EQUITY, EMOTION, AND THE HOUSEHOLD DIVISION OF LABOR

ABSTRACT

We explore the emotional costs of perceived inequity in the home. We move beyond existing studies that link inequity in the home with depression by incorporating a broader scope of emotions, by distinguishing between underbenefiting and overbenefiting—i.e., doing what one considers more or less than one’s fair share—and by examining these processes for women and men. We find general support for principles of equity theory: that is, emotions are closely tied to perceived inequity in the division of household labor. However, we also find that this pattern differs by specific emotions, the direction of the inequity and the sex of the perceiver. Implications for understanding emotion, equity theory, and family are then elaborated.
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Over recent decades, sociologists have become increasingly interested in the relationships between perceptions of equity emotion (Hegtvedt 1990; Kemper 1978; Sprecher 1986). Relying primarily on experiments, scholars have investigated how individuals respond to both over and underbenefiting, most typically in exchange scenarios with non-intimate or even simulated others (e.g., college students or computer avatars). Guided by insights from equity theory, these studies generally suggest that individuals experience distress upon perceiving an injustice to themselves. In contrast to some predictions made by others (Stets 2003; Weiss and Suckow 1999), equity theory also suggests that individuals will also experience distress when witnessing an injustice to others—that is, when individuals perceive they receive more than their fair share.

Necessarily, most experimental studies evaluate what happens in short-term encounters of relative strangers, despite increasing calls to explore equity principles in more intimate, longer term relationships in less rigorously controlled situations (Clay-Warner 2006; Lively 2006). Although all social interactions are potentially susceptible to emotional reactions, Steelman and Powell (1996) contend that family provides a particularly rich context for researchers to test formal principles arising from experimental research and explore additional avenues. Families provide opportune environments to better understand individuals’ emotional responses to perceived inequities that occur at the hands of—or at the expense of—loved ones.

Sociologists are not unaware of the powerful social dynamics that occur within families. Indeed, several have documented different forms of domestic inequality (Coltrane 1996; DeVault 1994), as well as strategies that husbands and wives use to alter their perceptions of inequity and subsequent emotional reactions (Hochschild 1989). Although these studies highlight some of the most fundamental social processes that underscore family life, they have done so—for the most
part—without capitalizing fully on insights gained from more formal social psychological theories of human interaction and emotion.

One exception is research on the consequences of perceived inequity with regard to the household division of labor. The handful of studies on this subject, however, tends to emphasize the nexus between perceived inequity and depression. Lennon and Rosenfield (1994), as just one example, find wives who view their household burden as unjust are more likely to suffer from depression than those who do not. With rare exception, examinations of this type do not differentiate explicitly between under and overbenefiting—that is, perceiving that one is doing more or less than one’s fair share. Additionally, studies of this genre pay negligible attention to emotional experiences other than those associated with depression.

Borrowing insights from equity theory, as well as other theories of emotion (Kemper 1978) and identity (Heise 1979, 2007), we explore connections among perceptions of equity, a wide range of everyday emotions – including anger - and domestic labor in two nationally representative datasets of married or cohabiting women and men. Our primary data source, the 1996 Emotion and Gender Modules from the General Social Survey, enables us to systematically test the relationships between reports of several emotions and perceived inequities concerning household duties. The secondary dataset, the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Household, permits a closely parallel test in a larger sample, albeit with fewer emotions. These analyses help assess whether patterns regarding general principles of perceived equity (or inequity) already demonstrated in laboratory studies of relative, if not complete, strangers or in convenience surveys of college students generalize to long-term relationships among married and/or cohabiting adults.
Integrating insights from equity theory, social interactional theory of emotion, affect control theory, and empirical studies of household labor, our analyses move beyond previous research by: (1) explicitly partitioning the emotional experiences associated with under and overbenefiting; (2) delineating between a variety of positive and negative everyday emotions; (3) exploring whether patterns of emotion and equity found in small groups of relative strangers are generalizable to more intimate relationships; and (4) determining if women and men experience different emotions in response to perceived inequity in the home.

