Attitude alignment in marriage and cohabitation: The case of sex-role attitudes

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Abstract

Alignment of attitudes in personal relationships has not often been examined with survey data. This paper examines changes in sex-role attitudes using a longitudinal and dyadic survey among 374 recently married and cohabiting persons. The paper tests 2 general hypotheses: (a) respondents will become more egalitarian (traditional) when the partner is initially more egalitarian (traditional) and (b) attitude alignment will be stronger when the relational relevance of the attitude is greater, which is defined as the degree to which the attitude topic has consequences for the internal functioning of the relationship. Both hypotheses are partly supported. The analyses show positive effects of the partner's attitudes on later attitudes of the respondent while controlling for prior respondent attitudes, confirming the notion of attitude alignment. In addition, alignment in sex-role attitudes appears stronger when conditions in the household are such that a traditional division of labor becomes more problematic. Differences by gender suggest that husbands change more often in the direction of the wife than vice versa.

Social and political attitudes are to a large extent affected by the primary relationships that people engage in. Parents are the most important socializing agents in this context, and their influence on children's attitudes has been studied frequently (Cunningham, 2001; Lueptow, 1980; Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997; Myers & Booth, 2002; Tallichet & Willits, 1986; Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992; Troll & Bengtson, 1979). Attitude influences of other family members, such as children, siblings, and the partner, have been studied less frequently. In family sociology, many survey analyses exist, that examine the link between attitudes and marriage, but these studies examine how the experience of life course transitions, such as getting married and having children,

affects attitudes, generally without regard to the characteristics of the partner (Amato & Booth, 1995; Jansen & Kalmijn, 2000; Lesthaeghe, 2002; Myers & Booth; Peplau, Hill, & Rubin, 1993; Tallichet & Willits; Waite, Goldscheider, & Witsberger, 1986). Hence, sociological studies show that being married influences attitudes, but they fail to show that the partner has something to do with that.

In the psychology of personal relationships, more attention has been given to the role of the partner (Kenny & Cook, 1999). Many studies have measured attitude similarity of partners, but most of these focus on how such similarities affect the development of the partner relationship (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001; Burleson & Denton, 1992; Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002; Surra & Longstreth, 1990). In addition, many studies have shown that attitude similarity increases the chances that personal relationships will be formed (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Byrne, 1971). Less attention, however, has been given to the question of if and how such attitude similarities arise in marriage.

One important exception can be found in Newcomb's classic study of long-term attitude change of American college women (Newcomb, 1963). In this study, Newcomb showed that husbands played an important role in sustaining wives' early shifts toward more liberal political views. An important recent exception is an experimental study among dating couples by Davis and Rusbult (2001). Davis and Rusbult asked partners about their opinions on a range of social and political topics. Levels of agreement were calculated, and partners were subsequently asked to discuss some of the issues about which they disagreed (they were not told that they disagreed). Attitudes were measured again after the experiment. The degree to which people changed their views in the direction of the partner's initial attitudes was the central dependent variable. Attitudes on which partners disagreed but that were not discussed served as the reference point. Davis and Rusbult found, among other things, significant shifts in the direction of the partner for discussed issues, while finding less convergence for issues that were not discussed.

In this contribution, I reexamine attitude alignment by analyzing a nationally representative panel survey among 374 recently married and cohabiting persons in the Netherlands. The waves of the panel were about 4 years apart, and in both waves, identical questions were asked about attitudes. The data are not only prospective but are also dyadic: In the first of the two waves, partners were interviewed independently about their attitudes. The attitudes I study are sex-role attitudes, which are defined as normative beliefs about how gender roles should be divided in society (in the home, the labor market, and society at large).

The first aim is to assess whether attitude alignment occurs. Do people's sex-role attitudes become more traditional if the partner is traditional, and vice versa; do people's attitudes become more egalitarian if the partner is egalitarian? Attitude alignment is closely related to the concept of partner influence, although there are important differences between the two (see also Kenny & Cook, 1999). Alignment is a broader concept because it also covers alignment that arises from common external experiences rather than from

partner influences. At the same time, not all partner influences will take the form of alignment because the influence of the partner may also be in an opposite direction, leading to divergence. Although in this study, the theoretical focus is on how partners influence each other's attitudes, empirically, I can only analyze attitude alignment.

The second aim of this contribution is to examine explanations of attitude alignment. Using notions derived from the theory of interdependence (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and theoretical insights from research on attitude change (Petty & Wegener, 1998), I argue that partners influence each other because disagreements on attitudes can lead to conflicts, which provide a motivation for attitude change. This notion is translated into a hypothesis about *relational relevance*: The more relevant the attitude discrepancy is for the functioning of the relationship, the stronger the degree of attitude alignment. This hypothesis is tested by examining how characteristics, which are believed to weaken or strengthen the degree to which sex-role attitudes are relevant to the relationship, moderate the degree of attitude alignment.

