Cooking Up Change.
A Qualitative Exploration of Weaponized Incompetence in the Household

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Abstract

This study investigates weaponized incompetence, i.e. the deliberate or strategic performance of inability to avoid domestic responsibilities within heterosexual cohabiting relationships. While the concept has gained traction in online discourse, it has received limited scholarly attention. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality and feminist critiques of domestic and emotional labor, this paper situates weaponized incompetence as a socially embedded strategy that reinforces gendered inequalities in the household. Methodologically, the research combines four semi-structured interviews with two Romanian couples in their twenties with an autoethnographic reflection, supported by a collaborative witnessing exercise. Thematic analysis of interview data highlights recurring patterns: women consistently assume responsibility for cognitive and emotional labor, while men selectively engage in visible tasks or frame avoidance as incapacity. These dynamics are naturalized through habitualization, silent bargaining, and cultural scripts that prioritize harmony over equity. The autoethnographic component extends these insights by demonstrating how performances of incompetence operate not only in interpersonal relationships but also in the researcher's own lived experience. By conceptualizing weaponized incompetence as a form of epistemic capital, the article contributes to scholarship on gender, care, and domestic labor, highlighting the need for relational accountability and deeper engagement with the emotional dimensions of inequality.

Keywords: weaponized incompetence, second shift, gender roles, emotional labor, qualitative approach

Why do some men claim they "can't cook" or "don't know how to clean", and why does this often leave their partner picking up the slack? This article explores a phenomenon known as "weaponized incompetence", where individuals strategically present themselves as less capable in order to avoid responsibility. While it may appear as simple forgetfulness or clumsiness, weaponized incompetence often reflects deeper gender dynamics that shape everyday life inside the household.

The study focuses on young heterosexual couples living together in Romania, drawing on both interviews and personal reflection. Two couples, each in their early twenties, shared their experiences of negotiating household chores, from cooking and cleaning to managing bills and emotional support. Their stories reveal a common pattern: while tasks are sometimes

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divided informally, women frequently carry the heavier load of cognitive labor (planning, organizing, anticipating needs) and emotional labor (soothing tensions, maintaining harmony). Men, meanwhile, are more likely to contribute in visible or episodic ways, by taking out the trash and repairing items, or to frame avoidance as a lack of ability, such as "I don't know how to cook."

To complement these accounts, the article also includes an autoethnographic reflection, where the author revisits his own experiences of cohabitation. This personal lens highlights how weaponized incompetence is not only an abstract idea but also a lived dynamic that requires active confrontation and self-reflection. By admitting to his own reliance on claims of incompetence in the past, the author shows how such behaviors sustain inequalities and contribute to emotional strain in relationships.

The findings suggest that weaponized incompetence is a way of performing ignorance that has real consequences for gender equality, fairness, and intimacy. Small acts of avoidance accumulate, creating patterns where one partner – usually the woman – carries both the practical and emotional weight of household management. These patterns are further reinforced by cultural expectations that normalize women's greater competence in domestic life.

Understanding weaponized incompetence in this way sheds light on why change is difficult, even for couples who value equality. It shows that domestic labor is not only about efficiency or preference but about power, recognition, and accountability. By naming and analyzing this phenomenon, the article encourages readers, especially men, to reflect on their own household practices, ask whether claims of incompetence are genuine or convenient, and imagine more equitable ways of sharing the work of everyday life.

"What we do is more important than what we say or believe."
—bell hooks

"Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one."
—Marcus Aurelius

INTRODUCTION

Defining Weaponized Incompetence

"Weaponized incompetence" is a term popularized through online discourse that describes the strategic, often gendered, act of feigning inability in order to avoid responsibility. It refers to situations where individuals, particularly men in heterosexual relationships, pretend not to know how to complete domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or laundry. The expression gained traction on social media platforms like Reddit, where users, primarily women, began describing patterns of domestic labor avoidance that hinge on gendered expectations and the unequal distribution of the "second shift", i.e. unpaid labor performed after formal work hours.

While weaponized incompetence has roots in romantic partnerships, its relevance is not limited to the private sphere. It can be understood more broadly as a performative, socially constructed strategy of ignorance, one that exploits gender norms and emotional labor asymmetries. Within households, such displays not only result in the deflection of responsibilities but often require the other partner, typically the woman, to manage both the

task and the accompanying frustration. This double burden reinforces the institutionalization of gender roles under the guise of individual inability.

