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INTRODUCTION

The hospital cafeteria was hushed in the lull between breakfast and lunch. Jackie, a White dietitian employed on one of the hospital's upper floors, sat across from me radiating nervous energy.¹ "It's me and my husband, Matthew," she began when I asked about her family. "I'm thirty-two. Oh my god, how old am I? I'm thirty-two. I'm going to be thirty-three in a week. Actually, next week. . . . Matthew and I have been together for seventeen years and married for eight soon—eight next week. And then we also have our two-point-two-five-year-old,² who is a boy and very cute."

Jackie and I met because she and Matthew had each agreed to participate in separate interviews about their household labor patterns. But I wasn't interested in the activities we typically think of as "housework." If I were, I would have tallied the minutes Jackie and Matthew each spend on action-oriented chores like cooking, cleaning, shopping, and home maintenance.³ And by that temporal measure, I would have identified *Matthew* as the primary household laborer. Jackie herself estimates he does 80 percent of such labor, though Matthew diplomatically describes his share as "a bit more" than half. He has likely accumulated more childcare hours, too: for the first eighteen months of their son's life, Matthew acted as his primary caregiver while working part-time from home.

It's worth underscoring the fact that Matthew's domestic contributions are far greater than those of most men, both past and present.⁴ And yet the metric of time spent on chores and childcare gives us an incomplete understanding of how he and Jackie work together, because it leaves out most of their *cognitive* labor. Simply put, cognitive household labor is a set of mental processes aimed at figuring out what the family requires, what it owes to others, and how best to ensure that both requirements and obligations are fulfilled. Most often, this takes the form of anticipating household members' needs, identifying options

for meeting them, deciding how to proceed, and following up after the fact. While Matthew stir-fried and vacuumed, Jackie's mind whirled: "It sounds kind of unfair to him," she apologized, before suggesting she does 90 percent of the family's cognitive labor. Matthew declined to offer a specific breakdown and instead described Jackie's cognitive load as "astronomically more" than his.

To uncover this overlooked form of work, I focused my conversations with Jackie and Matthew on their *mind-use* rather than their time-use.⁵ Before the interviews, I asked each of them to keep a diary of all the family-related decisions they made, contemplated, or debated over the course of a recent day. The log Jackie handed me that morning was among the most extensive I'd collected thus far. It contained 26 entries, ranging from how many crackers she could give her toddler without ruining his dinner to whether she should take up a second, part-time job to help make ends meet.⁶ Yet Jackie apologized for her log's brevity. Usually, she explained, her days felt like a never-ending stream of family-related decision making. "But, because I've been so crazy busy—this happens sometimes, that I actually *work* at work—you'll see chunks of time [in the log] where I'm not doing something, whereas I feel it's often every hour. I'll be like, 'Oh, I need to do this for our family.' And I don't feel like it was as often as usual."

I asked Jackie to tell me more about one of the decisions she'd listed: whether the family needed anything besides black beans from the grocery store. Jackie recalled that they'd planned to make bean burritos the previous night for dinner but realized, too late, that all the family had on hand were dry beans. "We were supposed to make beans"—that is, cook the dry beans, a lengthy process—"either on the weekend or last night, but we hadn't because we didn't have it on the [meal planning] board, and so nobody remembered." Jackie, who stopped at the store on her way home from work to pick up canned beans, approximated her train of thought while wandering the grocery aisles: "What do we need? Do we need a snack? Do we have enough snacks for the week? Do I need to buy mangos? Should I buy some bananas? I don't think my husband thinks any of that, which is funny. . . . It's the [grocery] list. The list is the list, and that is it. No more, no less. The list. The end."

Jackie's tendency to think two steps ahead was a recurrent theme as we continued discussing her decision log. Tracking household supplies? "It's always me," she noted, "unless Matthew needs his own deodorant, and then he'll buy it at a grocery store. . . . Whereas, for my deodorant, I'm like, 'Maybe we should go to Target because we also need da-da-da.'" Coming up with backup plans? When the family's washer broke, Jackie posted a query on a neighborhood forum while Matthew was troubleshooting in the basement. By the time

he emerged, defeated, she had identified three local repair companies and a neighbor willing to lend a *Consumer Reports* guide in the event they needed a new machine.

