Striving towards equal partnerships: Church-going couples and the division of household-related mental labour

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Abstract

This article explores the role of men and women's attitudes and practices in the creation of a form of egalitarian heterosexuality among New Zealand Protestant church-going couples who self-identify as egalitarian. It draws on thematic analysis of in-depth interview with 18 couples who were recruited from Protestant churches and Christian-based tertiary institutions across different regions of New Zealand. 'Doing religion' and 'doing gender' are conceptual lenses used to analyse what facilitates and what constrains the participant couples' equal sharing of household-related mental labour. The extent to which the couples equally share household-related mental labour is an important aspect of power-sharing within a partnership. Findings reveal that while some male participants drew upon patriarchal Christian beliefs to sustain relationship inequality, others challenged prevailing household labour patterns by drawing on theological convictions that resist hegemonic masculine ideals. Thus, investigating their underpinning theological beliefs allows us to better understand people's lived experiences of trying to achieve gender equality.

Keywords Egalitarian; Gender; Couples; Mental labour; Equality; Masculinity; Religion; Theology; Protestantism

Introduction

This article emerges from a qualitative inquiry I conducted into the lived experiences of church-going couples who self-identify as egalitarian and attend Protestant churches in New Zealand. This transdisciplinary research brought together sociology, family studies, gender studies, religious studies, and feminist theology to investigate ways in which the heterosexual couples who identify as egalitarian understand and experience the facilitators of, and barriers to, gender equality in their partnerships. Focusing on the Protestant tradition allows for an investigation into the distinct experiences of couples claiming to pursue relationships based on equality whilst negotiating

Protestant contexts known for their androcentric, sexist structures (Bons-Storm, 1996; S. K. Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Graham, 1999; Miller-McLemore, 2011; Porter, 2004; Storkey, 2015). Although gender inequality in heterosexual partnerships has received enormous scrutiny (Benton-Greig et al., 2018; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Karakurt & Cumbie, 2012; Kornrich et al., 2013; Nash, 2006; Storkey, 2015), we still do not know enough about men's and women's contributions to egalitarian heterosexual coupledom (L. J. Gallagher, 2019; Karakurt & Cumbie, 2012; King & King, 1993; Kornrich et al., 2013; Schwartz, 1994). In particular, we do not know enough about the egalitarian attitudes and practices of men and women affiliated with the Christian tradition, a group renowned for holding traditional attitudes towards the gendered division of labour (Aune, 2006; Bartkowski, 2001; Colaner, 2009; Denton, 2004; S. K. Gallagher, 2004; Whitehead, 2012). My research focused on one aspect of household-related labour frequently negotiated within the participant couples' experiences: the division of household-related mental labour. The distribution of labour takes a variety of forms, including paid labour as well as practical and household-related mental labour, and almost all participants shared how the mental load is inextricably connected to their experiences of egalitarianism and power sharing.

In this article, I provide an overview of the Christian landscape in New Zealand and define Christian complementarianism and Christian egalitarianism. I outline how 'doing religion' and 'doing gender' provide a framework for analysing the couples' attempts to divide mental labour in their partnerships, then discuss how household-related mental labour has been defined and its significance within partnerships. After outlining the methodology and methods of the study conducted, I then analyse the participant couples' narratives, exploring two key themes: what facilitates a more equal sharing of mental labour and what barriers constrain this same goal for equality.

Christianity in New Zealand

Since the 1970s, social scientists have observed that most western nations have experienced a process of secularisation, in which people are increasingly less likely to belong to formal religious institutions even though they may still have religious beliefs (Taylor, 2007). While New Zealand has no official religion, the country is infused with the Judaeo-Christian influence of the European settlers who arrived in the nineteenth century. There is diversity within Christianity in New Zealand, with people's religious expressions and experiences ranging from conservative to liberal. In their research on Christian churches, some scholars make the distinction between mainline Protestant churches and evangelical churches (Burke, 2016; Edgell, 2006; S. K. Gallagher, 2017). Evangelicals are often identified as conservative Protestants who are biblical literalists (S. K. Gallagher, 2004; S. K. Gallagher & Wood, 2005; Giles, 2017; Martin, 2007; Nash, 2006). In contrast, mainline Protestants tend to interpret the Bible in a modern context, rather than see it has a historical document to be read literally, a view that offers more room for egalitarian gender ideology (Colaner, 2009; Edgell & Docka, 2007; M. M. Wilcox, 2003). While Christianity overall and mainline churches are in decline, the number of New Zealanders associating with evangelical churches is increasing (Statistics New Zealand, 2019).

