

Division of household chores may depend on one's mess tolerance

November 1 2013



Does this trigger your threshold level? A series of photos was shown to individuals to measure at what point they would act.

Not that anyone is pointing fingers, but one individual went three weeks without noticing that dirty laundry had piled up.

The division of household [labor](#) is an issue that cuts across countries, genders and all types of relationships, from married couples to roommates.

"This is one of the top three conflict issues couples fight over," said Jess

Alberts, Hugh Downs School of Communication President's Professor.
"Wives who feel like the division of labor is unfair are more dissatisfied and more likely to think of divorce."

Strategies to cope are varied and inventive, said Alberts, who has conducted research on this issue for the past several years.

"This is the ongoing issue in my marital life and currently my favorite research project," she said.

Inspiration to address this most basic issue with universal effects was inspired by ASU School of Life Sciences President's Professor and entomologist Jennifer Fewell, who studies the division of labor between ants and bees.

"Fewell argued that ants and bees have specific [threshold levels](#) or tolerance for disorder in the hive. When they are bothered by their threshold level being violated, they are motivated to act," Alberts said.

This realization inspired Alberts' integrated theory of the division of labor that is currently in a testing phase and working "really well." Her theory argues that people will act according to their threshold levels for household clutter or disorder.

"People possess a tolerance threshold for various tasks in the home. If one person has a low threshold for disorder, then the person with the higher threshold may never do anything because his or her threshold is never reached. Through repetition, the person with a lower threshold becomes more experienced and better at it," she said. "Usually, the person with a lower threshold is not willing to wait for the person with the high threshold to be motivated to act."

Women typically tackle the majority of chores and evolutionary

psychology research explains why this may occur. For example, research shows that although parents equally respond to a baby in clear distress, they often vary their pattern if the baby is merely fussy. If mom responds faster to a fussy child, this becomes a reinforced pattern in which mom becomes the only one tending to the baby, Alberts said.

"Research suggests that females do about 50 percent more of household chores than males. Some people say it is an economic issue, but even when the woman makes more money, often she still does more housework. Sometimes the woman does more labor even when the husband is retired," she added.

If you've ever felt unappreciated for handling the housework, consider the "economy of gratitude" that refers to the fact that people are grateful for gifts when they are in a relationship. However, gifts are defined as receiving something more than is expected. If one person does a task all of the time in a relationship, then their effort is not seen as a gift. Yet, if the other partner does the task only occasionally, they expect to be thanked for doing it because they see their contribution as a gift, or something added.

"It's kind of like adding insult to injury," Alberts said.

In a survey they conducted, Alberts and former graduate student Justin Boren found that gay couples have an easier time in general with the division of labor because they talk about it more readily. Female roommates also talk about chores while male roommates typically don't. Instead, males may resort to passive-aggressive techniques, such as piling dirty dishes on someone's bed.

"Some men with a low threshold level expect women to do most of the household work and are bothered because their partner is not motivated to do so. This expectation may come from the fact that, for social and

evolutionary reasons, women pay more attention to and have more awareness of detail. They also have a keener sense of smell," Alberts said.

Kendra Knight, a former ASU graduate student, measured individuals' threshold levels by showing them a series of increasingly messy photos to discern at what point they would be motivated to act. Knight's work is being recognized at the National Communication Association Convention in November when she will receive the Gerald R. Miller Outstanding Dissertation Award.

How does one avoid the chore trap?

"At the beginning of a relationship, try not to do a task more than three times in a row, if you don't want be seen as owning the task," Alberts advises.

If someone has a lower threshold for messes, thank your partner for their efforts.

"If you don't feel that your partner is grateful for your efforts, especially if you perform the lion's share of domestic labor, that's likely to exacerbate feelings of inequity and dissatisfaction, making a difficult situation even worse," according to an article in *The Greater Good* that Alberts co-authored with Angela Trethewey, Hugh Downs School of Communication director and professor.

Keep in mind that some people are simply oblivious until it reaches a crisis point, such as when someone runs out of underwear after three weeks.

"If it doesn't trigger your threshold, it doesn't register," Alberts said.

Provided by Arizona State University

Citation: Division of household chores may depend on one's mess tolerance (2013, November 1)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2013-11-division-household-chores-mess-tolerance.html>

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