Matthew, who is also White, joined us in the cafeteria just as Jackie and I were finishing our interview. He looked the part of the graduate student he is: college T-shirt and baggy shorts, wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. Jackie headed upstairs for a meeting, leaving Matthew and me to talk while he ate leftovers from the notorious bean burritos, supplemented with fries from the cafeteria. Matthew, too, had completed a decision log for the previous day, though his contained one-third as many entries as his wife's. And as I soon discovered, Jackie had been the one to instigate several of the decisions he did record. At 3:10 p.m., for example, Matthew wrote that he was researching new lunchboxes for their toddler. How, I asked, had that come up? "There was this smell emanating [from his old lunchbox]," Matthew explained. "We tried all sorts of wipes and cleaning and maintenance and stuff, but it's just not going away. We think there's thread inside that got gunky somehow." Asked whether he and Jackie had discussed a plan for replacing the lunchbox, he recalled, "We did. And then she started doing a bunch of research on it. So, I told her to stop." He worried Jackie had too much on her mental to-do list and "wanted to take something off her plate."

When I asked Matthew to approximate his own mental list of things to do, errands to run, and issues to address, he started with professional responsibilities ("Snippets of code that I have to [write]. Readings I have to do. Labs to grade.") before naming several home improvement projects: "We'd like to buy a new couch at some point. We have some serious work to do in the backyard that just takes forever. . . . The basement is a mess." But Matthew guessed Jackie's list would be "whatever I just said, times fifty. She knows the exact steps in every single one of those things [I listed]. . . . So, like, 'Get a new bedframe.' Her list would be, 'Go here, look at their bedframes, go here, look at their bedframes, think about styles. Think about what would look good in our room.' . . . She would take it as a starting point for a web of concerns."

Matthew exaggerated, but only somewhat. Jackie's mental list went on approximately four times as long as his, including the following excerpt:

The kitchen needs to be cleaned. It's disgusting. We need a better system for cleaning the kitchen. We should make a list for how we're going to do our chores. The laundry isn't getting done quick enough. We need a better system for doing the laundry. . . . We need to clean out our son's toys

because he's been sitting with the same toys. There's literally infant toys in there. He doesn't use those anymore. . . . We should get some more age-appropriate toys for him. . . . I've been wanting to start a scrapbook thing for him forever, for the first year of his life. . . . I have three books to read about parenting, but I also want to read the three books I took [from the library] that are pleasure reading. . . . I was thinking about switching his pediatrician, having to gather all that stuff together, and interview the new pediatrician that my friend had recommended.

After hearing her list, I understood why Jackie described herself as “exhausted mentally” while Matthew fretted that she “carries a lot of load that I don't.”

I've now interviewed the members of 76 different-gender and 18 LGBTQ+⁷ couples—172 individuals total—about their cognitive labor practices.⁸ In this book, I draw on their stories to argue that our current, time-centered metrics lead us to *underestimate* gender gaps in household contributions. New insights emerge when we supplement familiar questions about how people use their time with careful attention to how they use their mind. Cognitive labor operates as a near-constant “background job”—to quote one of my interviewees—for the spouse who acts as cognitive laborer-in-chief. And among the majority of different-gender couples, including Jackie and Matthew, that chief cognitive laborer is a woman. In most of these “Woman-led” couples, the female partner *also* completes the bulk of the physical work for her family. Matthew is unusual among men in my study, because he completes a larger share of the family's physical household labor.⁹

After explaining *how* Woman-led couples divide up cognitive labor, I turn to the question of *why* their allocation is so lopsided. Most couples draw on a narrative I call “personal essentialism”: they argue that it is an individual's nature, independent of their gender, that either facilitates or inhibits their cognitive labor activities. Women, in their telling, just happen to be more organized and future-oriented; men are only coincidentally more scattered and present-focused. But this explanation does not stand up to scrutiny. Cognitive labor prowess is as much a function of learned skill as innate capacity, and I show how structural and cultural forces nudge women toward investing more in building and subsequently deploying those skills in the domestic context.

But while Woman-led couples comprise the majority of my sample, their experiences are not universal. In Balanced and Man-led couples, respectively, different-gender partners either share equally in cognitive labor or the male partner completes the majority. Meanwhile, most queer couples are Imbalanced in

their approach to cognitive labor (i.e., they divide it unequally between partners), though a handful of Balanced couples manage to split it equally. Despite these variations, what many of these couples share is a strong sense of their own agency, which they leverage to shape and reshape their cognitive labor allocation in ways that work for them. Their experiences, both positive and negative, simultaneously illustrate the challenges associated with operating against dominant social structures and the opportunities available to those willing to try.

