THE INTERPLAY OF SOCIAL COMPARISONS IN INFLUENCING EVALUATIONS OF JUSTICE IN THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

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Social Comparisons & Justice

social comparisons constitute a central element for the evaluation of justice

- daily life experience
- theories of distributive justice
  (e.g., Homans, 1961; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978)

Theories of distributive justice argue that social comparisons build the basis for evaluations of justice.

Our study primarily aims to contribute to the understanding of how social comparisons influence women's perceived justice of the division of household labor.
The division of household labor is generally very imbalanced to the disadvantage of women. However, the majority of women do not report any feelings of injustice about the division of household labor.

At least in part, this might be due to social comparisons.
Social Comparisons

Two kinds of comparisons:
(a) Comparison of the women with her partner
(b) Comparison of the partner with other men
   (e.g., Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991)

Two aspects of a comparison:
(a) Outcome of the comparison
(b) Frequency of the comparison
   (Buunk, Kluwer, Schuurman, & Siero, 2000;
    Grote, Naylor, & Clark, 2002; Mikula & Freudenthaler, 2002)

In our research, we distinguish two different kinds of social comparisons that can be regarded as particularly relevant to the division of household labor, the relational comparison between the shares of labor done by the woman and her partner, and the referential comparisons between the shares of labor done by the partner and other men. The differentiation is important because these different kinds of social comparisons likely have different functions and consequences for the evaluation of the division of household labor.

In addition, we distinguish two different aspects of social comparisons: (a) the outcome of a comparison, and (b) the frequency of making the respective comparison.

Let's take a look at the outcomes of the respective comparisons, first.
Outcome of the comparison of the woman with her partner

- Less: 5.1%
- About as much as: 10.8%
- More than the partner: 84.1%

More than 84% of women think that they do more household labor than their partner.

In our sample, more than 84% of women report that they are doing a larger share of household labor than their partner.

This result is not surprising. However, it's becoming more impressive if we look at the result of the comparison of the shares done by the partner with the shares done by other men.
Only 15% of women think that their partner does less household labor than other men.

The comparison between the shares of labor done by the woman and the shares done by the man usually reveals the existing degree of imbalance in the shares of labor done by the spouses.

But the comparison between the share of the man and the shares of other men can provide different meanings to the given imbalanced division of labor in one's relationship.
Outcomes of Comparisons

- **woman/partner comparison**
  
  outcome showing that the woman does a larger share of labor than her partner \( \rightarrow \text{less perceived justice} \)

- **partner/other men comparison**
  
  outcome showing that the partner does a larger share of labor than other men \( \rightarrow \text{more perceived justice} \)

What follows from these outcomes for perceived justice seems to be straight ahead: A comparison outcome that shows that the woman does a larger share than her partner will contribute to less perceived justice, and a comparison outcome that shows that the partner does a larger share than other men will contribute to more perceived justice.
Basic Research Question

If social comparisons contribute to the fact that most women do not perceive an unequal division of household labor to be unjust:

Is it important, which kinds of comparisons are made, and how often they are made by women?

The present study tries to contribute to the answer to the following question:

If social comparisons contribute to the evaluation of an unequal division of labor as just (and that is what is often argued by scholars):

How relevant is it which comparisons are made by the women, and how often they are made?
Frequency of Comparison (Assumptions)

(1) frequency of comparisons also relevant for evaluations of justice

(2) effect of the frequency upon justice depends on the outcome of the comparison

We argued that the usual outcome of the comparison between the woman and her partner leads to less perceived justice while the usual outcome of the comparison between the partner and other men leads to more perceived justice. But it is not only the outcome of a comparison that matters. The frequency of making a comparison is also relevant to perceived justice.

We propose that comparison frequencies should affect evaluations of justice, but the direction of the effect on perceived justice should depend on (the favorability of) the outcome of the respective comparison.
Hypotheses - Frequencies of Comparisons

• woman/partner comparison
  ... shows that the woman does more than her partner

  The higher the frequency of the comparison between partners the less women perceive their division of household labor in their own relationship to be just.