New Zealand religious historian Peter Lineham (2014a) notes how New Zealand mainline churches have, in recent years, been early adopters of change in new liturgies, theologies and social values on such matters as the role of women, gay people and Indigenous peoples but there has also been significant debate on these issues (Willcox, 2003). Religion continues to play a role in society generally, and within many lives specifically, and research examining ways in which New Zealanders reconcile values like gender equality and feminism with religion, spirituality and Protestant church culture is salient (Lineham, 2014b). There is more scope within some churches for people to develop a 'flexible gendered self' (S. K. Gallagher, 2017). Within Christianity there are two main, competing visions of gender relations: complementarianism and egalitarianism (Colaner, 2009; Denton, 2004; Giles, 2017).

Christian complementarianism

Complementarianism is the most hegemonic, well-documented Christian tradition in which gender relations are organised by the principles of male hierarchy and female subordination (Burke, 2016; S. K. Gallagher, 2004) and normative heterosexuality (Porter, 2015).[1] Conservative evangelical discourse often refers to gender in similar ways, focusing on endorsing gender essentialism, gender complementarity, and husband-headship and wifely submission (Bartkowski, 2001; Colaner, 2009; Denton, 2004; Porter, 2004). While complementarianism is especially visible in evangelical settings (Porter, 2004), nuanced versions of this are embedded within many Christian structures and contexts (Giles, 2017; Slee, Porter & Philips, 2013). These competing sets of gender ideologies take varied forms.

The complementarianism described by participants in the study I conduced encompasses two different representations: (1) male headship and the subordination of women deriving from specific biblical and theological reasoning; and (2) the belief that women and men complement one another in their binary, fixed differences, so that they are 'equal but different'. The second representation is more nuanced than the first; this is because the term 'complementarian' largely disguises the complementarian commitment to male headship by presenting itself more in terms of difference, which in the eyes of many conservative religious people likely gives complementarianism a more common-sense appeal that it would otherwise have. Many mainline Christian churches in New Zealand seem to affirm equality in principle, even though in practice things may be more complicated because they might be influenced by unspoken assumptions from a traditional, complementarian outlook on male headship (Whitehead, 2012). The position that men and women are 'equal but different' reifies traditional gender differences which reinforce men's privileged positions within family life and can shield a hierarchical gender ordering.

[1] This tradition locates its origins in select biblical passages, such as the Apostle Paul's teaching that women should "submit to your husbands" (*The Holy Bible: New International Version*, 1978/1983, Ephesians 5:22).

Christian egalitarianism

Relationship egalitarianism within a Christian context is widely understood as the position that men and women are of intrinsic, equal value and worth before God, and that gender does not define the roles or responsibilities a person can fulfil in the home, church or society (Denton, 2004; Edgell, 2006; S. K. Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Porter, 2015). This position draws from biblical and theological evidence, particularly an exegetical approach to interpreting Scripture that locates the Bible within the cultural-historical context in which it was written (Fee, 2014; Habets, 2011; Payne, 2009; Wright, 2004). Rejecting gender essentialism and patriarchy, Christian scholars encourage a form of marital equality in which both spouses are called to 'mutually submit'[2] or defer to one another concerning domestic decision-making. Many of these writers believe that masculine and feminine characteristics are products of socialisation and human stereotyping rather than foreordained by divine plan (Bons-Storm, 1996; Gaunt, 2013; Graham, 1999; Scanzoni & Hardesty, 1992; Slee, 2011; Slee et al., 2013). These commentators advocate fluid partner roles and equity in household labour allocation, challenging the view that husbands and wives should have separate spheres of activity and responsibility.

Instead of using descriptive terms like 'gender equality' or 'gender equity', I use the term 'relationship egalitarianism' to describe the experiences of the couples I interviewed to reflect this gender relations belief system within Christianity. This form of egalitarianism intersects with secular understandings of egalitarianism. Secular egalitarianism within the context of relationships is defined as the belief that 'the sex of an individual should not influence the perception of an individual's abilities or the determination of an individual's rights, obligations, and opportunities' (Beere et al., 1984, p.564). Domestic egalitarianism, more specifically, has been defined as an arrangement that has become a goal for many families, where partners share housework, childcare and paid employment (Davis et al., 2007; W. B. Wilcox

[2] The biblical call to mutual submission instructs women and men to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (*The Holy Bible: New International Version*, 1978/1983, Ephesians 5:21).