BACKGROUND

Equity Theory

Equity theory posits that when individuals perceive an inequity (in either direction), they consequently experience emotional distress. Notably, emotional distress can assume different forms. Homans ([1961] 1974), for example, distinguishes between anger and guilt. Others stress the need to explore the relationship between perceived equity and positive emotions, including excitement, satisfaction, contentment, pride, joy, and respect (Sprecher 1986). Unfortunately, these recommendations have not yet been fully adopted in studies of the division of household labor within families. Instead, as noted above, these studies often rely on depression scales, typically the Center for the Epidemiological Study – Depression Scale (Radloff 1977).

Although equity theory has been most often invoked by those interested in the psychosocial responses to perceived inequity in the home, the theory may actually be too broad—or too general—to adequately predict emotional reactions when individuals are faced with perceptions of underbenefiting (or overbenefiting) at the hands of (or at the expense of) a loved one in such an intimate setting as the home. Thus, given their reliance on equity theory and their use of depression scales, family scholars may have overlooked some of the more
dynamic emotions, such as anger and rage. These oversights are particularly striking given that anger and rage are believed to carry disruptive consequences when experienced and expressed in established social networks (Feshbach 1996).

That said, if general theories principles of equity are applicable to long term relationships between intimates, we expect that individuals who experience a perceived inequity in either direction will experience more days of negative emotions and fewer days of positive emotions. In other words, inequity to self and inequity to another should result in similar emotional reactions. Notably, these processes are not theorized to differ by women and men.

Social Interactional Theory of Emotion

To better understand how intimates respond when faced with perceived inequities in the home, we turn our attention away from equity theory per se and towards two social psychological theories of emotion and identity: social interactional theory and affect control theory. According to the social interactional theory of emotion (Kemper 1978), emotions typically arise from perceived injustices that occur along two fundamental interactional axes: status and power, and, thus, all emotions offer clues into how individuals respond to perceived injustice. For example, individuals are expected to experience anger and other related feelings when denied the status they expect to receive in a social interaction. They are also likely to experience positive emotions, such as happiness, tranquility, ease, and contentment when they perceive a gain in status and power (Stets 2003; Weiss and Suckow 1999).

Unlike equity theory, Kemper’s social interactional theory of emotion considers the affective nature of pre-existing relationships between actors—a condition that, not surprisingly, makes problematic the more general predictions detailed above. For example, status gains by another actor are expected to cause happiness (in self) if one likes the other, and unhappiness if
one does not. Similarly, status loss by other (where self is agent) is expected to instill guilt/shame (in self) if one likes the other and happiness if one does not. And, finally, status loss by other (where other or circumstance is agent) is predicted to cause unhappiness (in self) if one likes the other and happiness if one does not. When individuals receive the amount of status or power they expect to receive in a given interaction, they should experience positive emotions such as contentment, satisfaction, and happiness.

Assuming most spouses like one another, this perspective suggests that although individuals in general may experience feelings of happiness and security when they experience a gain in status, spouses who overbenefit in the household division of labor at the expense of a spouse are actually more likely to experience sadness and guilt. When spouses experience a loss in power at the hands of a spouse, they are expected to feel suspicion, anger and fear. And when they experience a gain in power, especially when that gain comes at the expense of a loved one, they are expected to experience shame and chagrin. Notably, individuals who see their own underbenefitting as a status “gift” to their partners (Hochschild 1989) may have potential negative reactions mitigated by feelings of happiness and joy.

Thus, we predict that the relationship between equity and emotion to be contingent upon the direction of the perceived inequity, as well as the specific emotion. Moreover, if Kemper is correct that these emotions are fundamental reactions to specific forms of social interaction and are not attributable individual status characteristics, then these responses should not vary for women and men.

