

# Men may not 'perceive' domestic tasks as needing doing in the same way as women, philosophers argue

December 22 2022

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Philosophers seeking to answer questions around inequality in household labor and the invisibility of women's work in the home have proposed a

new theory—that men and women are trained by society to see different possibilities for action in the same domestic environment.

They say a view called "affordance theory"—that we experience objects and situations as having actions implicitly attached—underwrites the age-old gender disparity when it comes to the myriad mundane tasks of daily home maintenance.

For example, women may look at a surface and see an implied action—'to be wiped'—whereas men may just observe a crumb-covered countertop.

The philosophers believe these deep-seated gender divides in domestic perception can be altered through societal interventions such as extended paternal leave, which will encourage men to build up mental associations for [household tasks](#).

Writing in the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, they argue that available data—particularly data gathered during the pandemic—suggest two questions require explanation.

One is "disparity": despite economic and cultural gains, why do women continue to shoulder the vast majority of housework and childcare? The other is "invisibility": why do so many men believe [domestic work](#) to be more equally distributed than in fact it is?

"Many point to the performance of traditional gender roles, along with various economic factors such as women taking flexible work for childcare reasons," said Dr. Tom McClelland, from Cambridge University's Department of History and Philosophy of Science.

"Yet the fact that stark inequalities in domestic tasks persisted during the pandemic, when most couples were trapped inside, and that many men

continued to be oblivious of this imbalance, means this is not the full story."

McClelland and co-author Prof Paulina Sliwa argue that unequal divisions of labor in the home—and the inability of men to identify said labor—is best explained through the psychological notion of "affordances": the idea that we perceive things as inviting or "affording" particular actions.

"This is not just looking at the shape and size of a tree and then surmising you can climb it, but actually seeing a particular tree as climbable, or seeing a cup as drink-from-able," said Sliwa, recently of Cambridge's philosophy faculty and now at the University of Vienna.

"Neuroscience has shown that perceiving an affordance can trigger neural processes preparing you for physical action. This can range from a slight urge to overwhelming compulsion, but it often takes mental effort not to act on an affordance."

There are dramatic differences in "affordance perception" between individuals. One person sees a tree as climbable where another does not. Objects offer a vast array of affordances—one could see a spatula as an egg-frying tool or a rhythmic instrument—and a spectrum of sensitivity towards them.

"If we apply affordance perception to the domestic environment and assume it is gendered, it goes a long way to answering both questions of disparity and invisibility," said McClelland.

According to the philosophers, when a woman enters a kitchen she is more likely to perceive the "affordances" for particular domestic tasks—she sees the dishes as 'to be washed' or a fridge as 'to be stocked'.

A man may simply observe dishes in a sink, or a half-empty fridge, but without perceiving the affordance or experiencing the corresponding mental "tug". Over time, these little differences add up to significant disparities in who does what.

"Affordances pull on your attention," said Sliwa. "Tasks may irritate the perceiver until done, or distract them from other plans. If resisted, it can create a felt tension."

"This puts women in a catch-22 situation: either inequality of labor or inequality of cognitive load."

This gender-based split in affordance perception could have a number of root causes, say philosophers. Social cues encourage actions in certain environments, often given by adults when we are very young children. Our visual systems update based on what we encounter most frequently.

"Social norms shape the affordances we perceive, so it would be surprising if gender norms do not do the same," said McClelland.

"Some skills are explicitly gendered, such cleaning or grooming, and girls are expected to do more domestic chores than boys. This trains their ways of seeing the [domestic environment](#), to see a counter as 'to be wiped'."

The "gendered affordance perception hypothesis" is not about absolving men say Sliwa and McClelland. Despite a deficit in affordance perception in the home, a man can easily notice what needs doing by thinking rather than seeing. Nor should sensitivity to domestic affordances in women be equated with natural affinity for housework.

"We can change how we perceive the world through continued conscious effort and habit cultivation," said McClelland. "Men should be

encouraged to resist gendered norms by improving their sensitivity to domestic task affordances.

"A man might adopt a resolution to sweep for crumbs every time he waits for the kettle to boil, for example. Not only would this help them to do the tasks they don't see, it would gradually retrain their perception so they start to see the affordance in the future."

Collective efforts to change [social norms](#) require policy-level interventions, argue the philosophers. For example, shared [parental leave](#) gives fathers the opportunity to become more sensitive to caring-task affordances.

Added Sliwa: "Our focus has been on physical actions such as sweeping or wiping, but gendered affordance perceptions could also apply to mental actions such as scheduling and remembering."

**More information:** Tom McClelland et al, Gendered affordance perception and unequal domestic labour, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/phpr.12929](https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12929)

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Men may not 'perceive' domestic tasks as needing doing in the same way as women, philosophers argue (2022, December 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-12-men-domestic-tasks-women-philosophers.html>

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