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Date: October 5, 2021

THINKING GENDER:

THE COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

A dissertation presented

by

Allison P. Daminger

to

The Social Policy Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirement

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Sociology and Social Policy

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

October 5, 2021

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Dissertation Advisors: Alexandra Killewald and Jocelyn Viterna Allison P. Daminger

Thinking Gender: The Cognitive Dimensions of Household Labor

Abstract

Decades of sociological research demonstrates that women in different-sex couples perform the majority of housework and childcare, even when both partners are employed. Yet the definition of housework animating such research typically encompasses only the *physical* aspects of household labor, such as cooking meals. Before a meal is made, however, ingredients must be procured and a recipe palatable to all household members identified. Such *cognitive* activities are ubiquitous but have been largely overlooked in prior studies of household affairs, in part because traditional techniques for measuring the physical dimension of housework are less effective in the cognitive dimension. My dissertation advocates for a multi-dimensional view of household life that more accurately captures differences in men's and women's experiences and in turn deepens our understanding of how and why gender inequality persists in the 21st century.

The dissertation draws on data from interviews with 136 men and women (representing 76 different-sex couples across the socioeconomic spectrum) to answer four key questions: What is cognitive labor? How is it gendered? How is that gendering established, and why does it persist despite its apparent conflict with egalitarian ideals? Finally, what enables a small number of couples to subvert normative cognitive labor patterns, and what costs do they face as a result of their nontraditional path?

I inductively define cognitive labor as the work of anticipating household needs, identifying options for fulfilling these needs, deciding among them, and monitoring the results.

Gender strongly predicts an individual's cognitive labor load, an association that is consistent across class groups. Men are not absent from the cognitive dimension altogether, but their efforts are concentrated in its discrete, time-bound, and arguably more influential components, such as decision-making. Equality is considerably more common in couples' physical than cognitive labor practices, suggesting the latter have been less affected by recent growth in support of gender egalitarianism at the societal level.

Couples understand their cognitive labor practices as a manifestation of their underlying selves and thus as largely immutable. These perceptions appear to shape the decisions they make about work and family. Yet I show how the traits they describe are better understood as learned skills, which are activated differently across contexts depending on one's gender. Finally, I find that in about one-fifth of the sample, the male partner does more cognitive labor or the couple shares such work roughly equally. These couples tend to have a nontraditional employment configuration (i.e., the female partner's career equals or exceeds her husbands in earnings or hours) as well as flexible or atypically-gendered self-concepts.

Across the dissertation, I argue for reconceptualizing the individual level of the gender structure, often termed "gendered selfhood," as "thinking gender." This concept is meant to draw attention to the ways self-concepts are socially patterned and evolve across the life course rather than innate or acquired in childhood. I define thinking gender as a primarily subconscious process of bringing our cognition into alignment with who we understand ourselves to be—and in turn with what we believe constitutes appropriately gendered patterns of attention, perception, and evaluation for someone in our unique social location. The theory of "doing gender," to which this idea pays obvious homage, focuses primarily on interpersonal interaction, arguing that gender is a situational achievement rather than an underlying individual characteristic. Thinking

gender, meanwhile, offers a way to take individual agency seriously without neglecting the social context in which that agency operates. In this way, it can serve as a bridge between ideas about gender as part of one's "psychic self" (Meadow 2018) and as an emergent product of social interaction. I use the case of cognitive household labor to elaborate this theory of thinking gender because such work is largely experienced as internal even as it has interactional causes and consequences.

These findings have important implications for the sociology of inequality, gender, and family. For instance, they suggest current estimates of gender gaps in household labor actually undercount women's contributions, because such estimates primarily capture only the physical elements of this work. My dissertation also introduces strategies, such as decision diaries and outcome-focused questioning, that enable researchers to systematically study a previously undertheorized aspect of household life. Beyond the discipline of sociology, my dissertation expands our understanding of what gender inequality looks like in the twenty-first century and why it persists despite society's increasing acceptance of egalitarian ideals. I show that lay theories regarding what men and women should *do* in the household context have broadened more than lay theories regarding how they should think, what they should notice, and what they should prioritize. Respondents understand these latter factors to be closely tied to their individual nature rather than manifestations of a broader gender system that patterns thought and sensibility as well as behavior. Cognitive labor equality is possible, as the handful of nontraditional couples in my sample demonstrate. Getting there, however, will require a collective rethinking of long-held beliefs about what is personal and what is social when it comes to men's and women's household roles.

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I recommend to every new grad student that they invest in developing a community outside of academia. I've been blessed with friends and family near and far who are supportive of my work but also remind me that it is not the end-all, be-all. I want to particularly thank my parents. My father was my earliest writing teacher. Despite his best efforts, my prose remains wordy, but this is no fault of his. My mother did an infinite amount of cognitive labor to keep our household going – work that I definitely did not appreciate at the time but for which I am now immensely grateful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It was 9pm on a Thursday. We sat in half-darkness, the lights lowered to avoid waking the toddler who had finally fallen sleep. Kevin, a thin man with shaggy brown hair, sat across from me at a dining table sticky with dinner's residue. Over the course of an hour, he described his daily life in minute detail, walking me through the challenges of juggling a demanding career as a physician and scientist with his roles as father and husband. More often than not, Kevin admitted, his wife Amy ended up picking up the slack at home. He paused before answering my final question of the evening: what did gender have to do with the couple's labor arrangement? "It's a complicated question," Kevin began.

Later in the week, I sat with Amy at that same dining table. She, too, reported struggling to balance her work as a librarian with her domestic responsibilities. Though she worked full-time at a local university, many of the day-to-day tasks involved in running the household fell to Amy. She was responsible not only for chauffeuring two children to various activities and tending to their basic needs but also for coordinating the family calendar, tracking the inventory of supplies, and remembering when the car was due for an oil change. Amy understood that Kevin was doing his best but still found it occasionally frustrating to carry a heavier load at home. I asked her the same question I asked her husband: what role did gender play in how she and Kevin divided domestic responsibilities? Amy frowned. "Hmm. Yeah, real tough to answer that."

Kevin and Amy are a highly-educated, staunchly progressive couple. Amy described writing weekly "resistance posts" on social media throughout the Trump administration, for instance, and Kevin found it amusing when his "more traditional" colleagues assumed his wife packed him lunch. Both agreed that a 50/50 household labor allocation, or something close to it,

would be their ideal. When I posed the question about gender, I wondered how the couple would square these egalitarian commitments with the more traditional arrangement they had just described.

Clearly thinking out loud, both Kevin and Amy struggled to articulate the relationships among their personal preferences, family dynamics, and the larger structures in which they were embedded. Amy conceded that gender might have "systematically" shaped their choices, in the sense that Kevin "felt empowered to be a doctor," whereas "maybe, like, did I want to be a doctor but then didn't do well in [organic chemistry]? I don't know." But then again, she concluded, "I don't think [gender affected us] in a proximate way. It's like, I do not think he's at all thinking, like, well, 'I'm a guy, so I don't need to clean the bathroom.'" Kevin conceded that "there could be a logical train of thought in saying that, you know, women are more often librarians, and so there's a gender thing where Amy's a woman, she became a librarian so that she could do things with the kids." But then again, "I don't think that logic train applies to our situation…this is a little bit more of a true/true/unrelated situation, where yes, I'm a doctor, yes, Amy's a librarian, yes, she has more flexibility in her time, but no, it's not necessarily [that] these things were set up in a gender-specific way."

This dissertation takes on the question that stumped Amy and Kevin—what *does* gender have to do with the roles men and women play in contemporary different-gender couples?—with specific attention to "cognitive labor." Drawing on data from 136 interviews with heterosexually partnered, cisgender men and women (representing 76 couples), I inductively define cognitive household labor as a set of internal processes aimed at ensuring the needs of a household and its members are met. I specify four primary subtypes of this work: noticing household needs, identifying options for meeting those needs, selecting an option, and monitoring the results.

Although core to domestic life, this class of household activities has historically been omitted from or downplayed in analyses of gender and domestic labor, leading us to miss an important part of the story regarding gender and family life.

Empirically, I find that the majority of women interviewed complete more of the family's cognitive labor than their male partners. This pattern is surprisingly consistent across social classes. Gender gaps are largest in the least visible and influential components of this work. While the data demonstrate gendered patterns, couples draw on broader cultural scripts related to individualism, self-expression, and authenticity to articulate a theory of cognitive labor practices as manifestations of their underlying *individual* (rather than gendered) selves (Brekhus 2020; Giddens 1991; Lamont 2019). By extension, they understand their cognitive labor allocation to be largely immutable, and they make work and family decisions accordingly. Yet I document the ways the traits they describe are socially patterned, more akin to learned skills and dispositions than immutable traits, and activated differently across contexts. Finally, I find that in about one-fifth of the sample, the male partner does more cognitive labor or the couple shares such work roughly equally. These couples tend to have a nontraditional employment configuration (i.e., the female partner's career equals or exceeds her husbands in earnings or hours) as well as flexible or atypically-gendered self-concepts[1].

Theoretically, I use the case of cognitive labor to articulate the concept of "thinking gender." "Thinking gender" refers to the processes by which individuals bring their cognition into alignment with who they understand themselves to be—and in turn with what constitutes appropriately gendered patterns of attention, perception, and evaluation for someone in their unique social location. The theory of "doing gender," to which this idea pays obvious homage,

[1] I use the terms "self-concept" and "self-understanding" interchangeably throughout the dissertation to refer to the ways that individuals perceive themselves, or who they understand themselves to be (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

focuses primarily on interpersonal interaction (Messerschmidt 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009), arguing that gender is a situational achievement rather than an underlying individual characteristic—something one does rather than something one is. "Thinking gender," meanwhile, draws on insights from cultural sociology to articulate a way for scholars of gender inequality to simultaneously attend to individual cognition and the social context in which that cognition operates (Brekhus and Ignatow 2019; DiMaggio 1997).

Cognitive labor—what one does, does not do, and how—is a key means by which gender is thought, just as physical labor is a key means by which gender is done (Berk 1984). Cognitive work is a largely internal activity with significant interactional consequences. Most respondents experience cognitive labor as highly personal, a manifestation of who they *are* rather than simply what they *do.* The gendered nature of this labor is thus easy to obscure. Couples like Kevin and Amy can simultaneously recognize the resemblance between their own life and traditional mores yet *experience* their arrangement as intensely personal. Amy is the "keeper of the [family] calendar," for instance, because she finds it calming to know in advance what's coming, whereas "that stresses Kevin out." She also describes herself as "a control freak" who would have trouble ceding responsibility for tasks like managing the family's finances or making decisions about her children to anyone else. Meanwhile, Kevin joked that "my brain does not think about money very well," so it was better for everyone that Amy managed their finances. He saw his wife as "naturally more social" and better attuned to others' expectations and feelings, making her the best person to manage the family's social life.

As I will show in the chapters to come, Kevin and Amy are far from alone in drawing a direct line between their sense of who they are and the cognitive labor patterns they enact. Nor are they alone in placing more of the cognitive labor burden on the female partner, particularly in

the realms of parenting, logistics and schedule management, and social life. Women often carry a heavier cognitive load even among couples who endorse egalitarian ideals, share physical labor equally, and/or where the female partner holds the "bigger" career. I argue that the apparent imperviousness of female-dominated cognitive labor allocations to ideology and economics can only be understood by bringing structural and cultural explanations for gender inequality into conversation with a revised notion of gendered selfhood. This renewed focus on self-concepts does not require a return to sex role theory or other functionalist socialization theories (Acker 1992; Ferree, Khan, and Morimoto 2007). Instead, I show how identity and interaction are co-constitutional (Giddens 1986): doing and thinking gender are closely linked. Further progress toward gender equality is likely to be slow so long as the gendered parts of our self-concepts remain largely outside our awareness.

I intend the "thinking gender" concept to mediate between theories of gender as a product of interaction and as an identity. This way of thinking about gender is not wholly novel, as I will elaborate below, but it is underrepresented in the literature on household inequality, which tends to prioritize interactional and structural explanations (e.g., Risman 2004). In the concept of "thinking gender," I see a way to leverage insights from psychology, cultural sociology, and feminist theory in order to better understand gender's continued influence on household life.
In the remainder of this introduction, I first review relevant sociological thinking regarding the stalled, uneven gender revolution and its manifestations at the household level. Next, I articulate a theory of "thinking gender" that better accounts for the interconnections between individual and interpersonal drivers of gender inequality and elaborate on my choice of cognitive labor as empirical case. Finally, I preview the core arguments in each of the subsequent chapters.

A patchwork of stasis and change

Depending on one's reference point, the current state of gender relations in the United States is cause for celebration or frustration. Compared to the women of previous eras, women today are undoubtedly better off. They experience less wage discrimination in the paid workforce; are better represented in the halls of power; and spend less time on household chores (Bianchi et al. 2000; Blau and Kahn 2017). Compared to the men of today, however, women remain at a disadvantage. The gender wage gap has diminished but remains sizable; men still dominate the upper echelons of business and politics; and women remain more economically vulnerable in the event of divorce (Bianchi et al. 2012; Pew Research Center 2018; Smock, Manning, and Gupta 1999). England (2010) memorably summarized this state of affairs as a "stalled and uneven" gender revolution: stalled, in that women have yet to reach full equality with men; uneven, in that some gaps have closed further than others.

The family remains a key site of both symbolic and material gender differences. In different-gender couples it is overwhelmingly the male partner who proposes marriage and the female partner who takes his surname (Goldin and Shim 2004; Sassler and Miller 2011). The majority of partnered women are paired with higher-earning men; women do more of the physical housework and childcare even when they work full-time for pay; and women's careers are more likely to be compromised for family reasons (Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan 2015; Bianchi et al. 2012; Damaske 2011). The persistence of gender-traditional behaviors like these contrasts sharply with changing ideals. Younger generations of Americans espouse egalitarianism at particularly high rates, not only as a general principle but as a personal ideal (Gerson 2011). Young adults desire partnerships in which paid work and caregiving responsibilities are shared, and they believe gender should not dictate men's and women's

familial roles (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019). Yet behavioral change has not kept pace with these new beliefs.

Sociological explanations for the persistence of gendered family labor patterns cluster around the material and structural on one hand and the cultural and interactional on the other, though scholars generally concede that the allocation of household labor cannot be fully explained by structural or cultural theories (Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Theories of gender as a multilevel structure or institution offer a useful framework for conceptualizing these myriad forces as a set of individual, interpersonal, cultural, and structural processes that work in concert to create and reify a system of gender stratification that extends to the family context (Martin 2004; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004; Tilly 1998).

At the structural level, women and men are positioned differently within institutions and organizations, such that men tend to have greater resources and more power (Risman 1999). The primary consequence for the allocation of household labor is that individual men often earn more or have jobs with higher prestige (Blau and Kahn 2017). In different-gender relationships, then, it is often considered financially prudent for him to specialize in paid work and her to specialize in domestic work (Becker 1993). Theories of time availability and relative resources argue that these material advantages for men will translate into greater domestic responsibilities for women: the partner who earns more, has higher earning potential, or works more hours for pay will carry a smaller domestic workload (Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Family inequalities are in this view an outgrowth of structural inequalities: so long as occupational segregation, wage discrimination, and other economic processes disadvantage women in the workforce, many families will continue to divide unpaid labor unequally (England, Levine, and Mishel 2020). The rise of overwork, particularly among knowledge workers, further constrains

many couples' choices by making it harder to invest in two careers (Cha 2013; Moen and Kelly 2020)

Yet these economic explanations are incomplete. Higher-earning or longer-working women married to men, for instance, often act as primary breadwinners *and* housekeepers (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Tichenor 2005). Women's paid work time has increased substantially over the past half-century, whereas men's housework time has grown more slowly (Bianchi et al. 2000; Pew Research Center 2015). Such contradictions suggest unequal household roles are not solely a function of economic structures. At the meso level, cultural and interactional explanations for household labor allocation help explain these inconsistencies.

This approach is typified by the "doing gender" theory. In their original articulation, West and Zimmerman (1987) defined gender as a recurring social achievement (something one does) rather than a static personal quality (something one is). To "do" gender, they write, is to "manage situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman 1987:127). In other words, our actions and interactions are assessed through a gendered lens. To act counter to cultural ideals of appropriately gendered behavior is risky, in that we may be "held to account" for perceived gender transgressions.[2]

Beginning with Berk (1984), scholars of household labor have applied the doing gender theory to the allocation of housework. Women, the argument goes, do gender by performing domestic tasks like nurturing family members and maintaining a clean home; men do gender by

[2] Despite its age, the "doing gender" theory remains central to current scholarship on gender and gender inequality. In recent years, scholars have drawn on this theory to make sense of how social change happens, to assess the ways gender interacts with other situational achievements (e.g., race, class), and to assess the content of the broader cultural narratives to which individuals are held accountable (Darwin 2018; Davis 2017; Deutsch 2007; Moon, Tobin, and Sumerau 2019).

avoiding household chores, with the exception of male-typed tasks such as car and lawn maintenance (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Because of assortative mating, occupational segregation, and related structural factors, normative ways of doing gender can often be justified in economic terms. In the smaller number of households with nontraditional employment configurations, the doing gender theory helps explain why economic logic is sometimes abandoned. Different cultural expectations adhere to men and women, even when they are similarly situated in broader structures (Blair-Loy 2005; Risman 1999). For instance, men's breadwinning demands may be enough to excuse their limited participation at home, because the cultural ideal of male providers remains strong (Cooper 2000; Riggs 1997). However, a woman's higher earnings will not necessarily absolve her of the expectation that she act as primary nurturer, because women's maternal duties still take precedence over their economic obligations in our cultural scripts (Collins 2019; Hays 1998; Johnston and Swanson 2007; Thébaud and Taylor 2021).

Finally, at the individual level of the gender structure are what Risman (1999) calls "gendered selves." Many individuals develop a self-concept that aligns with the societal expectations that adhere to their sex category (Risman 1999). Cultural scripts and stereotypes—e.g., that men are agentic and women communal—are thus experienced as personal preferences. In the professional sphere, research on career choices indicates that individualistic cultures like the United States experience higher rates of occupational segregation in part because the "personal" passions men and women pursue are in fact socially patterned (Cech 2013; Charles and Bradley 2009). Boys socialized to appreciate numbers and abstract reasoning may be predisposed to become scientists and engineers, while girls socialized to nurture and empathize are more likely to become nurses and social workers. In the household context, gendered selves

translate to gendered skills and preferences regarding household labor (Beagan et al. 2008; Lamont 2020). Girls socialized to be neat and conscripted into helping their mothers cook may grow up to have a lower tolerance for clutter and sharper culinary instincts. Boys expected to get messy and help their fathers in the yard may grow up with limited interest in housekeeping and greater facility with a lawn mower. In recent years, socialization theory—and, in turn, individual theories of gender, have fallen out of favor (Guhin, Calarco, and Miller-Idriss 2021). Yet to understand the persistence of gender inequality alongside changing ideals, we must attend to the way individuals *experience* gender and to how and when the individual, interactional, and cultural levels of the gender structure intersect.

From gendered selves to thinking gender

Definitions of gendered selfhood vary slightly among theorists but usually connote some level of stability and persistence across adulthood. Risman (1999) characterizes gendered selfhood as an internalization of masculinity or femininity, such that maleness or femaleness becomes a property of the individual. Cech (2013) argues that gendered selfhood is about the type of person an individual understands themself to be, which in the aggregate tends to align with traditionally gendered traits and preferences. Martin (2004) suggests that the institution of gender is experienced as a self-concept, which is then displayed to others in the form of a personality.

This gendered adult personality was once positioned as the outcome of childhood gender socialization. Yet critics have pointed out several problems with the ideas that there is a direct line between childhood socialization and adult identity and that this identity is what shapes our gendered behavior (Gerson 1985; Risman 1999). Socialization has fallen out of favor as a

sociological explanation because of its associations with functionalism (Guhin et al. 2021). The idea that culture is something to be downloaded wholesale into an individual consciousness has been rightly critiqued for its inattention to heterogeneity and individual agency.

Because terms like "cognition" and "consciousness" are more closely associated with psychology than sociology, it is worth pausing here to elaborate on what it means to study cognition through a sociological lens. Whereas psychologists focus primarily on the cognitive processes of individual actors, sociologists understand thought to be inextricably linked to an individual's status as a cultural being embedded in various communities in a particular time and place (Brekhus and Ignatow 2019). Lamont and colleagues (2017) offer a useful illustration of the distinction between a psychological and a sociological approach to cognition in their analysis of research on scarcity. The team of Shafir (psychologist) and Mullainathan (economist) documented a set of predictable psychological responses by individuals experiencing a lack of some key resource: they "tunnel in" on this lack and tend to ignore less pressing matters, which sometimes leads them to make suboptimal decisions (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). While Shafir and Mullainathan present these findings as a feature of the human psyche, Lamont and colleagues point out that culture enters into evaluations of what constitutes an important resource, what constitutes a "lack," and how to prioritize overlapping scarcities. Individuals' perceptions, and in turn actions, will vary depending on the scripts and frames made available to them by their culture and community and on their position within that community.

Though many of the scripts, narratives, and frames incorporated into individual cognitions are gendered (see, e.g., (Blair-Loy 2005), people often *experience* their cognition in personal rather than gendered terms. The language of personal choice and individual expression suffuses most aspects of contemporary life in the U.S. and other Western contexts, from

choosing a career to partnering with a mate (Cech 2013; Giddens 1991; Swidler 2003). Though the relationship between one's social location (in terms of class, race, and many other factors including gender) and one's "personal" choices may be apparent to a sociologist, individual agency is core to most people's self-concept, as the mass appeal of "choice feminism" attests (McIntyre 2021; Snyder 2008). Even when it comes to household chores, prior research shows that individuals often explain their behavior in terms of preferences and personality differences rather than idealized gender roles (Daminger 2020; Nyman, Reinikainen, and Eriksson 2018).

The difficulty of disentangling the personal—and in particular, personal *cognition*—from the social is perhaps clearest in efforts to explain the combination of rising egalitarian ideals and stagnant behavioral patterns. The much-critiqued preference theory, for instance, holds that women's attitudes about what is generally acceptable often differ from their personal preferences about how to combine work and family (Hakim 2001). Women's varied labor outcomes are in this view an effect of their heterogeneous preferences rather than of their continued subjugation. Of course, this perspective fails to interrogate how such preferences are formed and what it means to "choose" or "prefer" something in the context of a broader social and cultural context that limits one's options and shapes one's thinking (Crompton and Lyonette 2005; McRae 2003). Hakim's theory aptly illustrates the dangers of focusing too much on the individual level of the gender structure without attending to its interactional and institutional elements.

Nevertheless, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to take individual women's agency seriously without neglecting their social context. To do this, we must "socialize" the psychological experience of gender, drawing together ideas from cultural sociology, cognitive psychology, and gender studies. I propose replacing "gendered selfhood" with "thinking gender" as shorthand for the individual level of the gender structure, as the latter term alludes more

clearly to the contingent and adaptive nature of our self-concepts (Brekhus 2020). I define "thinking gender" as an ongoing process of aligning our cognition with our sense of self, a self that is in turn shaped by our understanding of appropriately gendered (and racialized, and classed) patterns of attention, perception, and evaluation. In earlier research on household inequality, selfhood and its analogues referenced static qualities that were primarily internalized in childhood n. "Thinking gender" emphasizes the way self-concepts are socially patterned across the life course, in keeping with more recent findings from cultural sociologists (Brekhus 2020).

More than mere semantics, the transition to "thinking gender" can help refine our understanding of why and how the gender revolution is unevenly stalled (England 2010). In recent decades, American society has made considerable progress toward destabilizing longstanding patterns of gendered behavior and gender ideology. For instance, over the past four decades individuals with traditional or strongly traditional gender attitudes dropped from 59% of General Social Survey respondents to a mere 7% (Scarborough et al. 2019). In the household context, the "new fatherhood" script calls for men to be active participants in family life, and indeed contemporary fathers spend more time with their children than earlier generations did (Cooper 2000; Hook 2006; LaRossa 1988; Sullivan 2010).

Yet we have collectively been less successful at disrupting essentialist notions of who men and women are at the level of feeling and cognition. We expect many women to enter the workforce, but also to feel conflicted about leaving their children behind (Christopher 2012; Hays 1998). We expect many men to scrub toilets, but to do so in response to a wife's request rather than at their own initiative (Coltrane 1996; Doucet 2001). What emerges as gender essentialism in the aggregate, however, is experienced differently on the ground. Feelings and

thoughts are experienced as deeply personal; in a nation of individuals, few wish to think of themselves as representative of a social type. And yet, until we find a way to surface the gendered elements of this cognitive core, behavioral change is likely to remain somewhat superficial. So long as inequality is understood as "about" one's personhood rather than a gender-unequal opportunity structure, even staunch egalitarians will struggle to contest it.

One might argue that "thinking gender" is simply another form of "doing gender." And indeed, these concepts are linked. In concrete terms, we "do" gender by cleaning the bathroom, and we "think" gender by noticing the bathroom needs cleaning. Both constructs conceptualize gender as something that is accomplished rather than something one is. As originally formulated, the doing gender theory hints at the role of attitudes, perceptions, and other cognitive elements of our gender performance (Butler 2006). However, West and Zimmerman's (1987) emphasis on interaction has obscured questions about the internal experience of gender (Meadow 2018; Messerschmidt 2009). This focus makes sense in light of their key insight that doing gender is about being held to account by others. Behavior is visible to others in a way that cognition is not. And yet behavior and cognition are inextricably linked; we cannot fully understand behavior without paying attention to the cognition that precedes it. Nor is gender-unequal behavior likely to fundamentally change so long as the underlying cognition rests on a self-concept one does not perceive as gendered. I use the case of cognitive household labor to elaborate this theory of thinking gender because this work is a largely internal activity that is nevertheless socially patterned and carries significant interactional consequences, as described in the following section.

The case of cognitive labor

Studies of different-gender couples often center on how responsibilities and resources are allocated between partners (e.g., Bianchi et al. 2012; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Sayer 2005). Information about which tasks each partner performs—or ignores, as the case may be—serves as a useful indicator of relative power and, in the aggregate, of gender-normative behavioral patterns. However, the majority of household labor studies restrict their definition of housework to a subset of the labor required to run a household and raise children. The precise task list varies from study to study but usually centers on observable, physical behaviors such as cleaning, cooking, shopping, and performing home repairs (Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000; Twiggs, McQuillan, and Ferree 1999).

There have been several calls to expand the area of inquiry to include "hidden" and "invisible" tasks related to maintaining extended family relations, promoting a healthy emotional climate within the family, and managing time (Daniels 1987; DeVault 1999; Papanek 1979). However, I seek to define a broader class of activities than typically included; to create a gender-neutral concept (even if the distribution of this work is far from gender-neutral); and to define the work positively rather than negatively (i.e., to explain what it is, rather than that it cannot be seen). Further, I aim to bring non-physical forms of housework to the center of discussions of family life, moving these concepts away from the periphery by offering a way to rigorously measure "invisible" tasks and providing conceptual clarity regarding the definition and operationalization of key forms of non-physical labor.

The marginalization or exclusion of these forms of labor represents a significant oversight, particularly given that available evidence suggests this invisible work is unequally distributed by gender. For example, even among couples who share housework and childcare equally, women are more likely to feel responsible for task outcomes (Doucet 2001), remind

their partners to complete certain chores (Ahn, Haines, and Mason 2017), and set standards for what constitutes an acceptable meal or clean house (Beagan et al. 2008; Mederer 1993). If we imagine a household as a business with its own production function, the emphasis on physical, observable tasks would be akin to studying front-line workers while ignoring the contributions of the managerial staff (Berk 1984). Without deeper knowledge of how the full range of tasks and responsibilities are allocated, we miss a large part of the "story" of household life and, potentially, of the different positions men and women still hold within different-gender relationships.

This dissertation takes up prior calls to expand our definition of household work by theorizing a cognitive dimension of household labor and systematically measuring its allocation between partners. In addition to enhancing our understanding of what happens in families, the study of cognitive labor offers important insights into the changing nature of gender and of the complex relationship between ideological commitments and actual practices. As I will show, nontraditional paid work and physical labor practices often coexist with traditionally gendered cognitive labor practices. Cognitive labor is particularly "sticky," I argue, because it is a key arena for thinking gender. Respondents *experience* their cognitive labor practices as deeply personal reflections of their individual nature. In the aggregate, however, the gendered patterning of these natures becomes apparent. By theorizing gendered cognitive labor patterns as a manifestation of gendered self-concepts, which in turn draw on cultural scripts related to femininity, masculinity, motherhood, and fatherhood, I show how progress and stasis can coexist. It is not enough to do gender differently; the next frontier in the slow march to full equality will be learning to think gender differently.

Dissertation overview

The dissertation proceeds in five additional chapters. In the first, I describe the data and methods used for this project. Across two closely related studies, I conducted in-depth interviews with 136 individuals, representing 76 different-gender couples and encompassing a range of socioeconomic statuses. Across the next four chapters, I ask and answer several empirical questions: What is cognitive labor? How is it gendered? How is that gendering established, and why does it persist despite its apparent conflict with egalitarian ideals? Finally, what enables a small number of couples to subvert normative cognitive labor patterns, and what costs do they face for thinking gender differently?

In chapter 3, "The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor," I inductively define cognitive labor as the work of anticipating household needs, identifying options for filling these needs, deciding among the options, and monitoring the results. Female respondents in my sample perform the bulk of this labor across social classes, life stages, and employment configurations. Men's contributions are concentrated in the less burdensome and more visible components of cognitive labor, such as decision-making, whereas women's cognitive labor tends to be more intensive but less visible. Physical household labor is also female-dominated in this sample, albeit considerably less so than cognitive labor. I use these findings to build a case for incorporating cognitive labor in future studies of the household, lest we underestimate women's contributions, and to bolster my argument that increasing behavioral options for men and women have outpaced their cognitive possibilities.

In chapter 4, "De-Gendering Cognitive Labor," I analyze respondents' accounts of their household labor allocation. I find that while most acknowledge differences in each partner's contributions, they "de-gender" these patterns by depicting their labor allocation as the

coincidentally gendered outcome of gender-neutral processes. Respondents use a form of personal essentialism to explain their cognitive labor allocation: they perceive this allocation as a product of their individual natures and thus as immutable. In contrast, physical labor allocations are largely attributed to current circumstances such as the couple's employment configuration, and thus future reallocation remains conceivable. Respondents' beliefs about the fixed or mutable nature of cognitive and physical household labor, respectively, appear to become self-fulfilling prophecies: cognitive labor patterns remain consistent even following major life changes such as job loss, while physical labor patterns are sometimes reconsidered in the wake of such events. When cognitive labor inequality is recast as personal difference, there is little impetus or hope for change.

Chapter 5, "Bringing Gender Back In," contextualizes respondents' individual narratives. Drawing on life-course data, I show the ways the qualities respondents perceive as deeply personal are also socially patterned along gendered lines. A host of interactional and institutional factors nudge men and women to "think gender" in normative ways. While childhood socialization undoubtedly plays a role, I focus on two gendered processes that extend into adulthood. First, the traits respondents articulate are honed via their *differential investment* in developing skills, collecting information, and forming social connections that facilitate their capacity to perform cognitive labor. Second, *contextual activation* means that the capacities they develop through this investment are not uniformly deployed across contexts. Instead, paid and unpaid work constrain men and women differently. For instance, men in jobs that require a high level of executive function are often said to use up their cognitive energy on the job, whereas women in similar occupations are expected to be equally "on" at work and at home.

In a final empirical chapter, "Thinking Gender Differently," I turn to the small subset of couples (N = 14) who do manage to share cognitive labor or even to put more on the male partner's plate. I show that these nontraditional behaviors are made possible by a combination of nontraditional ways of thinking gender and equal or female-led employment configurations. These couples are not living in a post-gender idyll, however. They are frequently held to account—or fear being held to account—for their non-normative choices. Nontraditional women in particular practice a form of "compensatory maternity" in which they retain control over their children's development and engagement with external institutions, even as they cede many of the traditional "wifely" duties to their male partner. Despite these efforts, most nontraditional couples report some examples of social censure, self-doubt, or spousal conflict as a result of their non-normative ways of thinking gender.

Finally, in a concluding chapter I describe my key contributions to the sociologies of gender and family. Among other points, I argue that this research reveals limits to our current understanding of how men and women in different-gender couples experience family life. Further, I show that it is possible to systematically examine "invisible" work, and I suggest an agenda for additional qualitative and quantitative research in this area. I also make the case for socializing the individual level of the gender structure and argue that to understand the persistence of gender-unequal behaviors we must look to *personal* as well as gender essentialist beliefs. I close by outlining the implications of my findings for individuals, organizations, and policymakers, whose goals should be to reduce the size of families' cognitive labor burden and make the distribution of that burden more equitable.

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Near the end of our interview, Amy struggled to articulate the tension she felt between understanding her choices as simultaneously personal and gender-normative. “Maybe,” she reflected, “there are these very broad, systemic things that were like decades in the making that led us to this same path of, like, it’s just easier for me to take care of the kids more, in the hours that I have.” But, she concluded, “I don’t know what that has to do with gender, exactly.” In the pages to come, I will explore the line between the personal and the social in our gender structure in some depth. Ultimately, I argue, gender inequality remains a function of what we do *and* who we understand ourselves to be: the personal is deeply social, and the social is deeply personal. We are unlikely to reach the next frontier in the quest for full equality without paying careful attention to both registers.

Chapter 2: Data and Methods

Data for this dissertation come from 136 individual interviews with members of 76 different-gender couples. I conducted interviews over the course of four years (2017-2020) in two distinct waves. The first wave, which I refer to as "Study 1," focused on college-educated couples with young children. In the second wave, "Study 2," I recruited couples with a range of educational backgrounds and school-aged children. In the following sections, I describe the sample, including how participants were recruited and their demographic characteristics; explain how each study was conducted; and outline the procedures used to analyze the resulting data.

Recruiting the sample

Study 1

In the first wave of data collection, I conducted 64 individual interviews with members of 32 college-educated, different-gender couples living in the Boston area. All interviews were conducted between June and December 2017. Eligible respondents were married or cohabiting[3], age 25 to 50, held at least a bachelor's degree[4], and lived with one or more children under age five. I chose this population for a combination of theoretical and methodological reasons. Parents with young children are among the most time-pressured demographics (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2007), and the transition to parenthood has been associated with increased gender differentiation among different-sex couples (Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). I was interested in understanding how such couples dealt with the myriad planning, logistical, and decision-making tasks involved in raising children, and I suspected this group

[3] In practice, all but one couple were married. The remaining couple had been cohabiting for four years at the time of our interview.
[4] One respondent completed 3.5 years of college but did not receive a degree.

would be particularly primed to reflect on such practices. By limiting my focus to couples of a similar life stage and family structure, I also mitigated the need to account for interactions between parental status and gender in a small sample.

Educational attainment served as a proxy for social class. I focused on college-educated individuals because they espouse egalitarian gender ideals at particularly high rates (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Scarborough et al. 2019). Education is positively associated with men's time in physical household labor and childcare activities, but negatively associated with women's (Bianchi et al. 2000; Sullivan 2010). At the same time, highly-educated women are closely associated with "intensive mothering" (Hays 1998), a set of practices requiring high levels of cognitively-demanding activities like planning and decision-making. Related research associates middle- and upper-middle-class families with a "concerted cultivation" parenting style (Lareau 2011) in which parents actively manage children's development, again facilitated by extensive cognitive exertion. This highly-educated sample thus served as a strategic site for exploring the effects of contradictory imperatives, including a desire for an egalitarian division of labor and the norm of an intensive parenting style culturally and socially linked to mothers.