This research aims to: (1) develop the concept of weaponized incompetence within gender-sensitive academic literature, (2) examine how heterosexual cohabiting couples negotiate domestic labor in the context of evolving gender norms, and (3) explore how everyday performances of incompetence produce and maintain inequalities in labor and power. Drawing on both Berger and Luckmann's social-constructionist theory and feminist critiques of emotional and domestic labor, the study employs a qualitative methodology: four semi-structured interviews with two heterosexual cohabiting couples, supplemented by an autoethnographic reflection.

Despite participants' differences in age, living arrangements, and socioeconomic background, the study expects to uncover recurring patterns in how domestic labor is divided, justified, and contested.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender and the Social Construction of Ignorance

Understanding the persistence of gendered divisions in domestic labor requires examining the cultural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions that underlie household work and the broader social processes through which these dynamics become institutionalized and normalized. Across historical, sociological, and theoretical analyses, research shows that household inequalities are not simply byproducts of individual preference or economic rationality but are actively sustained through cultural norms, invisible forms of labor, and the social construction of ignorance and incompetence.

Betty Friedan's (2001) exploration of the mid-20th century American housewife highlights the paradox of women's discontent despite material comfort and societal affirmation. Women were inundated with prescriptive advice on fulfilling traditional feminine roles, while their identities became tethered to the emotional and physical demands of domestic life. What a doctor at the time called the "housewife's syndrome" now exposes how these expectations trivialized women's dissatisfaction and obscured the structural constraints behind it, embedding a cultural script of self-sacrifice that discouraged questioning gendered arrangements.

Moreover, according to Hochschild and Machung (2003), research spanning the 1960s to 1980s shows that women's increasing participation in paid work did little to shift these dynamics. Instead, women consistently performed more total labor, both paid and unpaid, due to entrenched cultural expectations. Their own distinction among housework, childcare, and the invisible management of domestic life (planning, remembering, organizing) underscores how cognitive and emotional labor remain heavily gendered. These "second" (housework) and "third" (emotion work) shifts sustain women's mental and emotional responsibility for the household, even as men's contributions rise modestly.

Daminger (2019) deepens this focus on cognitive labor, revealing how its diffuse, abstract, and often invisible nature perpetuates inequality. Women disproportionately engage in anticipatory and monitoring work – tasks that tether them to household management even when absent. Because these contributions lack clear boundaries or visibility, they are rarely

acknowledged or reciprocated, privileging men who can "opt out" of mental burdens while benefiting from their partner's oversight.

Hartley (2018), on the other hand, examines emotional labor, where women manage not just tasks but the emotional comfort and stability of family members. Despite men's increasing involvement in childcare and housework, women often choose to complete taxing tasks themselves to avoid being perceived as "nagging," even when such choices exacerbate their own stress. This invisible emotional regulation, which benefits men's well-being and stability, further entrenches unequal power relations.

Sullivan (2021) situates these micro-level dynamics within broader structural and cultural contexts, showing how gender norms mediate household divisions beyond economic logic. Even when men lose economic dominance, many avoid undesirable chores to assert masculinity, while supportive norms and policies, such as paternity leave or egalitarian family backgrounds, are required to approach equitable arrangements. In the absence of such supports, women risk remaining disproportionately burdened with routine and undesirable tasks, restricting their economic mobility and perpetuating systemic inequality.

Thébaud et al. (2019) expose the social performance dimension of housework, finding that women face harsher moral and social judgment for domestic disorder. Even when men and women share similar standards privately, women's public accountability pressures them to invest more in cleanliness and domestic competence, framing housework as a site of gender performance and social control. This moral scrutiny reinforces household labor as a central arena where femininity, morality, and worth are evaluated.

Garcia and Tomlinson (2020) illustrate how these dynamics persist even amid economic disruption. Studying couples experiencing redundancy, they identify "strategic incompetence," where men resist rebalancing household labor by feigning inability or passivity, often supported by what she calls "silent bargains", which maintain traditional roles without explicit negotiation. Even when women become primary earners, they frequently shoulder emotional and organizational labor, while men seldom reciprocate when roles are reversed. These tacit behaviors reveal how gender norms and implicit power sustain inequality even when material circumstances change.

