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Perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction: the moderating roles of gender, religion and gender ideology

Abstract. Though women are increasingly taking part in paid labor, a traditional division of domestic tasks remains the status quo. Using data from Wave 1 of the New Families in the Netherlands survey ($N=1998$), this study investigates the influence of perceived unfairness about the childcare division on relationship dissatisfaction among parents, and whether this differs by gender, religiosity, and gender ideology. Equity theory provides the theoretical framework for the association between fairness perceptions and marital quality and serves to explain how an inequitable division of tasks leads to distress and eventually causes relationship dissatisfaction. Results from multilinear regression analyses show that parents' perceived unfairness about the childcare division is positively associated with relationship dissatisfaction. For mothers, this effect is particularly strong, and for fathers this effect is absent. There were no moderating effects found for religion and gender ideology.

Keywords: fairness perceptions, childcare, equity, relationship satisfaction, gender, religion, gender ideology

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INTRODUCTION

The upward divorce trend that has been present in Western societies since the 1970s has resulted in increasing scholarly attention for satisfaction within intimate relations (Røsand, Slinning, Røysamb & Tambs, 2014). Relationship dissatisfaction has indeed proven a decisive indicator for relationship dissolution, depression symptoms, and negative communication patterns between partners (Røsand et al., 2014; Uebelacker, Courtnage & Whisman, 2003; Merrill & Afifi, 2012). Thus, it is important to gain insight into the underlying causes of relationship dissatisfaction. An important explanation for relationship dissatisfaction among partners might be the perceived unfairness about the division of unpaid labor. Though the increase in female labor force participation since the second half of the twentieth century suggests a shift towards a more egalitarian division of unpaid labor, women tend to remain the ones in charge of housework and childcare (Sayer, 2005; Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie & Robinson, 2012). This apparent stall of gender equality in the domestic arena could have consequences for the perceived fairness of these aforementioned tasks. The threshold for parents to evaluate the division of household tasks and childcare as fair might have been lifted due to more egalitarian gender norms in the workplace and at home. Changing patterns in gender equality contrast sharply with the fact that women still tend to carry the heaviest burden when it comes to unpaid labor. Therefore, it is highly relevant to research the effect of perceived unfairness about the division of these tasks on relationship dissatisfaction.

To investigate relationship dissatisfaction, what matters is not so much the actual division of time spent on childcare, but whether this division is perceived to be fair or not by parents. This distinction is important to make because perceptions of fairness go beyond solely time spent on unpaid work, by including cognitive, psychological, and symbolic factors. Scholars found that fairness perceptions exacerbate the relationship between the time spent on household tasks and marital quality (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999). Another study by Blair (1998) also highlighted the important role of fairness perceptions about housework and childcare in explaining differences in relationship dissatisfaction.

Previous research was mostly concerned with the role of perceived fairness about the division of household tasks on relationship satisfaction, often considering housework and childcare as being somewhat indifferent. Perceived unfairness about these tasks does prove to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Gillespie, Peterson & Lever, 2019). Fairness perceptions with regards to the childcare division as a separate branch of domestic labor are much more understudied. There are multiple reasons why childcare should be reviewed

independently from housework. Parents are devoting increasingly more time to child care, according to a review by Sullivan (2013). This might be due to changing societal norms and the increasing focus on motherhood (Bianchi et al, 2012). Moreover, childcare involves tasks such as playing with children and helping them with their schoolwork. These tasks are perceived as being relatively more enjoyable than housework tasks such as cleaning or cooking (Sullivan, 2013). Nonetheless, childcare is still highly time-consuming and therefore important to take into consideration when determining the causes for relationship dissatisfaction. Scholars that separately examined the role of childcare found that fairness perceptions about the childcare division were related to relationship satisfaction (Chong & Mickelson, 2016). Hence, this study will focus exclusively on the effects of perceived unfairness about the childcare division and how this might affect relationship dissatisfaction among parents.

Since existing research on this topic is limited, there has not been much literature on the moderating effects that might come to play a role in the alleged relationship. This study will investigate several demographic and cultural individual-level characteristics that can moderate the relationship between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction among parents. First, to what extent perceived unfairness about the childcare division affects relationship dissatisfaction can differ for men and women. There is compelling evidence that fairness perceptions about the division of housework predict relationship satisfaction stronger for women than for men (Mikula, Riederer & Bodi, 2012; Blair, 1993; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Kluwer, Heesink & Van de Vliert, 1996). Similar to housework, women tend to account for the less enjoyable tasks within childcare, such as changing nappies or getting the children ready for school (Sullivan, 2013). If relationship satisfaction is only affected by mother's fairness perceptions and not fathers, this can have important implications for scholars studying family and gender.

The relationship between perceived fairness about childcare division and relationship satisfaction could also be moderated by religion. Existing research stays silent on the moderating role of religion in the relationship between fairness perceptions and relationship satisfaction. Decades of secularization resulted in the Dutch being primarily non-religious and though the overall influence of religion in Dutch society has diminished, religious affiliation remains a decisive indicator of overall happiness (Coumans, 2014). Thus, differences continue to exist between religious and non-religious individuals, which emphasizes the importance of taking religion into account in the present study.

