

## ***Couples' Gender Ideological Pairings and Sexual Frequency***

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### **Abstract**

Gender attitudes of either partner have emerged as one of the most consistent predictors of gendered family dynamics in couples. Linkages between couples' gender ideology and their work divisions have been extensively studied, however, very little is known on partners' gender ideology and their intimate lives. This is a significant research gap at a time when legal gender equality has been achieved in many social contexts, yet gender inequalities are persistent and have largely shifted from public and legal to informal and relational spaces. Our study addresses this research gap. We examine whether and how couples' gender ideological pairings are linked with their sexual lives, more precisely, their sexual frequency. Leaning on sexual scripting theory, we hypothesize that matching gender traditional couples have the highest sexual frequency, while mismatched couples with an egalitarian man have the lowest sexual frequency. Using data from the German Panel Analysis for Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam) and panel regressions, results indeed indicate the highest sexual frequency among couples with shared gender traditional attitudes. Findings for the other couple types are less clear cut. Future versions of this study will explore some of the underlying mechanisms of these findings.

### **Introduction, Topic and Theoretical Focus**

Gender ideology, on the individual level sometimes referred to as gender attitudes or values, on the societal level as gender norms or culture, has emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of gendered family and work dynamics, in an array of societies across the globe (e.g. Davis and Greenstein, 2004, 2009; Pessin, 2018; Scarborough et al., 2019, Kim and Luke 2020). However, to date, the bulk of research on linkages between gender ideology and gendered family dynamics focused on the division of domestic and labor market work. Very little is still known on partners' gender ideology and their more intimate lives. Only one recent study exists, which suggests that gender attitudes are likely very relevant for couples' sexuality as well (Carlson and Soller, 2019). They find that egalitarian attitudes positively predict partner communication, but that women's egalitarian attitudes decreased sexual frequency via decreasing male sexual control (ibid.). Other studies have investigated gender attitudes and sexual behaviors among singles, or addressed the association between gendered domestic work divisions in couples and their sexuality. They indicate, for instance, that men's traditional gender attitudes are associated with greater sexual activity in a sample of young athletes, although this study addressed men's sex lives only, not that of women or couples (Gage 2008). Other studies indicate larger sexual frequency among couples who share house- and child care work more equally, yet, they don't explicitly examine gender attitudes (Carlson et al 2016a and 2016b). More studies on linkages between partners' individual or joint gender attitudes and their sexual frequency or other aspects of their sexual lives like their sexual satisfaction are sorely missing.

This represents a significant research gap at a time when formal/legal gender equality has been achieved in many social contexts, yet gender inequalities (i.e. male dominance and power struggles, internalized gender ideologies/roles) are persistent and have largely shifted from public and legal to less tangible, informal spaces, not least to the private or relational sphere (Risman, 2018; Hobson and Fahlén, 2009). Against this background, sexuality is an important field and “defining social location” (Rahman et al., 2023), affecting gendered interactions, perceptions and inequality outcomes (ibid.). Besides the societal relevance for understanding the role of gender ideology-sexuality interaction and its development over individual life courses and couple relationships, the gender ideology-sexuality nexus has important links to major social science theories that appear under-explored at present. Current sociological sexuality research for example highlights the links to functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and queer theory (cp. Parker et al. 2017; Rahman et al., 2023).

For example, according to the sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) traditional gender attitudes should increase sexual frequency, as the “script” and each partners’ expected behavior in sexual interactions and for sexual intercourse is clearly defined: While male’s traditional sex role implies the “active” role, women’s traditional sex role is considered “passive”. In contrast, egalitarian attitudes are supposed to enhance couple’s communication and equal weight in (sexual and intimate) decision-making (Davis and Greenstein, 2009). Higher levels of intimacy, in turn are linked to passion and higher sexual frequency (Baumeister and Bratslavsky, 1999).

While the one existing study on gender ideology and sexuality in couples indeed shows that traditionalism increases sexual frequency through male’s sexual control and that egalitarian attitudes improve communication and have a positive effect on sexual frequency (Carlson and Soller, 2019), the study has examined gender attitudes for each partner separately only. Recent advances in the literature on gender ideologies and domestic work, however, show that the matching of the partners in gender attitudes has implications for couple’s dynamics (Nitsche and Grunow, 2018; McMunn et al., 2020). As “gender” is reproduced through social interaction (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and sexual interaction or intercourse is an act where both partners are involved at all times per definition, the ideological pairings are likely even more important in this area of intimate interactions. Furthermore, traditional gender attitudes have different implications for men and women, thus should lead to different behaviors for men and women.