& Dew, 2013). By focusing on Protestant couples who self-identify as egalitarian, I sought to explore behaviours and ideologies of couples whom Gaunt (2013) describes as 'norm-violating'. While research into how partners attempt to share domestic roles more equally has been conducted for decades (Coltrane, 2000; Coontz, 2005; Deutsch, 1999; Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020), an explicit focus on relationship egalitarianism in Christian contexts is a relatively recent phenomenon.

'Doing religion' and 'doing gender'

'Doing religion' and 'doing gender' are theoretical frameworks that I will use to frame the analysis of the participant couples' division of mental labour. These are explored in turn below.

'Doing religion'

Rather than framing women's experiences of conservative religions within the dichotomy that pits agency against complicity, Avishai (2008, p.429) suggests that the framework of 'doing religion' helps to make sense of religious traditions as they come in contact with competing ideas about women, gender, family and sexuality, noting how members of conservative religions 'do'—observe, perform—religion. 'Doing religion' is a semiconscious, self-authoring and performative project; it is a theory of agency that locates agency in religious observance. Drawing on the idea that subjects perform or 'do' gender within power relations and normative expectations, Avishai (2008, p.413) asserts that 'doing religion' means a performance of identity or a mode of conduct and being with the "goal of becoming an authentic religious subject against an image of a secular other." When analysing the intersection of Christian spirituality with egalitarian relationship praxis, it is useful to examine the participant couples' theological beliefs and the extent to which this informs their division of labour.

'Doing gender'

When talking about 'doing gender', West & Zimmerman (1987) suggest that men and women are held to prescriptive expectations particular to their gender about how to behave, which can be apparent within the household.

This lends itself to explaining the division of household labour commonly referred to as 'men's work' or 'women's work'. This division is visible in partners' negotiation of household labour and is at the heart of how partners divide labour lies power dynamics. The roles gender and power play in heterosexual partnerships have been explored in prior research (Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001; Carlson & Lynch, 2017; Esmiol Wilson, Knudson-Martin, C., & Wilson, 2014). Mutuality, which has been described as pursuing a power balance between men and women (Esmiol Wilson et al., 2014), appears to require more movement from male partners, involving men voluntarily relinquishing their power. This distinct aspect of mutuality has been documented by researchers. For example, the Work-Sharing Couples study was an action research project conducted in Norway in the early 1970s on how work, family and gender equality were reconciled within families. Its design involved both spouses working part-time and sharing childcare and housework. Bjørnholt's (2011) follow-up study focused on the original 16 heterosexual couples 30 years later and revealed that the male partners play a key role in sustaining egalitarian practices within partnerships in particular ways: their subscription to the contemporary concept of a pro-feminist masculinity, promoting the careers of their partners, and their authoritative agency in promoting more egalitarian patterns of work and care in their own families. Bjørnholt (2011, p.3) referred to this as a "constructive use of male power".

Men's use of power within heterosexual partnerships to contribute to the creation of a more equal relationship has been explored by other researchers. Coontz (2005), for instance, claimed that a key contributing factor in the historical changes in marriage from more traditional to more egalitarian is husbands having to respond positively to their wives' requests for change. Similarly, according to Gottman and Levenson's (1999) longitudinal research predicting marital dissolution, if a man responds positively to his wife's request for change, that is one of the best indicators that the couple will stay together and is essential for their well-being. Gottman and Levenson (1999) found evidence that it is the ability of men to accept influence from women (but not the converse) that is predictive of the

longitudinal success of the marriage in terms of marital stability. Mutual influence occurs, therefore, when both genders exercise both the masculinised positional power based on status and the feminised relational power based on personal relationship (Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001). Mutual influence and the ability of male partners, in particular, to share power is an important aspect of egalitarian praxis. Researchers have also identified that men's liberal attitudes and actions within relationships are conduits for increased levels of equality and relationship satisfaction (Coltrane, 2000; Gaunt, 2013; Kaufman, 2000; LeBaron et al., 2014; Randles, 2016).