Lastly, gender ideology could also play a moderating role in the relationship between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction. The increasing societal focus on gender equality perhaps damages the relationships of parents who adhere to egalitarian gender norms, but who find the division of childcare to be unfair. Multiple scholars have investigated the moderating role of gender ideology. For example, Greenstein (1996) found that the effect of perceived unfairness about the division of household tasks on marital quality is stronger for married women who adhere to non-traditional, or egalitarian norms than for married women subscribed to traditional, or non-egalitarian gender norms. He argues that traditional wives value stability and harmony in a romantic relationship, whereas to egalitarian wives independence and autonomy are more important. Moreover, traditional wives might not perceive an unfair division of household labor as unjust, because they truly believe that women are obliged to take on the majority of the household tasks. For egalitarian women, this might be the other way around. The current research could be an addition to the existing body of research about gender ideology by examining the moderating role of gender ideology on the division of childcare in association with relationship satisfaction.

In all, this study attempts to answer the following central research questions: *How does perceived unfairness of the childcare division affect relationship dissatisfaction for parents? To what extent is this relationship different depending upon parents' gender, religion, and gender ideology?* To do so, this research uses data from the New Families in The Netherlands (NFN) survey (Poortman, Van der Lippe, & Boele-Woelki, 2014). This dataset is particularly useful for the current study because its survey includes multiple questions about fairness perceptions.

THEORY

Associations between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction

Equity theory serves best to explain feelings of dissatisfaction within intimate relationships supposedly caused by perceptions of unfairness about the division of childcare. Embedded in rational choice theory, equity theory first assumes that people are intrinsically motivated by selfishness (Hatfield, Salmon & Rapson, 2011). In other words, they seek to maximize their outcomes. However, society obliges people to act according to norms that insist on fair and equitable treatment of others, to maximize collective reward. This leads people to seek relationships in which they are treated fairly, regardless of whether they are over-or under-

benefiting from it. Hence, the central assumption of equity theory is that perceived justice stems from the ratio between outcomes and inputs from an individual, and the comparison to one's partner.

Accordingly, individuals who find themselves being in an inequitable relationship tend to experience feelings of unease about their relationship and become distressed (van Yperen & Buunk, 1990). Feelings of distress can take two forms. The under-benefited parent might experience feelings of exploitation. On the other hand, the parent who feels as if they're gaining more than their counterpart is considered to be over-benefited and this leads to feelings of guilt or shame (Davidson, 1984). Though both work in different ways, the outcomes are similar. Equity theory predicts that individuals make attempts to solve feelings of distress, such as by negotiating time allocation. As a result, a conflict between parents arises, which leads to relationship dissatisfaction (Geerts, 2016).

Research confirms the assumptions proposed by equity theory. There has been compelling evidence that feelings of unfairness are indeed associated with higher levels of relationship dissatisfaction (Keizer & Schenk, 2012; Grote & Clark, 2001; Kluwer, Heesink & Van De Vliert, 1997; Stevens, Kiger & Riley, 2001; Dew & Wilcox, 2011). Though the abovementioned scholars focused on perceptions of unfairness about household labor altogether, the limited research on the specific role of perceived unfairness about the childcare division allows for predictions that follow similar reasoning. For example, a study by Chong & Mickelson (2016) evaluates fairness perceptions on housework and childcare separately, and they find that perceived fairness about the childcare division is positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Research by Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins (2004) reveals that violated expectations about the division of childcare are a better predictor for women's distress than violated expectations about the division of housework because women attach more importance to their husband's share in childcare than in household tasks. It should be noted however that their study relied on female data only, thus the effect is unknown for men. Thus, according to equity theory and earlier research on this topic, the current study hypothesizes that greater feelings of unfairness about the division of childcare will be positively associated with relationship dissatisfaction (*Hypothesis 1*).

Gendered differences

The relationship between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction may very well differ between men and women. According to Cross & Madson

(1997), a woman's sense of identity is derived more from her intimate relations with others than men's. In other words, a woman's self-esteem and self-enhancement follow from her relationships with others. Thus, relationships play a bigger role in her life than in his. Individuals who assign more value to their relationship with others are more strongly influenced by instances where unfairness arises (Brockner, De Cremer, van den Bos & Chen, 2005), so this may also apply to perceived unfairness about the childcare division. Moreover, because intimate relationships are more important to women, problems related to those relationships cause more distress to them (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999). In turn, distress about the relationship results in feelings of relationship dissatisfaction for women. For men, the mechanism works differently. Men derive their identity primarily from skills and internal traits, so they are less relationship-oriented. As a result, perceived unfairness about the childcare division does not cause as much distress, and relationship dissatisfaction is affected to a lesser extent. Men can still be affected by unfairness perceptions, but the effect on relationship satisfaction will be less salient than for women (Kluwer, Tumewu & van den Bos, 2009).