In comparison to the few earlier experimental studies on the topic, my paper has two novelties. First, the focus is on attitudes that have a direct bearing on the internal functioning of the relationship, rather than on attitudes that are unrelated to the relationship itself. Davis and Rusbult (2001), for instance, studied dating couples' views on the death penalty, tolerance of homosexuals, ethnic prejudice, and similar issues. While such topics may be important to individual respondents, they are less relevant to the relationship itself. The attitudes studied in the present paper, in contrast, are directly relevant to people's conjugal relationship. Disagreements on sex-role attitudes may lead to day-to-day conflicts about the division of labor in the household and the couple's participation in the labor market. Sex-role attitudes are therefore important for the stability of the marriage, and this is especially true for recently married couples (Amato & Booth, 1995).

Second, I study attitude alignment using a survey design rather than an experimental

design. The focus is on married and cohabiting couples rather than on couples who are dating, the sample is representative rather than selective (e.g., college students), and the focus is on long-term instead of short-term change (4 years vs. a number of hours or a couple of days). In sum, this paper expands our knowledge on the importance of intimate relationships for attitude formation and confronts these insights with survey data rather than experimental data.

Background and Hypotheses

Attitude influences in marriage

Experimental studies of attitude change have typically used designs in which people are expected to form or change their attitudes after being confronted with the attitudes of others. Within this type of study, considerable variation exists in the nature of the influence design (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Cooper & Croyle, 1984; Petty & Wegener, 1998; Wood, 2000). The influencing persons can form a group or can be single individuals, their attitudes can be presented with or without supporting arguments, the influence attempt can be hidden or overt, and face-to-face interaction with the influencing agent can be frequent or absent. In most cases, the influencing agent is (and remains) a stranger to the individual, which means that the relationship with the influencing agent has a short time horizon.

The natural setting of marriage is both similar and different from the experimental setting.[1] The partner is a single influence source who engages in high levels of communication with the respondent and who has a long future with the respondent. Partners may not necessarily want to change each other, they may not even express their attitudes, and if they do want to change each other, they may do so in various ways. In other words, the attitude change situation in marriage is heterogeneous.

Probably the most important difference with other attitude influence conditions is that attitudes in marriage may have consequences

for the functioning of the relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). If a person is confronted with the attitudes of strangers or with influence attempts by strangers, he or she can resist the influence attempt without this having any consequences for the relationship. There may be a motivation to reconsider one's attitudes, but this motivation will generally not stem from the relationship with the other person.

In couple relationships, this is different. Although some forms of dissimilarity may not have consequences for the relationship—diverging views on political issues, for example, can be ignored by not talking about politics—other forms of dissimilarity cannot be ignored. Partners are assumed to live together and thus need to engage in joint activities. If the attitudes refer to such activities, attitude dissimilarity has secondary consequences, and this is particularly obvious for the case of sex-role attitudes. In the theory of interdependence, these types of situations have been considered as a "noncorrespondence of outcomes," and much has been written about how couples come to a solution in such a dilemma (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Surra & Longstreth, 1990; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

The notions above suggest an important explanation for why partners will influence each other's attitudes (Borden & Levinger, 1991; Davis & Rusbult, 2001). First, when the attitude topic has real-life consequences, partners cannot avoid expressing their views and will be confronted more often with their differences. Obviously, having information about attitude differences will not by itself lead to attitude change. Nevertheless, without knowing another person's attitudes, convergence is not possible at all (Davis & Rusbult).

Second, attitude dissimilarity leads to a conflict of interest, which provides a reason to communicate about the discrepancies that couples have. Communication enhances the motivation to (re)consider one's attitudes, and this in turn may foster attitude change (Petty & Wegener, 1998). The reasoning is not that people compromise on attitudes—after all, people can only decide about what to do, they cannot decide about what to think—but rather that there is a motivation to talk about attitudes

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1. Unmarried cohabitation is included when I use the term *marriage*.

and that this communication process itself leads to new insights and to different thoughts.

Third, the conflicts of interest that people have when they have dissimilar attitudes may also be resolved by changing one's behavior. For example, the wife may agree to go to the movies with her husband even when she does not like movies or the husband may help in doing housework even if his sex-role attitudes are traditional. In such cases, at least one of the partners will be confronted with a state of affairs that is inconsistent with his or her attitudes. This leads to cognitive dissonance, which may be another reason for attitude adjustment (e.g., Wood, 2000). In other words, when attitude discrepancies are relevant to the relationship, people may either change their views directly or they may change their views in response to a change in their behavior.

Hypotheses

My first hypothesis addresses the possible occurrence of attitude alignment:

H1: *The more egalitarian (traditional) the attitudes of the partner, the more the respondent will change in an egalitarian (traditional) direction.*

I expect this hypothesis to hold for men and women equally. In other words, given that men are often more traditional than women (e.g., Kalmijn, 2003), men can change their wives' attitudes in a traditional direction, just as women can change their husbands' attitudes in an egalitarian direction. It has sometimes been argued that women are more influenceable than men (Eagly & Carli, 1981), but the evidence for this is mixed. Davis and Rusbult (2001), for example, did not find an interaction between sex and attitude change. Moreover, it can be doubted whether women are more influenceable than men in the specific case of sex-role attitudes. Cacioppo and Petty (1980) have shown that women are not more influenceable than men for issues about which women have much prior knowledge and for which their motivation is aroused. The case of sex roles seems to fit well with this condition.

