between gender role ideology and perceived fairness.

In the current study, I postulated that feelings of mattering to the partner will moderate the association between gender ideology and perceived fairness (Hypothesis 1). In other words, it was expected that the effect of women's gender ideology on their level of perceived fairness would differ according to the intensity of their feelings of mattering to their partners (moderational model shown in Figure 1). More precisely, it was expected that the moderational effect would occur through the following processes. Women who feel that they matter little to their partners would analyze the allocation of household labor in light of their gender ideology, whereas those who feel that they matter highly to their partners would not resort to their gender ideology to evaluate the fairness of the allocation of unpaid labor in their household. Accordingly, two additional hypotheses were formulated. When women report low levels of mattering to their partners, the level of endorsement of traditional gender ideology would be positively associated with perceived fairness in the division of household labor (Hypothesis 1a). However, when women report high levels of mattering, gender ideologies would not be associated with perceived fairness (Hypothesis 1b).

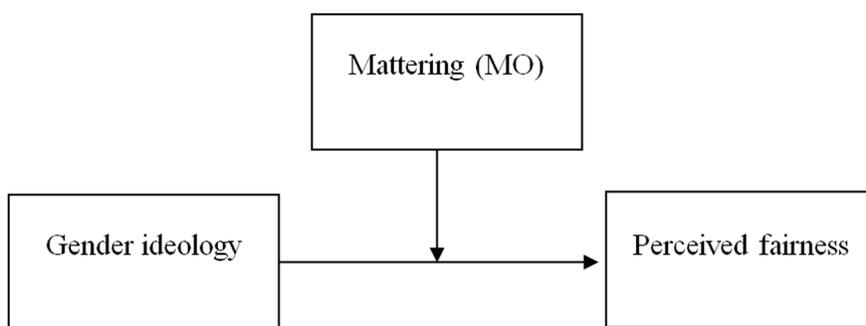


Figure 1. Conceptual model of mattering as a moderator.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 141 mothers with at least one child between the ages of two to five years old and who were in a relationship with the father of that child. Most participants were recruited through daycares and family centers in New Brunswick and Ontario. A number of participants were also recruited through snowballing. Participants were either legally married ($n = 106$ women; 75%) or cohabiting without being married ($n = 35$ women; 25%). The average woman was a highly educated 32 years old, in a relationship with her partner for approximately 10 years with two children (see Table 1). One hundred and twenty-seven women (90.3% of the sample) occupied

a job outside the home and worked an average of 35 hours per week (*s.d.* 8.68). Eleven women (7.8%) were stay-at-home mothers. Three participants had missing data regarding their professional status. The median personal annual income ranged from Can\$50,000 to Can\$59,000. The means and standard deviations of the demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Demographic and Major Study Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	
			<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Demographic variables				
Age	32.55	4.80	19	43
Length of relationship in years	10.40	4.24	2	20
Number of children in household	1.80	.69	1	4
Years of education	17.29	2.75	11	25
Hours in employment per week	29.30	15.26	0	50
Hours spent on household labor	27.65	12.19	9	63
Independent variable				
Gender ideology	16.77	4.05	7	30
Moderator variable				
Mattering	46.32	6.41	27	56
Dependant variable				
Perceived fairness	2.79	.46	1.29	3.86

Measures

Individual and household demographics. The demographic questionnaire asked participants to report their age, marital status (i.e., married or cohabiting), total length of relationship in years, years of education, personal annual income (coded as eight categories ranging from 1 = *Can\$0-9,999* to 8 = *Can\$80 000\$ and more*), and number of children currently living in the home.

Time-use information: Time spent on paid and unpaid labor. The time spent on paid labor was assessed by asking respondents to report the average weekly number of hours worked outside of home. The time spent on household labor was measured for each participant by calculating the sum of reported hours spent on 7 household tasks per week: (1) Preparing meals, washing dishes and cleaning up after meals, (2) cleaning house, (3) outdoor and household maintenance, (4) shopping for groceries and other household goods, (5) washing and mending clothes, (6) paying bills and keeping financial records, (7) automobile maintenance and repair.

Gender ideology. Participants' gender ideology was measured utilizing the Gender Role Attitude Traditionalism Scale (Booth & Amato, 1994). The seven-item Likert-type scale assesses the participants' level of agreement with seven statements regarding the appropriate and preferred roles for women and men in the private and public spheres, such as "A husband should earn a larger salary than his wife" and "A working mother can establish just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work". The response categories offered ranged from 1 (*Strongly agree*) to 6 (*Strongly disagree*). Four items were reverse-coded so that higher scores on this measure reflected more traditional gender ideology. In the current study, the internal consistency of this scale (Cronbach's alpha = .51) is somewhat low. In previous studies, the scale has demonstrated higher internal con-

sistency (Cronbach's alpha of .70; Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2011) and adequate test-retest reliability (Amato & Booth, 1995). The scale demonstrates good predictive validity as it has been found that changes in gender role attitudes measured with the scale predict changes in marital quality (Amato & Booth, 1995).