**Affect Control Theory**

Affect control theory (Heise 1979, 2007), which conceptualizes “affect” as a function of the valence of the disconfirmation and the situated identity meanings that result from interaction,
can also be useful in making predictions about emotional responses to perceived inequity in the realm of domestic labor. In layman’s terms, affect control theory takes into account individuals’ culturally shared fundamental sentiments regarding social identities, behaviors and settings. When researchers combine these identities and behaviors (typically theorized as Actor-Behavior-Object sequences) into situated events, the theory makes predictions regarding associated emotions. For example, a situation in which a husband (Actor) kisses (Behavior) a wife (Object) is likely to be associated with feelings of happiness (Heise 2007). In contrast, a situation in which a husband kicks a wife is likely to be associated with negative emotions.

Similar to equity theory, affect control theory predicts that actors who experience more than their fair share should generally experience positive emotions in short-term interactions among strangers. But similar to Kemper’s theory, these predictions change when taking into consideration 1) the setting in which the interaction occurs (e.g., in a lab, classroom, or home) and 2) the relationships between actors. In fact, when embedding perceptions of equity within the context of family—that is, when a spouse does something negative to another spouse—affect control theory predicts that both parties are generally expected to experience negative, albeit slightly different, emotions.

While equity theory and Kemper’s social interactional theory of emotions do not explicitly presume that equity processes should vary by sex, affect control theory, through its computer simulation program INTERACT, suggests a somewhat different story. Using INTERACT allows researchers to generate hypotheses regarding sex by viewing the situated interaction from the perspectives of women and/or men. Although most studies of depression and the division of household labor have focused exclusively or primarily on wives’ reactions to perceived inequity, on the grounds that so few men underbenefit or are aware of their tendency
to overbenefit, affect control theory-inspired computer simulations suggest that husbands and wives should respond differently to perceived inequity in the home.

Based on insights garnered from affect control theory, as well as our hypotheses generation derived using INTERACT, (available upon request) we predict that the relationship between equity and emotion is contingent on not only the direction of the inequity and the emotion being considered, but also the sex of the perceiver.

DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS

We rely on two national datasets to examine the relationships between perceived inequity in the household division of labor and a variety of every day emotions: the General Social Survey 1996 and the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households.

The General Social Survey 1996

In 1996, a random subset of respondents was asked questions from both the Emotion and Gender Modules of the General Social Survey (Davis and Smith 1996). The Emotion Module is important because it is the only nationally representative data set that records individual accounts of emotional experiences, including self-reports of a wide range of emotions—among them happiness, fear, anger, loneliness, and outrage—felt within a seven-day period. The Gender Module incorporates many questions on family and gender, including items regarding the nature of and perceived fairness in the division of domestic labor within the home. Although some scholars have explored sex differences in the Emotion Module (Lively and Powell 2006; Simon and Nath 2004; Lively 2008), to our knowledge, this study represents the first effort to merge the Gender and Emotion Modules into one analysis. Because our interest lies in linking individual emotional experience to perceptions of inequity in the domestic division of labor, we restrict the analysis to 699 individuals who reported being married or cohabiting with an opposite-sex
romantic partner, who were administered both gender and emotion modules, and for whom we have complete information on our key independent and dependent variables.

**Measures**

*Emotional Experience*

To assess respondents’ recent emotional reactions, individuals were instructed: “Now I’m going to read a list of different feelings that people sometimes have. After each one, I would like you to tell me on how many days you have felt this way during the past seven days.” From this list of 18 emotions, we use confirmatory factor analysis to derive nine discrete factors—distress, anger, rage, tranquility, excitement, fear, self-reproach, pride, and joy—that were then summed. Perceptions of fairness are measured by one item asking respondents “How fair do you feel the division of work around the house is in your household? Would you say that it is fair to both you and your spouse or partner, unfair to you, or unfair to your spouse or partner?” We also controlled for the amount of self-reported housework performed by self and spouse, as well a number of other variables, including sex, age, education, employment, marital status, and children under the age of 18 living at home.