Many studies took into account the moderating role of gender when assessing the relationship between perceived unfairness about the division of household tasks and relationship dissatisfaction, and found convincing evidence that this relationship is indeed stronger for women than for men (Mikula et al., 2012; Blair, 1993; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Kluwer et al., 1996). None of these studies focused specifically on the division of childcare. Hence, the second hypothesis central in this study suggests that the positive relationship between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction is stronger for women than for men (*Hypothesis 2*).

Religious differences

The current study also expects to find that the relationship between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction differs for religious and non-religious parents. Individual religiousness is strongly associated with marital commitment, according to a meta-analytic review on religion and marriage (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2008). High commitment is part of relational orientation, meaning that highly committed individuals are focused on persisting in their intimate relations. Thus, religious parents tend to invest more in their relationship and attach more value to the benefits derived from marriage. According to Kluwer et al. (2009) high relational orientation is related to increased sensitivity to unfair treatment, which is in turn related to higher

relationship dissatisfaction. Religious parents are therefore more prone to unfairness and this results in strong dissatisfaction with their relationship. For non-religious parents, however, the absence of religiousness leads to lower relational commitment and thus less sensitivity to unfairness. This weakens the relationship between unfairness perceptions and relationship dissatisfaction. Hence, it is expected that the association between unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction is stronger for religious parents - whose commitment to their relationship is high - than for non-religious parents, whose relationship commitment is less salient due to the absence of individual religiousness.

Previous research on the moderating effects of religion in the relationship between perceived unfairness about the division of domestic labor and relationship dissatisfaction is rather absent. Nonetheless, theoretical expectations on this topic are sufficient to predict the moderating effect of religion. The current study thus expects to find that the positive relationship between the perceived unfairness of childcare division and one's dissatisfaction with the relationship will be stronger for religious parents than for non-religious parents (*Hypothesis 3*).

Gender ideology

Lastly, gender ideology likely plays a moderating role in the relationship between perceived unfairness about the division of childcare and relationship dissatisfaction. Building on the work of Greenstein (1996) and Thompson (1991), the distributive justice framework can explain how traditional parents differ from egalitarian parents in the context of perceived unfairness about the childcare division and its effect on relationship dissatisfaction.

Following the distributive justice theory of Thompson (1991), outcome values, comparison referents, and justifications play a role in determining the fairness of a situation. However, for the mechanism explaining the moderating role of gender ideology, only the outcome values are relevant. Traditional parents value different outcomes than egalitarian parents (Greenstein, 1996). While harmony and stability are important to traditional parents, egalitarian parents adhere more value to independence and autonomy. As a result, traditional parents react differently to perceived unfairness about the division of childcare than egalitarian parents. More so than traditional parents, egalitarian parents will attempt to adjust the current task allocation to achieve a more egalitarian division, according to Greenstein (1996). If a parent fails to do so, feelings of resentment arise, which then result in relationship dissatisfaction. For traditional parents, this relationship is less salient, because harmony and stability are more important than readjusting the unfair situation. So for them, perceived

unfairness will have a less strong effect on relationship dissatisfaction. Therefore, the effect of perceived unfairness about the childcare division on relationship dissatisfaction will be stronger for egalitarian parents than for traditional parents.

Previous research supports this proposition by providing sustaining evidence that unfair perceptions about the division of housework affect relationship dissatisfaction more strongly for egalitarian couples than for traditional couples (Greenstein, 1996; Pina & Bengtson, 1993; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Lavee & Katz, 2002; Kluwer et al., 1997). As a result, the final hypothesis of this study predicts that perceptions of unfairness about the childcare division will have a stronger effect on relationship dissatisfaction for egalitarian parents than for traditional parents (*Hypothesis 4*).

METHOD

Data

To answer the hypotheses, this study draws on the extensive dataset New Families in The Netherlands (NFN; Poortman et al, 2014). The initial purpose of NFN was to collect large-scale, longitudinal data about the legal arrangements of divorced and separated parents in the Netherlands by gathering data from both separated and intact families - for controlling purposes. The current study solely makes use of data from the latter group, which includes data on married and cohabiting parents. The intact families were included in the NFN study to allow for comparisons between divorced and intact families but also had research purposes of their own – namely to study how parents combine work and family. Data has been collected in three waves thus far by a collaboration between Utrecht University and Statistics Netherlands (in 2012/2013, 2015/2016, and 2020). NFN gathered data using a multi-actor approach, meaning that both parents were approached to take part in the study, and a multi-method survey, consisting of an online questionnaire, several online reminders, and a final reminder on paper.

The current study uses data collected during the first wave and exclusively uses data aimed at intact families, consisting of a heterosexual couple with at least one child under the age of eighteen. Stratified random samples without replacement were drawn from the targeted population of married and cohabiting parents to increase comparability between the separated and intact families. Through stratified random sampling, it could be ensured that the age distribution across children was comparable among different targeted groups. This was

necessary because for the most part children from intact families were older than children of divorced parents, due to the prolonged duration of surviving relationships. Stratification was done based on the age of the youngest child, which resulted in sampling from three different strata: (a) 0-3 years old; (b) 4-11 years old; (c) 12+ years old.

