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**MATTERING AND WIVES' PERCEIVED FAIRNESS OF  
THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR**

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Mattering and Wives' Perceived Fairness of the Division of Household Labor

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### Abstract

Using data on married women from the sixth survey wave of the Marital Instability over the Life Course (2003,  $N = 489$ ), we examine the influence of mattering on wives' perceptions of fairness of the division of household labor. Mattering is conceptualized as the wife's perception of the level of concern her husband has for her, which taps into the larger emotional context of the marriage. Consistent with our expectations, we find that the more a wife believes she matters to her husband, the more likely she is to report the division of housework is fair, regardless of the share of housework she performs. Moreover, mattering positively interacts with a wife's perceived obligation to her husband such that higher levels of mattering and obligation to her husband are associated with especially high likelihoods of perceived fairness. This research contributes to prior work on wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor by demonstrating the salience of broader emotional dynamics in the marriage.

Although wives perform about twice as much household labor as their husbands, they usually report this division of labor is fair (Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991). However, most wives do not usually enjoy doing housework (Thompson, 1991). Wives often report negative emotions towards household labor, including stress, frustration, exhaustion, and boredom (Gager 1998). Nonetheless, negative feelings about household labor do not typically translate into perceptions of unfairness of division of the household labor among wives, revealing a critical discrepancy between individual behavior and emotional dynamics. Indeed, Thompson (1991) calls for greater attention to emotional factors in research on wives' fairness perceptions and household labor.

In this study, we introduce the concept of *mattering* as a predictor of wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor. In a marital relationship, mattering refers an individual's perception of the level of concern one's spouse has for the individual (Booth et al., 2003). Mattering is conceptualized as how much a wife perceives she matters to her husband, that is, her perception of his level of concern for her. We examine the influence of mattering on wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor using data from the sixth survey wave of Marital Instability over the Life Course, a large national sample of marrieds. Prior studies show that the emotional rewards wives receive by performing household labor, such as providing care for loved ones and appreciation from the spouse, are important factors for their fairness perceptions of division of household labor (Hawkins et al., 1995; Hochschild, 1989; Thompson, 1991). Thus, we expect that mattering enhances perceptions of fairness among wives regardless of the objective distribution of household labor. Wives' perceptions of how they matter to their husbands should be positively associated with their perceived fairness of the division of household labor, net of their own appraisals of their obligations to their husbands and the actual amount of labor they perform.

## Background

Previous research shows that a majority of married women are in the paid labor force today (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Still, married women –regardless of employment status- perform most of the household labor. Recent studies show married mothers were spending an average of 19 hours on housework per week in 2000, and married fathers were spending an average of 10 hours per week (Bianchi et al., 2006). Despite this gender imbalance in housework performance, wives rarely report that the division of household labor is unfair (Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991).

Married women's overwhelming tendency to perceive fairness of the division of household labor regardless of its objective distribution is related to the emotional rewards they receive in a marriage. For wives, performing household labor is important because it implies taking care of family members and maintaining harmony in the household (Hochschild, 1989; Thompson, 1991). Women especially value providing care when they have children (Gager, 1998; DeMaris & Longmore, 1996). Demonstrating care for family members by performing housework also implies meeting social expectations of womanhood by “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, wives are less likely to perceive a sense of unfairness of the division of household labor even when they perform more housework than their husbands.

In addition to doing care work for family members by performing housework (Hochschild, 1989; Thompson, 1991), married women value appreciation for their household labor, and perceptions of appreciation are related to their sense of fairness (Blair & Johnson, 1992; Hochschild, 1989; Sanchez & Kane, 1996). In their empirical research, Hawkins et al. (1995) include husband's feeling of appreciation for a wife's household labor, external validation of the maternal role, ministering to family, and minimizing trouble as predictors of wives' sense of fairness of the household labor. They find a husband's feeling of appreciation for a wife's

household labor is the strongest predictor of her sense of fairness of the division of household labor. When wives feel that family members appreciate their household labor, they recognize that they are effectively meeting the needs of their loved ones and are more likely to report fairness even when the division of household labor is objectively unequal (Hawkins et al., 1995).