The second hypothesis addresses the underlying reasons for attitude alignment. The discussion above suggests that the strength of attitude alignment varies with the relational relevance of the attitude. Relational relevance is defined as the degree to which the attitude is important for the functioning of the relationship. Note that the concept of relational relevance is not the same as attitude importance and its sister concepts (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). For such concepts, the prediction is just the opposite: Greater personal involvement in the attitude, for example, would lead to stronger attitudes and to less, not more, influenceability (Petty & Krosnick). The hypothesis here is that greater relational relevance of an attitude leads to more attitude alignment.

To translate this hypothesis into testable predictions, variation can be sought across attitudes or across conditions. In the former case, one compares partner effects for two or more attitudes varying in the degree to which they have implications for the couple's life (e.g., sex-role attitudes vs. political views). In the latter case, one compares partner effects for two or more situations in which a given attitude is more or less relevant to the relationship. I follow the latter approach and use three real-life indicators of relational relevance: having children, whether the wife works, and having busy work schedules. All three variables are indicators of how difficult it is for the couple to run the household. The more difficult it is for the couple to run the household, the more problematic it will be if the husband has traditional sex-role attitudes and the wife has egalitarian attitudes (by far the most common type of dissimilarity). Conversely, if the partners have different views about sex roles, but there is little household work to do, there will also be no conflict and the topic can be avoided.

This leads to three research hypotheses:

H2a: *The more hours the wife works, the stronger the degree of attitude alignment.*

H2b: *The busier the working schedule of the couple, the stronger the degree of attitude alignment.*

> H2c: *When the couple has children, the degree of attitude alignment is greater.*

The hypotheses above also suggest gender differences. More specifically, I expect that when conditions are difficult in the household, it is more likely that the husband will change toward the wife than that the wife will change toward the husband. The reason for this is that the difficulties of a demanding work-family life will probably more easily be solved by moving toward a more egalitarian mode. It is also plausible that the wife will make more effort in changing her husband in an egalitarian direction when work conditions in the household are more difficult. As a result, we would expect that under conditions of high relational relevance, husbands will be more likely to adjust than wives.

Method

Data

The data I use come from a panel study of young adults in the Netherlands who were born in 1961, 1965, and 1969 (Liefbroer & Kalmijn, 1997). I analyze the 1995 and 1999 waves of the panel, here referred to as Wave 1 and Wave 2, repectively.[2] In Wave 1, not only the original respondents were interviewed but the partners also were interviewed. They were interviewed with the same questionnaire and self-completion booklets that were used for the respondent. In Wave 2, respondents were interviewed again, but the partners were not reinterviewed. The interviews in Wave 1 were face to face, and those in Wave 2 were done by telephone. In Wave 2, respondents were 30, 34, and 38 years of age.

The analyses in this paper are based on respondents who were living together with a partner in Wave 1. Of the 542 married and cohabiting couples in Wave 1, 416 were interviewed again in Wave 2, and of those, 374 were still together at that time.

The dropout due to attrition in the full sample was 27%. To assess whether attrition is

selective, I examined differences between dropouts and those who remained in the sample. Dropouts were *not* more or less egalitarian in their opinions about sex roles ($t = .2$, $p > .05$ for men; $t = -.6$, $p > .05$ for women), and more importantly, they did not differ with respect to the level of prior disagreement, as measured by the absolute difference in partners' sex-role attitudes ($t = 1.2$, $p > .05$ for men; $t = .6$, $p > .05$ for women).

Because the partner was not interviewed again in Wave 2, I can only measure whether the respondent changes his or her views in the direction of the original attitudes of the partner. This implies alignment if one is willing to assume that the partner does not change his or her attitudes in an opposite direction. Although it would yield more insights if we had changes of both partners, this is not possible with the data at hand. Recent experimental research has used this ''one-sided change design'' as well (Davis & Rusbult, 2001).

Measures

Sex-role attitudes in Waves 1 and 2 were measured using five statements about the appropriate role of men and women in society (e.g., ''it is unnatural for women to be in charge at work'' and ''men are the natural breadwinners''). The reliability of the scale of sex-role attitudes is $\alpha = .70$ for respondents in Wave 1, $\alpha = .68$ for partners in Wave 1, and $\alpha = .69$ for respondents in Wave 2. While these are not very high, they are comparable to earlier studies (Amato & Booth, 1995; Tallichet & Willits, 1986). The scales are constructed by taking the mean of the items (the items were reversed where needed and were standardized to give them equal weights in the scale). Higher scores on the scale imply more egalitarian attitudes.

The scales were constructed in exactly the same way for respondents and partners and for the two waves. Because the second interview was done by telephone, there was concern as to whether it would be more difficult to measure people's opinions. To solve this, we sent a written questionnaire to respondents in advance. Respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaire, and the answers were subsequently

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2. Other waves of the panel were in 1987, 1989, and 1991.

recorded during the telephone interview. The second wave did not yield poorer scales, as measured by Cronbach's α, than the first wave.