Stalled and Uneven

Your interpretation of Jackie and Matthew's story depends on whether you focus more on the full or empty half of the proverbial glass: Do you celebrate Matthew's active fathering as a sign of progress toward gender equality? Lament Jackie's larger cognitive burden as a marker of persistent inequality? Parallel questions plague anyone who contemplates the broader state of gender relations in twenty-first-century America. For the optimists among us, encouraging statistics abound. Compared to their foremothers, today's women have considerably more education.¹⁰ They make more money.¹¹ They are better represented in the halls of power.¹² These were the trends I knew best before beginning this research. After a childhood dominated by "girl power" messaging,¹³ I came of age believing gender inequality to be more historical curiosity than persistent feature of twenty-first-century life. In fairness to my younger self, I was not wholly naive. Cultural touchstones such as Anne-Marie Slaughter's viral *Atlantic* article "Why Women Still Can't Have It All"¹⁴ and Sheryl Sandberg's bestseller *Lean In*¹⁵ came out shortly after my college graduation, drawing renewed attention to contemporary gender inequalities. Still, it wasn't until graduate school that I fully appreciated the enigma that is our current gender moment.

In historical terms, it is true American women have never had it better. But if the comparison point is contemporary men rather than prior generations of women, a different conclusion emerges. American women earn roughly 82 cents for every dollar men earn, and even less if they are Black, Native, or Hispanic.¹⁶ Women are woefully underrepresented in the upper echelons of business and politics.¹⁷ Women are more likely to be living below the poverty line.¹⁸ And women do more of the physical housework and childcare for their families, Jackie and Matthew's counterexample notwithstanding.¹⁹

This more dismal set of statistics is at odds with what many Americans say they want. Many—though certainly not all—Americans endorse gender

equality or something close to it.²⁰ And yet our practices, particularly when it comes to how we arrange our homes and families, routinely conflict with those ideals.²¹ In the early 1960s, when my mother was born, the average married woman spent nearly 34 hours per week on housework, roughly seven times as many hours as the average married man.²² By the time I was a young child three decades later, that ratio had shrunk to about 1.9, in part because men increased their hours, but mostly because women decreased theirs.²³ Thirty years after that, when my niece was born in 2022, the female-to-male housework ratio had barely budged.²⁴

Sociologist Paula England sees patterns like this one as evidence of a “stalled and uneven” gender revolution.²⁵ Stalled, because decades past the feminist victories of the 1960s and 1970s, women haven’t yet reached full equality with men; more troublingly, the rate of change has slowed, stopped, and in some cases even reversed. Uneven, because some gender gaps have closed further than others.

One interpretation of these facts is that not enough time has passed.²⁶ In the aftermath of any revolution, old behaviors are often slow to align with new ideals. Institutions like businesses, schools, and government agencies often resist change, particularly when it requires investments of time, money, and other resources.²⁷ Eventually, though, behaviors catch up with beliefs. If women haven’t yet reached parity with men, perhaps we just need to be patient.

The problem is that this story of a slow but gradual convergence of men’s and women’s fortunes doesn’t fit the data. Instead, on several key metrics we see a period of rapid change coinciding with women’s mass entry into the paid labor force, followed by a long plateau in which gender convergence trickles off or stops altogether.²⁸ This is the pattern for physical household labor: massive change in the 1960s through 1980s followed by more than three decades of relative stasis. Why did the physical housework revolution stall out? And why has the cognitive housework revolution barely started?

Doing Gender on the Second Shift

I first encountered Arlie Hochschild’s seminal book *The Second Shift* as a graduate student. Though the text was nearly thirty years old, I found myself underlining and dog-earing every other page, stunned by the way Hochschild seemed to capture both my peers’ and my parents’ household labor dynamics. Hochschild was writing in 1989, at the tail end of a major overhaul in women’s lives. In the preceding decades, women had entered the workforce in huge

numbers.²⁹ But this seismic shift in women's paid work contributions did not presage an equivalent revolution in men's housework contributions.³⁰ Instead, many women were now working the equivalent of two jobs, including the housework Hochschild famously described as their "second shift." Though I hadn't planned to study gender in graduate school, this encounter with Hochschild's work steered me onto a new path. I wanted to understand why many women were *still* working that double shift—and how the story might change if we considered forms of household labor Hochschild largely overlooked.³¹