Similarly, Thompson (1991) notes that it is important for women to provide care for loved ones by performing household labor, but she does not address a wife's care towards her husband.

Taken together, these studies speak to the importance of emotional dynamics in the division of household labor among wives and husbands and are a fundamental building block for the current study's emphasis on mattering.

#### Current Investigation

The emotional rewards wives receive from interactions within the marital relationship seem to be quite influential on their perceptions of the fairness of the division of household labor. But previous research (e.g., Hawkins et al., 1995) showing that a husband's feelings of appreciation for a wife's household labor are central to her fairness perception only considered emotional dynamics *specific to the division of household labor*. To decipher the discrepancy between behavior and emotions with regard to the division of household labor, the current investigation extends prior work by conceptualizing emotional dynamics more broadly in *the marital relationship* rather than exclusively within the domain of household labor.

The nature of modern marriage supports an emphasis on the emotional dynamics between wives and husbands. Cherlin (2004) argues that marriage is in the process of "deinstitutionalization," meaning that social norms and laws are losing their regulating power in family life; men and women are becoming more individualistic to fulfill personal goals. In deinstitutionalized marriage, the primary exchanges between wives and husbands involve love

and intimacy (Cherlin, 2004). That is, emotions are exchanged instead of resources and domestic labor, which were exchanged in traditional marriages. Marriage is no longer on the basis of the traditional gender division of labor seen in breadwinner-homemaker couples and further, women are less economically dependent now due to their high labor force participation rates.

Consequently, marital relationships are likely to end if individuals do not receive adequate love and intimacy from spouses. Therefore, the emotions in marital relationships are key components of contemporary marriage.

Drawing from the significance of emotions in marital relationships, this research examines emotional dynamics between spouses. The study contributes to prior work by examining the influence of mattering in marital relationships on wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Mattering in this research is conceptualized as how much a wife perceives she matters to her husband, that is, whether she feels her husband is there for her when she needs him, he cares about her, he provides emotional support to her, he appreciates her, and so forth. Thus, mattering to her husband is one of the emotional rewards wives receive in marriage. This conceptualization is advantageous because it is not domain-specific. Instead, it captures the emotional dynamics of the marriage more broadly. A wife's perception of the degree to which she matters to her husband is likely to be consequential across several domains of the marital relationship. Expanding on prior research about emotional dynamics surrounding the division of household labor, we anticipate that mattering may play a salient role in this relationship. Specifically, our expectation is that the more a wife perceives she matters to her husband, the more likely she will be report the division of household labor is fair.

This research controls for several factors associated mattering or perceived fairness of the division of household labor. We control for wives' perceived obligation to husbands because

wives may be less likely to perceive the division of household labor is unfair when they feel obligated to consider their husbands' well being as their primary concerns. The share of household labor is controlled because the more a wife shares the household labor the less she is likely to feel the division of household labor is fair (Hawkins et al., 1995). We control for the presence of a child 18 years of age or younger in the household because married women value providing care especially when they have children (Gager, 1998; DeMaris & Longmore, 1996), but at the same time, having children typically increases women's household labor. Age, wife's and spouse's education, employment status and contribution to household income are controlled. A wife's lower education, being non-employed, and little contribution to household income are indicative of their economic dependence on their husbands, and dependence is negatively associated with perceptions of unfairness of the division of household labor (Kane & Sanchez, 1994; Sanchez & Kane, 1996). Along with the same line, women who have fewer options for their lives are more likely to think the current division of household labor is fair even if the division is objectively unfair (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). Race also needs to be considered because African-American women are more likely to report the division of household labor is unfair regardless of whether they have options (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). We also control for religiosity because it is positively related to a more traditional division of household labor (Morgan, 1987).