The individual response rate was 45%, with virtually no differences between married and cohabiting parents. On the household level, the response rate for intact families was 56%, which is relatively high in comparison to other Dutch family surveys. In total, the first wave included 2173 participants from 1338 households. In terms of representativeness, men were found to be underrepresented, and similar patterns emerged for parents of 'non-western' descent and parents with a relatively low income. Consequently, Dutch-originated and high-income parents are overrepresented in the sample. Before analysis, the data were checked for missing values on the variables of interest and to only include participants that met the requirements of the sample. After the selection of heterosexual parents with children younger than 18 years old, 2157 cases remained. Consequently, selecting valid values on the dependent variable further reduced the number of cases to 2151. Listwise deletion was used to remove any missing values on the independent and controlling variables, because missing values were scarce and ranging from 0% to 1,6% in most cases, with the noteworthy exception of 4,4%. Hence, the final dataset used for the analyses in this paper consisted of 1998 cases from 1273 separate households.

Measure of Dependent Variable

Relationship dissatisfaction. The current study used the 5-item measure by Kluwer & Johnson (2007) of global relationship quality derived from the Investment Model Scale that has been integrated into the NFN-dataset to measure the dependent variable relationship dissatisfaction (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). Participants were asked about how satisfied they are with their relationship (0= *very dissatisfied* to 8=*very satisfied*), how much happiness and fulfillment they get out of their relationship (0=*very little* to 8=*very much*), how they evaluate their relationship compared to other relationships (0=*much worse* to 8=*much better*), how positive or negative they feel about their relationship (0=*very negative* to 8=*very positive*), and finally how they compare their relationship with the ideal relationship (0=*far from ideal* to 8=*ideal*). The 9-point scale was reverse coded to measure relationship dissatisfaction. Hence, a high score on the scale is now an indicator of greater relationship dissatisfaction. Conducting factor analysis of the items revealed that all five items loaded

higher than .40 on one single factor, with factor loadings ranging from 0.69 to 0.93. Thus, the means of all five items were combined to measure relationship dissatisfaction. Cronbach's alpha of .940 confirmed that the reliability of the scale was very high.

Measures of Independent Variables

Childcare unfairness. To measure perceived unfairness about the childcare division, parents were asked to rate how fair they considered the division of care and supervision of the child or children to be arranged by themselves and their partners. The original 7-point single item ranged from 0 (*very unfair for me*) to 6 (*very unfair for my partner*), with 3 reflecting the division to be fair for both. To analyze the different effects of over-benefiting versus under-benefiting parents goes beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, research confirms that both sides of unfairness result in feelings of inequity and thus might exert the same influence on relationship dissatisfaction (Adams, 1965). Hence, the choice was made to recode the item in a way that 'unfair for me' and 'unfair for my partner' were treated similarly. This resulted in a 4-point item, with 0 (*fair for both*), 1 (*somewhat unfair*), 2 (*unfair*), and 3 (*very unfair*) measuring the degrees of perceived unfairness about the childcare division. Of note, the average response to this item indicated that most participants consider the division to be fair for both parents since the distribution is highly skewed to the left. Correlation statistics showed that perceived unfairness about the childcare division is significantly correlated with relationship dissatisfaction ($r = .23, p < .001$).

Gender. The moderating variables in this study were operationalized in different ways. A dummy variable for gender takes the value '1' if the participant is female, and the value '0' if the participant is male.

Religion. Religion was measured by the question 'Do you consider yourself to be a member of a particular religion or church? If yes, which?'. Options included 'No religion', 'Roman Catholic Church', 'Dutch Reformed Church', 'Reformed Church (Synodal and other Reformed Church community)', 'Evangelical Church community (e.g., Pentecostal, Baptists)', 'Islam', and 'Other'. The different religions were recoded into a dummy taking the value '1' if a participant considered themselves to be a member of a religion or church, and the value '0' if a participant answered she/he belonged to no religion. Those who answered 'Other' were recoded as a missing value because it was unclear whether they adhered to a religion or not.

Gender ideology. This study used a four-item scale to measure gender ideology. Parents were asked four questions assessing different aspects of gender norms: (a) ‘A woman is more suitable for bringing up small children than a man’ (1=*completely agree*, 5=*completely disagree*), (b) ‘Mothers are just as responsible as fathers for earning a decent family income’, (c) ‘It is more important for men than for women to have a job’ and (d) ‘Fathers are just as responsible as mothers for the upbringing of children’. Two of the questions, namely question b and d, were reverse coded in a way that a higher score now indicated more egalitarian views, whereas a lower score indicated that the parent had rather traditional gender norms. Factor analysis revealed that only three items loaded higher than .40 on the item. Moreover, Cronbach’s alpha could slightly improve if the item ‘Fathers are just as responsible as mothers for the upbringing of children’ was to be removed from the scale. However, an adapted three-item scale did not indicate different results in the analyses than the original four-item scale. Thus, the choice was made to refrain from any adjustments to the measure and include all four items to best reflect gender ideology. Cronbach’s alpha of .638 indicated minimal internal reliability. However, in the absence of other variables intended at measuring gender ideology, analyses were conducted using the existing measure. When interpreting the results, its poor reliability will be taken into consideration.

