

Couple Conflict about Household Responsibilities

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When couples are unhappy about the allocation of household responsibilities, the stress level in their relationship can increase considerably. Researchers have found that the unequal distribution of household chores is one of the top stressors in many relationships (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018).

While such research often reflects how traditional gender roles influence household duties, the uneven distribution of household responsibilities is not limited to heterosexual married couples. Couples who cohabitate as romantic partners are often prone to the same problems. However, same sex couples tend to divide chores more equally, although evidence suggests that this arrangement tends to change somewhat once they have children (Miller, 2018).

Stress levels increase in the home when partners are frustrated by unfinished chores and/or by their perception of the unfair burden they believe they have to shoulder in completing household chores. Not surprisingly, couples experience conflict over who does what around the house almost as much as they fight over money (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). What may matter more than an even 50/50 split in assuming household responsibilities is how partners divide up household duties; that is, partners tend to feel more satisfied when they share more of the same rather than separate types of household responsibilities (Carlson, Miller, & Sassler, 2018).

Surveys and studies consistently point out that even though many women work outside the home, they still tend to do the majority of household chores (Brenan, 2020). Evidence also indicates that this disparity was exacerbated significantly by the COVID pandemic (Collins, Landivar, Ruppner, & Scarborough, 2021). In the past, the division of household labor was generally attributed to differences in the labor force; namely, that men were more likely to work full-time outside the home while women were more likely to take on the responsibility of managing the household.

Uneven Division of Responsibilities

Despite shifts in these traditional roles and employment trends, evidence indicates that women are still primarily tasked with the responsibilities of running their households and caring for their families (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). There are a number of factors that contribute to this uneven distribution of household responsibilities, including the influence of traditional gender roles, the couple's beliefs about equality, the lack of supportive social policies, and claimed incompetence by one or both partners.

Traditional Gender Roles. Gendered expectations about how men and women are supposed to behave and the roles they are supposed to play in the family often significantly influence how household responsibilities are divided. Chores that involve greater autonomy are often perceived as "men's" work, whereas repetitive, mundane chores (like doing laundry or dishes) are frequently viewed as "women's" work (Bartley,

Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005). Studies consistently find that traditional gender roles are associated with imbalanced household contributions. This imbalance is also linked to increased work-family conflict (Shockley, Shen, DeNunzio, Arvn, Knudsen, 2017).

Beliefs About Equality. Individual partner beliefs about how work should be divided in the home can and do influence who performs what household tasks. These beliefs are largely shaped by the socialization that took place in each partner's cultural and growing up experiences (Marks, Bun, & McHale, 2009). These beliefs, in turn, are typically expressed in the degree to which such traits as conscientiousness and fairness become influential factors in the judgment and behavior of each partner. When this judgment and behavior in turn translate into mutual agreement that household work should be evenly distributed, couples report being happier than those who are not able to establish such agreements (Lam, McHale, & Crouter, 2012).

Social Policies. Social policies, such as lack of paid family leave and access to affordable healthcare, can also affect how household labor is divided. For example, the lack of paternity/maternity leave, affordable child care, and workplace protections for pregnant and nursing mothers can make it difficult for parents to take time off of work during critical periods such as after the birth of a child. These circumstances can also make it difficult for parents to return to the workforce (Wharton, 2015).

Claimed Incompetence. Claimed incompetence entails maintaining to be deficient at performing required tasks to avoid participating in shared responsibilities (Sandberg, 2007). Claiming ineptitude when it comes to routine housework such as folding laundry, loading the dishwasher, or tidying up rooms foists these duties onto the other partner, who often takes over to ensure that these necessary household chores are finished properly. The partner who takes over in this manner often feels alone, resentful, and overworked.

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