Mattering. The participants were asked to complete a 14-item questionnaire that measures feelings of mattering to the romantic partner (see Kawamura & Brown, 2010 for a presentation of the items). Mattering is conceptualised as the extent to which the woman perceives that she makes a difference in the life of her romantic partner. The items such as "How often does your partner make you feel that he is there for you when you really need him?" and "How often does your partner give you a sense of emotional security and well-being?" were answered with a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*nearly always*) to 4 (*almost never*). Items were recoded when appropriate so that higher scores indicate perceptions of mattering more to the partner. The instrument demonstrates high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .85).

Perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Respondents were asked to complete a 7-item questionnaire rating how fair they perceived the division of household tasks to be to themselves within their relationship. Each item presented one of the main categories of household labor used to assess time spent on unpaid labor and participants were asked to rate the degree of fairness of the division of each of those tasks. Responses ranged from 1 (*very unfair to me*) to 5 (*very unfair to my partner*). A mean score was calculated with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived fairness to self in terms of division of household labor. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is .60 for this scale.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Examination of the descriptive statistics for the sample showed that, globally, the women in the current study reported relatively egalitarian gender ideology, high sense of mattering to their romantic partner, and a slight sense of perceived unfairness of the division of household labor. More precisely, a slight majority of respondents (55%) reported that the division of household labor in their home was less than fair to them, whereas 45% of them reported a sense of fairness in this regard. Concerning their personal implication in household labor, women reported completing an average of 28 hours per week on household tasks, most of which are spent on preparing meals (12 hours), cleaning (5 hours), and doing laundry (4 hours). Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for all the variables under study. Pearson correlations were computed for pairs of continuous variables (see Table 2).

Moderating Role of Mattering

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were calculated to examine the extent to which mattering moderated the association between gender ideology and each outcome measure of perceived fairness of the division of household labor, after controlling for demographic characteristics (age, years of education, personal annual income, number of children currently living in the home), number of hours of employment and number of hours spent completing household tasks per week. To demonstrate that the effect of the independent variable, gender ideology (denoted as X), varies linearly with respect to the moderator variable of mattering (denoted as Z), the XZ product term must be significant while X and Z are controlled (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

Table 2

Correlations Between Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Hours in employment	–								
2. Age	.07	–							
3. Years of education	.27**	.15	–						
4. Personal annual income	.47**	.27**	.35**	–					
5. Children in household	-.10	.15	-.18*	.10	–				
6. Hours spent on family labor	-.35**	-.14	-.19*	-.21*	.16	–			
7. Mattering	.07	-.12	.29**	.11	-.05	-.07	–		
8. Gender ideology	-.14	-.22*	-.32**	-.27**	.05	-.04	-.29**	–	
9. Perceived fairness	.10	-.13	.31**	.13	-.21*	-.24**	.45**	-.12	–

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The first variables entered in the regression equation were control variables, gender ideology, and mattering (step 1), followed by the interaction between the last two variables (step 2). Prior to multiplication, gender ideology and mattering were centered by subtracting the grand mean from the value for each participant. When the interaction is significant, post-hoc probing analyses need to be conducted (Holmbeck, 2002). Post-hoc power analyses were computed using the G*Power 3.1 computer program (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). With a sample size of 141, an alpha of .05, a total of 9 predictor variables, and an estimated medium effect size (f-square = .15), the power corresponded to .90, which is considered a reasonable level of power (Aiken & West, 1991).

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Women's Perceived Fairness

Predictors	β	ΔR^2	Total R
Step 1			.29***
Hours in employment	-.065		
Age	-.066		
Years of education	.170 ^a		
Personal annual income	.088		
Children in household	-.145		
Hours spent on family labor	-.161 ^a		
Gender ideology	.055		
Mattering	.356***		
Step 2		.06**	.34**
Hours in employment	-.030		
Age	-.025		
Years of education	.151		
Personal annual income	.067		
Children in household	-.138		
Hours spent on family labor	-.140		
Gender ideology	.019		
Mattering	.395***		
Gender ideology X Mattering	-.255**		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. ^a $p = .09$.

The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3. Concerning perceived fairness of household labor, the results revealed that the total model accounted for 34.4% of variance, $F(9, 110) = 5.90$, $p < .001$. Control variables were not significantly associated with women's perceived fairness in the division of household labor. The interaction between gender ideology and mattering emerged as significant $\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .06$.