The moderator variables are the following.

Wife's work: number of paid working hours per week in Wave 1.
Children: whether the couple had children in the first wave or at any point between the first and the second wave (yes is coded 1, no is coded 0).
Busy work schedules: measured with three questions applying to the respondent: how often the person works irregular hours, how often the person works overtime, and how much time it takes to travel to work. This was assessed in the Wave-2 interview only. A Wave-1 measure would have been better, but the data in Wave 1 do not include this information.

I include several control variables, which have been considered relevant in the literature on sex-role attitudes (e.g., Cunningham, 2001; Moen et al., 1997; Thornton et al., 1983). The measures pertain to Wave 1. The variables are defined as follows.

Age: ranges from 26 to 34 years in Wave 1.
Sex: woman are coded 1, men are coded 0.
Respondent's education: the highest degree of schooling obtained, measured on a continuous scale ranging from 1 for *elementary education* to 7 for *university education*.
Division of household labor: five items measuring how household tasks were distributed (e.g., cooking, cleaning). Answers were given on a scale from 1 (*entirely done by husband*) to 7 (*entirely done by wife*). The scale score is the average of the respondent's answers to the items (α = .78).
Mother's religion: whether the mother attended church weekly when the respondent was 14 years (weekly attendance is coded 1, all other categories coded 0).
Mother's employment: whether the mother worked for pay when the respondent was 14 years (yes is coded 1, no is coded 0).

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Means and standard deviations of independent variables in Wave 1 (N = 374)*

	M	SD
Sex (women = 1, men = 0)	0.54	
Age	31.16	2.98
Educational level	4.14	1.56
Children present in the home (up to Wave 2)	0.84	0.37
Wife's working hours (0–40)	18.24	15.95
Wife's relative contribution to household labor (1–7)	5.46	0.99
Mother's weekly church visit in youth	0.38	
Mother employed during youth	0.33	
Index of traveling time, working overtime, irregular hours (Wave 2)		1.00

Note. No standard deviations presented for dummy variables.

Models

Four regression models were estimated. Each subsequent model is an elaboration of the previous model. The first model (Model A) addresses the first research question of whether there is attitude alignment. This can be analyzed by a standard change model (Allison, 1990), which is here defined as follows:

$$Y_{2R} = b_0 + b_1 Y_{1R} + b_2 Y_{1P} + e, \quad \text{(Model A)}$$

where Y is the attitude variable and the subscripts refer to the waves (1 or 2) and to whether the measure applies to the respondent (R) or partner (P). This model regresses Wave-2 attitudes of the respondent on Wave-1 attitudes of the partner while controlling for the Wave-1 attitudes of the respondent. If the effect of the partner's attitudes (b_2) is positive, the respondent changes his or her attitudes in the direction of the partner. This can be considered as evidence of attitude alignment. Note that this model is mathematically equivalent to a model in which Wave-2 attitudes are regressed on Wave-1 respondent attitudes and

the initial difference between respondent and partner attitudes.[3]

Model B adds control variables to Model A (i.e., age, education, children, wife's working hours, the division of household labor, mother's church visit, and mother's employment). This model presents a better estimate of alignment because it takes into account that Wave-1 attitudes are correlated with Wave-1 behavior. Since both may affect Wave-2 attitudes, it is important to control for Wave-1 behavior.

Model C addresses the second research question of whether relational relevance moderates the degree of attitude alignment. Using Model B as a starting point, these models add interaction effects of the partner's Wave-1 attitudes with the three variables measuring relational relevance. These interaction effects tell us if and to what extent the effect of the partner's attitudes is stronger or weaker with varying levels of the moderator variable. If the interaction effects are significant, this can be considered as evidence that attitude alignment depends on relational relevance. Model C includes the interaction effects for each moderator variable separately, which means that there are three versions of Model C (C1, C2, and C3). Model D, finally, is less parsimonious and includes all interaction effects simultaneously.

All models are presented for the full sample, as well as for men and women separately. I test whether the differences between the coefficients for men and women are significant (using a model containing interaction effects of sex and all other main and interaction variables). If the effects are different, this means that attitude alignment is gender specific. This would mean, for example, that husbands more often change in the direction of the wife than

that wives change in the direction of the husband. The interaction effects with relational relevance can also be different for men and women. This would mean that the conditions fostering alignment have a stronger impact on changing men's attitudes than on changing women's attitudes.

To test whether regression coefficients are statistically significant, I use a one-tailed test for cases where I have a (directional) hypothesis. For the control variables, I use a two-tailed test.

Results

Descriptive results

In Table 2, I present average scores for the separate sex-role items and for the resulting scale. The scale is coded in a liberal direction, but the items in the table are coded in the direction in which they were originally phrased and coded. Hence, a decline in the mean for the scale means that respondents become more traditional. To interpret a decline in the mean for an item, the wording of that specific item should be considered. Scores are presented for the two waves, and a t test is presented to assess whether changes are significant. Table 2 shows that during the 4 years considered in the study, there was little average change in sex-role attitudes. The overall means decline somewhat (and significantly for women), but this is primarily due to changing responses on the first item, which is about whether men or women are better nurturers. Although the averages do not change much, there may be individual changes over time in the sense that some individuals may become more traditional, whereas others become more liberal. The correlation between sex-role attitudes in the two waves is high but far from perfect: $r = .57$ for men and $r = .54$ for women. This suggests that individuals are not very stable in their attitudes, but it should be recognized that this degree of instability over time is also caused by measurement error.

