



**Talk Is Not Cheap:
How Communication Affects
the Gender Division of Household Labor**

Citation: Baszczak, Ł., Rozbicka, I., Wincewicz-Price, A., Lewandowski, M., Pyrkowski, M., Gasiorowska, A. (2026), *Talk Is Not Cheap: How Communication Affects the Gender Division of Household Labor*, Working Paper, No. 1, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw.

Warsaw, June 2026

Authors: Łukasz Baszczak (Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw, Poland; University of Warsaw, Poland), Iga Rozbicka (Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw, Poland), Agnieszka Wincewicz-Price (Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw, Poland), Marcin Lewandowski (Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw, Poland; University of Warsaw, Poland), Maksymilian Pyrkowski (University of Warsaw, Poland), Agata Gasiorowska (SWPS University, Warsaw, Poland)

Editing: Jakub Nowak, Małgorzata Wieteska

Graphic design: Anna Olczak

Text and graphic composition: Sławomir Jarząbek

Polish Economic Institute

Al. Jerozolimskie 87

02-001 Warsaw, Poland

© Copyright by Polish Economic Institute

Table of contents

Abstract.....4

Introduction5

Overview of the study and research hypotheses8

Transparency Statement10

Method..... 11

 Participants 11

 Procedure..... 13

 Results..... 14

Discussion.....16

 Theoretical Contribution16

Limitations and Future Directions.....20

References22

Abstract

We examine how communication transparency moderates the division of household-like labor when intimate partners face conflicting financial incentives. In a preregistered laboratory experiment, 99 heterosexual cohabiting couples jointly folded towels under a payment structure in which personal over-contribution reduced individual earnings while raising the likelihood of increased aggregate payout – thereby rewarding free-riding. Within each couple, one randomly selected partner received an additional individual goal with a contingent bonus, creating motivational asymmetry. Couples were randomly assigned to a transparent condition (goal disclosure permitted) or a non-transparent condition (goal disclosure prohibited). Contrary to our preregistered prediction, women did not assume a larger share of labor. Instead, results revealed a significant Gender $\times$ Transparency interaction. In the non-transparent condition, incentivized men contributed substantially more than incentivized women – a pattern we interpret as reflecting men's selective response to the individual performance goal at the expense of individual financial reward. Women's lower contribution under the same conditions reflects a financially rational response to the overall payment structure. An alternative decomposition confirmed that the interaction was driven entirely by women: transparency significantly increased incentivized women's contribution but had no effect on men's. We propose that transparency introduced domain-specific identity threat for women – for whom domestic performance carries evaluative stakes – while leaving men's goal-driven contribution unchanged. These findings suggest that gendered domestic labor division reflects the interaction between motivational orientation and informational context rather than static gender preferences.

Keywords: household labor; communication transparency; gender differences; volunteer's dilemma; gender differences; market mindset; identity threat; goal salience

JEL Classification: C91, D91, J16, Z13

Introduction

The persistent gender gap in unpaid household labor remains one of the most robust findings in social science. Despite decades of convergence in paid employment, women in industrialized nations continue to devote substantially more time to domestic chores, caregiving, and household coordination than their male partners (Bianchi et al., 2000; Garcia-Moran & Kuehn, 2023; Voicu et al., 2009). Understanding this asymmetry is not only a matter of descriptive accuracy: it has direct implications for gender inequality in labor markets, well-being, and the distribution of economic and social resources within households. Yet the causal mechanisms underlying domestic labor allocation remain contested, and the role of informational structures in shaping these mechanisms has received comparatively little empirical attention.

The dominant economic account attributes the gender gap in domestic work to comparative advantage and differential opportunity costs. Becker's (1981, 1985) household production model predicts specialization along the dimension that maximizes household utility: because women have historically faced lower market wages, concentrating on household production was rational for couples. Bargaining extensions of this framework (Manser & Brown, 1980; McElroy & Horney, 1981) embed the allocation of domestic work in cooperative game theory, treating it as the outcome of implicit or explicit negotiation in which each partner's relative resources and outside options determine bargaining power. These models generate clean testable predictions, but they struggle to account for a striking empirical regularity: the gender gap in domestic work persists even in dual-earner couples where women earn equal to or more than their partners (Bittman et al., 2003; Horne et al., 2018). Bargaining power alone is insufficient to explain observed patterns.