On the former point, I was in good company: though Hochschild's study is perhaps the best-known, the question of why women do so much household labor has preoccupied hundreds of social scientists over multiple decades.³² Many have looked to economics, reasoning that a couple's domestic labor allocation is largely a function of their paid labor allocation.³³ That is, the spouse who earns more money or works longer hours for pay will do a smaller share of the chores at home. Why? Higher earnings create dependency on the part of the lower earner, which gives the primary breadwinner more power to bargain their way out of distasteful tasks. The laws of comparative advantage push spouses to specialize, which often means the higher earner's career takes priority. Finally, time spent at work is typically incompatible with time spent on physical housework or childcare: if your spouse is at the office until 8:00 p.m. most nights, they cannot help with dinner and bedtime for your toddler.³⁴

These economic theories are nominally gender-neutral. If couples are merely responding to economic incentives or logistical constraints, the identity of the breadwinner shouldn't matter. But something curious happens among the minority of different-gender couples with a woman in the chief earner role. Sociologist Veronica Tichenor put it bluntly in the subtitle of her 2005 book: "Successful wives can't buy equality." Rather, such women often do double duty as chief earner *and* chief housekeeper.³⁵ This asymmetry hints that a couple's labor allocation is not just about earnings or hours. It's also about gender. More specifically, it's about cultural beliefs regarding gender—what do we believe women and men should do for their families?—and, on a deeper level, about how those beliefs are reflected and refracted in the way individuals "do" their gender.³⁶

The idea of "doing" one's gender sounds odd to those of us accustomed to thinking of gender as a personal quality—something we *are*. But many sociologists understand gender as more akin to an activity. In this view, "woman" is not an inherent feature of who I am but rather a role I continually enact.³⁷ We each do our gender in myriad ways, ranging from how we clothe and

groom ourselves to the hobbies we pursue and the ways we communicate. Women can wrestle and men can pirouette, but doing so is socially risky. In the words of the original “doing gender” theorists, Candace West and Don Zimmerman, to do gender is to “engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment*.”³⁸ Behaving in ways that run counter to others’ understanding of our gender makes us particularly vulnerable to their judgment.

Housework—the tasks we complete, those we skip, and the ways we do so—is yet another arena for doing gender.³⁹ For women, doing gender has historically meant completing most of the physical housework and childcare tasks. For men, it has long entailed ignoring or underperforming such tasks, with the notable exception of certain “male-typed” chores like taking out the trash and tending to the lawn.⁴⁰ But missing from most studies of how we do gender via housework is a consideration of what it means to do gender in the context of *cognitive* household labor.⁴¹ And as it turns out, deeply ingrained notions of what gender means and how it should manifest shape the way we use our minds as well as our minutes.

Our Gendered Selves

Americans are famous—some might say infamous—for their individualist streak. Where other cultures emphasize family and group membership, Americans celebrate “self-made” and “self-reliant” individuals.⁴² We encourage young people to find and follow their passion or calling.⁴³ We implore one another to remain true to who we are and to surround ourselves with those who appreciate our unique quirks.⁴⁴ Though these messages seem largely positive, even banal, they have an underexplored shadow side. Popular discourse tells us our personalities and preferences are innate elements of our innermost selves. But this individualistic message obscures the role of context. In a narrow sense, we underestimate how our circumstances bring out different sides of us: delivering a lecture, I am authoritative; at dinner with friends, I’m laid-back.⁴⁵ More broadly, we overlook the ways our social location—that is, our unique combination of characteristics like gender and race and class—shapes our sense of self.

Many sociologists of gender argue that each of us has a “gendered self,” but they aren’t referring to fundamental differences in men’s and women’s psyches.⁴⁶ Rather, they’re pointing out that our understanding of who we are is shaped (largely outside our awareness) by cultural ideas about what gender means. Consider the act of choosing a career, one of many decisions where

we're encouraged to let personal passion be our guide. As sociologist Erin Cech compellingly documents in a recent book, when men and women follow this advice they tend to self-select into different jobs.⁴⁷ Women are overrepresented in the so-called "helping" fields, like nursing, teaching, and social work. Men are overrepresented in technical and mechanical fields like engineering, computer science, and the trades.⁴⁸

My best friend and her husband are a case in point. She teaches at an elementary school. He owns a car-detailing business. One could interpret their career choices as evidence of innate gender difference: women gravitate toward people (in this case, young children); men gravitate toward things (in this case, cars).⁴⁹ Indeed, 89 percent of elementary school teachers are women, and 82 percent of auto dealers are male.⁵⁰ When men and women have the freedom to choose their occupational paths, they often choose differently.

