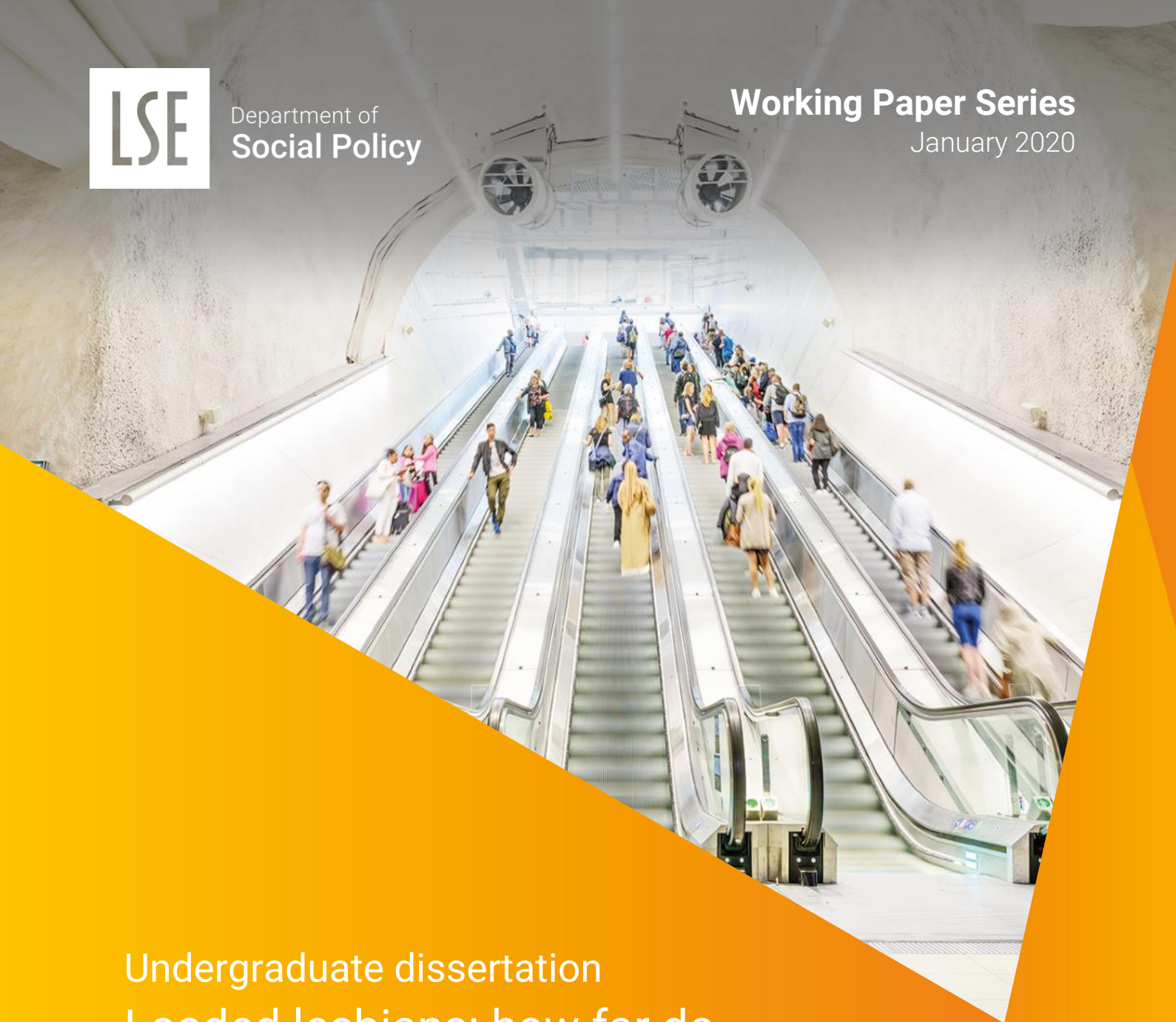




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Undergraduate dissertation  
Loaded lesbians: how far do  
negotiations in the private sphere  
transfer to the labour market?

Working Paper 01-20

**Liz Searle**

## Social Policy Working Paper 01-20

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Department of Social Policy  
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## Abstract

Lesbians experience a pay premium in UK labour markets relative to heterosexual women according to data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), even allowing for variables such as children and education. Research has shown that same-sex couples can experience a more egalitarian division of domestic labour, which has been linked to better labour market outcomes. This division has itself been connected to processes of intra-couple negotiation as the basis for the division of chores by contrast with sex-typed divisions of labour. This dissertation extends our understanding of the role of negotiation in dividing housework among lesbians, through in-depth interviews with four couples. It aims to ascertain if patterns of negotiation and consequent equitable division of domestic labour can be linked to lesbians' labour market success. It does this by asking: how is division maintained and negotiated? Do lesbian couples do, undo or redo gender? Whilst it has been claimed that undoing gender is impossible, I suggest that conscious action to deconstruct the gender binary can constitute undoing rather than redoing. Among my respondents I found that that they were doing and redoing gender simultaneously. Only one couple, I argue, undoes gender.

**Keywords:** (re/un-doing) gender; domestic labour; sexuality pay-gap; lesbian; housework.

## Author



Liz Searle studied Sociology and Social Policy at LSE whilst undertaking an internship at DFID and working for a FGM charity. Liz has recently completed her masters at LSE in Gender, Development and Globalisation. Her main interests are in the theory of gender, sexuality and critical race theory. Liz has recently started on the civil service fast stream and would love to do a PhD one day.

## Introduction

Lesbians experience a pay premium of 11% compared to heterosexual women when controlling for variables such as education, location, age, occupation, industry and children (Arabsheibani et al.2006:20). Initially, this outcome appears illogical considering that 'lesbians face structural disadvantages based on both their gender and sexuality' (Goldberg et al. 2012:814).