Researchers differ on their stance about male agency to create change within heterosexual partnerships. Jurva (2020) studied women's narratives of their experiences of heterosexual relationships in Finland. Drawing on feminist research on heterosexuality and affect theory, she argues that an egalitarian narrative—what she refers to as a 'progress narrative'—can be affirmative and empowering for women, but at the same time it invites women to accept male dominance as an inevitable part of a heterosexual life. Studies conducted in a Nordic context thus highlight different nuances of agentic power to change within partnerships: Bjørnholt (2011) discusses the possibility of the constructive use of male power to create egalitarian dynamics in relationship, whereas Jurva (2020) argues that a progressive relationship is likely to disguise deeper patterns of male dominance.

Household-related mental labour

'Mental labour' is a concept which has largely evolved from sociological theorising, including Hochschild and Machung's (1989) notion of 'emotional labour' and Walzer's (1996) concept of 'worry work'. 'Mental labour' refers to the invisible labour associated with the household and family, historically performed by women, including organising, task management (Robertson et al., 2019, p.196; see also Daminger, 2019). Whilst there has been substantial research focused on the division of physical household labour (Liss, 2014; Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Ting et al., 2015), analysis of how men and

women divide and share the cognitive aspect of labour within partnerships and families is less developed.

The unbalanced distribution of household-related labour, both physical and mental, continues to be highlighted by scholars as a signifier of inequality in heterosexual partnerships (Bass, 2015; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Harryson et al., 2012; Offer, 2014). Research paints a visceral and unhappy picture of women being burdened by household-related mental labour in heterosexual partnerships with studies showing that mental labour continues to be disproportionately performed by women and by mothers compared to men and fathers (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Robertson et al., 2019; Wong, 2017). Regarding the division of mental labour among women and men in dual-earner families, findings show that while mothers and fathers are equally likely to think about family matters, these thoughts are only detrimental to emotional well-being in mothers (Offer, 2014). This contributes to the greater risk of ill health among women (Väänänen et al., 2005), while perceptions that the division of household labour is not only unequal, but also unfair, increase the risk of psychological distress (Harryson et al., 2012). The inequitable distribution of household labour also continues to restrict women's undistracted involvement in paid employment, often allowing men to advance in their jobs and accumulate power from the more highly valued sectors (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Researchers highlight discrepancies, with men reporting more than women that they perceive their couple relationship as gender-equal and that mental and physical household labour is equally shared, even when this is not the case (Harryson et al., 2012; Treas & Tai, 2012). Considering that a significant barrier to greater egalitarian partnerships lies not in the unequal distribution of cooking or childcare time but in mental labour (Robertson et al., 2019), this cognitive component of family life requires further examination.

While qualitative research illustrates how the unequal distribution of mental labour perpetuates gender inequality in heterosexual relationships, it relies mostly on the accounts of women and mothers. Little in-depth analysis of men's and father's participation in mental labour is available (Harryson et al., 2012; Treas & Tai, 2012). Yet family researchers have long observed that

men play an essential role in initiating and implementing equality in heterosexual partnerships (Baldwin, 2017; Bjørnholt, 2011; Gauthier & Forsyth, 1999; Greenstein, 1996; Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Singleton & Maher, 2004). This indicates that men's, as well as women's, attitudes and behaviours need more measures of analysis in the context of heterosexual partnerships.

Methodology and methods

As noted above, this article reports part of the findings of a larger research study investigating church-going couples and their practice of egalitarianism in New Zealand. The focus here is on the division of mental labour between the participant couples. To answer my research question—how do heterosexual couples who identify as egalitarian and attend Protestant churches in New Zealand understand and experience facilitators and barriers to equal partnerships?—I adopted a self-conscious feminist methodology. I began this process by reflecting on my own positionality. I am a Pākehā middle-class New Zealander, a self-identified feminist and egalitarian, as well as a heterosexual cisgender woman. These various standpoints influenced how the fieldwork was carried out. Having grown up in a religious household, I consider myself having some insider knowledge in terms of Protestant faith beliefs and church practices. I view this insider position as giving me familiarity with discourses and debates regarding women's positionality within Christianity. At the same time, I am an outsider because I am not affiliated with the churches or church denominations from which I recruited participants.