Measures of Control Variables

Beyond these variables, other factors were controlled for that have been identified by previous research as representing the most plausible alternative explanations for changes in relationship dissatisfaction. These include *age*, *education*, and *marital status* (Chong & Mickelson, 2016). The sample ranged from 25 to 67 years old. Participants were asked about their highest attained level of education and were presented with ten different answer options: 1=*incomplete elementary*, 2=*elementary school only*, 3=*lower vocational*, 4=*lower general secondary*, 5=*medium general secondary*, 6=*upper general secondary*, 7=*intermediate vocational*, 8=*higher vocational*, 9=*university* and 10=*post-graduate*. Marital status was measured using the question ‘Are you married, have you registered your partnership, or are you cohabiting?’. Since marriage and registered partnership in the Netherlands do not practically differ in terms of legal rights (Rijksoverheid, n.d.), and relatively few participants reported being in a registered partnership (7,2%), this variable was transformed into a dummy variable taking the value ‘0’ if a participant is married or in a registered partnership and the value ‘1’ if the participant is cohabiting.

Other controlling variables of interest for the current analyses include *the participant's time spent with the child* and *weekly hours spent on paid work*. Scholars studying fairness perceptions with regards to housework often take into account the actual time spent on housework or childcare (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994; Baxter, 2000). Employment is generally considered an important control variable in studies researching relationship quality and fairness (Ruppner, 2008; Sutor, 1991; Hu & Yucel, 2018). The time spent with the child is measured by an 11-item measure that offers participants the question: 'During the last month, how often have you spent time with.. (insert name of the participant's child)'. The different items included 'Having dinner together', 'Helping with school or homework', 'Talking about issues in the child's life', 'Watching television', 'Playing a game and/or doing crafts (e.g., a videogame or jigsaw)', 'In leisure activities away from home, like playing sports together, going to the playground, or shopping', 'Reading to him/her', 'Dropping him/her off and/or picking him/her up', 'Taking him/her out of bed or putting in bed (including washing, dressing, and undressing)', 'Doing household tasks together (e.g., chores, the dishes, and going to the supermarket)' and 'Visiting a play, sport match, etc. of him/her'. The participant could answer with 1 (*few times per day*), 2 (*(almost) every day*), 3 (*few times per week*), 4 (*once a week*) 5 (*few times per month*), 6 (*once a month*) or 7 (*not*), and value '88' indicated that the item is not applicable, for example, because the child is too young or too old – hence, these were assigned a missing value. The items were reverse coded such that a high score now indicated more time spent with the child. The means of the different items were combined in one scale measuring the time spent with the child. Even participants who had a valid score on only one of the eleven items were included because most participants indicated that the item was not applicable on at least several of the items. For example, on the item measuring time spent reading to the child, about 31% of respondents indicated that the item was not applicable, most likely because the child was too old to read to. The internal consistency of the scale was very good ($\alpha = .860$). The weekly time spent on paid work was measured using the question: 'How many hours per week do you currently actually work? Enter the number of hours per week'. Those who reported that they were not currently in paid employment were assigned value '0'. Two outliers with extremely high values over '80' were assigned value '80' because extreme values could lead to misleading results. This resulted in a continuous variable ranging from zero to 80 hours that measured the actual hours weekly spent on paid work. Ranges, means, and standard deviations of the study's variables of interest can be viewed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics*

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Relationship dissatisfaction	0	8	1.74	1.35
Perceived unfairness about childcare division	0	3	0.30	0.59
Respondent's gender				
Female	0	1	0.55	a
Male	0	1	0.45	a
Respondent's religion				
Religious	0	1	0.42	a
Non-religious	0	1	0.58	a
Respondent's gender norms	0	4	2.59	0.67
Respondent's age	25	67	43.16	6.32
Respondent's educational attainment	1	10	6.76	1.95
Marital status				
Cohabiting	0	1	0.27	a
Married	0	1	0.73	a
Time spent with child	1	7	4.58	0.97
Weekly hours spent on paid work	0	80	30.40	16.57

Source: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 1; 1,998 observations of 1,273 separate households.

Notes: a refers to the standard deviation (SD) of discrete variables, which are not included in the table.

Analysis strategy

Descriptive analyses were conducted to gain insight into the characteristics of the variables of interest. The distributions of relationship dissatisfaction and childcare unfairness were thoroughly examined and their dependency was inspected using crosstabs. Afterward, the effect of perceived unfairness about the childcare division on relationship dissatisfaction was examined using multilinear regression analysis. Several assumptions of multilinear regression were accounted for. The introduction of a quadratic term of unfairness about the childcare division proved insignificant, which confirmed the assumption of linearity. Inspection of the variables revealed that the distribution of both relationship dissatisfaction as well as unfairness about the childcare division are highly skewed and deviate from normal distributions. Log transformations did not result in a more normal distribution and removal of

the outliers on relationship dissatisfaction worsened the fit of the model. Moreover, the assumption of normality is not of great importance due to the large sample size used in the analyses (Agresti, 2018). Finally, the 9-point scale by which relationship dissatisfaction was measured was treated as an ordinal approximation of a continuous variable. Hence, the choice was made to conduct the analyses using multilinear regression and refrain from other forms of regression.