I recruited Study 1 participants primarily via posts on email listservs and social media groups dedicated to Boston-area parents. Approximately 25% of the sample came via referrals from my extended network or from prior participants. I advertised the project as a study of "how parents make decisions" to avoid priming potential respondents about gender or the division of household labor and to reduce the likelihood that only parents with strong feelings about such issues would volunteer. Toward the end of the recruitment period, I specifically sought stay-at-home or "lead parent" fathers in order to ensure rough comparability in the employment statuses of men and women in the sample.

Study 2

In the second wave of data collection, I conducted 74 individual interviews with members of 44 working- and middle-class couples. Interviews were conducted between May 2019 and May 2020 in the Greater Boston Area (30 interviews with members of 17 couples) and in Southern New Jersey (44 interviews with members of 27 couples). I began the interviews in Boston before adding a second interview site. This addition was motivated by initial difficulties recruiting working-class respondents in the Boston area, where most of my own contacts were associated with a university. Because I grew up in South Jersey and have family in the area, I had access to a more educationally diverse group of potential respondents. A second motivation for adding the additional research site was my concern that Boston's progressive reputation would raise questions about the applicability of my findings in other, less urban or less politically liberal settings. The towns I recruited from in New Jersey are in a county that went for Trump in 2016 and have a considerably more suburban feel than those from which Boston-area respondents were recruited (NJ Department of State 2016).

Eligible respondents were married or cohabiting with a different-sex partner and living with at least one child aged 5-14. I sought socioeconomic diversity, which I proxied by educational attainment, following the precedent of other qualitative scholars studying class (e.g., Streib 2013). Couples in which both partners held a 4-year degree were categorized as middle-class; couples where neither partner had a 4-year degree were categorized as working-class; and couples in which only one partner had a 4-year degree were categorized as "borderline." I used a screening survey to ensure diversity in the occupations and employment configurations (i.e.,

whether both partners were working full-time, part-time, or not at all) of respondents within each class category.

Because one of my core interests was how different-gender couples share cognitive labor, I required that respondents be living with a partner. I did not, however, require them to be married or the biological parents of any of the children in their household. Further, I encouraged but did not require both partners to participate in individual interviews. This decision was based on the hypothesis that couples with a high degree of relationship dissatisfaction or inequality might select out of a study that depended on both partners' cooperation, leading me to underestimate either the level of inequality or its consequences.

Finally, I chose to recruit only parents of school-aged children, and I required each interviewee to live with at least one child aged 5-14. I limited my sample to parents for reasons similar to those described above: I expected parental status to be an important predictor of household cognitive labor requirements; the transition to parenthood has often been associated with increased gender differentiation among different-sex couples (Yavorsky et al. 2015); and I wanted to ensure broad comparability with respondents interviewed in the previous wave of data collection. I chose the 5-14-year-old age range because it corresponds roughly with the elementary and middle school years, a time when children are old enough to be involved in extracurricular activities and social gatherings but too young to manage their affairs on their own. While early childhood comes with a particularly heavy physical childcare workload, I anticipated that middle and late childhood would bring new and intensive cognitive labor challenges, and I wanted to understand how couples would respond to these demands.

To recruit participants in the Boston area, I advertised the study via online forums for local parents, college alumni listservs and employee parenting groups tied to specific

workplaces. Later, I broadened my advertising to include social service agencies, online parenting groups in low-income and economically diverse neighborhoods and towns, and in-person recruiting (e.g., at an open house for a local elementary school with a substantial population of students eligible for free or reduced school lunch). At my second research site, in Southern New Jersey, I advertised the study to two school districts via social media posts, email blasts, and paper flyers sent home with all students by the school on my behalf. In these outreach materials, I framed the study as one about how parents "manage their busy lives" and noted that I was particularly interested in hearing from men and from parents without a bachelor's degree.[5]

Respondent demographics

Study 1

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics for the first set of respondents. On average, participants were in their mid-30s. The majority had one or two children, who were on average 2.7 years old. Ninety-two percent of the women and 70 percent of the men held an advanced degree, and several more were enrolled in a graduate program at the time of the interview. Conditional on paid employment, women reported working a median of 40 hours for pay each week and men a median of 45 hours. Conditional on paid employment, women earned a median of $73,000 and men a median of $105,000. Household income ranged from $60,000 to $345,000, with a median of $163,000. Participants' industries varied widely and included law, medicine, academia, business, tech, finance, and policy. 76 percent of the men and 70% of the

[5] In earlier phases of recruiting, I found that these groups were least likely to volunteer. With specific encouragement, fathers and working-class parents reached out at higher rates, but women and middle-class parents continued to express interest.

women worked full-time; 12% of men and 14% of women worked part-time; and 12% of men and 16% of women were out of the workforce at the time of our interview.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study 1

Individual-level			
Men		**Women**	
Mean age	36	Mean age	35
Race		Race	
White	81%	White	78%
Asian	9%	Asian	16%
Other	9%	Other	6%
Median income[a]	$107,500	Median income[a]	$70,000
Median work hours[a]	46	Median work hours[a]	40
Work status at time of intvw.		Work status at time of intvw.	
Full-time (34+ hrs.)	78%	Full-time (34+ hrs.)	66%
Part-time	9%	Part-time	16%
Unemployed	13%	Unemployed	18%
Education level		Education level	
Some college	3%	Some college	0%
Bachelor's	28%	Bachelor's	9%
Graduate degree	69%	Graduate degree	91%
Couple-level			
# of children	1.5	Years married	6.6
Youngest child's age	2.0	Median income	$170,000
Relative income		Relative paid work hours	
Wife $5k+ more	22%	Wife 4+ more	28%
Equal earnings	13%	Equal	13%
Husband $5k+ more	65%	Husband 4+ more	60%

Note: Data come from participants' responses to a series of demographic questions posed at the end of their interview. N = 64 (32 women, 32 men).

[a] Conditional on paid employment.

I did not advertise any eligibility criteria related to race or sexual orientation, but 53 participants identified as white, and 32 couples consisted of a cisgender man and woman. Nine participants identified as Asian; four as multiracial; and one each as Black and Hispanic. Two couples consisted of two cisgender women, and one couple consisted of a cisgender woman and

a transgender man. Data from these three couples were excluded from analyses of the gendered distribution of labor, given the extremely small sample size.

Study 2

Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of respondents interviewed in the second study. Among the 44 couples represented in the sample, I interviewed both members of 32 couples (73%) and only one member of the remaining 12 (27%), for a total sample of 43 women and 31 men.[6] The average female respondent was in her late 30s and the average male in his early 40s. Approximately two-thirds of the sample (64% of men and 69% of women) held at least a bachelor's degree. One-fifth of the sample had some post-high school education but had not earned a 4-year degree, while the remaining 16% of men and 12% of women did not continue past high school. Employment status was identical between men and women, with 77% working full-time (at least 34 hours/week), 16% working part-time, and 7% unemployed or out of the workforce. Conditional on paid employment, women worked a median of 40 hours and men a median of 44. Women in the workforce earned a median of $66,000 and men a median of $100,000. Overall household income was a median of $142,000 but ranged from $21,000 to $355,000. Racially, most respondents identified as white (84% of men and 88% of women). All couples consisted of a cisgender man and woman.

[6] Individual-level demographic information presented in Tables 1-3 only includes interviewees. However, class category assignments and couple-level information also take into account the demographic information provided by respondents about their non-interviewed partner, if applicable.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Study 2

Individual-level			
Men		**Women**	
Mean age	42	Mean age	39
Race		Race	
White	84%	White	88%
Asian	10%	Asian	2%
Black	3%	Black	5%
Hispanic	3%	Hispanic	5%
Median income [a]	$100,000	Median income[a]	$66,000
Median work hours [a]	44	Median work hours [a]	40
Work status at time of intvw.		Work status at time of intvw.	
Full-time (34+ hrs.)	77%	Full-time (34+ hrs.)	77%
Part-time	16%	Part-time	16%
Unemployed	7%	Unemployed	7%
Education level		Education level	
HS/GED	16%	HS/GED	12%
Some college	10%	Some college	12%
Associates	10%	Associates	7%
Bachelor's +	64%	Bachelor's +	69%
Couple-level			
Middle-class (2 BA+)	50%	Location	
Borderline (1 BA+)	20%	NJ	61%
Working-class (0 BA+)	30%	MA	39%
		Median income	$142,000
Relative income		Relative paid work hours	
Wife 5%+ more	34%	Wife 4+ more	23%
Equal earnings	7%	Equal	28%
Husband 5%+ more	59%	Husband 4+ more	49%

Note: Data come from participants' responses to a series of demographic questions posed at the end of their interview. N = 74 (43 women, 31 men).

[a] Conditional on paid employment.

In the 22 middle-class couples, representing 50% of the sample, both partners had at least a bachelor's degree. The remaining 22 couples were split between working-class couples where neither partner had a 4-year degree (12 couples; 30%) and "borderline" couples where only one partner had a 4-year degree (9 couples; 20%). Demographic information on the combined sample of 138 respondents is featured in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of the Full Sample

Individual-level			
Men		**Women**	
Mean age	39	Mean age	37
Race		Race	
White	83%	White	83%
Asian	9%	Asian	9%
Hispanic	2%	Hispanic	4%
Black	3%	Black	3%
Multiracial	3%	Multiracial	1%
Median income	$100,000	Median income	$65,000
Median work hours	43	Median work hours	40
Work status at time of intvw.		Work status at time of intvw.	
Full-time (35+ hrs.)	79%	Full-time (35+ hrs.)	69%
Part-time	11%	Part-time	19%
Unemployed	10%	Unemployed	12%
Education level		Education level	
HS/GED	8%	HS/GED	7%
Some college	6%	Some college	7%
Associates	5%	Associates	4%
BA+	81%	BA+	83%
Couple-level			
Middle-class (2 BA+)	70%	Location	
Borderline (1 BA+, 1 <BA)	13%	NJ	36%
Working-class (0 BA+)	17%	MA	64%
		Median income	$150,000
Relative income		Relative paid work hours	
Wife 5%+ more	29%	Wife 5+ more	24%
Equal earnings	9%	Equal	23%
Husband 5%+ more	62%	Husband 5+ more	53%

Note: Data come from participants' responses to a series of demographic questions posed at the end of their interview. N = 138 (63 men, 75 women, 76 couples).

Study procedures

Study 1

Once a couple agreed to participate, I scheduled interviews with each partner at their home, workplace, or a local café. When possible, I conducted these interviews on the same day. In all cases, I asked respondents to avoid discussing the experience with their partner until after both interviews were complete. Interviews averaged 60 to 80 minutes in length and were recorded with respondents' permission.

Speaking with both partners individually afforded several advantages. First, I received two first-person reports from each couple rather than relying on one person to describe both partners' cognitive activity. Second, this strategy increased the likelihood that respondents would present their honest perspective. Without their partner nearby to overhear, respondents could share critical assessments of his or her behavior; at the same time, knowing their partner would also speak with me likely reduced the temptation to exaggerate their personal contributions (Kamo 2000). Finally, considerable overlap in the events discussed by each partner enabled me to directly compare their understanding of the same incidents.

Nevertheless, my focus on couples may have inadvertently led to a sample with above-average levels of marital satisfaction or commitment to shared parenting. My recruiting procedures ensured that whoever learned of the study first had to convince their partner to participate. Several people—primarily women—withdrew from the enrollment process when they could not convince their partner to participate or preemptively declined to try. Consequently, results from study 1 may underestimate the amount of conflict the division of cognitive labor generates in the average household. In study 2, I adjusted the protocol to allow only one partner to participate, a strategy with its own set of advantages and drawbacks described below.

Prior to each interview, I asked participants to independently record all household- or child-related decisions they made or were involved in over the course of 24 hours. I encouraged them to define "decision" loosely (i.e., to include planning-related activities, unresolved questions, and ideas they were mulling over). Fifty-seven participants completed written logs. Three women and ten men failed to do so, citing lack of time, uncertainty regarding the task, or forgetfulness. Women's completed logs included 4 to 40 entries, with an average of 15. Men's

logs numbered 3 to 20 entries and averaged 10. Appendix A includes both a sample decision log and the interview protocol used for this study.

Given variation in respondents' compliance with the task, I primarily used the logs to customize each interview. First, I asked respondents to elaborate on a subset of logged activities spanning multiple topics (e.g., food, childcare). I asked what triggered each entry, what alternative options they considered, what role (if any) their spouse played, and how this example compared to typical events in their household. Next, I asked participants a similar set of questions about irregular activities: the last time they bought something for a child, experienced a medical problem, made a home or car repair, took a vacation, established or modified a childcare arrangement, and selected a place to live.

For most of the interview, I asked respondents to describe specific incidents before reflecting on what "typically" happens, thereby minimizing the tendency to report aspirational practices or exceptions to dominant patterns (Small 2017). I emphasized detailed, process-oriented questions to reveal cognitive activities respondents took for granted or carried out subconsciously. Where possible, this involved working backward from a decision or outcome. For instance, if a respondent reported a decision to make pasta for dinner, I asked a series of follow-up questions: What gave him this idea? Had he considered other options? Was he looking through the fridge when he made the decision? If not, how did he know what ingredients were on hand? This line of questioning helped reveal the cognitive labor embedded in processes respondents experienced as mundane or primarily physical. Only in the final portion of the interview did I invite participants to speak in general terms, via a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the ideal and actual divisions of cognitive and physical labor in their

household. At the close of each interview, I asked a series of demographic questions and offered respondents $20 for their time.

Study 2

In broad strokes, study 2 mirrored the previous wave of data collection: I conducted individual interviews in which I asked respondents a series of questions about their household affairs. I focus here on the differences introduced in study 2. First, I encouraged but did not require the participation of both partners. Once I deemed a study volunteer eligible, I explained that I would like to hear from their partner as well and asked whether he or she would be willing to participate. Many agreed or declined up front to include their partner, while others deferred. At the conclusion of the first partner's interview, I asked once more about interviewing the other partner, if he or she had not already agreed to participate. Some respondents offered at this point to put their partner in touch with me; a minority declined but were willing to answer a short series of questions about his or her demographic characteristics. In the end, I spoke with both members of 32 couples and only one member of an additional 12. In this latter group, I spoke with only the female partner in 11 cases and only the male partner in one. Of the 13 men who initiated contact regarding the study, 12 successfully recruited their wives to participate as well. Of the 31 women who initially volunteered, 20 successfully recruited their husband.

I allowed respondents to pick a convenient location and time for the interview. Most chose to meet at home on an evening or weekend day, though a significant minority opted to meet at a library, coffee shop, fast food restaurant, or workplace.[7] Interviews were recorded with respondents' consent. They varied widely in length, with the shortest lasting 45 minutes and the

[7] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted four interviews virtually, either by phone or via videoconference.

longest over two hours. I began with a series of questions about the respondent's background and life trajectory, including their family of origin, education and career, relationship with their partner, and parenthood. This section of the interview included a mix of factual questions (e.g., who they lived with as a child, whether they had worked full-time throughout adulthood) and interpretive prompts (e.g., their goals as a parent, what they saw as their partner's strengths and weaknesses, and how they envisioned their career changing in the coming years).

In the second stage of the interview, I asked for details about household management practices, including spousal communication via phone, text, and email; calendar management; and systems for keeping track of household tasks. Next, I gave respondents a deck of thirty-eight cards printed with common household tasks. Twenty-four were cognitive in nature (e.g., "decide what the family will have for dinner") and fourteen were physical (e.g., "drive a child to/from an after-school activity"). I chose activities for the cards with the goal of diversifying the topic or domain (e.g., food, shopping, home maintenance) and cognitive labor type (i.e., anticipation, identification, decision-making, monitoring), using categories inductively generated via Study 1. A list of the tasks printed on each card is available in Appendix A.

I asked respondents to sort the cards into five piles according to who typically completes the task for their household: the respondent, their partner, either/both (e.g., if they took turns, completed the task together, or otherwise shared the work), someone else (e.g., a child, grandparent, or housecleaner), or none of the above. During and after the sorting process, I asked respondents to elaborate on their labor arrangement, particularly for tasks placed in the "either/both" or "someone else" categories. For instance, if a respondent placed the "know whether we can afford a big purchase" card in the either/both pile, I asked whether both partners had access to paper or digital account statements, if and when they discussed financial matters,

and whether one person was likely to have greater knowledge of their financial state on any given day.

The final portion of the interview featured a series of more reflective questions, using the card-sort exercise as a jumping off point. For instance, I asked respondents why they believed they were the ones to complete the tasks in their pile, whether they could remember any explicit conversations about who would handle which tasks, and how they believed their own allocation of tasks compared with their friends' or family members' allocation. Next, I offered a definition of both physical and cognitive labor, using several example cards to illustrate the distinction. I asked respondents to estimate what portion of each type of labor they currently completed and, subsequently, what portion they would complete in their "ideal world." Where the two numbers differed, I asked respondents to describe the barriers they perceived to reaching their ideal.

Regardless of whether their ideal and actual matched, I asked all respondents what cards they would reallocate if they could and which they would retain even if their partner offered to take them over. Finally, I asked how fair they felt their current division of labor was and what, if anything, they thought gender had to do with the way they allocated responsibility. I closed with a series of demographic questions and offered respondents a cash incentive ($25) in exchange for their time.[8]

Data analysis

Data consist of interview transcripts, decision logs (study 1), card-sort results (study 2), and ethnographic notes written shortly after each interview. After each wave of data collection, I began analysis with a round of open coding. I read the transcripts closely, highlighted recurring

[8] A significant minority declined this payment, saying that they were simply happy to help.

themes, and reflected on emergent issues in a series of memos. Next, I index coded each transcript by topic and/or interview question (Deterding and Waters 2018). Coding proceeded iteratively in several succeeding rounds; each time, I generated new insights that expanded or modified the initial set of codes and highlighted deviant cases.

Estimating cognitive labor loads

In the early stages of analyzing Study 1 data, I inductively identified nine cognitive labor domains: food, care for children, logistics/scheduling, cleaning/laundry, finances, social relationships, shopping/purchasing, home/car maintenance, and travel/leisure. These categories applied to most couples in the sample and encompassed the majority of cognitive activity discussed. In the process of analyzing Study 2 data, I divided the childcare category into two domains, basic care and management/enrichment, for a total of ten categories. The former encompasses cognitive labor related to feeding, clothing, bathing, and supervising children; the latter includes cognitive labor centered on managing relationships with external institutions and individuals (e.g., schools, extracurricular activities, children's friends), activities that were less prevalent in the sample of parents of very young children. Table 4 provides examples of cognitive tasks in all ten domains. Although several overlap with activities commonly measured in studies of physical labor (e.g., food, cleaning, home maintenance), I am primarily interested in the *cognitive* aspects of a given domain unless otherwise specified.

Table 4. Cognitive labor domains

Domain	**Cognitive Labor Examples**
Food	• Deciding what meals to cook • Ensuring consistent supply of groceries
Care for children *(Study 1 only)*	• Selecting a childcare center • Setting sleep/meal schedule
Basic childcare *(Study 2 only)*	• Deciding what to pack in child's lunch • Monitoring child's clothing needs
Children's management and enrichment *(Study 2 only)*	• Researching summer camp options • Tracking child's academic progress
Logistics/Scheduling	• Maintaining family calendar • Resolving a schedule conflict
Cleaning/Laundry	• Remembering when sheets/towels need to be changed • Coordinating with paid cleaning service
Finances	• Ensuring bills are paid on time • Deciding how to allocate assets

Table 4. (Continued)

Social relationships	• Selecting gifts for upcoming birthdays • Coordinating a playdate
Shopping	• Identifying items needed • Choosing a brand/model
Home/Car maintenance	• Recognizing an item in need of repair • Finding repair professional (e.g. plumber)
Travel/Leisure	• Planning vacation itinerary • Finding activities for a holiday weekend

To assess the amount of cognitive labor—both overall and of specific types—each respondent completed relative to their partner, I looked at patterns of cognitive leadership in all nine (ten) domains. Cognitive work does not lend itself to precise quantification; it is diffuse, disjointed, and often invisible even to the doer, as I will show in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, my data enable me to establish the *direction* of gender disparities within each couple via comparison of partners' written logs, card-sort, descriptions of specific incidents, and evaluation of what "typically" happens. To make this assessment, I compiled all examples of cognitive labor mentioned in each interview—including labor respondents conducted themselves and second-hand reports of their partner's labor—into a single list of cognitive "episodes." For example, one participant's first few episodes were deciding what to make a child for breakfast, deciding who would walk the dog, and identifying items for the weekly grocery list. In study 2, I was able to draw on card-sort results as an additional data source. Because there was evidence of substantial inconsistency in respondents' definition of a "shared" task, I used the interview transcripts as my

primary source of information on respondents' cognitive labor patterns and the card-sort as a check on my qualitative assessment.

For each couple, I coded all nine (ten) topical domains as female-led, male-led, shared, or undetermined. In female- or male-led domains, one partner completed the majority of related cognitive labor or oversaw such work. In the cleaning/laundry domain, for instance, I assessed who was more likely to determine the appropriate time interval between rounds of cleaning, manage the relationship with hired cleaners, remind their partner to complete their portion of the chores, and ensure that necessary cleaning supplies were on hand or added to a shopping list. In domains coded as shared, both members of the couple completed a substantial amount of domain-related cognitive work. For example, if a couple reported that partners were equally likely to initiate a cleaning session or that each partner had sole responsibility for a distinct subset of tasks within the cleaning/laundry domain, I coded them as sharing this domain. In a small number of cases coded as undetermined, couples did not provide enough information about a domain for me to make a definitive assessment.

In study 2, which included questions and task cards related to physical labor, I assessed respondents' physical labor patterns in a similar fashion. I recorded all references to physical housework and childcare activities from each transcript, using the card-sort data to fill in any gaps. Next, I determined which, if either, partner did a more consistent, time-consuming share of physical work related to food, cleaning/laundry, shopping, maintenance, and childcare. Finally, I used this information to determine whether a couple was female-led, male-led, or shared the majority of physical labor.[9]

[9] Because I collected less information on physical than on cognitive labor patterns, I opted not to attempt a domain-by-domain assessment of leadership and only classified respondents' overall physical labor allocation.

Because I relaxed the requirement that both members of a couple participate in interviews for study 2, analyzing labor patterns for this group was particularly challenging. In most cases (73% of study 2 couples), I had two perspectives on the same household to compare, but in the remaining subset I had only one person's testimony to work with. Given previous research on the self-serving bias of individuals' labor reports (Kamo 2000), this may mean that I overestimated the cognitive and physical contributions of the women (and one man) whose spouse I did not hear from. However, it is also possible that respondents who could not convince their partner to participate had an especially unequal division of labor.

Charting paths and making meaning

In later chapters, I explore the processes that lead couples to pursue and maintain a particular division of cognitive labor. The life history component of the study 2 interview protocol, where respondents described their family of origin, career and relationship trajectory, and parenting history, was particularly helpful for this purpose. First, I wrote short summary memos about respondents and couples. I noted any hypotheses about how their characteristics and life experiences might relate to the cognitive labor patterns I observed and connected these insights to larger patterns across the sample. Next, I focused exclusively on the subset of nontraditional couples where cognitive labor was shared or male-led. After identifying a set of commonalities across members of this group, I looked for counterexamples among the more traditional couples. For instance, one early hypothesis was that respondents whose parents had an unconventional division of labor would go on to pursue a nontraditional arrangement themselves. I rejected that hypothesis when I saw that the incidence of nontraditional families of origin was similar among traditional and nontraditional couples. However, I did notice subtler distinctions

in the way these two groups reflected on their parents' practices, leading me to generate a new hypothesis to explore. This process proceeded iteratively over many rounds.

Analysis for Chapter 4 proceeded from the observation that few respondents reported conflict over or attempts to alter their division of labor, even though many of them acknowledged inequalities. In subsequent rounds of reading, memo-writing, and coding, I focused on respondents' efforts to justify discrepancies between their beliefs and behaviors, their (relatively rare) descriptions of conflict or dissatisfaction regarding household labor, and, more broadly, their explanations of why they behaved as they did. These data analysis generated themes such as "personality" and "nature," which I explore in depth in Chapter 4.

A note on how results are reported

Because the sample demographics and topics covered are roughly comparable across the two studies, I combine them into one larger sample when reporting results unless otherwise noted. For example, the protocol for Study 1 did not include significant questions about respondents' physical labor practices, though this topic came up organically in many interviews. When talking about respondents' division of physical labor, I thus report results only from the second study.

Chapter 3: The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor[10]

Sociological questions regarding household labor are often, at bottom, questions about inequality: how does who we are shape the costs we bear and rewards we reap as members of a family unit? In keeping with this tradition, I begin by asking what cognitive labor is and what costs and rewards accrue to cognitive laborers. Next, I ask how gender affects the amount and kind of cognitive labor an individual completes and whether this relationship varies predictably across demographics and life circumstances. Finally, I explore the relationship between physical and cognitive labor, asking what we can learn about gender inequality by looking at these two dimensions of household life separately and concurrently.

I inductively define cognitive labor as a sequence of anticipating needs, identifying options, making decisions, and monitoring the results—processes aimed at ensuring the needs of a household and its members are met and that the family fulfills its obligations to external communities or stakeholders. These cognitive efforts vary widely in intensity and significance and can be applied to ten domains of household life. Female respondents perform the bulk of this labor in most couples, regardless of social class or life stage. Men are not absent from the cognitive dimension, but their efforts are concentrated in its less burdensome and more influential components. Cognitive and physical labor can be decoupled, albeit not without effort, and an egalitarian or nontraditional division of labor is considerably more common in the physical than in the cognitive dimension.

These findings underscore the importance of including cognitive labor in future studies of household labor. When we examine the gendered division of physical labor alone, we likely

[10] This chapter includes some text from previously published work (Daminger 2019).

underestimate women's contributions to the household. Much of the female-typed cognitive work I uncover is particularly pervasive and ongoing, with likely implications for other components of gender inequality, including well-being and employment (Craig and Brown 2016; England et al. 2020). Physical and cognitive labor patterns may be moving along different trajectories, with equality easier to establish in the former than the latter dimension. This suggests that our collective understanding of what men and women do in the household context has broadened more than our understanding of how they think, what they notice, and what they prioritize. Understanding how we *think* as well as *do* gender—and how these individual and interactional elements of the gender structure intersect within the domestic sphere—has important implications for the future of gender equality and the potential path forward toward change in the gender system (Risman 2004; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009).

The nature of household labor

Despite innovation over time in the methods used and questions asked by scholars of household labor, the object of study has remained largely consistent. Both qualitative and quantitative scholars use a definition of housework heavily weighted toward physical activities (e.g., Berk 1984; Bianchi et al. 2012). Typical categories include cooking, shopping, cleaning and laundry, home maintenance, and paying bills; time is the primary measure used to assess and compare individual workloads (Bianchi et al. 2000; Coltrane 2000; Twiggs et al. 1999).

Critics of the dominant strand of research contend that this definition and operationalization of household labor captures only a portion of the work required to run a household and raise children. An exclusive focus on concrete, observable tasks—what I refer to as physical housework or physical household labor—is, they argue, incomplete, because it

overlooks “hidden” or “invisible” forms of labor that do not match dominant understandings of domestic work (Daniels 1987; DeVault 1991).

Research on “emotional labor” or “emotion work” has partially filled this gap by theorizing the affective dimension of one’s paid or unpaid work as a form of labor distinct from the physical work of completing a task (DeVault 1999; Hochschild 1979). Hochschild introduced “emotional labor” into the lexicon to describe the way service workers’ affect was subject to regulation by their employers (Hochschild 2012). She developed the concept via analysis of the paid work sphere but suggested that the related concept of “emotion work” might describe similar processes in the domestic sphere. The “work”/”labor” in question was defined as the effort required to intentionally manage and display one’s feelings, often in service of influencing others’ feelings. Despite this relatively narrow definition, in the ensuing decades “emotional labor” became a catch-all term for many distinct phenomena that did not fit into conventional understandings of work—an evolution Hochschild herself has lamented (Beck 2018).

Yet even this two-dimensional conception of household labor as both physical and emotional falls short by omitting the cognitive or mental components of household tasks. Like emotional labor, cognitive labor is “invisible;” unlike emotional labor, cognitive labor is not centrally related to questions of feeling and mood. Instead, it is a more cerebral exercise of managing the “project” that is family life. Practically speaking, the three dimensions of household work coexist in most tasks or episodes. The work of getting dinner on the table, for example, typically requires some combination of physical, emotional, and cognitive labor: chopping vegetables, comforting unhappy children, and figuring out which recipe to make. Nevertheless, these three dimensions are distinct enough that they require different measurement and categorization strategies.

Efforts to study non-physical aspects of household labor have been stymied by imprecise concepts and measurement techniques. Cognitive phenomena are typically referenced as an aside in studies of physical labor (Coltrane 1996; Deutsch 2000; Tichenor 2005); treated as a category of work equivalent to physical tasks (e.g., appearing as "household management" alongside "cooking" and "shopping") (Hochschild and Machung 2012); conceptualized narrowly in terms of schedule management or as a primarily maternal phenomenon (Daly 2003; Hessing 1994; Ruddick 1995; Walzer 1996); or framed negatively rather than positively (i.e., as "hidden" or "invisible" work) (Daniels 1987). I seek to define a broader class of activities; to create a gender-neutral concept (even if the distribution of this work is far from gender-neutral); and to define the work positively rather than negatively (i.e., to explain what it is, rather than that it cannot be seen).

Innovative time-use studies attempting to quantify cognitive forms of labor have produced mixed results regarding the prevalence of such labor and its gender distribution. On one hand, some time-use data support the notion that one hour of a woman's housework time is not equivalent to one hour of a man's time. Women spend more hours per week multitasking, for instance, and are more likely to feel rushed than men with equivalent leisure time (Mattingly and Sayer 2006; Offer and Schneider 2011). Both multitasking and time pressure may be symptoms of women's heavy cognitive load.

On the other hand, two studies that explicitly operationalize a "mental" component of housework find both the gender gap and overall cognitive workloads to be negligible. Lee and Waite (2005) find U.S. men complete an average of 2.3 hours per week of mental labor (defined as "thinking about household labor when…not performing household tasks" (332)) and women an average of 3.1 hours. Adding mental labor time to the overall housework tally decreased

men's share of domestic work by only three percentage points. In their study of multitasking, Offer and Schneider (2011) define mental labor as "various thoughts related to work and family members" (2011:816) and find no gender differences in the proportion of all multitasking that involves mental labor (about 8 percent of all episodes) or in how frequently respondents report focusing their mental labor on domestic matters.

Mediating among these conflicting findings is important in part because of the likely consequences of cognitive labor. Recent research links a heavy cognitive burden to significant psychological and behavioral consequences, including reduced capacity to exercise willpower and make long-term decisions (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; Vohs et al. 2008; Wang et al. 2010). Compared to physical labor, which is largely restricted to the home, cognitive tasks are likely to intrude in contexts where distractions are unwelcome, such as the workplace (Darrah, English-Lueck, and Freeman 2007). While direct examination of the consequences of a gendered distribution of cognitive labor is beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is reason to believe that health, relationship satisfaction, and career trajectories could all be impacted.

Gender and cognitive labor

Prima facie, there are two primary reasons to expect women in different-sex couples to do a larger share of the cognitive labor. First, qualitative data on cognitive activities point directly to its gendered nature. Some scholars report the largest gap between male and female participation in domestic work lies not in cooking or childcare time but in "management" activity (Deutsch 2000). Even among couples who share housework and childcare equally, women are more likely to feel responsible for task outcomes (Daly 2003; LaRossa 1988), remind their partners to complete certain chores (Ahn et al. 2017), set standards for what constitutes an

acceptable meal or clean-enough house (Mederer 1993), and coordinate and supervise hired help (Gregson and Lowe 1994; Hertz 1995). Regarding childcare specifically, scholars report that women are more attuned than men to the work of overseeing child development and ensuring children's needs are met (Ruddick 1995; Walzer 1996).

Second, the large body of research on physical housework consistently finds that women in different-sex couples do more domestic labor. Women spend disproportionate time on "core" tasks that occur frequently and are difficult to put off, such as cooking, whereas men's housework time is disproportionately allocated toward discretionary, flexible tasks (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010; Tai and Treas 2013). Childcare, which is increasingly analyzed separately from housework, is also consistently gendered (Dotti Sani and Treas 2016; Sullivan 2013). Women spend more time caring for children than men and are more likely to adjust their paid work to accommodate family demands (Bianchi et al. 2012; Cha 2013; Stone 2007). In parallel with the gender divide in completion of core versus discretionary housework, men's childcare time is disproportionately concentrated in the most directly rewarding elements of parenting, such as teaching and play, while less pleasant tasks like feeding and bathing remain female-dominated (Monna and Gauthier 2008). If the cognitive and physical dimensions of household labor are highly correlated, we would expect similar gender imbalances in cognitive labor patterns.

However, several factors complicate this picture. First are the findings, cited above, of Lee and Waite (2005) and Offer and Schneider (2011): both pairs find little to no gender difference in self-reported mental labor activity. One possible explanation for the contradiction between qualitative and quantitative findings is that qualitative researchers have identified activities respondents *perceive* as female-typed, but which are in fact shared or divided equitably

between partners. Another is that the primarily time-based metrics utilized by quantitative researchers are poorly suited for estimating either relative or absolute cognitive labor loads.

A second challenge to the expected association between women and cognitive labor comes from men's historical position as head of household. Including decision-making under the umbrella of cognitive labor might tip the balance toward men, who have traditionally wielded disproportionate decision-making authority (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Men in different-sex couples are more likely to exercise "veto power" over a debate and, more subtly, determine which issues are up for discussion in the first place (Komter 1989; Miller and Carlson 2016; Tichenor 2005). We might thus expect men to be relatively more involved in setting family priorities (cognitive labor) than in cooking or cleaning (physical labor).

Finally, the relationship between physical and cognitive labor is unclear, meaning that the gender dynamics of the former may not transfer neatly to the latter. One possibility is that physical and cognitive labor are tightly coupled, such that it is impossible or, at best, onerous to separate the planning of a task from its execution. If this were the case, we would expect a given individual to do comparable amounts of physical and cognitive labor, and we could predict women's heavier cognitive load on the basis of their greater physical load. An alternative possibility is that cognitive labor is separable from physical labor, in the sense that the person who decides what must be done need not be the person to do it. If true, physical labor patterns would not be a good proxy for cognitive labor patterns.

Predicting cognitive labor allocations

Uncertainty regarding the relationship between physical and cognitive labor writ large translates to uncertainty regarding the predictors of cognitive versus physical labor allocation. In

the physical dimension, scholars have identified an array of social forces and family characteristics shaping couples' division of labor. Economically, partners' relative financial resources and time available net paid work hours have been shown to shape their labor allocation (Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). According to these theories, it is because women typically earn and work less than their male partner that they take on more physical housework and childcare. However, there is evidence of gender asymmetry. Women in couples where the male partner earns or works more tend to do more of the physical housework and childcare, but the reverse is not necessarily true in couples where the male partner earns or works less (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Tichenor 2005).

The "doing gender" perspective offers an additional explanation for women's greater household labor burden that accounts for these gender asymmetries. Proponents of the doing gender theory understand gender in symbolic interactionist terms, as an accomplishment that must be enacted in every interaction rather than as a stable characteristic (West and Berk 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009). Adopting gender-normative means of self-presentation, including clothing and hairstyle, is a way of doing gender, as is performing housework and care work (for women) and avoiding it (for men) (Berk 1984).

Beyond these three major theories of physical labor allocation (relative resources, time availability, and doing gender), scholars have examined other demographic and contextual factors that shape a couple's physical labor allocation. For instance, certain moments in the life course, in particular the transition to parenthood, have been associated with increased gender differentiation in domestic roles (Yavorsky et al. 2015). Social class has also been theorized as a driver of distinct household labor patterns, largely via the mediator of gender ideology (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009). Education is positively associated

with egalitarian gender ideology for men and women (Scarborough et al. 2019; Usdansky 2011). For men, it is also positively associated with time spent on housework, whereas for women the association is negative (Bianchi et al. 2000; Sullivan 2010). However, other research turns up important scope conditions for these relationships: for instance, couples—disproportionately working-class—working alternate shifts tend to practice a more egalitarian division of labor by virtue of men's greater solo parenting time (Deutsch and Saxon 1998; Presser 1994).