As a researcher, my experiences within intimate partnerships, families and religious institutions enabled me to reflexively approach how they intersect. As I constructed my interview questions, I identified the patriarchal paradigm within which Protestant beliefs about gendered relationships have historically been framed. Asking specific questions allowed for the problematisation of the institution of Christianity and its associated patriarchal gender beliefs (Holland et al., 1999; Phillips, 2011). I had gut reactions to the complementarian messages and experiences of sexism some

of the participants divulged in the interviews, and my frequent supervision meetings helped me process this in a reflexive way.

My identity as someone who is feminist, egalitarian and who has had experience navigating intimate heterosexual relationships did not disappear when I conducted interviews. My willingness as interviewer to expose some of my personal thoughts, primarily through voicing empathy for participants' feelings, succeeded in creating an atmosphere in which respondents felt free to do the same. I also approached the interviewees collaboratively; I repeatedly checked in with participants during each interview to ensure I heard them correctly, inviting them to correct me if I was misinterpreting what they were trying to say. In many of the interviews I shared with the participants a trend or trends within research and asked them to share their thoughts on these.

Using purposive sampling, I advertised my study in Protestant churches of varying denominations including Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist and non-denominational churches, and tertiary institutions with a Christian affiliation, across a range of cities in New Zealand. To participate in this study, couples needed to be affiliated with or attend a Protestant church and both partners needed to strongly identify as 'egalitarian', which I defined as 'the position that women and men are of equal, intrinsic value; there are no gender-based limitations of what functions or responsibilities each can fulfil in the home, church or society'. The descriptor 'Protestant' was deliberately kept broad to capture participants from across this Christian tradition. I decided to avoid using the modifier 'evangelical' as this is commonly seen as synonymous with conservatism (Burke, 2016), biblical literalism and gender traditionalism. Instead, I wished to focus on a more progressive Christian cohort of participants who subscribe to progressive social and gender ideals and a non-literal understanding of the Bible.

I recruited 19 heterosexual couples (38 individuals) associated with six different religious organisations, though only 18 couples fit the criteria to be interviewed. I was contacted by as many male participants as female participants desiring to be interviewed. Two same-sex couples and transgender members of two couples voiced interest in being interviewed but, on consultation with my supervisor, I decided that the experiences of queer

couples in Protestant churches in New Zealand were outside the scope of my study, which sought to problematise the unique power dynamics between cisgender men and women, examining the at times contradictory reconciliation of patriarchal inequalities with egalitarian values. Empirical research on queer couples and families in Christian contexts should be conducted in the future to capture their specific experiences (Acosta, 2020; Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki & Olson, 2008).

At the beginning of each interview the participants were asked to provide information about their age, education qualifications, relationship status, length of relationship, number of children, ethnicity and whether they were in paid employment at the time of the interview. The partner's ages ranged from their mid-20s to their mid-80s. The length of the couples' relationships ranged from one to 40 years, and the sample included couples who were either dating, cohabiting or married. Approximately half of the couples had children, with the number of children ranging from one to five, and the children ranging from six months old to adulthood. The majority of the participants had university degrees, including postgraduate degrees. The self-identified ethnicity of the participants was predominantly Pākehā New Zealander but the sample also included three Māori participants and three participants who had migrated to New Zealand.

The majority of the female participants were in paid employment at the time of the interviews, with about half working full-time and half working part-time. Five women were not in paid employment at the time of the interviews, including those who were full-time students, stay-at-home parents, retired and those not working for personal reasons. Out of the 18 male participants, 11 worked full-time in paid employment, three were full-time students and four worked part-time, with one participant both working and studying part-time. While participants varied in ages, ethnicities and marital status, overall the data predominantly reflect the experience of highly-educated, middle-class, primarily Pākehā individuals.

Interviews with couples were conducted either in person or via Skype in areas outside of my hometown. The participants were given the option of being interviewed separately at first and then brought together for a shorter

joint interview or being jointly interviewed from the beginning. All couples opted to be interviewed jointly. Joint interviews can enable rich observation of intra-couple dynamics and negotiated family practices, particularly through spouses' corroboration and challenging of each other's stories (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). Joint interviews can diminish the role of the researcher as a "keeper and mediator of secrets" (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014, p.15) and encourage men's involvement in research in a less intimidating way than one-on-one interviews (Valentine, 1999). However, joint interviews can become problematic if a knowledgeable or powerful partner dominates the storytelling and if a couple's focus on self-presentation deters them from in-depth, honest sharing (Hertz, 1995; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). I acknowledge that interviewing the partners together and separately within the same design would have been ideal and could have resulted in a broader picture of their experience as a couple. However, for this study, joint interviews ended up being the most effective avenue through which to investigate family life as a "negotiated reality" (Hertz, 1995 p.447).

