

Does Goal Incongruence Lead to Unequal Division of Household Labour? An Experimental Study of Polish Couples

Extended Abstract

Introduction

An unequal division of household duties between women and men occurs in most developed countries (ISSP, 2016, 2025). The consequences of this inequality affect multiple areas, including the gender wage gap and falling fertility rates (Doepke et al., 2022). In Poland, existing research suggests that unequal household division influences intentions to have children, though this may be an indirect effect mediated by dissatisfaction (mainly among women) with how tasks are divided by couples— (Baszczak et al., 2025).

Despite changing social norms toward greater gender equality and declared preference for an egalitarian division of household work in many households, the reasons for this persistent inequality that prevail in the literature and common comprehension are still to some extent unsatisfactory. Numerous hypotheses point to factors that are difficult to test empirically. Consequently, there is a limited number of experimental studies analysing decision-making processes regarding the division of household labour and the factors influencing these decisions.

A review of experimental studies involving couples is provided by Munro (2017). His article surveys experimental designs using games such as the dictator game, the prisoner's dilemma, and public goods games, as well as less conventional physical-task-based experiments. An example of experimental research addressing gender equality in resource allocation is provided by Mani (2020). Beblo and Beninger (2017) conducted an experiment examining whether partners perceive income as individual or shared household resources. The same authors have also investigated negotiation dynamics between partners (Beninger & Beblo, 2014). Cochard et al. (2016) conducted an experiment with 100 couples focusing on cooperation tendencies and strategies (using a prisoner's dilemma design, comparing couples with male–female stranger pairs). Peters et al. (2004) used a public goods game involving family members. Görge (2021) used the “battle of the sexes” game to study gender framing effects on strategy choice, while Couprie et al. (2020) investigated gender associations with different task types. Görge (2015) also explored gender and relationship effects on self-sacrifice tendencies among 40 couples (20 real and 20 matched strangers). Düval (2023) used vignette-based experiments to study perceptions of paid and unpaid labour division, finding no gender differences.

Potentially crucial, yet underexplored, factor might consist in goal incongruence. Vierling-Claassen (2013), in a game-theoretic model, demonstrated the theoretical possibility of

unequal task distribution arising even when both partners share the same ultimate goal of equal division. The goal of equality may conflict with other personal objectives—such as achieving task completion (e.g., cleaning the apartment or caring for a child). This difference in goals can, in turn, lead to unequal outcomes.

Such inequality may not stem from conscious calculation but from differences in socialization, psychological traits (e.g., agreeableness, negotiation style), and other gender-correlated characteristics often cited as drivers of inequality in domestic labour. However, goal incongruence provides a way to operationalize these mechanisms empirically and identify a concrete channel linking broader gender-related variables to household division patterns.

A mitigating factor may be communication, i.e. partners' ability to express needs and preferences or lack thereof. Given that partners in romantic relationships often act altruistically, those less concerned with task completion may still aim for fairness to maintain relationship quality. Therefore, our hypotheses include interaction effects between goal incongruence and communication.

We designed a laboratory experiment and conducted a pilot study, examining the effect of goal incongruence - situations where one partner cares more about task completion than equal division. We aim to test whether this factor affects women more strongly than men. In the lab, we induce this difference exogenously by randomly assigning the additional goal to either female or male partner.

Experimental Design

Participants are cohabiting heterosexual couples. Each couple must divide a real manual task: folding a heap of 50 towels. The task is simple, measurable, and non-fatiguing. For each pair, we record how many towels are folded by each of the partners.

Each participant receives an “egoistic” goal: to complete as little work as possible. Their individual monetary reward equals maximum PLN 100, but decreases by PLN 2 for every towel they fold. They can only receive any reward at all if all 50 towels are folded. One partner additionally receives an extra goal: to complete the task within 12 minutes (versus the 30-minute general deadline). This additional goal is randomly assigned to either woman or man in each pair to simulate motivational asymmetry. It is rewarded with a separate PLN 50 voucher.

Thus, the participant with the additional goal must balance their egoistic incentive (minimize effort) with the need to achieve timely completion, while their partner faces only the egoistic goal, gaining a stronger bargaining position. If women assigned the additional goal fold significantly more towels than men assigned it, this would indicate that gender differences in household labour arise primarily from fundamental gendered mechanisms beyond mere goal incongruence.

We further introduce communication control: in half of the couples, both partners' goals are known (transparent condition), while in the other half they remain undisclosed (opaque condition). This allows us to examine whether communication mitigates inequality effects.

Table 1. Experimental Group Design

	Who in the couple has the additional goal?	Are goals disclosed?	Number of couples in the pilot study
Group I	Woman	Disclosed (transparent)	5
Group II	Man	Disclosed (transparent)	5
Group III	Woman	Undisclosed (opaque)	5
Group IV	Man	Undisclosed (opaque)	5

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Women will perform a larger share of the work when they receive the additional goal than men do in the analogous condition.
- **H2:** Transparent goal conditions will reduce the effect of goal incongruence: couples with disclosed goals will share the task more evenly compared to couples with undisclosed goals.

In an exploratory manner, we will conduct further analyses with additional variables as covariates and/or moderators. The measurement of these variables will be conducted as a pre-experimental survey and a post-experimental survey.

Potential covariates: age, level of education, relationship status (formal, informal), relationship duration, children in household (number, age), financial situation, health status, employment status.

Potential moderators: socialization, norms, worldview (political orientation and beliefs regarding social and gender issues), quality of communication in the relationship, personality traits (IPIP).

Other variables measured for exploratory purposes: actual division of household duties, relationship satisfaction, vision of the future (concerns, expectations).

Pilot Study Results

Due to the small pilot study sample (20 couples), results are not statistically significant but indicate the expected patterns. In opaque conditions, women with the additional goal performed more work than men with the same condition. Across both genders, transparent-goal couples showed more balanced divisions, suggesting that communication may mitigate goal asymmetry effects.

Table 2. Pilot Experiment Results — Mean Number of Towels Folded by Participants with the Additional Goal

Who received the additional goal	Transparent goals	Opaque goals	Total
Woman	25	34,75	28,9
Man	26	28,8	27,7
Total	25,4	31,2	

Note: the total number of towels folded by each pair is 50. Each pair in the pilot study managed to fold all 50 towels under 12 minutes.

Results such as those obtained in the pilot study would confirm both hypotheses, if more couples were tested. That is why a full-scale experiment (N = 100 couples, 200 participants) has been launched and will conclude by the end of 2025.

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