How well any of these theories or predictors would apply in the cognitive context remains an open question. Key distinctions between the two dimensions might alter the pathways linking time, resources, and gender to household practices. For instance, time availability may be less salient in the cognitive dimension, because cognitive activities are less tied to specific contexts. One can research a vacation while at the office, for instance, but cooking can only be done at home. The relative resources theory hinges on the presumption that housework is an undesirable activity that individuals will leverage their greater financial resources to avoid (Coltrane 2000). Cognitive activities, such as decision-making, may be less uniformly onerous and thus subject to more complex bargaining patterns. For instance, an individual might leverage their financial resources into *greater* involvement in decision-making for the family.

Finally, the doing gender literature centers on "observable practices in interaction" (West and Zimmerman 2009) but has little to say about the cognitive precursors to those interactions. Another literature, on gendered identities, partially fills this gap by connecting apparently personal preferences, aspirations, and other internal processes to social patterns and cultural schemas (Cech 2013; Charles and Bradley 2009; Correll 2004; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). However, this literature tends to focus on the educational and occupational sphere, explaining patterns of educational attainment and occupational choice. Similar forces likely operate in the

household, where (gendered) selfhood may be enacted via perception and attention as well as action. Recent data suggests there has been greater gender convergence in the public than in the private sphere (England 2010; England et al. 2020). Greater understanding of cognitive labor—and its role in individuals' production of gender—may help explain the discrepant pace of change across spheres by illuminating the relationships among gender, cognition, and behavior.

In the sections that follow, I begin by asking what constitutes cognitive labor. I conceptualize it as a series of four activities varying in intensity and significance that are applied to distinct domains of household life. Next, I examine the relationship between gender and this labor and ask whether that relationship varies across social classes, employment configurations, and life stages. Finally, I explore the relationship between the physical and cognitive dimensions of household labor, asking whether and to what extent these dimensions are intertwined.

Findings

The nature of cognitive labor

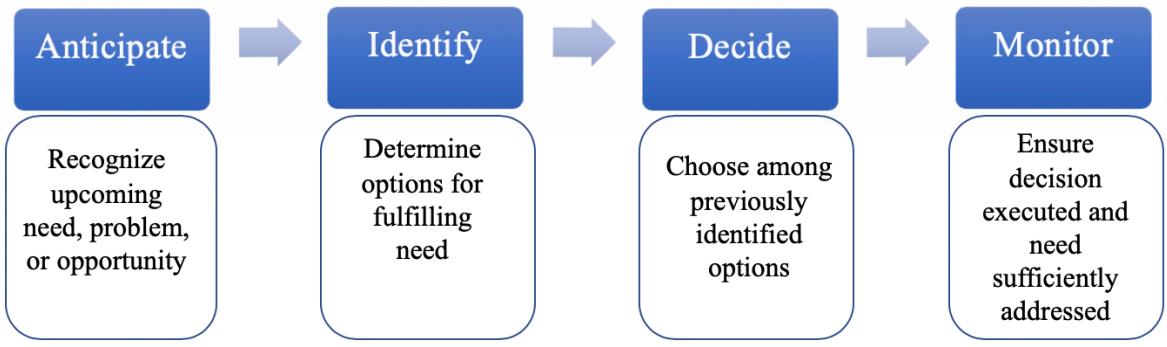
I find that cognitive household labor is comprised of four major components that can be applied to ten different domains of domestic life. After describing these actions and domains, I turn to qualitative variations in the intensity and significance of cognitive tasks. Cognitive labor emerges from this portrait as a multifaceted phenomenon, albeit one with underlying patterns that can be studied systematically.

Cognitive activities Most cognitive tasks can be classified as anticipation, identification, decision-making, or monitoring work (see Figure 1). I use examples drawn from

interview transcripts to illustrate how these four activities unfold sequentially in a cognitive "episode" that may stretch across minutes, hours, or weeks.

First, anticipation work entails the recognition of an upcoming need, potential problem, or opportunity. It is future-oriented, though the "future" in question may be the next hour or the next year. Chelsea noticed her toddler waking up progressively earlier each morning and envisioned her hours of rest dwindling. William remembered his family's upcoming trip to Pennsylvania for a wedding and saw an opportunity to plan a longer getaway. After hearing friends describe the challenges of finding affordable childcare, Desiree initiated a conversation about daycare well before she and her husband would need care for their unborn daughter. Bram noticed he used the last of the milk while preparing his son's morning oatmeal and realized the family would need more soon.

Figure 1. Four Components of Cognitive Labor



Cognitive labor is comprised of four elements that unfold sequentially.

Once the need or opportunity is anticipated, identification work begins: the individual or couple must generate options for meeting the need or taking advantage of the opportunity. Some identification work requires research, in the form of consulting outside sources (e.g., people, websites, or books) to generate and compare options for filling an anticipated need. For example, Chelsea asked her Facebook network for advice and learned that other parents rely on "okay-to-wake" alarm clocks that turn green to signal a child it is acceptable to get out of bed. She began sifting through product sites to familiarize herself with the range of features and price points available. Once she began contemplating childcare, Desiree embarked on an extensive search for the right daycare center, combing the web, polling friends and colleagues, and compiling spreadsheets with her findings. Other identification work is informal, conducted in the moment with limited external input required. After hitting on the vacation idea, William brainstormed several friends and relatives who live near the wedding venue and could act as potential hosts for his family's trip. As he poured out the last of the milk, Bram considered how long he could feasibly put off a grocery store run given the family's inventory of other staple foods and their schedule for the next few days.

At the third stage, a decision must be made: which of the identified options will the individual or couple pursue? Despite objections from her husband, Chelsea purchased a higher-end okay-to-wake clock she could program from her phone. William secured an agreement from a cousin to host his family and from his wife to request time off from her employer. After touring several options and deliberating with her husband, Desiree picked a moderately-priced daycare center recommended by people in her network. Bram noted that the family's supply of eggs was also depleted and resigned himself to a grocery trip, which he determined could be fit in during the hours his son attended preschool.

The fourth component, monitoring, entails following up to ensure the decision is carried out and satisfactorily addresses the anticipated need. For Chelsea, monitoring meant assessing the effect of the new clock on her son's wake-up time: was he staying in his room until an acceptable hour, or would she need to try another strategy? William needed to remind his cousin that their visit was coming up and confirm that his wife had successfully requested time off from work. Desiree's monitoring work was ongoing: was the daycare center meeting her daughter's needs? Were any drawbacks she learned about cause for concern or inherent to the daycare experience? Finally, Bram had to remember to ask his wife whether she needed anything from the grocery store, to follow up hours later when she hadn't yet responded to his text, and to travel to the store rather than back home after dropping his son off at school.

Cognitive domains As the previous examples suggest, cognitive labor can be directed to a wide range of issues and goals related to meeting the household's needs and fulfilling its obligations. For the population sampled here—couples with young or school-aged children—most of these issues fit into one or more of ten domains of household life: basic care for children, institutional engagement on children's behalf, relationship management, logistics and scheduling, shopping, cleaning and laundry, food, travel and leisure, finances, and maintenance. (See Table 4 in Chapter 2, which defines each domain and offers examples of cognitive tasks in that category.)

Cognitive labor domains overlap significantly with the categories ascribed to physical housework, which include shopping, cleaning, cooking, paying bills, and maintenance. This overlap reflects the symbiotic nature of these two dimensions of work: cognitive labor often culminates in physical labor. Chelsea's research on okay-to-wake clocks prompted a trip to the

store, as did Bram's monitoring of the household milk supply. Desiree's childcare decision was followed by daily drives between home and daycare, and William's travel planning led to the packing of suitcases and loading of the car. Such cognitive "pre-work" would likely be absent, however, from traditional calculations of household contributions.

Further, several domains of cognitive labor are absent from studies of physical labor altogether. Among these are institutional engagement on children's behalf, including tasks such as identifying extracurriculars and communicating with teachers; relationship management; and logistics and scheduling. Cognitive labor in these cases may lead to physical labor—driving a child to baseball practice, for example, or making a dish for a potluck—but such labor is typically limited in comparison to the cognitive labor that preceded it.

Burdensome and significant A final axis of variation within the broader category of cognitive labor is qualitative rather than categorical: cognitive tasks vary widely in burdensomeness and significance. Cognitive tasks can be more or less burdensome depending on their level of complexity and time-boundedness, and more or less significant depending on their visibility and the opportunity they afford to exercise influence. A final task characteristic, novelty, contributes to both the burden and significance of a cognitive task. There is considerable variation in these traits at the task level, but patterns are apparent at the cognitive component level (e.g., anticipation).

The complexity of a cognitive task is directly related to its burdensomeness. Complex tasks require the cognitive laborer to track multiple inputs, coordinate with several players, and/or allocate finite resources, often over a long time horizon. Comparatively simple tasks include fewer moving pieces to juggle and typically have a much smaller temporal scope.

Among the more complex tasks respondents faced was managing the family calendar. Inputs came in the form of emails, text messages, school flyers, and verbal communication. The preferences and constraints of spouses, childcare providers, and family members all had to be accounted for. Scheduling conflicts often forced creative reshuffling of family members' itineraries. By contrast, the cognitive work involved in cleaning was less complex in many households. Cleaning patterns were often routinized; there were few stakeholders to coordinate; and the only real "inputs" to consider were one's perceptions of dirt and clutter.[11]

Time-boundedness also shapes the burden imposed by a cognitive task. The least time-bound (and most burdensome) tasks tend to be pervasive and inflexible. They have no defined start or endpoint and are not easily deferred to a convenient time and place. Carla described the problem with such tasks: "Sometimes, it pops into my head, like, god, I should really get extra stuff for [our daughter]. I kind of wish that didn't pop into my head during the day…that I could actually just be working when I'm working." In comparison to ongoing tasks, such as managing a child's wardrobe or the family's calendar, time-bounded cognitive tasks—researching hotels for an upcoming trip, gathering documents for tax time—have a clear beginning and end and can be executed in a preferred time and place, rather than coming to mind unbidden.

An additional two characteristics reflect the significance, or what we might call the "return on investment," of cognitive tasks: visibility and influence. Many cognitive tasks are invisible to people other than the laborer, who see the physical outcome but not the mental work that enabled it. When Chelsea presented her husband with the clock she wanted to purchase, for instance, he had little idea what effort she had put into researching alternative options and

[11] For couples who outsourced some or all of their cleaning, this task became slightly more complex, as they had to coordinate with a cleaning person or service.

weighing their merits. Bridget joked that from her husband's perspective, the children's clothes "just appear like magic, as far as he's concerned."

Some cognitive work even goes unrecognized by the laborer herself, to the extent it is deeply engrained in habits and modes of thought or exists as a secondary activity carried out in parallel with other tasks. Maintaining a consistent supply of toiletries, paper goods, and properly sized children's clothing was one such category of invisible work. Holly, like many respondents, was baffled by my questions about how she tracked household inventory: "Umm, it's usually in my head. I generally have a good idea of how much we have of stuff." The idea that constantly monitoring the supply of toothpaste was work for which Holly was responsible had not occurred to her. More visible tasks were easier to receive "credit" for, either from oneself or one's spouse. Cognitive work surrounding unusual or one-off events, such as buying or renovating a home or planning a vacation, tended to be more visible than the cognitive work that went into maintaining the status quo, such as updating a child's wardrobe or planning meals. Though critical to a household's functioning, such maintenance tasks were not often recognized as real work when partners reflected on their contributions, meaning they did not necessarily show up on the household balance sheet and were excluded from a couple's "economy of gratitude" (Hochschild and Machung 2012).

A second characteristic on the beneficial side of cognitive labor centers on authority, or the extent to which cognitive tasks afford an opportunity to exercise influence over valued outcomes. Some cognitive tasks, such as figuring out where to move or which apartment to rent, have high stakes: they carry lasting consequences or come with large financial implications. The more cognitive work one puts into such a task, the better their ability to sway the outcome—and, thus, the family's trajectory—in their preferred direction. By contrast, much of the day-to-day

cognitive work of running a home and raising a family is low-stakes, at least in any one instance. Choosing a new home is distinct from choosing a takeout restaurant; picking out a new car is distinct from picking out a new bedspread.

A final variable, novelty, straddles the line between burden and significance. Novel cognitive tasks require individuals to meet a new challenge or address an unfamiliar issue, whereas familiar tasks involve the maintenance of existing systems or routines. Respondents talked about novelty as the difference between setting and implementing policy, or between the fixed and variable aspects of running a household. Novel tasks are burdensome to the extent they require an upfront investment of research and deliberation, and significant to the extent they offer an opportunity to exercise influence by establishing a new pattern. Kendra gave the example of preparing her children's lunches. On any given morning her husband is the one figuring out what to pack, but he operates within the constraints Kendra previously set: "I got the lunch bags, put them in lunch containers, and established these are the [ingredients] we generally need to have on hand for lunches." Ted drew a distinction between "fixed" tasks—every evening, dinner must be planned; every week, a grocery list must be compiled—and "variable" tasks, which arose unpredictably. Most salient for him in the latter category was his daughter's recent allergic reaction. She had never experienced dermatological problems, but now the couple had to find a specialist to treat her.

Broadly speaking, the four component activities of cognitive labor are differentially burdensome and significant. Anticipation and monitoring work tend to be high-burden and low-significance. They are pervasive and difficult to restrict to a particular time and place, yet comparatively invisible and do not in themselves allow the laborer to shape the family's course.

Putting an item on the household agenda may increase the odds an issue will be addressed, for instance, but this is distinct from determining *how* it should be addressed.

Decision-making, by contrast, is higher in significance, because it is often carried out via conversation and thus visible to both partners. Many decisions are spontaneous, but those with higher stakes are typically deliberated over a longer period and can be postponed to a convenient time. Decision-making is also the cognitive activity most closely associated with power and influence: participation in the decision-making process is the best way to advocate for one's preferred outcome.

Finally, identification work is a more heterogeneous category. Issues requiring formal research tend to be simultaneously more burdensome and significant than informal identification work. When dealing with costly issues (e.g., a large purchase) or when the stakes of making a bad decision were considered high (e.g., selecting a daycare center), the identification process tended to be both complex and visible to both partners.

The allocation of cognitive labor

Just as gender strongly influences the distribution of physical labor (Bianchi et al. 2012; Tai and Treas 2013), I find that gender is strongly correlated with the distribution of cognitive labor. Male and female respondents completed different amounts of cognitive labor; they applied their cognitive efforts to different activities and domains; and their cognitive loads were differentially burdensome and significant. In this section, I address each facet of cognitive labor's gendering in turn.

Overall workload[12] In most couples (82%), women carried a heavier overall cognitive load. Only 8% of couples were male-led in the cognitive dimension. A final 11% shared the cognitive load roughly equally. This pattern of female leadership in the cognitive dimension was broadly consistent across a range of demographics and circumstances we might otherwise expect to shape cognitive labor patterns. First, the majority of women in each social class grouping carried a heavier cognitive load than their male partner. Modest differences did emerge in particular domains: for instance, food-related cognitive labor tended to be allocated more traditionally in working-class and mixed-class couples, whereas finance-related cognitive labor tended to be allocated less traditionally.[13] Yet the overall cognitive labor allocation was nearly identical across classes: across middle-class couples, women led an average of 6.5 (of 10) cognitive labor domains, and across working-class and borderline couples, women led an average of 6.7 domains.

Second, the pattern of female dominance held among parents of newborns, high-schoolers, and all ages of children in between. Women's greater child-related cognitive load was the status quo, not a brief phase in the transition to parenthood. If anything, the gendering only increased over time. New parents often understood learning how to parent as a joint project. Danny, whose son was only a few months old at the time of our interview, reflected that "the baby is so young and new that we want to make sure that everything is, we are agreeing with it." Similarly, Joel reported that he and his wife had both immersed themselves in learning about parenting best practices, reading "a bunch of books" until they were "on the same page about guiding principles." Though their wives still took the lead cognitively, Danny and Joel did not

[12] See Chapter 2 for a detailed explanation of how I assessed cognitive workloads.
[13] This finding is in keeping with prior research showing women are more often in charge of finances when the couple's primary concern is making ends meet, and men take the lead when the couple is focused on maximizing returns (Cooper 2014).

necessarily see them as the childrearing experts. By the time children reached elementary school, however, mothers' role as leader and coordinator on all things child-related had solidified. Patterns of female dominance were slightly stronger among parents of older children, even as the cognitive demands of parenting increased. There were teachers, coaches, and friends to coordinate with; extracurricular endeavors to manage; and homework to supervise. It was overwhelmingly women who handled their children's social lives, signed them up for extracurriculars, and kept a close eye on the information coming from their school, even though there was no longer a plausible biological driver (e.g., breast-feeding) of parents' gender-differentiated roles.

Finally, the pattern of female cognitive dominance was shaped but not determined by economic considerations. 51 of the 55 men with "bigger" careers (in terms of earnings and/or hours worked) than their wives did less cognitive labor. The same was true of only 11 of the 30 higher-earning and/or longer-working women. This asymmetry suggests economics interact with gender to produce the observed cognitive labor outcomes, a theme I will return to in subsequent chapters.

Cognitive components In addition to overall cognitive workload, there were gender differences in the types of cognitive activities performed. Anticipation work was primarily female-led. Even in areas outside their expertise, women were often the first to notice a problem or initiate a discussion. For example, female respondents were markedly less likely to complete physical maintenance work but were often the ones to notice objects needing repair. They reminded their partner about the problem until he hired a contractor, purchased the necessary supplies, or otherwise worked toward a fix. Chelsea and Phil epitomized this dynamic:

> *I had read this news article, how to get your house ready for winter, and the biggest thing you've gotta do is clean your gutters. We moved into this house a couple years ago, and I don't think we've ever done any gutter cleaning. But, lately I noticed one of the gutters was clogged. So I think, so I've sort of been asking [my husband] to do the cleaning. . . . We were going back and forth on how to deal with that.* (Chelsea)

Although both partners assumed the act of physically removing leaves from the gutter would be Phil's responsibility, it was Chelsea who anticipated the need to winterize their home and brought it to her husband's attention, as she did most maintenance needs. Similarly, Sheila reported that maintenance tasks such as changing lightbulbs were among the small number of activities in her husband's purview. However, the anticipatory work was Sheila's: "I'll notice that the lightbulb needs changing, and I'll be like, 'I really need you to change this bulb. Here are the lightbulbs that I bought.'"

These two couples were not alone in pushing the bulk of anticipation work onto the female partner's plate. This dynamic frequently arose in meal planning, where many women anticipated the need for a grocery trip and solicited input from their husband while preparing a shopping list: "I'll tell him, like, think of something you want to cook, and he'll text me later, after he thinks" (Holly). It arose in shopping: "With a lot of [purchases] she'll either just find it and put it in the [online shopping] cart or send me a link, or [my wife] will say, 'Hey, we need socks . . . go find this'" (Jay). Likewise, it arose in planning for children's enrichment: "[My wife] does come up with the ideas [for weekend activities] more often than I do. I know it's probably because she's here and also probably because she is just constantly thinking about planning. . . . She's always thinking about what's going to happen" (Steve).

While women typically acted as the default anticipators regardless of which partner's purview the associated physical activity fell under, men rarely "crossed over" to take on anticipation work in female-led domains. Exceptions to this pattern centered on issues men felt

especially passionate about, which also happened to be stereotypically male. For instance, while women more often managed children's overall extracurricular pursuits, men were often involved in sports. Even within the broader category of sports, men were sometimes selective and ignored any feminized activities. Alex listened to a podcast about an unusual swimming technique around the time he realized his daughter was old enough to learn to swim, and he went out of his way to find her an instructor who specialized in this technique. He left the extracurriculars he felt less strongly about to his wife: "If it's ballet, you know, it's whatever." Tiffany explained that her husband was perpetually on the lookout for opportunities for their children to participate in organized sports: "Anything that they've ever been interested in, he will typically see it on, you know, like our [local] Facebook page or things like that." But when their daughter expressed an interest in gymnastics, which her husband does not consider a sport, "He wanted no parts of it. He would go and watch [our daughter], but other than that, he's obviously not looking for gymnastics [opportunities]."

Monitoring, too, was primarily female-led. Returning to the gutter-cleaning advocated by Chelsea, not only did she anticipate the need to winterize their home and identify gutter-cleaning as an important task, she also monitored the outcome of her husband's physical labor to determine whether further action was necessary:

> *Thursday night after dark, [my husband] Phil had gotten the stepstool out and basically reached out and gotten the one clog out of this gutter. And then Friday—when he told me, he said, "I cleaned out the gutters, we're all good now." . . . So then Friday, I'm looking out the window . . . and like, from where I can see, that gutter is like, still got a bunch of leaves in it. So I'm like, "Mmm . . . what, you know, I thought you cleaned it, look, it's full of leaves." He's like, "Those leaves don't matter." Then we had this long discussion about, to what extent do a few leaves in the gutter matter?*

Chelsea's concern suggested that tasking Phil with the physical labor of removing leaves did little to reduce her own cognitive burden: only when she determined the anticipated need (i.e., to winterize their home) had been sufficiently fulfilled could she move on.

Like Chelsea, Nina found that the act of delegating a task to her husband Julian did not preclude her from monitoring the outcome. Several weeks before our interview, she asked Julian to schedule a flu shot for their 2-year-old. When she checked in a few days later, the task remained undone: "He couldn't, like he literally, physically couldn't find the 15 minutes in his work day to fit it in. . . . Maybe if I had left him with that task for a couple weeks he might've found the time. But I want him to get it done and get [our daughter] her flu shot." Similarly, Heather often "tasks" her husband Jeremy with specific to-dos: "I'll say like, 'I've tasked you,' or 'you've been tasked.'" Once she sent off the email, I asked, was she able to stop thinking about the delegated task? "Not really," Heather admitted, "until he'll email me and say like, 'Okay, this is done.'. . . So I have to follow up with him and say, 'Did that actually get done? If not, can you do it tomorrow?' So it's not really off my plate mentally until I know that it's done."

Whereas women like Heather used spousal reminders as a way of managing their own cognitive workload, their male partners sometimes mistook monitoring for nagging. Both Molly and her husband Dean brought up their upcoming trip to Disneyworld several times in their independent interviews. "We're about to go to Disney next week," said Molly, "and I am like—big crowds! small children!—feeling anxious, and he thinks that I'm just crazy." She seemed to be channeling some of that anxiety into reminders for her husband Dean: "I'll be like, 'Make sure you bring your bathing suit,' because it's winter [and] we're not thinking about the summer." Dean, who was responsible for booking restaurant reservations, theme park passes,

and a rental car, reported receiving an increasing number of vacation-related texts from his wife. "I discuss some of it" with my wife, he said, but "sometimes she doesn't remember [what I tell her] or isn't listening or whatever…so then sometimes she'll worry about it. So she has been very worried about whatever we do." The rental car was a particular sticking point: Dean wanted to wait until the last minute in hopes that prices would drop, but Molly kept asking him for updates. From his perspective, this exemplified a broader dynamic in which Dean does a lot of the family's research and troubleshooting, whereas his wife "worries about it more." In the end, "she might spend more time actually using brainpower thinking about it, but I am the one who ends up doing it later, mentally."

Identification work was the most heterogeneous category. Its gendering varied based on the precise nature of the work involved (e.g., was research necessary, or was informal identification sufficient?) and on the domain in question. The distribution of informal identification work largely depended on proximity, expertise, and general patterns of cognitive responsibility. The parent home alone with the crying child figured out how to soothe her. The more experienced cook came up with possible dinner ideas on an evening with no advance plan and few ingredients on hand. The partner who led cognitive efforts in the logistics domain brainstormed strategies for resolving a potential scheduling conflict as soon as it came to their attention. To the extent that women were more often home, had expertise in a wider range of domestic tasks—largely as a function of doing those tasks over the course of years—and more broadly served as primary cognitive laborers, they also took on the bulk of informal identification work. In other words, identification work could be a self-reinforcing cycle, in which the partner who did such work built skills in that area and increased their ability to carry out this work most effectively, a dynamic I explore in more depth in Chapter 5.

Formal research was less feminized. In many couples, it was the primary responsibility of neither person; instead, both partners took the lead in a few domains. The division of this labor was especially clear-cut for Sharon and Douglas:

> *I research all of the purchases, almost exclusively. Douglas researches travel and activities. It is pretty much very cleanly divided down the line. He finds things to do and, when we are going on a trip somewhere, obsessively [searches] Priceline, airline tickets, rental car, all of that stuff. Anytime we need something for the house, I do the research on that.*

More commonly, research responsibilities were implied rather than strictly delineated. Liz, like many female respondents, does the bulk of the identification work in the childcare domain. When her husband, Nathan, has a parenting question, "I kind of give him the expert info, and then we talk it out and [decide], 'What are we comfortable with?'" Nathan takes on research related to home improvement projects and long-term investments. When they ran into problems with their tap water, for example, Nathan researched the pros and cons of purchasing a refillable water dispenser.

Within broad domains, such as shopping, gendered patterns sometimes emerged. "Gadget" research (e.g., technology, cars, and appliances) was largely shared or within the male partner's purview. Katie leaves "anything related to cars"—comparing models, looking for deals, and so on—to her husband. Danielle noted that her husband's growing interest in smoked meats recently led him to buy a smoker "out of nowhere," although as the primary chef she would be the one to actually use the new device. For "everyday" shopping and for gifts, women did more of the identification work, even if they delegated the actual purchase to their husband. "[My husband] would buy gifts. I would send him to the store, [but] I would tell him what to get, 100%," explained Kim. Likewise, Shaun said his wife "would tell me what she wanted and I'd

be the one to go get it…[She would say,] 'Hey, go get me a three-pack of onesies and this.' I would run out, but she would be the one to determine [what to get]."

Identification patterns also varied depending on how each partner's research skills were assessed. If one partner's internet research process was deemed superior, he or she took on the bulk of such work. Joanna and Isaac both agreed that Isaac was "much better at doing the internet research [needed] to make these kinds of purchasing decisions." Joanna occasionally did a cursory search, but halfheartedly, knowing Isaac would step in if she presented options he considered subpar. In another couple, Jackie acted as the designated internet researcher. When I asked her husband Matthew to compare his research process to hers, he told me, "She'll go to maybe four or five consumer sites and try to get reviews on everything, whereas I'll look at one or two actual product sites and just read the reviews on the site itself, and then make a choice based on that." Matthew was trying his best to "come up to her level . . . rather than force Jackie to come down to my low standards."

While internet research was relatively gender-neutral, "social" research was often female-led. Women more often built a choice set from the testimony and recommendations they collected from friends and acquaintances. This was especially true when the question touched on parenting, as most women were connected to social networks of mothers who freely shared information and advice, either in person or online. Men did not describe parallel networks of fathers, and they often reported reluctance to interface with mothers. As a result, when questions called for crowd-sourcing, women were often the ones to collect information. Sam recollected that his wife led the search for childcare, largely because she was part of a local "First-Time Moms" Facebook group: "I feel like we got a lot of information out of that group, and she would share it with me and then we'd talk about it." Colleen explained that "the moms go to the moms

for help…like I don't think any mom would just go to [my husband]. And, honestly, if they did, I'd be like, 'Well that's weird.'"

Finally, decision-making was a largely shared activity. Both men and women reported consulting their partner "about all sorts of things" (Isaac), "no matter how little" (Douglas), to the point where they were "semi-codependent" (Jackie). Questions that involved a significant outlay of resources, represented a deviation from routine, or would impact both partners were rarely decided unilaterally. Heather explained that "we both bring each other in on most decisions," to the point where it was "maybe too much." Her husband Jeremy agreed that "we're constantly consulting." Jackie's husband Matthew reported making most work-related decisions on his own, but "almost everything else, I think we at least try to bounce off each other or make each other aware of." Yet this rhetoric of collaboration obscured variation in the degree to which decision-making was truly shared.

At one extreme, couples deliberated and debated options together, using information they collected independently or that one partner identified and shared with the other. Jill explained that with big decisions—whether to have another child or build an extension on the house, for instance—she and her husband will "leave no stone unturned." They debate the pros and cons of each option and then table the discussion until both partners have had time to think things through.

In other cases, "joint" decision-making entailed one partner making a preliminary decision and offering the other an opportunity to veto it. Said Brooke, "I bring [my husband] in a lot to help with decisions, because even though I kind of make a decision, I need him to agree with it for me to feel like it's a decision." These semi-unilateral decisions were usually made by the partner cognitively responsible for the domain in question. To the extent women led more

domains in most households, they also did more of this kind of decision-making. Kara, for example, noted that any question about their 1-year-old required both her and her husband's perspective. She drew a marked contrast between her own and others' relationship in this regard:

> *There are some couples where there's like, wife domains and husband domains, and things that [fall within] the "wife" domain, she'll just do. My sister and her husband, I think, are like this. When it came to planning my nephew's first birthday, she did everything, and I don't even think she told her husband what the plan was; he was happy either way. I think even though I have more time to do that type of thing, [my husband] Joel likes to be involved and give his opinion.*

As she described Joel's participation in their own son's birthday party preparations, however, it became clear that "collaboration" largely consisted of Kara sharing her tentative plan with Joel and securing his agreement: "I wanted to make sure we talked about it, so that it was, 'I think we should get bagels.' 'Great! Bagels sound good.'"

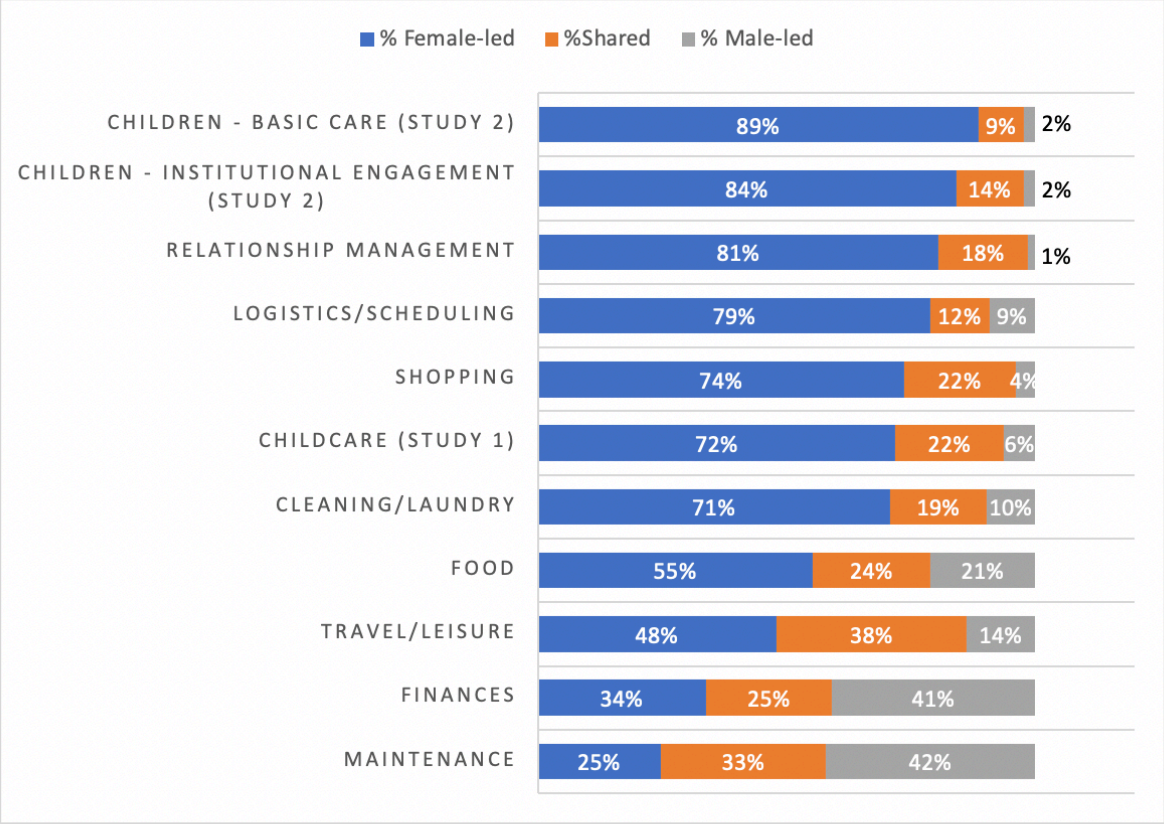
This nominal collaboration helped obscure more fundamental cognitive labor inequalities. Multiple couples exhibited a pattern of gender imbalance in anticipation and identification work followed by consultation at the decision-making stage. Although Jenna and Peter mutually agreed to enroll their daughter in a music class, it was Jenna who found the class and alerted Peter. Similarly, Desiree and Danny discussed the merits of buying a second stroller before agreeing together to purchase one. However, it was Desiree who suggested the need for a more compact option, identified a good model, and noted an upcoming sale.

The pattern of female anticipation and identification followed by "joint" decision-making was particularly apparent in the realm of formal childcare. Many men spoke knowledgeably about the couple's search for the right daycare and offered a clear rationale for their choice. Only when I pressed for details did I learn that in nearly all cases, the female partner initiated the search and identified a shortlist of options before inviting her husband to tour the finalist centers

and help select one. In this fashion, men retained some of the power associated with decision-making and received "credit" for participating in cognitive activity without putting in the preparatory labor required to reach the decision stage.

Domain Focus Gender differences were also apparent in respondents' domain focus, as figure 2 shows. The strongly female-typed cognitive domains of childcare, cleaning, and shopping mirror findings on the gendering of physical tasks (Bianchi et al. 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Yet two of the domains women led, logistics and relationship management, are rarely accounted for in studies of physical labor. In most families, both partners had access to a shared calendar; however, women updated it more frequently, more often issued reminders about upcoming events, and were more likely to ensure compatibility among individual family members' schedules. As Phil reported, "[My wife] owns the social calendar. I make requests or whatever, but . . . she owns calendaring." He is hesitant to schedule things on his own, "because if I just made [an appointment], she'd be like, 'Uh, that was the one morning we had to "something"—to sleep in.'" Danny attributed his wife's greater control over the family calendar to his own incompetence: "I'm awful. I have a calendar for big events, but for things—like, we knew we were coming here [for the interview] and I just kept reminding myself—but my wife, she is the glue."

Figure 2. Gendering of cognitive domains



Percentages represent fraction of couples in which a cognitive labor domain was classified as female-led, shared, or male-led

Likewise, women were especially likely to identify appropriate gifts for friends and family, keep track of birthdays, and coordinate social gatherings. This pattern held even where it seemed inconvenient or inefficient. Because of his work schedule, for instance, Antoni routinely drives his daughter to and from daycare and interacts frequently with classmates' parents: "I would chat with other parents and say, 'Hey, what do you think about, if we want to do a playdate?' The planning then is handled by [my wife] Siobhan. If I start the conversation, she will email the parent and plan a playdate or something." Similarly, both Joanna and Isaac agreed that Joanna maintains the family's social connections. As she elaborated on the arrangement, however, Joanna acknowledged an oddity: "It's funny because we have a big group of friends,

mostly his friends. People he knew in college or friends of college friends. They are his friends, but I've become part of the group, and a lot of it is the men who are the college friends but the women who do the social organizing."

There was no domain where the majority of men led cognitively; however, finance and maintenance came the closest (at 41% and 42% male-led, respectively). Men frequently handled long-term or big-picture financial matters, such as managing an investment portfolio and determining how much the family could afford to pay for a home or for childcare. Financial tasks such as managing a monthly budget and paying bills were less clearly gendered, with numerous cases of male and female leadership. Finally, some couples preferred to keep separate accounts, with each person responsible for managing a subset of bills and expenses. Bridget described a "monthly reconciliation" where she and her husband sat down together to correct any imbalances in what each partner spent for the previous month. Desiree and Danny preferred to split expenses in real time. "If we both go grocery shopping together," explained Desiree, "we ask if we can split [the cost] in half, and we both swipe our card." In the maintenance domain, men more often managed home renovations and researched solutions to minor mechanical problems, but women typically handled the aesthetic aspects of setting up and maintaining a home, such as deciding where to hang a picture or when it was time to replace the couch.