Grünberg's (2019) survey data underscores the cross-cultural endurance of these patterns in Romania. Women overwhelmingly perform time-intensive, routine chores, while men handle episodic or specialized tasks like repairs. This entrenched division institutionalizes expectations and conflict, reinforcing women's association with the household's daily upkeep regardless of broader societal changes.

Together, these studies reveal that domestic labor inequalities are sustained not only through explicit divisions of tasks but also through invisible cognitive and emotional work, social expectations, and strategic behaviors that normalize women's disproportionate burden. These processes are reinforced by mechanisms of ignorance and institutionalization that make these roles appear natural, inevitable, and resistant to change.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) provide a foundation for understanding how such norms become institutionalized. Through habitualization, repeated household behaviors become patterned and embedded in each partner's "stock of knowledge," reducing the perceived range of alternatives. Reciprocal typifications – partners' shared expectations that "actors of type X

perform tasks of type X" – solidify these routines into institutions that present themselves as external, objective realities. Over time, these institutions confront individuals with coercive force, shaping conduct while concealing their human origins and changeability.

Burke (2023), however, highlights how ignorance, like knowledge, is historically and socially produced, existing in forms that reinforce such institutionalization. Passive ignorance (unawareness), active ignorance (resisting unsettling information), and sanctioned ignorance (privileged avoidance of others' experiences) all function within households. When a partner's avoidance or lack of skill is framed as incapacity rather than choice, the other assumes compensatory responsibility, further embedding the division of labor as a naturalized arrangement.

Rayner (2012) expands this by framing ignorance as a deliberate social achievement. Domestic units, like organizations, can manage "uncomfortable knowledge" – threats to established roles – through denial (refusing engagement), dismissal (acknowledging only to reject), diversion (redirecting focus), or displacement (substituting symbolic acts for real change). Feigned incompetence, tolerated avoidance, or performative participation can operate as such strategies, preserving a stable but unequal domestic order while minimizing overt conflict.

Alasuutari (2018) situates these practices within struggles for epistemic capital, the accumulation of authority through recognition. Authority in households is relational and discursively constructed, as partners invoke cultural expectations, expertise, or ontological authority, i.e. claims about what is "realistic" or "necessary," to legitimize their roles and absolve themselves of certain responsibilities. These forms of authority shape whose perspective defines competence, whose labor is recognized, and whose ignorance is excused, embedding gendered power dynamics in the negotiation of domestic work.

These dynamics of gendered domestic labor and the ways they are institutionalized through culture, emotion, cognition, and ignorance demand methods capable of capturing both the deeply personal and the structurally embedded. Autoethnography offers one such approach, allowing researchers to interrogate how cultural scripts of labor, care, and avoidance are lived, internalized, and contested.

By positioning the researcher as both narrator and analyst, autoethnography bridges individual memory and broader social context (Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 2009). It treats recollection not as objective fact but as meaning-making, chronicling the routines, crises, and relational negotiations through which household roles take shape (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). This inward-outward lens (Adams et al., 2015) makes it possible to trace how emotional burdens, cognitive labor, and even feigned incompetence are experienced and rationalized by those enacting them.

Through feminist perspectives, autoethnography also foregrounds vulnerability and precarity (Ettorre, 2017), revealing how emotions and embodied experience, often minimized in conventional scholarship, are central to understanding how domestic inequalities endure. Reflexive approaches informed by Pierre Bourdieu (Reed-Danahay, 2009) further expose the institutional and cultural fields that shape these micro-level negotiations, dismantling the false binary between subjective and objective accounts.

In this way, autoethnography becomes not only a methodological tool but a lens through which to analyze how ignorance and incompetence are constructed and mobilized in everyday domestic life, embedding gendered divisions within seemingly natural, unchangeable routines.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews with an autoethnographic reflection, to explore how domestic labor is negotiated and experienced within cohabiting couples. This dual strategy enabled the analysis of both interpersonal dynamics and individual, reflexive accounts, capturing how social expectations intersect with lived experiences.

During the preliminary stages of the literature review, OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5, 2025) was used to assist in identifying potentially relevant academic sources and refining keyword searches. It should be noted, however, that the final list of sources was curated by the author, who independently reviewed and decided which materials to include or exclude.