Another way to explain it, however, is that as a child my friend was celebrated for behaving in a nurturing way toward her friends and her dolls, given copious opportunities to babysit, and instructed by female elementary school teachers she saw as role models. Along the way, she developed a sense of herself as patient and caring, and she eventually identified teaching as an ideal way to make use of these gifts. Meanwhile, her husband was given toy cars to play with, encouraged when he displayed mechanical aptitude, and invited to help his father in the garage. He developed a keen sense of spatial awareness and channeled his energies into learning the ins and outs of various car models. Both my friend and her husband chose their profession, and neither, I suspect, would be happy in the other's occupational shoes. And yet their career choices were likely shaped by their gender as much as their innate personal qualities.

In other words, when we act in ways that feel instinctive, natural, or in line with who we are, we are often *also* doing gender. To be clear, I'm not arguing that personality is a myth or that there's no such thing as an authentic preference. Rather, I'm arguing that we tend to *overestimate* the effects of individual difference and *underestimate* the effects of social forces, including gender, on who we are and what we want. Nature and nurture work in concert, but our tendency is to focus too heavily on the former when it comes to explaining our personality and preferences.⁵¹

When I asked different-gender couples why they divide cognitive housework unequally, I heard the same focus on individual nature. They told me things like, "She's just way more organized," and "He's more of a go-with-the-flow guy." In other words, they argued that personality and temperament dictate one's cognitive labor role in a household. The problem is that when we

understand cognitive labor as deeply personal, an extension of *who we are* rather than merely *what we do*, its gendered nature gets obscured. Overwhelmingly, female interviewees were the ones identified as “type-A” and “the planner”—characteristics central to what I term the “Superhuman” archetype. Meanwhile, their male partners—including high-powered surgeons and meticulous project managers—were described as laid-back “Bumblers” who lacked sufficient planning skills.

In effect, my interviewees’ deft use of the Bumbler and Superhuman archetypes replaced gender essentialism with *personal* essentialism: they reframed long-standing gender stereotypes as individual differences. This meant that couples who endorsed egalitarianism ended up perpetuating inequality, all the while believing—or, at least, telling themselves—gender had little to do with their cognitive labor arrangement. Focusing on personality meant they could avoid confronting the social and cultural forces that make gender traditionalism the path of least resistance for so many. Meanwhile, couples who desired change were thwarted by their belief that it would be impossible. After all, our cultural obsession with finding and enacting one’s authentic self tells us it’s unreasonable to ask a Superhuman woman to suddenly embrace spontaneity or a Bumbler man to begin planning two steps ahead. Framing cognitive labor allocations as a function of innate qualities rather than learned skills helped trap couples in patterns misaligned with their ideals.

“Just on My List for Now”

Among most couples I spoke with, cognitive labor inequality was narrated as an inevitable consequence of personality difference. But a notable minority broke from this mold. Roughly one-fifth of the different-gender couples I interviewed were Balanced (i.e., each partner carried a roughly equal cognitive load) or Man-led (i.e., the male partner took on more of the cognitive labor). Among the LGBTQ+ interviewees, whom I shorthand as “queer couples” throughout the book, cognitive labor inequality was the norm; I refer to these couples as “Imbalanced.” However, that inequality was quantitatively and qualitatively different than the inequality I observed among Woman-led couples like Jackie and Matthew. Together, the queer and nontraditional different-gender couples highlight alternate ways of understanding the relationships among gender, self, and cognitive labor.