### Method

In this study, data from the sixth wave of the Marital Instability over the Life Course (Booth et al. 2003) are used to examine the influence of mattering on wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Data collection began in 1980 with a national sample of marrieds. The



respondents were re-interviewed in 1983, 1988, 1992, 1997, and 2000. We rely on this latest wave of data not only because it is the most recent but also because it is the only one that contains the items we use to measure mattering. Of the 1066 respondents who were interviewed in 1997, 962 individuals (90 %) were re-interviewed in the survey in 2000. Interviews were conducted mainly by telephone, but long mail interviews and short interviews were also used occasionally. Additional information about the data is available at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) web site (Booth et al. 2003).

Our research interest is women's perceived fairness of household labor within marriage and thus analyses are restricted to married women. Of the 962 respondents, 611(63 %) are women. Among the women, 489 (80 %) are married at the time of interview in 2000. Thus, the analytic sample is comprised of 489 married women. We focus only on women because there is little variation in perceived fairness of the division of household labor among men.

#### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Perceived fairness is measured by the item, "Do you think this (chore division) is fair or do you think you do more than your share?" Household labor is defined as routine tasks such as cleaning the house, doing the laundry, cleaning after meals, and cooking dinners (Booth et al., 2003). The original response categories were 1 = *fair*, 2 = *do more than own share*, and 3 *other*. Response category 2 (do more than own share) means the division of household labor is unfair. Although the reasons for the third response category- other- are not specified, doing less than one's own share may be included. That is, the division of household labor is unfair, but to husbands, not to wives. This third category is vague and it also has only five cases. Therefore, we excluded the five cases in which wives reported a value of 3. Perceived fairness is a dichotomous variable

such that 1 = *fair* and 2 *do more than own share* is recoded as 0 *unfair* and. The frequency distribution on this recoded variable is in line with prior research findings of high proportions of women reporting the division of household labor is fair (Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991). About 87 % of the sample reports the division of household labor is fair, while 13 % reports that it is unfair.

### Focal Independent Variable

The independent variable in this research is *mattering*; a wife's perception of how she matters to her husband. *Mattering* is measured by fourteen items. For example, items such as "*How often does your husband make you feel he is there for you when you really need him?*," "*How often does your husband let you down when you are counting on him?*," and "*How often does your husband make you feel he really cares about you?*" are included. All 14 items measuring *mattering* are shown in the appendix. The four-point scale originally ranged from 1 = *nearly always*, 2 = *some of the time*, 3 = *occasionally*, to 4 = *almost never*. We recoded some items so that higher values always indicate a wife's higher perception of her *mattering* to her husband. Thus, the four-point scale used in this analysis ranges from 4 *nearly always*, 3 *some of the time*, 2 *occasionally*, and 1 *almost never*. Asterisks are put beside recoded items in the appendix. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.90 and the mean is 3.57 (standard deviation = 0.57), indicating that wives in this sample have a relatively strong sense that they matter to their husbands.

### Control Variables

We use the wife's perceived obligation to her husband, the share of household labor she performed, age, race, the wife's and spouse's level of education, presence of child (children) 18 years of age or younger in the household, employment status, the wife's contribution to household income, and religiosity as independent control variables since prior research

demonstrates these factors are associated with perceived fairness (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994; Sanchez, 1994; Hawkins et al., 1995).

*Perceived obligation to husbands.* A wife's perceived obligations to her husband are measured by four items: "*I feel personally responsible for my husband's well-being,*" "*If my husband were feeling bad, my first duty would be to cheer him up,*" "*I would do almost anything for my husband,*" and "*One of my primary concerns is my husband's welfare.*" The four-point scale ranges from 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, to 4 = *strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.74. The mean is 3.18 (standard deviation = 0.65), indicating that wives in this sample generally have strong perceived obligations to their husbands.

*Share of household labor.* Household labor includes cleaning the house, doing the laundry, cleaning up after meals, and cooking dinners. We recoded the five point scale of share of household labor by a wife so that it ranges from 5 = *all of it*, 4 = *most of it*, 3 = *about half of it*, 2 = *less than half*, to 1 = *none of it*. Higher values indicate more household labor performance. The mean is 3.8 (standard deviation = 0.73), suggesting that wives in this sample generally share more than half of the household labor. About 13 % report performing all the household labor, 59 % report performing most of the household labor, 24 % perform about half of the household labor, and only 3 % and 1 % report performing less than half of the household labor and none of the household labor, respectively. In other words, a majority (almost all) of wives shares more than half of the household labor.