A second body of work emphasizes gender norms and identity. Drawing on Akerlof and Kranton's (2000, 2005) economics-of-identity framework, gender identity theory posits that individuals internalize prescriptions for gender-appropriate behavior and incur psychological costs when they deviate from them. Applied to domestic work, this framework predicts that women may perform household labor not because of comparative advantage, but because failing to do so imposes identity costs. Conversely, when women out-earn their partners, men may compensate by reducing their own domestic

contributions – a pattern documented by Bittman et al. (2003) and Procher et al. (2018) as a “doing gender” effect, in which the normative logic of femininity and masculinity is reproduced even under economically egalitarian conditions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These identity-based mechanisms operate at the level of individual motivation but are reinforced by socially shared norms and gender socialization processes (Davis & Greenstein, 2020; Magda et al., 2024).

A third, more process-oriented body of work attends to the micro-dynamics of how partners actually negotiate and coordinate domestic labor. Survey-based studies consistently identify communication quality, negotiation strategies, and perceived equity as important predictors of labor allocation beyond individual-level characteristics (Carlson et al., 2020; Charbonneau et al., 2019). Qualitative research documents how couples implicitly or explicitly renegotiate chore arrangements under conditions of asymmetric information about each other’s preferences, obligations, and available time (Daminger, 2020; Komter, 1989). Alberts et al.’s (2011) Integrative Theory of the Division of Domestic Labor formalizes one mechanism: partners have different “response thresholds” – the subjective discomfort level at which they act on a perceived need – and gender differences in these thresholds systematically contribute to unequal distributions. Taken together, this process-oriented literature suggests that domestic labor division is an emergent property of ongoing relational coordination rather than a fixed expression of individual preferences.

Despite this rich literature, several important questions remain underexplored. First, the majority of existing evidence relies on cross-sectional surveys measuring stated preferences, attitudes, or retrospective accounts of behavior (Coltrane, 2000; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Sullivan, 2018). Stylized recall-based measures are known to deviate systematically from time-diary estimates (Bianchi et al., 2000; Kan, 2008), and cross-sectional designs cannot capture the dynamic, interactive processes through which labor divisions are negotiated within couples (Grunow et al., 2012). Second, most observational and survey-based approaches cannot disentangle the causal contributions of gender norms, resource bargaining, and communication processes (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Gupta, 2007; Shelton & John, 1996). Because the same behavioral outcome – women performing more household labor – is consistent with multiple competing mechanisms, cross-sectional designs leave the operative process theoretically underdetermined (Cochard et al., 2018). Third – and most directly relevant to the present study – the role of information transparency in shaping domestic labor division has received almost no formal empirical attention despite its theoretical centrality (Carlson et al., 2020; Cochard et al., 2018; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Household coordination is fundamentally a problem of strategic interaction under incomplete information (Harsanyi, 2004; Lundberg

& Pollak, 1994; Vierling-Claassen, 2013): partners routinely lack full knowledge of each other's current workload, obligations, and motivational states (Cavalan et al., 2022; Daminger, 2019; Komter, 1989; Walzer, 1996), and this informational incompleteness may drive allocation outcomes in ways that standard preference-based models cannot capture.

Recent experimental work has begun to address this gap. Cochard (2018) used a laboratory “specialization game” with cohabitating couples to demonstrate that differences in productivity alone cannot explain gendered household labor patterns, implying that broader social norms and institutional factors likely play a greater role than traditional economic models tend to assume. Nisic & Trübner (2024) showed that mechanisms shaping labor distribution are less about explicit bargaining or economic specialization than about gendered expectations embedded in couple interactions. In a field experiment in a non-Western context, Alem (2023) documented that preference differences between partners can lead to inefficient household allocations even absent the gender-normative pressures typical of Western samples. Taken together, this emerging experimental literature corroborates the view that standard economic models are insufficient – but it has not yet systematically examined the role of information transparency in mediating or moderating these processes.

Overview of the study and research hypotheses

The present study is a preregistered incentivized laboratory experiment in which romantic cohabitating couples jointly folded a set of 50 towels – a physical, repetitive, effort-based household chore deliberately selected to be non-gendered, requiring no specific competences, and imposing no differential task familiarity across men and women. This task design was intended to isolate motivational and identity-based mechanisms from any confounds arising from gender-typed competence differences or prior skill asymmetries: if one gender contributes more, it cannot be attributed to differential ability or familiarity with the chore itself. The experiment examined how communication transparency – the ability to openly disclose individual goals and incentives – interacts with the gender of the additionally incentivized partner to shape this household-like labor division.

