“Do You Think That I Should Care?”

Measuring Social Expectations About Cognitive Labor in Household Contexts

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Abstract

Social expectations underlay women’s persisting higher burdens in the private sphere. Yet, previous quantitative evidence is mostly limited to expectations about the allocation of physical labor, leaving out social expectations governing the allocation of cognitive labor in households. We outline a factorial survey experiment to measure gendered expectations about the division of cognitive household labor. Therein, we differentiate between prescriptive beliefs (how cognitive labor should be allocated) and descriptive beliefs (how most couples allocate cognitive labor) and allow for heterogeneity across dimensions and domains. Presenting the vignettes to 163 German B.A. students in 2020 reveals descriptive expectations of women shouldering greater cognitive labor than men, especially in the dimensions of anticipating household tasks and monitoring their completion, as well as in the domains of scheduling, childcare, and food. Prescriptive beliefs indicate that especially decisions in households should be made together. As the surveyed students overwhelmingly subscribe to gender egalitarianism, the found gendered expectations about cognitive labor are likely more pronounced in the general population. We aim to conduct a representative survey to improve our measure of expectations about the allocation of cognitive labor and thereby broadening our understanding of why women shoulder a greater burden in cognitive labor in household contexts.

Keywords: Cognitive labor, gender, social expectations, beliefs, mental load

Introduction and Theoretical Background

Even though the participation of women in the labor market has increased tremendously over the last decades, women still shoulder the primary share of housework and care work (for the German context see [Samtleben, 2019](#); [Hobler et al., 2017](#)). While the current literature mainly

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focuses on the allocation of physical labor in households – namely, who carries out which tasks or contributes the greater share of time – the cognitive dimension has often been left out.

The limited evidence on cognitive labor indicates that its allocation is gendered as well. Household-related cognitive labor can be defined as thinking work which serves a family/household-care function and can be performed separately from physical task completion (Robertson et al., 2019).¹ In contrast to physical labor, cognitive labor is rather invisible, can be carried over into the workplace, and is never fully completed (Dean et al., 2021). Daminger (2019) conducted interviews with American couples which revealed that decision-making was rather collaborative, whereas women did more cognitive labor especially with respect to anticipation and monitoring family needs (see also Grether, 2018). Quantitative evidence indicates that women burden a higher load in family-related cognitive labor by Ahn et al. (2017) revealing that women more often than men remind their partners about outstanding tasks and by employing experience sampling methods in which American respondents stated “What was on their mind” at random time points during the day (Offer, 2014). Gender disparities in cognitive labor vary also by domain, with women leading cognitive labor related to scheduling, child care, and cooking, and men managing finances and home maintenance related activities (Daming, 2019). This finding not only mirrors the gender segregation in time-use (Blair and Lichter, 1991; Quadlin and Doan, 2018), but rather expands on this as not only the time-use is unequal but also the activities’ cognitive burden. Moreover, even couples seeking an egalitarian division of labor maintain a gendered allocation of responsibilities (Daming, 2020) that often continues after union dissolution (Luthra and Haux, 2022).

So why is cognitive labor in the household context more often carried out by women? Aside from time availability or relative resource theories, a perspective of gendered expectations, their internalization, and role performance has been proposed to explain the allocation of physical household labor (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Berk, 1985; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Accordingly large-scale surveys incorporated questions on respective societal attitudes and norms, which generated wide empirical support of gendered expectations accounting for women’s per-

¹This phenomenon has been described by various terms (e.g., “management of domestic life” (Hochschild, 1989) or “mental labor” (Offer, 2014)). We distinguish it from employment-related thoughts spilling-over into the domestic domain (Offer, 2014), emotional labor to maintain relationships (Horne and Johnson, 2019) or meta-parenting (Holden and Hawk, 2003).

sisting high shares of housework and care work (e.g. [Treas and Tai, 2016](#); [Nitsche and Grunow, 2016](#); [Bittman et al., 2003](#)). By contrast, empirical evidence on social expectations with respect to cognitive labor is scarce. Previous studies invoke, for instance, research on trends of social attitudes, qualitative interviews about felt social expectations, and policies indicating social norms to explain the gendered allocation of cognitive labor (e.g. [Christopher, 2020](#); [Offer, 2014](#)). However, social expectations are thereby only indirectly or implicitly assessed. Only a few exceptions aim at measuring social expectations for cognitive labor directly. For instance, [Ahn et al. \(2017\)](#) demonstrate that men are expected to do less mnemonic work and [Thébaud et al. \(2021\)](#) employ a vignette-study design on perceptions of a room’s tidiness to show that women are held to higher standards of cleanliness than men; in response, women might identify the need for cleaning earlier than men. Yet, we lack a comprehensive picture of social expectations of cognitive household labor across different domains and dimensions.