*Age.* Age is coded in years and ranges from 39 through 75 years old. The respondent is asked her age on her last birthday. The overall mean of age is 54 (standard deviation = 8.6). Thus, wives in this sample tend to be middle aged.

*Race.* Race is dummy-coded as White or non-White because the sample is skewed to

White. White is coded as 1. The distribution of race in this sample shows that about 94 % are White.

*Education.* The wife's education was originally coded in years. We created a series of dummy variables: high school completion or less (2 years to 12 years), some college education (13 years to 15 years), and college or higher education (16 years to 28 years). We are not able to distinguish those without a high school degree from those with a degree because only 3 % of wives have less than high school education. The modal category in this sample is high school education or less, which serves as the reference category the analyses.

*Spouse's education.* The spouse's education is coded in the same manner as the respondent's education: high school completion or less (2 years to 12 years), some college education (13 years to 15 years), and college or higher education (16 years to 28 years). In contrast to wives' education, the modal category for husbands of wives in this sample is a college degree or more education. We treat high school completion or less as the reference category.

*Presence of a child (children) 18 years of age or younger in the household.* The presence of a child (children) is dummy-coded to indicate whether the respondent has a child (children) who is no more than 18 years of age in the household. The presence of a child (children) is coded as 1. About 26 % of this sample has a child (children) in the household.

*Employment status.* Three dummy variables capture the respondent's employment status: working full-time, not working (includes those who are unemployed, retired, in school, keeping house, and other), and working part-time (reference category). In this sample, 50 % are categorized as full-time workers, 16 % are part-time workers, and 34 % are not working.

*Contribution to household income.* The wife's contribution to household income is coded as a percentage and ranges from 0 through 100 %. The mean contribution to household

income by a respondent is about 34 % (standard deviation = 22.75). That is to say, married women in this sample earn about one-third of household income, on average. About 15 % of this sample does not contribute any household income.

*Religiosity.* The respondent is asked about her religious activities. Religiosity is measured by four summed items: frequency of church activities, frequency of prayer, frequency of watching religious broadcasts, and frequency of reading the Bible. Frequencies of church activities, prayer, watching religious broadcasts, and reading the Bible are measured by the five-point scale ranging from 5 = *daily*, 4 = *weekly*, 3 = *monthly*, 2 = *less than once a month*, to 1 = *never*. The Cronbach's alpha is 0.78.

We estimated the variance inflation factor (VIF) for all independent variables and control variables to diagnose multicollinearity. The result of VIF shows that tolerances are greater than 0.1 or are smaller than 10, which indicates there is no multicollinearity problem (DeMaris, 2004). Therefore, we retained all independent variables and control variables in the analyses. The means and the standard deviations of all variables used in the analyses are shown in Table 1.

#### Analytic Plan

This study examines whether mattering is positively associated with wives' perceptions of fairness of the division of household labor. Since the dependent variable is binary, 0 *unfair* and 1 *fair*, logistic regression is used in the analyses. In order to test whether mattering is positively associated with wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor, the variable *mattering* is entered into the model 1a. Then, control variables are added in model 1b. *Mattering* needs to be significant and positive net of control variables to support our argument.

We also test whether *mattering* and wives' perceptions of their obligation to their

husband interact positively in their effect on fairness net of the control variables. We decided to test the interaction because mattering and a wife's perception of her obligation to her husband are positively moderately correlated (not shown). In model 2, *mattering* and perceived obligation are entered along with an interaction term comprised of these two variables.

## Results

The results of the series of logistic regressions which examine the influence of mattering on women's perceived fairness are shown in Table 2. Model 1a shows that *mattering* is significantly positively related to perceived fairness. The more a wife believes she matters to her husband, the more likely she is to report that the division of household labor is fair.

