

Study looks at what happens when roommates, partners have different levels of tolerance for housework left undone

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(Medical Xpress) -- One area that can contribute to relational satisfaction between romantic partners or roommates can be division of household labor. Studies have shown that women traditionally do more in the household.

While the differences often vary based on the selected study, the amounts are disproportionate. Sarah Riforgiate, assistant professor of [communication studies](#) at Kansas State University, wanted to know why those differences exist. She collaborated with Jess Alberts and Paul Mongeau, professors of [human communication](#) at Arizona State University, to examine the issue.

The idea originated seemingly unintentionally. Alberts was leisurely reading about ants and bees and discovered that entomologists have found that insects have different threshold levels of tolerance for uncompleted tasks. If bees with different threshold levels are paired together, the bee that is most disturbed with a low honey level has been found to work harder, sometimes working itself to death. Riforgiate's master's thesis and dissertation tried to determine if such thresholds exist in human relationships and what the effects are as a result. She examined same-sex roommates and found that, unsurprisingly, different thresholds have detrimental effects on relationships.

"If we have different threshold levels, we're more likely to have lower

perceived relational satisfaction," Riforgiate said. "And we're much more likely to have conflict."

Differing threshold levels negatively impact the idea of task divergence and gratitude as well, she said. When a romantic couple or roommates have differing threshold levels, the person with the lower tolerance level will often become bothered and complete tasks more promptly. Repeated instances of this behavior can lead to those tasks being regarded as the person's job.

"Then we no longer need to be grateful for our partner's work or compensate because it's their job," Riforgiate said.

Practical implications stem from the study's results. Special considerations might help in pairing roommates or assist couples in having important conversations before living together, Riforgiate said. Riforgiate's team hopes to aid in this process by developing explicit communication strategies to improve relationships. She said a failure to complete a specific task is not always what it seems.

"If they don't notice it's a problem, it's not always simply because they're lazy," Riforgiate said. "We make really negative attributes about people who we live with -- roommates, [romantic partners](#) -- that are not helpful in our relationship and may actually have nothing to do with what's really going on."

The team considered several other factors in their research. The theory known as the integrative theory of the division of domestic labor accounts for biological differences between the sexes that would influence the completion of certain tasks. These differences go beyond sex roles, according to Riforgiate.

"Women have a slightly better sense of smell," Riforgiate said. "Men and

women have a different number of rods and cones in their eyes. Men are better at seeing movement, and women are better at seeing color and texture. These small biological differences can contribute to differences in threshold levels."

Prior theories do an inadequate job of accounting for those differences, according to Riforgiate.

The team arrived at its results by sampling large introductory level communications classes. Students were sampled to ensure they met the necessary qualifications. The qualifying students predominately lived in apartments or residence halls and their average age was 19 or 20.

Riforgiate hopes future studies will examine different intervention strategies with mixed-sex couples. She also hopes to implement the team's findings into an effort of better selecting college [roommates](#). But Riforgiate knows that communication will not be the sole method of fixing relational issues.

"In past nontheoretical studies, communication has improved relationships, but it hasn't changed the allocation in a positive way," Riforgiate said. "I think we need to understand what is going on. That's why I've spent a lot of time determining if this theory is holding up.

Riforgiate says the topic of study is central to the success of relationships.

"I think it has great application and it's certainly worth studying," she said. "Our hope is that once we understand what we're studying that we can really see what types of communication make a difference."

Provided by Kansas State University

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