

# Researchers asked same-gender couples how they share the 'mental load' at home. The results might surprise you

July 14 2023, by Caitlan McLean and Paul Ward

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Housework is rarely split evenly, for lots of different reasons. Sometimes it's tied to who has more time at home or more physical capacity, but most of the time it is linked to gender and gender roles.

A significant body of research has looked at how [heterosexual couples](#) divide housework, so we decided to look more closely at the housework experiences of people in same-gender [couples](#).

Our study, published July 13 in the journal *PLOS One*, involved interviews with 16 same-gender couples with no children. Specifically, we wanted to know how these couples handled division of "[cognitive labor](#)", also known as the "[mental load](#)".

That's the often-invisible "project-manager" work of running a household—things like organizing bills, scheduling appointments, remembering birthdays and anniversaries, keeping track of house maintenance, writing the grocery list, keeping stock of the fridge and planning meals.

In heterosexual couples, the burden of the mental load falls primarily on women. Uneven division of household labor can affect mental and physical [health](#) and drive resentment.

Many people assume labor is evenly split in same-gender couples. Our study found, however, that same-gender couples divided the cognitive labor according to each other's strengths, preferences and changing needs.

In other words, the couples did not necessarily aim for the split to be 50/50, but rather for it to be "fair".

## **What we did and what we found**

The 16 couples in our study were in a same-gender relationship and living together. They did not have children living with them and were aged between 19-47. We interviewed these couples over eight months via Zoom. Four of our interviewees were men, ten were women and two

were non-binary. All interviewees identified as being in a same-gender couple at the time of the study. Unlike most other studies, we chose to speak to the interviewees as a couple so they could tell their story together.

What was stark was the performance and allocation of cognitive labor shifted between each person depending on their individual circumstances.

We found the cognitive labor workload wasn't shared 50/50 all the time (and sometimes not at all). Instead, this labor was divided according to needs that arose within the household and what was considered to be fair and just.

Couples talked about cognitive load shifting between them because of things like study commitments, changes at work, chronic illness and health. Couples also predicted their management of cognitive labor would likely shift through the course of their lives.

The way these couples viewed and performed cognitive labor was influenced by a few different factors.

These included the way they'd seen their own parents manage it, past relationships they had been in and also the way they valued fairness, justice and the uniqueness of their relationship.

Our results show that couples divided the cognitive labor according to each other's strengths, preferences and changing needs. As one interviewee put it:

"That was one of the first things that I was, like, 'this is an awesome part of being queer and creating your house.' And so for me, I've just thought, it doesn't have to be, there's a person who always does these

things and a person who does these things and those lists better be the same length."

## **No 'queer utopia'**

Some couples said this did not mean they were living in a "queer utopia". During interviews, couples talked about reaching a threshold and feeling stressed by the cognitive labor they were taking on.

There were some couples who had not considered cognitive labor their partner was taking on for their household until it was discussed in the interview (such as keeping Google calendars for [social events](#) or making plans to prepare their house for changes in seasons).

But many found ways of dealing with it. Couples talked about communicating their needs and their changing capacity to take on this labor on a regular basis.

They also acknowledged no one person should always be responsible for certain tasks. Cognitive labor in the home was something couples made a point of negotiating on a regular basis. Many saw the ability to be dynamic in how they performed housework as a strength. One participant said,

"I think part of my philosophy of household division of labor, sharing the emotional and cognitive load, goes back to my perspective on what a queer household is. And a 50/50 division of labor, I don't know; we can create whatever we want the house to be."

Our research offers fresh insight into how we can look at and understand housework inequity. A 50/50 split in cognitive labor may not work for everyone or be the goal couples strive for.

Instead, our data shows it's possible to see cognitive labor as something that is negotiated and shifts dependent on the needs, strengths and preferences of the couple.

**More information:** Caitlan McLean et al, The management of cognitive labour in same-gender couples, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0287585](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0287585)

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