In the interviews, participants were invited to discuss their relationship with their partner and their attitudes towards egalitarianism, gender identity, biblical interpretation, church experiences and feminism. A key ethical concern for me was to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants. I did this by both omitting and altering identifying information in the direct quotes including place names, names of people, names of tertiary institutions and churches and names of professions. All participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

During interviews with couples, I inquired about which partner they perceived was responsible for delegating household chores and, more generally, who felt the weight of the 'mental load' in their family life. This term has been popularised in the media and was familiar to the couples, who found it easy to use throughout the interviews. Participants eagerly shared their experiences of this dynamic in their partnership, and for participants with children this included their experiences as parents as well.

I transcribed the interviews myself and used NVivo, a computer-based qualitative analysis program, to code each interview and organise quantitative

descriptive information about my participants. Applying thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2019), I developed a coding scheme which enabled me to organise respondents' comments into a coherent framework for qualitative analysis. I then looked for similarities across respondents' answers to identify recurrent patterns of meaning, which—after checking them against the data set—I grouped into initial, larger categories. These were then refined, split and named as themes. A reflexive approach to thematic analysis allowed me to explore both semantic and latent meanings within the data. These are explored in the next section.

Findings

This analysis is focused on how the participant couples described how they divided mental labour in their partnerships. All participants shared how the mental load of managing family life is inextricably connected to external factors, including paid employment and childcare, as well as internal ones, such as socialised roles and culturally inherited gender expectations. My analysis here explores two themes arising from the participant couples' narratives: (1) what facilitates their division of household-related mental labour and (2) what constrains this same division of labour.

Factors facilitating egalitarianism

A key factor shaping the egalitarianism within the relationships of interviewed couples was the attitudes of the male partner. Male participants across interviews frequently voiced their desire to share in carrying domestic mental labour. Nate and Maya discussed how this practice is essential to their relationship egalitarianism. Nate explained the responsibility he feels men have to share and disseminate power by not relegating mental and emotional labour to their partners:

> Humans do so badly when they hang on to power. It just doesn't work out so well, they do dumb shit. Whilst it can feel nice to feel powerful, I think for Christians the idea of egalitarianism is letting go of power, cos I think Jesus was letting go of power. If I have the power it's somewhere being imbued on me by society, I have to disseminate, to share it, not cling to it. If masculinity is a

> place where power just sort of ends up, it seems, I'm gonna actually choose to do my fair share of the mental labour and okay, "Let's see what chores we've got this weekend", and actually start that conversation … So nappies going from bin into washing machine; I'll proceed accordingly without the feeling of "I am a hero. I am doing Maya's job for her, she's going to be so grateful." I'll put them on and I don't even need to mention that to her like, "Yay, I put on the nappies!" Cos I think it's about the decision to do that as well as the action.

Nate claimed that Christianity helps him to "let go of power" and to "share it". He connects this to him taking responsibility for mental (and physical) labour without needing praise. Maya agreed with Nate, adding how they often joke with each other about "men needing praise" when they do anything domestic. This is what Hochschild and Machung (1989) called the 'economy of gratitude', whereby praising or showing gratitude for men sharing the mental labour associated with housework is both unnecessary and unhelpful. Like Nate, the majority of male participants use theological arguments to support the broader project of gender equality.

In Zac and Hayley's relationship, Zac takes on some caregiving responsibilities for Hayley, who has a chronic physical disability. Zac claimed he does more of the physical household labour than Hayley, while they both agreed that they equally divide the mental labour responsibilities. Zac shared how his changing "relationship with power" has made it easier for him to be responsible for carrying out more of the household labour. He described how, although he is not overly involved with church life, he participates in a small, fringe gathering with others from the church who meet to practise meditation and centring prayer, which focuses intentionally on genderless images of "God as spirit". He described the meditation as "about self-emptying and giving up the struggles of power and control, which I find very helpful". When I asked him if he finds this spiritual practice part of, or connected to his commitment to egalitarianism, he replied:

> Oh this is not disconnected [*pause*] yeah, I think the connection runs through the power side of things partly, that because a lot of centring prayer is focused on the kenosis [self-emptying of Jesus'

> own will and becoming entirely receptive to God's divine will], on how Jesus humbled himself, that participating in that practice over a long period, for years, that it does change my relationship with power and makes it easier to let go and not kind of grasp after power and status. So I think it does help with the egalitarian marriage, with not trying to be the, the one in charge … Sometimes if I find myself resenting that I'm doing more I remind myself, well, I am a Christian husband and loving and serving my wife is part of that, and that helps shift my perspective. I'm able to see it as an outworking of my faith.

David and Heidi similarly claimed that they work hard to equally share the mental labour of their busy family life. David used to be a full-time stay-at-home parent but now they both work part-time; this was a deliberate decision they made to ensure they share childcare equally. Giving a specific example of mental labour, Heidi said that David takes their children to the doctor and "carries that mental load of the specifics of a child in a medical context", linking this practice to David's attitudes:

> If David chose to just seek standard masculine culture and put himself and his reputation as a male ahead of what our family needs, then we simply wouldn't have a harmonious family life. I would be depressed and anxious stuck at home with these kids, then our kids wouldn't be thriving. It's a decision for all, instead of a decision for one. I'm grateful that God gave me a husband that doesn't see it in a complementarian way, I don't think that would go very well [*laughs*].

David happily received this praise from his partner. His choices regarding employment and fathering had caused him to reflect on how he perceives his own masculinity. Like Nate and Zac, David's thinking about masculinity drew inspiration from Jesus: "Jesus washing people's feet was a different kind of masculinity that also requires strength, courage, and determination, but would not necessarily be part of today's broader cultural definition of being masculine."

While other male participants discussed Jesus' embodiment of humility, service and non-violence as ultimate expressions of treating others with equality, Arthur offered a contrasting view that resisted positioning Jesus

as an egalitarian feminist hero. During the interview Arthur criticised how Jesus "chose 12, all male disciples". Similarly, Madison, Arthur's partner, was critical of other aspects of Christian patriarchal culture, including the male-dominated language for God. Madison shared how she begrudgingly allowed her child to attend "Bible in Schools" but observed that, "She comes home with all this God-as-a-male garbage" so she deconstructed this with her daughter by frequently referring to God as "she" or "her" as a way to counter "all the patriarchal input." This attempt to recast Christian discourse as more inclusive or feminist helped Maya and a few other participants who referred to God as "she" to distance themselves from male-dominated religious spaces without truly detaching from them. Arthur and Madison are among a handful of couples who challenged Christian patriarchy more directly than other participants, seeking liberation from systemic sexism within Christian culture.

Barriers to egalitarianism

In presenting the second theme, which focuses on the constraints to equally sharing the mental labour of household management, I highlight the experiences of one couple, Marcus and Christine but their experiences were similar to those of several other couples in the study. Marcus and Christine discussed both the external and internalised sexist discourses which constrain their ability to divide their family responsibilities more equally. Notably, these barriers are ones shared by all couples, whether religious or not, but this section highlights how—just as with factors facilitating egalitarianism—religious beliefs help shape men's attitudes.

At the time of the interview, Marcus and Christine both worked full-time outside the home, were outsourcing some household cleaning and had experimented with different childcare options. Marcus claimed he cannot take on more household-related labour, specifically the mental labour associated with organising childcare, carving out family time and delegating chores: "We need to make sure I'm not sacrificing my [work] role [because] I get paid more." This led to the following discussion:

> **Christine:** Here I am teaching in a female-dominated industry. I've got children I've got to look after. Quite often I feel like one of those vending machines that's selling care. I keep putting the money in cos I've got to keep giving that. I sometimes think it doesn't seem right. We both get our pay which goes into the same account. I don't feel like I'm working less than Marcus, especially in terms of all this care I'm giving, so it's quite frustrating. Marcus gets at least one-third more money than I do. He gets more perks, more training.
>
> **Marcus:** That's the field I'm in.
>
> **Christine:** For me the idea that women get paid less … The challenge for me and egalitarianism is that I believe each person needs care. So how do you fund that? Systemic tensions.