1. Interview Process and Participants

Two cohabiting heterosexual couples (participants in their early to mid-20s) were recruited to represent diversity in occupational status, household arrangements, and relationship duration. To avoid partner influence on responses, interviews were conducted individually. Each participant was told the study examined the "division of domestic labor," without reference to weaponized incompetence, to avoid priming their accounts. All interviews were conducted in Romanian, recorded with participant consent, and manually transcribed. Relevant excerpts were later translated into English for analysis.

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for comparability while leaving space for elaboration on personal routines, conflicts, and perceptions of fairness. Questions addressed the division of tasks, conflict resolution, gender norms, and strategies for negotiating responsibilities. Female participants, however, were initially more reticent in discussing frustrations. My positionality – a male researcher with personal experience in cohabitation – likely shaped these interactions, as some participants moderated their tone or emphasized rational explanations for conflicts rather than emotional responses. Recognizing this, I maintained a conversational style, validating responses without pressing for elaboration beyond their comfort level. Finally, to safeguard participant confidentiality, all names have been changed, and any identifying details have been removed or altered.

2. Coding and Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. First, descriptive codes (e.g., "expressed incompetence," "conflict triggers," "gender expectations") were applied to the transcripts. These were iteratively grouped into four overarching themes: (1) division of labor, (2) conflict and negotiation, (3) expressions of incompetence, and (4) gender norms – which structure the findings section. Quotations were selected to illustrate the diversity of perspectives and to ground the analysis in participants' own words.

3. Autoethnography and Collaborative Witnessing

To complement participant accounts, I incorporated an autoethnographic reflection on my own cohabitation experience, drawing from my relationship with a former partner of five years. With her consent and borrowing from Allen et al.'s (2019) concept of collaborative witnessing, she conducted a self-interview, recording her responses to the same questions the participants had answered. This approach allowed both perspectives to be integrated without my presence influencing her recollections, ensuring a fuller, more balanced narrative.

Combining interviews, autoethnography, and collaborative witnessing allows the study to capture both broader relational patterns and deeply personal textures of domestic life. This approach recognizes that the division of household labor is not merely a structural phenomenon, but also a lived negotiation embedded in individual histories and relational contexts.

FINDINGS

1. Relationship Dynamics and Division of Domestic Labor

This analysis compares two young, middle-class, Gen Z heterosexual couples, Mark and Mary, on one hand, and Sebastian and Sophia, on the other, who recently started cohabiting. Both couples moved out from their parents' homes or dormitories, marking a transition to shared domestic life with new routines and responsibilities.

Mark (25, doctoral student) and Mary (21, master's student) have lived together for four months, while Sebastian (22, master's student) and Sophia (24, undergraduate) have shared an apartment for two months. Both describe cohabitation positively but with different tones: Mark reflects a pragmatic acceptance of the move, while Sophia feels more relaxed than she did living at the dorm.

Relationship descriptions reveal subtle gendered dynamics. Mark calls their relationship "unconventional" due to rejecting marriage, but admits their domestic life is fairly typical. Mary emphasizes harmony and good communication. Conversely, Sebastian describes their bond as soulmate-like but notes traditional gender roles: he handles heavy or technical tasks, while she cooks and cleans more, explaining this as partly involuntary and influenced by his anxiety around cooking and struggles with depression. Sophia acknowledges a "modern" relationship with "traditional" elements and perceives a persistent, often unspoken double standard expecting women to perform certain chores, something she consciously rejects based on her mother's experience.

Daily routines reflect gendered distributions of cognitive (Daminger, 2019) and emotional labor (Hartley, 2018). Mary and Sophia take on the bulk of planning and household coordination, while Mark and Sebastian contribute more sporadically or in specific tasks like dishwashing or laundry. Sebastian openly cites mental health as limiting his energy for chores.

Domestic responsibilities are divided along gendered lines and institutionalized through habit rather than explicit negotiation, consistent with Berger & Luckmann's (1991) theory of habitualization. Mary and Sophia largely manage cooking, cleaning, laundry, and financial

tasks, while Mark and Sebastian handle trash, some dishwashing, and technical repairs. Both women describe taking leadership in the household due to greater competence or confidence, often correcting or "educating" their partners. Mary describes this as a "dictatorial" role, while Sophia expresses frustration mixed with accommodation for Sebastian's mental health.

