

Housework Distribution in Dual-earner Couples: Modeling Individual Satisfaction and Interpersonal Comparisons

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Empirical research tends to show that, despite the fact that the largest part of housework tasks is still carried out by the female member of the couple, only a surprisingly low proportion of men and women reports high level of dissatisfaction and unfairness with the actual distribution of domestic labor [1].

According to an increasing number of studies, this gap between the objective distribution and the actors' judgments is partly related to the inter-temporal and interpersonal comparisons that actors make to evaluate their own situation. Even though men's and women's reference terms may differ, they tend indeed to compare themselves to actors who are in the same boat as they are thus concluding that the housework distribution existing in their own couple is more or less the same as the usual distribution. Actors thus tend to conclude that their couple actual distribution must be acceptable, if not fair [2, 3].

While existing empirical studies convincingly demonstrate that social comparisons may matter, they have not been able so far precisely to figure out the way these comparisons work. In particular, the mechanisms by means of which actors reach their final judgment about others' housework distribution are still unclear. Which specific contact actors look at within their network? How do they select the contacts who do more, less or the same as them? Which heuristic do actors adopt to combine the amount of information they collected? Does the number of contacts the actor can exploit to estimate others' housework distribution affect the perception of actors with similar contribution to the domestic labor? Answering these questions is particularly challenging when actors operate in the context of multiple, and often competing, potential comparison terms.

The paper aims at advancing these questions in a formal way. To do so, we build on an approach integrating standard multivariate statistic techniques and less usual, at least in sociology, computational methods [4, 5]. In particular, an *empirically-calibrated agent-based model* is programmed and systematically analyzed [6, 7].

On the basis of survey data on about 400 dual-earner couples living in the metropolitan area of Torino (north-western Italy) [8], we build an artificial society where the members of the virtual couples have the same socio-demographic profile as the sampled couples. Artificial agents, then, form the judgment about the housework distribution of the couple they live in on the basis of a logistic regression equation estimated on the real data. One of the variables of this equation is the comparison term that, among comparison terms considered in the survey, affects the most real actors' perceptions (namely, male friends for men and female friends' husband for women).

The focal point of the paper consists in studying how these perceptions and the related judgments of satisfaction and fairness change as a function of the specific mechanism that one postulates being at work under the self-reported evaluation of others' contribution to domestic labor. By systematic situating the empirical distribution of actors' judgments within the range of judgments generated by the simulation under these different hypotheses, the paper assesses the predictive power and the theoretical plausibility of the several mechanisms postulated in order to hierarchize them as plausible *explanans* of the observed data.

References

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