Whilst there has been much research on the gender pay gap, which currently sees women earn around 20% less than men (Brynin, 2017), little has focused on the sexuality gap. An increasing number of the UK population identify as Lesbian, Gay or Biesexual (LGB) with the largest proportion found in London at nearly 3% (ONS,2016) . Of those aged 16-24, 4.1% of the population identify as LGB showing greater identification among younger generations. Consequently, this dissertation focuses on younger, London-based couples. Qualitative studies of same-sex couples are increasing but most have been conducted outside the UK where labour market structures differ. This research aims to link sociological theories between home and labour market outcomes by conducting interviews that examine the negotiation and division of labour in lesbian homes. I consider domestic labour arrangements, defined as 'the physical tasks and household management activities that go into maintaining people, everyday lives, relationships and homes' (Eichler & Albanese, 2007:248), in relation to this puzzling premium.

Understanding the allocation of domestic labour in lesbian homes helps to add nuance to understandings of the reproduction of gender. I consider West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender" and question if lesbians are doing, undoing or redoing gender through negotiations in the home. The analysis of lesbian partnerships is crucial because they offer an opportunity to undertake divisions of household and market labour which are not structured by dichotomous gender scripts (Dunne, 1997:179). This potentially provides a model that may be attainable in different-sex relationships.

The focus on couples, although valuable has partly been chosen due to limitations of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) from which this pay premium has been calculated. The LFS only records lesbians who cohabit with their same-sex partner meaning others are assumed to be heterosexual, exemplifying the institutionalised nature of heterosexuality. While this is problematic, the phenomenon that co-habiting lesbians earn more on average than straight women is still interesting, especially when considering the domestic division of labour, prompting the question: can there be equality in the labour market without equality in the home? I argue that a more egalitarian and flexible arrangement in the home is conducive to better outcomes in the labour market, because responsibility for domestic labour does not fall to one individual. This highlights the importance of equality in the private sphere to achieve equality in the public sphere. The home is a site where societal ideals can be contested and a space where the hierarchal binary of gender can be deconstructed. Whilst West and Zimmerman claim that undoing gender is impossible, I find that a conscious action to deconstruct the gender binary can constitute undoing rather than redoing.

I undertook interviews with four couples (eight interviewees) to explore the extent to which the allocation of domestic labour was negotiated and, if so, what drove the negotiation (or lack thereof) and with what outcome. Divisions of labour can be distinguished between those that prioritise 'fairness', that is, they take account of work done outside the home and the total burden of labour, and those that prioritise equality, that is, having an equal division of chores independently of labour market position.

While perceptions of fairness are important, outcomes of equality achieved are potentially more critical for lived experience as they impact on employment. The couples interviewed experienced notable levels of egalitarianism as an outcome and motivator for negotiations to occur. Participants were found to be doing and redoing gender simultaneously. Only one couple, I argue, undoes gender.

### Literature review

Despite increases in female employment, women are still undertaking the majority of domestic labour with male participation in housework still considered optional (Coltrane, 1996). Women spend on average 168 minutes a day on housework compared to men's 74 minutes (OECD, 2018a). This is one of the reasons for a recent plateauing in female employment rates (ONS, 2013), coined the 'stalled gender revolution' (England, 2010). The gender pay gap has been linked to occupational segregation (Hartmann & Hegewisch, 2014) which can be connected to a reliance on female labour in the private sphere. The responsibility of domestic labour can reinforce assumptions about innate skills which transfer to the labour market (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007) reaffirming 'ideal' gendered jobs and low pay for care work (ibid, 2007). Furthermore, the physical, emotional and timely nature of domestic labour can have adverse effects on women's health and career prospects (Oakley, 1975). Women's dependence on family context limits their access to economic and social resources, restricting their ability to negotiate successfully within the marriage (Bergan, 1991). Therefore, 'domestic work is a persistent source of inequality which interpenetrates occupational and labour market experiences' (Platt, 2011:53).

The private sphere is associated with a heterosexual nuclear family (Barrett, 2015:193) where gender is used to allocate housework (Esmail, 2010:592). Housework has consistently been shown to connect to the public sphere (Dunne, 1997:1) thus domestic arrangements interpolate the labour market. Therefore, the queer home is a site to subvert heteronormative assumptions about gendered housework and divisions between paid and unpaid labour. Gender can, therefore, be 'redone' through the negotiation of domestic labour allowing women more success in the labour market.

### Doing gender

West and Zimmerman define gender as 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (1987:127). Gender inequality is maintained and reified through everyday interactions of 'doing gender', 'both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements as a means of legitimating one

of the most fundamental divisions of society' (ibid,1987:126). Therefore, relying on women to do housework legitimises and sustains the gender pay gap in the labour market. 'Doing gender' provides accounts of people's methods for negotiating everyday situations. Participants produce the order of social settings through their shared sense-making practices which, for this dissertation, are domestic labour. 'Doing gender' reflects 'the interactional process of creating gender identities that are then presumed to reflect and naturally derive from biology' (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009:442). Through women cleaning and caring for children, 'natural' aptitudes for nurture and aesthetics become linked to the female genitalia and the feminine identity is created.

According to Connell, 'doing gender is a theory of interaction; it presupposes a structural context that enables challenges to the gender binary' (Connell, 2010:52). This is similar to Butler's theory of performativity where "'male" and "female" do not exist unless we "do" various acts to constitute [their] reality' (1990, 173). Within the home, gender is sustained by interacting with other household members and is maintained by repeated performance of tasks constructed to be feminine or masculine. However, lesbians are also part of wider society and interact with those outside the household. In this sense, they too are constructed as women with normative actions attached. This poses the question: to what extent are lesbians being good housewives when both women do the housework in an egalitarian manner as socialised by society?

Butler has introduced the concept that sex itself is a social construct, meaning we are 'sexed bodies' as 'gender is the social significance that sex assumes' (1990) and so is replaced by gender. The realisation that sex has also been constructed through repetitive actions creates the possibility of more than two genders, which will be considered during the analysis section of this dissertation.