Theoretically, this structure instantiates an asymmetric volunteer's dilemma (Diekmann, 1985), a social dilemma in which at least one player has a payoff structure that differs from others, and in which contribution equilibria depend critically on beliefs about the partner's incentive type. The communication manipulation maps directly onto the distinction between complete and incomplete information in this game. In the transparent condition, partners could freely disclose their goals and incentives, transforming the interaction into a complete-information coordination problem in which the bonus-holder's motivation to ensure task completion is mutually known and negotiation is possible. In the non-transparent condition, each partner knew their own incentive structure but not their partner's, creating the conditions of a Bayesian game: strategic uncertainty about the partner's type was elevated, and each had to infer whether the other faced a completion incentive from observed behavior alone – conditions conducive to competitive signaling, impression management, and miscoordination (Daminger, 2020; Komter, 1989).

The gender of the additionally incentivized partner was randomly determined, and couples were simultaneously randomized to one of two communication conditions: transparent (partners could freely disclose their individual goals and incentives) or non-transparent (disclosure of personal incentives was prohibited). The resulting design was a 2×2 between-subjects factorial experiment, crossing the gender of the partner assigned the additional completion objective (woman vs. man) with the availability of explicit

communication about incentive structures (transparent vs. non-transparent). This allowed us to examine gender as a causal moderator of contribution behavior independent of the self-selection processes that confound observational research (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994), and to test whether the effect of gender-typed motivation on labor contribution depends on whether incentive asymmetries can be openly communicated between partners.

We formulated two main preregistered hypotheses. First, drawing on gender identity economics (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000), doing-gender theory (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and the sociology of domestic labor (Coltrane, 2000; Sullivan, 2018), we expected (H1) women assigned the completion-contingent bonus to fold more towels on average than men assigned the identical incentive. Because the task was designed to be free of gendered competence asymmetries, any observed gender difference in contribution must reflect motivational rather than ability-based mechanisms – specifically, the greater subjective cost to women of allowing a shared household task to fail (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994). Second, we hypothesized that (H2) transparent communication would moderate this gender asymmetry by revealing each partner’s incentive type and converting the interaction from a game of incomplete information – in which gender-normative defaults fill the strategic vacuum – into an explicit coordination problem in which motivations can be disclosed and allocations negotiated (Carlson et al., 2020; Lundberg & Pollak, 1994).

The study contributes to the behavioral economics and economic psychology literature in three respects that directly address gaps in prior work. First, by measuring directly observed behavior under real monetary incentives rather than self-reported preferences or retrospective accounts, it avoids the social desirability, recall, and measurement biases that limit survey-based research on domestic labor (Bianchi et al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000; Kan, 2008). Second, the experimental design isolates causal mechanisms that purely observational approaches cannot disentangle (Bittman et al., 2003; Cochard et al., 2018; Shelton & John, 1996): by holding task difficulty, competence demands, and gender-typing constant, it permits inference about motivational asymmetries that would be confounded in observational settings. Third, it provides the first direct experimental test of communication transparency as a causal determinant of labor division in intimate couples – a mechanism that is theoretically central to household coordination (Damingier, 2019; Vierling-Claassen, 2013) but is almost entirely absent from the empirical literature (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). The findings bear on a question of broad theoretical and policy relevance: whether domestic labor inequality is best addressed by changing gender preferences and norms, or whether modifying the informational environment in which couples coordinate may itself be sufficient to produce more equitable behavior.

Transparency Statement

This project adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct and the Declaration of Helsinki, and was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research of SWPS University, Faculty of Psychology in Wrocław, decision number 01/P/10/2025. All participants in all studies provided informed consent by clicking within the survey system. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures, and we followed JARS (Kazak, 2018). Data analysis was conducted using R. The experiment was preregistered at <https://aspredicted.org/s6sp-b6bq.pdf>.

Participants

Participants were recruited via public advertisements targeting residents of the Warsaw metropolitan area. Inclusion criteria required that couples be in a formal or informal heterosexual partnership, cohabit in a shared household for at least 6 months, be native Polish speakers, be residents of Poland, and be at least 20 years of age. A total of 106 couples were scheduled for laboratory sessions. Seven couples were subsequently excluded prior to analysis per pre-registered criteria (see Supplementary Materials for details). The final sample comprised 99 heterosexual cohabiting couples ($N = 198$ individuals; the demographics are provided in Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic information for the participants

Variable	Women	Men
Age, M (SD)	30.09 (7.97)	32.17 (9.43)
Education, %		
Primary/vocational education	2.02	3.03
Secondary education	8.08	25.25
Secondary education – currently studying	21.21	14.14
Higher education	68.69	57.58
Financial situation, %		
I can afford only basic needs	7.07	7.07
I can afford some, but not all, expenses	46.46	49.49
I can afford everything I need	22.22	19.19
I can afford everything and additionally save money	24.24	24.24
Political orientation, %		
Razem Party (leftmost)	26.26	17.17
New Left	13.13	5.05
Civic Coalition	23.23	19.19
PSL/Poland 2050	3.03	3.03
Undecided	23.23	36.36
Law and Justice	4.04	8.08
Confederation Liberty and Independence	4.04	8.08
Confederation of the Polish Crown of Grzegorz Braun (rightmost)	3.03	3.03