Although this study is about convergence of attitudes, it is important to recognize that there is also some degree of agreement on attitudes in the first wave. Although on average, men

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3. More specifically, the model would then be $Y_{2R} = d_0 + d_1 Y_{1R} + d_2 (Y_{1P} - Y_{1R})$, where $(Y_{1P} - Y_{1R})$ is the level of prior disagreement. If we compare the two models, we obtain $b_0 + b_1 Y_{1R} + b_2 Y_{1P} + e = d_0 + d_1 Y_{1R} + d_2 (Y_{1P} - Y_{1R}) + e$. Solving this equation shows that $b_1 = d_1 - d_2$ and $b_2 = d_2$. The partner effect is the same, but the interpretation of d_1 is more ambiguous. This is the main reason I decided not to include disagreement scores in the model. Including disagreement scores and main effects of respondent and partner is logically impossible (i.e., disagreement does not vary when both respondent and partner attitudes are held constant).

Table 2. *Mean sex-role attitudes of men and women in Waves 1 and 2 and tests of individual changes (SDs in parentheses)*[a]

Abbreviated item	Male sample (N = 173)			Female sample (N = 201)		
	Wave 1	Wave 2	t test of change	Wave 1	Wave 2	t test of change
"Women are better nurturers than men"	2.49 (1.21)	2.86 (1.24)	3.99*	2.00 (1.07)	2.51 (1.23)	6.02*
"Technical schools are good for women to attend"	4.44 (0.87)	4.48 (0.81)	0.68	4.60 (0.75)	4.71 (0.64)	2.02*
"Men are the natural breadwinners"	2.27 (1.24)	2.41 (1.29)	1.62	2.08 (1.22)	2.14 (1.14)	0.77
"It is bad if women are in charge at work"	1.48 (0.80)	1.51 (0.93)	0.47	1.25 (0.61)	1.37 (0.87)	1.99*
"A traditional division of labor is best"	1.88 (0.93)	1.83 (1.07)	−0.56	1.66 (0.94)	1.66 (0.99)	0.00
Standardized scale (higher scores are more egalitarian)	−0.13	−0.24	1.52	0.24	0.10	2.47*

[a]Items scored from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 5 (*fully agree*) and presented in the direction in which they were phrased.
*$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed paired observations test).

are somewhat more traditional than women (Table 2), there is a significant correlation between husbands' and wives' attitudes ($r = .35$). The degree of similarity in sex-role attitudes is lower than the degree of similarity in partners' social and demographic characteristics, such as age at marriage and education (Kalmijn, 1991). Similarity in the first wave stems not only from assortative mating but also from earlier, unobserved convergence. Many respondents were already married or living together for some years when we first interviewed them.[4]

An exploratory analysis of attitude alignment is presented in Figure 1. Respondents were divided in 11 groups differing in the degree to which there was agreement in Wave 1. Respondents in the middle agree on sex-role attitudes, respondents to the right have partners who are more egalitarian, and respondents

to the left have partners who are more traditional. The groups are constructed in such a way that they contain the same number of respondents. For each group, I calculated the mean level of attitude change. Positive averages represent movements in an egalitarian direction,
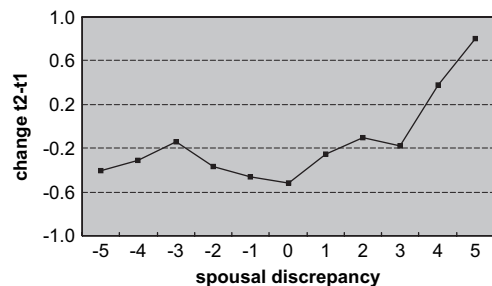

Figure 1. Attitude changes in sex-role attitudes by initial spousal discrepancy in attitudes (positive values on discrepancy indicate a more egalitarian partner, and positive values on change indicate change in an egalitarian direction).

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4. I also considered an interaction effect of the partner's attitudes with the duration of the relationship, but this interaction was not statistically signficiant.

and negative averages represent movements in a traditional direction.

The figure shows that most respondents move in a traditional direction in the 4-year marriage period, a phenomenon also apparent in Table 2. More important is that changes are systematically related to initial attitude discrepancies. The more egalitarian the partner is compared to the respondent, the more the respondent changes his or her views in an egalitarian direction. This supports the notion of attitude alignment.

Regression results: Main effects

In Table 3, I present the results of the first set of regression models. Continuous independent variables are standardized so that coefficients are equal to standardized coefficients. Model A shows that after controlling for the respondent's own prior attitudes, there is a positive and statistically significant effect of Wave-1 partner attitudes on Wave-2 respondent attitudes.