Strategic incompetence (Garcia & Tomlinson, 2020) appears in both men's selective engagement with domestic tasks, maintaining traditional gender divisions through limited involvement or expressed anxiety. Meanwhile, women bear most of the invisible cognitive and emotional labor – organizing, monitoring, and managing household life – highlighting ongoing gendered inequalities in cohabiting relationships despite modern ideals.

2. Conflict, Negotiation, and Satisfaction

Both couples experience low levels of explicit conflict regarding the division of domestic labor, though subtle tensions and negotiations are evident beneath the surface. Mark states, *"Misunderstandings, no,"* emphasizing that while minor requests occur *("maybe you cook," "you wouldn't be hanging clothes if I didn't tell you"*), these rarely escalate into conflict. Similarly, Mary accepts the current arrangement, noting *"he does what I tell him to,"* highlighting a hierarchical dynamic where she directs much of the domestic work. The main friction lies in small tasks like watering plants, where assumptions about responsibility create minor conflicts, reflecting a gap in communication rather than fundamental disagreement.

The second couple reveals more emotional labor entwined with conflict. Sebastian admits, *"she has moments when she's upset and feels like I'm not doing enough,"* linking his limited contribution to anxiety and low energy. Sophia echoes this by describing unspoken expectations and relaxed standards: *"we didn't argue… we just talked, and it passed,"* illustrating conflict resolution through low-stakes negotiation rather than confrontation.

Regarding satisfaction, Mark expresses cognitive dissonance, aware that their domestic labor division is skewed but personally comfortable: *"I think this is where the cognitive dissonance comes into play."* He acknowledges that, were he an outsider observing, he might view the situation as unfair but accepts it due to relational context. Mary, however, foresees future frustration from the unequal load: *"it doesn't bother me at the moment… but I'll probably get sick of it."* This anticipates potential burnout, highlighting the gendered emotional labor embedded in domestic management (Hochschild & Machung, 2003).

Sebastian voices regret and desire for improvement: *"I should be doing more,"* signaling awareness of imbalance and motivation for change, while Sophia perceives their division as fair and functional but acknowledges that she takes more responsibility for errands and household tasks. This pragmatism reflects adaptive negotiation to lived constraints.

When asked what they would change, Mark desires proactive initiative and skill acquisition from himself, to reduce his partner's burden: *"it'd be nice to do stuff on my own initiative,"* reflecting a move toward more egalitarian labor distribution. Mary emphasizes the emotional and cognitive gap: *"I should change the man,"* critiquing his lack of attentiveness to subtle needs, underlining the often invisible work women perform. Sebastian wishes to cook more, wanting to overcome his fears and contribute better, while Sophia stresses mutual accountability, warning against shared procrastination: *"we both hesitate."*

Overall, the couples' negotiations show gendered patterns of labor division maintained through a mix of implicit expectations, emotional labor, and negotiation strategies that prioritize relational harmony over strict equity.

3. Expressions of Incompetence

Expressions of incompetence around domestic labor serve multiple social functions in both couples: they mark areas of genuine skill disparity, signal discomfort, and sometimes reinforce implicit gender roles. Participants use phrases like *"I can't do it"* or *"you do it better"* in both practical and emotional registers: sometimes as genuine admissions, sometimes as strategic deflections.

For Mark, incompetence is not necessarily claimed outright but is inferred through his partner's standards: *"she feels I wouldn't meet them"*, especially in tasks like vacuum-cleaning or hanging clothes. Mary observes that he does claim *"I'm not that good"*, but it's framed as a warning before acting: less refusal, more self-protection in the face of perceived scrutiny. This aligns with what Mark later describes as a "negative feedback loop," where his lack of knowledge creates hesitation: *"I'm still in housekeeping kindergarten in this house, while she's a graduate."*

These expressions aren't merely about skill. They reflect the relational positioning and cognitive load. Mark vividly describes the mental barrier of starting a task like cooking: locating the kitchen utensils, checking ingredients, navigating unfamiliarity. For him, even basic chores feel *"uncanny"*, because the process hasn't been internalized into routine. His incompetence is performative and structural, not innate – a gap between embodied familiarity and cognitive overload. Mary validates this gap only to a point: *"the first time is an acceptable reason, but after that you should already know how to do it."* This suggests a pedagogical dynamic where the labor of teaching also falls unequally.