#### Undoing vs Redoing

Risman suggests we can think of 'undoing gender ... when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged' (2009:83). However, West and Zimmerman disagree, claiming that abandonment of accountability to one's sex category is impossible. They argue that gender is 'not so much undone as redone' (2009:118) through shifts in the accountability structures that sustain gender in interaction. In other words, accountability structures may shift to accommodate challenges to sex categories, so that tasks originally seeming masculine can become feminine and vice versa. Kelly and Hauck claim that gender is redone through 'negotiating a division of labour, enabling female participants to pursue careers in male-dominated fields' (2015:452).

I conclude that gender can be undone as Connell found in her 2010 study about transgender people. I argue that undoing gender can occur through conscious actions; avoiding repetition of actions; and, doing actions in a way that subverts the binary of gendered norms. Following Butler, if 'female' and 'male' do not exist until the doing of an action then an action can challenge the sex category. West and Zimmerman argue that sex category accountability is the reason for the inability to undo gender. However, when we consider that sex categories are actually gender, following Butler's logic, then gender has replaced sex category and through this abandonment,

gender can be undone. The binary of sex is only realised through mundane repetitions and practices of doing gender. Therefore, when gender is not done in a binary way, sex categories are deconstructed and the binary is removed.

### Previous studies

Current queer literature has begun to discuss how the home lives of queer couples challenge normativity and the 'entrenched heterosexualization of the home' (Barett, 2015:194) giving an opportunity to 'redo gender' (Kelly & Hauck, 2015:438). Research has provided conflicting evidence on whether same-sex relationships are more egalitarian than heterosexual relationships, although more have found this to be true for lesbian couples (see Goldberg et al., 2012; Khor, 2007; Patterson et al., 2004; Solomon et al., 2005).

An issue is whether there is specialisation or sharing of labour. Esmail's (2010) study found that lesbians were more likely to share household tasks, which is essential when considering flexibility, time and burden of household tasks in relation to the labour market. This also fits with Kurdeck's findings that 'lesbians tended to share tasks compared to heterosexual couples and gay couples who tended to split tasks' (1993:128). Oerton confirms that 'lesbians, unlike hetero women, felt the responsibility for housework was never theirs alone' (1998:71).

Kelly and Hauck found that couples did not describe their division as egalitarian and that specialisation was present but limited (2015:440). However, current arrangements were described as an outcome of negotiations using 'income, time availability and personal preferences' (ibid, 2015:438) and in some respects are fair despite inequity. Peace also finds that when specialisation occurred it was due to ability, time and preference (1993). Hence, queer couples were still redoing gender 'through challenging normative gender roles and creating alternatives for how gender shapes social life' (1993:438).

Kelly and Hauck's findings underline the importance of structural factors in the ability to realise an egalitarian split. Most studies on lesbian couples have been focused in the United States (Brewster, 2017:64) and more are needed outside the American context. Kelly and Hauck focused on the USA where little part-time work is available and where benefits of employment such as health insurance are only available to those who work full-time. In this situation, it arguably makes sense to specialise between the labour market and domestic labour, no matter the ideologies of the individual couple. It is vital to locate couples in broader contextual settings and to consider the structural factors that may mitigate the materialisation of an egalitarian division. Carrington's 1999 ethnographic study found that same-sex couples had a strong egalitarian ideology and so tended to overemphasise equality in their divisions, but in practice were more divided.

In comparison, Jaspers' and Verbakel's (2013) study researched the division of labour in same-sex couples in the Netherlands which has the highest rate of part-time employment in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2016). They found that lesbians were less likely to specialise (Jasper & Verbakel, 2013: 341). In half of all lesbian couples, both worked part-time and thus had a more egalitarian division (ibid). Their study invites an essential question

regarding the extent to which lesbian and gay couples are enacting traditional gender roles. They found that gay couples worked more hours than lesbians but that both couple types had a relatively equal division. They argue this indicates that 'gender roles are still relevant in [the] decision process' (2013:388) in that normative ideals lead to the same division, resulting in equality within the couple. As they put it, 'Two partners of the same gender have been socialised with the same normative gender expectations, their behavioural choices are more alike than those of a man and a woman in a different sex couple' (ibid, 2013:345). Kurdek's 1989 study also argues that same-sex couples involve two individuals who have been socialised in the same way. Shechory and Ziv (2007) agree that housework is shared equally, stating that 'two women living together have grown up in a society in which social values and norms link the performance of household tasks and traditional role division with love and devotion to one's spouse and family' (Shechory and Ziv 2007:636). This explanation may be too simplistic for outcomes in same-sex couples because it ignores difference in gender identities and agentic negotiations in forming decisions and then maintaining the division.

Solomon et al. (2015) attempted to address more directly the question of the extent to which conventional socialisation processes drive divisions in domestic labour between same-sex and opposite-sex couples. They compared siblings where one was heterosexual and the other homosexual because they could be assumed to be socialised similarly having been brought up in the same households. They supported the conclusion that same-sex couples had a more equal division than heterosexual couples (2015:572). Furthermore, they found that between siblings, sexual orientation was a stronger predictor of division in domestic labour than income difference, countering a resource explanation for an unequal division. Solomon et al.'s study points to the importance of looking into individual agency when 'doing gender' in the creation of domestic division.

Shechory and Ziv (2007) also investigated the relationship between gender role attitudes and household tasks, finding that lesbian couples were more egalitarian than heterosexual couples. They identified that same-sex couples were more liberal in their gender role attitudes than heterosexual couples (2007:634) and argue this is why egalitarianism is often found in lesbians. However, they argue a same-sex couple 'eliminates the option of any gender hierarchy within the spousal relationship' (ibid, 2007:630). This is a misconception, showing an underlying assumption that gender must follow sex, so is too binary. First, lesbians are social subjects who do gender like any other; secondly, a hierarchy can still present itself when we consider that there may be more than one gender in a same-sex relationship. Two lesbians may identify at different ends of the gender spectrum, and so a lesbian household is not empty of gender.