To help with the interpretation of the interaction, post-hoc probing analyses were conducted following a procedure proposed by Holmbeck's (2002). Mattering was assumed to be the moderator. In accordance with the recommended procedure, two regressions were computed, one generating a slope when the moderator (i.e., mattering) was 1 SD above the mean (i.e., High-mattering) and the other one generating a slope when the moderator is 1 SD below the mean (i.e., Low-mattering). The analysis controlled for demographic characteristics. The results of the post-hoc probing analyses (see Figure 2) regarding the association between gender ideology and perceived fairness of the division of household labor was not significant when mattering is high, $\beta = -.21$, *ns*. However, it could be worth noting that the effect approached significance $p = .10$. On the other hand, gender ideology is significantly associated with perceived fairness when mattering is low, $\beta = .25$, $p < .05$. The direction indicates that when women perceive lower levels of mattering from their partners, a traditional gender ideology is associated with a greater likelihood of women reporting the household division of labor as fair.

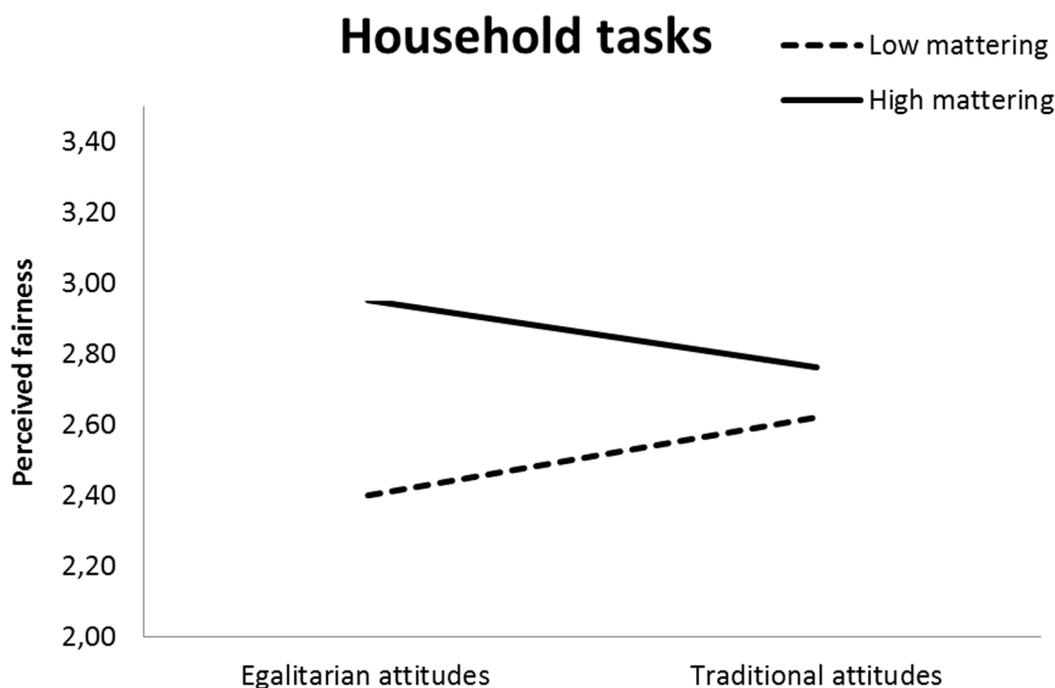


Figure 2. The moderational role of mattering in the relationship between gender role attitudes and perceived fairness in the division of household labor

Discussion

The current study contributes to the growing body of literature on the perception of fairness in the division of household labor. This study aimed to verify the moderator role played by the feeling of mattering to the partner

in the association between gender ideology and perceived fairness of the allocation of unpaid labor among mothers of children aged 2 to 5 years old. The results obtained support the moderating hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) and indicate that the emotional rewards mothers of young children receive from their romantic partner do influence the way they use gender ideology to evaluate the fairness of the division of family labor in their household. It is worth noting that the moderational relationship observed is significant beyond the time spent on household labor and the effects of demographic characteristics of the sample. The current study supports the idea that emotional rewards are useful in understanding the social-psychological processes that are related to perceptions of fairness. The results reveal that the feeling of being appreciated by their partner is central to young mothers' sense of fairness within the relationship.

The current study sheds light on previous research, particularly on the inconsistent findings regarding the association, or lack thereof, between gender role ideology and perceived fairness of the division of household labor. The moderational role played by the sense of mattering in the relationship between gender ideology and perceived fairness of the division of household tasks could explain, at least in part, why a number of researchers found no link or a poor link between the latter two variables (Baxter, 2000; Blair & Johnson, 1992; Ruppner, 2008), whereas others did find an association (Greenstein, 1996; Layte, 1998; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003). The results suggest that the sense of mattering to the partner can modify the influence of expectations of equality.