In the second couple, Sebastian openly claims incompetence in tasks like cooking, though he frames them with good humor. When confronted with something unfamiliar, like changing a lightbulb, he imagines himself feigning confidence: *"'Yes, sure!'... but deep inside: 'Shit, how do I do that?'"* Sophia, on the other hand, rejects incompetence as an excuse altogether: *"Anyone who claims that is lying through their teeth!"* This reflects a strong norm of self-sufficiency and perhaps a defensive stance against gendered assumptions about domesticity.

Interestingly, both women, Mary and Sophia, at times suspect a pattern of learned helplessness. Sophia admits she may contribute to this dynamic: *"I have a history of 'This is not right'..."* undermining her partner's learning process. Sophia, though uncertain, suspects avoidance: *"he seemed to me to be avoiding it a bit."* Her anecdote about her boyfriend's scattered sneakers – *"it was rubbing me the wrong way"* – reveals how small gestures of neglect can feel symbolic of deeper resistance or entitlement.

These expressions of incompetence are not neutral: they become gendered scripts, often reinforcing asymmetry in emotional and cognitive labor. While men may voice incompetence with sincerity, women often bear the burden of instructing, correcting, and accommodating.

4. Gender Norms and Social Expectations

Gender norms and socialization patterns significantly shape how domestic labor is perceived and divided, though participants disagree on the extent to which these dynamics stem from personality versus societal expectation. For Mark and Mary, differences in household standards are largely attributed to upbringing and temperament rather than gender per se. Mark notes, *"it doesn't seem to me that it's because she's a woman… she has high standards that she holds herself to… but she doesn't impose it as much on me,"* attributing his partner's initiative to her early exposure to household chores rather than any inherent gendered disposition. Mary echoes this: *"it's not about gender, it's about upbringing… and how you grew up."* For them, disparities emerge less as ideology and more as inertia from past routines.

In contrast, Sebastian identifies a systemic, gendered expectation, particularly for women to perform "double duty": *"we don't just have the expectation that the woman has to sit at the saucepan – we have the expectation that she has to sit at the saucepan after she's been at work."* He frames this as a backlash phenomenon, fueled by both misogynistic attitudes and women reinforcing traditionalist narratives online, amplifying pressure on women to fulfill both professional and domestic roles. Sophia concurs that *"there is always the expectation that a woman can handle cooking better,"* though she situates it in cultural habit rather than conscious sexism: *"that's the way we're used to… but it doesn't mean that's the way I want to go about it."* Her observation about male celebrity chefs underscores a broader double standard: women are expected to cook at home, while men dominate the professional culinary sphere.

When reflecting on their own dynamics, both couples acknowledge that their divisions often "illustrate" traditional roles (as Mark and Mary concede) but with caveats. Mary attributes this to her *"meticulousness,"* describing her high standards and control over organization as a personal quirk rather than capitulation to gender norms. Conversely, Sebastian and Sophia argue their relationship actively resists broader gendered expectations, particularly financially: *"we share everything… it's all equal,"* with both partners transparent and collaborative in budgeting. For them, sharing costs equally and maintaining open communication about spending explicitly defies societal expectations where *"the man pays the rent wholly."*

In comparing themselves to peers, both couples recognize their arrangements as somewhat atypical, whether due to more deliberate financial transparency (Sebastian and Sophia), or a more functional task-based division (Mark and Mary). Yet, even as they rationalize disparities as rooted in personality, upbringing, or efficiency, traditional gender norms remain a persistent backdrop, shaping expectations, tensions, and the frameworks through which fairness is negotiated.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that domestic labor division is shaped by a mix of personal habits, negotiated dynamics, perceived competence, and lingering gendered expectations – sometimes challenged, sometimes reinforced – within each relationship. These patterns highlight not just how couples manage household work, but how broader social norms intersect with individual personalities and histories. Before we draw any broader conclusions, however, let us take a look at how these themes resonate with my own lived experience, through an autoethnographic reflection.