Overall, the literature suggests that the division of labour (and attitudes towards the division of labour) tend to be more egalitarian in same-sex couples, but that the extent to which this is realised is partially dependent on the degree to which broader economic structures favour specialisation. It leaves unspoken the extent to which practices are consciously negotiated or how far gender informs processes of sharing and the division of labour, and therefore how practices in the home articulate with those in the public sphere. It is these issues that my study addresses.



## Methods, design, approach

I undertook four in-depth, semi-structured interviews with lesbian couples. My purposive sample of co-habiting couples was selected based on LFS findings that lesbians in co-habiting relationships tended to be university-educated, live in London, be in professional occupations and under thirty (Arabsheibani et.al, 2006). These criteria were used to select participants enabling an exploration of variation within a relatively homogeneous group. My recruitment strategy involved contacting LGBT societies in companies and then employing snowball sampling to ensure that participants would be kept in a 'social circle' of tertiary educated professionals living in London. This approach achieved a sample that met the criteria and enabled drawing out sources of variation within a relatively homogeneous population. This facilitated the explanation of factors unrelated to education, occupation or metropolitan setting. However, it only speaks to the experience of a subset of lesbians. Like other research, which has focused on white middle-class Americans, the participants in this study were, with one exception, also white and middle-class. Thus, further research might consider the lives of those who do not fit the white, middle-class demographic and thus speak to the ways in which class, race or ethnicity shape the performance of gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Whilst in a larger study, it would have been beneficial to have a more diverse sample, there were advantages to this sample. Specifically, the similarity to my own identity and social position meant that much of the power dynamic between participants and interviewer was diminished. Furthermore, the match between interviewer and respondents has allowed me to more confidently understand and make inferences. This positionality potentially eased access, facilitated discussion, and made me less likely to draw the wrong inference based on misunderstanding or unconscious bias.

Couples, rather than individuals, were selected in order to gain insight into the dynamics between the partners, especially as questions often prompted discussions, negotiations and sometimes arguments. Hence, a vital part of the interviews was observation. Due to the potential for provoking disputes between participants, I felt it necessary to be aware of power dynamics between myself and the interviewees. Hence, participants were made aware that I am a lesbian living with my partner to reduce any potential stigma about sexuality and living arrangements. This 'insider status' (Sherry, 2008) facilitated a more conversational style of interview that allowed partners to discuss and negotiate their positions more naturally.

After completing the Research Ethics Checklist and with the approval of the University, an information sheet and consent form was provided to potential participants. This explained the intended research and sought permission to record the interviews thus affording the opportunity to observe how couples interacted. The discussion used a series of broad questions and prompts which are detailed in Appendix 1. These covered how housework was divided; how the division arose; perceptions of the division equality; and what were the motivators in discussing divisions. Background questions about income differentials between couples, class and occupations were also collected along with a discussion of general awareness of concepts such as gender. Participants were also asked to compare their perception of their domestic division to those of friends, colleagues and family. Additionally, couples were asked about the possibility of having children in the future. This question was intended to gain an understanding of how couples

approach discussion and negotiation, thereby determining their 'ideal' situation to infer underlying ideologies.

Participants were given a scale of 'masculinity-femininity', with masculine at one end and feminine at the other (see Appendix 3). They were asked to complete the scale before the interview to receive an impulse answer that would be 'natural', because the response may have differed after discussing gender and housework for an hour. Participants were asked about the perceptions of their own gender identity and their partner's, along with how they thought their partner saw them. This counteracted any assumption that due to an absence of men, the household is empty of gender (see Shechory & Ziv 2007; Jaspers & Verbakel 2013). If these scholars' hypotheses are correct, then we would expect the respondents to both identify as traditionally feminine and to an equal extent. The 'masculinity-femininity' scale also shed light on whether lesbians were (re/un)doing gender through negotiation and egalitarian division in the home, or if it was two women who have both been constructed to have the responsibility to do housework, thereby, enacting traditional gender roles resulting in shared labour.

During my research, I was careful to not see the couples through a heteronormative lens that assumes 'traditional male and female roles can be straightforwardly mapped onto (homosexual) relationships' (Barrett, 2015:201). This is symptomatic of prevailing heteronormative discourse that, in a household, the masculine and feminine binary also exists in chores. As Kelly & Hauck state, 'specialised divisions should not always be interpreted as heteronormative' (2015:439). This was achieved by maintaining reflexivity through being sensitive to my own cultural, political and social context (Bryman, 2012:393).

Interviews took from between 31 and 90 minutes, with a median of 54 minutes. The duration varied due to the semi-structured nature of the interview where questions prompted and encouraged participants to talk about thoughts and feelings in an unrestricted manner. Interviews were fully transcribed, totalling 30,886 words, and identifying information has been removed by inserting pseudonyms. The research has used Bryman's (2012) guide for 'four stages of qualitative analysis' to code individual transcripts and create themes. Excerpts from transcripts were then added into multiple themes (see Appendices 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d), due to the complex nature of relationships and the multi-faceted nature of constructing negotiation and fairness. Finally, the themes were clustered into what I deemed most valuable to this study. Couple dynamics were also analysed and a systematic counting of the amount of 'interruptions' was undertaken. I focus on the themes of negotiation and the (re/un)doing of gender in what follows as these are most closely linked to the questions I set out to address.

### **Analysis and findings**

All couples identified as being middle-class, university-educated and between the ages of 21 and 33. Three participants out of eight had obtained or were completing postgraduate study. A descriptive table of couples can be found in Appendix 2.

## Negotiation and the construction of fairness

### *Fairness over equality*

Like Carrington's 1999 study, an underlying egalitarian ideology was present, but in reality, fairness was constructed rather than equality. Egalitarianism in role division relates to symmetry in division of tasks, whereas fairness represents the individuals' subjective perception of the level of their investment in the relationship regarding their feeling rewarded by it (Brehm, 1985). Couples constructed fairness by negotiating a division that they both felt benefited them individually and as a couple. A fair division could be experienced despite an unequal division of domestic labour. Whilst equality was considered the utopia, couples faced structural restraints that limited the ability to achieve equality, and so fairness was constructed as the next best thing.