Whitney, a Latina woman who works in sales, chuckled while recalling her father singling out his daughters for domestic chores. “Go help your mom

with the dishes,” he would say. “You know, like, ‘Girls, go do that.’” In response, Whitney remembered telling him, “‘My husband will wash the dishes for me. I’m not washing the dishes.’ I guess I’ve always been a bit rebellious against that perception [that housework was women’s work].” The dish-washing husband never materialized; instead, Whitney married Vanessa, a cheerful woman who gestures emphatically as she speaks. “It’s a big benefit to be a queer couple,” Vanessa, who is White, asserted. “There just isn’t an established role, at least for us. . . . So any chore, or any household thing, it’s a conversation.” Whitney offered a similar sentiment:

We’re very equal partners, I would say. We don’t have that sort of expectation where there’s, this, like, “Well, you’re just automatically going to do this. And I’m automatically gonna do that.” I think part of that . . . [is] the fact that we’re both women, though. So it has to be a little bit more deliberate for us. But I would say it’s easy for one of us to feel lazy and let the other one do it, no matter what gender we are. And we purposefully try not to do it that way.

Whitney and Vanessa’s strong mutual commitment to equality did not translate into a 50/50 labor allocation. Both spouses agreed that Vanessa completes more of the cognitive labor for their family, which at the time of our interviews included one toddler and a baby on the way.⁵² “I’m the planner of the two of us,” Vanessa, a communications manager, explained. “I’m the one who schedules appointments, calls doctors, does all our insurance stuff, is always thinking about that kind of stuff. Whitney wouldn’t go to the dentist if I didn’t schedule her.” Whitney concurred: “[Vanessa] is the admin of our home for sure.”

Vanessa may be the household’s primary cognitive laborer, but Whitney and Vanessa are not simply a same-gender version of Jackie and Matthew. Both women referenced traditional gender archetypes, even as their labor patterns simultaneously scrambled them. Vanessa described Whitney as “such a mom, in that she thinks about every little thing [with our son], and she’s anxious about it all the time.” Whitney complained that in the early days of parenthood, Vanessa acted “like a scared new dad” awaiting Whitney’s parenting instructions. Why, then, was “scared new dad” Vanessa the one managing their toddler’s diet, scheduling his pediatrician appointments, and coordinating the childcare schedule? When I posed a version of this question to Vanessa, she paused for a minute before venturing a guess: “[Whitney is] the moment-to-moment stuff, and she’s the very long-term. Whitney’s not, like, ‘I’m thinking ahead to next week,’ or even three months out. She’s either, like, ‘[Our son’s]

future’ and ‘His career path’ and ‘His education,’ or ‘What coat is he wearing right now?’”

Like Whitney and Vanessa, most of the queer couples I interviewed were Imbalanced—that is, they divide cognitive labor unequally, defying the simplistic stereotype of queer couples as egalitarian.⁵³ But Imbalanced queer couples’ version of cognitive inequality differed markedly from that of their different-gender peers. Queer respondents cited individual personality to explain their division, yet they rarely described personas that mapped neatly onto the Superhuman and Bumbler archetypes I observed among different-gender couples. Vanessa’s suggestion that Whitney attended to the immediate present and the far future, while Vanessa handled most of the in-between, was unique to this pair, but my conversations with queer couples revealed a wide range of similarly idiosyncratic explanations.

Queer and nontraditional different-gender couples alike also evinced a more flexible understanding of the relationship between their cognitive labor allocation and their innate selves. “We’re not super stuck in our ways, in that we have to be rigid,” explained Whitney. “We’re quick to pivot if we need to.” Asked to explain why she is the one responsible for certain household tasks, Vanessa concluded, “It’s a combination of things I’m just stronger at, [things] I actually like doing, and things that are just on my list for now.” The belief that a cognitive labor arrangement could be informed, but not dictated, by perceived personality differences did not ensure perfect equality. This belief did, however, seem to help partners like Vanessa and Whitney find a mutually satisfying equilibrium.

Collecting the Data

In the pages to come, I draw from the stories of 172 parents representing 94 distinct couples. Across countless kitchen, café, and office tables, they opened up about the big and the small stuff of their lives. The earliest interviews took place in the summer of 2017, after I put out a call for college-educated, different-gender couples parenting young children. The transition to parenthood is often accompanied by an increased household labor load and a more gender-traditional division of that labor.⁵⁴ I was curious to see how these changes would play out in the cognitive labor sphere, among a demographic group (i.e., the highly educated) known for their strong endorsement of gender-egalitarian ideals.⁵⁵ But I later wondered whether the cognitive labor patterns I’d observed so far were an “upper-middle-class thing”: to what extent did they

generalize beyond a very narrow, privileged slice of the population? Thus, in late 2019 I returned to the field for a second round of interviews, this time with different-gender couples from a wider range of educational and occupational backgrounds. Finally, in 2022 I conducted a third round of interviews with LGBTQ+ parents. I wanted to understand how cognitive labor operated outside the context of a different-gender relationship: Was there greater equality? Did couples use different logic to explain their arrangements?