Model 1 includes the effect of the central predictor in this analysis – unfairness about the childcare division - on the dependent variable relationship dissatisfaction, as well as the direct effects of gender, religion, and gender ideology on relationship dissatisfaction, and the control variables. Model 1 is aimed at testing the first hypothesis central in this study, namely that increasing unfairness about the childcare division is related to greater relationship dissatisfaction. In Model 2, the interaction terms are added to the existing model. Model 2 examines whether the effect of perceived unfairness about childcare division on relationship dissatisfaction differs between men and women, religious and non-religious parents, and changes if a parent adheres to modern gender norms. All interaction effects were simultaneously included because separate models did not yield different results. The incremental F-test was performed to test whether the interaction terms in Model 2 were a significant addition to the power of Model 1.

RESULTS

Descriptive analyses

To gain greater insight into the main variables' characteristics, Table 2 shows the distribution of unfairness perceptions and relationship dissatisfaction. Table 2 part A presents the distribution of relationship dissatisfaction. For the ease of interpretation of this table, the variable measuring relationship dissatisfaction was recoded from a 9-point variable into a 4-point variable. Values from 0 to 2 were assigned the value '1' (*satisfied*). The values between 2 and 4 the value '2' (*somewhat satisfied*), between 4 and 6 the value '3' (*somewhat dissatisfied*), and finally all values between 6 and 8 were assigned value '4' (*dissatisfied*). Most participants report great relationship satisfaction, with is in line with other research aimed at studying relationship satisfaction in the Netherlands (Blom, Verbakel & Kraaykamp (2020). Table 2 part B provides information about the distribution of the main independent variable, namely perceived unfairness about the childcare division. For the same purposes, unfairness perceptions were dichotomized. Parents who answered that the childcare division was somewhat unfair, unfair, or very unfair were merged and took the value '0'. If parents

reported that the division of childcare was fair for both, they were assigned the value ‘1’. In line with other research studying fairness perceptions in housework, most participants rated the division of childcare to be fairly divided between both parents (Lavee & Katz, 2002).

Table 2. *Descriptive analyses for differences in research variables*

A. Distribution (in percentages) of relationship dissatisfaction	
Satisfied	68.3
Somewhat satisfied	25.0
Somewhat dissatisfied	5.9
Dissatisfied	0.9
Total	100
B. Distribution (in percentages) of unfairness about the childcare division	
Fair	76.5
Unfair	23.5
Total	100

Source: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 1; 1,998 observations of 1,273 separate households.

The findings in Table 3 are the first indicator of dependence between relationship dissatisfaction and childcare unfairness. As can be seen in Table 3, 82,2% of parents who are satisfied with their relationship reports that the division of childcare is fair. In comparison, only 41,5% of parents who are dissatisfied with their relationship reports that the division of childcare is fair. Overall, relationship satisfaction is highest when childcare is fairly divided among both parents. Similarly, relationship dissatisfaction is highest when the childcare division is unfair.

Table 3. *Parents’ level of relationship dissatisfaction by perceived (un)fairness about the childcare division (in percentages)*

	Fair	Unfair	Total
Satisfied	82.2	17.8	100
Somewhat satisfied	66.5	33.5	100
Somewhat dissatisfied	58.5	41.5	100
Dissatisfied	41.2	58.8	100

Source: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 1; 1,998 observations of 1,273 separate households.

Note: $X^2 = 85.285$ ($p < .001$).

Hypotheses testing

Model 1 in Table 4 shows the effect of perceived unfairness about the childcare division on relationship dissatisfaction. Following the theoretical assumptions central in this study, the more unfair parents perceived the division of childcare to be, the stronger feelings of relationship dissatisfaction ($B = 0.483, p < .001$). To review the effect of childcare unfairness regardless of the size of the current study, the effect size was calculated. The effect size of childcare unfairness was modest ($0.36 = 0.48/SD(Y)$ with $SD(Y) = 1.35$). Hence, this confirms the first hypothesis central to this study. Though the current study has not formulated hypotheses concerned with the direct effects of the moderating variables on relationship dissatisfaction, it is interesting to include them in these results. First, gender did not have a direct effect on relationship dissatisfaction, meaning that relationship dissatisfaction is not influenced by the parent's gender. Religion did prove to exert a significant influence on relationship dissatisfaction. According to Table 3, religious parents are less dissatisfied with their relationship than non-religious parents ($B = -0.230, p < .001$). Moreover, gender ideology also had a direct effect on relationship dissatisfaction. The more one adheres to modern gender norms, the less dissatisfied one will be in their relationship ($B = -0.105, p < .05$). Lastly, several of the control variables that were included in Model 1 also proved to exert a significant influence on relationship dissatisfaction. First, age is significantly associated with relationship dissatisfaction, meaning that older parents on average report greater relationship dissatisfaction than younger parents ($B = 0.015, p < .01$). Moreover, educational attainment is also positively associated with relationship dissatisfaction. Hence, the more years of finished education a parent has, the more dissatisfied a parent is with the relationship ($B = 0.071, p < .001$). Cohabiting parents also report greater relationship dissatisfaction than married parents ($B = 0.242, p < .001$). Lastly, the more time a parent spends with their child is associated with lower relationship dissatisfaction ($B = -0.098, p < .01$).