"Fairness and also, fairness not in terms of I wouldn't say 'equality' I'd say fairness, because actually it's when we make decisions it's based on things other than whether or not things are the same but more the other person's, like, amount of time they have that week and their emotional state that week and things like that" - *Rebecca*.

Rebecca clearly makes the distinction between fairness and equality. 'Emotional state' was used as a deciding factor, indicating that negotiation may have arisen through conversation about an individual's feelings. Furthermore, emotion was not seen as negative but as a valid reason for why someone may not do their share of housework. This is not symptomatic of heteronormativity where emotion is perceived as a weakness and a feminine aptitude. In this context, it was valued, respected and used to both inform and construct a collective decision.

Kylie and Sadie were also aware of the difficulties in creating equality, mentioning efficiency:

K: I think it's partly about being efficient about it, and partly about having an equal...

S: I don't think it's about equal

Both: About a fair division

K: A fair division more than equal cos it's not always going to be able to work out as equal but-

S: Yeah, we wouldn't spend hours making a rota or working out the amount, *it's the feeling of fair*" - *Kylie and Sadie, emphasis added*.

Efficiency in a household is often used as a justification for one partner staying in the home (Becker, 1981). However, they have negotiated a division that is both efficient and fair. Sadie mentions the feeling of fairness, relating to the subjective nature of fairness. Whilst it could be perceived that an unequal division is not fair and would not benefit a couple in the labour market, Kurdeks' study found that housework was experienced as less burdensome when it was not being

completed for an oppressing power (2007). This would benefit an individual in the labour market as the emotional and laborious nature of housework would be reduced if the individual felt the division was fair.

### *Time*

Kelly and Hauck's study found that income and time availability were critical factors in driving negotiation between lesbian couples. Here, couples have indicated that time does influence the negotiation of the division of domestic labour. However, couples in this study frequently called their division 'flexible', thus while time was a factor that drove negotiation, flexibility was what sustained and maintained the feeling of fairness.

R: "Umm... We don't have set roles

L: We have sort of, well we don't have set roles

R: *[Interrupting]* we have routines, we don't have set roles

L: We alternate who does what like the cleaning work and *we're equally responsible*

L: if one person cooks the other person cleans up, and we alternate who cooks

R: We change the sheets together, [...]

L: [...] you'd cook but I'd clean up, but then if someone misses their turn and you do two in a row it's not like a big deal

Me: you do have, like, turns?

L: *Flexible* though

R: [...] like if I have lots of work on then Leila will take the load of more cooking

L: But then you would do the cleaning up afterwards" – *Rebecca and Leila, emphasis added.*

Rebecca and Leila confirm Oerton's findings that 'lesbians, unlike hetero women, felt the responsibility for housework was never theirs alone' (1998:71). Rebecca and Leila demonstrate how a fair division is obtained through the medium of flexibility. A division can be uneven at a particular point in time but, through negotiation, they co-operate to ensure equal responsibility by maintaining an unspecialised split over a period of time. This flexible nature of division not only means that housework is less emotionally and physically taxing, but that time can be made available for an individual as the other partner can pick up her tasks when needed as there are 'no set roles'. This could mean the ability for working hours to be negotiated when deadlines or other factors such as work drinks and networking present themselves.

### *Gender and power*

West and Zimmerman (1987:127) define gender as 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category'. Applying this to housework, there are different household activities associated with different sexes. The lesbians I interviewed were aware of gender normative conceptions of domestic labour,

highlighting that they are also subjects shaped by social norms.

R: "I think it is feminised, but I don't think it should be. I don't think it is inherently gendered, but I think that it is gendered in our society.

L: yeah I don't think it is inherently gendered but in society it is, and so that my view of housework, or when I'm doing housework, I do see it as consciously gendered in some way"  
–*Rebecca and Leila.*

Leila mentions that whilst she is doing the housework it is gendered. This suggests that West and Zimmerman's concept works, by doing an activity that is gendered you are doing gender. Thus gender can be reproduced and redefined because an individual can do an activity that is not normative for their assigned sex.

The queer home provides a space to recreate gender, as Sofia says 'fixing is what men do, and women do like cleaning and tidy, making things look nice'. In a lesbian household, fixing still needs to occur and so the gender script is redefined by an individual doing a deviant task. The interactional nature of gender by which individuals negotiate everyday situations such as housework to produce social order, opens the possibility of re-gendering an activity. Studies that assumed a lack of gender in a lesbian household ignore that lesbians still undertake activities that have been constructed to be masculine or feminine. Furthermore, when we consider Butler's argument that gender does not follow sex and is not binary, we can begin to understand that despite sex being held constant, gender may not be within the lesbian home. Gender can be analysed by looking at actions that an individual does. A non-normative gender display in the lesbian home may be beneficial in the labour market as their actions could signify masculinity which is currently better rewarded in the public sphere.

Individuals did not perform entirely normatively or entirely deviantly. Instead, gender was simultaneously done and redone through negotiation with a partner. First, I analyse doing gender, then redoing gender, looking at the adverse effects if only one individual in a household is consistently redoing gender. Secondly, I consider rejections of heteronormativity by couples, noting that a rejection of heteronormativity and a home with more than one gender are not mutually exclusive. Lastly, I consider undoing gender.

### *Doing gender*

Normative gender displays have been put forward as justification for the sharing of domestic tasks in lesbian households (Jaspers & Verbakel 2013). Here, I infer cases where a normative gender display is occurring by analysing the use of naturalising language when explaining how a division was created and maintained.

