



## Dividing Labor

*A Review of Heterosexual and Homosexual Couples*

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Kylea Caughman offers a comparative survey of sociological research on labor distribution among heterosexual and homosexual couples, noting the greater proclivity for egalitarian labor practices among same-sex couples. Caughman argues, finally, that the heterosexual couples stand to attain a higher quality of life by resisting gendered labor norms, as many same-sex couples have. This essay was written for Sociology of the Family with Dr. Chris Garneau.

**D**UE TO CHANGES IN SOCIETAL norms of gender-based work, many heterosexual couples end up having an unequal division of labor in the household. Rational work has been defined as masculine, leaving it up to the man in the relationship. Emotional work has been defined as feminine, meaning the woman in the relationship must be responsible for it. However, as women have entered into labor markets at a greater rate, taking on more and more rational work, this division of labor has become even more unequal than it had been before. Most of the time, men are still only dealing with rational work, while the woman in the relationship takes on both rational and emotional work.

As Western society has become more open about sexuality, more researchers have been able to study homosexual couples, allowing

for a comparison between heterosexual and homosexual couples. Because homosexual couples cannot follow typical gender norms within the household, new research shows how homosexual couples navigate the division of labor between the couple. There is no current norm for how homosexual couples divide up labor, which leads to thoughtful discussion between the partners, rather than each person falling into the role they believe is expected of them. Because of this, homosexual couples often settle into egalitarian forms of division of labor.

This literature review is an examination of how gender-based work influences heterosexual couples, and how homosexual couples deal with breaking these norms. I will determine how heterosexual couples and homosexual couples divide up labor within the household, and whether gender influences only heterosexual couples, or if it also plays a role in homosexual couples. I will also determine what types of divisions of labor lead to higher rates of satisfaction within couples, heterosexual and homosexual both.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Division of Labor in Heterosexual Couples*

Over time, men have started taking on more emotional work at home, but the majority of domestic work is still handled by women in heterosexual relationships. According to van Hooff (2011), women in heterosexual relationships, on average, take on about 70 percent of the household labor. Women are staying in charge of the home and family, resulting in a second shift of work for working mothers in heterosexual relationships. As Moras (2017) found, even when the woman of the household reaches out for help by hiring cleaning laborers, she still wants to stay in control of handling this work. Women supervise and select the employees themselves, still leaving part of this household work in their own hands, rather than their male counterparts’.

Despite the existence of unequal distributions of labor in heterosexual couples, the couples often claim to share the labor equally. The couples hold egalitarian values, but the values do not exist in the actual division of labor between heterosexual couples. When this fact is pointed out, both members of the couple are there to defend the inequality. They will claim that one is more competent doing certain tasks, or has preferences for certain tasks (van Hooff, 2011). Though heterosexual couples don't call household labor "women's work," this labor is taken up by the woman in most cases and considered obligatory because of gender expectations. The women in these situations do not claim it as unfair, usually praising their significant others for helping out once in a while (Moras, 2017).

Traditional gender roles within the household significantly explain why heterosexual couples often fall into these forms of unequal division of labor. Both men and women use strategically defend inequality, not challenge it, even when these practices contradict the couple's own beliefs about gender equality. Even when heterosexual couples decide to arrange the division of labor in an anti-sexist way, the woman in the relationship still finds herself reliant on the man's agreement and follow-through (van Hooff, 2011). Among couples where the man is employed and earning money while the woman is not, this role of "homemaker" becomes even stronger. Because the women see the men as the breadwinners, they take on the traditional role of homemaker by default (Moras, 2017).

### *Division of Labor in Lesbian Couples*

In a study conducted by Chan, Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson (1998), the researchers found that lesbian parents on average showed a more equal distribution of unpaid labor than heterosexual couples. However, this relative equality was not found in shared household work, which was relatively similar to that of heterosexual couples. The difference was in childcare, in which lesbian couples had a more equal share of responsibilities than the heterosexual couples examined. Lesbian mothers receive much more help than heterosexual

mothers. Anecdotal evidence from Dunne (2000) suggested that lesbian mothers opt to find help outside of the household as well, allowing friends and extended family to be very involved in the raising of their children.

However, because lesbians do not have specific gender-normed roles in the household, the division of labor becomes quite complex. It is not always the case that lesbian couples are more equal in the distribution of labor. Lesbian couples have the potential to challenge the breadwinner/homemaker norms, but sometimes choose to adopt them instead. However, a study conducted by Rawsthorne and Costello (2010) showed that the lesbian couples who did adopt this style of labor-division experienced the greatest number of conflicts over the subject. In these cases, it was often the birth mother who ended up in the role of the homemaker. Despite these interesting findings, the majority of families' studies did have some form of negotiation over the division of labor in the household, which minimized conflict between the couple.