Burdens and benefits Gender differences in men's and women's cognitive specialties led to gender differences in the burdensomeness and significance of their cognitive workloads. Men were disproportionately involved in the more time-bound, visible, and influential aspects of cognitive labor, whereas women's tasks tended to be more pervasive and less visible.

Men's involvement was highest in the decision-making component of cognitive labor. Because this work is often collaborative and directly followed by a tangible outcome, decision-making is among the most visible elements of the cognitive dimension. It also represents the best opportunity to exercise power; indeed, marital power has historically been determined based on who gets the final say in more decisions (Blood and Wolfe 1960). The cognitive activities with highest male involvement, decision-making and some identification work, also tended to be the most time-bound. Identification work can be scheduled and crossed off a task list once complete. Decision-making, particularly for higher-stakes issues, is often carried out via a conversation that can be postponed to a mutually convenient time.

Women's cognitive work was comparatively less time-bound and less visible. Neither anticipation nor monitoring work, both female-dominated activities, can be easily confined to a to-do list, because it is the work of creating and managing the to-do list itself. Simultaneously, these activities were among the least likely to be credited as "labor" by respondents. The work of perceiving and remembering was taken for granted until it was absent and the family ran out of toilet paper, missed an appointment, or forgot to send a child to school with the appropriate gear.

Both men and women took on some complex cognitive tasks, such as managing a home renovation (male-typed) or the family's calendar (female-typed). With some exceptions (e.g., many men oversaw families' investment portfolio), men's complex tasks were project-based, with a relatively clear-cut beginning, middle, and end, and salient to both partners because of the financial investment required or the visible construction progress. Women took on complex projects, too (e.g., selecting a nanny or daycare center), but their complexity often came in the form of nebulous, never-ending roles as calendar manager, social coordinator, and children's

clothing supervisor. In contrast to projects, roles are ongoing and less gratifying because they are non-linear and never completed.

Finally, with the exception of the maintenance and finance domains, women tended to be more involved in the novel or variable components of managing a household, whereas men focused on routines. As Colleen put it, "[my husband] automatically does a lot of things, whereas my [to-do] list is managing all the things that change" from week to week, like buying supplies to send in for a special school project or finding a new medical specialist. On one hand, this meant women often got to "set policy" for the household and ensure their priorities were met. On the other, it is more difficult to recognize new needs and build systems and practices from scratch than to implement a familiar practice. Habits can be put on autopilot, whereas novel issues require focus.

In sum, gender suffused all aspects of the cognitive dimension. Women did more cognitive work in general, and they specialized in some of the least beneficial and most burdensome tasks and activity types. Men were not absent from the cognitive dimension, but their participation centered on its more visible and influential components, including formal research and decision-making. Some of the most female- and male-typed domains mirrored findings on the division of physical labor: men were most active in cognitive labor related to maintenance and finances, for instance, whereas women specialized in childcare. But several domains dominated by women (e.g., logistics and scheduling, managing social relationships) are not typically counted in traditional studies of household labor.

The relationship between physical and cognitive labor

By some measures, gender in the cognitive dimension appears to echo established findings regarding gender in the physical dimension of household labor. Women do more cognitive work, except when it comes to making decisions (generally shared), maintaining the home, and managing long-term investments. Women's cognitive work is less time-bound and more pervasive, mirroring the distinction between "core" and "discretionary" tasks in literature on physical housework (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010; Tai and Treas 2013). These similarities suggest an important question: are the physical and cognitive dimensions of household labor meaningfully distinct? In this final section, I argue that they are indeed separable, albeit related, constructs and that a comparison of the two dimensions offers important insights into the changing nature of gender inequality.

Respondents themselves offered two competing arguments about the relationship between cognitive and physical labor. Some believed these dimensions were separable, and inequalities in one dimension could be offset in the other. Others viewed cognitive and physical labor as intertwined, such that the lead cognitive laborer was inevitably the lead physical laborer, too. When asked, at the close of their interview, to separately estimate their own allocation of physical and of cognitive labor, many respondents described these as offsetting: the female partner carried a heavier cognitive load, while the male partner carried a heavier physical load. Heather and Jeremy, who independently reported that "she sets it up (i.e., plans)" and "he knocks it down (i.e., executes)," exemplified this group, as did Jenny and Shaun, who described her as the household's "brain" and him as the brawn who carried out the plans she devised.

Whereas the off-setter group believed the physical and cognitive dimensions were separable, other respondents argued the contrary. As Colleen put it, "[My husband said,] 'Make me a list, and I'll do the things on the list.' And I'm like, if I make the list then that means I

already had to think about it, and I might as well just do it. Like the thinking of it is, I'm almost done it." In other words, it was at best inefficient and at worst impossible to separate the conception and execution of tasks. Respondents like Colleen saw cognitive and physical labor as "bundled," in that the partner who thought about an issue and crafted a plan was typically the same partner who executed that plan.

In practice, there were elements of truth to both groups' perspectives. In many couples, men's involvement in physical tasks was indeed higher than their involvement in cognitive tasks. Women frequently came up with a plan but delegated execution to their partner. Brooke drafted a packing list, for instance, and her husband Jason gathered the supplies she asked for. Bridget created weekly meal plans, and her husband Jimmy cooked the dinners she planned. Siobhan generated a shortlist of daycare centers and a list of criteria to evaluate them on but sent her husband to tour the centers and report back.

However, many respondents struggled to "un-bundle" the cognitive and physical elements of complex tasks that required substantial background knowledge to successfully complete. Alexis argued that some tasks "kind of fit together nicely," such that "it makes sense for one person to manage." For instance, with a task like finding a new babysitter, Alexis could ask her husband to call a reference. Without understanding of the broader context, however, he wouldn't know what to ask on the phone. In the food domain, Nicole reported that she had tried sending her husband grocery shopping but mostly given up: "I just have to send him the list, and then sometimes he, while he's shopping you get 20 messages, like, 'Is this the right [item]? Is this the right milk?'"

Across the sample, only four couples were true off-setters, in that the physical dimension was male-led and the cognitive dimension was female-led. More often, couples were strongly

female-led for cognitive labor but either shared in or were only slightly female-led for physical labor. Nevertheless, couples came closer to equality in their physical than cognitive labor practices. A substantial minority of couples in study 2 (21 of 44) either shared the physical labor roughly equally (14 couples) or were male-led in the physical dimension (7 couples). By comparison, the vast majority of couples (37 of 44) were female-led cognitively. Only 3 were male-led, and the remaining 4 shared cognitive labor roughly equally.[14] Sharing physical labor appeared to be a necessary but insufficient condition for sharing cognitive labor: couples who shared cognitive labor nearly always shared physical labor, but the reverse was not true. There were no cases where the male partner led both dimensions and only one case where he led cognitive labor only. However, there were multiple cases where women led both dimensions or led cognitive labor while sharing in physical labor.

This comparison of the physical and cognitive dimensions suggests that the female-typing of cognitive tasks may be particularly "sticky." The fact that some couples managed to divide and conquer the same physical and cognitive tasks others viewed as inextricably linked suggests the relationship between these two dimensions is shaped as much by preferences and perceptions as rigid constraints. With an upfront investment in sharing information and agreeing on standards of completion, many physical tasks could be successfully transferred from one partner to another. Yet oversight for those tasks remained in women's purview, with limited exceptions. Carla explained, "If I say [to my husband], 'Buy [our daughter] two pairs of leggings,' he will go out and buy her two pairs of leggings, without resentment." He "doesn't have problems" doing any physical task she asks him to, but "it's just—it wouldn't occur to him

[14] Throughout this section, I focus on the 44 couples in Study 2, as I did not collect sufficient information to assess Study 1 couples' division of physical labor. See Chapter 2 for more detailed information regarding the measurement of physical labor in the sample.

to do that" on his own. Or, as Bridget said of her husband, "I think his brain would have to be different" before he could take on more cognitive labor. It was these "brain" differences, rather than any old-fashioned ideas about men's and women's work, that respondents like Bridget and Carla saw standing in the way of cognitive equality. Physical equality, or something close to it, was understood as a more attainable goal, as we'll see in the next chapter.

Discussion

In this chapter, I defined cognitive labor; showed how it is gendered; and examined the relationship between the physical and cognitive dimensions of household labor. I found that cognitive labor is comprised of four primary activities (anticipation, identification, decision-making, and monitoring) applied to distinct substantive domains of household life (e.g., food, logistics, social relationships). Gender is associated with both the quantity and quality of cognitive labor an individual completes. Across life stages and social classes, women in most couples complete the majority of cognitive work for their household. Women are particularly apt to take on the pervasive and inflexible elements of cognitive labor, such as anticipation and monitoring, whereas men's cognitive contributions are highest in more time-bound and influential tasks, such as decision-making and formal research. Sharing physical labor seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for sharing cognitive labor. The correlation between physical and cognitive workloads varies across couples: cognitive tasks and their physical correlates are easily bundled but may be disentangled with some upfront effort.

These findings have important implications for scholars of gender, family, and social change. First, they underscore the importance of expanding our definition of household labor to include both its more visible and invisible components. If, as I find here, women routinely

complete more cognitive labor than their male partners, current research may reflect an underestimate of the gap between men's and women's household labor burden. In turn, the omission of cognitive labor may obscure key pathways linking women's domestic responsibilities to their health, relationship satisfaction, and employment outcomes. Compared to men, women report higher rates of stress, anxiety, and feelings of time scarcity (Craig and Brown 2016; Offer and Schneider 2011). Women are also more likely to initiate divorce and less likely to be employed (England et al. 2020). While my data cannot establish causal connections between the allocation of cognitive labor and gender disparities in economic or health outcomes, they indicate a need to build cognitive labor into future studies of household life and of work-family conflict.

Second, my data help rule out alternative explanations for the link between gender and cognitive labor. A traditionally gendered division of cognitive labor is not—or not solely—a function of social class, employment configuration, or life stage. Women who earn or work more than their male partner frequently retain oversight of domestic affairs, even as they delegate or outsource many physical chores to their spouse or a paid service-provider. While one might expect highly-educated couples to be in the vanguard, given their higher rates of egalitarian beliefs (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Scarborough et al. 2019), female cognitive leadership is the dominant pattern across educational groups.

Finally, my data point to different rates of change in the physical and cognitive dimensions of household labor. I find considerably more gendering in the cognitive than physical dimension. In the portion of the sample where I have data on both physical and cognitive labor, only seven couples were cognitively male-led or shared cognitive labor roughly equally. By contrast, 21 of these couples were male-led in the physical labor realm or shared physical labor roughly

equally.[15] This discrepancy suggests that even as men's and women's physical labor patterns inch toward equality, gender-traditional cognitive allocation patterns are considerably "stickier" (Bianchi et al. 2000). Perhaps this is because cognitive labor lies outside mainstream discourse regarding household labor, leaving egalitarian couples without the language or conceptual framework to articulate their different cognitive roles as a form of inequity.

Cognitive labor may also feel closer to an identity than a set of behaviors. It is one thing to mop, and another to be bothered by the accumulation of dust. Likewise, driving a child to dance class is distinct from feeling reassured by a pre-set plan for who is going where, and how they will get there, in a given week. The former are discrete actions that one may do or not do; the latter may be experienced as something closer to personal traits or proclivities that cannot be turned on or off at will. My research suggests that changes in how gender is done (i.e., in the visible, interactive elements of running a household) do not necessarily presage changes in how gender is thought (i.e., in how needs are anticipated, options identified, and household affairs monitored).

Data on broader trends in gender ideology lends credence to this hypothesis. There is increasing acceptance of the idea that both men and women can *do* anything, and that neither is inherently superior (Charles and Grusky 2004; Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011). Yet essentialist beliefs remain widespread: while a woman may *do* anything, she is still perceived as fundamentally different from a man (Knight and Brinton 2017). Activities converge, but men's and women's preferences and proclivities are seen as distinct (Cech 2013; Charles and Bradley

[15] This estimate puts my sample at the vanguard, with a considerably higher rate of equal sharing than in the general population (see, e.g., Hall and McDermid 2009). This may be a selection effect: those who opted into a study on parenting and decision-making might be more equitable than the average couple. It might also be that I've been overly generous in determining what constitutes "shared" in the physical labor realm, in part because I have less detailed data on physical than on cognitive labor.

2009). Cultural scripts regarding the "involved father" and "helpful husband" are increasingly available, but remnants of the separate spheres ideology still position women as ultimately responsible for domestic outcomes, whether or not they are physically doing every chore (Cooper 2000; Doucet 2001; Gerson 2011). I interrogate the meanings respondents attribute to cognitive labor, with a particular focus on identity and personality, in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: De-Gendering Cognitive Labor[16]

Heather and Jeremy, married parents of two toddlers, are a proudly egalitarian couple. In separate interviews, Jeremy reported that "[we] don't believe in a lot of traditional gender norms. . . . We think a lot of that stuff is nonsense," and Heather argued that "obviously ideally [our division of household labor] is 50/50." Yet both partners admitted they fall short of their ideals. Heather "does most of the mental [work] and I probably do most of the physical [work]," argued Jeremy. "Ideally I would like to do more mental stuff, because I think that would make her happier. I think that would unburden her to some extent." Heather estimated that she had been doing more of both the physical and cognitive work while she was on maternity leave, but she thought the gap was smaller in the physical than in the cognitive dimension. Her strategy for rebalancing the load was to "task" Jeremy with whatever was on her mind: "I'll text him, like, 'Look at your email, you've been tasked.' He'll just do it….I think he's done the best he could by saying, like, 'I'll get it done if you just tell me what you want me to do.'"

Heather attributed the gap in the spouses' physical labor contributions to their current circumstances. For one, she was breastfeeding and home all day caring for their two children. For another, Jeremy's job is "super demanding…the type of job where after the kids go to sleep, often he has to bring his computer out and work some more." She expected their physical labor allocation to rebalance somewhat once she returned to work, and especially once their youngest stopped breastfeeding. However, she doubted their cognitive labor arrangement would shift much:

> *I'm more of a worrier generally, and I have a hard time getting beyond—if something is on the to-do list, it seems more urgent to me than it really is….At times, even pre-kids, I wanted*

[16] This chapter includes material from previously published work (Daminger 2020)

> *to say, 'Jeremy, can you just worry about this? I don't want to.' But then it just, I think that over time we've understood just where we are, where our tendencies are.*

Though Heather admitted her reality did not live up to her ideals, she did not seem especially troubled by the gender differences she described, particularly in the cognitive dimension. Jeremy, too, appeared relatively unbothered by the inequalities he acknowledged: "Our [household labor] system has been fairly organic, based on comparative advantage, which makes me think that it's a good system."

In this chapter, I ask how it is that couples like Heather and Jeremy can acknowledge gender inequalities in their household labor contributions, admit they are suboptimal, and yet remain relatively content with their status quo. This micro-level puzzle mirrors macro-level questions about the stalled and uneven nature of the gender revolution (England 2010). If egalitarianism is on the rise, why do men's and women's household contributions remain so unequal? The theory of cognitive dissonance predicts that changing beliefs about gender should prompt dissatisfaction with the persistence of gendered labor patterns (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, and Levy 2015). Yet for Heather, Jeremy, and others like them, recognition of household labor inequality fails to catalyze significant spousal conflict or sustained change efforts, particularly in the cognitive dimension.

To explain why, I examine the accounts and justifications couples offer when asked to explain how and why they have allocated domestic responsibilities in a particular way (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Scott and Lyman 1968). Heather and Jeremy are typical of this sample in that they use a rhetoric of *personal essentialism* to account for cognitive labor patterns they recognize as unequal. That is, they argue that their cognitive labor roles are a largely immutable function of who they are as individuals. Heather is a "worrier" and "planner," while Jeremy is

"bumbling" and more easily distracted; given their temperamental differences, both spouses believe Heather is more or less destined to take on more of the couple's cognitive labor.

By describing their cognitive allocations as a product of individual temperament rather than gender norms or ideology, couples like Heather and Jeremy *de-gender* their unequal labor arrangements: they distinguish what they see as a coincidentally gender-traditional outcome from an allocation process they perceive as gender-neutral. This de-gendering minimizes spousal conflict and personal dissatisfaction, but it also reduces the likelihood of change. If cognitive labor patterns are intrinsically tied to individual natures, couples see little point in trying to alter the immutable.

Respondents also de-gender their physical labor patterns, albeit using different logic. Heather and Jeremy, like many couples, focus on their current circumstances: Jeremy's demanding job, and Heather's extended maternity leave. Like personal essentialism, this circumstance-oriented logic dissolves the connection between gender ideology and physical labor. But by seeing the physical labor as a function of circumstance rather than temperamental difference, couples leave open the possibility of future change. In Heather and Jeremy's case, the couple expects Heather to return to work and the spouses' hours at home to converge. They also plan to move to a new state within a few years to be closer to family, which could lead to a job transition that reduces the intensity of Jeremy's professional commitments or increases Heather's.

Across the sample, respondents' beliefs about the possibility or impossibility of change tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Interviewees report many more examples of physical than cognitive labor reallocation in the wake of childbirth, job loss, career changes, and other major life transitions. By contrast, relatively few describe concerted efforts to reallocate

cognitive labor, and even fewer report success in those attempts. These findings help crystallize the link between cognitive labor and self-concept: while physical labor is largely seen as a matter of what one does, cognitive labor is largely seen as a matter of who one is. This insight suggests one reason the gendering of this labor is so difficult to undo (Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009). Because respondents understand their tendency to do or avoid cognitive labor as a manifestation of who they are as individuals rather than as men and women, gender essentialism is effectively replaced by personal essentialism. This apparently benign narrative in fact obscures the gendered social forces that drive so-called innate tendencies and, ultimately, staves off the cognitive dissonance that might otherwise prompt change.

Accounting for inequality

The rise in egalitarian beliefs has outpaced the rise in egalitarian household labor practices. Over the past four decades, individuals with traditional or strongly traditional gender attitudes went from comprising the bulk of General Social Survey respondents (59 percent) to all but disappearing (7 percent) (Scarborough et al. 2019). Young adults in particular idealize long-term partnerships where paid work and caregiving responsibilities are shared (Gerson 2011). Yet men still spend approximately half as many weekly hours on physical housework as women—a gap that has remained relatively stable since the mid-1990s (Bianchi et al. 2012).

We would expect the disjuncture between beliefs and behaviors to generate cognitive dissonance and spousal conflict for couples living out their own version of the stalled gender revolution, and for that disjuncture to become particularly salient in the interview context (England 2010; Hochschild and Machung 2012). Recognition of inconsistencies between one's beliefs and behaviors typically sparks a state of inner tension, or dissonance, which can be

resolved by altering one's beliefs, altering one's behaviors, or reframing the situation so as to remove the appearance of conflict between the two (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones et al. 2015). Applied to the empirical case at hand, these options translate to changing one's beliefs in the importance of egalitarianism, working to bring unequal behaviors closer to the egalitarian ideal, or finding a way to see labor inequalities as consistent with egalitarian principles. Prior research demonstrates all three tactics at work in the realm of household labor. For instance, the transition to parenthood is sometimes associated with increased traditionalism in gender beliefs (Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde 2010). Deliberate efforts to change behaviors are also evident: in response to dissatisfaction with or conflict over household labor allocation, for example, individuals or couples may actively pursue a more equal division of labor (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Mannino and Deutsch 2007).

However, it is the third option, reframing family labor patterns as consistent with egalitarian principles, that has received the most attention. Scholars have turned up several genres of "family myths" that allow couples to erase or justify household inequalities. Respondent Nancy Holt, from Hochschild and Machung's (2012) classic study of household labor, exemplifies the erasure approach. Although Nancy completes the majority of housework and childcare for the family, she reframes her responsibilities as encompassing only the "upstairs" activities (Hochschild and Machung 2012). In the researchers' estimation, Nancy's responsibilities clearly exceed her husband's, yet Nancy frames his work as parallel to her own. Evan, she says, completes the "downstairs" tasks of pet care, car maintenance, and lawn work. Creative reframing of each spouse's contributions as distinct but equivalent effectively resolves Nancy's cognitive dissonance: she retains her feminist commitment to sharing the household load but avoids conflict with her husband, who resisted her prior efforts to change his behavior.

Similarly, sociologists attempting to recruit egalitarian couples report that many self-identified egalitarians fail to meet even lenient criteria for equality (Deutsch 2000; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). Their identity as egalitarians may lead such couples to interpret their household activities through a particular lens.

Couples can also reframe their labor patterns by acknowledging inequality and subsequently justifying it, or establishing its legitimacy with reference to another higher-order principle or order of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Consistent with time availability and specialization theories, for instance, some couples justify an unequal allocation of unpaid labor as fair by arguing that each partner's overall contributions to the household are similar (Becker 1993; Deutsch 2000). If one partner works longer hours outside the home, a couple may consider it appropriate for the other partner to complete the majority of the domestic labor (van Hooff 2011). Even if partners' paid hours are similar, they may cite the inflexible or stressful nature of those hours as an obstacle to one partner's greater participation in household affairs (Beagan et al. 2008). Outside the arena of paid work, couples may offer their personal preferences or skills—for instance, one partner's higher tolerance for disorder or limited facility with a mop—as the reason one partner performs certain chores (Lamont 2020; Nyman et al. 2018). Whether they point to differences in skills, preferences, or employment circumstances, couples who recognize a disjuncture between their ideological commitments and daily housework practices clearly have a broad repertoire of both specific justifications and higher-order principles (e.g., fairness, authenticity) from which to draw.

Translating accounts to the cognitive dimension

To date, these "family myths" or accounts have largely been explored in relation to the allocation of physical housework and childcare tasks. Two questions arise when we think about translating these insights to the cognitive dimension of household labor. First, do couples recognize a contradiction between unequal cognitive contributions and egalitarian beliefs? Second, if they acknowledge a conflict, will they offer the same accounts (e.g., regarding the constraints of paid employment) to justify that conflict? Answers to these questions could help explain the apparent stickiness of cognitive labor inequality relative to physical labor inequality that was documented in the previous chapter.

Physical household chores are consistently rated less enjoyable than leisure activities and even paid work (Robinson and Godbey 2010). When they have the means, many people choose to outsource routine chores or adopt new technologies that promise to reduce the time needed for housework (Hochschild 2001; Strasser 1982; Sullivan and Gershuny 2013). While some physical chores are more enjoyable than others, the idea that tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and home maintenance constitute labor is broadly accepted. When this work is unequally divided, couples who aspire to equality must typically find a way to justify this unequal allocation as nevertheless fair (Gager 2008; Smith, Gager, and Morgan 1998).

Yet the classification of other kinds of household tasks is considerably more ambiguous. For example, modern parenting ideology situates children as precious, sacred beings whose development is to be carefully cultivated, ideally by a family member (Hays 1998; Ishizuka 2018; Lareau 2011; Zelizer 1994). Even if such care is effortful, it is often rewarding in a way that housework is not. Many parents thus view time spent with children as intrinsically valuable and may not necessarily consider fewer childcare hours to be preferable (Mannino and Deutsch 2007; Sullivan 2013).

Literature on the categorization of cognitive household labor is comparatively sparse, but the available evidence hints that such work may also occupy a gray area between low-status labor and leisure. Decision-making, a core component of cognitive labor, has historically been used as an indicator of power rather than burden: whoever has the "final say" on more decisions is deemed the more dominant spouse (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Gillespie 1971; Kranichfeld 1987). More recent scholarship with a sample of women who out-earn their husbands finds that approximately half of those who act as "family organizers"—i.e., primary coordinators of schedules and logistics for the household—view their role as a source of power (Tichenor 2005). In the parlance of this dissertation, these women would be considered primary cognitive laborers. According to Tichenor, however, family organizers relish their cognitive activities because these enable them to shape the family's trajectory in accordance with their own preferences. If cognitive labor contributions in general are coded as somewhere between benefit and burden, respondents may not perceive a conflict between their egalitarian beliefs and their gendered cognitive arrangement.

Among those, like Heather and Jeremy, who do recognize an inconsistency between ideals and practices, cognitive labor-specific accounts are likely. For instance, external, employment-related circumstances may be less salient in respondents' cognitive accounts. Employment outside the home clearly interferes with one's ability to cook, clean, and care for a child, as these activities require the laborer to be in the home or in the presence of children. The same cannot necessarily be said of cognitive tasks such as meal planning, emailing a child's teacher about a recent issue, or booking flights for an upcoming family vacation. Such labor is less tied to location and can often be performed in parallel with other tasks (e.g., commuting can

be combined with dinner planning) (Bittman and Wajcman 2000; Emens 2019). As a result, partners' different paid work conditions are likely to be less central to cognitive accounts.

By contrast, I expect respondents' personal qualities to loom larger in cognitive accounts. The importance of personality and preferences has come up in prior studies not explicitly focused on cognitive labor (Miller and Carlson 2016; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). However, upon closer examination these studies often implicitly reference the cognitive aspects of otherwise physical work. For instance, one partner is said to have a lower tolerance for disorder; thus, that partner typically *anticipates* the need for a cleaning session or *remembers* to restock the cleaning supplies (Lamont 2020). Research outside the household context also indicates that personality-based narratives can be an effective way to disguise—and thus inadvertently perpetuate—gendered patterns. In the occupational space, scholars have documented a paradoxical relationship between economic development and gender segregation: more developed countries tend to have higher rates of occupational segregation (Charles and Bradley 2009).

Cech (2013) calls this the "self-expressive edge" of occupational segregation. She argues that individualism is a core value in many post-industrial countries, and personal preferences and passions are among the primary motivations for individuals' major and career selection. A college student might major in nursing or social work, for instance, because she strongly values helping others and caring for those in need. Yet because our personal values are socially patterned, the aggregate effect of individuals following their passion is the reproduction of gendered career norms. While the college student *experiences* her career choice as entirely personal, gender has undoubtedly shaped her self-concept. Lamont (2014) uncovered a similar phenomenon in the dating realm. She finds that women with egalitarian beliefs can justify their

participation in gendered courtship norms (e.g., men make the first move, pay for the first date, and eventually propose marriage) as a personal preference rather than a concession to outdated gender ideals. These women's focus on the personal rather than the social appears to stave off the cognitive dissonance they might otherwise feel, but it also perpetuates gender-traditional dating patterns that afford men more power.

In sum, the combination of change in gender attitudes and stasis in gendered household behaviors raises questions about how couples reconcile egalitarian ideals with traditional labor practices. Prior research on physical housework suggests they can reduce or avoid cognitive dissonance by justifying their inequalities as fair given differences in partners' skills, preferences, or employment conditions. We know less, however, about whether and how respondents justify cognitive inequalities, which may not be as cleanly categorized as "labor" in respondents' minds nor as closely tied to external circumstances. I hypothesize that identity and personality will play a larger role in cognitive labor accounts, with consequences for respondents' acceptance of cognitive inequalities and, in turn, the potential for change.

Findings

The gendered nature of cognitive labor, and to a lesser extent physical labor, were clearly documented in Chapter 3. Many respondents recognized this inequality, at least to some extent, yet few reported actively attempting to reallocate household responsibilities. To explain this apparent disconnect between beliefs and behaviors, I look to the meaning respondents ascribe to household tasks and the justifications they offer for their allocation between partners. In keeping with prior research, I find that physical housework is largely understood to be work that is allocated based on circumstantial constraints such as paid employment conditions (Beagan et al.

2008; Becker 1993; van Hooff 2011). By contrast, respondents categorized cognitive labor more heterogeneously as work, power, or a complex mix of the two. They framed the allocation of cognitive tasks as a function of individual natures—a matter of "who we are" rather than "what we do"—that was not necessarily dependent on external circumstances.

In effect, respondents' accounts of both physical and cognitive tasks "de-gendered" their allocation patterns. Those who recognized the resemblance between their own patterns and traditional gender norms were able to write this off as coincidence because they understood the *process* of allocating labor, if not the end result, to be gender-neutral. This de-gendering appeared to reduce both spousal conflict and the potential for labor reallocation. Yet respondents' belief in the immutability of cognitive allocations, and the relative mutability of physical allocations, tended to become self-fulfilling prophecies: few couples reallocated cognitive labor in any substantial way following major life changes, whereas physical labor patterns did shift in some cases.

"I know the large gender blah blah blah structure, but…"

Consistent with prior research documenting widespread egalitarianism among the demographic studied here (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009), most respondents described their "ideal world" division of labor as something close to a 50/50 split. "I want it to be an equal partnership," said Kristen, echoing many respondents' sentiments. Other respondents added more nuance to their answers, but the underlying ideal remained consistent. Miranda, for instance, argued that she wanted a "horizontal" rather than vertical split: "[My partner should] take half the things in our life and think about them, and I'll take half the things in our life and think about them, but I don't want to think about half the finances *and* [my

partner] think about half the finances." Similarly, Kendra was okay with task-by-task variation so long as it "washes out to a good 50/50."

Among respondents reporting an ideal other than 50/50, many nevertheless aspired to a more equal division than they currently had. Nina estimated that she completes 90 percent of the physical labor in her household but would ideally complete only 70 percent: "I guess probably, like, realistically, I would hope that [my husband] could do 30 percent of [the physical labor]. You know, idealistically, I would say 50/50, but that's just not the reality on the ground." Like other respondents, Nina endorsed an equal division of labor as a general principle but seemed unable even to imagine a world in which such equality would be attainable.

Widespread egalitarian or near-egalitarian aspirations coincided with widespread admission of current inequality. Few spouses agreed they have a 50/50 allocation (or the qualitative equivalent) in both the physical and cognitive labor dimensions. Instead, most indicated that the female partner does more overall household labor. Despite widespread acknowledgment of a discrepancy between the labor allocation they desired and the one they experienced, the majority of couples referenced infrequent, mild, or previously resolved, if any, disagreements regarding labor allocation.

Further, despite the acknowledged resemblance between their behavioral patterns and traditional gender norms, respondents rarely drew a link between personal gender ideology and labor outcomes. Even when directly asked at the end of the interview what, if anything, gender had to do with their household labor patterns, most disavowed any connection. "I know the large gender blah blah blah structure," said Levi, "but I don't know why we specifically do this the way we [do]." "Oh, I don't think it's a gender thing," explained Kathleen, "I don't think my husband has those ideas, and I don't either." Though Jennifer had just finished telling me about

the inequalities in her marriage in response to a previous question, she was adamant that gender "doesn't at all" have a causal role. "My husband doesn't say, 'Oh, that's a woman's job,' and I don't say, 'Oh, that's a man's job.'…There are no gender roles with us at all."

Those who did acknowledge gender's role tended to do so reluctantly or obliquely, appearing torn between their sense of themselves as egalitarians and the gendered story they had just told when describing specific labor practices. Two interviewees distinguished between a "male/female thing" and a "me thing," arguing that their allocation was driven by the latter, and any parallels between their division and stereotypical gender norms were coincidental. Similarly, Denise remarked at one point that she was "just shocked" by the resemblance between her family's division of labor and "gender stereotyping" that became apparent in our interview. Later, she argued that although her husband "does all the boy stuff and I do all the girl stuff," this was a function of "where our natural strengths are": "As individuals…I'm much more of the [traditional] woman…and Bradley is just like, he's an engineer, and his dad was an engineer, and they did a lot of stuff outside, and he likes fishing."

A minority of respondents did acknowledge gender's role more directly. But for the most part they depicted gender as subconsciously shaping their choices, acknowledged its role in only a small subset of tasks related to childcare or manual labor, or argued that it had been imposed on them from the outside.[17] For instance, Tonya reported that her division of labor is "so much more traditional than I ever imagined [it would be] when I was pre-kids." She attributed this in part to "the gender roles that were modeled for my husband and for me," but noted that they were working hard to raise their children differently: "We want our kids to play with every toy. Do what interests them, you know, not feel confined by that kind of [gender] stuff." Katie argued

[17] Two exceptions were Latina immigrants who drew a direct line between their cultural heritage and their husband's ideas regarding gender roles.

that gender has "definitely" shaped her and her husband's behavior, but "I don't think it [was] like a conscious decision that way." Amber was unusual in calling certain tasks, like mowing the lawn and taking out the trash, "a man's job." But she was adamant that she *could* do those tasks if she wanted to: "I physically, like, know how to, and have helped to deal with [home maintenance, but I just prefer not to do it."

Still, the majority of respondents presented de-gendered accounts of their labor practices. Those who acknowledged a resemblance between their own lives and gender stereotypes saw this as coincidental or accidental, distinguishing gendered outcomes from allocation processes they saw as gender-neutral. As Kenneth summed up many respondents' argument, "We have accidentally wound up in fairly gender-normal—I know there's a term—gender-normal ways." In the following two sections, I examine respondents' understanding of their labor allocation process in more depth to explain how, exactly, gender was so easily erased.

Ascribing meaning to household tasks

Most respondents characterize physical housework and childcare as labor: physical household tasks were more or less enjoyable but nevertheless constituted work. As Ian put it, this is "the stuff that nobody wants to handle, like taking [a child] to birthday [parties] and giving baths—that's just work. That sucks….Nobody wants to have to deal with that." Respondents complained about cleaning bathrooms, chauffeuring children to endless activities, and folding laundry, among other undesirable physical chores. In the household ledger, such activities clearly credited the laborer's account and were ideally offset by partners' equivalent contributions elsewhere.

There was less consensus, however, regarding the appropriate categorization of cognitive activities: were they a form of labor, a source of power, or somewhere in between? If labor, a partner's limited participation in cognitive activities could be interpreted as shirking responsibility. If power, however, the same limited involvement could be reframed as a magnanimous gesture. A minority of men characterized cognitive labor as a form of power. Women, meanwhile, were more conflicted, with many describing an uneasy tension between desiring control and resenting their burden.

Advocates of the power classification depicted the cognitive laborer as ideally situated to set family priorities and acquire valuable information they could use to steer household decision-making. Sam, for instance, noted that his wife completes most cognitive tasks for their family, but he saw this as a beneficial arrangement for both of them. "I feel like I have input," he explained. "I think I'm also easygoing enough and I'm—I'm willing to accept other decisions 'cause I'm not that opinionated about what we need to do." He was deferring to his wife's preferences, he argued, rather than overburdening her with decision-making responsibility. Chris also framed his limited cognitive contributions as a concession to his wife's stronger will: "I think for the most part, if she wants to do something, I'm like, 'Okay, we'll do it.' You know, sometimes the activity's not great, but then you just kind of like…go along with it." Bruce, a repairman, reported that he "will never overstep. Just like [my wife] wouldn't jump in my truck and go fix an appliance, I wouldn't come home and rearrange the living room. That's her thing."

For men like Sam, Chris, and Bruce, acting as equal cognitive partners felt like usurping domestic power rather than sharing a burden. As a result, they felt little impetus to change their behavior and take on a larger share of cognitive tasks. Sam mused that his cognitive labor allocation was "probably not that fair, but some of it I think [my wife] enjoys. Or she prefers.

Uh, she has a stronger opinion about it than I do." He trusted that if Donna ever tired of their allocation, "She'll tell me to do it. Hopefully she doesn't have a concern, making that delegation." Likewise, when I offered Harry a metaphorical magic wand that could reset his allocation of cognitive tasks with his wife, he declined it. "It's one of those things where, like, if she came to me and she was like, 'This sucks, I'm doing all the work here, you aren't contributing,' then yeah, I would want to wave that wand, but I don't get the sense that that's how she feels about things…So I guess I wouldn't—if I could be, maybe choose whether or not to wave that wand right now, I wouldn't." Because he believed his wife relished her leadership role, particularly on the parenting front, he saw little reason to get more involved.