**The National Survey of Families and Households**

To supplement our analysis of the General Social Survey, we also examine the second wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (1992-1994), conducted by the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. We rely on a sample of primary respondents who reported being married (N=4,517) or cohabitating with a domestic partner (N=413) and who provided complete information on our key independent and dependent variables.
Scholars interested in the implications of the household labor for depression or marital satisfaction often use National Survey of Families and Households because of its fairly extensive set of measures regarding housework (Glass and Fujimoto 1994; Robinson and Spitze 1992; Wilcox and Nock 2006). Its coverage of emotions, however, is narrower: the number of days in the previous week that the respondent felt anger, distress and fear. Once again, we used confirmatory factor analysis on individual emotion items that were then summed. Our primary goal is to test whether and, if so, how these emotions are related to perceived inequity in the division of household labor, and whether these patterns remain once other factors (reported amount of housework performed by the respondent and spouse/partner, race, age, education, income, marital status, parental status, and sex) are controlled.

RESULTS

Perceived Fairness and Emotions

Negative and Positive Emotions

We first assess whether emotional experiences vary by feelings of inequity. Perceptions of unfairness are significantly linked to both negative and positive emotions, though more strongly for the former than the latter. Consistent with equity theory, individuals who perceive themselves as either overbenefiting or underbenefiting with respect to housework report significantly more negative emotions than do their counterparts who judge the arrangement as fair to both parties. This pattern holds even with the introduction of control variables. Moreover, the influences of under and overbenefiting on negative emotions are approximately equal.

The frequency of experiencing positive emotions is negatively associated with perceived inequity to both oneself and to one’s spouse/partner. Still, the effects of underbenefiting and overbenefiting vary in magnitude. Not surprisingly, underbenefiting is more influential than
Notably, interactional analyses suggest that the effect of underbenefiting on negative emotions (but not positive emotions) is significantly greater for men than for women. This, however, does not mean the underbenefiting does not affect women. In fact, we find that women who perceive the situations as unfair to themselves also are likely to experience more days of negative emotions and, in particular, more days of anger. In other words, according to the General Social Survey, underbenefiting appears to affect both men and women, although it affects men more profoundly; a finding that is consistent with predictions from affect control theory inspired simulations noted above. Given the small number of men who report that they do more than their fair share of the household tasks—and, as will be shown shortly, we are mindful that this pattern should be viewed guardedly.

*The Negative Emotions: Distress, Anger, Rage, Fear, and Self Reproach*

Aggregated measures of positive and negative emotions may obscure (or exaggerate) the magnitude of the consequences of inequity. Consequently, we now turn to a more nuanced delineation of emotional experiences. Because of its overlap with depression, as measured by the Center for the Epidemiological Studies – Depression scale, we begin with feelings of distress—i.e., a composite of individuals’ responses to items regarding the number of days in which they felt blue, sad, or lonely. Consistent with equity theory, individuals who see themselves as either overbenefit or underbenefit report significantly more distress than do their counterparts who see the division as fair to both parties. Our findings also suggest that the influence of underbenefiting is almost twice that of overbenefiting. Effects remain significant with the introduction of control variables and are surpassed in strength only by age and its negative relationship to distress.
Similar patterns are observed for feelings of anger and rage. Perceptions of inequity to self and, to a lesser degree, inequity to spouse are significantly linked to these emotions. Adding sociodemographic factors weakens these effects, especially for perceptions of unfairness to partner, although the significant effect for unfairness to self persists. Despite theoretical reasons to distinguish anger and rage from distress (Lively and Heise 2004), these emotions behave similarly.

A different pattern emerges for fear and self reproach. Indeed, these emotions are not consistently linked to perceptions that the division of labor is unfair to oneself. Instead, overbenefiting has a much stronger effect.

Positive Emotions: Tranquility, Excitement, Pride and Joy

Positive emotions, however, do not mirror the aforementioned patterns. Tranquility (a composite score based on responses regarding the number of days the respondent felt happy, content, at ease and calm) is negatively linked to perceived unfairness to both self and to spouse. Excited feelings, however, are significantly and negatively linked to perceived inequity to self but not to inequity to spouse. Finally, perceptions of inequity wield little influence on feelings of pride of joy. This pattern may not be surprising given that these two emotions are also least affected by sociodemographic factors, such as age.