Cleaning, Cooking, and Confronting Myself: An Autoethnographic Account

Growing up, the division of domestic labor in my family was shaped by both circumstance and traditional gender roles, but it was never explicitly framed that way at home. My father worked abroad as a truck driver for much of my childhood, leaving my mother to manage the household alone. When he was home, he took on physical and outdoor tasks such as chopping wood, maintenance, and repairs – work culturally coded as masculine due to its physicality or association with traditionally male spaces like the backyard or the garage. My mother, on the other hand, handled cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caregiving duties. She also managed household logistics: writing shopping lists, planning meals, and generally keeping track of domestic life.

Because my father was often absent, many of the heavier, physical tasks fell to my mother, who sometimes struggled with health problems due to the strain. As I grew older, especially after my mother secured a full-time job as a social worker, I was expected to take on more chores, such as cleaning, doing dishes, and tending the wood-burning stove. This shift was difficult: I felt overwhelmed balancing school and home responsibilities, and at times lonely and neglected. Even as a child, witnessing my parents' frustrations and arguments over the division of labor left an impression that the arrangement was unfair and unsustainable.

Reflecting now, I see how deeply gendered these roles were, both reinforced by social norms and by practical necessity. I grew up observing a version of masculinity that involved physical strength and technical skills but avoided caregiving and domestic work. Cooking, for example, was something my father rarely did at home, despite managing for himself abroad. This shaped my own attitudes toward household tasks in ways I did not fully understand until later.

When I moved in with Julia during our university years, we initially tried to split chores equally, alternating tasks to keep things "fair." However, this arrangement was transactional rather than truly equitable, especially since I lacked cooking skills and confidence. Julia took on the bulk of cooking duties, while I focused on other chores like taking out the trash, doing dishes, and cleaning. I often justified my limited involvement by emphasizing the chores I did, but I now recognize that this was a form of what has come to be called "weaponized incompetence." I performed ignorance around cooking to avoid the discomfort and responsibility involved, while expecting Julia to compensate by handling emotional and cognitive labor, such as planning meals and managing food supplies.

Conflicts arose, especially around cooking and shopping, where my insecurities and communication difficulties played a large role. Arguments about what to buy, who should carry groceries, and when I would cook were frequent. I often reacted defensively when Julia pointed out my shortcomings, trying to shift focus to other contributions rather than addressing the underlying issue. I wanted to avoid tension but also struggled to admit fault or change ingrained habits. These conflicts left both of us frustrated and emotionally exhausted, sometimes erupting into tears and withdrawal.

After our breakup, I began living alone and taking full responsibility for all household tasks. This change forced me to confront my prior behaviors and assumptions directly. Over time, I have developed not only practical skills but also a greater awareness of the emotional and relational dimensions of domestic labor. Cooking, once a source of anxiety, has become

something I enjoy, especially when sharing meals with friends, including Julia. Our relationship has transformed into a friendship marked by mutual respect and openness, and I am grateful for the chance to grow through this connection.

Writing about these experiences now evokes a complex mixture of guilt, shame, hope, and gratitude. These emotions remind me of Rayner's (2012) four strategies of dealing with uncomfortable knowledge: denial, dismissal, diversion, and displacement. Early on, I denied the significance of my role in the inequitable division of labor, brushing aside the frustration Julia expressed as just "her being upset." Later on, I dismissed her concerns by emphasizing other chores I did, deflecting attention away from cooking because it was a domain where I felt incompetent. I also engaged in diversion by focusing on transactional fairness, counting tasks instead of addressing the emotional labor and underlying power dynamics. Finally, displacement occurred as I projected responsibility for the problem onto external factors such as my workload or stress from exams.

By confronting these strategies within myself, I have begun to dismantle the defenses that kept me from fully owning my part in the dynamic. This process of self-reflection reveals how uncomfortable knowledge about gender, power, and responsibility can be avoided, yet it is precisely by "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) that meaningful change becomes possible.

My story reflects broader social patterns where women disproportionately bear the unpaid "second shift" of domestic and emotional labor, even amid changing norms. It underscores the importance of accountability, communication, and continuous self-reflection in disrupting these patterns. By sharing my personal journey alongside academic inquiry, I hope to contribute to a richer understanding of gender and care, as well as encourage others – especially men – to examine their own roles in household dynamics. Ultimately, I want this reflection to be an invitation for greater honesty, empathy, and partnership in how we negotiate domestic life.

DISCUSSION

The personal narrative I shared in the autoethnographic reflection echoes many of the themes that emerged from the interviews with the cohabiting couples, particularly around the division of domestic labor and the performative nature of incompetence. Both the interviewees and my own experience reveal a persistent tension between evolving gender norms and entrenched expectations that continue to shape how chores are divided and negotiated.