As expected, the current findings reveal that when young mothers feel that their partner demonstrates a low level of appreciation toward them, traditional gender ideology is associated with a greater sense of fairness in the division of household tasks (Hypothesis 1a). In other words, when they feel that they are not particularly appreciated by their partner, women with gendered expectations about men's and women's proper roles in the family are more likely to perceive that the allocation of unpaid labor in their home is fair compared to their more egalitarian counterparts. It appears that, even when they do not receive many outcome rewards for their implication, women with traditional gender role orientations may be more likely than those with egalitarian beliefs to perceive that the housework is fair because they define it as their primary role (see Baxter, 2000 for a similar argumentation).

On the contrary, and as it was postulated (Hypothesis 1b), when mothers of young children feel that their partner respects, appreciates, and cares for them, egalitarian gender role attitudes are not associated with a perception of unfairness. In summary, no matter how much time they invest in family labor or how much she believes in egalitarianism between romantic partners, if a woman feels respected and appreciated by her partner, she is more likely to perceive that the household labor is divided fairly.

From the results obtained, it is possible to speculate on why perceptions of inequity are relatively infrequent in spite of reported inequalities in the division of family labor. As argued by Braun and colleagues (2008), inequality could have a different meaning to different people. The results of the current study offer similar insight: When women feel valued in the marital context, they appear to analyze the question of equality between romantic partners in a different light. Only women who feel unappreciated in the marital context are likely to analyze the division of household labor in light of their gender role attitudes and, among those, the ones who believe in egalitarianism are more likely to report greater unfairness. In other words, women appear to be more disposed to complete a "second shift" at home (as it was dubbed by Hochschild, 1989) if they feel valued by their partner or if they have gendered expectations about men's and women's proper roles in the family.

The current study contributes to the literature on women's perception of fairness of the division of unpaid labor both on the theoretical and methodological levels. As this study suggests, relational contexts are significant to

women's sense of fairness in the household. My findings are consistent with the argument that the symbolic meaning of housework and the emotional rewards women obtain in exchange for their contribution to family labor are important in understanding women's position in the household (Piña & Bengtson, 1993; Thompson, 1991; Lee & Waite, 2010). By specifying how mattering can play a moderator role in the relationship between gender role attitudes and perceived fairness in the allocation of household labor, the findings of the current study add to those of Kawamura and Brown (2010). That study introduced the concept of mattering as a predictor of women's perceived fairness and conveyed the message that women in general benefited from a greater sense of appreciation. The current results suggest that all women are not influenced in the same way by their partner's demonstration of appreciation.

On the theoretical level, and more specifically in terms of the distributive justice theory, the results support the idea that outcome values and justifications are relevant dimensions, which influence the way individuals evaluate fairness and justice in the familial sphere (e.g., Gager, 1998; Kawamura & Brown, 2010; Thompson, 1991). The fact that mattering, an interpersonal outcome value, moderates the impact of gender role ideologies, a justifying principle, supports the notion that these underlying dimensions do not act independently and can interact to modify perceived fairness.

The current study also adds to Kawamura and Brown's (2010) work on the methodological level. Firstly, my analyses support the usefulness of the mattering measure, which they recently introduced. Secondly, these researchers focused on a sample of married women aged 39 to 75 and argued that mattering should be studied among other populations, which was done in the current study. More precisely, by focusing on a sample of married as well as cohabiting women aged 19 to 43, all of whom were mothers, the current study suggests that emotional rewards are also relevant to the younger generation and to the cohabiting and parent populations.

This investigation has some limitations. The sample, like many others dealing with young parents, was non-random. Therefore, generalizing to other samples should be done with caution. In addition, as is the case with all cross-sectional studies, the nature of the data used in the current study could not confirm a causal interpretation of the relationship between gender ideology, mattering, and perceptions of fairness.

Overall, the results demonstrate the importance of taking emotional concepts such as mattering into account in future research on the perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Despite the recent advancement in the literature, more research is needed to fully understand the processes and psychosocial mechanisms that explain perceived fairness. In summary, the results of the current study lead to the conclusion that, when they do not receive sufficient emotional rewards for their contribution, women rely on their gender ideology to justify the division of household labor. In such cases, those who endorse egalitarian attitudes are more likely to perceive that the allocation of family labor is unfair and probably hope to find a way to be relieved from part of the responsibility. On the contrary, when women receive emotional rewards for their contribution to the family, they are less inclined to use gender ideology to determine whether the allocation of unpaid labor in the home is fair or not, possibly because they are less likely to want to change their situation.

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