For some cognitive tasks, often in the childcare domain, women echoed this view of cognitive tasks as valuable and thus outside the household labor equation. Sam's wife Donna relished her management of their children's wardrobes, for instance, because "I get to pick out what they wear a little bit, like that's not going to last for long. I like to do it while I can impose my tastes on my kids." Likewise, Meredith said she "would have to put my foot down" if her husband tried taking over birthday party planning or picking out Christmas gifts for their children. More often, however, women understood their cognitive tasks as work akin to physical labor or as a complicated mix of labor and authority.

Denise mused that while her own and her husband's paid work hours were similar, and she did more "home and kid stuff," she could not in good conscience call their allocation unfair because on some level she wanted to be the cognitive leader: "I've made a decision to do some of that stuff, you know?" Jennifer was mad enough to instigate couples' therapy, because "I'm frustrated" and "I need more help." Yet she largely blamed herself for the state of affairs in her household, citing "my need for control" as the primary barrier to greater equality in her marriage.

Tonya reported, “There are a lot of things I wouldn’t want to relinquish [to my husband], like selecting medical providers, making decisions about medical care, and school, and like enrichment activities for the kids.” When I asked why, she elaborated, “The stakes feel high. They're too important to—and I know like if I left it up to him and he made a choice that was different than something I would do, and something didn't go well as a result, I would be really angry about that. So I just would rather be the person that always does [those tasks].” Amy listed a number of tasks, both physical and cognitive, that she would or would not willingly transfer to her husband, before summarizing, “There’s a lot of things that he can do, but I do like these control things…So the theme is sort of like, I like to drive my kids and sort of like make decisions about them.” These women did not depict cognitive labor as the privilege some men described it. Yet they also believed that it was valuable and important, such that the optimal outcome was not necessarily for them to do less of this work.

Consistent with prior research (Robinson and Godbey 2010), physical household tasks were largely classified as work in respondents’ minds. A fair allocation was one in which neither partner was overly burdened with such work. Respondents’ understanding of cognitive tasks was more complex. For many, cognitive tasks were as burdensome as physical tasks. Yet men in particular sometimes depicted cognitive tasks as a source of power, and thus a desirable commodity, rather than a burden. Women more often espoused the work perspective or felt simultaneously compelled to do the cognitive tasks and frustrated by their burdensome nature. This complex classification of cognitive labor offers one explanation for many respondents’ apparent acceptance of cognitive inequality: it is difficult to contest an unequal labor allocation if you are not sure whether it is in fact labor at all.

Explaining the allocation process

Turning away from the question of how respondents categorized cognitive and physical labor, I now ask how they explained its allocation. In place of gender or gender ideology, the majority of respondents described the cognitive labor allocation process as a matter of self-expression and the physical labor allocation process as a response to external circumstances.[18] The cognitive labor a person did or did not do was described as a manifestation of their essential "nature," "temperament," or "personality." These personal essentialist narratives depicted cognitive work as primarily a function of who one *is* rather than merely what one *does.* Physical labor patterns, by contrast, were largely described as the most efficient or expedient arrangement given external constraints such as paid employment.

Two archetypes of the primary cognitive laborer emerged. In one, she was depicted (or depicted herself) as hyper-competent and organized: "type-A," "detail-oriented," or "planful." In the other version, she was neurotic and overbearing: "uptight," "OCD," and "anxious."[19] These qualities were usually pitted against a partner's. Competent women, for instance, were paired with bumbling men who were "passive," "disorganized," and prone to "make stuff up on the fly." Uptight women were largely contrasted with comparatively "laid-back," "relaxed" and "in the moment" partners. While the most common pairing was a competent or anxious woman with a laid-back or disorganized man, respondents rarely referenced gender stereotypes. Rather than generalize about men's inability to plan ahead or women's tendency to worry, most respondents centered their arguments around the characteristics of a specific man or woman and how these compared to their partner's.

[18] Most respondents accounted for their labor allocation using multiple justifications, but these were the two most common.

[19] I use female pronouns to describe primary laborers and male pronouns to describe secondary laborers because this was the most common arrangement. In a later chapter, I will focus on couples who reverse these roles.

References to an inherent desire for control were common in descriptions of primary cognitive laborers and often paired with an understanding of cognitive labor as a source of power. Eight women used the term "control freak" to explain why they took on particular cognitive tasks or a greater share of the cognitive work in general. One of those women, Jennifer, said she has "stomach issues and anxiety issues because I worry about everything." Though she sometimes resented having to be the one to do most of the cognitive labor for her household, Jennifer felt that "it's not [my husband's] fault that I'm, you know, a control freak." Sonya also attributed her heavy cognitive workload to her need for control. She repeatedly cited a self-help book called *Drop the Ball*, which encourages women to stop willingly taking on all of the household labor: "[The author] coined this phrase, uh, HCD or something. House, uh, House Control Disorder or House Control Syndrome. So the controlling person in me will have trouble letting go of some of the things…But for my own sanity, I have to." Kim explained that the one occasion she left her husband home alone with their two children had "involved color-coded spreadsheets on a clipboard with each day laid out and everything everyone needs, and who's picking up what child when and what their telephone number is. Um, my anxiousness over those types of situations is best controlled when I sort of [account for] all of the possibilities."

In addition to primary cognitive laborers' self-assessed neurotic tendencies, many secondary laborers depicted their partner as craving control and even borderline neurotic, hinting that any additional cognitive work they took on was willingly assumed. When I asked Glenn to estimate the cognitive labor allocation in his household, he implied that his wife's heavier cognitive labor load was somewhat compulsive: "My wife's brain doesn't stop, that's the problem…How do you put a percentage on something like that?" Alex admitted his wife does "more than 50%" of such work, but he was skeptical that all of it was necessary: "I don't know

how much of it is her putting pressure on herself, as opposed to actual things that need to get done." A 50/50 allocation would "obviously" be his ideal, Alex said, but his strategy for getting there involved changing his wife's mindset rather than taking on more tasks: "Somehow being able to alleviate that need of hers to, you know—whatever is causing that stress, that anxiety. To be able to get rid of that for her. So it's not something that she feels like has to be done." In other words, the way to rebalance their allocation was to convince his wife to do less of the superfluous work that wasn't worth doing in the first place. Similarly, Bradley explained that he "would want to do as much [cognitive labor] as my wife would want me to do to support her" but doesn't "place as high of an emphasis" on cognitive tasks. He cited financial management as an example of their different standards: while his wife preferred to actively monitor each account and manually pay each bill, he was a fan of automating everything. Implicit in his explanation was the idea that his wife's extra workload was partially self-imposed—if she could just relax, she might not be so busy.

For other couples—and sometimes the same couples at different points in their interview—the same pattern of one partner's greater cognitive engagement was framed in a different light. Rather than the woman's unreasonable anxiety, the focus here was on the man's incompetence. Bradley described his wife Denise as "supermom" and "the type of person that's always going to do everything"—which he was grateful for, because "my cognition is crap." Shaun used similarly self-deprecating language to compare his bumbling efforts to his wife's expert management of household life. "I'm not a dumb person," he explained, "but…I kinda shoot from the hip. I'm more, um—I'm trying to think of the word. I'm more like spur of the moment." In contrast, he said his wife Jenny tends to process information quickly, recognizing potential scheduling conflicts and strategizing about the most efficient ways to accomplish the

couple's objectives. Ted described himself as the "laborer" and his wife Colleen as the "architect" of family life. While he focused on hammering metaphorical nails, his wife was overseeing the building site, always "two steps ahead."

These men's wives seemed to share their assessment of the situation, judging the complexity of family life to be more than their husband could handle. Colleen was especially blunt, predicting that Ted would "mess it up" if left in charge of tasks like managing the children's wardrobe or tracking the family budget. When I asked Jenny if there were any cognitive tasks she would want to retain, even if her husband Shaun offered to help, she said, "This is going to sound weird. I like—I guess I like being the brain. Does that make sense?…I don't know. Maybe I'm bossy. I don't know. I trust—I guess I trust my judgment. Would it be super cool to completely trust somebody else's judgment? Yes. Do I? No." Sheila used similar phrasing to explain why her preference would be to do all the cognitive tasks and give her husband all the physical chores: "Yeah, that would be ideal if I could just be the brain." While several respondents joked that they hoped nothing bad happened to them because their partner would surely struggle to manage the cognitive load alone, Sheila experienced a version of this when she was repeatedly hospitalized for a serious illness. She left nothing to chance. From her hospital bed, she did "all of the bill paying, all of the meal planning, all of the scheduling." She organized a meal train so that her family would still "eat properly, even though I wasn't here to enforce it." She also made "lots of lists" with reminders for her partner. Though both her husband and her father were taking care of the kids and house while she was hospitalized, Sheila "just didn't think that they could handle" all of the organizational work.

Whereas cognitive labor was primarily about partners' relative natures, physical labor was largely described as a function of circumstance. Respondents relied on a logic of efficiency

in accounting for their physical task allocation, arguing that they allocated this labor in ways that minimized the time, effort, or money needed to reach a desired outcome. Todd noted that both he and his wife are "very good at identifying if [we're] capable of doing something that will make a process more efficient," for example, and Troy recalled a conversation about how he and his wife could "maximize" their limited childfree hours to unpack and settle into their new home.

Most often, the efficient allocation was determined based on the relative timing, location, and intensity of each partner's paid work. Holly's workday ends earlier than her husband's; therefore, she starts dinner. Jason, a financial services analyst, can work remotely, whereas his wife, a teacher, cannot; thus, Jason is more likely to pick up a sick child from school. Because Joanna is taking an extended maternity leave while her husband works in an office full-time, Joanna handles all preschool pick-ups and drop-offs. Kathleen explained that as a teacher, her schedule was inherently more flexible than her husband's: "I get out of work earlier, I have the summer off, so I don't really have a huge problem [doing the bulk of the domestic work]." Amy attributed their division of labor to her husband's longer hours: "Kevin really works a lot of hours, and it's not like he can—so he's just not home for the dinner prep hour, and he can't pick up a kid…I just think [our allocation's] out of necessity. It's not out of, like, he expects it of a wife kind of thing." Though women's paid work was more often conducive to greater household responsibility than men's, respondents' accounts were largely de-gendered: any resemblance to traditional mores, if acknowledged, was a matter of coincidence.

Implications and consequences

Respondents' de-gendered understanding of their cognitive and physical labor patterns had several important implications. First, it downplayed the role of partners' conscious intent and

pointed instead to external circumstances or deep-seated personality traits, neither of which was seen as within partners' immediate control. Second, it led respondents to understand physical labor as at least potentially malleable over the long run and cognitive labor as largely immutable. These beliefs reduced interpersonal conflict and personal frustration over an unequal labor allocation, but they also seemed to discourage respondents from actively pursuing change, particularly in the cognitive labor realm.

An understanding of cognitive labor as a source of power or as a more or less inevitable expression of one's inner nature allowed respondents to acknowledge cognitive inequalities without attributing them to the gender-traditional ideology they disavowed. For instance, it allowed many women to see their spouse as incapable of planning ahead rather than willfully shirking responsibility. Colleen explained that she sometimes got frustrated with her husband's apparent inability to proactively notice what needed to be done around the house. "Nothing ever gets better on its own if I don't do it," she complained. "I would prefer a world where Ted just recognizes things and then does them, but he's not programmed like that." Colleen's description of Ted's "programming" downplayed his agency, effectively channeling her frustration toward the situation rather than her spouse.

Because one's cognitive role was seen as a function of temperament and nature rather than external circumstance or conscious intent, most respondents viewed their cognitive labor arrangements as relatively permanent rather than subject to change over time. As Bridget put it, "[my husband's] brain would have to be different" in order for him to take on more cognitive labor. Mindy guessed that reallocating cognitive labor in her marriage would be impossible "barring a fundamental change in [my husband's] whole being." Jeremy reported that his wife Heather "is a planner," the verb choice connoting his belief in the fixed nature of this

characteristic. Sonya noted that she and her husband had made progress in shifting physical labor off of her plate and onto his, but "I go back and forth" about whether cognitive labor patterns could be adjusted. She was trying to get him to take responsibility for initiating plans for an upcoming move but suspected that nothing would happen until, eventually, "I'll probably nag him…It would be nice to get to a place where I don't have to nag him about it. It would be nice for hm to come up with an idea someday and say, 'Hey, this is what I was thinking.'…But truthfully, historical pattern, I would say I probably will most likely end up pushing him to find [a realtor]."

Respondents also shied away from attributing physical labor patterns to conscious intent, instead emphasizing the role of external constraints, particularly employment. But whereas temperament was understood as fixed, external circumstances were seen as contingent. Thus, physical labor allocations were at least theoretically mutable: they could be changed if circumstances called for it, and they might just as easily have turned out differently. Accordingly, Shaina, who was in the process of looking for a full-time job when we spoke, argued that "if I start to work full-time, I [would] need my husband to do more [of the housework]." Brenda, a "work-at-home mom" who runs a small craft business, speculated about a parallel life in which she had been earning more than her husband prior to having children: "If I had had a job in a public school [rather than a parochial school], I'd probably be making more than him with my degree, and then he'd be the one staying home!"

This combination of beliefs about mutability and responsibility had important implications for personal satisfaction, spousal conflict, and the possibility of reallocating labor. First, respondents' focus on inherent nature or external circumstance rather than conscious intent as the driver of labor inequalities helped preserve marital harmony. Instead of blaming their partner for

underperformance, many women offered up a version of the argument that "he can't help it." Most couples referenced only infrequent and mild, if any, disagreements regarding labor allocation, either in response to a question about a recent disagreement or when asked to compare their actual labor allocation to their ideal. Some referred to historical disagreements but indicated that they had been resolved, usually because the female partner resigned herself to her husband's incapacity in the cognitive arena.

The pacifying effects of respondents' beliefs about responsibility are perhaps best illustrated by the negative cases: in a handful of couples where one partner veered off-script and connected labor inequality to gender, conflict loomed. Stephanie, for example, told me she'd recently read about "how, in the U.S., even if both husband and wife work equal time, the wife still does more than 50 percent of the household work. I just think that's really unfair. And so I definitely want our family to be—to not contribute to that statistic. I've worked really hard to make sure that we're equitable." Even though, as a graduate student, Stephanie's schedule was more flexible than her software engineer husband's, she insisted they split pickups and drop-offs equally and that Carl handle most of the cooking. Stephanie was proud of this arrangement: "We're equitable," she argued, "because I put in all this work to get that way." Yet Carl seemed frustrated by his wife's vigilance, which he implied was a waste of time. Stephanie "will often accuse me of not doing as much," he said. "If I neglect my portion [of the chores], or kind of either on purpose or inadvertently neglect starting laundry . . . then she'll either do it or she often reminds me to do it." Stephanie's insistence on gendering the couple's actions despite her husband's contrasting perspective set them up for ongoing tension, and occasional conflict, over their labor allocation.

Similarly, Robert described his wife Carla as "particularly conscious of [the division of labor], in not wanting to sort of fall into the stereotyped gender roles." She did not want to be solely responsible for transporting their daughter to and from daycare "even though she could do that," he said, because she wanted it to be "a shared responsibility." Robert seemed willing to humor his wife's request—he managed to configure his work schedule to allow him to do 30 to 40 percent of the weekly pickups and drop-offs—but suggested limits to how far he would go. Getting to 50/50 on this particular task would "require a significant overhaul" of their lives, he argued, and potentially hurt them financially. For these two couples, the problem was not the magnitude of their perceived inequality—indeed, they were far from the most extreme in the sample on that dimension. Rather, the suggestion that the inequality they did experience was gendered and within partners' conscious control to ameliorate was a larger threat to marital harmony.

Whereas the logic of personal essentialism appeared to reduce conflict and dissatisfaction, a second, less benign implication was the fatalism induced by respondents' understanding of cognitive labor as immutable. Because most women were understood as *inherently* "Type-A" regardless of the specifics of their employment, there was no reason to expect cognitive patterns to change along with the couple's employment configuration. By contrast, respondents' understanding of physical labor as changeable and circumstance-dependent was sometimes reflected in their actual practices. Physical housework and childcare tasks were more strongly correlated with employment circumstances than cognitive tasks were. Women with "bigger" careers—measured in terms of hours worked or income earned relative to their male partner—were more likely to achieve an equitable division of physical housework and childcare than women with "smaller" careers. In the majority of cases, the same was not true for

cognitive labor: 65% (20 of 31) of the higher-earning and/or longer-working women in the sample completed more than half of the cognitive labor for their household. Among the smaller subsample of higher-earning or longer-working women for whom I had sufficient physical labor data, only 30% (6 of 20) were female-led for physical labor.

Even following big changes in employment, cognitive labor rarely shifted, but physical housework and childcare responsibilities sometimes did. Multiple men experienced a period of unemployment after a layoff or in the course of a voluntary career change. Most of these men took on additional physical labor responsibilities at home once their time opened up. One of them, Greg, lost his factory job following health complications and was unemployed at the time of our interview. In the year he had been out of work, he had taken on a larger portion of the physical housework. Each morning before she left for work, his wife Jennifer put together a to-do list for him, detailing the tasks she expected him to accomplish that day. The morning of our interview, the list instructed Greg to "'straighten up the house, set the pork up [i.e., defrost it],…clean the litter box'….Stuff that she needs to be done around here, so I'll do it." Melanie's husband Stan had also recently lost a job and was channeling some of his newfound free time to housework and childcare. He had taken on a large chunk of the transportation required to get their children to and from various extracurriculars and part-time jobs, for instance. Finally, Mindy's husband Trevor was employed, but he worked 15 fewer hours per week than his wife. They had successfully reallocated physical chores around the time Mindy returned to full-time paid work after an extended maternity leave, and Trevor is now explicitly responsible for cooking, dishes, and laundry.

Cognitive tasks proved more resistant to circumstantial change, in part because such changes were not seen as altering more fundamental differences in each partner's essential

nature. Melanie, for instance, sounded both amused and exasperated as she noted her skepticism that Stan could take over some of the cognitive responsibilities she managed so seamlessly. "He's trying to help," she noted, but that help was too bumbling to be entirely useful. If Stan was left to his own devices in running the household, Melanie suspected "it would be a disaster. I've done little things, like I left something on the stairs to see how long it would stay on the stairs, and it would stay on the stairs forever." She joked that "Stan probably doesn't know what grade all [our] children are in." Similarly, Mindy remains the primary cognitive laborer because, as she puts it, Trevor's "brain does not observe" things like a sock left on the floor. She even retained cognitive oversight over some of Trevor's physical chores. "Technically," Trevor reported, "I'm in charge of laundry, so I will wash it [and] put it in the dryer, but somehow I lose interest by then. Getting it from the dryer and folding it—it slips my mind that that's also part of doing laundry," and Mindy sometimes finishes the job or reminds him to do so. Mindy did not foresee future change on the cognitive front either, "barring a fundamental change in Trevor's whole being."

Respondents' understanding of cognitive labor as an expression of innate tendencies that would remain fixed over time helped stave off frustration and conflict that might otherwise follow from the clash between unequal reality and egalitarian ideal. But it also stymied attempts at reallocation: after all, as Mindy put it, if being attentive to household needs is "not how his brain works," then calls for change would likely be futile. Respondents' attribution of physical labor allocations to circumstantial constraints also facilitated marital harmony by putting the blame for inequality "out there" rather than at either partner's feet. Yet circumstances were understood as changeable in a way temperament was not. Couples often believed physical labor

reallocation was possible, and indeed their patterns were sometimes responsive to major life shifts.

Discussion

In this chapter, I examined respondents' accounts of physical and cognitive labor for clues about the puzzling disjuncture between growing egalitarian beliefs and static household behaviors at the population level (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Scarborough et al. 2019). I also compared physical and cognitive labor accounts in hopes of explaining why cognitive labor patterns are even more consistently gendered than physical patterns. I found widespread acknowledgment of differences in partners' household contributions and desire for something closer to equality, combined with relatively little spousal conflict or sustained efforts at reallocation. I attribute this disjuncture to the meanings respondents ascribe to cognitive and physical tasks, as well as to their belief that the labor allocation process was "about" something other than gender.

In the cognitive dimension, respondents do not uniformly categorize cognitive tasks as labor; in some cases, they are reframed as power or as an ambiguous mix of power and labor.[20] This understanding recasts differences in cognitive contribution as a product of his deference to her or of her greater desire for control. Whether cognitive tasks are classified as labor or as power, respondents argue that these responsibilities were allocated on the basis of individual differences unrelated—or only coincidentally related—to gender. Primary cognitive laborers are inherently "uptight" or "Type-A," while secondary laborers are "laidback" or "disorganized."

[20] In Boltanski and Thevenot's (2006) terms, we might say that respondents justify inequality by appealing to distinct orders of worth germane to various polities. For instance, in the "industrial polity," efficiency and productivity are prized. Boltanski and Thevenot's schema do not perfectly capture respondents' appeals to self-expression as a higher-order principle, but their understanding of the "inspired polity" comes closest.

This perceived link between nature and cognitive practice implies that a particular cognitive allocation is more or less inevitable. Indeed, couples rarely succeed in significantly altering the division of cognitive tasks. By contrast, physical tasks are largely understood as work that should ideally be divided fairly, such that neither partner is overburdened. Like gender-traditional cognitive practices, gender-traditional physical practices are divorced from gender ideology in respondents' minds. But because they primarily attribute physical labor allocations to changeable external circumstances rather than fixed personal characteristics, reallocation is more common in the physical than the cognitive dimension of household labor.

These findings deepen our understanding of the couple-level processes that uphold cognitive inequalities. In principle, gender-traditional labor arrangements should conflict with increasingly widespread egalitarian ideals, prompting dissatisfaction and conflict (Harmon-Jones et al. 2015; Scarborough et al. 2019). In practice, many couples—including the majority of those sampled here—tolerate apparent inequalities as their status quo. This is in part because few respondents view their experiences through a gender lens. They may acknowledge their unequal labor outcomes, but they erase any connection to gender ideology.

In place of gender, I show that the majority of couples understand their cognitive labor allocation as a function of partners' individual rather than gendered natures. This finding aligns well with research on cultural scripts related to individualism, authenticity, and self-expression (Erickson 1995; Giddens 1991) and parallels findings from scholarship on other axes of inequality. Morning (2011), for example, reports that the widespread sociological consensus that race is a social construct has not spread far beyond our discipline's bounds. Elsewhere in the academy and among laypeople, more subtly essentialist notions of race—largely "redeemed" from their earlier association with racism—remain common.

Scholars have documented similar scripts related to gender and gender inequality. Because self-concepts are highly gendered, women and men often express themselves in distinct ways, exacerbating gender segregation as they self-select into different majors and occupational fields (Cech 2013). My research extends this theory into the domestic sphere by connecting cognitive labor patterns to individuals' attempts to act in accordance with their invisibly gendered identities. We can think of this as a form of "personal essentialism," or the belief that one's choices reflect a core element of individual nature rather than social location. In the context of dating, Lamont (2014) finds that women think of themselves as individuals with unique preferences and men as a collective with shared traits. Similarly, my research suggests that a couple's awareness of gendered *societal* patterns need not catalyze a critical reflection on their *own* practices, which they see as highly personal rather than socially constrained.

Couples' eagerness to de-gender their labor allocation process may be better understood as a form of adaptation than of self-deception—an uneasy compromise between conflicting imperatives to pursue equality and individuality. Although ideals have changed considerably in recent years, many other elements of the gender structure remain intact: men still choose different college majors, enter more lucrative and less flexible occupations, and face strong societal pressures to provide for their families (Cha 2013; Charles and Bradley 2009; Riggs 1997). Women are still trained from a young age to attend to others' needs and feelings; held more accountable for domestic outcomes; and concentrated in family-friendly—and less remunerative—occupations (Charles and Grusky 2004; Erickson 1993; Harman and Cappellini 2014; Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppanner 2019). Cultural imperatives to "intensively" parent clash with employers' expectations of their "ideal workers," making it difficult for one person to compete in both arenas (Becker and Moen 1999; Blair-Loy 2005; Hays 1998; Reid 2015). By de-

gendering their labor allocation, couples open a path through the contradictions of our incomplete gender revolution, exerting control at the narrative level even as more fundamental changes remain unrealized.

De-gendering also appears to preserve marital harmony, perhaps serving as a twenty-first-century form of family myth-making (Hochschild and Machung 2012). The story that keeps the peace is not one about overlooking inequality, as Hochschild and Machung found in the 1980s; instead, it is about acknowledging inequality and denying its connection to gendered forces. Stephanie's and Carla's insistence on gendering their household labor allocation processes may serve as a cautionary tale. Their husbands bristled at the implication they were less than egalitarian and appeared to resent the occasions when they were asked to practice equality for its own sake. A gendered understanding risked pitting husband against wife, whereas a de-gendered understanding pitted the couple against their circumstances or natures. Neither approach facilitated true equality, but the de-gendered version at least promoted peaceful cohabitation.

Finally, differences in the way cognitive and physical labor patterns are de-gendered hints at a possible divergence in their future trajectories. To be sure, there are many remaining obstacles to gender equality in the physical dimension, including occupational segregation, the gender wage gap, and family-unfriendly public and workplace policies (Blau and Kahn 2017; Cha 2013; Charles and Grusky 2004). Yet my research suggests that as external circumstances change, we can expect many couples to continue rethinking their physical labor practices. By contrast, changes in external circumstances seem less likely to reshape cognitive labor practices without a concurrent shift in cultural ideas about gender and selfhood. So long as cognitive labor is tied to personal identity, women's increased economic and political empowerment need not

presage change. To break the link between cognitive labor and identity, we need a better sociological understanding of why and how certain cognitive labor patterns emerge, an understanding I seek to develop in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Bringing Gender Back In

From respondents' perspective, gender had very little to do with their labor allocation patterns. Kathleen, quoted in the previous chapter, summed up a widespread sentiment: "I don't think my husband has those ideas [about gender norms], and I don't either." Yet while Kathleen and her husband may not have been thinking *about* gender as they set up a home and built a life together, they were almost certainly thinking gender. Respondents' cognitive labor arrangements were a manifestation of largely subconscious efforts to align their cognition—patterns of attention, perception, evaluation, and so on—with their own gendered self-concept. Contextualizing respondents' accounts within their own life history and sample-wide patterns, this chapter shows both how gender shaped each couple's cognitive labor arrangement and how that shaping disappeared from their view.

My analysis of the aggregate data indicates the majority of couples sampled here were not, as their narratives implied, operating independently of the gender structure (Risman 2004). They were neither "undoing" gender, in the sense of challenging or dismantling gender inequality (Deutsch 2007), nor enacting Lorber's (2000) vision of a "feminist degendering movement." Lorber envisioned what we might call a "deep" de-gendering, in which gender difference is no longer the axis around which patterns of caregiving and breadwinning turn. In contrast, my respondents practice a "shallow" de-gendering, in which long-standing behaviors are simply relabeled while the underlying gendered patterns remain intact.

The data suggest two processes by which gender shaped respondents' cognitive labor trajectories outside their conscious awareness. First, the personal qualities said to facilitate cognitive labor were neither innate nor fixed in early adulthood. Rather, these "traits" were

learned skills that evolved over the life course as a result of *differential investment*. Small differences in respondents' abilities snowballed over time as men and women ignored or attended to particular practices, habits of mind, and interpersonal relationships. Eventually, they came to be seen as unbridgeable gulfs. Even if the groundwork for such differential investment was in some cases laid in childhood, long-term outcomes were far from fixed at the start of the couple's relationship.

Second and relatedly, respondents relied heavily on the language of constraint to account for their household labor behaviors. The constraints cited most often were temperament/personality (i.e., "we have to do it this way, because this is who we are") and relative employment conditions (i.e., "paid work prevents me from doing more at home").[21] Yet the aggregate data reveal how perceptions of constraint depend on an *interaction between gender and context*. Men's paid work was believed to deplete their cognitive reserves in a way women's paid work was not. This gendered logic ultimately shaped the career possibilities men and women envisioned and the career trajectories they experienced.

The fact that gender continued to shape respondents' practices despite their disavowal of its influence does not mean couples were deluded or oblivious. Rather, gender's effects were clearest at the aggregate level. When individual couples cited differences in each partner's employment circumstances or personality traits to explain why the female partner shouldered a heavier domestic load, it was easy to write off as a coincidence. Only when those factors consistently align with gender-traditionalism, as was the case across these respondents, does the gender-neutrality of the allocation process come into question.

[21] While these accounts were the most common, most respondents mixed and matched several accounts. For example, some argued that they divided tasks by preferences and others downplayed the idea that there were differences in partners' contributions at all.

Gendered traits, gendered investments

Psychologists of personality report modest gender differences in some traits but generally find more intra- than inter-gender variation (Costa, Terracciano, and McCrae 2001).[22] These population-level findings about gender and personality contradict the accounts respondents offered for their cognitive labor practices, which would imply that the majority of my sample was comprised of conscientious women paired with careless men. This discrepancy suggests that what respondents understand as personality difference may instead be rooted in gendered social processes. Specifically, I contend that to a large extent, the personality traits respondents reference are better understood as skills or capacities that are built via differential investment of energy and attention, and then deployed selectively across paid and unpaid labor contexts.

Physical housework tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and infant care are relatively easy to conceptualize as teachable skills. Many children learn to bake cakes, scrub toilets, and change diapers by watching and helping their parents or by taking classes in home economics, cooking, and childcare, for instance (Paradise and Rogoff 2009). Young adults today can also turn to an immense library of instructional YouTube videos for help with a tricky home repair or unfamiliar cooking technique. Practice and experience may interact with natural ability (e.g., mechanical aptitude may be understood as an individual trait underlying one's home repair skills), but the prevalence of home economics classes, tutorials, and other resources reinforces the idea that domestic skills are by and large learnable with sufficient investment.

Within the "economy" of the family, partners typically specialize, performing certain tasks and ignoring others and thereby building some skills while letting others atrophy (Berk

[22] Such findings have done little to diminish the popularity of "pop psychology" books arguing that men and women are fundamentally distinct – e.g., that the former are from Mars and the latter from Venus (Gray 2012)

1984). In extreme cases, one partner specializes in paid work, and the other specializes in the unpaid work of raising children and running a home (Becker 1993). More often among contemporary couples, specialization occurs within rather than between spheres, as both partners work for pay and take the lead on different aspects of domestic life (Bianchi et al. 2000, 2012; Pew Research Center 2015).[23] Who invests in which skills depends on a number of factors, including time availability, personal interest, and, in some cases, gender norms (Coltrane 2000). Initially small skill or knowledge differences can expand over time as one partner takes on and the other avoids particular tasks.

By contrast, many components of cognitive labor are harder to conceptualize as a function of skill and, thus, of time and energy investment. As we saw in the previous chapter, respondents frequently argue that patterns of perception and attention in particular are hardwired. Many women, for instance, could neither explain how it was that they were the first to notice a child was outgrowing his clothes nor fathom how they might go about teaching their husband to attend to this issue. But what respondents understand as innate differences are better understood as differences in the way individuals invest their time, energy, and attention. Over the life course, they experiment with scheduling techniques and systems, build habits around checking and updating the calendar, and over time practice juggling commitments and rearranging to make everything fit. Prior research has demonstrated this process at work in financial literacy, as the partner who manages the money is not necessarily more fiscally savvy to begin with but becomes so over time, even as their spouse's financial literacy stagnates or atrophies (Ward and Lynch Jr 2015).

[23] This does not mean that men's and women's roles in breadwinning and caregiving are generally equal, of course, but rather that the strict "separate spheres" approach that characterized many (largely white) 20th-century families is far less extreme today.

This skill perspective raises new questions: where and how do men and women acquire the skills that facilitate cognitive labor? How is it that skills related to anticipating family needs become female-typed? Gendered socialization offers a partial explanation. By the time children reach preschool, the process of encouraging gender-specific tendencies is well underway: girls are encouraged to be neat, polite, and caring; boys are expected to be messy, loud, and assertive (Kane 2012; Martin 1998). It is easy to see how a girl's early socialization to care for others' needs might translate not only to an investment in learning concrete childcare techniques but also in learning to read others' emotions and anticipate what they might need or want. Similarly, a boy's early experiences of being cared for by others might inhibit his own investment in such emotional and observational skills.

Yet an exclusive focus on gender socialization overlooks the role of circumstances and context in shaping the particular skills and capacities we draw on throughout our lives. Psychologists find that situational factors are better predictors of behavior than dispositional factors (Ross and Nisbett 2011). Sociologists, too, report that early ambitions regarding career and family poorly predict later outcomes compared to contextual features such as marital status, career success, and the like (Gerson 1985; Risman 1999; Stone 2007). This situation-dependence leads scholars like West and Zimmerman (1987) and others in the interactionist tradition to argue that when it comes to gender, there is "no there there": gender is not an individual characteristic acquired in childhood but a repeated accomplishment created and recreated via social interaction.

While this "doing gender" perspective revolutionized the sociology of gender, it is not without its limitations. For one, as Meadow (2018) writes in a study of transgender children, "the idea that there is no self behind the expressions that constitute it is in direct tension with people's deeply held ideas of the essence of who they are" (2018:215). The lived experience of gender is

often more personal than performative (Butler 2006), and a sociological perspective on gender requires attention to both context and agency. This perspective suggests men and women beginning a partnership are not blank slates, but nor have their preferences and proclivities been fully determined by their gendered upbringing. Which possible selves are activated depends on the choices they make and the context in which they find themselves. What I call "thinking gender" largely consists of managing the interplay between self and situation, working to bring not only behaviors but also cognitions in line with what our invisibly gendered self-concept calls us to be and do in a particular circumstance. We think gender in order to uphold our sense of self, in much the same way we do gender in order to uphold others' sense of who we are.

If thinking gender is about both self and situation, we must attend to gendered patterns in the *application* of particular skills and habits, which vary by context. That is, not only do men and women invest differently in acquiring cognitive-labor related skills, they also apply the skills they acquire differently. Many of the skills that facilitate household cognitive labor—attention to detail, organization, problem-solving—are also assets in the context of paid employment. Yet a long line of research reveals that the arenas of home and work carry different meanings for men and women (Riggs 1997). The proportion of male-breadwinner families has declined significantly over recent decades, yet men's paid work still carries outsize weight in many families' eyes (Pew Research Center 2015). Couples often treat women's paid labor as supplementary or voluntary, sometimes even when this defies economic logic, whereas they understand men's to be non-negotiable (Damaske 2011; Killewald and García-Manglano 2016). Women who do invest in careers are often expected to do so without sacrificing the quality of their parenting and housekeeping, leading to heated debates over whether women can "have it all" or must choose work or family (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Jacobs and Gerson 2015;

Riggs 1997; Slaughter 2012). The gender gap in earnings and paid work hours has declined in recent decades, but men have not made comparable investments in unpaid labor (Bianchi et al. 2012; Blau and Kahn 2017). When conflicts between the work and home spheres arise, it is more often women who make career sacrifices, a dynamic brought into stark relief by the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Collins et al. 2021; Dunatchik et al. 2021). In light of these facts, we might expect men and women to feel differently obligated to apply their cognitive and managerial skills at home and at work.

Findings

Whereas most respondents used the rhetoric of personal essentialism to explain their cognitive labor allocation, the aggregate data suggest it was socially patterned along gendered lines. In the following subsections, I describe two key processes by which cognitive labor became gendered, largely independent of respondents' conscious intentions. First, men and women exhibited different patterns of investment in the skills, habits, and relationships that facilitate cognitive labor, particularly parenting-related labor. Second, the skills they did have were activated in different ways for men and women across the spheres of paid and unpaid work, such that the same circumstances were perceived to differentially constrain men's and women's options. Over time, their perceived constraints became actual constraints as couples leaned into his career potential and soft-pedaled her career success.