"It wasn't a verbal conversation I just know it happened that naturally" –*Molly.*

Molly explains that there was never a 'sit down' conversation, something that most of the couples echoed, and that their division just happened naturally. She is referring to Beth doing nearly all the cleaning and cooking during the first year of their relationship. Beth saw herself as more feminine than her partner, while Molly perceived Beth to be more feminine than she was. In this case, it appears that 'naturally' means that one partner enacted gender norms whilst the other subverted. This account of 'natural' differs to other couples whose 'natural' indicated a sharing of housework with both individuals acting normatively.

Sadie discusses her perceptions of domestic divisions between her friends in straight and lesbian relationships:

"she is always having to like cajole him to do the chores... so I feel that's quite a stark contrast whereas it's not when I think of some of our gay [female] friends... there seems to be a pretty fair division, I feel like they just share it more naturally" - *Sadie*.

She assumes that her lesbian friends 'share it more naturally'. This implies an assumption that women are more inclined to help with domestic tasks and thus an egalitarian division will result. Whilst this is a perception of someone else's relationship, it provides insight into how Sadie instinctively thinks, demonstrating the saliency of gender norms. Therefore, believing that women are more likely to be conscientious around the home fits with Kurdek's (2013) study that same-sex have been socialised the same way.

### *Redoing gender*

Grace and Sofia provide a clear example of how they redo gender. They note that in their household which is comprised of themselves and straight women, they do the 'boy' tasks:

S: [Whispering] sometimes I think, the jobs in this house that a boy would do, somehow, we do those things

G: Yeah yeah, like lightbulb changing

S: We live with two girls who are straight, this is probably a coincidence, but I feel like we, if there was like you know something was broken and needed fixing or taking the bins out you know something like that

G: [Interrupting] 100% of the time that's us! - *Grace and Sofia*.

These expectations are potentially due to the heteronormative notion that lesbians are masculine. In a house of straight women, it is the lesbians who undertake the housework that is subversive for their assigned sex. This example highlights the fact that gender in an interactional sense does not just happen between the couple and could be extrapolated to consider how such expectations also shape interactions in the public sphere.

In this excerpt, Grace and Sofia redo gender by satirising gender roles in society:

“Grace does like loads of the gardening and she’ll wear like dungarees, like gardening clothes or whatever [...] cos we don’t think about our gender at all in our relationship... but then we’ll be like, it’s just joking around like as if Grace’s the man, then we will perform those roles cos we find it really funny cos it’s not like that. So, Grace might come in like covered in mud and I’ll be like [exaggerated female housewife voice] ‘oh I’ve made you a cup of tea’ and shit like that.

I think we enjoy doing that cos it’s not there at all, the rest of the time. [...] we can pick out what gender is supposed to be like, or not supposed to be, but how people perform it and then like to do it cos it’s funny” –*Sofia*

The ability to use comedy as subversion shows a clear understanding of how actions are gendered in society and again contradicts studies that point to a household empty of gender. Furthermore, Sofia is also redoing gender, as she clearly does not associate the persona enacted with herself in everyday life. It is a performance that she puts on to indicate her feelings that gendered roles in a house are senseless, undermining the expression of more traditional attitudes (Schechory & Ziv, 2007:634).

Despite couples being able to redo gender by doing masculine tasks, there were strong rejections of heteronormative understandings of their divisions or gender identities. Molly is explicit in her understanding that she is a female who does masculinity and is, therefore, redoing gender:

“I identify as a female maybe if I was thinking about it leaning slightly more towards masculine, [...] everything I do is on the masculine side, you know I fall into a lot of male gender roles, and that’s not because I feel like a man or that I am a man ..... the way I do things, the way I dress, the way I sit, it’s a bit more typically masculine. BUT if someone came up to me and said, ‘so you’re the man in the relationship’ I’d punch them verbally in the face, because I don’t think we fit into that.” – *Molly*

Molly has a firm rejection of people outside her relationship saying, ‘so you’re the man?’ She responds in a normatively masculine way by suggesting violence. This rejection was present in all couples, with Sofia saying, ‘it’s annoying, it’s just like neither of us!’ in response to people asking ‘who’s the man?’, she continues below:

S: “Like we’re not ascribing to... we haven’t done like Grace’s the man and I’m the woman, like we’re not doing that at all, but like we obviously are both women biologically or whatever, how we perceive ourselves. But it’s not like, like I don’t see any of these roles as...

You know, like if Grace's cleaning I'm not like 'Ooh Grace's looking a bit girly dusting', and then if I'm doing the light bulb I'm not like the man doing the lightbulb, there is nobody else to do it. One of us is gonna have to" –*Sofia*.

Grace and Sofia also echo that within a lesbian household all chores must still be done. Sofia states that no-one is ascribing to a gendered role as their division is flexible. Grace was seen to be more feminine by herself and her partner, and she was also responsible for most of the cleaning within the relationship. Nevertheless, in their previous quote, it was mentioned that Grace did the gardening. This is an example of how despite there being differing gender identities, household tasks are not assigned in general based on those identities. Instead, a flexible division through negotiation around time and equality decides who does what. Three out of four of the couples were doing and redoing gender simultaneously and in an apparent ad-hoc manner leading to the sharing of tasks, not specialisation.

#### *Ramifications of one individual redoing gender*

One of the couples did not redo and do gender in a symbiotic manner, and so their division was more specialised. If one partner only does or redoes gender then due to the interactional nature of gendered actions particularly relating to housework, the other partner must do the activities on the opposing binary.

"maybe we do fall into a masculine and a feminine role within our relationship ..... you know cos I've decided to be slightly more masculine that I need to take on these roles, cos I do, if I wasn't with Beth I'd still be in construction and I'd still love DIY, it doesn't have any play in our relationship but I'm conscious of it, I don't dislike it , I don't, I like being, I like taking those roles, I like the way the dynamic is, and I couldn't be with someone who was more masculine than me" – *Molly*

"Because I haven't been with a girl before, I haven't experienced the different dynamics, so I think automatically I've fallen into the more female roles cos that's what I know"- *Beth*

This is clear indication that the lesbian household is not empty of gender. This also shows that the most constructive part of creating as close to an egalitarian relationship as possible is flexibility. In this couple, Molly redoes gender, she earns twice as much as Beth and works in a highly-masculinised sector. Kelly and Hauck claim that gender is redone through 'negotiating a division of labour, which enables female participants to pursue careers in male-dominated fields' (2015:452). If women become more like men, as neo-liberal feminist discourse calls for, women need to still have a 'wife' whether that be their partner or outsourced help.