This dialogue between Marcus and Christine is a direct example of the mental labour discussed by Robertson et al. (2019). Christine's later reflection that "sometimes, as a way of balancing it out a little bit, I will write all these things and say, 'What do we do about shopping this weekend?'" suggests quite clearly that she carries the heavier but invisible mental labour within her family. Marcus appears to see this as justified because he earns a higher income. This reflects, to some degree, the hegemonic ideal of men being the main financial provider, even if Christine—like so many women today—is also contributing financially to the household. Of course, considerable research tells us that that women's greater responsibility for children is an important factor in explaining why women earn less than men (Fuchs, 1989; Kaufman, Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2016; Sigle-Rushton & Waldfogel, 2007).

But what is interesting here is how Marcus' notions of hegemonic masculinity were reinforced at their church, which was more conservative than many of those attended by other participant couples. Notably, Marcus claimed he enjoys attending church weekly, while Christine claimed that because she works full-time she is "not in the value system" of people at church. This was illustrated by her experience of "the woman church pastor asking me: 'Well, when do you wash the sheets?'" Christine found the gendered assumptions present "off putting to the point where I wonder if it's the right church for us to be going to".

I always invited couples to reflect on their egalitarian partnership and share these reflections with each other at the end of the interview. The tension that these religious differences created in Marcus and Christine's relationship was evident, and Christine's frustration was palpable:

> **Interviewer:** After your time sharing with me and your partner about your egalitarian relationship, if there's one thing you'd like to share with your partner what would it be? [*pause*]
>
> **Marcus:** [*moves over on the couch and puts his arm around Christine's shoulders*] It would probably be that I want you to be the best you could be.
>
> **Christine:** That's nice, thank you. Um, I think for me it would be that I would, I would love if you became more aware of the factors that make my world such that it's difficult for me to do that. So basically removing barriers. Yeah, yeah [*Marcus moves his arm away from her shoulders*, *long pause*]

Christine honestly acknowledges here that, to live out her egalitarian ideals, specific barriers need to be overcome in their partnership. The physical response from Marcus and Christine's subsequent discussion of how she planned to drop from full-time to part-time employment in order to cope with the weight of their family's mental labour suggests that, as other research has found, male partners are often less willing to change than their partners (Bjørnholt, 2011; Gottman, 2011; Gottman & Levenson, 1999). In this case, Marcus' complicit support of traditional gender norms espoused at his church supported his lack of willingness to change, in contrast to how the religious beliefs of other male participants helped them justify a shift in attitudes and behaviours.

Conclusion

Family studies continue to find that unpaid, invisible household-related labour disempowers those who perform it (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Yet there is a developing discourse of relationship egalitarianism and practices that sees men and women more equally sharing cognitive labour. Couples desiring to be more egalitarian must deconstruct power imbalances and Lund et al. (2019) argue that that this inevitably involves men, whose gendered practices

are shaped by traditional masculinist ideals, letting go of their "will to dominate" (hooks, 2004, p.2). Indeed, while some of the men in this study drew on their religious beliefs to challenge patriarchal structures and expectations, others—even those who self-identified as egalitarian—used religious doctrine to support and sustain relationship inequality. This suggests that one way to deconstruct power imbalances is to develop relationship-focused resources for church communities that draw on theological justifications for positive change in gender relations, as religious men are more likely to support such change if it is framed from within a theological framework.

This article has also demonstrated that church-going couples strive towards egalitarian relationships in different ways and that the mutual negotiation of household-related mental labour is vital to achieving change. The participants' experiences illustrate that trying to be egalitarian involves active negotiation and direct challenging of hegemonic masculine ideals. The participants' liberatory interpretation of gender and power, specifically amongst the male participants, helps in this equal sharing of mental labour. While many of the interview participants asserted that their beliefs and convictions around Christian spirituality enhance their commitment to equality, the extent to which partners can liberate themselves from the effects of patriarchy through deliberate ideological or theological commitments remains questionable. Bjørnholt (2011) argues that behaviours of change towards egalitarian heterosexual partnerships include the male partners' subscription to the contemporary concept of a pro-feminist masculinity, promoting the careers of their partners and their authoritative agency in promoting more egalitarian patterns of work and care in their own families. I believe that church-going couples desiring egalitarian partnerships must 'do gender' in different ways but they must also 'do religion' in a way that challenges the sexist nature of religious structures and ideology in order to act and think in less hegemonic ways within a partnership.

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