Differential investment

When they spoke about their current cognitive labor practices, respondents suggested their hands were tied. Our inequalities are "a function of how we are wired as people," explained

Shannon. “It’s just the way [my husband] works, it’s just not the same as me,” mused Jackie. When we discussed the broader arc of their careers and relationships, however, it became clear that respondents’ apparent “wiring” was more consequence than cause, the result of ongoing investment or disinvestment rather than innate tendencies. Kara offered an insightful metaphor to explain this process:

> *You know when you’re in a new city how, if you’re traveling with someone, one person just takes responsibility for being the navigator, and the other person walks around blind? Sometimes, you’re the navigator. Sometimes, you’re the passenger. With different people, you take on that role…I think because [my husband’s] doing that long-term thinking, I’ve shut off that part of my brain a little bit because I know he is taking care of it…I think it’s a little bit that way for the day-to-day, routine stuff: because I am thinking about it, he’s shut off that part of his brain.*

Kara was unusual in recognizing that she and her husband chose to “shut off” certain parts of their brain. Far more commonly, respondents recognized the outcome (one person had limited capacities in a particular cognitive labor domain) without interrogating the drivers of that deficit.

Respondents commonly asserted, for instance, that the female partner managed elements of childcare due to her greater knowledge of children’s changing needs and her sharper instincts regarding the best response to new parenting challenges. Mateo marveled at his wife Leah’s ability to track their 1-year-old’s evolving diet. “I know the basics,” he explained, “but in terms of progress, like each month [our daughter] kind of changes in terms of what she can eat and can’t eat and how you prepare it. I think Leah has all the knowledge.” He predicted Leah would “always be better at sensing what our daughter needs as a next developmental step…my sense is she will always be ahead of me, mentally prepared to do the next necessary step in our daughter’s development.” Meanwhile, when I asked Leah how it was that she came to manage their daughter’s diet, she suggested her greater knowledge was a product of time and research

rather than innate ability: “I’m at home alone with her the whole week, and I read about it, what she can eat, and what is better.”

Other female respondents revealed the mundane secret behind their uncanny ability to know which products their children need: concerted attention. “When we go out, I look to see what other [parents] have, to see what would make our lives easier,” said Desiree. Most recently, she noticed that other parents had strollers that handled uneven ground well and convinced her husband Danny that they should buy one. Kendra joked that “my product research around here tends to be watching other kids and other parents.” Last winter, for instance, “I saw kids wearing boots that have the handles on them. They are super easy to get on.” She had already purchased several pairs. In this way, years of observing or ignoring other parents’ behaviors and of detailed attention or inattention to a child’s consumption habits built up women’s expertise.

Primary cognitive laborers also accumulated information and honed their instincts by investing in social connections centered on family life. Some of these connections were virtual: Sam explained that his wife tends to spearhead decisions that require collecting information “because of her connection to the online community, [which] gives her more perspective on things. Like, sometimes she’ll even bring it up and ask me what I think about something, and I’ll say, ‘Well, what did the moms’ group have to say?’” Other connections were grounded in the physical world, via relationships formed with teachers, doctors, and the parents of their children’s friends. Kara and Joel worked hard to share parenting responsibilities as evenly as possible, for example, but Joel’s long and unpredictable hours meant Kara often took the lead. She attended every doctor’s appointment, whereas Joel came only when he could slip out of work. She acted as the primary liaison to their nanny, who was often long gone by the time Joel returned home from the office. Transferring cognitive responsibilities from Kara to Joel would

require transferring a relationship in addition to information. There was nothing magical or innate about Kara's familiarity with childcare institutions; she had simply put in more hours engaging with them.

Even seemingly simple cognitive tasks often drew on a web of contextual knowledge built up over time, which increased respondents' sense that such responsibilities were non-transferrable. Bridget noted that asking her husband to take over management of their daughter's wardrobe "would be significantly more stressful for both of us," in part because he "would feel like he didn't have the parameters to make the decision about seasonality and warmth and appropriateness for the kinds of activities she does." Plus, he was less attuned to the unspoken rules that could shape the way their daughter—and the family—were perceived by outside observers: "He would not care if she wore the same clothes every day…and they didn't fit. He would not be embarrassed by that." Rather than teach her husband to see and think like she did, Bridget opted to retain wardrobe duties, largely without questioning how the gulf in the partners' capacities had developed in the first place.

There was suggestive evidence that this process had its roots in childhood socialization, such that partners came into the relationship with different habits of mind that then diverged further over time. The majority of respondents' parents modeled traditionally gendered behaviors: most fathers had worked full-time, and most mothers had stayed home or otherwise modified their career to accommodate family demands. Though I did not ask specifically about parents' cognitive labor allocation, several respondents spontaneously referenced their mothers' managerial and planning prowess. She was "just very on top of things," said Katie of her mother. Kim's mother "ran a tight ship…Everything was organized. We never had a shampoo bottle run

out, or—it was just always there." Colleen loved that her mother planned special activities for holidays, because "that kind of makes life more fun."

Respondents like Brittany explicitly connected their parents' dynamic to different expectations for sons and daughters: "Many men, their mothers have done all this stuff, keeping track of their stuff or whatever. But with women, their mothers turn it over to them at a younger age. You were making your own haircut [appointment] when you were a teenage girl. But if you're a boy your parents are probably still making your haircut appointments." Kendra noted that she and her mother were similarly planful, whereas her father and brother preferred a more spontaneous approach:

> *My dad tells a story from when we were kids. My parents were divorced when I was little and my mom is a lot like me. She is very* [snaps fingers], *"This is the only way it's going to work." My dad is not like that, and on a random Sunday afternoon, I was like, "I did my homework, did this, and I have the rest of my day to myself." My dad was like, "Guys, it's raining out, let's go see a movie." My brother was like, "Awesome, what movie?" I was like, "No, I'm not going to do this." He was like, "It's a movie, why?" Nope. Too big of a course correction. I feel like [my husband] is much more able to be like, "Guys, let's go do this!" I can't change gears that fast.*

Amanda traced the difference in her own proactive and her husband's reactive approach to managing household life, and in particular their children's education, to their differing scholastic histories. Her husband is "so freaking smart," she said, but could never be bothered to put in much effort in school. Whereas she has "always struggled…I wasn't that great of a student, I just tried hard." Amanda concluded that diligence and organization were just as important as raw skill, and she applied this mindset to overseeing her sons' development. Meanwhile, her husband's hands-off approach was more in keeping with his own lackadaisical tendencies.

It was against this backdrop that couples established each partner's role in the early days of marriage and parenthood, making key decisions about how to allocate time, attention, and energy based on small differences that would compound over time and come to look like

unbridgeable gaps. Regardless of the initial accuracy of respondents' belief in cognitive labor as a reflection of one's inner nature, this belief tended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy as time passed and patterns grew entrenched. Through the daily practice of cognitive labor, women accumulated information and connections and refined their skills, whereas men's resources atrophied. Eventually, a counterfactual arrangement came to resemble an impossible fantasy rather than a viable possibility.

Gendered interactions between nature and context

A second challenge to the "essential nature" account of cognitive labor patterns was the apparently contextual nature of the cited traits. Men with economically "bigger" careers were said to use up their cognitive energy on the job; women with bigger careers were expected to preserve cognitive resources for their domestic responsibilities and tended to pull back from the workforce when they feared they could not. Men with economically "smaller" careers were allowed to preserve cognitive energy for their hoped-for future success, whereas women with smaller careers were rarely given such leeway. Temperament was thus differently constraining for men and for women, suggesting that "innate" differences were less a fixed constraint than a retrospective justification for gendered choices.

Many of the same men noted for their reactivity or laidback nature at home held demanding jobs as management consultants, project managers, physicians, and other positions that required high levels of executive function and proactive leadership. Yet the traits that likely facilitated their professional success were not necessarily deployed at home. Robert, a psychiatrist, described his limited cognitive labor involvements as the result of limited time and limited energy: "Logistical scheduling is a big [barrier to reallocation]. But I think that coming

along with that is sometimes just fatigue…where—like there might be times where [my wife and I] get home [from work] at a similar time, but I don't really want to make dinner because I'm tired." Physician Julian also pointed to fatigue, arguing that by the time he returns home from the hospital, he is "fairly intellectually exhausted" and as a result does not have the mental energy to contemplate childcare issues.

Several men seemed to stumble on the curious juxtaposition of competent worker and oblivious spouse in the course of our conversation, though they chose not to interrogate the contradiction too closely. Alan described himself as the "ideas guy" in his marriage, and his wife as the "project manager" who figures out "what are we going to do and how [would] that actually work, and like, the nitty-gritty." Their arrangement is "funny," he admitted, because Alan works full-time as a project manager for a large insurance company: "That's partly what I need to do in my job, is get into the nitty-gritty." Steve noted that his wife is the one to plan the family's leisure time. "Oddly, I'm a project manager by trade," he admitted, "but sometimes I don't want to plan for the weekend."

While men with higher-powered careers were allowed to be different people at work and at home, women in a similar position were often expected—or expected themselves—to be as competent at home as they were on the job. Cassie, for instance, is a telecommunications executive whose annual income is more than twice her husband's. Until a few years ago, she described herself as "a workaholic" who was "consumed" by her job. Despite her intense career, Cassie did not give herself much latitude to coast at home. "My stress level at that point in my life was through the roof," she explained. "I was literally working from, like, 6:00am 'til 9:30PM and then would get up the next day and do it again. And [my husband] was working in the car business 'til 9:30 at night, so I would have to come home and still do everything that needs to be

done when you're a parent." Cassie reached a breaking point when she was giving her six-month-old a bath one evening and her work phone buzzed. "My phone was going off and was buzzing and, it's always numbers, numbers, numbers. And, um, like nothing happened to him, but he, like, turned and I wasn't paying attention, and I was just like, 'I gotta get out of here, 'cause I'm not paying attention to my child while he's in the tub.'" Cassie switched from the commercial to the government sector of the business, which was much less intense, and felt she now had sufficient mental bandwidth to be an attentive parent. Intellectual exhaustion was not, in her mind, a valid excuse to reduce her domestic responsibilities.

Even among nontraditional couples where the male partner was out of the workforce to care for children, women often felt a responsibility to remain cognitively invested in domestic life. Meg, who works full-time from an office while her husband cares for their children at home, reported that whenever she is present she tries to do more than 50 percent of whatever needs doing, "just to give [my husband] that break." She also pointed out that being home less than her husband was not an excuse for slacking: "There's a lot of that [cognitive labor] I can do while I'm not at home. . . . I can think about stuff while I'm [commuting] on my bike, and during my lunch break or whatever." Gina works as a postdoc at an academic research center, whereas her husband Garrett is home full-time. Despite her time constraints, Gina believes she must remain connected to family life, or chaos descends: "I tend to do the planning when [all four kids] are at home, and I tend to try to be around when they are all at home. . . . Now that there are many more moving parts, I tend to take over a lot of the planning, because it is complicated." She looked forward to leaving academia and starting a "required 9:00 to 5:00 office position" with some trepidation: how would her husband manage without her continual oversight?

By contrast, time gaps that favored men were acceptable justifications for his mental absence. Lisa, a stay-at-home mom, argued that her husband's limited time at home should not be wasted on routine chores: "It seems ridiculous to me to have [my husband] put in a 10- or 12-hour [work] day, and then say, 'Hey, please, now make the dinner.'" Joanna was on an extended maternity leave, caring for her two children while her husband Isaac worked 40 hours per week in marketing. Joanna argued that many childcare responsibilities fell to her "by default, because I've taken on the role of being with the kids." The correlation between time at home and domestic responsibility was "natural," she said, and "shouldn't be any other way." Frank, a financial consultant, works full-time hours from a home office in the attic while his wife cares for their three children downstairs. Although he has considerable ability to shape his schedule—"If I want to [get a haircut during the traditional workday], I just have to clear my calendar at work and get it"—he argues he must maintain a strict barrier between job and family to keep his work-from-home setup viable. He cited a recent morning as an example:

> *I said goodbye to everyone and went up to work. Then I could hear the kids raising hell downstairs and [my wife] trying to clean the house because we have a cleaning lady coming over. . . . So I knew it's not going well. I just felt like I made this decision, and I'm just going to have to talk to [my wife] about it later. I'm not going to stop working and go down there. I have a noise machine, I put it on, and I put some music on and just ignored [the noise].*

This context-dependence, for men, and context-independence, for women, had important consequences for respondents' career trajectories. Women on a high-powered career track often put the brakes on their career, either because they doubted their partner would be able to pick up the slack or because they didn't want to cede responsibility for managing their children's lives. Women's continued investment in cognitive leadership, regardless of career success, ensured

that career gaps favoring women grew more slowly, or even reversed, than career gaps favoring men, which were often allowed to grow exponentially.

Donna, a computer programmer, cut down her hours to provide more childcare, but even with those reduced hours, she still earned considerably more than her husband Sam. She reported uncertainty about whether to coast in her career or strive for advancement: "To move up in my career, I'd have to travel a lot more than I do," she mused. Donna had recently sold her first project to a consulting client, but the travel required to win the contract "is making me second-guess whether I want to do this again or whether I should, you know, not lead another project…I could stay at my same level and get by without traveling, but I certainly wouldn't be advancing my career that way, and I might be hurting it." For his part, her husband Sam also expressed little interest in advancing much further in his career, albeit for personal rather than familial reasons. He recently turned down a promotion that would have given him several direct reports, because "if those people had to get let go…then I would be responsible for giving that information. And I was not interested in that." For Sam, the upper limit seemed to be his own ambition; for Donna, family concerns made her hesitant to invest more in her career and inclined to let her income plateau. She and Sam shared physical labor roughly equally, but Donna retained a majority of the cognitive labor and seemed uncertain about shifting more of it to Sam.

April is an engineer married to Kenneth, a non-profit founder turned real estate agent. Her income and work hours have remained stable over the years, whereas her husband's fluctuate widely. "His [career] choices are not huge money-makers," mused April, although Kenneth's greater schedule flexibility has meant that he does more of the daytime chauffeuring of their children. Still, April felt a constant pull between her roles as mother and employee and worried that "I am falling short in every role." On the personal front, she compared herself

unfavorably to her own mother, who had sewn Halloween costumes and baked birthday cakes from scratch. On the professional front, April was expected to clock a large number of billable hours each week as well as to bring in new business, which is non-billable. However, "I cut myself off at 40 hours" weekly, she said, and deprioritize non-billable work, which "I know ultimately could stunt my growth professionally." She expected her career to flatline over the next few years, whereas Kenneth was optimistic that his sales numbers would continue to grow. Indeed, his salary had been inching closer to his wife's and was now within 10%. Kenneth also felt a conflict between his work and home responsibilities, but for him the concern was that he didn't have the flexibility he needed to excel on the job. "The more effectively I work, the more I get paid, 'cause it's all commission. So if I'm not working, I'm not getting paid….So yeah, I can take off tomorrow kind of at a moment's notice unless I have a [client] appointment, but…then I don't earn anything." His responsibility for transporting his kids interfered with that flexibility, although his wife had recently started working from home a few days a week to relieve him of some of that burden.

Men with "smaller" careers rarely faced the expectation that they would step up at home, unless the couple had specifically designated him the lead parent (a topic I'll revisit in Chapter 6). In some cases, this was because women did not believe their husband was capable of taking a cognitive leadership role, based on his perceived temperament and personality. In others, it was because the couple remained invested in his career *potential* despite evidence that it would be financially prudent to double down on her career. For Tonya and her husband Tómas, it was a little of both. She makes considerably more as a social worker than her husband does on a construction crew, but both partners continue to work full-time. Tonya admitted their dual-full-time arrangement was not entirely based on a rational assessment of each partner's earning

potential. She recalled suggesting "more than once" that Tómas consider staying at home with their children, but in the end she concluded that "it's better for everybody in our home that we [both] have a place where we go where we feel competent."

Interestingly, Tonya speculated that the relative precarity of her husband's job led her to do more at home than she might otherwise: "If my husband had a job that had more benefits and salary, I wouldn't, I would not do as much as I do [for the household] right now." The insecurity of his job meant it was important for him to preserve his energy and retain maximum flexibility, she argued, rather than invest more on the home front. Tonya reported that she is "far less ambitious in my career" than she might be if Tómas was able to help manage the household. She anticipated staying in her current job rather than trying to advance, because "I've been here for a long time and they trust me to get the work done…[I have] the ability to be at my kid's, whatever, school events and all that kind of stuff." Plus, she believed Tómas had little aptitude for domestic tasks other than home maintenance. Tonya recalled a recent evening when he was in charge of putting the kids to bed while she worked late: "It's like even embarrassing to say. But like one night, not that long ago, um, he was like, oh—long story short, he didn't know that our youngest wore a diaper to bed. I was like, Oh my...how does this happen, you know? Like, yeah, she wears a diaper. The diapers are in the closet."

In another couple, Sonya had been the primary breadwinner and the primary cognitive laborer for most of their marriage, though her husband Ray had taken on increasing physical labor responsibilities over time. Despite Sonya's higher earnings as an accountant, she was clear that Ray's career was the priority. Currently a government attorney, he aspired to eventually become a judge. "With the right support system, I could probably reach higher" and enter the executive suite, admitted Sonya. But early in parenthood, "we decided it was really important for

us to see his career goals through, because I don't really have a goal such as—one as important as his is." The couple's reluctance to disinvest in Ray's career kept their hours and income differentials within reasonable bounds. Indeed, just before I interviewed them, Ray received a promotion that would equalize their salaries, and he remained on track to someday become a judge, whereas Sonya had bounced between jobs over the past few years searching for a family-friendly firm.

Mindy and Trevor were in a similar situation. Although she worked longer hours and earned 40% more than her husband Trevor across two part-time jobs, she and Trevor remained invested in the idea of his career—what it could one day become, even if that potential had not yet been realized. The couple met while working on the same international development team in Trevor's native Vietnam. Soon after they married, they relocated to the U.S. so Trevor could pursue his dream graduate degree. During his student years, Trevor had time flexibility but little income, which put pressure on Mindy to earn a stable salary while still completing a large chunk of the childcare. She found several part-time jobs, none of which she felt particularly passionate about, but which nevertheless paid the bills without keeping her away from her daughter too long. After his graduation, Trevor launched a nonprofit. He held out hope that the organization would eventually become financially self-sustaining, providing more economic stability for the family. In the meantime, he took up part-time hourly work to supplement his wife's income. Trevor recognized the sacrifices his wife had made to allow him to pursue his dream: "She has sacrificed, I would say, in terms of what she really wanted to do. Because I was doing the [job] search for a few years. I really wanted to do what I came [to this country] to do…so she kind of kept doing things which were just, just to keep the household going." Still, Trevor's dreams were

the axis around which the couple's decisions turned and a key reason Mindy stayed in unfulfilling jobs rather than invest in building her own career capital.

Discussion

This chapter contextualized respondents' de-gendered cognitive labor accounts, highlighting the gendered social forces undergirding tendencies they experienced as highly personal and thus immutable. Apparent traits, such as organization and attentiveness, emerged as a function of *differential investment* in relevant skills and *differential application* of those skills across contexts. For men in particular, I found a stark divide between the self of the office and the self of the home. If respondents recognized the disjuncture between responsible employee and lackadaisical husband, they usually implied that his mental energy was depleted on the job. In contrast, women's paid labor exertions were not typically accepted as an excuse to cede household management to her husband. If paid work threatened to interfere with a woman's ability to parent, she often put the brakes on her career. Meanwhile, couples worked to preserve men's time and cognitive capacity for paid work, even in cases where his career success remained an unrealized ideal.

Viewed narrowly, at the level of an individual couple operating at a single point in time, cognitive labor accounts centered on personality differences are compelling: it seems reasonable for the more organized partner to manage the family calendar, for instance, regardless of gender. However, when we expand the aperture to ask how individuals develop and then selectively deploy managerial capacities, gender comes back into view. Respondents treat their temperamental differences as fixed constraints, but these differences are better seen as the

product of ongoing investment (or disinvestment) in acquiring knowledge, skills, and social capital—processes that may have begun in childhood but continue into the present.

In this way, respondents' daily practices end up creating and recreating the self they are said to reflect, via a circular process that connects identity, thought, and behavior. In the context of a romantic relationship, identity has a strongly comparative component: couples create a shared reality, but they also carve out personal niches based on perceived contrasts in skills, preferences, and personalities (see, e.g., Nyman et al. 2018). Childhood and adolescent socialization likely put men and women on slightly different footings, such that they enter their adult relationships with different experiences, knowledge, and ability (Kane 2012; Martin 1998). Even initially small differences can then snowball over time as partners' individual identities nudge them down distinct pathways, which in turn reinforce their sense of difference. The question of whether gender is something we do or something we are thus turns out to be a paradox: we do *because of* who we understand ourselves to be, and in the process we *become*.

My findings suggest that men's identity is particularly context-dependent, in keeping with prior research on the gendered meanings of paid and unpaid labor (Damaske 2011). Whereas men largely preserve the best of themselves for paid labor, women often attempt to embody both the ideal worker and ideal mother schemas, opting for the latter if they feel they cannot do both (Blair-Loy 2005; Stone 2007). The idea that couples were constrained by who they were as individuals obscured the degree to which those constraints were built on choices. Respondents appealed to choice and personal agency when they described their commitment to self-expression: their preferences and personality traits, they said, inspired them to take on certain cognitive chores. At the same time, they implied that because these characteristics were core to who they were, they were effectively constrained to act in accordance with these

tendencies. Choice and constraint are thus two sides of the same coin. Which is which from a couple's perspective depends on the interaction of context and gender.

These adaptable understandings of choice and constraint prevent respondents from viewing their experiences through a gender lens. They may acknowledge their unequal labor outcomes, but they erase any connection to gender ideology. This "de-gendering" likely contributes to the noted intractability of gender inequality in different-sex romantic relationships (England 2010). In previous eras, gender was more widely acknowledged as a heuristic for labor allocation (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Scarborough et al. 2019). This ideology has eroded in recent years, as younger generations aspire to a new, more involved fatherhood and a romantic partnership in which breadwinning and homemaking are shared by both partners (Cooper 2000; Gerson 2011; LaRossa 1988). Nevertheless, behaviors have remained relatively stagnant, in part because the drivers of those behaviors (e.g., a gendered opportunity structure) have remained in place (Bianchi et al. 2000, 2012). This means that the couples in my sample, born primarily in the late 1970s and 1980s, found themselves between rock and hard place when they came of age. The goalposts had moved in the direction of gender equality, but the cultural and structural resources for reaching those goals remained limited.

These findings remind us that attitudinal change alone is insufficient. When couples reduce cognitive dissonance by reframing rather than reforming their behavior, they inadvertently send gender "underground," where it can operate unchecked (Beagan et al. 2008). Household labor imbalances that are "about" personality or an "inevitable" result of circumstantial constraints are more difficult for egalitarians to contest than imbalances attributed to sexist ideas about men's and women's roles. Collectively, we must provide individuals and couples with the resources needed to act on their ideals, an idea I return to in the conclusion.

However, the patterns described here do not match the experience of a minority of couples who somehow manage to forge new cognitive labor patterns. In a final empirical chapter, I explore what sets these nontraditional respondents apart from the rest and examine what happens when they are held to account—or hold themselves to account—for their nontraditional ways of thinking gender.

Chapter 6: Thinking Gender Differently

Shannon and Richard have been together for 13 years, during which time they moved cross-country, changed jobs and industries several times, and had two kids. Both work full-time, though in practice Shannon often exceeds 40 hours, and she earns about 40% more than Richard. He completes more of the physical housework, from dishwashing to lawn-mowing, arguing that his greater flexibility and time in the home make this arrangement the most logical. More surprising, however, was the couple's cognitive labor arrangement: while Shannon maintains responsibility for several key domains, more of this work, too, tends to fall on Richard. The drivers of this nontraditional arrangement began to crystallize as I listened to Shannon and Richard explain how they think and what they prioritize.

Like the traditional couples introduced in chapter 4, Shannon and Richard used the language of personal essentialism to explain their arrangement. Unlike those traditional couples, their account identified Richard as the planful partner and Shannon as the laidback one. Richard is "more naturally organized, and more naturally a planner," explained Shannon. "It's not that I'm incapable of it, you know, I've had jobs where [planning and organization have] been a big part of my job…But he just does—he does things before I even realize that it needs to be done." Before any excursion, for instance, Richard makes sure to pack a bag with snacks and water bottles, whereas Shannon's attitude is "we'll figure it out." She wondered aloud whether this was her way of "trying to balance [Richard], because he is so, like, organized and sometimes tightly wound, and I'm just like, 'Ahhh,' just cause—I feel like I don't, I can't, we can't both be that way." Richard concurred that he is "a highly organized person" who lives by calendars and spreadsheets. As a case in point, he cited his "traveling doc," which contains packing lists,

frequent flyer information, and other vacation preparation reminders. Shannon has access to this document, but Richard doubted she ever bothered consulting it.

Shannon and Richard differ in at least two important ways from the majority of respondents, whose gender-traditional cognitive labor practices were documented earlier. First, they turn the logic of personal essentialism on its head by linking the *male* partner's temperament to a propensity for cognitive labor. Second, and somewhat contradictorily, their personal essentialist beliefs are loosely held. Shannon recognized, for instance, that she is "not incapable" of playing the organizer role and surmised that her laidback domestic persona was meant to "balance" Richard's "tightly wound" one. Both partners were cognizant of the interaction between their personality and their circumstances and reflected on prior turning points when they might have taken a different path.

In this chapter, I analyze the 14 couples who shared equally in or were male-led in the cognitive labor sphere. I ask what enabled them to follow a different path than so many of their peers, and I examine the challenges they experienced as a result. I argue that couples like Shannon and Richard are "rethinking gender" via a mix of intention and accident. These cisgender, heterosexually partnered men and women are neither operating outside the gender binary nor seeking to dismantle the larger gender structure constructed around that binary, although most do express feminist views. Yet they have somehow managed to carve out an atypical position for themselves within that structure, largely because their sense of self incorporates gender-nontraditional elements, and their economic conditions facilitate those elements.

Nontraditional couples are not, however, living in a post-gender idyll. These couples do not invert the dynamics of highly traditional couples but instead blend elements of tradition and

change. The parenting realm is particularly fraught. Nontraditional women do not "check out" of the childrearing in the same way some of their traditional male counterparts do. Instead, many practice a form of "compensatory maternity": they retain a cognitive leadership role in key areas of their children's lives—particularly at the interface between the family and institutions such as daycares, schools, and healthcare providers—even as they pursue non-normative paid work and housework arrangements. Meanwhile, nontraditional men struggle to immerse themselves in the social worlds of parents, because they are unable or unwilling to enter spaces they see as highly feminized.

Despite these subtle concessions to dominant ways of thinking gender, non-traditional couples routinely face challenges as a result of the disjuncture between their practices and the expectations of outside institutions and observers. They report both subtle and overt experiences of judgment from family, friends, and practitioners. Some struggle with self-doubt or report frustration with their partner for his or her failure to live up to expectations. The challenges these couples face remind us that individual-level change alone is insufficient to restart our stalled gender revolution (England et al. 2020). Until our cultural expectations and institutional structures expand to accommodate many more ways of thinking and doing gender, couples like the ones featured in this chapter will continue to face an uphill battle.

The drivers and costs of nontraditionalism

Much of the literature on household labor centers inequities, asking why women do the "lion's share" of household work (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). Less attention has been paid to different-sex couples who disrupt traditional gender mores in their labor practices, in part because this is a small group. One study of dual-earner couples (i.e., both partners employed

part- or full-time) estimates the prevalence of "parallel" couples[24] at 9% (Hall and MacDermid 2009). Another analysis of married couples with children at home reports that as of 2009, 4.4% were comprised of a mother working full-time and a father working part-time or not at all (up from 2.2% in 1976) (Kramer, Kelly, and McCulloch 2015). Among these at-home fathers, just over one-fifth reported themselves as primary caregivers.

To understand who these nontraditional couples are and what drives their behavior, we might begin with the relative resources allocation theory: when women earn more, do they do less housework? The answer turns out to be surprisingly complicated, as scholars disagree on both the empirical patterns and how best to interpret them. One group argues for "gender-deviance neutralization," pointing to the curvilinear relationship between women's earnings and housework time (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Greenstein 2000). Women's housework time is negatively correlated with their income until they surpass 50% of total household earnings, at which point the correlation becomes positive (Schneider 2011). One hypothesis is that this pattern reflects the couple's attempt to counterbalance a disturbance to the gendered order in the paid work sphere by practicing traditionalism in the domestic sphere. However, this theory has been critiqued by scholars who argue that once wives' absolute earnings are taken into account, the empirical pattern largely disappears, and women's absolute income is indeed negatively correlated with their housework hours (Gupta 2007; Sullivan 2011). A qualitative study of women who out-earn their husbands suggests the relationship between earnings and housework is not solely a function of economics (Tichenor 2005). Instead, whether a primary-breadwinner woman is able to leverage her income into lower housework time depends on whether her husband *perceives* her career as more important.

[24] Parallel couples were defined as both partners spending similar weekly hours on paid work, childcare, and household chores (Hall and MacDermid 2009).

A second consideration is time availability: when women work longer hours than their male partners, do they do less housework? Mannino and Deutsch (2007) find a negative relationship between women's paid work hours and their share of housework. Others have focused on the timing of partners' work hours: partners who work alternate shifts share more housework and childcare duties, in part because men spend more solo time in the home (Deutsch and Saxon 1998; Gerstel and Clawson 2018; Presser 1994). Nevertheless, women who work more hours do not necessarily do less work than their partner, but rather less work relative to similarly situated women (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010).

Several qualitative studies focused exclusively on "peer," "post-gender," and "equal sharer" couples help us understand how both economic and non-economic processes may combine to produce a nontraditional outcome (Deutsch 2000; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998; Schwartz 1994). Risman and Johnson-Sumerford (1998) identify several distinct pathways to a nontraditional marriage, including both partners' equal investment in their career and/or family life; deliberate efforts to pursue nontraditionalism; or external circumstances that effectively force the couple's hand (e.g., a chronic illness). In her study of egalitarian parenting practices, Deutsch (2000) reports that equality is often the unintended consequence of external constraints rather than a pre-meditated intention. Further, she argues that women in egalitarian couples do not necessarily have more economic power relative to their counterparts in more traditional relationships, but rather more emotional power: their husbands are particularly invested in both the marital relationship and in having children, and this gives women leverage to advocate for an egalitarian labor allocation.

Importantly, the criteria used to recruit egalitarian couples for these studies feature physical labor-centered definitions of housework and childcare. For instance, Risman and

Johnson-Sumerford (1998) required that both partners complete 40-60% of common household chores such as cooking meals, cleaning, and paying bills. The data hint that even these nontraditional couples would skew more traditional, if assessed on their cognitive labor practices. Deutsch (2000) reports that even among equal-sharer couples, household management remains particularly gendered, and Ehrensaft (1987) finds that women in egalitarian relationships still tend to do more "worrying" and household scheduling. These reports correspond with my finding, detailed in prior chapters, that physical labor equality is more common than cognitive labor equality. They also suggest that the specific drivers of nontraditionalism in the *cognitive* dimension have not yet been studied.

In addition to understanding the factors that lead a couple to a nontraditional division of physical and/or cognitive labor, we might also want to know how such couples fare: what obstacles do they face, and how do they respond? This is an important area of inquiry in its own right, but also insofar as it may shed light on the barriers preventing more couples from enacting egalitarian ideals. The original doing gender theory makes clear that while it is possible to do gender in non-normative ways, individuals who do so risk being "held to account" for their actions (West and Zimmerman 1987). "Virtually any activity," West and Zimmerman elaborate, "can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature" (p. 136). When an individual socially categorized as female engages in activities socially coded as masculine, for instance, onlookers would register a contradiction.

Prior research on couples with a nontraditional division of caregiving and/or physical housework suggests that nontraditionalism indeed carries costs as well as rewards. Couples who deviate from gendered scripts are indeed subject to others' judgment, as West and Zimmerman (1987) predicted. At-home and primary-parent fathers, for instance, struggle to integrate into

parenting communities dominated by mothers who may view them with suspicion (Doucet 2000, 2006). Women with high-powered careers are sometimes judged as "bad mothers," given the presumed incompatibility of the ideal mother and ideal worker roles (Blair-Loy 2005; Thébaud and Taylor 2021). Because women are held accountable for family outcomes and judged more harshly for perceived failings in the domestic arena, a woman's greater career commitments do not necessarily absolve her of responsibility for such matters (Riggs 1997; Thébaud et al. 2019).

There is also some evidence that nontraditional couples hold *themselves* to account for perceived gender transgressions, especially in cases where circumstance rather than ideology was the main driver of their labor allocation choices (Miller and Sassler 2012; Risman 1999). Nontraditional women sometimes compare themselves unfavorably to their own mothers, for instance, and nontraditional men sometimes regret the career sacrifices required for them to be involved parents (Deutsch 2000). Further, it is not uncommon for spouses to have different expectations or goals. If a couple practices equality, but one partner expected or desired a different arrangement, equality will not necessarily promote marital harmony (Hochschild and Machung 2012). Conflicts over domestic labor can also arise when partners disagree over what constitutes equality (Deutsch 2000).

In sum, prior research on egalitarian couples has largely focused on those who share physical housework and childcare, and there are indications that these couples do not necessarily share the cognitive labor. This research suggests that economic considerations (i.e., income and hours worked) will be an important starting point in any examination of nontraditionalism but may not tell the whole story: a woman's greater earnings and/or hours do not necessarily guarantee her an equitable division of physical labor. Finally, prior research draws our attention to the potential costs of egalitarianism, which include social censure and self-doubt. As we have

seen, cognitive labor is often understood as a manifestation of one's essential self rather than simply a set of behaviors. Thus, we might expect rethinking gender via egalitarian cognitive practices to be even riskier, socially speaking, than undoing gender via egalitarian physical practices.

Findings

I present my findings in three sections. In the first, I identify the factors that distinguish nontraditional couples from their peers, chiefly their nontraditional employment configuration and sense of self. Next, I show that nontraditional couples are not the mirror image of more traditional peers and that cognitive parenting practices in particular remain somewhat traditional even among this group. Finally, I describe the costs these nontraditional partners face as they are held to account for rethinking gender by outside observers and, sometimes, by each other.

What differentiates the nontraditional couples?

I assessed 14 couples (18% of the sample) as "nontraditional," in that cognitive work was roughly equally divided (N=8) or skewed male (N=6).[25] Ideologically, this group was largely unremarkable: like many of their more traditional peers, they eschewed gender traditionalism and held up household labor equality, or something close to it, as their ideal. The majority came from traditional families in which their mother was out of the workforce for a period of time and/or was the secondary earner throughout their childhood. These couples were highly-educated, but not substantively more so than the sample as a whole. 79% of nontraditional men and 86% of nontraditional women had at least a 4-year college degree, compared to 81% and

[25] In all but one case, physical labor was also shared or male-led.

83% of men and women in the full sample. (See Table 5 for a comparison of the nontraditional group's demographics to that of the full sample.)

Table 5. Demographic Characteristics of Nontraditional Couples Compared to Full Sample

Nontraditional Men (*Full Sample*)		**Nontraditional Women (*Full Sample*)**	
Mean age	42 (*39*)	Mean age	38 (*37*)
Median income	$77.5K (*$100K*)	Median income	$99K *($65K)*
Median work hours	40 (*43*)	Median work hours	41 *(40)*
Work status at time of intvw.		Work status at time of intvw.	
Full-time (34+ hrs.)	71% *(79%)*	Full-time (34+ hrs.).	93% (*69%*)
Part-time	7% *(11%)*	Part-time	7% *(19%)*
Unemployed	21% *(10%)*	Unemployed	0% *(12%)*
Education level		Education level	
HS/GED	7% *(8%)*	HS/GED	0% *(7%)*
Some college	14% *(6%)*	Some college	14% *(7%)*
Associates	0% *(5%)*	Associates	0% (*4%*)
Bachelor's +	79% *(81%)*	Bachelor's +	86% *(83%)*

**Nontraditional Couples (*Full Sample)*			
Middle-class (2 BA+)	71% (*70%*)		
Borderline (1 BA+)	21% *(13%)*	Median income	$192.5K (*$150K*)
Working-class (0 BA+)	7% (*17%*)		
Relative income		Relative paid work hours	
Wife 5%+ more	57% *(29%)*	Wife 4+ more	57% *(24%)*
Equal earnings	14% *(9%)*	Equal	36% (*23%*)
Husband 5%+ more	29% *(62%)*	Husband 4+ more	7% *(53%)*

Note: Data come from participants' responses to a series of demographic questions posed at the end of their interview. For nontraditional couples, N = 28 (14 women, 14 men). For the full sample, N = 138 (63 men, 75 women, 76 couples).

