

Who's doing the Dishes?

Negotiating household tasks and improving relationships

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The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) is a consortium of scholars who examine the intersections of work, domestic life, and wellness. Research foci include workplace bullying, emotion labor, burnout, conflict, gender and work-life negotiation. PWWL holds a use-inspired research approach, developing projects that increase theoretical knowledge while simultaneously impacting policy and improving the everyday lives of women and men. PWWL is a strategic initiative of The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. For more information, please visit our website: www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/. For correspondence, please contact Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu.

Executive Summary

Despite women's strong presence in the workplace, they continue to advance at a slower pace professionally than do men. A significant contributor to this difference is the inequitable division of household tasks. Many academics study how domestic labor is distributed; now scholars from the Project for Wellness and Work/Life are conducting research to explain how these disparities occur and how they can be reduced.

Research reveals that men's professional success often is tied to the greater freedom they have to dedicate the time, energy, and attention necessary to further their careers because of their partners' support at home (Hewlett, 2007). In addition, men's careers often are prioritized to the detriment of women's when couples make decisions about managing the home and caring for children (Stone, 2008), which further undermines women's progress professionally. When partner support patterns are coupled with divorce rates that hover around 50 percent, women's slower advancement in the workplace has significant income implications for them and their families.

Further, disagreement over household tasks is one of the major reasons given for marital conflict and is associated with increased thoughts of divorce. Also, bearing an unfair burden of household chores contributes to depression and declines in physical health. However, when household jobs are re-allocated, men who contribute to half of the tasks are able to reduce their female partner's stress without any negative impact on their own health (Bird, 1999). In fact, when men take a more active role in household tasks it frequently results in more mutually satisfying relationships (Chethik, 2006).

Because divisions of chores in the home influences paid work, relationship conflict, and health in profound ways, it is important to better understand how individuals can make positive choices that benefit both them and their partners.

Researchers have found that typically couples' do not openly discuss the division of household tasks but rather rely upon unexamined assumptions about responsibilities – assumptions regarding who should perform a task, how often the task needs to be performed as well as *how* a task should be performed – that lead to women taking on an inequitable burden of domestic labor.

This white paper presents four practices that couples can use to more fairly distribute domestic tasks. They include: 1) Explicitly allocating tasks, 2) Switching tasks, 3) Delaying task performance by over performers, and 4) Performing tasks on a schedule for under performers.

Background

The key to more fairly balancing the distribution of household tasks in heterosexual relationships is understanding how household tasks become allocated. Typically, romantic

Assumptions about responsibilities often lead to unfair task allocation

couples divide and assign tasks with little thought or discussion. Certainly couples discuss and make decisions about many aspects of their lives together, such as where to live and what style of furniture to purchase.

However, only rarely do couples overtly discuss and negotiate who will perform and be responsible for specific household tasks, such as laundry, cooking and bill paying. Even when couples do enter into such discussions, they often are guided by unexamined assumptions about responsibilities—assumptions regarding who should perform a task, how often the task needs to be performed as well as *how* a task should be performed.

Unfortunately, these unexamined assumptions set the stage for women to take on the majority of household labor – and women overwhelmingly do so when a male is present in the household. Although this is especially true of married couples with children, studies show that, on average, both married and unmarried couples divide household tasks to the benefit of the male partner.

One of the assumptions that disadvantages women is that women are better at performing “indoor” chores and that men are better at “outdoor” chores, so this a fair way

Indoor chores require more time and are more repetitive

to divide labor. However, as many women soon discover, indoor chores require more time and are more repetitive (cooking, dishes, laundry) (Blair & Lichter, 1991) while outdoor chores (mowing the lawn or repairing items) may be

performed less than weekly, monthly or even annually and can be performed at one’s convenience.

A second assumption that increases the likelihood women will perform more household labor is the belief that whoever is most bothered by an unperformed task should complete it. For example, a study of roommate's decision making about and management of household chores found that roommates, especially male roommates, believe that the person who is most disturbed by the dirt, unwashed dishes and smelly trash should be responsible for taking care of it (Riforgiate & Alberts, In Progress). This perspective disadvantages women because females are likely to have a lower tolerance for dirt and disorder, due both to genetics and socialization (Alberts, Trethewey & Tracy, 2006).