Compared to heterosexual men in the study by Chan et al. (1998), the non-biological mother in lesbian couples shows a greater involvement as a caregiver. The researchers attributed this development to identity-formation differences between the genders. Socialization tells women to take on nurturing, caregiver roles, while men are socialized to take on paid employment as a means of providing for the family. As a result, the division of labor when it comes to childcare is more equal between lesbian couples than heterosexual couples, which leads to higher rates of satisfaction of lesbian mothers over heterosexual mothers (Farr & Patterson, 2013).

### *Divisions of Labor in Male Homosexual Couples*

Compared to heterosexual couples, homosexual male couples on average have a more equal distribution of labor. According to the findings of Gotta, Green, Rothblum, Solomon, and Balsam (2011), this equality of shared household labor has actually decreased over time. However, the division of labor between a homosexual male couple

is still markedly more equal than heterosexual couples' division of labor. These researchers, along with Goldberg, Smith, and Perry-Jenkins (2012), found that homosexual male couples equally share not only "feminine" household tasks, but also typically "masculine" tasks within the home as well.

Tornello, Sonnenberg, and Patterson (2015) also found that the distribution of labor in gay male couples was relatively equal, especially when they had negotiated to be egalitarian in the division of labor. Higher levels of life satisfaction were associated with the gay couples who used the egalitarian model for distributing labor, while the gay couples who felt that they had not met that standard held lower levels of life satisfaction.

Male homosexual couples are not completely equal in their division of labor, either. While Nico and Rodrigues (2013) found that gay male couples were more egalitarian in dividing household labor, they were less equal in sharing labor than lesbian couples. The researchers hypothesized that rather than outside factors, such as socialization and gender-normed work, influencing this inequality, that the couple is actually responsible for the inequality. Though they do not gender housework, the inequality is justified by the couple as preference and difference in competency, similar to the justifications given by heterosexual couples.

## DISCUSSION

THE LITERATURE REVIEW HAS examined the different ways that couples, depending on their sexuality, choose to negotiate the division of labor within the household. Studies found that heterosexual couples often did not heavily negotiate the division of labor in the household. Instead, they often separated the work by relegating the "masculine" work to the man and the "feminine" work to the woman in the couple. This often resulted in the woman taking up a second shift of work, leaving her less satisfied in this area of the relationship.

Among lesbian couples, division of labor was usually negotiated. In the research, there were some exceptions, in which one woman took on the homemaker role, while the other took on the breadwinner role. These couples showed greater dissatisfaction with the distribution of labor between the couple. However, the majority of the research showed that lesbian couples had the most equal division of labor between the types of relationships examined, most notably in the aspect of shared child-care between the couple.

Homosexual male couples also had a more equal distribution of labor than the heterosexual couples; however, it was less equal than that of the lesbian couples studied. The homosexual couples were not perfect in the research reviewed either, showing some couples that had an unequal division of labor. However, it is hypothesized that this is due to poor negotiation, rather than adapting to couple and gender norms. In terms of couple satisfaction, the couples that had egalitarian forms of division of labor rated higher satisfaction in the relationship than those who had more unequal distributions of labor.

These studies are not only important for expanding the research on LGBTQ+ couples, but also for reading into and understanding the forms division of labor between couples. Questioning and evaluating norms that have been ingrained into couples for decades allows for conversation about why those norms are in place, and whether those norms still represent what we want to see couples do today. Because the typical division of labor in heterosexual couples is gendered, looking at different strategies used by lesbian and gay couples can help create insight into how to change these norms.

Looking at negotiation, specifically within lesbian and gay couples, creates a new understanding of how households can run at the spousal level. Not only does egalitarian division of labor in couples make partners feel more equal, but it also gives both parties within the couple greater levels of satisfaction in their relationship. This can be the key in helping heterosexual women feel more equal and

satisfied in their relationships regarding the distribution of labor and help them reduce or eliminate the second shift altogether.

In America, proposed policy changes are difficult to enact. Marriage and family are institutions that resist outside forces. However, more open discussion about the unequal distribution of labor between heterosexual couples needs to begin. Just as testimonies in the studies illustrate, most of these unequal couples do not realize how unequal they are. They just fall into this outdated system of gendered work and become unequal. In most cases, both parties of the couple even defend the inequality, defensive over their roles.

This should no longer be the case when research shows that equal labor distribution leads to greater satisfaction in the relationship. The division of labor needs to be something unique to each and every couple, and always negotiated beforehand. Gender should not determine how much work is put upon one member of the couple's shoulders. As seen in both lesbian and gay couples, there is a different and better way to handle the division of labor.

This is not something that can happen overnight. Couples have practiced these gender norms for decades, and many still do today. Some couples are already working toward progress, but it might be a long time before the gender norms are broken. Open discussion and criticism can only do so much and reach so many people.

Future research should look more into heterosexual couples who have adopted egalitarian forms of labor distribution. It would be interesting to compare these practices to those of both gay and lesbian couples. Comparing the levels of equity, satisfaction, and strategies used would perhaps shed some light on the effectiveness of negotiation in heterosexual couples regarding the division of labor. ► ►

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