Supplemental Analyses Using National Survey of Families and Households

As mentioned earlier, we investigate the possibility that our findings are idiosyncratic to the General Social Survey by conducting a similar, although necessarily more circumscribed, analysis of National Survey of Families and Households, where we estimated effects of perceived inequity on a composite scale of negative emotions, as well as on distress, anger, and fear. Effects of perceived inequity—in favor of oneself or one’s spouse—are significant and
remain so even with the inclusion of control variables. Generally, we see that findings regarding the main effects of inequity are consistent across datasets, with the exception of those regarding fear, which we attribute to measurement differences. In addition, socio-demographic variables generally operate similarly in the National Study of Families and Households as they do in the General Social Survey. That said, the main effects of sex are stronger in the National Study of Families and Households than they are in the General Social Survey and they are statistically significant.

Consistent with expectations from affect control theory, interaction models in National Survey of Families and Households suggest women may be more emotionally sensitive to overbenefiting at the expense of their spouse or domestic partner than men. Again, this does not suggest that men are not affected by perceptions of underbenefiting; indeed, in auxiliary analyses, we find that men who perceive the situation as unfair to self also experience more days of negative emotions, distress, anger, and fear. Although these associations are statistically significant, they are nonetheless weaker than (in the case of overall negative emotions and distress) or undistinguishable from those found among women. We return to this point below. These variations notwithstanding, both datasets reveal general support for equity theory, as well as the differential effects of over and underbenefiting and the need to consider emotions other than those associated with depression.

CONCLUSION

Building on previous studies that examined the relationship between depressive symptoms and perceptions of inequity in the household division of labor, our work assesses the degree to which different types of inequities are coupled with daily emotional experiences. Moving beyond the classic tenet of equity that individuals who experience an inequity in either
direction are likely to experience distress, we draw upon insights from theories of emotion and identity that take into consideration not only perceptions of injustice, but also the situated nature of the interaction and the sex of the perceiver. This project also sheds light on how responses to inequities documented in short-term, less consequential relationships among relative strangers may differ from those experienced in long-term, significant relationships with a spouse or domestic partner. Further, we document the degree to which these processes differ for women and men.

We find general support for equity theory when limiting our analyses to composite measures of negative and positive emotions. Adhering to basic principles of equity theory, individuals report experiencing increased negative emotions and decreased positive emotion when they also perceive inequity (in either direction) in the division of household labor. Note that the overall relationship is stronger when the perceived inequities disfavor the respondent. However, if we halted our analysis here, we would have missed out on substantively important variation in terms of how emotions operate in the face of inequity—not only in terms of individual emotions, but also in terms of the sex of the perceiver. Thus, equity theory, the most commonly used of the three theories among family scholars, may potentially lead researchers to overlook important sources variation in how individuals likely react to perceived inequities in household labor.

Despite most scholars’ focus on the relationship between inequity, household labor and composite reports of depression, we find that a variety of specific negative emotions are related to perceived inequity in the household division of labor (Kemper 1978). In many ways, Kemper’s structural interactional theory invites scholars to move beyond the general tenet of equity theory by providing numerous testable predictions, many of which were supported by our
analyses. Given his stated goal of creating a general theory of emotion (1978), however, Kemper eschews the effects of settings or the degree to which emotional reactions to perceived inequities vary by individual characteristics, of which sex is just one (Lively et al 2008). In keeping with predictions from Kemper’s structural interactional theory of emotion, as well as affect control theory (Heise 2007), our analyses reveal that individuals are more likely to experience distress—the emotion in this analysis that is most closely associated with depression—when perceiving that they are doing more than their fair share. However, they are also more likely to experience anger and rage, emotions that are not typically subsumed under measures of depression.