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Given their lower threshold level, women are likely to believe household chores need to be performed more frequently and regularly, and they will often become disturbed if they are not. Thus, if living with a partner who has a higher tolerance, women are likely to perform the task in the absence of someone else doing it.

A final assumption that undermines efforts to distribute labor equally concerns how tasks should be performed. Even today, girls and young women are socialized to perform more traditionally "feminine" tasks such as laundry, dishwashing, and bed making. Therefore, typically women enter shared households with greater skills and higher standards for performance than do men. Combined with low tolerance levels, these skills and standards often lead women to criticize the less skillful performance of their partners and to redo or take over tasks "so they are done right."

However, once a woman takes over a task repeatedly, that task is seen as her responsibility – both by her partner and by herself. Then, because it is her responsibility,

Consistent performance of a task will mean that you "own" that task.

her partner does not feel ownership for the task. And even more distressing, her partner does not even feel grateful for her performance, because she is only doing what she insists upon doing anyway.

These three assumptions and their associated beliefs, skills and predispositions lead to an unacknowledged process whereby women "fall" into a pattern of performing the majority of household labor, to their personal and professional detriment.

Creating a Fairer Distribution of Household Tasks

What can men and women do to create fairer distributions of household tasks? Below we offer a set of communication strategies that can help couples improve fairness in the distribution of household labor and improve the quality of their relationships.

1) *EXPLICITLY ALLOCATE TASKS*

To make sure tasks are divided fairly, it is important to talk about each partner's expectations. Research involving romantic couples and roommates shows that talking about expectations up front can result in more equitable divisions of household tasks. Therefore, it is important to explicitly discuss who will do each task, what the task entails, and when and how often the task needs to be completed.

Tips

- ❖ Discuss and negotiate what tasks need to be completed and who will be responsible
- ❖ Make sure both partners know when and how tasks will be performed
- ❖ Have a plan in place if tasks are not completed as discussed

For example, couples should clearly define what it means “to do the laundry.” Does it mean washing and drying clothing and linens? Or does it entail sorting laundry, washing it, drying it, folding it and putting it away? Also, does the laundry need to be done every other day, weekly, or bi-weekly?

Some couples also will need to discuss standards for performance; for example, how long, if at all, should laundry sit in the dryer before being folded and put away? These details are important, so that misunderstandings don't undermine partners' efforts.

In addition, it is useful to develop a plan in advance regarding what to do if tasks go undone or are poorly done. With a plan in place, both parties know how to respond. For example, if laundry should be done once a week but isn't, how long is it reasonable for one's partner to wait before commenting?

Establishing ground rules in advance can help minimize nagging and criticism as well as lead to constructive, supportive behaviors.

2) SWITCH TASKS

It is easy for each partner to overestimate his or her contributions while underestimating the partner's. One way to prevent this is to understand and experience all

Tips

- ❖ Make a list of all the tasks each partner completes and switch tasks for a month or two
- ❖ Consider which tasks each partner likes most and least and compare notes – are there tasks each would like to trade?

the varied household tasks. Couples can find it helpful to record a list of tasks each person performs and then to switch lists and complete the partner's tasks for a month or two (Chethik, 2006).

In addition to increasing understanding and appreciation, switching tasks allows each partner to learn how to complete every task and develop competence. Also, this practice can help make sure no one member of the household is overly burdened.

Performing each other's tasks may lead partners to discover new tasks they prefer and to discuss switching more permanently. Also, switching tasks may lead to recognition of how much each partner actually does, prompting expressions of appreciation or even redistribution of tasks.

Are you an over performer or an under performer?

Rate each item according to how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

	<i>Agree</i>			<i>Disagree</i>	
1. I have higher standards for cleanliness than does my partner.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is important to me that my house/apartment is nice and neat.	1	2	3	4	5
3. An overflowing trashcan bothers me.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I don't like coming home to a messy house/apartment.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Leaving a stack of dirty dishes in the sink overnight is disgusting.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Messes bother me more than my partner.	1	2	3	4	5

How did you score?

Add the each of the numbers you circled to obtain a total between 7 and 30.

Score

- 24-30 You probably are an over performer. Most likely you tend to pick up after others and you wonder why your partner doesn't notice the dirt.
- 15-24 You fall somewhere in between. You like it when your house is clean, but can tolerate a mess every once in a while.
- 7-14 Dishes? What dishes? When it comes to household chores, you may be an under performer. It isn't that you aren't willing to do housework, it just never seems like things get dirty enough that you need to do anything.