Model 2 includes the interaction terms that were created to test the moderating effect of gender, religion, and gender ideology on the association between perceived unfairness about the division of childcare and relationship dissatisfaction. The incremental F-test proved significant (F-change = 9.564, $p < .001$), meaning that the interaction terms substantially add power to the model. Hence, this allows for interpretation of the interaction terms. Table 4 shows that only one of the three hypothesized interaction terms is significant. The effect of childcare unfairness on relationship dissatisfaction is positive and differs significantly for

men and women ($B = 0.556, p < .001$). According to the results, there is no significant association between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction for men. To examine the effect for women, additional analyses (not shown) were performed where the reference category was changed to men. These analyses revealed that the association between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction is positive and significant for women ($B = 0.774, p < .001$). In other words, greater perceived unfairness about the division of childcare results in greater relationship dissatisfaction for mothers and not for fathers.

Table 4. *Parameter estimates from multilinear regression models predicting relationship dissatisfaction*

Predictors	Model 1 ^a		Model 2 ^b	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Perceived unfairness about childcare division	.483***	.050	.218	.204
Gender (ref. = male)	.129	.075	-.011	.079
Religion (ref. = non-religious)	-.230***	.061	-.222***	.068
Gender norms	-.105*	.046	-.104*	.050
Age	.015**	.005	.014**	.005
Educational attainment	.071***	.016	.071***	.016
Marital status (ref. = married/registered partnership)	.242***	.070	.249***	.069
Time spent with child	-.098**	.036	-.117***	.036
Weekly hours spent on paid work	-.001	.002	-.001	.002
Perceived unfairness about childcare division × Gender			.556***	.105
Perceived unfairness about childcare division × Religion			-.031	.100
Perceived unfairness about childcare division × Gender norms			-.031	.076
Constant	1.212	.365	1.389	.369
<i>Model information</i>				
Adjusted R^2	.082		.093	
<i>F</i> -change	20.694***		9.564***	

Source: New Families in the Netherlands Wave 1; 1,998 observations of 1,273 separate households.

Note: two-tailed * $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,01$, *** $p < 0,001$

This is in line with the hypothesis about the moderating effect of gender, which suggested that the association between perceived unfairness about the division of childcare and poorer relationship quality is stronger for women than for men. Visualization of the interaction effect of gender (not shown) reveals that this effect is particularly strong for mothers if they find the childcare division to be very unfair. According to Model 2, the interaction terms of religion and gender ideology proved insignificant. Hence, the relationship between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction did not differ for religious and non-religious parents, nor for the degree to which a parent adhered to modern gender norms. Thus, the third and fourth hypotheses central in this study cannot be confirmed.

Robustness analyses

Additional analyses were performed to further examine the moderating effects of religion and gender ideology. Research has shown that religiosity enforces traditional gender roles and ideologies (Voicu, 2009). Inspection of correlational statistics showed that religion and gender ideology were somewhat correlated ($r = -.188, p < .001$). Though the correlation was not particularly high, the choice was still made to analyze religion and gender ideology in separate models. Without religion in Model 1 and Model 2, the direct effect of gender ideology disappeared. The interaction term of gender ideology remained insignificant. Without gender ideology in the models, the direct effect of religion was still present ($B = -0.209, p < .001$). Adding the interaction term in Model 2 did not yield different results. Religion was still an insignificant moderator to the relationship between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction. Normal VIF-values already indicated no signs of multicollinearity, and the additional analyses confirmed that. Finally, the multilinear regression analyses were performed separately for men and women, to see whether this altered the moderating effects of religion and gender ideology. Previous research has shown that gender ideology possibly only plays a moderating role in the association between fairness perceptions and relationship satisfaction for women (Lavee & Katz, 2002). Hence, separate analyses for men and women might reveal these mechanisms. However, doing so yielded no different results in comparison to the main analyses.

CONCLUSION

The combination of increasing gender equality in the workplace and an often traditional division of unpaid labor between parents raises questions about unfairness perceptions in association with relationship satisfaction. Though plenty of scholarly attention has been

devoted to the association between perceived unfairness about family labor and relationship quality, few scholars clearly distinguish between childcare and housework when researching their effects on relationship dissatisfaction. This study adds to the limited body of evidence through thorough research into the association between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and parents' relationship quality. Moreover, the current research further tries to disentangle the different ways in which this relationship comes into play, by examining the moderating effects of gender, religion, and gender ideology on the association between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction. To do so, a recent large-scale Dutch dataset was used that offered unique insights into unfairness perceptions about unpaid labor and included a very reliable measure of relationship dissatisfaction.