This is a formal test confirming the notion of alignment. The effect is not very strong, however ($\beta = .14$), showing that the degree of alignment is modest. The magnitude of this coefficient is 27% of the effect of the respondent's own attitudes. The difference between respondent and partner effects is statistically significant ($t = 4.99$, $p < .01$). My first conclusion is that there is a clear though modest tendency for people to become more egalitarian (or traditional) in their attitudes if they have an egalitarian (or traditional) partner.

Model A in Table 3 further shows that partner effects are of the same magnitude for men and women ($\beta = .15$ and $\beta = .14$, respectively). The difference between these two effects is statistically not significant (see the fourth column in Table 3), which confirms my expectations.

Is attitude alignment symmetric? Because the climate of change in society at large is toward more egalitarian gender roles, one would perhaps expect that partner pulls in a

Table 3. *Regression of men's and women's egalitarian sex-role attitudes in Wave 2*

	All $(N = 374)$	Men $(N = 173)$	Women $(N = 201)$	Difference[a]
Model A				
Constant	-0.102	-0.100	0.091	
Respondent attitudes, Wave 1	0.510†	0.529†	0.486†	-0.044
Partner attitudes, Wave 1	0.137†	0.147†	0.135†	-0.013
Sex (1 = woman, 0 = man)	0.189*			
R^2	0.343	0.339	0.309	0.344
Model B				
Constant	0.113	0.282	0.232	
Respondent attitudes, Wave 1	0.499†	0.533†	0.443†	-0.090
Partner attitudes, Wave 1	0.102†	0.137	0.111†	-0.026
Sex (1 = woman, 0 = man)	0.209*			
Age	0.080	0.047	0.116*	0.069
Educational level	-0.030	-0.008	-0.030	-0.023
Children	-0.136	-0.417*	0.060	0.477*
Wife's paid working hours in Wave 1	0.047	0.043	0.034	-0.010
Wife's household labor in Wave 1	-0.093*	0.031	-0.172*	-0.203*
Mother's church visit in youth	-0.195*	0.026	-0.385*	-0.411*
Mother employed during youth	-0.117	-0.186	-0.091	0.095
R^2	0.375	0.370	0.399	0.401

Note. Attitude variables and other continuous variables are standardized (in the full sample).
[a]The difference between coefficients is obtained from regression model with interactions by sex (difference defined as female–male coefficient).
*$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed tests, for control variables). †$p < 0.05$ (one-tailed tests, for attitude variables).

liberal direction are more likely than pulls in a traditional direction. To test this, I construct the following two indicator variables: TRA_{1P} (the partner belongs to the third most traditional partners) and EGA_{1P} (the partner belongs to the third most egalitarian partners). The reference group consists of partners in the middle.[5] The model estimated was as follows:

$$Y_{2R} = b_0 + b_1Y_{1R} + b_2TRA_{1P} + b_3EGA_{1P} + e.$$

Hence, we would expect a positive effect of EGA on the respondent's egalitarian sex-role attitudes ($b_3 > 0$) and a negative effect of TRA ($b_2 < 0$). What matters here are the magnitudes of these two coefficients. If partner effects are symmetric, the negative effect of a traditional partner should be equal (in an absolute sense) to the positive effect of an egalitarian partner (i.e., $b_3 = |b_2|$). This was tested using an F test (Hardy, 1993).

My results show that the egalitarian effect of the wife is stronger than the traditional effect of the wife ($\beta = .335$ vs. $-.093$), whereas the traditional effect of the husband is stronger than the egalitarian effect of the husband ($\beta = -.232$ vs. $.115$). Even though the asymmetries are plausible from a theoretical point of view, the tests for asymmetry are both not statistically significant ($F = .77$, $p = .38$ for men; $F = .26$, $p = .61$ for women). I therefore continue with the simpler linear variables.[6]

Model B in Table 3 adds control variables and shows that changes in sex-role attitudes are affected by background and marital characteristics in Wave 1 as well, although effects tend to be different for men and women. While a traditional division of household labor has a significant negative effect on women's egalitarian attitudes, children have a significant negative effect on men's egalitarian attitudes. In other words, women become less egalitarian in Wave 2 when the division of labor in the household in Wave 1 was unequal. In contrast,

men become more traditional in their sex-role attitudes when the couple has children. The former effect can be interpreted as a case of attitude adjustment. If day-to-day life in marriage is traditional, despite having egalitarian attitudes, women will adjust their attitudes in a traditional direction. That children make men more conservative is a new finding in the literature. If the division of labor becomes more traditional when there are children, it may point to an adjustment of attitudes in the direction of behavior. The effect may also mean that men begin to believe that women are better nurturers when they are confronted with child-care tasks themselves.

Education, wife's working hours, and mother's employment have no significant effects on attitude change. We should keep in mind that the effects are controlled for prior sex-role attitudes and hence apply to changes in sex-role attitudes, not to the overall variation in attitudes. In addition, the model already includes the actual division of labor in the home, which—at least for women—is a strong predictor of their attitudes later on.