Hence, our project aims at filling this gap by asking to what extent social expectations ascribe cognitive labor in households to women and men. Therein, we distinguish between prescriptive beliefs (“how cognitive labor *should* be allocated”) and descriptive beliefs (“how *do most other people* allocate cognitive labor”) because descriptive beliefs serve as a point of reference ([Bicchieri, 2017](#)) and thereby affect the realization of prescriptive beliefs ([Thébaud and Pedulla, 2016](#)). Revealing social expectations that govern the gendered allocation of cognitive labor helps to understand its sociological, psychological and economic effects ([Ciciolla and Luthar, 2019](#); [Offer, 2014](#)), which have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic ([Czymara et al., 2020](#)). It also speaks to the public debate around women’s cognitive burden, which is divided in proposing either to individually cope with the burden or questioning the gendered allocation ([Cammarata, 2020](#); [Rodsky, 2019](#)).

Building on previous qualitative and conceptual work, we formulate expectations that guide our quantitative exploration of gendered social expectations on cognitive labor. In accordance to indications of women’s greater cognitive burdens in household contexts, we anticipate that prescriptive and particularly descriptive expectations ascribe household-related cognitive labor more often to women than to men. Second, cognitive labor can be divided across the three dimensions of (1) anticipating and identifying household tasks, (2) deciding among options, and (3) monitoring whether household needs were sufficiently addressed (cf. [Daminger, 2019](#);

Robertson et al., 2019). These differ in their visibility and possibility to exercise influence, with anticipation and monitoring being invisible and providing few opportunities to exert influence while deciding lies at the opposite extreme (Daminger, 2019). The invisibility and low influence of anticipation and monitoring leave them more vulnerable to essentialist beliefs of divergent skills ascribing household labor to women. In contrast, decision-making is more visible and can be expected to be guided by an egalitarian ideal, even though, in reality, it is often carried out by women as well (Daminger, 2019). Thus, we expect that gendered ascription of cognitive labor to women is less pronounced for decisions about household labor and more evident for the dimensions of anticipation or monitoring. Another moderation of the gendered allocation is expected across domains. As household domains are sex-typed (Blair and Lichter, 1991; Quadlin and Doan, 2018), we expect an alignment of who is doing the physical labor and who is expected to do the cognitive labor within the same domain (Daminger, 2019).

Factorial Survey Experiment

We propose to measure gendered social expectations about cognitive labor in an experimental factorial design. Therein, respondents evaluate verbal descriptions of fictitious situations (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). These vignettes vary in so-called factors and a set of vignettes is randomly assigned to respondents. We choose this design for two reasons. First, as cognitive labor itself is an abstract concept and vague to oneself and others, asking respondents directly about their expectations on the division of cognitive labor seems infeasible. The topic “cognitive labor” is also relatively new in the public debate and respondents might not be familiar with the terminology. Factorial survey experiments bypass this problem by describing concrete situations which can be evaluated without further knowledge on the topic. Second, the randomization of multidimensional factors diminishes the problem of social desirability, as in a mixed design, respondents do not directly compare two levels of a factor against each other. A factorial survey design can combine the internal validity of experimental studies with the external validity of representative survey samples (Atzmüller and Steiner, 2010).

We include three factors which vary across the vignettes (Table 1). First, we distinguish three *dimensions* of cognitive labor: (1) anticipating and identifying, (2) deciding, (3) monitoring