  The more the frequency of this comparison increases, the less women perceive their division of household labor in their own relationship to be just.

Assuming that most women do a much larger share of household labor than their partner, and that the unequal division of labor is generally accompanied by negative feelings, we hypothesize:

*The higher the frequency of the comparison between the woman and her partner, and the more the frequency of this comparison increases, the less women perceive their division of household labor to be just.*
Hypotheses - Frequencies of Comparisons

- partner/other men comparison
  ... shows that the partner does not less than other men do

The higher the frequency of the comparison of the partner with other men the more women perceive the division of household labor in their own relationship to be just.

The more the frequency of making this comparison increases the more women perceive the division of household labor in their own relationship to be just.

Assuming that most women think that the partner does more household labor than other men, and that this outcome may lead to less negative or even positive feelings, we hypothesize: The higher the frequency of the comparison of the partner with other men, and the more the frequency of such comparisons increases, the more women perceive the division of labor in their own relationship to be just.

In short, the comparison of the woman with her partner should contribute to less perceived justice while the comparison of the partner with other men may lead to more perceived justice.
### Sample

**Women from dual-earner couples with young children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>389</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**two waves**: 2003, 2006

The data for the present analyses have been obtained from 389 women who participated in two survey-waves with a time interval of about three years (the first survey in 2003, the second in 2006). The present analyses build upon the combined data set of the three national samples to increase the power of the statistical analyses. The questionnaires of both surveys addressed various aspects of the work/life balance of dual-earner couples with young children.
Central Variables

- **perceived justice** of the division of household labor at Time 1 and Time 2
- **outcomes** of the comparisons at Time 1
- **frequencies** of making the comparisons at Time 1
- **changes in the frequencies** of making the comparisons with time
  \[
  \text{comparison frequency at Time 2} - \text{comparison frequency at Time 1}
  \]

These are the most important variables included into our model:
- Perceived justice: Women rated how just they regarded the given divisions of labor between them and their partner on 6-point rating scales (1 = very unjust, 6 = very just).
- Outcomes and frequencies of both comparisons, the comparison of the woman with her partner, and the comparison of the partner with other men, and, last but not least,
- changes in comparison frequencies with time.

We computed **changes in comparison frequencies** as frequency at Time 2 minus frequency at Time 1. That means that positive values indicate an increase in comparison frequencies (while negative values indicate a decrease in comparison frequencies).
This is the starting point of our analysis. On the left you find perceived justice at Time 1, on the right perceived justice at Time 2. We controlled for several variables, for example variables indicating women's socio-economic status or normative gender role attitude. For reasons of time, I will not present these results in detail. But when I talk about coefficients both, the standardized coefficients of the model without and the model with controls will be shown. The latter ones are presented in brackets.
This slide shows again perceived justice at Time 1 and at Time 2. In addition, you see the frequency of making comparisons of the woman with her partner at Time 1 and the change in the frequency of making this comparison with time. This slide should sketch the way we modeled the associations between Time 1 variables, changes with time, and Time 2 variables. I am not able to present all the results. But you should know that we always control Time 1 variables if we look at changes with time or at Time 2 variables.
So, here are the results. We begin with the comparison of the women with her partner. On the left you see the comparison outcome at Time 1, whether the woman does a larger share than her partner. Above, you find the frequency of making the comparison at Time 1, and next to it the change in the frequency of making comparisons with time.
First, if women thought at Time 1 that they are doing a larger share than their partner, the division of household labor was perceived less just at Time 2.
Second, the higher the frequency of making comparisons between the woman and her partner was at Time 1, the less just women perceive the division of labor at Time 2.
In addition, the more this frequency increased between Time 1 and Time 2, the less just women perceive the division of labor at Time 2.
We argued that the meaning of increasing the frequencies of certain comparisons follows from the outcomes the respective comparisons show. This latter assumption is tested in the following investigating whether the outcomes of the respective comparisons moderate the effects of changes in the comparison frequencies of social comparisons upon perceived justice.

Therefore, we additionally entered interaction terms; that means the change in comparison frequency times the comparison outcome.
The interaction term for the comparison between the woman and her partner shows a significant effect.