The individuals who ultimately shared their stories with me were, by many measures, a diverse bunch. Some were in their twenties, others in their fifties. Some lived in the center of a major city, others on the periphery of a sleepy suburban town. They labored as construction workers, carpenters, doctors, and dietitians (to name but a few occupations), or they served as full-time caregivers for their children.

Still, they are by no means a representative sample of the U.S. population, and my results thus cannot showcase the full range of behaviors, beliefs, and circumstances that shape American families' cognitive labor dynamics. By design, all of my interviewees are parents; the majority are also legally married and reside in one of two East Coast states (New Jersey and Massachusetts).⁵⁶ As a group, they trend affluent (with a median household income of \$155,000), though I spoke with couples occupying many distinct rungs on the class ladder.⁵⁷ At one end, Valerie and her partner Joe, neither of whom finished college, were barely scraping by on an annual income of \$21,000; at the other, Kara and Joel, who both held graduate degrees, lived very comfortably on more than \$300,000. I expected to find significant differences in the cognitive labor patterns of couples like these, given prior research on class differences in household labor allocation and gender ideology.⁵⁸ Indeed, my analysis turned up some variations, particularly in the way interviewees of different social classes talked about gender. However, these cross-class differences were minor compared to the overwhelming similarities I observed among couples across the socioeconomic spectrum. Thus, I have opted to describe class differences where relevant but have not made it a primary focus of my analysis.

My sample is also overwhelmingly White (84 percent) and U.S.-born (88 percent), an important limitation given the growing body of research showing how gender operates differently across races, ethnicities, and immigrant statuses.⁵⁹ Because I spoke with so few members of specific groups other than White, U.S.-born individuals, I cannot confidently speak to the question of how cognitive labor patterns vary across these dimensions, and my results should not be interpreted as a universal norm.⁶⁰ I describe any differences

I did observe as hypotheses to be explored in future research rather than definitive conclusions.

Once I figured out *whom* to interview, my next challenge was figuring out *how* to interview them. My working assumption was that cognitive labor would be an unfamiliar concept, one that many respondents had not named for themselves, let alone found a way to communicate to a stranger. So, I developed a tool I hoped would help make the invisible visible to both interviewer and interviewee. I emailed each participant a “decision diary” a few days before we were scheduled to meet and asked them to complete it ahead of their interview. This diary was modeled after the time diaries popular in traditional studies of housework, in which participants keep a minute-by-minute log of their activities.⁶¹ But rather than their actions, I asked my respondents to keep track of all the family-related *decisions* they made or contemplated over a twenty-four-hour period.

When we sat down together—most often in their home, sometimes in a library or coffee shop, and occasionally in an office cafeteria or break room—the diaries my interviewees kept provided ample fodder for the first half of our conversation. Some of the decisions participants recorded were mundane (“decided to order takeout for dinner”) and others monumental (“decided to place an offer on a house”). I peppered them with questions about both. Later, we transitioned into a discussion of more abstract topics, such as how they make joint decisions with their spouse and what portion of the physical and cognitive household labor they each complete.

Because I required both partners to participate in separate interviews, I was able to directly compare the way they talked about similar events. Though many participants half-jokingly asked if I could tell them what their partner said, I always demurred. Even if I had shared, they might have been disappointed. Few partners directly contradicted one another, perhaps because they knew I would also be speaking with their spouse. Still, the details they shared or omitted offered important clues as to what role the interviewee had played in any given interaction.

My second and third rounds of interviews resembled the first, albeit with tweaks to the protocol that reflected my evolving understanding of the issues. For example, I added detailed questions about participants’ backstory (i.e., their upbringing, career trajectory, and relationship history) in hopes of understanding the pathways that led them to their present (in)equality. I also replaced the decision diaries with a deck of cards printed with cognitive and physical household tasks.⁶² Participants sorted the cards into piles based on

who typically handles each task in their household and explained their reasoning aloud during and after the exercise. Finally, I relaxed the requirement that both partners participate in the study, lest I inadvertently screen out unhappy couples. I strongly encouraged dual participation, however, and in most cases (roughly 80 percent) was still able to interview both members of each couple. Readers interested in the finer points of my study design will find considerably more detail in the appendix.

