Sex and housework: Does perceived fairness of the distribution of housework actually matter?

1. Introduction

More often than not, housework is distributed traditionally between men and women in cohabiting relationships (Bianchi et al. 2012). Over the past few decades, men’s share of housework has increased, but women still tend to carry most of the workload in the home (Bianchi et al. 2000; Bianchi et al. 2012; Blair/Lichter 1991; Klünder/Meier-Gräwe 2018). Moreover, studies show that partnership characteristics are influenced by the distribution of unpaid family work. For example, if the man’s share of housework increases, the woman’s partnership satisfaction seems to rise and conflicts occur less often (Amato et al. 2003; Coltrane 2000). The likelihood for second births is also higher if the father participates to a greater degree in housework and child care (Cooke 2004). Therefore, an equal distribution of housework could be beneficial to a partnership. On the other hand, some researchers suggest that it is actually the perceived fairness of the division of labor that influences partnership satisfaction, rather than the actual distribution of household...
tasks (Coltrane 2000). If individuals perceive their share of housework to be justified, they appear to be happier with their relationship (Coltrane 2000). However, relatively few studies to date have addressed how exactly housework distribution and the perceived fairness thereof influence a couple’s sexual relationship.

Sexual frequency and satisfaction are both important factors in an intimate relationship. Sexuality has been found to be related to marital satisfaction (Smith et al. 2011) as well as union stability (Yabiku/Gager 2009). Therefore, it is important to examine possible influences of housework on a couple’s sex life. Since the Kinsey reports (Kinsey et al. 1948), the frequency of sexual intercourse and sexual satisfaction in relationships have received considerable attention in the social sciences. However, due to the lack of longitudinal data, the majority of studies has relied on cross-sectional analyses. Kornrich and colleagues (2013) examined married couples in the United States and found a positive correlation between a gender-stereotypic division of housework and sexual frequency. However, they analyzed decades-old, cross-sectional data and did not take into account the perceived fairness of a couple’s housework distribution.

Using data from the German Family Panel (pairfam), a randomly sampled panel survey with focus on partnership and family dynamics, I have examined how changes in the distribution of housework and the perception of fairness affect sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction for cohabiting and married couples from a longitudinal perspective. Johnson and colleagues (2016) also analyzed pairfam data in this regard with autoregressive cross-lagged (ARCL) models. They found an association between men’s perceived fairness of housework distribution and a couple’s sex life, but no association to the actual distribution of housework. However, Johnson and colleagues did not distinguish between core (traditionally female) and non-core (traditionally male) tasks as suggested by Kornrich et al. (2013), and thus cannot fully refute the findings of Kornrich and colleagues (2013). By categorizing household tasks into traditionally male and female, the following analyses aim to verify the hypothesis that a gender-stereotypic distribution of household tasks stimulates sexual scripts and leads to an increase in sexual intercourse. Further, both studies mentioned above may be biased due to unobserved heterogeneity, with one relying on between-person comparisons and the other not differentiating between and within variation. By applying fixed effects regression models, I can eliminate all couple-specific time-constant heterogeneity and examine whether a change in the division of household labor and/or the perception of fairness thereof actually influences sexual satisfaction and frequency in intimate relationships.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Actual distribution of housework

Most heterosexual cohabiting couples continue to maintain a traditional division of household tasks. While women tend to carry the majority of the total workload, they spend more time completing core household tasks (e.g., laundry, cooking, cleaning) whereas men focus on more non-core household tasks such as gardening and repairs.
Bianchi et al. 2000; Dechant et al. 2014). Kornrich et al. (2013) suggest that a gender-traditional division of labor stimulates a so-called sexual script which leads to an increased frequency of sexual intercourse. Sexual scripts are formed by culture to define with whom, how, and when individuals should have sex (Simon/Gagnon 1986; Dworkin/O'Sullivan 2007). Through socialization we internalize cultural scripts that define situations as sexual, and together with our own learning experiences, form individualized interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts (McCormick 2010). Teenagers learn traditional sexual scripts in which men initiate sexual encounters and women are mainly portrayed as sexual objects (Kim et al. 2007). Gender differences and gendered behaviors supposedly play a crucial role in heterosexual attraction, and Kornrich et al. (2013) argue that femininity and masculinity are linked to sexual behavior by way of such sexual scripts: The display of gender differences through traditional gender behavior, such as the distribution of housework, fuels internalized sexual scripts which creates sexual attraction and leads to sexual interactions (Kornrich et al. 2013). However, the distribution of housework is only one domain in which couples are able to display gender and consequently stimulate traditional sexual scripts.

One opposing argument is based on exchange theory and does not distinguish between different types of housework. It assumes that neither men nor women enjoy doing housework, although housework traditionally falls into the domain of women (Coltrane 2000). On the other hand, men seem to have a higher desire for sexual intercourse, as they report more intense sexual desires, spontaneous thoughts about sex, and sexual fantasies than do women (Baumeister et al. 2001). Therefore, within this perspective, sex is seen as a female resource which can be exchanged for other goods, including housework (Baumeister/Vohs 2004), which could lead to a positive correlation between men's share of housework and a couple’s sexual frequency.

However, it is debatable whether women see sexual interaction as a way to trade in for other goods, implying that there might be another explanation for a positive association between men’s participation in housework and a couple’s sexual frequency. For example, Amato and colleagues (2003) show that husbands’ participation in household tasks is linked to wives’ marital happiness. Marital happiness has been shown to be associated with both sexual frequency and sexual satisfaction (Smith et al. 2011). Women that are satisfied with their partnership might therefore engage in more frequent sexual encounters. The more the male partner participates in household tasks, the happier the female counterpart could become with the relationship, and the higher the sexual frequency and satisfaction might be.

2.2 Perceived fairness of housework distribution

Most women perform more household tasks than their partners, but only 20 – 30% of women perceive the existing distribution of housework to be unfair (Mikula 1998). A couple with a traditional gender ideology might not perceive an unequal distribution of housework to be unfair. Moreover, a woman that does most of the housework might perceive her share of housework to be fair if her partner works more hours in paid labor and has a higher salary. The distributive justice framework proposed by Thompson (1991) attempts to explain women’s sense of fairness in the distribution of household work by tak-