"I struggle with how I dress in the office, I'm the only woman who dresses like I do so I feel



like I stick out like a sore thumb, all the girls wear tights and dresses and heels and I think if anything it's reinforcing the difference the two halves in the office, there's men and there's women and they have two completely different places in my workplace[...]Beth was doing a lot of work and I personally didn't think it was fair, cos she'd cook for me every single night and tidy the room and I let her do a lot of that a) because she claimed she wanted to do it but b) because *naturally* Beth is a much tidier person than I am" –Molly, *emphasis added*

Molly uses naturalising and reductionist language to explain why she cleans less than her partner. She also articulates the binary that she experiences between men and women, something that may encourage housework to be performed in a binary manner. Both Molly and Beth studied subjects at university that did not include gender or other social phenomena, and as such use biological rhetoric to justify a technically unequal division. This indicates how vital education can be within formulating divisions in the private sphere.

Furthermore, Molly says 'I let her' indicating an uneven power balance within the relationship, something which may stem from Molly's more lucrative salary or her strong ability to redo gender. Whilst Molly is reflective about the nature of their relationship and is aware that she could 'abuse' her economic securities, she continuously emphasised throughout the interview the effort she makes to ensure that Beth is happy and feels that her division is fair. However, it is worth nothing that this is one of Molly's terms as Beth mentions that their unequal division wasn't making her 'miserable enough to bring up'. Therefore, a lack of negotiation in this division means that it depends on Molly's ability to notice that her partner is doing an unfair amount or is getting emotionally or physically tired.

Molly interrupted Beth five times as much (ten) as Beth interrupted (twice) Molly. However, throughout the interview Molly regularly spoke for Beth even when Beth was asked a direct question, causing me to say numerous times 'What do you think Beth?' to increase her participation. This may reflect an unequal power dynamic, or it could be that Beth is shyer than Molly or was less able to formulate her thoughts into words. If it is the latter, Molly was very attentive to Beth and aware of her partner's needs. However, this does exemplify a potential issue, that if one individual redoes gender solely, the other may be forced to do gender.

### *Undoing gender*

Risman suggests that we might think of 'undoing gender' (Deutsch 2007) as occurring 'when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged' (2009:83). West and Zimmerman disagree, asserting that it involves abandonment of accountability to sex category which they believe is not possible. They argue that gender is 'not so much undone as redone' (2009: 118) through shifts in the accountability structures that sustain gender in interaction.

I argue that Rebecca and Leila undo gender because if gender is achieved and sustained through interaction, the interaction within their household defies the sex binary. Through conscious actions

to challenge the binary, they change the dynamics within their household which produces better results in the labour market structures. Therefore, gender is undone on individual and structural levels through the production of a pay premium for lesbians.

This occurs through a conscious effort to purposely do feminine tasks so as not to devalue them:

R: "I think now I'm actually more likely to help out at home. Because I've done so much thinking about it, and actually realise now how that work is devalued and I don't want to devalue it [...] I want to help my mum, I want to say this is a valuable thing, and acknowledge that this is difficult for you" - *Rebecca*

Rebecca performs a feminine task but does so in a subversive way, by making it valued. The gender binary has been undone in the sense that how the action is performed has involved a conscious effort. This means the subject's 'doing' is removed from a gender script that dictates that action because it was a conscious choice to perform and give value. Rebecca has dissociated herself from her gender to consciously choose an action that shows appreciation by adding value and visibility. Therefore, she is not merely falling on one side of the binary, but is attempting to change what femininity is without it becoming masculine. This does not mean that the structures have shifted to alter accountability via sex category, but that a new category is being formed. This is further enforced by Rebecca's identification as gender-neutral on the scale. Despite being female and doing a feminine task, she is actively changing what that task means.

Leila, Sofia and Rebecca identified themselves as neutral on the scale provided to participants, whilst the rest were somewhere in the middle. However, Leila also chooses to identify as queer to subvert binaries:

"umm, I think I probably fall under the umbrella of bi-sexuality, however, umm I think bisexual sort of imposes a binary" - *Leila*.

This is a conscious decision that involves self-reflection and a critical awareness of dichotomies in society that are conducive to power imbalances. Leila's purposeful identification outside of the binary undoes gender, because she does not link her identity or actions to a specific sex.

As well as a conscious effort to value feminine tasks, Leila and Rebecca also talk about conscious efforts to subvert gender norms and enact masculinity.

R: "He had a problem with you paying last night,

L: Yeah, I paid for dinner, he didn't wanna be seen as being paid for by a woman!

R: Yeah cos he was on a table with three women, so he didn't want to be paid for by a

woman in front of other women

L: Super traditional

R: But as soon as he said that I knew that Leila was going to insist on paying, I mean I would have!" – *Rebecca and Leila*.

Here, they discuss a dinner with Leila's brother. Conscious efforts to subvert gender norms and value femininity whilst identifying as queer and gender-neutral constitutes undoing gender. The ability to undo gender needs deep understanding and self-reflection not to fall on one side of the binary and thus maintain a balance. Due to the interactional nature of gender, it also requires the other people in the house, in this case, the partner to be undoing gender in a symbiotic way. This relies on flexibility and negotiation around domestic labour.

### Conclusion

Same-sex couples divide their time between market work and household work in a different way than heterosexual couples do, resulting in differences in labour market outcomes (Black et al, 2007). In this study, whilst time, preference and equality were factors that drove negotiation regarding domestic labour, flexibility sustained and maintained the feeling of fairness and avoidance of specialisation in a couple's division. Domestic flexibility may lead to better outcomes in the labour market as responsibility for housework does not fall on one individual.