Given the small and nonrepresentative nature of the sample, demographic statistics should be considered suggestive rather than decisive. Nevertheless, two factors merit closer attention. First, and consistent with some prior research on couples with nontraditional physical labor allocations, the nontraditional couples are among the most economically privileged in the sample (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). Nontraditional couples had a higher median

household income ($192,500) than the full sample ($150,000). Working-class respondents were underrepresented: in 13 out of the 14 nontraditional couples, at least one partner had a 4-year degree.

Second, women's relative income and/or hours worked appear to be an important prerequisite for a nontraditional division of cognitive labor. In all but one nontraditional couple, the female partner's paid work equaled or exceeded the male partner's on the earnings and/or hours dimensions.[26] Nontraditional men earned *less* than average ($77,500 versus $100,000), but nontraditional women earned *more* ($99,000 versus $65,000). Similarly, nontraditional men worked fewer hours and were less likely to work full-time than the average male respondent, whereas nontraditional women worked more hours and were more likely to be full-time than the average female respondent.

Yet there were 19 women in the sample who out-earned and/or worked more paid hours than their husband but still did more of the cognitive labor. This pattern suggests a nontraditional employment configuration may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for a nontraditional cognitive labor allocation. The qualitative data indicate that nontraditional respondents also think gender differently than their traditional counterparts. Some rely on the language of personal essentialism but flip the script to argue that the *male* partner is the Type-A, organized one. Most recognize the contingency of their arrangement, emphasizing an interaction between personality and circumstance and acknowledging alternative possibilities.

Richard and Shannon, introduced earlier, exemplify the pattern of gender-flipped personal essentialism. Where Richard prioritizes both physical and logistical order, Shannon

[26] One couple shared cognitive labor, but the female partner's hours and earnings were lower. This couple was unusual along several dimensions, including the fact that this was the only couple in which I was only able to interview the male partner, the only working-class couple to share cognitive labor, and the only couple in which physical labor was traditional (female-led) and cognitive labor was nontraditional (shared).

prefers to take things as they come. Likewise, Kurt described himself as "fairly particular about my things" and "an organized person." He recalled a difficult adjustment period after moving in with his wife, who is more outcome- than process-driven: "[Meredith] is a little more like, 'I'm here, I need to be there, I will do and run through anything to get from this point to this point,' and sometimes there's just, you know, explosions occur." Meredith tends to get absorbed in her work and forget about other responsibilities, he said. "She's definitely more fly-off-the-cuff." Meredith regularly makes last-minute plans Kurt learns about at the eleventh hour, which "drives me nuts, 'cause I like to know what I have on my plate every day."

Ronald and Carried described a similar dynamic: "I take the lead on all logistics," explained Ronald, because "[my wife] just really dislikes dealing with all that crap." She is more of a "big idea person.…She's a strategist rather than an implementer." Ronald feels more comfortable with a concrete plan in place, whereas Carrie hates being tied down. This can cause conflict when it comes to vacation planning: "If you gave [Carrie] an itinerary that told her where to be and when at any given moment on vacation, she would blow her brains out." Their compromise was that Ronald figures out where they will be day by day but always books refundable hotel options in case they change their minds.

Antoni is similarly comforted by plans, routines, and systems. At the end of every month, he prepares a detailed financial summary, because "it just comes naturally to me that I need to know what the next month looks like, and what the previous month looked like. I like to be reflective on planning." He admits to being "a little OCD" about certain chores. His wife "doesn't do it to the level that I like it," explained Antoni. While she makes some effort, "she knows I'm going to change things" after she's done and thus doesn't exert herself too much.

At first glance, these statements could be interpreted as evidence that "personality" is indeed the deciding factor in a couple's cognitive labor allocation: whichever partner is more regimented and organized will end up doing more of this work. Yet closer examination shows that the personal essentialism voiced by nontraditional respondents differed from that espoused by their traditional counterparts. In both groups, most respondents saw themselves as personally well-suited to their household roles. However, the nontraditional respondents simultaneously recognized that they might have been equally well-suited to a different role, if partnered with someone else or had their career taken a different turn.

Several nontraditional respondents acknowledged playing aspects of their nature up or down in response to their circumstances. As Shannon put it, "It's not that I'm incapable of [planning ahead]," but because Richard is so on top of their household affairs, "those skills have atrophied in my personal life." Likewise, Ronald reported that he is the one to do most of the "RSVPing for stuff and whatnot, booking things," but was clear that his wife is "perfectly capable…She'll do it when she has to." Carrie agreed that Ronald is "better at detail-y things," whereas she is more comfortable "scoping out" the bigger picture. But, she continued, "I can finish things when I need to. But I think sometimes Ronald is like, 'We should investigate all 75 avenues,' and I'm like, 'I don't feel like I need to look up 17 things for this.'" Carrie saw herself as tempering Ronald's tendency to exhaust all the possibilities in even low-stakes decision-making.

Nontraditional respondents also made clear that even if they experienced a match between their temperament and current household role, other options had been and remained plausible. Jonathan, a stay-at-home father, left his job as a lawyer when his wife Rebecca gave birth to their first child. He recalled making the decision based on a combination of economics

("she gets paid a lot more than I did") and interest ("she's more enthusiastic and more career-driven than I was…I think I enjoyed being home more"). Yet the couple was clear that their arrangement was an ongoing experiment subject to evaluation. Rebecca explained, "We decided during [my maternity leave] that Jonathan would try [staying] at home. And so, he tried a couple months, then decided to try until [our child turned] 2 years old, and then decided to keep going. . . . . If [a career opportunity] comes back up again [for Jonathan], then we'll just rearrange stuff." Jonathan agreed that they are "kind of figuring out as we go along…It's been explicitly stated between us, if I found something that I want to do [for pay], that we'd make it work." While each reported satisfaction with their current arrangement, neither believed that their natures constrained them to a particular path.

Similarly, Meg reported that she and her husband Bram "would both be able, I think, to stay at home. We both felt we had the skill set to be able to do that, you know, to run a house." When their oldest child was born, Meg was earning more, so they decided that Bram would stay at home. Over the years, Bram had built up more connections with other parents, greater knowledge of the local extracurricular options, and a rhythm for planning days and weeks with the kids. "He's in the day-to-day more than I am," explained Meg, who sometimes worried she should do more to lighten Bram's mental load and couldn't quite articulate what stopped her. Yet the couple was in the process of planning a move to Bram's home country in Europe and considering a wide range of employment arrangements, including having Meg stay home or both partners work part-time. Their openness to these distinct possibilities suggested that they held two beliefs in mind simultaneously: their current arrangement suited them well, but equally suitable alternatives existed.

Whereas Meg, Bram, Rebecca, and Jonathan made a deliberate decision to prioritize the female partner's career, at least temporarily, other nontraditional couples came to this arrangement unintentionally. When the female partner's career took off at the same time the male partner's career stagnated, both partners were able to reconcile their sense of self with the role circumstances called them to play. The male partner turned his focus inward to family life and found that he both enjoyed and was good at managing a household. Simultaneously, the female partner stepped back to let him handle many household affairs rather than expect herself to achieve at a high level in both the work and home spheres.

Shannon and Richard, for instance, both majored in the arts as undergraduates. Neither managed to turn this passion into a full-time career, but Richard held out hope longer than his wife, who entered a corporate career soon after graduation. Shannon unexpectedly found herself both enjoying the work and rising through the ranks. When we spoke, she had just accepted a new position, which was "different and exciting and scary" but presented considerable room for growth. Richard also entered the corporate world eventually but did not come to enjoy it as his wife did. His dissatisfaction came through despite the optimistic spin he put on the situation: "Half of [the work] is just fine," Richard mused, and after all, "everyone has to work." Whereas some of the traditional couples profiled in the last chapter might have continued to hold out hope that Richard would eventually "make it," Shannon and Richard leaned into their unexpected roles. Even though Shannon had taken to working from home a day or two each week, ostensibly to give him a break from rushing out of work to pick up the kids from school, Richard still preferred to duck out of the office as early as possible. On those days, "I don't need to leave the office exactly on time," he said, but "sometimes I do just 'cause no one knows I have support at home and I'd rather just leave." Meanwhile, Shannon felt comfortable prioritizing her career, her

health, and her children and leaving much of the rest to Richard. “I don’t want to say I don’t care [about how our house is run],” she explained. “It’s just, it’s not something I’m passionate about, and it’s not something that’s kind of a top priority for me.”

Kurt and Meredith had a similar history. When he graduated from college, Kurt’s dream was either to work in law enforcement or to build guitars. Neither path worked out, however, and he ended up joining the engineering firm where he had interned. Fourteen years later, Kurt was relatively content with his position there, less because he liked the work than because it allowed him the flexibility to be the on-call parent. He described his familial role as closer to his mother’s than his father’s: “I’ve kind of put myself…in a position where I am more available to the kids [than my father was] and I am home more.” Meanwhile, Meredith had always known she wanted to work in business. After a few false starts, she found a career as a mortgage underwriter. She works “a lot” of hours and occasionally feels guilty about not being able to give her children the attention she’d like to, but it was also clear that she relishes the intensity and dynamism of her daily work. Several years earlier, Kurt faced an exciting career opportunity but turned it down because “I knew Meredith was never going to just stop and quit working.” It hadn’t been his plan, exactly, to be the lead parent, but given how absorbed Meredith tended to be with her job, he figured it had all worked out for the best—though not without occasional regrets, as I detail below.

The question of why men like Kurt and Richard and women like Meredith and Shannon had self-concepts flexible enough to accommodate nontraditional pathways is difficult to answer with these cross-sectional data. However, two possibilities emerged as worthy of future investigation. First, several of the nontraditional women had a strong distrust of the traditional institutions of marriage and family, based on the negative example of their parents’ marriage or

their own unsuccessful prior union. Carrie, for instance, said her parents had been "a disaster" for a long time before they finally divorced, when she was in her 20s. She summarized their division of labor as "my mom did everything and my dad complained about stuff and then sat on the couch." Their example soured Carrie on the prospect of marriage. She remained skeptical of sentimentality and tradition even after she relented and accepted her husband's proposal. "I'm always joking that I'm, like, the boy in the relationship," she explained. "I'm like, 'We don't need to get married, it's fine.' I forget anniversaries….He's more [into], like, cards. He's just much more like, 'Oh, I never take my [wedding] ring off.' I'm, like, I take my rings off immediately upon getting home." Ronald had to meet a high bar to convince Carrie that marriage need not be a miserable endeavor.

Cheryl, who had been married for two decades before an acrimonious divorce, was frank about her history. In her previous marriage, she recalled, "Basically, I was a slave, and I don't like to be a slave." By contrast, "everything is pretty even" between her and current partner Jacob, "which I know is kind of an unusual sort of arrangement…It's really nice. Especially after what I lived with before." Keen to avoid the problems that plagued her marriage, Cheryl recalled making very clear to Jacob what she would and would not tolerate in their partnership.

A second striking pattern was that five of the 14 nontraditional couples featured an American-born woman partnered with a European-born man. Cross-national differences in gender ideology and family policy between the U.S. and countries like the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany may have opened these men up to alternative forms of masculinity (Collins 2019; Hook 2006). Alternatively or in addition, the personal qualities that attract someone to a cross-cultural marriage (e.g., openness to new experiences) may overlap with those that facilitate nontraditional marital practices. Finally, in some but not all cases, the man's immigration status

was dependent on his relationship with his wife; this fact might subtly shape a power differential in the woman's favor. However, two counterexamples of American women who were married to Latin American men and did the majority of physical and cognitive labor suggest that an immigration-related power differential is not a sufficient condition for nontraditionalism.

Compensatory maternity

The nontraditional couples show us what might be possible in a future where more diverse and flexible ways of thinking gender are socially sanctioned. Yet their experiences also remind us that we do not yet live in this world. My data show that traditional and nontraditional couples were not mirror images of one another. The most extremely male-led couples were less extreme than the most extremely female-led couples. While it was not uncommon for women to lead eight, nine, or even all ten cognitive domains, the most a man led was six. Child-related cognitive work in particular was very rarely male-led. Among the 44 couples whose management of children's enrichment and interactions with outside institutions I documented as a separate domain, only one couple was classified as male-led. In this couple, the children were the biological children of the male partner only. In the sample of parents with very young children, I coded one "childcare" category rather than specifying basic care versus enrichment/institutional engagement. Of these 32 couples, only two were male-led in the childcare domain.

The persistence of traditional childrearing arrangements suggests that nontraditional women, with the support of their male partners, practiced a form of "compensatory maternity": they retained control over key cognitive and emotional elements of parenting as a way of distinguishing between their own and their husband's role, even as they happily ceded housework and many physical childcare tasks to their partner. As noted earlier, Shannon was

clear that her priorities were her career, her health, and her children. During her limited hours at home, she wanted to be focused on her two boys, rather than on washing dishes and cleaning bathrooms. She joked, "I don't really know what value-add I am to this equation, but uh…I'm really good at reading aloud. *He* won't read them Harry Potter." Her husband Richard agreed that Shannon's household management was lacking but elaborated on her unique parenting contributions: "I feel like she connects with [the kids], I don't know, on more emotional things, or like musical things, where I'm more structured and I can teach them how to sweep…The kids just always want her, like if she has to go somewhere, they're like crying and depressed. I go somewhere, and they're like, 'Bye!'…I would say she gives them a lot more, like, loving." Despite her busy work schedule, it was Shannon who volunteered at the children's school and maintained the primary relationship with their teachers, though Richard was the logistics point person for most other areas.

Meredith and Kurt had a similar dynamic. Kurt's fathering was grounded in the physical and the routine: he more often planned and prepared the children's meals, for instance, and drove them from place to place. But it was Meredith who picked out a daycare, handled the process of getting their son diagnosed with autism—"I had to fight, really, really fight," she recalled—and managed the children's appearance. As Kurt put it, Meredith is more focused on "the nurturing kinds of things," whereas he is more pragmatic about the children's physical needs. For her part, Meredith depicted herself as the one who ultimately knew her children best and was their fiercest advocate. She was happy to have Kurt manage their daily routine, but there were other parenting tasks she felt she was uniquely qualified for: "If [Kurt] said he was going to buy the kids' clothing, or did the Christmas shopping, I think I would have to put my foot down….I wouldn't say that he can't give the gifts, because I know he means well, but like, I know what our kids

really want." For his part, Kurt was usually happy to acquiesce when Meredith sought out control.

Siobhan was also clear that her husband Antoni takes on more of both the physical and cognitive labor for their household. "That's his personality," she explained. "He is more organized than I am…He cannot function if things are not in a certain way." Antoni handles meal planning, schedules medical appointments for his daughter and his wife, and spearheads most travel planning. Siobhan described herself as more naturally a "go with the flow" person and said she was "very happy with him planning everything," as long as he takes her feedback into account. But there were several exceptions to the couple's customary dynamic, where Siobhan played an unusually proactive role. Most concerned their preschool-aged daughter. For instance, Siobhan recalled a tumultuous process of enrolling her in daycare a few years back. Uncharacteristically, the selection process "was all me," explained Siobhan. Touring candidate centers was "a source of some frustration," she remembered, "because everywhere we went Antoni would be like, 'Yeah, I think this is fine,' and I would be like, 'Ah, no.' But he pretty much left that decision up to me, because he was like, 'Well, you're the expert, you have very strong feelings about this, I don't.'"

The daycare Siobhan chose didn't have an opening until a few months after their daughter needed care, so they found a small family center as a stopgap. Siobhan worked from home her daughter's first week, so she could be close by in case anything went wrong. When the provider called to tell Siobhan her daughter had thrown up, she came right away and was disturbed by what she saw: "It was just very obvious from [my daughter's] body language that she was uncomfortable in that set-up. And I just called Antoni, and I was like, 'I'm not doing

this.'…He was like, 'How are we going to find childcare overnight? It's gonna be impossible.'" For the first time, Siobhan found herself questioning her choices:

> *I think a lot of it for me had to do with, my mom was stay-at-home, so she always stayed at home with me. And I never thought I would feel guilty about leaving [my daughter], because I'm not that kind of person….When the childcare situation wasn't working out, I looked at Antoni and I was like, 'I'm gonna quit my job.' And you know, thankfully I didn't, because I would have regretted it….So where to send her [for daycare] was a very big decision. Because I guess I felt a little guilty about not being with her.*

For nontraditional women like Shannon, Meredith, and Siobhan, mental and emotional involvement in their children's lives was depicted as a unique contribution that could not be replicated even by well-meaning husbands. They were happy to share the work of cleaning, cooking, and transporting children from place to place or even leave such tasks entirely to their husband. But on some level, these nontraditional women retained a sense that "mother knows best," at least when it came to managing children's emotional development, making decisions about their care, and orchestrating the moments that made childhood special. For their part, nontraditional men seemed happy to acquiesce to their wives' preferences.

Held to account

As the original doing gender theory tells us, individuals are free to do gender however they like (West and Zimmerman 1987). But they do so at risk of being held to account for their actions. The nontraditional couples in my sample suggest that thinking gender differently is similarly risky. These respondents were indeed held to account for their nontraditional ways of doing and thinking gender by their community, their families, and even themselves.

Several nontraditional women reported instances of social censure in which they faced scrutiny for ceding certain responsibilities to their husband. Shannon, for instance, was indignant

about others' incorrect assumptions regarding her division of labor with her husband Richard. Because of Shannon's work schedule, Richard is often the parent interfacing directly with summer camps, doctor's offices, and other institutions, whereas Shannon does more of the behind-the-scenes research to identify extracurricular opportunities and come up with a strategy for managing their older child's mental health needs. She cited a recent example where she had, atypically, been the one to take their son to a dentist appointment. All of the reminder texts went through her husband, and he missed the instruction that their son should not eat before the procedure. Learning of the mistake, the dentist asked Shannon, "'Should *you* be getting these texts?' Like, so, just, rude about it. And I'm like, 'No, like you've no idea. Like, my husband is so organized, and I think you guys sent him about ten texts with conflicting information.'"

Carrie was also frustrated with others' inaccurate assumptions about her marriage. Her husband Ronald has almost exclusive responsibility for cooking, meal planning, and all things food-related. When Carrie traveled recently for work, a colleague "found out I had kids and he was like, 'Oh no, but who's feeding them while you're gone?' And I'm like, 'Uh, the same person who always feeds them!'" She found friends' assumption that she was the party planner and children's activity scheduler similarly frustrating. "People will call or only email me if [our daughter's] going to have a party to go to…I think because I'm the mom, so I'm [supposed to be] the social coordinator. But I'm like, 'I'm not the party planner in our house!'" She believes she and Ronald have mostly succeeded in ignoring others' judgment, though it could be hurtful. "Even my mom, 'cause she stayed home with [my siblings and I]…I felt like she thought that—I mean, she never said it straight out, but I think she felt like I should have been home with my kids. And I was like, I love my kids. But if my options were to stay at home full time or not have children, I would have chosen to not have children." For his part, Ronald reported defending his

wife to his own mother, who complains that Ronald is "doing all the work, and [Carrie] does nothing. I'm like, 'No, that's not true at all. I tend to do the work in the relationship that's much more visible, and she does much more of the behind-the-scenes stuff.'…It looks like she's a slacker to somebody who isn't seeing the big picture."

Nontraditional men faced obstacles of their own, particularly when they interfaced with mother-centric parent communities. Dean noted that he did not think gender should dictate one's household responsibilities but then added a caveat: "I mean, like other than maybe talking to other women, which is—I do go. I do take [our son] to the birthday parties a lot, and it's me and a bunch of moms. And that's one reason I don't like it…If [my wife] goes, she'll talk to them, she'll get to know them. And I don't know them." Nontraditional couple Chelsea and Phil get much of their parenting information through a local mothers' Facebook group, which was frustrating for Phil: "The problem I have is the best resource for [learning about opportunities] is the town moms' group, which is difficult, because I can't join it…There's no 'parents'' group. There is a dads' group, but it's not anywhere near equivalent to [the moms' group]."

While much of the implicit or explicit critique came from outside the couple, some partners seemed to hold *each other* to account for their departure from gendered ideals. This was particularly true for couples who hadn't explicitly set out to pursue a nontraditional relationship. Richard reflected that "we certainly didn't plan for me to have a more, um, an easier commute, and specific work-from-home days, which makes things extremely predictable and easy on my end. And then her commute [into the city] and spending more time [at work], so—we didn't plan for that." For the most part he was okay with the arrangement, but there were times when the discrepancy in his and Shannon's attentiveness to household needs rankled:

> *Sometimes, if days will go by and she doesn't do dishes, I'll get frustrated…and then sometimes I'll get a Tupperware, [fill it with her dishes,] and then just put it around the corner, and then I can clean…It's half passive-aggressive. On the other hand, it's like, if I'm doing 30-40 minutes of dishes a day for a whole week and I'm the only one doing them, I'm going to do that.*

When I asked Kurt to estimate how much of the cognitive labor he completes for the family, he sighed. "I feel like as far as the scheduling of the family and the coordination of family, I would say I'm probably like 75%...I would like to see [my wife] handle some more of the, you know, the mental and cognitive, 'cause I do feel it's a little off-balanced." He recognized that the imbalance stemmed partly from the gap in their work hours, but "there is a level of frustration for me because, you know, there's that whole [idea] of, 'I'm a man, I'm supposed to be a provider of the family.' Yet, I see Meredith much more invested in her work than I am."

Nontraditional couple Molly and Dean had a particularly rancorous relationship. Molly resented Dean's tendency to give her parenting "pointers," based on his experience as a teacher. "Have you ever watched *Supernanny?"* she asked. *"*Where Supernanny comes in, she observes, and then like sometimes she'll make little comments and pointers? He'll do that to me, and it pisses me off because it's like, no…You're not Supernanny. You're the co-parent here." Meanwhile, Dean resented having to do more of the physical and cognitive labor for the household, when his ideal would be 50/50. The obstacle to equality, he said, was "what [Molly] is willing to do or can do." Their allocation was "a little more fair for her," he quipped bitterly, professing himself to be pessimistic about future change.

By some measures these 14 nontraditional couples were success stories, harbingers of a more equal future to come. Yet their struggles with the judgments and criticisms levied by others and with the doubts and frustrations they experienced personally, remind us that change is never

easy. Mothers who dare to leave key areas of household life in their husbands' hands, and fathers who step into traditionally female roles, often find that the gender structure does not bend as easily as they might have hoped.

Discussion

This chapter centered the 14 couples who achieve what many others aspired to: an equal or even male-led cognitive labor allocation. Almost uniformly, these couples invert traditional career dynamics, in that the female partner works more hours or earns more money than her husband. Beyond economics, however, I find that many of these nontraditional couples also think gender differently. The combination of self-professed "type-A" woman and laidback man that typifies the traditional couples is inverted here, with many nontraditional men taking on the "type-A" role. Further, nontraditional respondents seem to hold their personal essentialist ideas lightly, acknowledging interactions between selves and situations. Yet these couples are not the inverse of their traditional counterparts in all respects. Nontraditional women retain a cognitive leadership role in childcare-related matters in the majority of cases, via a practice I've called "compensatory maternity." Finally, these couples are also held to account for rethinking gender: they face others' negative judgment and sometimes judge themselves for the gap between their gendered expectations and nontraditional reality.

These findings confirm and extend prior research on the drivers of nontraditional household behaviors. Economics matter in both the cognitive and physical labor spheres: nontraditional women almost always have paid work that equals or exceeds their partner's in terms of hours worked or income earned (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). Yet the meaning and importance attributed to each partner's career also matters, as Tichenor (2005)

reported. So long as the *idea* of the male partner's career remains paramount in the couple's mind, he is unlikely to take on significant cognitive labor in the home. My findings enhance our understanding of what enables a different perspective: many of the cognitively nontraditional couples also think gender in unconventional ways. Many understand their cognitive patterns to be a manifestation of their underlying selves, but those selves do not align neatly with the normative pairing of hyper-organized woman paired with laidback man. Further, they are often more cognizant of the role of context and agency, identifying alternative pathways where their traditional counterparts primarily see constraints.

Importantly, and in keeping with some prior research on equal sharer couples, I find that egalitarian intentions and conscious efforts to pursue equality are not a prerequisite for cognitive equality (Deutsch 2000; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). The nontraditional couples in my sample did not necessarily set out to overturn gender conventions, and in fact some seemed puzzled by the unexpected turns their lives had taken. But when circumstances nudged them in nontraditional directions—perhaps through a career break for her or stagnation for him—many found an unexpected match between situation and self. Women like Shannon and Meredith found themselves caring more about office politics than domestic maintenance; men like Richard and Kurt felt a certain pride in their logistic abilities.

Nontraditional couples did not challenge convention in all aspects of their lives, however. My findings point to the maternal role as particularly sticky. Most nontraditional women practiced a form of "compensatory maternity," taking particular pride in their greater knowledge of children's needs and preferences. This likely helps prove—to themselves and others—that regardless of their career success, they remain good mothers. Compensatory maternity bears obvious relation to the concepts of compensatory masculinity and gender-deviance

neutralization, which argue that men and women seek to counterbalance a disturbance to the gendered order in the paid work sphere by practicing traditionalism in the domestic sphere (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994). This theory has been hotly debated (Gupta 2007; Sullivan 2011). While my data do not support the idea that women compensate for their workforce involvement by completing a greater portion of physical labor, they indicate a need to distinguish among different forms of labor (e.g., physical housework, cognitive childcare) with distinct drivers and motivations (Sullivan 2013). Changes in gender norms and ideology over recent decades may have diminished the salience of physical housework and childcare tasks to individuals' gender identity even as cognitive practices—and in particular cognitive childcare—remain core (Scarborough et al. 2019). My findings support the notion that childcare and housework are increasingly driven by distinct scripts, while adding that a further distinction between cognitive and physical labor may be necessary.

Consciously or not, women practicing compensatory maternity are likely aware of the risks inherent in thinking gender differently. As West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory predicts, these couples are indeed held to account for their deviation from others' expectations—by mothers-in-law, dentists, friends, and neighbors. Women's apparent disinvolvement is the subject of scrutiny in much the same way men's involvement is viewed with some suspicion (Doucet 2006). Nontraditional couples can learn to ignore or circumvent this pushback, but for many it still rankles. Some couples, particularly those whose path to cognitive equality was largely unintentional, appear to judge themselves for their gender transgression (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998). Men worry about the implications of their disaffection with paid work or resent the career sacrifices they've made to support their partner's ambitions. Women struggle with the gap they perceive between their own and their mother's parenting style. Most

manage to live with these doubts, but these couples' misgivings remind us that individuals cannot opt out of the gender structure. Whether they resist or accept its tenets, they think and act in response to it.[27]

[27] This point is similar to Lorber's (1995) argument that even gender transgressions tend to reinforce the binary.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Kathy and Randall live with their three teenagers in a sleepy suburb of Philadelphia. On the night of our interview, however, their home hummed with activity. Randall prepared dinner in the kitchen while Kathy and I spoke at the dining room table. The family dog, a black lab, barked to go outside, then barked to come back in. Their eldest child needed to be picked up from play rehearsal, and the youngest needed to be reminded to turn off his phone until he finished his homework.

The story of Kathy and Randall's lives emerged slowly amidst the hubbub. Randall, a middle school administrator, took a circuitous route through his early adulthood. He "bounced around" from college to college, changing his major five times in the process and taking several years off to serve in the military and work in construction. "I didn't get a career 'til I was 30," Randall reflected. That was around the time he married Kathy: "Us getting married kind of like focused me more, as opposed to, like, jumping from this to this."

Kathy's path to her current role as a community college professor was also winding. She described herself as "aimless" coming out of high school. "I wasn't very intentional with, you know, goal-setting…and [had] no idea what my major is going to be and wasn't worried about it." She chuckled at the memory of her naïve younger self. Kathy dabbled in nonprofit work for a few years before discovering a passion for adult education. While she pursued a graduate degree in the field, the couple had three children. "I felt like my professors were like, 'Oh my god, this girl's always pregnant,'" she joked. After graduation, she found work as a lecturer and eventually a professor, a job she loves for its flexible hours and relative autonomy.

Despite the similarities in their trajectories (a meandering start, followed by career fulfillment) and fields of work (education), Kathy and Randall understand themselves to be very different people. When they first started living together, Randall was 29 but, according to Kathy, "emotionally like an eighteen-year-old." He is "a mess," whereas Kathy is "a control freak." Financially, he's a spender and she's a saver. Randall has a "reckless, carefree" nature, whereas Kathy is prone to worry. Both Kathy and Randall drew a direct line from these temperamental differences to their division of household labor. Kathy acts as "the planner, like the foreman," explained Randall. "She's in charge of, you know, when we're doing this stuff." Randall, meanwhile, is "the doer." He explained:

> *Like this weekend, a friend of mine raises pigs, so we got a quarter of a pig. So we have—I got the pig, and I got it [home], but she's like, 'Alright, so Sunday, like, you get something from the pig and cook'…So like, she's kind of like the foreman of it, and then like, I'll do a lot or—I mean, we probably both do the same, but she'll plan most of it. Like a [school] break comes up, and she'll be like, 'We're gonna work on the kitchen this Friday.'*

Kathy largely confirmed Randall's description of their distinct roles. "My entire success in life is based off the to-do lists," she joked.

Toward the end of our interview, Kathy admitted, "I can see that we are a little—not a little, we're a lot, um, gender-stereotyped…but it's not 100% [on me]. Like, he is attentive, much more than my dad was anyway, to the kids' stuff. Um, he does love to cook, and you know, everything like that." Neither Kathy nor Randall expressed much dismay over the cognitive labor inequalities they recognized, perhaps because, as Kathy put it, "We both went where our strengths are."

Kathy and Randall's story encapsulates several of this dissertation's key findings. In contrast with generations past, Randall is an engaged father and husband who cooks, does laundry, and transports their children to various activities. Over the years, they had worked hard

to adjust their division of physical labor. Early in their lives as parents, Kathy recalled feeling like all of the childcare work fell on her shoulders. But when she re-entered full-time work and the children stopped breastfeeding, Randall stepped up to help. As Kathy put it, "He just kind of grew up." With two parents working full-time and three children at home, by necessity life became "an all-hands-on-deck kind of operation."

Yet Kathy's household responsibilities extended far beyond physical chores to the cognitive work of anticipating needs, making a plan for meeting those needs, and monitoring household happenings. Both Kathy and Randall framed their cognitive labor allocation as an outgrowth of their respective personalities. Because they understood cognitive labor as a function of their natures rather than their circumstances, the transition to new life stages had not significantly altered their cognitive patterns in the same way it had their physical responsibilities. Kathy was, had always been, and probably would always be the "planner," both argued. Thus, there was little point trying to swim upstream and adjust their roles at this point.

This personality-based understanding may have facilitated marital harmony by transferring responsibility for inequality out of either partner's conscious control. Yet by centering the individual rather than gendered drivers of their arrangement, this narrative also excised the social context driving their arrangement and reduced the likelihood of change. Though Kathy estimated she does 80% of the cognitive labor and mused that "I could give up some of the mental stuff," this was largely an idle wish. "We've got this dance down," she said. Both Kathy and Randall worked as educators, a job that requires planning, an ability to multi-task, and at least a modicum of organizational skills. However, it appeared that only Kathy brought these capacities home with her, whereas Randall was free to be a leader at school and a follower at home. Because the couple focused on their *selves* rather than on the interaction

between self and situation, they overlooked the ways gender continued to shape their relationship. Whether they recognized it or not, Kathy and Randall were thinking gender every day.

Summary of the findings

This dissertation draws on 136 interviews with 76 different-gender couples to define the cognitive dimension of household labor, document the relationship between cognitive labor and gender, explain why such gendering persists, and show what a nontraditional arrangement might look like. In Chapter 3, I took up earlier scholars' calls to study "hidden" and "invisible" forms of household labor in a rigorous, systematic way (Daniels 1987; DeVault 1991). I identified four primary components of cognitive labor: anticipation, identification, decision-making, and monitoring. These components vary in complexity, time-boundedness, visibility, and power and can be applied to numerous domains of household life. In 86% of the couples interviewed, the female partner completed the majority of the cognitive labor. Gender gaps were largest in the anticipation and monitoring components and in cognitive work related to parenting, logistics, and social relationships. Men were not absent from the cognitive dimension, but their participation tended to be highest in its less burdensome and more visible/powerful elements, such as decision-making. By contrast, only 52% of couples were female-led for physical labor.[28]

Chapter 4 examined the apparent disjuncture between respondents' cognitive labor ideals, which were largely egalitarian, and their practices, which were largely gender-traditional. I found that most respondents explained their cognitive labor allocation using a "personal essentialist" logic. That is, they attributed their action or inaction on the cognitive front to innate personal

[28] This figure references only the 44 couples for whom I collected sufficient data on physical labor practices.

qualities, suggesting cognitive labor was a matter of "who we are" rather than merely "what we do." Most commonly, couples depicted the female partner as "type-A" relative to her more laidback husband. These personal essentialist narratives implied the couple's cognitive labor allocation was both inevitable and immutable, a matter of individual nature rather than gender inequality. This "de-gendered" understanding helps explain how aspiring egalitarians could avoid the cognitive dissonance and spousal conflict we might otherwise expect to accompany a belief/behavior disjuncture (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones et al. 2015). But the dark side of personal essentialism is that it appears to forestall change. Respondents understood physical labor inequalities to be a product of circumstances. When circumstances changed (e.g., one spouse lost a job), physical labor patterns often did, too. But because changed circumstances did not alter respondents' underlying sense of self, cognitive labor patterns remained consistent over time.

Chapter 5 "socialized" the personal essentialist accounts respondents offered for their cognitive labor patterns by documenting two processes by which gender invisibly shaped those patterns. First, I showed that women's cognitive prowess was better understood as the product of investment than of innate qualities. Women consistently invested more of their time, energy, and attention in building the skills, connections, and knowledge that facilitated cognitive labor, particularly across the transition to parenthood. This differential investment helped produce a gap between partners that was increasingly difficult to bridge as women's capacity grew and men's atrophied. Second, I showed that the personality traits cited appeared to be contextually activated in different ways for men and women. The cognitive skills men brought to bear in their day jobs were less often deployed on the home front, whereas women rarely had the option to cite intellectual exhaustion as a reason for shirking responsibility at home. This is in part because

the ideal of a man's career—sometimes independent of the empirical facts—loomed large in many couples' minds, effectively putting a cap on many women's ambitions.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I turned to the outliers, 14 nontraditional couples who did *not* put the majority of cognitive labor on the female partner's plate. In all but one case, the female partner's career equaled or exceeded her husband's in time spent and/or income earned. But because the same was true for a substantial minority of traditional couples, employment configuration cannot be a sufficient condition for a nontraditional cognitive labor arrangement. I found that nontraditional couples also tended to either eschew a personal essentialist logic altogether or to deploy it in service of a gender-nontraditional narrative. By viewing cognitive labor skills as at least potentially accessible to both partners, or by subscribing to a narrative of the male partner as type-A and the female partner as aloof or disorganized, these nontraditional couples expanded the range of possibilities open to them. Whether or not they planned to pursue egalitarianism, their more flexible self-understanding enabled them to respond creatively to the unexpected turns their lives took. This approach was not without consequences, however. Couples who "rethink" gender faced judgment and pushback from others, and in some cases expressed frustration and self-doubt as they reflected on the gap between the life they'd envisioned and the one they now led.