In model 1b, the control variables are added. *Mattering* is still significantly positively associated with perceived fairness when control variables are in the model, although the magnitude of the coefficient is reduced by 50 %. The share of household labor is significantly negatively associated with fairness perceptions, net of *mattering* and the other control variables. This is in line with previous research arguing that women do not value performing household tasks (Thompson 1991). Other control variables, including a wife's perceived obligation to her husband, are not significantly associated with wives' fairness perceptions. Thus, as expected, a wife's perception of how she matters to her husband is positively associated with her perceived fairness of the division of household labor, net of other relevant factors.

Model 2 includes all of the variables in model 1b and adds an interaction term for mattering and a wife's perceived obligation to her husband. As expected, the interaction term is significantly positively associated with perceived fairness. Higher levels of mattering coupled with higher levels of perceived obligation to a spouse are especially likely to be associated with

wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor. In other words, when a wife believes that she matters to her husband and she feels a strong obligation to his well-being, the likelihood that she reports the division of household labor is fair is highest.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the influence of an innovative concept, mattering, on wives' sense of fairness in the division of household labor by using data from the sixth wave of the Marital Instability over the Life Course (Booth et al. 2003). We find that mattering, a wife's perception that she matters to her husband, is positively related to her perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Moreover, mattering and a wife's perceived obligation to her husband have a significant positive interactive effect on the likelihood that she perceives the division of household labor is fair. Expanding on previous studies arguing the importance of emotional rewards wives receive from performing household tasks such as meeting needs of family members (Hochschild, 1989; Thompson, 1991) and appreciation from the spouse for their labor (Blair & Johnson, 1992; Hawkins et al., 1995; Sanchez & Kane, 1996), this study shows that wives value the concern of their husbands in the broader marital context.

Consistent with previous research (Major, 1993; Thompson, 1991), most married women in the sample report the division of household labor is fair to them. On the other hand, the results of our regression analyses consistently show that the greater the share of household labor the wife performs the less likely she is to perceive fairness in the division of household labor, holding the other variables constant. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that larger contributions to household labor by husbands are positively associated with wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996;

Sanchez, 1994). Although we tested for an interaction effect between the share of household labor performance and mattering, it was not statistically significant (not shown).

There are some limitations of the study to discuss. The mean age of married women in this sample is the middle 50s, and therefore future research should include younger women to determine whether age (or cohort) is related to perceived fairness of the division of household labor. In addition, better measurement of household labor would benefit future research. As Carrington (1999) describes in his qualitative research, household tasks measures need to include emotional labor such as planning or supervising. Indeed, emotional labor has not been examined adequately in the research on perceived fairness of the division of household labor. Another limitation of this study is that the data do not permit objective measurement of fairness. We could only examine fairness in the division of household labor in terms of *fair* or *do more than own share*. As a result, the frequency distribution is extremely skewed to *fair*. Research on fairness of the division of household labor needs a more precise measurement of this concept. As previous research shows (Smith et al., 1998), wives' sense of fairness of the division of household labor might be better measured by a scale that ranges from *very fair to me* to *very unfair to me*. In addition, feeling of fairness might be captured by asking about other feelings. As previous studies imply (e.g., Glass & Fujimoto, 1994; Ross & Willigen, 1996), unequal division of household labor translates into negative feelings such as being stressed, depressed, or angry. Therefore, future studies should attempt to examine wives' sense of fairness both in direct and indirect ways.

Building on previous research that revealed the salience of emotional factors for wives' sense of fairness of the division of household labor, this study sheds light on the importance of mattering. Although previous studies have focused on emotions specific to the division of labor



in marriage, the concept of mattering used in this research taps into broader emotional dynamics between spouses. Our study extends prior work by demonstrating that mattering is central to wives' perceived fairness of the division of household labor. An emphasis on mattering is consistent with recent conceptualizations (e.g., Cherlin, 2004) of modern marriage. As contemporary marriages are increasingly predicated on emotional exchanges, it is essential that researchers attend to these dynamics. Future work would benefit from a consideration of other aspects of emotions and sentiments in marital relationships and their consequences for individual and marital well-being.