Table 1: Proposed Vignette Factors and Levels

	Factor	Level
1	Dimension	Anticipating Deciding Monitoring
2	Domain	Maintenance Scheduling Cleaning Food Child care
3	Allocation	Female Male Both (only deciding-dimension)

and instructing (cf. [Daminger, 2019](#); [Robertson et al., 2019](#)). Second, household labor occurs across several *domains* and according tasks vary by to what extent they are ascribed to each gender based on perceived skills ([Coltrane, 2000](#)). Following previous research, we obtain five levels of domains (1) maintenance, (2) scheduling, (3) cleaning, (4) food, and (5) child care (cf. [Coltrane, 2000](#); [Blair and Lichter, 1991](#); [Robertson et al., 2019](#)). As our main interest is the social ascription of cognitive labor to each gender, we select tasks that occur with medium frequency to hold tasks’ regularity constant (avoiding daily or irregular tasks such as dish-washing or buying a car). In our first assessment, we selected the following domain-specific situations: changing the internet provider, scheduling a dinner with friends, throwing out used glass, writing a list for grocery shopping, and a child wants to sleepover at a friend’s house. Finally, the factor *allocation* allows to assess gendered expectations. It distinguishes whether dimension- and domain-specific cognitive labor is carried out either by (1) a woman, (2) a man, or (3) both partners, with the latter only applying to the dimension “deciding”. The levels are incorporated within the vignettes by employing gender-specific names (Julia as the woman, Christian as the man), which were the most popular names of Germans born in 1980 (www.beliebte-vornamen.de/jahrgang/j1980). All vignettes only describe cognitive tasks, which are independent of who actually carries out physical tasks.²

A preamble introduces all vignettes (see Figure [A.1](#) in the Appendix), which states that daily

²For instance, anticipating that groceries are needed for the upcoming week is independent of who shops them. However, we are aware of the fact that such independence is hard to achieve in the case of monitoring, in which reminding a partner of an outstanding task likely implies that the partner is responsible for it. As we cannot bypass this problem, we will take that into account in interpreting potential results.

situations of a married couple named Müller should be evaluated, with them living together and working to the same extent.³ Prescriptive as well as descriptive beliefs governing cognitive labor in households captured by asking respondents about perceptions of fair and of how common the allocation of cognitive labor in the described vignettes are. Both beliefs are measured on 7-point scales. An exemplary vignette for the domain “Food” and the dimension “Anticipation” is provided in Figure 1 (all vignettes are listed in Table A.1 in the Appendix).

Figure 1: Example Vignette of the Domain “Food” and the Dimension “Anticipation” (translated from German)

Every two weeks the Müller family does their bulk shopping. *Julia* remembers to write the items to be purchased on the shopping list.

How fair is the described role allocation?

completely unfair							completely fair
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

In which share of families do you think is the described role allocation common?

in none			in half			in all
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Current Study

A first test of the outlined factorial survey has been carried out with B.A. students of Social Sciences of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The participants were recruited from a mandatory statistics course with a main audience of first-year students. An online survey was implemented in the software Unipark and 163 respondents participated between November, 29th and December, 5th 2020. 63 percent of the respondent identified as female, 32 percent as male, and 5 percent as non-binary. On average, the respondents were 20 years old (S.D. of 4.2) and the

³We chose this fictive family for two reasons. First, they are married, live together and named Müller because this is the most common living arrangement of couples and the most common family name in Germany, thus representing a likely point of reference for beliefs. Second, both spouses work to the same extent ensures that beliefs about allocations of paid labor does not affect beliefs about responsibilities in the household. Stating that both spouses work prompts a rather gender-egalitarian expression of the couple and potentially more pronounced expectation about gendered allocations of cognitive labor could be expected for couples with rather traditional roles.

median interview duration of was 2.7 minutes (interquartilsrange: 2 to 3.7).

Combining all factors spans $(3 \times 5 \times 2 + 5)$ 35 vignettes, which is too many to be judged by each respondent. Therefore, we partition the full vignette-population in 7 decks with each 5 vignettes. We ensure that each deck encompasses at least each level once and that each level occurs with about equal frequency within a set.⁴ Though set-effects may compromise the identification of interaction-terms (Atzmüller and Steiner, 2010), this is diminished by generating sets randomly within the mentioned constraints, ordering vignettes randomly for each respondent, and randomly assigning sets across respondents.

Multiple regression models with prescriptive and descriptive vignette evaluations as the dependent variable and the levels of all three factors as independent variables allow us to assess gendered beliefs about cognitive labor in the household. The clustering of five vignette evaluations per respondent and several respondents per vignette deck is accounted for by respondent-level clustered standard errors and by fixed deck-effects.