3) STRATEGIES FOR OVER PERFORMERS

If it bothers you that tasks remain undone, or if you are consistently performing tasks before your partner has a chance to do them, you likely are an overperformer. The first step is to recognize that by performing tasks immediately, you are removing the opportunity for your partner to complete the task.

Second, stop and think. Before you do a task, ask yourself "how important is it that the task be done *right now*?" If the task can wait, give your partner a chance to respond.

Tips

- ❖ Before you do a task, ask "how important it is that the task be done *right now*?" Can the task wait until your partner notices or until the agreed upon schedule?
- ❖ Rather than stewing over an undone task, politely ask your partner to take care of it
- ❖ When your partner does a task, express your appreciation

Also, ask your partner to do a task before simply completing it (and possibly expressing anger). It is likely your partner is not aware that the task needs to be done, and a kind request is all it takes to remind him/her.

Be sure to express appreciation verbally and in other ways for the tasks your partner does. At times it might be difficult to be appreciative for things you feel are not your responsibility, but recognizing your partner in a positive, consistent manner helps to reinforce the behavior and increases positivity in your relationship.

In addition, it is important to consider what does NOT

work when attempting to make meaningful changes. If you wish to promote healthy and positive change, negative strategies work against that goal. Research has shown that nagging, criticizing and accusations might lead to temporary change, but over the long term these strategies fail. Nagging is not only unpleasant, it leads to resistance over time.

Criticizing one's partner reduces his/her motivation to do the task. No one wants to

Tips

- ❖ Instead of nagging your partner, take a deep breath and change your nagging into a respectful request
- ❖ Before you criticize your partner for doing a task "incorrectly," ask yourself, "Is there more than one effective way to do the task?"
- ❖ Rather than make accusations, take your partner's perspective. Could other reasons for the behavior exist?

perform a task if he/she anticipates being harassed for doing incorrectly. Remember that learning how to complete a task takes time. The more one does a task, the more competent one becomes. Therefore, allow your partner time to master the task.

Finally, although you might feel that your spouse is at fault, resist the temptation to make accusations. Differences in tolerance levels for cleanliness suggest your partner is not intentionally ignoring a task, but simply does not notice that it needs to be done. Instead of assuming, ask your partner to complete the task. This creates an opportunity for your partner to please you.

In the best case, nagging, criticism, and accusations might push your partner into doing a chore once or twice. However, this temporary result probably will not become permanent, and these strategies frequently damage relationships.

4) STRATEGIES FOR UNDER PERFORMERS

If you relax and watch TV while your partner frantically vacuums around you, or if you never need to take the garbage out because it is never seems full, you might be an underperformer. Chances are, you did not choose your partner so you never had to clean; it just may be that your house is never dirty enough that it bothers you. In this case, recognizing that you are benefitting from your partner's efforts and choosing to alter your behavior is essential to restoring equity to your relationship.

Because it does not bother you when tasks are left undone, one step you can take in your relationship is to talk with your partner. Ask your partner how frequently tasks need to

be done and then adhere to a schedule you both can agree upon. A schedule will help make sure the chores are performed, even if you happen not to notice them.

Tips

- ❖ Rather than rely on individual preferences, set a schedule for cleaning that both partners can tolerate.
- ❖ Recognize your partner's efforts and express appreciation.

It might feel like you are cleaning more than you need to, but recognize that individuals have different needs – for cleanliness, affection, and support. In successful relationships, partners meet each other's needs, they don't insist that their partner's needs match their own. If doing tasks regularly improves your relationship, your spouse's health, and reduces fighting, why not?

Summary and Conclusion

How couples divide household chores impacts their relational conflict, health, and success at paid work. The key to dividing chores fairly is communication – both when couples initially reside together and regularly throughout their relationships. Concrete solutions to improve relationships through communication practices include explicitly

The key to dividing chores fairly is communication

discussing tasks, trading chores, recognizing if one is an under or over performer, and taking steps to change unfair behavior patterns.

Although following these steps will not end all conflict about household labor or solve all relationship ills, doing so can help couples reduce the frequency and intensity of their conflicts, better understand their differences related to cleanliness and order, avoid taking each other for granted and perhaps even increase their appreciation of each other's contributions.

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