Individuals are also likely to experience a different set of negative emotions (that is, fear and self-reproach) when faced with overbenefiting in addition to the distress, anger and rage that they are likely to feel when faced with perceptions of underbenefiting. Calling into question the generalizability of short-term observations made in laboratory settings of strangers (Stets 2003; Weiss and Suckow 1999), our results indicate that in situations where romantic partners engage in completing tasks, exploitative behavior appears disturbing—as opposed to satisfying—to the beneficiary.

Finally, turning our attention to affect control theory, we find support for the expectation that men and women do not respond to perceived inequality in similar ways. Consistent with computer simulations using affect control theory’s computer simulation program, INTERACT, as well as ethnographic studies of dual income couples, men (at least those in the General Social Survey) are more emotionally responsive than women to perceptions of underbenefiting, whereas women (at least those in the National Survey of Family and Households) are more emotionally responsive than men to perceptions of overbenefiting at home. On the surface our findings from one dataset may seem inconsistent with those from the other. Yet these findings are in fact
complementary and are well in accordance with the computer simulations cited above. Of the three theoretical perspectives explored here, affect control theory may take scholars who are interested in the study of emotional reactions to perceived inequity in the home and their linkage to gender farther than the other two theories heretofore used to understand emotions and perceptions of inequality. Affect control theory’s promise in this regard rests on its theoretical insights that are in large part consistent with those from equity theory and Kemper’s structural interactional theory and its unique ability to account for the setting in which interactions occur and the differences observed between women and men.

Although each of the three theories predict that perceptions of inequity (in either direction) would garner fewer days of tranquility, none of them adequately account for the decrease in days of excitement. This rather anomalous finding suggests that although these theories may be useful in predicting a lessening of sanguine emotions, such as those captured by our measure of tranquility, they may be less equipped to predict decreases in more powerful and active emotions, such as excitement. Indeed, given that none of the theories perfectly predict the lessening of excitement, our results suggest that existing theories of inequity, interaction, and identity—at least as they relate to emotion—are better suited to understand increases in particular negative emotions and the disruption of well-being than they are in predicting the lessening of particular positive emotions.

In our study we use nationally representative survey data to explore expectations regarding equity—not just from equity theory, but also from theories of emotion and identity—in a natural context, family. Family, characterized by enduring relationships among intimates, provides a naturally occurring, albeit surprisingly underutilized, setting to study group processes (Steelman and Powell 1996). Using survey methods to understand the emotional outcomes of
perceived inequity within families, we encompass a broader range of emotions than could ordinarily be assessed in the laboratory.

These findings also highlight a key lesson that we have learned from experiments: the importance of replicating findings across multiple data sets. Qualitative researchers concur, as demonstrated by their reliance on multiple sources of data from which complementary patterns emerge (Charmaz 1990). Here, we follow in the same spirit by relying on two different datasets. For the broadest finding of this analysis—that perceived inequity is implicated in everyday emotion—the patterns are consistent across both the General Social Survey and National Survey of Family and Households, adding confidence to the major findings presented here. In contrast, we unexpectedly find seeming discrepancies between the two datasets regarding sex. From the General Social Survey data, we would conclude that men are more strongly affected by household inequity. We would reach the opposite conclusion if we relied solely on the National Survey of Family and Households data. However, as we note earlier, these two findings are not entirely disparate. If there is a greater effect for men, as suggested in General Social Survey, it is only when men believe that they are doing more than their share of household labor. But if there is a greater effect for women, as suggested in National Survey of Family and Households, it is only when women are doing less than their fair share. These two patterns—when taken together—are complementary with one another and with well documented norms that establish domestic labor as “women’s work” (Brines 1994; Hochschild 1989). They also correspond with predictions from affect control theory (Heise 2007).

Our inquiry, embedded as it is in long term affective relationships, strongly suggests that emotions may vary by the type of task under consideration, the direction of the perceived inequity, the type of emotion being considered, and even the sex of the perceiver. They also
point to the need for future research on household division of labor—and other emotionally laden
tasks—to more closely examine of the role that everyday emotions play in perpetuating
household inequity.
REFERENCES