Organization of the Book

Our story begins in chapter 1 with an abridged history of activists' and scholars' attempts to define and study household labor. For good reason, researchers in this field have primarily looked to the clock to assess and compare household contributions. But this focus on time has an unfortunate side effect: it shrinks the experience of household labor down to its most visible components and leaves out large swaths of the work that goes into maintaining a household and raising children. I suggest we supplement familiar time-use metrics with attention to "mind-use" and introduce cognitive labor as the key component of this dimension of household life.

Chapters 2–4 center the Woman-led couples who comprise the majority of my interviewees. In chapter 2, I show why current, time-based estimates likely understate gender gaps in household labor. The fathers I interviewed are a far cry from the distant dads lampooned in popular media and lamented in earlier eras of social science research.⁶³ Most are heavily involved in family decision making, and many devote considerable time to chores and childcare. But it is primarily women whose minds are disproportionately dedicated to household affairs. Women in different-gender couples do more cognitive work overall and are particularly likely to take on the most burdensome aspects of this labor.

Puzzlingly, this inequality persists even though most respondents in Woman-led couples expressed a desire for an equal (or equal-ish) cognitive labor allocation. Yet as I document in chapter 3, this apparent contradiction between ideal and reality rarely translated into sustained efforts to change. This disconnect was possible because most couples recast gendered inequalities as personal quirks. As one respondent explained, "It's not a gender thing, it's a *me* thing." This "personal essentialist" narrative alleviated the pressure couples might otherwise feel to live up to their egalitarian ideals. It also discouraged reallocation—it is difficult, and perhaps unkind, to ask one's partner to become someone they are not—even as it helped minimize spousal conflict.

Contrary to the personality-based explanations favored by my interviewees, I argue in chapter 4 that successful completion of cognitive labor depends as much on one's skills and capacities as on innate traits. The catch is that men and women in Woman-led couples *invest* differently in building relevant skills and, even in areas where they have similar abilities, they *deploy* them differently between their paid work and home. The skills men bring to their employment, for instance, are frequently overlooked in the domestic context. I show how these twin processes of gendered investment and deployment are driven as much by social forces, such as norms that hold women more accountable for domestic outcomes, as by individual choices. But regardless of their origins, these skill-related patterns end up creating and sustaining the perceived personality differences they are said to merely reflect.

Is this gendered division of cognitive labor inevitable? In the final two chapters, I turn away from Woman-led couples like Jackie and Matthew to explore alternative ways of understanding and allocating cognitive labor. In chapter 5, I describe the small subset of different-gender couples who have a Balanced or Man-led division. Their diverse experiences, not all of them positive, reveal both the promise and the peril of operating outside the status quo. The most satisfied of these nontraditional couples perceive a match between who they are and what their circumstances demand of them, and they view themselves as active agents in the design of their cognitive labor arrangements.

Meanwhile, the labels "Man-led" and "Woman-led" make little sense when applied to queer couples like Vanessa and Whitney, whose experiences I document in chapter 6. Instead, I describe these couples as Balanced or Imbalanced depending on their cognitive labor allocation. The majority fell into the latter camp. Yet both the magnitude of their cognitive inequality and the ways they made sense of it set them apart from most Woman-led couples. For one, queer couples tended to be more cognizant of their labor patterns and to grapple with them jointly rather than individually. For another, though queer respondents frequently cited personality to explain their cognitive labor allocation, they rarely described "selves" that mapped onto existing gender stereotypes. These couples were not, however, uniformly untroubled by cognitive labor-related conflict or dissatisfaction, and the sources of their struggles help bring the obstacles to greater equality into stark relief.

Building on these insights, I conclude with a vision for an expanded sociology of household labor that places as much emphasis on mind-use as time-use. Though the associated measurement challenges are formidable, the payoff will be worthwhile. Understanding gender inequality in the twenty-first century

depends on our ability to track subtle distinctions in men's and women's experiences of household life, as well as the evolving narratives that sustain those distinctions. To move beyond the status quo, we will need to do more than exhort women to lean in at work and men to step up at home. I close the book with a series of recommendations for actors ranging from policymakers to institutions to couples. Change is possible. But achieving it will require us to rethink deeply entrenched assumptions about who we are and who we might yet become.

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