Key sociological contributions

This research makes several important contributions to the sociology of gender, family, and inequality. My findings make clear that our understanding of gender differences in household roles will be inaccurate if we do not take non-physical forms of labor into account. Cognitive labor is ubiquitous, highly gendered, and, because of its invisibility, unlikely to be

accurately captured via time-use studies, which are considered the gold standard for quantifying and comparing household contributions (Robinson and Godbey 2010). If my finding that cognitive labor is female-typed holds in the broader population, we have likely been *underestimating* the gap in men's and women's household work. In turn, we have likely underestimated the gender gap in the consequences of domestic burdens. For instance, women report higher rates of stress, anxiety, and feelings of time scarcity than men (Craig and Brown 2016; Offer 2014; Offer and Schneider 2011). Adding appropriate measures of cognitive load into the equation might help to explain such gaps, which are not fully attributable to differences in physical housework time.

In a small-sample, qualitative study, information about prevalence and proportion should be treated as suggestive rather than definitive. That said, my data hint that gender-traditional cognitive labor practices may be more widespread and harder to change than gender-traditional physical labor patterns. Among couples for whom I collected such data, I classified an unexpectedly high proportion (approximately one-half) as sharing physical labor or even male-led. There are few estimates of the prevalence of such couples in the general population, but one quantitative study puts the figure at about 9% (Hall and MacDermid 2009). This discrepancy may be a function of my research design and sample: I required (study 1) or strongly encouraged (study 2) both partners to participate, and the majority of respondents were highly-educated (a demographic known to be more progressive on gender issues) (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Scarborough et al. 2019). Regardless of the reasons, if these respondents are unusually egalitarian in their physical labor practices, it seems possible that they are also unusually egalitarian in their cognitive practices: couples who shared cognitive labor nearly always shared physical labor, but the reverse was not true.

This research leaves several questions about cognitive labor unanswered, suggesting an agenda for future study in this area. First, scholars should work to refine techniques for quantifying and comparing individuals' cognitive load. This will be challenging given the invisibility of much cognitive labor, even to the laborer herself, but I am aware of several promising efforts to develop cognitive labor survey instruments. Techniques developed by behavioral scientists to measure the effects of a heavy "mental load" on cognitive functioning present another potential model (Mani et al. 2013).

Second, we need to study more diverse populations in order to disentangle the effects of gender from those of other demographic characteristics, such as parenthood and different-gender romantic partnership. I began that work here by recruiting a sample of working-class respondents without a Bachelor's degree. My findings revealed few differences by education level in the gendering of cognitive labor patterns: across educational levels, the dominant pattern was a female-led cognitive labor allocation. This finding, coupled with Sherman's (2017) report that among the uber-wealthy, women in different-sex couples are responsible for household management, suggests that cognitive labor may be similarly gendered across class lines. However, there was some evidence that nontraditional cognitive practices were less common among working-class couples. Given the very small sample of such couples, additional research will be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

Finally, we need to examine the causes and consequences of gender-traditional cognitive labor patterns. My study highlighted several of the important processes contributing to gender inequalities in cognitive labor, including differential investment in cognitive labor-related skills and cultural ideals prioritizing men's paid work (Collins 2019). However, I am unable to establish causality using these data. Nor have I been able to definitively assess the consequences

of a heavy cognitive labor load, though I do find a correlation between women being the primary cognitive laborer and having the secondary career in a couple.

In addition to these empirical contributions, each chapter of the dissertation built toward the larger theoretical argument that we should replace notions of "gendered selfhood" with the concept of "thinking gender." The influential "doing gender" perspective revolutionized sociological thinking by arguing that gender is a recurring accomplishment rather than a static personal quality—something one does, rather than something one is (West and Zimmerman 1987). And yet this understanding does not mesh with many people's lived experience of gender. Meadow (2018) makes this point clear in her study of trans children, for whom a consistent gender identity underlies their efforts to be recognized as girls or as boys. The idea that gender is solely an accomplishment, with no underlying referent, stands in direct contrast to these individuals' "deeply held ideas of the essence of who they are" (Meadow 2018:215).

My approach to thinking gender draws on early insights from feminist theory and cultural sociology to show how we might "socialize" the psychological experience of gender for cis- as well as transgender individuals in a way that takes both the psychological and the sociocultural registers seriously (Butler 2006; Lizardo 2017; Ruddick 1995). Our sense of who we are both shapes and is shaped by the relationships and structures in which we are enmeshed (Coleman 1990; Frank 1979). To illustrate this argument, I paid close attention to individuals' and couples' accounts of their physical and cognitive labor patterns. Most respondents understood their physical labor to be contingent, driven by circumstances such as job characteristics and children's ages. By contrast, they understood their cognitive labor to be a manifestation of their inherent natures and expected their cognitive allocations to remain consistent regardless of circumstance. Even those who decried outdated, gender-essentialist stereotypes about men and

women nevertheless essentialized *themselves* and took on cognitive roles that meshed with that self-understanding.

Life course interview data, coupled with analyses of sample-wide patterns, enabled me to show the ways respondents' selfhood was also social, in keeping with findings from cultural sociologists studying identity (Brekhus 2020). Individuals tended to invest time and energy in building the skills, knowledge, and relationships that enabled them to enact their sense of self, suggesting the difficulty of disentangling who we are from who we desire to be. Further, because identities are multifaceted, context is critical. Traits and tendencies can be played up or down—largely subconsciously—as circumstances and interlocutors demand (Ross and Nisbett 2011). Taken together, the evidence suggests we cannot think of gender as either fully contingent or fixed in childhood. There may be an underlying gendered self that follows us throughout our lives, but that self is heavily influenced by circumstance—both the immediate, interactional context and the broader gender structure in which those interactions take place (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004).

These insights help make sense of some of the inconsistencies in our "stalled, uneven" gender revolution (England 2010). I show that the range of acceptable behavioral possibilities for men and women may be expanding faster than the range of acceptable cognitive possibilities.[29] Behavior is understood as subject to conscious control in a way thought, attention, and perception are not. Thus, the latter may be seen as "truer" manifestations of one's essence—and, in turn, the social costs of nontraditional ways of thinking gender may be even higher than the costs of nontraditional ways of doing gender.

[29] Here I use "acceptable" to mean culturally sanctioned, or consistent with dominant scripts regarding femininity/masculinity and motherhood/fatherhood.

My examination of nontraditional couples who "rethink" gender suggests that cognitive childcare—particularly the work of knowing what children need, managing their engagement with the outside world, and monitoring their development—is among the hardest to truly de-gender (Lorber 2000). Even among the least conventional couples in the sample, women remained leaders (or, less commonly, equal partners) of the "project" of child-rearing. The "new fatherhood" discourse calls on men to spend more time with their children and to assist in the labor of tending to their physical needs (Cooper 2000; LaRossa 1988), and there are signs that men are indeed heeding this call (Sullivan 2010). But if the nontraditional couples in my sample are any indication, these changes stop short of challenging the old tropes that mothers know best and care most—or should.

Finally, these findings contribute to a long tradition of research about dominant American cultural scripts related to individualism, authenticity, and self-expression, coupled with an unwillingness to acknowledge structural explanations for inequality (Erickson 1995; Giddens 1991; Lamont 2019; Morning 2011). In the gender and family sphere, for example, Collins (2019) reports that American mothers tend to blame themselves for their difficulties combining work and family responsibilities and seek individual solutions rather than focus on policy change, whereas mothers in other countries come to different conclusions about the source of their challenges. Cech (2013) shows that a similarly individualistic logic drives career decision-making, as individuals taught to "follow their passion" end up perpetuating occupational segregation. My respondents also emphasize their individuality and inadvertently obscure the gendered social and cultural forces shaping their self-concepts, and in turn their cognitive labor habits.

Implications and a path forward

In addition to its sociological import, this research has important implications for couples, employers, policymakers, and other actors with the power to effect change. Couples who aspire to a more equal division of cognitive labor, or to an allocation that reflects their unique needs rather than gendered heuristics, can take several actions. The first step is recognition: we need to broaden our understanding of what is required to run a household and raise children and learn to recognize contributions not easily measured in minutes spent or dollars earned. A more comprehensive accounting of each partner's paid and unpaid contributions should be followed by an explicit agreement about who is responsible for what—not just in terms of the outcome but in terms of the process (Rodsky 2019).

For example, several women in my sample recalled asking their partner to take on more physical housework: making dinner once or twice a week, driving the children to baseball practice, or undertaking a similarly discrete task. These reallocation attempts were often unsatisfying or ineffective, in part because they did not address the related cognitive labor. Women who asked their husband to cook a meal, for instance, often retained responsibility for making a grocery list, reminding their partner it was his night to cook, and stepping in when he had to work late or forgot to pick up necessary ingredients. More clearly delineating the physical and cognitive sub-tasks involved in keeping the family fed (DeVault 1991), and then delegating task "bundles" rather than decontextualized individual activities, is likely to be a more effective reallocation strategy. Of course, those who attempt such a reallocation should be prepared to face challenges in keeping with the experiences of the nontraditional couples profiled here. Judgment from others may be somewhat inevitable, but clearly communicating preferences and responsibilities (e.g., "Please call John first in case of emergency") may help.

At the institutional level, organizations that interface with families (schools, daycares, pediatricians, etc.) could help by reducing the cognitive burden they impose. Reducing and streamlining communication, for instance, would make it easier for partners to share or trade off responsibility for liaising with the institution, rather than necessitating that one partner be the "expert" responsible for collating information and learning unwritten rules. This might mean sending home one weekly digest rather than myriad emails and flyers on a daily basis. It might mean reducing the number of special events that parents must keep track of, perhaps by focusing on in-school activities that do not require costumes and props brought in from home. Centralized calendars and options to specify the circumstances under which each parent should be contacted would also make it easier for both partners to share the work.

On the employer side, this research adds to the growing consensus that inflexible or unpredictable work, as well as norms of overwork, harm families and exacerbate existing inequalities both within and across families (Cha 2013; Harknett, Schneider, and Luhr 2020). Employers should recognize the cognitive costs that come with managing an ever-changing schedule, such as arranging last-minute or backup childcare (Daminger et al. 2015). They should normalize the fact that most employees, regardless of their parental or partnership status, will need to do some personal cognitive labor during work hours. If possible, they should make it easier for employees to do so, rather than installing employee monitoring software and instating unrealistic expectations such as that employees will not check personal email during work.

At the policy level, many commonly requested changes—paid leave, affordable childcare, and protections against overwork—will also be helpful for reducing cognitive burdens and, in turn, reducing gender inequality by making it easier for women to combine paid work and household management. The labor involved in finding high-quality childcare and figuring out

how to pay for it, for instance, should be built into calculations about the costs of our current, largely privatized system. Efforts to sync daycare, school, and employment calendars would go a long way to reducing the burden of coordinating multiple conflicting schedules. Simplicity and ease should be prioritized in the design of any new programs, ensuring that efforts to help families don't inadvertently add to their cognitive load (Daminger et al. 2015; Emens 2015; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). More broadly, any efforts to reduce economic inequality will likely have a trickle-down effect on families' cognitive labor loads, insofar as rising inequality has incentivized cognitively intensive standards of parenting (Ramey and Ramey 2010). With greater assurance that society will care for all of its members, parents might feel less compelled to concertedly cultivate their children's development from a young age (Lareau 2011).

Finally, at the level of cultural discourse it is important that we call attention to both the size of families' cognitive burdens and the gender inequalities in how those burdens are currently distributed. The history of activism around inequalities in housework suggests that change can happen only once the labor is recognized and legitimized. It took a coalition of activists, scholars, and policymakers to name housework as important labor, despite its unpaid status, and to carefully document the size of the burden and its gendered allocation (Folbre 1991; Kneeland 1929). With time—and in a process that is still ongoing—this understanding has permeated the understanding of many laypeople. This is evident in the language around parenting as "the hardest job," in the increasing momentum around policies that support caregivers, and in the rise in calls for men and women to share in caregiving work (Caring Across Generations 2021; Valdez 2017).

There are promising signs that this conversation is broadening to include non-physical forms of household labor. In the years since I began this project, for instance, a comic about the

"mental load" went viral (Emma 2018); multiple conference panels on mental labor have been organized; and related research has received coverage in major media outlets (Grose 2021). As awareness of cognitive labor continues to grow, it will be critical to avoid relying on the personal essentialist narratives that convinced many of my respondents change would be impossible. Denying the lived experience of gender as deeply personal rather than performative will likely be counterproductive. Instead, we must take individual selfhood—and its connections to patterns of attention, perception, and thought—seriously, without losing sight of the ways that self is ever-evolving in tandem with circumstances. Girls and women may be more practiced in the skills and habits that facilitate domestic cognitive labor, but these skills and habits are open to individuals of any gender with time and practice. We have come a long way over the past century in questioning assumptions about what men and women can or should do. It is past time to work toward dismantling our assumptions about who they *are* and who they could *become*.

Appendix – Interview Materials

Study 1 Interview Guide

Decision Diary Review/Everyday Issues

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and your family. [Probes: *household composition, occupation, employment status*]

2. Pause to review "decision diary" completed in advance of interview

3. This diary looks great. Now I'm going to ask you follow-up questions about some of the items in your log—and we'll return to the list you just wrote later on in the session. *[Topics to hit: Food, Childcare, Purchase/financial, Schedule or future plans, Home/car issue]*
    a. Give me a little more context about ___. (e.g., what prompted you to start thinking about this, what options or scenarios you thought through, how—if at all—you involved or plan to involve your partner, how you felt while doing all of this)
    b. Now think about decisions or issues like this one that have come up over the past two weeks. Was the situation you just described typical or unusual? If unusual, why/how? (Prompt to describe a more typical example)

    Repeat 4-6 times for decisions in different domains

4. Are there any decisions or cognitive housework tasks that come up on a regular basis that didn't happen to occur during the day you recorded? [*If yes]* Tell me about the most recent example of this.
    a. Give me a little more context about ___. (e.g., what prompted you to start thinking about this, what options or scenarios you thought through, how—if at all—you involved or plan to involve your partner, how you felt while doing all of this)
    b. Now think about decisions or issues like this one that have come up over the past two weeks. Was the situation you just described typical or unusual? If unusual, why/how? (Prompt to describe a more typical example)

Irregular Issues

Now we're going to turn to some topics that likely come up on an irregular or unpredictable basis. For each one, please tell me about a specific/recent instance, rather than what happens in general. If you can't think of an example, let me know, and we can skip the question.

1. Tell me about the last time you bought new clothes or shoes for your child - [*Probes:* how did you identify the need for new items? Decide what/where to buy? Who shopped?]
    a. Was the sequence of events you just described typical or unusual for issues of this kind, where you're scanning for or anticipating needs? Explain.

2. Tell me about the last time your child had a medical appointment or a health issue – [*Probes:* How did that appointment get on your calendar? Who took the child to the appointment? How did you communicate about the appointment with your partner?]
    a. Was the sequence of events you just described typical or unusual for issues of this kind, where you're planning ahead and coordinating schedules? Explain.

3. Tell me about the last time something broke/needed repair in your home or car. - [*Probes:* How did you become aware of the issue? How did you decide what actions to take? Who completed those actions?]
    a. Was the sequence of events you just described typical or unusual for issues of this kind? Explain.

4. Tell me about the last out-of-town trip you took as a family - *[Probes:* who suggested the trip? How did you research your options? Make a final decision about what to do/where to go? Who made what logistical arrangements? Packed for the child/group?]
    a. Was the sequence of events you just described typical or unusual for issues of this kind? Explain.

5. Tell me about the childcare arrangement you and your partner have. Who takes care of the kids, and for about how many hours a week?
    a. How did you arrive at this arrangement? [*Probes:* What options did you consider? Why was X/Y <u>not</u> considered as an option? How did you/your partner gather

information about those options? What factors weighted most heavily in making the final decision?]

b. How, if at all, was your partner involved in this decision/process?

6. Tell me about how you came to be living in your current home/apartment. [*Probes:* How/why did you decide you wanted to leave your old place? How did you go about identifying potentials apartments? How did you narrow down your options?]
    a. How, if at all, was your partner involved in this decision/process?

7. Tell me about a recent decision or household issue you and your partner disagreed on. [*Probes:* What was the decision? What was each person's point of view? How did you resolve the disagreement/what ended up happening?]

Decision-Making Process/Perceptions of Cognitive Labor

1. Many people have a mental list of things they need to pick up for the household, tasks that need to be done, or issues that must be addressed at some point. What, if anything, is on your list right now?
    a. How do you imagine your partner's mental list differs from the one you just described?

2. Have you and your partner ever talked explicitly about your decision-making process (e.g., who would be responsible for what, how you want to make decisions as parents)? If yes, when, and what did you discuss?

3. What makes a decision a two-person choice? (i.e., under what circumstances do you bring your partner in?) Can you give me one or two recent examples of such a choice, and how you went about involving your partner?

4. How, if at all, have your decision-making patterns changed over time? (E.g., compared to when you were first dating, first moved in together, before having kids) What do you think prompted these changes?

For this last part of the interview, I'm interested in understanding what you might call "mental" or "cognitive" housework. This involves the research, planning, decision-making, and coordination of your household (meaning, for or related to the family or the child(ren), rather than yourself as an individual). I will also have a few questions about physical housework, but I'll be sure to specify what I'm talking about throughout. Here are two examples:

Ex. 1 –

- Chopping vegetables and sautéing chicken breasts for dinner = physical
- Making a plan for the week or night's meals and identifying any ingredients that will need to be purchased = cognitive/decision-oriented

Ex. 2 –

- Taking the car to the mechanic for an oil change = physical
- Remembering that the car is due for an oil change and deciding to schedule one = cognitive

Does the distinction between cognitive and physical housework make sense to you?

5. In an ideal world, how would you and your partner divide up the **physical** housework/childcare? *[If they say "equally" or "fairly", try to probe for their specific definition. What would equality or fairness look like? Same amount of time/energy spent? Etc.]*
    a. How would you describe your current division?
    b. If different, what do you think keeps you from your ideal/what would need to change for you to reach that ideal?

6. In an ideal world, how would you and your partner divide up the **cognitive** housework/childcare? *[If they say "equally" or "fairly", try to probe for their specific definition. What would equality or fairness look like? Same amount of time/energy spent? Etc.]*
    a. How would you describe your current division? [E.g., what percentage you do and your partner does]
    b. If different from your ideal, what do you think keeps you from achieving your ideal/what would need to change for you to reach that ideal?
    c. Have you ever tried to adjust the division of labor? How? What happened?

d. What do you think would happen if you suddenly stopped performing your part of the cognitive housework, or cut back significantly?
e. What do you see as the pros and cons of your current dynamic? Could you imagine any arguments *against* changing things up?

Wrap-up/Demographics

To wrap things up I'd like to ask you a couple demographic questions [*only ask if this doesn't come up during interview]*:

- How old are you?
- How old are your children?
- What is your race/ethnicity?
- What is your occupation (*if applicable)*?
- Approximately how many hours per week do you work?
- Has your work been about the same (in terms of hours and full-time status) since your child was born? If not, tell me about how it has changed.
- How much schooling did you complete?
- What is your approximate personal (not household) income?
- What did your parents do for work while you were growing up?

Do you have any questions for me, or is there anything I didn't ask you about that you'd like to bring up?

Study 1 Decision Log Template

	Start Time	End Time	Issue/Decision	Outcome	Setting	Others consulted or involved
1	*[Example] 8:45:00 AM*	*8:48 AM*	*What to feed daughter for breakfast*	*Told husband to give her cheerios*	*At home getting ready for work*	*Husband in charge of breakfast; he asked me what to feed*
2	*[Example] 9:30:00 AM*	*9:35 AM*	*Son needs new shoes*	*Made a note about going to mall this weekend*	*Was at home dressing son and noticed shoes were tight*	*N/A*
3						
4						
5						

Study 2 Interview Guide

I. Overview and history

- Tell me about who you live with.

- Children – ages/grades
    - Do you have any other kids not living with you right now?
- Partner – Name/Occupation/employment status

- And what about you, what occupies your time?

A. FAMILY OF ORIGIN

- **Where** did you grow up?

- **Who** did you live with as a child?
    - Mother's education/occupation (and if she worked throughout childhood)
    - Father's education/occupation (and if he worked throughout childhood)

- How would you describe your **parents' relationship** with one another?

- How would you describe your **parents' division** of housework and childcare activities?
    - *[If needed, probe with]*: For example, would you say they both did about the same amount of housework/childcare, or that one person did a little or a lot more than the other?

- Looking back now that you're an adult, is there anything you particularly **liked** about the way your parents arranged their lives and have tried to imitate?
    - That you **disliked** and have tried to do differently?

B. EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

- Let's imagine that I was interviewing you at the end of high school. How would your 18-year-old self have described your **career/job goals**?
    - What do you think appealed to you about that path?

- What did you end up doing **after graduating** high school?
    - *Clarify degrees received/schooling completed*

- After you finished your last degree, what did you **do for work**?

- Since then, have you **[always/ever] worked full-time**?

    - *If PT or UE time reported, ask about timeline and cause. If re-entered workforce, ask what prompted them to return.*

[IF CURRENTLY EMPLOYED]

- **How long** have you been in this job?

- What **motivated** you to take this job or leave whatever you were doing before?

- About **how many hours** a week do you work?

- How **flexible** is your schedule?
    - Able to work from home?
    - Adjust hours if needed?

- How common is it for you to work on **nights or weekends**?

- Do you ever feel as though the things you need to do to be a good employee are in **conflict** with the things you need or want to do as a parent/spouse?
    - *[If yes]* Can you give me a recent example of how that conflict arose?
    - *[If no]* What do you think it is about your work/family situation that makes it possible to balance the two?

- How do you feel like [partner's] career path has impacted your own?

- How, if at all, do you expect your work life to **change in the next five years**?

- If you were **offered a promotion**, what factors would you consider before saying yes or no?

    - Have you ever **turned down a promotion**/job offer/other professional opportunity? What was it, and why?

C. RELATIONSHIP

- Tell me about **how you met** [current partner].
    - What year was that? What was going on in your life then?
    - Had you been previously engaged or married?

- What do you think it was about him/her that **drew you to your partner**/made you fall in love?

- After you met and started dating, what was the **next big turning point** in your relationship?
    - *If confused, prompt with moving in, getting engaged, marrying, having a kid.*

- [MOVING IN]
    - Tell me about **how you decided** to move in together.

    - From there, how did you go about **finding a place** to live?

        - *If moved somewhere new, ask what their personal role was in finding the place.*

    - Can you give me an example of an **adjustment** you had to make or **conflict** you had to work through when you first started living together?

- [ENGAGEMENT/MARRIAGE]

- Tell me about how you decided it was **time to get engaged**.
  - Was the proposal a surprise for either person?

- What was each person's role in **planning the wedding**?

- Other than having your children, which we'll talk about in a minute, have there been **any other turning points** or big changes in your relationship since then?

- In what ways would you say you and your partner are **alike**?

- In what ways are you **different**?
  - Tell me about a time when those **differences caused problems** or conflict.

D. PARENTING

TWO BIO PARENTS:

- **At what point** in your relationship do you remember first talking about having children?
  - At that time, were you in **agreement** on whether/how many/when you wanted kids?
    - *[If no]* How did you resolve these differences?

  - *[If current configuration is markedly different from stated plans]*: Based on what you've told me about your family today, it sounds like things didn't turn out quite

as you planned. Can you tell me a bit about **what happened to shift you** off that original path?

- Once you knew you were going to have your first baby, what did you do **to prepare** yourself for parenthood?
    - What was your role in getting ready?
    - What was your spouse's role?

- Before *[oldest child]* was born, did you and *[partner]* have any discussions about **how you would divide** up childcare duties?
    - What about how becoming parents would impact each person's **career/work life**?
    - Did either partner **consider staying home** or pulling back to part-time?

- Okay, so then *[oldest child]* was born. How long did each of you have **off from work** following the birth *(or, if one/both not working at the time, how long stayed at home)*?

- [*If both employed]* Once you were both back at work, what did you do for **childcare**?
    - What was **your role in finding** that childcare?
    - What was **your partner's** role?

[If more than one child]:

- When your second child was born, did you do anything **differently**, in terms of employment or childcare?

    - How long did each of you have **off from work** following the birth?
    - *[If applicable]* Once you were both back at work, what did you do for childcare?

[*Repeat as needed for additional children]*

- And today, *[oldest child]* is in X grade, correct? How is he/she doing in school?
    - Is he or she involved in any **activities** or extracurriculars?
    - Can you tell me about a recent **challenge** or problem related to [child], and how you resolved it?

[Repeat as needed for up to two more kids]

- How would you describe your **goals** as a parent?

- How would you say you're doing in **meeting your goals**? What makes you say that?
    - *[If falling short]*: What do you think is keeping you from being the parent you want to be?

- Do you and *[partner]* have **similar ideas** about what parents should do/be, or does *[partner]* approach things differently?
    - Can you give me an example of a **recent parenting difference** or disagreement? How did you resolve it?

BLENDED FAMILIES:

[TO BIO PARENT:]

- **How old** were your children when you and your ex split up?
- Can you tell me a bit about your **custody arrangements**?
    - *[Probes]*: Whether, when child sees other parent
        - How do you **coordinate visits** and other logistics with your ex?
        - Does *[current partner]* have any role in coordinating with your ex?
        - What kinds of **parenting decisions** would you discuss with your ex rather than decide on your own? [*Probe for recent example]*

- What do you remember about your **discussions with *[current partner]*** about the role he/she would play with your children?

- Would you say that you **co-parent** your children or that you play different roles?

    - Can you give me an example of something **you would do or decide**, parenting-wise, but your **partner wouldn't**?

[TO STEP-PARENT:]

- What do you remember about your **discussions with *[current partner]*** about the role you would play with his/her children?

- Would you say that you **co-parent** your partner's children or that you play different roles?
    - Can you give me an example of something **he/she would do or decide**, parenting-wise, but **you wouldn't**?

II. COGNITIVE LABOR IN DAILY LIFE

A. LIFE MANAGEMENT TOOLS

[MESSAGING]

- When you aren't face-to-face, how do you and your partner **usually communicate** with each other? (e.g., text, email, IM, phone call)

- What kinds of things did you **communicate about today** [or yesterday]? Feel free to get out your phone if it would help jog your memory.
    - *Topic, how resolved, whether typical*

- Are there any [other] **conversations** you have about **logistics/scheduling/kid stuff** on a regular basis via text/phone?

[CALENDAR]

Do you have a calendar for family/home events?

- *[If yes]*:
    - Is it a **digital or paper** calendar?
    - Is it just for personal stuff, or do you **also put work stuff** on it?
    - What are some of **the events listed** on your calendar for this coming week? If you can, feel free to pull it up on your phone/take it down from the fridge to consult.
    - Does your **partner have access** to this calendar?
        - *[If yes]:*
            - Does he or she **add things** to the calendar, **or just consult** it?
            - Who, if anyone, would be **more likely** to write down…
                - A pediatrician's visit?
                - A sports game?
                - A child's friend's birthday party?
                - An adult get-together with neighbors or other friends?
            - When a kid's event gets put on the calendar, how do you know who is responsible for **getting the child there**?
                - What about for making sure they **have everything** they need? *(If needed, prompt with gift/card, snack, swimsuit…)*
        - *[If no]:*
            - How does your **partner keep track** of their schedule?
            - How do you and your partner **coordinate** your schedules?

- Can you think of a time in the past few months where you had a **scheduling conflict**? What happened, and how did you work it out?

- *[If no*]: How do you **keep track** of your schedule? Your kids'/partner's schedule?
    - Do you have a **calendar for work** activities?
    - Let's say a **neighbor calls** to invite you to their child's birthday party in a few weeks. How would you know **whether you could attend**? How would you **remember to go** when the day of the party arrived?
    - Can you think of a time when not having a calendar **caused a problem or scheduling conflict?**

[TO-DO LISTS]

Do you make to-do lists related to your home/family life?

- *[If yes]*:
    - Do you keep an **ongoing** list, or just make them from **time to time**?
    - [*If ongoing]*
        - Is it a **paper or digital** list?
        - Is it **shared** with your partner **or just for you**?
        - What's **on the list** right now? Feel free to pull it up if you can.

    - *[If time-to-time]* Can you remember the **last time** you made a list? What **prompted** you to do that?

        - Do you have a list going right now?
            - *If yes, what's on it?*
            - *If no, ask about mental list*

- *[If no lists]*: How do you **keep track** of what needs to be done?
    - Have you kept lists in the **past**? If so, what led you to stop?
    - Do you make lists in any **other area** of your life, such as work?
    - Okay, let's talk about your "**mental to-do list**": things that need to be done soon or further in the future, related to your kids/home/family life. What is on that mental list right now?

- What about your **partner**—does he/she keep a **to-do list**?
    - *[If yes]*: How does (or how do you imagine) his/her list **differ from yours**?
    - *[If no]*: How does **he/she keep track** of what needs to be done for the household?
        - Have you ever made a list for him/her?
        - How do you think his/her mental list would **differ from yours**?

Miscellaneous

- Let's say your partner comes home from work tonight and tells you they've got an **unexpected work trip** or family emergency, and they need to be out of town for the next 3 days, starting tomorrow morning, leaving you in charge.

- What **information would you need** from them in order to make sure everything goes smoothly with the kids/pets/household in general while they're away?

- What if the situation was reversed, and <u>you</u> were suddenly called away for the next few days—what **info would your partner need** from you?

- Are there **any other tools or strategies** we didn't discuss that you use to keep track of your schedule and what needs to be done for the home/family?

B. CARD-SORT

[Note: If interviewing someone who lives with a combo of step- and biological children (depending on how they described their parenting set-up previously – might not be an issue), clarify that if a card lists something they would do for their own kids but their partner would do for his/her own, then the card should go in the "either/both" category. If it's something their ex would do, put in the "Someone else" category. If it's shared with their ex, put in the "Me" category.]

<u>Cognitive tasks</u>

1. Make sure we don't overdraw our checking account
2. Identify camps/programs the children could attend this summer.
3. Know whether we can afford a big purchase (like a car, appliance, or furniture).
4. Identify a few activities for the family to do over a long holiday

5. Decide where to go on a family trip
6. Keep track of any returns to be made (e.g., kids' clothing in wrong size)
7. Do the research related to a big purchase for the home (e.g., identify a few brands/models/options)
8. Notice the car is due for an oil change
9. Find a plumber or electrician, or communicate with the landlord/super about a problem
10. Recognize your child needs a haircut
11. Figure out what time the family needs to leave the house in order to make it somewhere on time
12. Decide that the bathroom needs to be cleaned
13. Figure out how to remove a bad stain from a child's shirt
14. Find an item a family member has lost or misplaced
15. Figure out how to resolve a problem related to health insurance or a government benefit
16. Notice your child seems to be getting sick or is not acting like him/herself
17. Make sure last year's snow boots and winter gear still fit before it gets cold
18. Make sure a permission slip is returned to child's school on time

<u>Physical tasks</u>

1. Prepare breakfast for child on a weekday morning
2. Go grocery shopping
3. Transport child to/from friend's house or after-school activity
4. Go to child's school for a parent-teacher meeting
5. Clean the bathroom

6. Fold a load of laundry
7. Drop off a package at the post office
8. Buy a gift for a family friend's baby shower
9. Shovel the sidewalk or dig out the car after a snowstorm
10. Change a lightbulb
11. Take the car to the mechanic for an oil change
12. Pack family supplies for a day trip
13. Make or purchase a dish to bring to a potluck/party
14. Pick up a child from school if they are sick and need to be taken home

- What was that like—anything in particular **going through your mind** as you sorted these cards?

- Why do you think **you're the one** to do the cards in the "Me" pile?

- Why do you think your **partner is the one** to do the cards in their pile?

- *Go through Either/both cards and ask about the last time this came up – what happened/who did it?*

- Can you remember having any **conversations** with your partner about **who is doing or should do** certain tasks for the family/household?

- [*If yes]* Tell me about how those conversations went – when? Who initiated? Outcome?
- *[If no]* If it wasn't through conversation, how did you and your partner arrive at your current arrangement?

- Can you remember anytime you had a **fight or disagreement** about what either of you was or wasn't doing for the kids or around the house?
  - *[If yes]*
    - What prompted the argument?
    - What was each person's perspective?
    - How did you resolve things?

- Has the way you and your partner split things up **changed over time** or stayed pretty consistent?
  - What about **before versus after you had kids**? How did things shift then?
  - [*Same question about employment status transitions, if applicable]*

- *[If they outsource any labor]* You mentioned that you've hired someone to help with____.
  - When did you **start** working with a *[cleaning person/laundry service]*?
  - What **prompted** you to get help from someone else?
  - *[If paid help]* Tell me about **how you found** him or her.

- Is it you or your partner who typically **communicates** with them about scheduling, payment, etc.?

III. BIG-PICTURE THINKING

In this final set of questions, I'd like you to a think on a slightly broader scale about who does what in your household. I'm interested in two main categories. One might be called "physical activity" – *explain/show example cards, including some childcare.* Another might be called "cognitive/mental activity."

Examples: Remembering the car is due vs. taking the car to the mechanic

Deciding what the family will have for dinner vs. cooking dinner

Making a list of supplies to pack for a trip vs. packing the suitcase/loading car

Mental, then physical:

- **What %** of these activities, and others like them, would you say ***you*** **do**? **Your partner** does?
    - Tell me about how you got to these numbers – what was your thought process?

- Now, if I had a **magic wand** and could grant you a do-over/reset, what % of these kinds of activities would you *ideally* do? What about your partner, what % would he/she ideally do?
    - Why do you think this is the best set-up for you?

General:

- *[If ideal/actual are the same]*:
    - Even if overall you're satisfied, are there any individual tasks, mental or physical, that you would **start or stop doing** in your ideal world? Why?

    - If your partner wanted to move things around and take some of your tasks over, is there anything that you would **want to hold onto** and keep doing yourself? Why?

- *[If ideal/actual differ]:*
    - What specific **cards would you move around** in order to get to your ideal? Why?

    - If you were shuffling things around, are there any cards that you would definitely **want to hold onto**/keep doing yourself? Why?

    - What do you think **currently prevents** you from reaching this ideal, or moving the cards around in the ways you've just described?

    - Do you imagine things **changing in the future**? Why/why not?

    - Has the contrast between what you actually do and what you would do in your ideal world ever **caused conflict** between you and your partner?
        - *[If yes]:* Tell me about how this conflict usually plays out.
        - *[If no]:* Why do you think that is?

- Has this contrast between your ideal and actual ever been a **source of stress** or negative feelings for you personally?
    - *If yes, probe for more detail on nature of the emotions*
    - *[If no]:* Why do you think it doesn't really bother you?

- If you had to guess, how would you say the way you and your partner split up housework and childcare activities **compares** to the way your friends or family members with children do things?

- People define fairness in many ways. **How "fair"** would you say your division is? What makes it fair or unfair?

- What, if anything, do you think **gender** has to do with the way you and your partner have divided things up?
    - Have you ever talked with your partner about these issues?

- Those are all of my questions for you. Before we go over some quick demographics, can you think of **anything we didn't cover** that seems important for me to know, in terms of what happens in your house/how your family works?

IV. DEMOGRAPHICS/WRAP-UP

- How old are you?

- How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
- What is your approximate personal income?
- Would you describe yourself as more liberal, moderate, or conservative?

[At this point, can ask whether they think partner would be willing to do an interview, too – if not already set up. If not doing partner interview, ask:]

- If you don't mind my asking, what do you think it is that makes your partner hesitant to participate?
- Is participating something you asked them about, or did you decide ahead of time that it wasn't worth bringing up?

So that I have the full picture of your household, can you tell me a little bit more about your partner?

- Age
- Race/ethnicity
- Occupation + hours worked + income
- Education
- Family background: where grew up, parents' occupations

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