Results

Though we only surveyed a particular population, the student sample provided valuable insights. Figure 2 reveals that prescriptive beliefs do not specify gendered allocation of cognitive labor in households. Rather situations in which both partners carried cognitive labor were evaluated as most fair, although this finding is limited to the dimension of decision making. The strong support for shared cognitive labor and the lack of gendered prescriptive beliefs is in line with growing support for egalitarian gender ideals that are overwhelmingly supported among the surveyed students (see Figure A.2 in the Appendix).

The average descriptive beliefs, about how common the allocations of cognitive labor described in the vignettes are, are in line with our expectation. The surveyed students expect that women more often shoulder household-related cognitive labor, which reveals an awareness about the existing gendered allocation that has been found in previous qualitative and quantitative studies.

Turning to the moderation by dimensions in Figure 3 highlights again prescriptive beliefs

⁴This results into a mixed-design with main effects being identified at the respondent-level and interaction-effects being only estimable across respondents.

Figure 2: Predicted Prescriptive and Descriptive Beliefs by Factor Allocation

N=789; clustered SE at respondent-level (N=163); 95% confidence intervals shown

that decisions in household context should be made by both partners, yet, students do not expect that this is actually more common than men or women deciding on themselves (see right panel). By contrast, the less visible and salient cognitive processes of anticipating household

Figure 3: Marginal Effects for Prescriptive and Descriptive Beliefs by Factor Allocation across Dimensions

N=789; clustered SE at respondent-level (N=163); 95% confidence intervals shown

tasks and monitoring their completeness are expected to be carried out more often by women than men. The only unexpected finding is that vignettes are evaluated as more fair if men anticipated household labor. Again, this could be based on the surveyed social science students overwhelmingly subscribing to egalitarian ideals and expecting men to catch up in anticipating household labor (see Figure A.2 in the Appendix). This could also underlay women reminding their partners being evaluated as fair.

Finally, we observe little variation in prescriptive beliefs with respect to the domain (Figure 4). Only in the case of child care, the otherwise widespread support for a shared allocation of cognitive labor vanishes, which might be due to the specific situation described in the vignette (deciding whether the child can have a sleep-over at a friend's house). In open responses, the students also raised that the decision on who throws out used glass seems too trivial, which could account for why students do not believe that this is commonly decided by both. Aside from this, the descriptive beliefs align with previous findings of the gendered allocation physical labor across domains.

Figure 4: Marginal Effects for Prescriptive and Descriptive Beliefs by Factor Allocation across Domains

N=789; clustered SE at respondent-level (N=163); 95% confidence intervals shown

Discussion

Our goal is to measure social expectations about cognitive labor in household contexts. Therefore, we outlined a factorial survey experiment that builds on previous qualitative and conceptual work (especially [Daminger, 2019](#)). The design allows measuring to what extent prescriptive and descriptive beliefs ascribe cognitive labor to women and men, as well as heterogeneity across dimensions and domains. Presenting the vignettes to 163 German B.A. students of social sciences in 2020 reveals descriptive expectations of women shouldering more cognitive labor than men, especially in the dimensions of anticipating household tasks and monitoring their completion, as well as in the domains of scheduling, childcare, and food. Prescriptive beliefs indicate that especially decisions in households should be made together.

Self-evidently, this first assessment of our outlined vignette study comes with some limitations. First, the student sample is not representative and does not allow an inference of general gendered expectations about cognitive labor in households. Due to their young age, they might less often have to negotiate the allocation of cognitive labor in long-term relationships, thus, they could be more strongly guided by idealistic expectations. Additionally, the surveyed students overwhelmingly support gender egalitarianism (see [Figure A.2](#) in the Appendix), rendering them a least likely case for holding gendered expectations with respect to cognitive labor. As we still find evidence, particularly for gendered descriptive beliefs, one can expect an even more pronounced ascription of cognitive labor to women in representative samples of Germany’s population.

Second, students’ feedback indicated that a fairness evaluation seems difficult when no further context information is provided. On the one hand, this could explain why we found less support for our expectations with respect to prescriptive beliefs. On the other hand, this raises doubts about the obtained results on prescriptive beliefs, which should be interpreted with caution. For future surveys we plan to adjust the wording by stating a prescriptive belief about the allocation of cognitive labor in the vignette itself and surveying agreement towards it. Therein, one could also conduct a split ballot design of randomly assigning whether a respondent evaluates prescriptive or descriptive beliefs to eliminate potential anchor effects.