More important is that the effect of the partner's attitudes is still present when the control variables are added to the model. In the full sample, the effect of the partner's attitudes is reduced somewhat between Models A and B, but the effect is still significant. For women, we also see a reduction in the effect, but here too, the effect remains significant. For men, the effect is not significant anymore in Model B, but the decline in the effect is trivial. Overall, the results suggest that attitude alignment is not due to the influence of correlated marriage characteristics at Wave 1 and underlying family background characteristics.

Regression results: Interaction effects

In Table 4, I present the interaction models for the full sample as well as for men and women separately. Interaction effects are entered one at a time in Models C1, C2, and C3. Model D enters interaction variables simultaneously. I first focus on the results for men. I find positive evidence for two of the three hypotheses. The interaction effect of the partner's attitudes and having children is statistically significant.

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5. The three groups of respondents were constructed for men and women separately.
6. I also tested whether the effect of a traditional partner is stronger when the partner is the husband rather than partner is the wife, but this difference is not significant ($t = .65$, $p = .26$). Similarly, the effect of an egalitarian wife is not different from the effect of an egalitarian husband ($t = 1.07$, $p = .14$).

Table 4. *Conditional partner effects on egalitarian sex-role attitudes: Selected coefficients from regression models*

	All (N = 374)	Men (N = 173)	Women (N = 201)	Difference[a]
Model C1				
Main effect: partner attitudes	−0.061	−0.184	0.192	0.376
Main effect: children	−0.187	−0.549†	0.083	0.633†
Interaction effect	0.182	0.414†	−0.086	−0.499†
Model C2				
Main effect: partner attitudes	0.105†	0.127	0.101	−0.026
Main effect: wife's work	0.048	0.027	0.026	0.000
Interaction effect	0.020	0.094	−0.037	−0.131
Model C3				
Main effect: partner attitudes	0.124†	0.093	0.145†	0.052
Main effect: busy work	−0.030	−0.056	0.015	0.070
Interaction effect	0.096†	0.215†	0.075	−0.140
Model D				
Main effect: partner attitudes	−0.075	−0.268	0.231	0.499†
Main effect: children	−0.198	−0.547†	0.094	0.641†
Interaction effect	0.229	0.454†	−0.100	−0.554†
Main effect: wife's work	0.046	0.021	0.022	0.001
Interaction effect	0.023	0.129	−0.053	−0.182†
Main effect: busy work	−0.029	−0.052	0.022	0.074
Interaction effect	0.102†	0.195†	0.088	−0.108

Note. Models include control variables used in Table 3. Attitude variables are standardized (in the full sample).
[a]The difference between coefficients is obtained from regression model with interactions by sex (difference defined as female–male coefficient).
†$p < 0.05$ (one-tailed tests).

The interaction effect is positive, indicating that the effect of the wife's attitudes is stronger when the couple has young children living at home. To see what the interaction effect implies, we consider the main effect and the interaction effect simultaneously. The effect of the wife is negative when there are no children present in the household ($\beta = -.184$) and increases to $\beta = .230$ (i.e., $-.184 + .414$) when there are children. This is in line with the hypothesis that alignment is stronger when the attitude topic has more relevance for the relationship. This effect is also significant in the model with all interactions entered simultaneously.[7]

The interaction effect of the wife's working hours and the partner's attitudes in the model for men is not statistically significant, although the sign of the interaction effect is in the predicted direction and the magnitude is not small. In the full model, the interaction effect is $\beta = .129$ and the one-sided p value is .07. This tentatively suggests that attitude alignment in marriage is stronger if the wife works more hours.

The last interaction effect for men, that of having busy working schedules and the partner's attitudes, is positive and significant. For men with the average level of working schedules, the effect of the wife's attitudes is $\beta = .093$ (note that the variables are standardized so that their mean is zero). For men with busy working schedules (1 *SD* above the mean), the effect of the wife's attitudes increases to $\beta = .308$ (i.e., $.093 + .215$). Hence, men's attitudes

7. The main effect of the partner's attitudes in Model D is difficult to interpret since all interactions are entered simultaneously. Hence, it is the effect of the partner's attitudes when all moderator variables have a value of 0.

are adjusted more strongly in the direction of the wife if they have a busy working life. This is also in line with my hypothesis. The finding does not change when including all interactions in one model.

For women, we find no significant interaction effects. The effect of the husband's attitudes on the wife does not depend on whether the couple has children, whether the wife works, or whether the wife has a busy working schedule. The last column of Table 4 tests whether the interaction effects are different for men and women, and this shows that in two of the three cases, the interaction effect is significantly weaker when women are the respondents. Hence, relational relevance has a stronger impact on husband's attitude adjustment than on wife's adjustment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although partner influences have become an increasingly important topic of research in both social psychology (Kenny & Cook, 1999) and family sociology (Blossfeld & Drobnič, 2001), few studies have directly examined attitude alignment. The few studies that have been done examine short-term attitude change in experimental settings using data on select samples of dating couples. At the same time, the literature on personal relationships has been criticized for relying too exclusively on small and nonrepresentative samples, and calls have been made for a methodological broadening of the area (Felmlee & Sprecher, 2000, p. 372). My study adds to the literature by using longitudinal survey data on a representative sample of young married couples, which contain dyadic data in the first wave.