Interview participants often noted that, while contemporary attitudes reflect a desire for equality – splitting chores or costs "fairly" –, traditional gendered patterns subtly persist. For instance, women frequently remain responsible for cooking and emotional labor, even when men take on more visible tasks like cleaning or paying bills. This mirrors my experience with Julia, where despite an initial attempt at transactional equality, I performed incompetence around cooking to avoid responsibility, reinforcing a double standard typical of weaponized incompetence. The interviews' acknowledgment of this dynamic as partly rooted in childhood socialization and habit echoes my reflection on family gender roles shaping attitudes and behaviors.

This comparison highlights the benefits and pitfalls of "gender mainstreaming" (Verloo, 2016; Walby, 2005) as the policy and cultural effort to embed gender equality across institutions and everyday life. On one hand, gender mainstreaming's push to raise awareness about inequality has empowered many couples to question traditional roles, fostering more egalitarian arrangements. Some, like Sebastian and Sophia, deliberately split financial responsibilities and challenge norms, reflecting increased consciousness and intentionality in domestic negotiations.

However, the pitfalls emerge when gender mainstreaming fails to account for the deeper, affective, and unconscious dimensions of gendered behavior. As my own story shows, even awareness of inequality does not automatically translate into behavioral change. Defensive reactions, emotional discomfort, and socialized insecurities can hinder the renegotiation of roles. In fact, weaponized incompetence thrives in the gap between awareness and action, where men may know they should contribute more but unconsciously or strategically avoid tasks tied to femininity or vulnerability.

The interviews and my reflection also underscore how self-awareness is a critical, though insufficient, catalyst for change. I became aware of my weaponized incompetence only through the painful process of reflection and post-breakup solitude, enabling me to develop skills and attitudes aligned with more equitable domestic labor. Similarly, some interview participants described ongoing negotiations, highlighting that change is incremental, relational, and often fraught with conflict.

This suggests that gender mainstreaming efforts need to extend beyond policy and discourse to address emotional literacy, communication skills, and cultural scripts that shape everyday interactions. Supporting individuals in recognizing their own complicity in reproducing gendered inequalities – and in managing the discomfort that arises – is essential. Otherwise, the performative aspect of incompetence can persist, maintaining structural imbalances under the surface.

Finally, the interplay between my autoethnographic reflection and the interview data illustrates the complexity of domestic labor negotiations within shifting gender norms. While gender mainstreaming has made valuable inroads in promoting equality, bridging the gap between consciousness and practice remains a challenge. A more nuanced understanding of the emotional and performative dimensions of gender roles can enhance both scholarly research and practical efforts to foster genuine, sustainable change in households.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how heterosexual cohabiting partners negotiate domestic labor within the context of evolving but persistent gender norms. The findings show that negotiation is a dynamic process shaped by individual personalities, childhood socialization, and broader societal expectations. While many couples strive for equitable division, traditional roles often subtly influence who performs which tasks, especially regarding cooking, cleaning, and emotional labor.

Housework norms play a crucial role in institutionalizing gender roles by embedding expectations about "appropriate" tasks for men and women. These norms are reinforced both

through socialization and through the tacit acceptance of double standards, such as the assumption that women should maintain higher standards of cleanliness or emotional care. Such norms create a framework within which domestic labor is divided and justified, even as couples attempt to challenge or adapt them.

The social construction of incompetence emerges as a strategic performance within households, where one partner – usually the man – feigns inability to avoid certain chores. This weaponized incompetence functions as a form of epistemic capital, shifting responsibility and emotional labor onto the other partner. This dynamic reinforces power imbalances by enabling some individuals to evade accountability while relying on their partner's compliance or reassurance.

These patterns have significant implications for power relations within the household. They perpetuate unequal labor burdens and emotional work, shaping not only the division of tasks but also the emotional climate of relationships.

For future research, longitudinal studies could illuminate how weaponized incompetence and domestic labor negotiations evolve over time, especially through different life stages or after significant relational transitions. Additionally, exploring how intersectional factors, such as social class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, influence these dynamics would deepen understanding of how domestic labor and gendered power relations are shaped across diverse contexts.

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