So what does that mean?
In this figure you see - on the ordinate - perceived justice at Time 2, and - on the abscissa - the change in the frequency of making the comparison over time.

Women reporting doing more household labor than their partner at Time 1 perceive the division of labor the less just at Time 2, the more the frequency of making comparisons between themselves and their partners increased between Time 1 and Time 2.
Comparison of the women with her partner

However, the black regression line drawn for women, that think that their partner is not doing less household labor than themselves, looks different. The association between the change in the comparison frequency and perceived justice is not pronounced with this group of women. The slope of the black regression line is not significantly different from zero.

The outcome of the comparison is important for the effect of changes in comparison frequencies with time on perceived justice.
This slide shows the variables concerning the comparison between the shares of the partner with the share of other men. Again you see the comparison outcome at Time 1 – whether the partner does about the same share of labor as other men or even a larger share -, the comparison frequency at Time 1, and the change in comparison frequency with time.
Women reporting at Time 1 that their partner did more or at least the same share of household labor than other men perceive the division of labor more just at Time 2.
In addition, the higher the frequency of making comparisons between the man and other men was at Time 1, and the more this frequency increased between Time 1 and Time 2, the more women perceive the division of labor to be just at Time 2.
And again the interaction term turns out to have a significant effect.
The black regression line is drawn for women that report that their partner is doing a smaller share of household labor than other men do. Women perceiving their partner doing less household labor than other men perceive the division of labor the less just, the more the frequency of making comparisons between their partner and other men increased.
But: Women perceiving their partner doing more household labor than other men perceive the division of labor the more just, the more the frequency of making comparisons between their partner and other men increased.
This clearly confirms our hypothesis: The effect of the change in comparison frequency over time is dependant on the respective comparison outcome.
Let me summarize our major results:

The more the frequency of making comparisons between the woman and her partner increased with time, the less just women perceive the division of labor at a later point in time.

But the more the frequency of making comparisons between the man and other men increased, the more women perceive the division of labor to be just.

The possible reason for these differences is that the comparison outcome serves as a moderator of the effect of changes in the frequency of making comparisons on perceived justice.
Conclusions

• woman/partner comparison
  → shows unequal division

• partner/other men comparison
  → may mitigate the negativity of an unequal division
  → useful to cope with the unequal division
  → allows to maintain a positive portrayal of the own relationship

The comparison between the woman and her partner provides the most direct information of the degree of imbalance of the shares of the two partners.

But the comparison between the shares of the partner with the shares of household labor done by other men can provide information that mitigates the negativity of an unequal division of labor because most women think that their partner does more than other men do.

Relational comparisons as the comparison between the other partner and other men can be used, consciously or unconsciously, to make a given imbalanced division of labor appear less negatively.

The comparisons that women make, and the outcomes they perceive, can make the given division in their relationship appear as common and acceptable. This evidence agrees well with relevant propositions of the distributive justice framework of Major (1993) and Thompson (1991) and is also in line with propositions of system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994).
Finally, I want to talk about the strengths and limitations of this study.

(1) We considered different kinds of comparisons. The comparison of the partner with other men is often ignored.

(2) We considered not only the outcomes or only the frequencies of social comparisons; we included both, the outcome and the frequency in our model and computed an interaction between the change in the frequency with time and the outcome at Time 1. I think we could show that both, outcomes and frequencies matter for evaluations of justice, and these results may contribute to the answer to the question whether comparisons should be measured in terms of outcomes or in terms of frequencies.

(3) As far as we know, this is the first approach to analyze effects of changes in the frequency of making social comparisons with time on perceived justice. Though difference scores may not be the best way to conduct such an analysis – and we are well aware of this – it is at least one step into the right direction. (Multicollinearity problems did not allow testing our assumptions within a methodologically sounder framework.)

(4) We look at women from dual-earner couples with young children. On the one hand, this is strength because it is this group of women for that the division of household labor – and perceived justice of the division – is most important. On the other hand, because the restriction to this special group of women there was no sampling frame available. The non-representative character of the sample used in our study limits the generalizability of the obtained results.
References