### **Hypotheses**

Against this background, we aim at testing the following hypotheses:

- 1) Both partners have traditional attitudes: positive effect through his “agency”, and through the lack of communicative discord (++)
- 2) Both partners have egalitarian attitudes: negative effect through his lack of “agency”, but positive effect of enhanced levels of intimacy and communication (-+)
- 3) She egalitarian, he traditional: positive effect of his “agency”, but negative effect due to value/communicative mismatch (+-)
- 4) He egalitarian, she traditional: negative effect through his lack of “agency”, negative impact through communicative mismatch (- -)

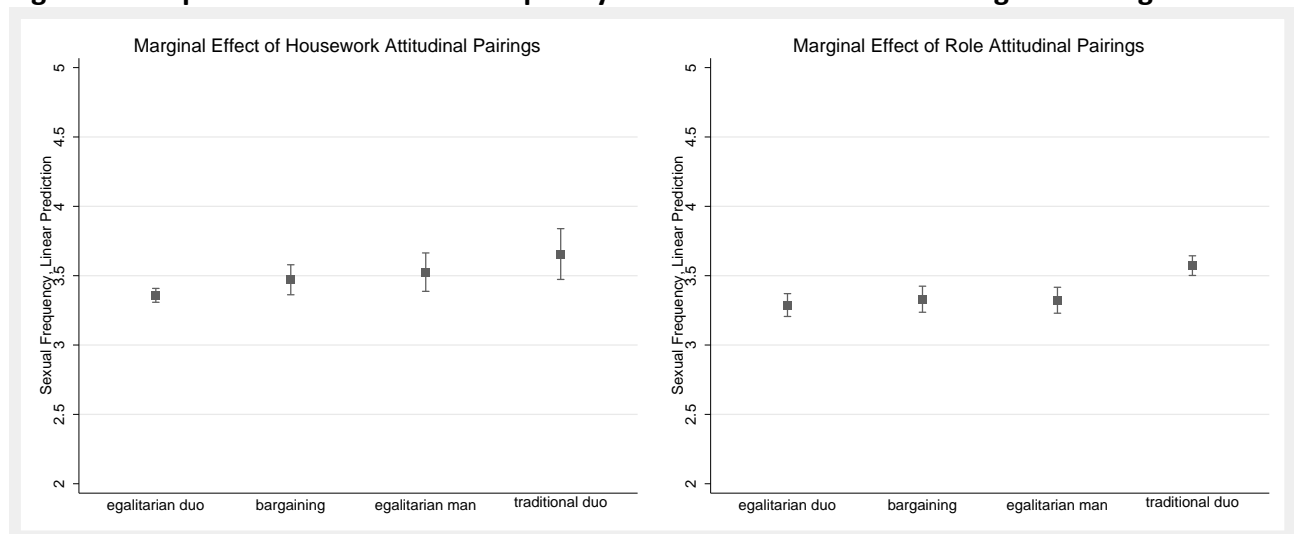
## Data and Methods

The data for our study comes from waves 1-11 of the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam) (Brüderl et al., 2020). We did not use the waves collected during the pandemic, because both gendered and sexual behaviors may have shifted during that time. We select all co-residential couples, in which both partners answered the gender attitudes questions. Our final sample consists of 3172 couples, and 12426 observations. Sexual frequency is measured on a scale from 1 (not in the last three months) to 7 (daily). We use information on sexual frequency provided by the anchor individual and control for the sex of the anchor to adjust for systematic reporting differences between men and women. We control for various socio-demographic characteristics. These are the sex of the focal person, the woman's age, the partners' age gap, their number of children, the focal individual's birth cohort, marital status of the couple, an indicator for East/West German residence, and a DemoDiff sample indicator. We also control for his and her education, measured in 4 mutually exclusive categories: up to lower secondary, upper secondary (reference group), tertiary, and currently enrolled in education. We coded education enrolment as a separate education category, because a significant proportion of this rather young sample is being enrolled in education (2.9% of male observations, 4.4% of women's). We use linear panel regressions to estimate couples' sexual frequency as a function of their ideological pairings, controlling for the above-mentioned factors.

## Preliminary Findings

Indeed, our preliminary findings indicate a significant link between couples' gender ideological pairings (we currently use two different single item measures of gender attitudes, on equal housework sharing and on work-family roles of women) during their first year of observation in the panel, and their sexual frequency in subsequent years (Figure 1). As hypothesized, traditional duos exhibit the highest sexual frequency. Surprisingly, egalitarian duos report the lowest sexual frequency, while mismatched couples lie in between. Future versions of this paper will explore some of the underlying mechanisms of these findings, such as couples' communication, partners' time spent in the labor market, and measure on self-perceived sexual attractiveness and agency.

**Figure 1: Couples Predicted Sexual Frequency as a Function of Their Ideological Pairings**



Source: pairfam (Brüderl et al. 2020), calculations by authors. Note: Linear Prediction based on linear regression panel models. Co-residential couples only, models control for both partners' age, number of children, marital status, education, income, and region within Germany.

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