Third, our results might be influenced by our selection of specific situations that were de-

scribed in the vignettes (see all of them in Table A.1 in the Appendix). Although the findings are interesting in themselves for our exemplary cases, further situations might be evaluated differently and could be more indicative for expectations about who should burden associated cognitive labor. Moreover, we selected situations with a moderate frequency to aim for greater comparability across domains. Yet, cognitive labor associated with high-frequency tasks, such as cooking or cleaning, might be especially gendered correspondingly to the strong gender disparity in who carries them out (Coltrane, 2000; Quadlin and Doan, 2018).

Revealing gendered social expectations about cognitive labor concerning household labor points towards why the allocation of cognitive labor is gendered and helps to understand its sociological, psychological, and economic effects (Ciciolla and Luthar, 2019; Offer, 2014) that have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Czymara et al., 2020). For example, if societal expectations about the division of cognitive labor translate into the actual division of cognitive labor, the resulting higher cognitive burden for women likely causes greater stress levels and sleep deprivation and impairs their mental and physical health (for an overview see Dean et al., 2021). Making societal norms visible is a first step towards creating awareness of the expected unequal distribution and leading to a more gender-equal distribution. Yet, only a representative sample for the average population allows us to assess social expectations about cognitive labor in greater detail. We aim to incorporate the proposed adjustments to conduct a survey on a representative sample within Germany.

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Appendix

Figure A.1: Preamble for all Vignettes (translated from German)

In the following, we are interested in your assessment of couples' distribution of roles in the household. Therefore, imagine the Müller family. Julia and Christian live together, are married and both are employed to the same extent.

You will be asked about five different scenarios, each describing a situation coming up in their daily life. Some situations mention that the couple has a child. In these cases, you should assume that both partners are involved in child care.

We are really only interested in knowing how you feel about the behavior of the individuals. There are no right or wrong answers.

Table A.1: List of All Vignettes Across Domains, Dimensions and Allocations

Domain	Dimension	Text (levels of allocation in italic)
Cleaning	Introduction	The box in which the Müller family collects their used glass is full.
	Anticipation	<i>Julia/Christian</i> notices that the box needs to be emptied. <i>She/He</i> wants to ask in the evening who of them can take the glass away this weekend.
	Deciding	<i>Julia/Christian</i> decides that <i>she/he</i> will take the glass away this weekend. <i>They</i> decide together that they will take turns taking the glass away on the weekends.
	Monitoring	Before <i>Christian/Julia</i> leaves the house, <i>Julia/Christian</i> reminds <i>him/her</i> that the used glass has to be taken away.
Scheduling	Introduction	Good friends invite Julia and Christian for dinner.
	Anticipation	<i>Julia/Christian</i> has the schedule in mind and knows that they have time to go to the dinner. Therefore, <i>she/he</i> suggests accepting the invitation.
	Deciding	<i>Julia/Christian/They</i> decide (together) they will go to the dinner and accept the dinner invitation.
	Monitoring	When <i>Christian/Julia</i> leaves the house in the morning, <i>Julia/Christian</i> reminds <i>him/her</i> that they have an invitation this evening.
Child care	Introduction	Their daughter Emma is 10 years old and wants to sleep over at a school friend's house on the weekend.
	Anticipation	<i>Julia/Christian</i> remembers that there is still a bag to be packed with Emma's overnight things.
	Deciding	<i>Julia/Christian/They</i> decide (together) to allow Emma to stay overnight at her friend's house.
	Monitoring	<i>Julia/Christian</i> reminds Emma to take her overnight bag, before Emma leaves the house.
Food	Introduction	Every two weeks the Müller family does their bulk shopping.
	Anticipation	<i>Julia/Christian</i> remembers to write the things to be purchased on the shopping list.
	Deciding	<i>Julia/Christian/They</i> decide (together) what to write on the shopping list for the next purchase.
	Monitoring	Before they go shopping, <i>Julia/Christian</i> reminds <i>Christian/Julia</i> to check the shopping list for completeness.
Maintenance	Introduction	Soon the notice period for the Internet provider expires.
	Anticipation	<i>Julia/Christian</i> thinks about the deadline and address a possible provider change.
	Deciding	<i>Julia/Christian/They</i> decide (together) to change providers.
	Monitoring	The day before the cancellation period expires, <i>Julia/Christian</i> reminds <i>Christian/Julia</i> to change the contract.

Figure A.2: Responses to Items of Gender Ideologies