This dissertation has analysed three potential reasons relating to domestic labour for the pay premium experienced by lesbians in the UK labour market: doing, redoing and undoing gender through negotiation.

Whilst redoing is a successful strategy in the labour market for one person, it can be disadvantageous when only one individual undertakes it as it forces their partner to do gender. Couples who 'redo' gender provide evidence there is not an absence of gender in the queer home. This is further supported by the masculine-feminine scales where participants often identified themselves differently on the 'masculine-feminine' scales, showing the existence of gender in their homes.

The pay premium may also be realised through individuals simultaneously redoing and doing gender through negotiating and maintaining a flexible division. Both partners can adapt to the labour force and benefit from an egalitarian split. This method of dividing labour was found to be most common in this study. However, due to the limitations of the sample size, further research could ascertain whether this is prevalent in the wider lesbian population.

Couples can also engage in undoing gender to achieve success in the labour market. However, to 'undo', a deep understanding of gender is a prerequisite. If sex is constructed and gender replaces sex (as sex is only socially significant when it becomes gender), then the abandonment of the category can occur by valuing feminine actions and subverting masculinity. Within the context of a

couple, this must be done symbiotically to avoid falling on one side of the binary more than the other.

This dissertation has shed light on how all women can reformulate the private sphere, resulting in better outcomes in the labour market through their flexibility and negotiation. This approach could be transferred to different-sex couples. Furthermore, the egalitarian division and pay premium associated with lesbians indicates the importance of domestic labour in analysing pay gaps. Therefore, future policy should consider the home as point of focus.

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**Appendix 1: Interview prompts**

General background info

How old are you?

What is your education level?

What socio-economic background?

How do you identify?

How long have you been together?

How long have you been living together?

What are your occupations?

Does one of you earn more than the other?

Do you discuss/are aware of concepts such as gender/feminism/equality?

Do you consider housework to be feminine?

Who does what in the home?

Would you describe this division fair?

What is your definition of fair? E.g. unequal hours but fair division

How have you arrived at this division?

Did you discuss who does what?

How do you maintain the division?

Does one of you delegate? If so how did that come to be?

Do you consider time, pleasure, or equality to be the main factor in decisions around domestic labour?

Would you consider your division as flexible?

Have considerations around your jobs come into the division?



What would you describe as your motive to discuss divisions in labour?

How does your division compare to your friends/family/co-workers?

Have you discussed children?

Appendix 2: Descriptive table of couples

| Names                   | Age            | Occupation  | Income disparity                 | Flexible  | Gender scale   | interruptions                                 | Overall notes on interview  |
|-------------------------|----------------|---|----------------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Molly (M) & Beth (B)    | M: 22<br>B: 21 | M: Contract Manager in construction<br>B: Graphic   | Yes, M earns twice as much as B  | Relatively, but strong preferences for tasks in constructing fairness   | M more masculine, perceived herself to be and was perceived by her partner to be. B was more feminine and did majority of cleaning. M did gender, B did gender | M interrupts 10 times<br>B interrupts 2 times | Less aware about theoretical concepts of gender than other couples, but aware of general gender roles. M spoke and interrupted more indicating lack of ability to negotiate. Preference and money were main factors in decision making. Naturalising language used as excuse for unequal division 'm genetically less tidy'. Have extensively discussed children with favoured option being part time indicating an underlying egalitarian ideology. M as doing gender but at the expense of B doing gender? language indicating choice 'used to not eg women to choose to work, division slightly unequal but both consider it fair as was driven by enjoyment. Although few occasions where B was getting drained', had not discussed housework. Had had deep discussions about children - would want to be flexible and both part time in ideal world - approached with egalitarian ideology |
| Laila (L) & Rebecca (R) | L: 22<br>R: 21 | Both post grads in full time study.<br>L- feminist philosophy<br>R- feminist politics                                     | no                               | Very flexible, No set tasks, Preference was not a reason for one to do more than the other, Strongest underlying egalitarian ideology | Both relatively gender neutral, Rebecca slightly more feminine and was the one who would ask for cleaning to happen. Both did gender together                  | L interrupts 3 times<br>R interrupts 11 times | Clear egalitarian ideology, flexible not specialised, Huge awareness of gender concepts at structural & individual level, Disagreements occurred within interview and were resolved, participants challenged each other, Made conscious efforts to value feminised tasks and to subvert by doing a masculine task, Fairness/equality main motivator, didn't want to include money in any negotiation  |
| Kylie (K) & Sadie (S)   | K: 24<br>S: 33 | K: works in human rights charity that is LGBT specific<br>S: works for university improving diversity and social mobility | S: earns twice as much as K      | Specialisation only occurred due to structural factors - K commute x longer   | Both did gender. K more feminine. S very masculine   | K interrupts once<br>S interrupts 5 times     | Took turns well, had previously negotiated bills, housework etc before cohabiting. K responsible for making things look pretty'. Overall flexible, egalitarian ideology   |
| Grace (G) & Sofia (S)   | G: 26<br>S: 25 | S: civil servant and comedian<br>G: counter extremism PR  | G: earns tiny amount more than S | Flexible division, where specialisation occurred preference was reason  | Both did gender. S gender neutral. G more feminine   | G interrupts 21<br>S: 2                       | Didn't say that they negotiated but did extensively during interview. Aware of gender roles and subverted and satirised them. Share tasks and flexible but G more cleaning than S. Uneven split but was heavily discussed, flexible division, where specialisation occurred preference was reason   |

### Appendix 3: Femininity-Masculinity scale

Make a mark on the line

?

?

How do you see yourself?

?

Feminine  Masculine

?

?

?

?

How do you think your partner sees you?

?

Feminine  Masculine

?

??

?

?

How do you see your partner?

?

Feminine  Masculine

?

?

?

?

?

How do you think your partner sees themselves?

?

Feminine  Masculine

?