The survey approach strengthens rather than weakens the existing evidence on attitude alignment. I find that when the partner has egalitarian (or traditional) attitudes toward sex roles, respondents develop more egalitarian (or more traditional) attitudes during the marriage. This finding shows that there is convergence of attitudes in marriage. A plausible interpretation of this phenomenon is that partners influence each other's attitudes, but as has been discussed in the beginning, alignment

may also stem from common experiences. I controlled for some of these experiences in the regression models, but it is impossible to rule out other unmeasured common experiences. It therefore remains difficult to prove spousal influence directly.

Although the present study supports the notion of alignment in marriage, alignment is not very strong. The standardized coefficient for the partner's attitudes is $\beta = .15$, which is modest. Important, however, is that this conclusion applies to the average effect. For men, we found significant interaction effects, and these imply different partner effects in different subgroups. In other words, although the average degree of alignment in sex-role attitudes may be modest, alignment can be substantial under specific conditions.

The findings also suggest a nuanced conclusion about gender differences, at least for sex-role attitudes. First, we see that the main effect of the wife's attitudes on husbands is of the same magnitude as the main effect of the husband's attitudes on wives. Hence, husbands adjust as often to wives as wives adjust to husbands. At the same time, however, we see that the interaction effects are stronger for husbands than they are for wives. This implies that even though on average, husbands and wives adjust to the same extent, certain subgroups of husbands will adjust more than wives, whereas other subgroups of husbands will adjust less.

The second contribution of the paper was to examine some of the mechanisms behind attitude alignment. Recent experimental studies have emphasized the importance of the relationship itself in the process of attitude change. For example, Davis and Rusbult (2001) show that attitude change toward the partner is more likely in better functioning relationships characterized by high dyadic adjustment. This confirms the well-known relationship between similarity and liking, which has been explained from both a cognitive perspective (Heider, 1958) and an exchange perspective (Homans, 1961). My paper adds another aspect of the relationship to this perspective by introducing the concept of relational relevance. More specifically, I argue that partners will influence each other because discrepancies in attitudes often lead to day-to-day

problems in the relationship, which create incentives for change.

I tested the role of relational relevance by comparing couples that vary in the degree to which sex-role attitudes are relevant to the relationship. I assumed that sex-role attitudes are more relevant to couples with children, to couples in which the wife works, and to couples in which the work schedules are busy. Subsequently, I found that the husband adjusts his views more to the wife when the husband has more demanding work schedules and when there are children. I also found a positive interaction in the predicted direction with the wife's working hours, but this was not significant. All in all, the interaction effects seem to support the notion that the influence of the partner is stronger when the attitude is more relevant to the relationship. The evidence was only found for effects of the wife on the husband. One explanation for this is that movements toward a more egalitarian mode are a better solution than movements toward a traditional mode if the work-family demands are high. Another explanation is that wives may make more of an effort in convincing their traditional husbands to change their views when the work-family conditions in the household are difficult.

Because the measurement of relational relevance was indirect—using plausible indicators of the couple's role demands—it is important to consider alternative interpretations of the interaction effects as well. One possibility is that knowledge of how difficult role demands can be is more developed among women than among men. For men, the experience of heavy role demands may lead to new knowledge, and assuming that sex-role attitudes are in part based on this knowledge, men will change their attitudes more than women will. This would also be consistent with the finding that the interaction effect is only present for men. At the same time, however, the notion of experience is not necessarily inconsistent with the notion that difficult role demands make the attitude topic more relevant to the functioning of the relationship.

The effect of relational relevance can work in three ways. First, greater relational relevance of the attitude increases the awareness of attitude differences, which is a necessary condition for partner effects. Second, greater relational relevance creates a motivation to communicate, and in the process of communication, people may acquire new insights, which may lead them to reconsider their attitudes. Third, greater relevance may have an indirect effect because when a conflict of interest over household labor arises, people may change their behavior in an egalitarian (traditional) direction, which in turn may be followed by the adjustment of attitudes in the direction of the new behavior. New research is needed to assess the importance of these three mechanisms. Whatever the mechanism that is involved, the contribution of this paper has been to underscore the importance of the relationship itself for the process of attitude change.

In earlier studies of attitude influences in close relationships, the role of relational relevance has not been studied. In the study by Davis and Rusbult (2001), the focus was on attitudes that had little direct bearing on the relationship, such as views on the death penalty and tolerance toward homosexuals. Although there can still be good reasons for partner effects in such cases, it is less clear whether such influences would also occur in real life. In the experimental situation of Davis and Rusbult, partners were asked to discuss their opinions, whereas in real life, there may be an incentive to avoid topics on which partners disagree. When topics are irrelevant for the relationship, avoidance is possible, and partner influences may therefore be weaker. This also suggests new line of research. Future research could focus on a comparison of different types of attitudes. For example, one would expect stronger partner effects for sex-role attitudes and attitudes about child rearing than for social and political attitudes.

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