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More Equal? Still Different?

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Equality is widely heralded as a desirable social principle both within the social sciences and beyond. But gender equality specifically is increasingly often connected to processes of social change in personal relationships rather than to the transformation of wider society. Here, drawing on interviews with 31 participants, I will examine how the concept of equality is understood in couple relationships, including how these understandings change as ideas about equality are interpreted, reinterpreted and applied in different ways depending, not only on values but also on context and circumstance.

Despite a good deal of research on couples there has been little discussion about how equality actually feels in the complex, emotionally charged reality of couple relationships. Here I will illustrate the gap between agreeing to equality as a principle and the application of this principle in day to day life.

Equality = Gender Equality

When asked about equality, the most common response was for interviewees to talk about gender and their domestic division of labour. There seems to be a strong assumption that equality in couples refers directly to who does the housework or earns the most money. So that when asking about equality within a relationship a person's opinion about gender equality in society at large is revealed.

One group of respondents, who referred most explicitly to the gendered nature of equality, I have called 'biological determinists', as they argued that men and women are 'hard wired' in different ways, preventing equality between the sexes. This position is exemplified by Clint, who makes his views on gender equality clear when he says:

"The issue seems to be equality seems to be going the other direction now. It's kind of like, I actually saw something on Facebook the other day my friends have posted something I do agree with, its chivalrous when the woman is in the mood and it's sexist when it's not. There are certain things a woman can do that a man can't and certain things a man can do that a woman can't..... So yes it is important to me that we are all on a level playing field, but as long as the person who is best at doing the job is doing it and I'm talking about that in the general means as well as within the household, I'm fine with it. "

This statement shows how for Clint equality has a very physical dimension of 'who does what' and how biology determines this. While he is agreeing with the principle of equality, he has reservations about how applicable this actually is in the context of gender differences as he understands them. Given that this statement was given in response to my asking about equality in his relationship, his lack of practical details shows how equality is more a guiding principle for him rather than something he negotiates or tries to put into practice in his daily life. This lack of an attempt to put equality into practice was reported by all six of the participants in the 'biologically determinist' group, indicating a clash of beliefs when reservations are held about the validity of gender equality.

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Not all participants presented this view of gender however, rather equality was, for many of my respondents, acknowledged as being a positive, desirable goal in couple relationships.

Equality in Practice

If equality is accepted as desirable, then the gap between equality as a principle and equality as practice has to be bridged through negotiation between partners. For some this process of negotiation comes easily, whereby dialogue around how equality is interpreted and applied to everyday life is openly discussed and mediated. However, this research has found that there are a wide variety of ways in which equality is understood, and therefore applied.

Participants reported different factors as being important in balancing out their contribution to the relationship including a variety of financial arrangements, the volume of household duties performed or the amount of time committed to childcare. An example of a traditional reciprocal relationship is described by Becky, who is in a civil partnership:

“I know it sounds hilarious because it is kind of against my ethics as how you should be as two women equal, but it is quite interesting how we have assumed those roles. It is probably because I am actually quite a home bird anyway and I'm quite happy being at home. On the financial front, because I'm working part time I'm not earning as much as her, she actually also adds a little bit more to the financial side. What we do, we basically put the same money in towards the house, it's kind of pro rata based on what we earn and that feels for me that's fair. So I do my bit at home and she's doing her bit and then that makes it more equal, I feel anyway.”

This way of putting equality into practice was echoed in most interviews, whereby household duties and financial contributions remain the two most important resources to be negotiated.

However, as can be seen in Becky's account, there is a high level of reflection on the reciprocity taking place. Most participants reflected on the gendered breakdown of their private division of labour, frequently comment on how they have 'fallen into' traditional patterns, although there is high variance across relationships as to what is being contributed. What is consistent is the importance of feeling that the arrangement is fair, and therefore understanding it as equal. Claire, a mother of young children who recently decided to stop working sums this up well:

“I think we both know that we're both working equally hard and we will probably have an equal balance of ... okay his job is stressful but he really likes doing it, so no I think overall, and I suppose it's a kind of choice isn't it and I've obviously chosen to be at home.... but there is a, not so much point counting, but I suppose feeling it's fair.”

This prioritising of fairness is one way of making equality as a principle easier to handle in day to day practice as it takes the focus off of the specific tasks being completed. Instead placing importance on how one feels about the balance of contributions. This approach

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enables a wider set of factors to be included under the heading of equality, leading ultimately to being able to 'feel equal'.

Feeling Equal

It is, it seems, possible to plug the gap between actual equality and practice through a process of negotiation, with a different weighting of resources in each unique relationship. In order to get to this point however, lines of communication must be open between partners. Marlene even goes so far as to say that for her this actually *is* the definition of equality:

"I think maybe being equal is about being able to have that type of conversation rather than about totting up the number of minutes you've spent doing things. It would be open to either of us to challenge the status quo and negotiate something different."

The importance of negotiating and feeling heard is central to feeling equal. Equality here takes on a third dimension: as well as being a social principle; and guide to practice; it also refers to an equality of effort between partners to listen to each other. Ali, an Arab man who has been married for over 20 years, articulates this difficulty in measuring equality in terms of 'who does what':

"Equality (pause) in the relationship it's difficult to say equality, because there is nothing, you can't weigh it and say maybe equal, but I do believe when you want to share life, I mean to get married and share life with another person, you share it because you love them and you want to be with them, you are not sharing it because you want a housemaid or you want somebody to do everything for you."

This emphasis on the emotional component in achieving a sense of equality was present in many accounts of relationships – notably those described as happy and fulfilling. This implies that feeling equal is not only about successful negotiations around who does or pays for what. But rather 'feeling equal' is contingent upon feeling loved and respected to the extent that you don't need to focus on who does what. Crucially though, if one partner feels this is becoming unfair it can be raised easily and be resolved.

Can we ever be equal?

When examining understandings of equality in this context, it is hard to pull apart ideas around equality, gender and the division of labour. These seem to have become entangled in a commonsensical understanding of applying 'equality' in principle to the day to day. Sharing one's life with a partner, and the resultant sharing of decision making, can become fraught with tension or resentment. What seems to smooth out these cracks is an underlying faith that one's efforts are appreciated and that any problems can be sorted out by being open about them and talking them through.

So, the answer to the question 'Can we ever feel equal in couple relationships?' has to be 'yes' – if we are prepared to negotiate hard for what we feel is fair and listen to what our partners version of equality is in return. But, and it is an important but, what my research shows is the ways in which ideas about balance and an acceptance of differentiation (as long

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as it is mitigated by fairness) have come to stand in for equality in its more feminist and political sense. This interpersonally negotiated equality is the equality of the private sphere and seems to impinge very little on gender inequality in society more generally.

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