On average, a large majority of the parents in this sample reported that the childcare was fairly divided between both parents. These findings are in line with scholars studying fairness perceptions with regards to household labor (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994; Sutor, 1991). Second, this study showed that increased perceived unfairness about the childcare division was positively associated with greater relationship dissatisfaction. These findings also confirmed what literature on family and marriage has previously suggested, namely that fairness perceptions are an important indicator of relationship dissatisfaction (e.g. Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999; Blair, 1998). Moreover, these findings are also in line with equity theory, which offered the theoretical framework behind the association between perceived unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction. Equity theory presumed that the input/output ratio between parents' efforts in household labor was the predictor of perceived unfair outcomes. As a result, under-benefiting, as well as over-benefiting parents, tend to experience feelings of distress, which in turn results in greater relationship dissatisfaction. The current research is an addition to the body of literature on equity theory by presenting convincing evidence that there is indeed an association between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and poorer marital quality.

Third, the results indicate that the association between perceived unfairness about the childcare division and relationship dissatisfaction is moderated by gender. The alleged relationship is stronger for mothers than for fathers, which is in line with the theoretical expectations. The results suggest that the relationship between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction is absent for fathers altogether. Women are generally more relationship-oriented than men, thus perceived unfairness in the division of unpaid labor tends to affect relational quality more for women than for men – who generally are less

relationship-oriented. This also aligns with existing research on the moderating effect of gender in the association between fairness perceptions and relationship quality. Many scholars have distinguished the different paths in how fairness perceptions affect relationship quality for women and men, and all found that this association is stronger for women than for men (Mikula et al, 2012; Blair, 1993; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Kluwer et al, 1996).

No support was found for the idea that perceived unfairness about childcare might affect relationship dissatisfaction stronger for religious than for non-religious parents. There was also no evidence supporting the claim that the aforementioned association is stronger for parents who adhere to egalitarian gender norms than for parents who adhere to traditional gender norms. Regardless of additional analyses that accounted for the fact that religion and gender ideology might hinder each other's influence on the relationship between unfairness perceptions and relationship dissatisfaction, the two moderators yielded no significant effect. For religion, the absence of any significant results can be attributed to how religiosity was operationalized. The variable measuring religion only took into account which religion a parent adhered to, not how strong this religious affiliation was. This can account for why there was no significant difference between religious and non-religious parents, as the strength of religiosity was not included in the measurement.

Fifth, previous research has shown that a parent's gender ideology moderates the association between fairness perceptions and marital quality, though only for women (Lavee & Katz, 2002). That the current study found no significant moderating effect of gender ideology can be ascribed to how gender ideology was operationalized in this study. The internal reliability of the four-item scale intended to measure gender ideology was relatively low. Thus, it may very well be the case that gender ideology was not accurately measured by the measure used in this paper.

Regardless of the insights of this study, several limitations should not go unnoticed. First, this study relies on cross-sectional data. Longitudinal data can provide insights into the changing pathways of unfairness and dissatisfaction. As parental duties change, fairness perceptions will very likely evolve as well. For instance, parents consider childcare tasks such as undertaking leisure activities and interactive tasks as being most 'fun'. In contrast, changing nappies or getting the children ready for school are considered the least enjoyable tasks (Sullivan, 2013). Throughout the child's life, the amount of time spent on routine work will probably decline, and more time is spent on interactive activities. Spending more time on

'fun' childcare activities can alter the relationship between unfairness perceptions and relationship dissatisfaction. These changing family patterns could be further examined by using longitudinal data. Second, due to the relatively small sample size of dissatisfied parents, conclusions should be made with caution. It is possible that the results are skewed and that the hypotheses are falsely confirmed. Further research should replicate this study to increase its validity.

Third, the moderating effect of religion should be further examined by operationalizing religiosity differently. The current measure did not measure the strength of religiosity, which could explain why no significant moderating effects were found for religion. Further research could use church attendance e.g. to better measure religion as a moderating variable in the association between childcare unfairness and relationship dissatisfaction. A final limitation of this study is its very homogenous sample. Parents of 'non-western' descent and low-income parents were highly underrepresented. The relationship between unfairness perceptions and marital quality is perhaps more salient in relationships between parents with a higher income because financial issues are also an important predictor of relationship dissatisfaction (Dew, 2016). Hence, the current results might present an overestimation of the actual effect of childcare unfairness on relationship dissatisfaction. Future research would ideally include a diverse sample to increase the study's generalizability.

Overall, the current study stresses the importance of unfairness perceptions about the childcare division as an indicator of relationship dissatisfaction. These findings suggest that even perceptions of unfairness about enjoyable childcare tasks result in relationship dissatisfaction, at least for mothers. Hence, it is clear that the division of seemingly trivial tasks has longstanding emotional consequences for the relationship outcomes of mothers. Thus, fathers should be wary of the influence of an unfair division of tasks and take up their share of the work.

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