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## Appendix A

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviation of Dependent Variables, Independent Variables,  
and Control Variables*

Variable Names	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
			Min	Max
Dependent variable				
Perceived fairness (1 = yes)	0.88	0.33	0	1
Independent variables				
Mattering	3.57	0.57	1	4
Control variables				
Obligation to Husband	3.18	0.65	1	4
Household Labor	3.8	0.73	1	5
Age	54.37	8.6	39	75
Race			0	1
White	0.94	0.23		
Non-White (ref.)	0.06	0.23		
Respondent's education			0	1
< High and High school (ref.)	0.38	0.49		
Some college	0.31	0.46		
College or more	0.31	0.46		
Spouse's education			0	1
< High and High school (ref.)	0.38	0.48		
Some college	0.26	0.44		
College or more	0.36	0.48		
Child under 18 years old in household	0.26	0.44	0	1
Employment status			0	1
Full-time	0.5	0.5		
Part-time (ref.)	0.16	0.37		
Not working	0.34	0.47		
Contribution to household income (%)	33.73	22.75	0	100
Religiosity	2.97	0.98	1	5

*N* = 489.

Table 2

*Logistic Regression Models Predicting Women's Perceived Fairness of the Division of Household Labor*

	Model 1a			Model 1b			Model 2a		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
<i>Independent variables</i>									
Mattering	0.98 ***	0.21	2.66	0.50 *	0.26	1.65	-1.20	0.81	0.30
<i>Control variables</i>									
Obligation to Husband				0.29	0.27	1.34	-1.81 +	0.97	0.16
Share of household Labor				-1.27 ***	0.30	0.28	-1.29 ***	0.30	0.28
Age				0.03	0.03	1.03	0.03	0.03	1.03
Race									
White				0.13	0.67	1.14	0.25	0.68	1.28
Non-White (ref)									
Respondent's education									
< High and High school (ref)									
Some college				-0.14	0.39	0.87	-0.19	0.40	0.82
College or more				0.26	0.46	1.30	0.15	0.47	1.17
Spouse's education									
< High and High school (ref)									
Some college				0.69	0.45	1.99	0.70	0.45	2.00
College or more				-0.11	0.40	0.89	-0.02	0.41	0.98
Child under 18 years old in household				-0.34	0.43	0.71	-0.34	0.43	0.71
Employment status									
Full-time				-0.77	0.52	0.46	-0.88	0.52	0.42
Part-time (ref)									
Not working				-0.16	0.57	0.85	-0.21	0.58	0.81
Contribution to household income (%)				-0.01	0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.01	0.99
Religiosity				-0.10	0.18	0.91	-0.08	0.18	0.92
<i>Interaction term</i>									
Mattering * Obligation to Husband							0.65 *	0.29	1.91
Intercept	-1.39			3.91			9.31		
Max-rescaled $R^2$	0.09			0.21			0.24		

Source: Marital Instability over the Life Course 2000 (Wave six)

+ $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Appendix B

Fourteen items measuring Mattering (\* recorded items)

1. \* How often does your husband make you feel he is there for you when you really need him?
2. How often does your husband let you down when you are counting on him?
3. \* How often does your husband make you feel he really cares about you?
4. \* How often does your husband make you feel you can talk to him about your worries?
5. How often does your husband act as if he is the only important person in the family?
6. \* How often does your husband make you feel you can tell him anything?
7. How often does your husband insist on having his own way?
8. \* How often does your husband give you a sense of emotional security and well being?
9. How often does your husband make you feel you could not turn to your husband for support when you have a problem?
10. How often does your husband make you feel uncertain that your husband would give you the care you need if you became ill with a prolonged illness?
11. How often does your husband insist that you agree with him?
12. How often does your husband criticize your ideal?
13. \* How often does your husband let you know that he appreciates you, your ideal, or the things you do?
14. How often does your husband not listen to you?