Variable	Women	Men
General health, %		
Very poor	0	0
Poor	3.03	2.02
Medium / Hard to say	14.14	7.07
Good	54.55	61.62
Very good	28.28	29.29
Relationship satisfaction, <i>M (SD)</i>	8.72 (1.18)	8.68 (1.19)
Satisfaction with the division of household labour, %		
Definitely dissatisfied	3.03	0
Mostly dissatisfied	9.09	13.13
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied / Hard to say	10.1	5.05
Mostly satisfied	54.55	59.6
Definitely satisfied	23.23	22.22
Frequency of arguments, %		
We do not argue at all	5.05	9.09
We rarely argue	55.56	51.52
We sometimes argue	36.36	32.32
We often argue	2.02	6.06
We argue very often	0	1.01
Prefer not to answer	1.01	0
Household financial decision-making arrangement, %		
I decide how all the money is spent and allocate my partner's share to them	1.01	2.02
We pool all our money together	8.08	13.13
We keep some money in a shared pool and some separately	52.53	44.44
We keep all our money completely separate	33.33	37.37
My partner decides how all the money is spent and allocates my share to me	1.01	1.01
Prefer not to answer	4.04	2.02
Relationship duration, <i>M (SD)</i>	6.38 (5.95)	
Number of children, <i>M (SD)</i>	0.34 (0.67)	
Relationship status, %		
Informal relationship	29.8	
Informal relationship, planning marriage	24.24	
Engaged	12.63	
Married	33.33	

Note: relationship satisfaction was measured on a scale from 1 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction. Assessments of relationship duration and relationship status differed between partners therefore these variables were calculated as the average of both partners' responses.

Source: own elaboration by PEI.

Procedure

Couples arrived at the laboratory together and were seated in separate waiting areas, where each partner individually completed a pre-experimental survey covering demographics, relationship characteristics, self-reported division of household labor, political orientation, and personality traits. Partners were then briefed separately by the experimenter on the task, their individual incentive structure, and the communication rules applicable to their assigned condition.

Each participant's primary compensation was inversely proportional to their contribution – folding no towels yielded 200 PLN, with earnings decreasing by 4 PLN per towel folded, reaching 0 PLN at 50 towels. Within each couple, one randomly selected partner additionally received a secondary incentive: a fixed bonus of 50 PLN (in the form of a store voucher pre-selected by the participant) contingent on the couple folding all 50 towels within 12 minutes, regardless of how labor was distributed between partners (additional goal assigned to men $n = 49$; women: $n = 50$). Additionally, couples were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the *transparent condition* ($n = 50$), participants were informed that they were free to discuss their incentives, motivations, and objectives with their partner during task execution. In the *non-transparent condition* ($n = 49$), participants were explicitly instructed that revealing or hinting at their individual incentives was prohibited; violation of this rule would result in immediate session termination and loss of earned compensation.

Following the separate briefings, partners were brought together into the experimental room, reminded of their communication rules, and the task commenced. The task consisted of jointly folding 50 towels stacked in a disordered pile on a central table. Each participant had a designated individual folding station; the only permitted actions were to take one towel at a time from the communal pile, carry it to one's own station, and fold it. Both partners worked simultaneously and could continuously observe each other's activity. Couples had a maximum of 30 minutes to complete the task. We preregistered that we would use the division of work, that is, the number of towels that have been folded by a man and a woman in each couple, as our dependent variable. However, as all 99 included couples finished within the time limit, these numbers always added up to 50, creating singularity in the analysis. Therefore, we deviated from the preregistration and used the number of towels folded by the additionally incentivized partner as the dependent variable ($M = 27.14$, $SD = 7.24$, range 2-50).

Following task completion, partners completed a post-experimental survey in separate rooms before being debriefed and compensated. All sessions were audio-video recorded with participants' informed consent.

Results

Because the dependent variable was a count variable and showed overdispersion, we used a negative binomial regression model with a log link. We used the gender of participants who received the additional incentive (with women as the reference category), the communication condition (with transparent goal as a reference condition), and their interaction as independent variables, and the number of towels folded by participants who received the additional incentive as the dependent variable. The overall model fit was significant, $\chi^2(3) = 12.17$, $p = .007$, accounting for approximately 10.6% of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .106$, adjusted $R^2 = .081$). The χ^2/df ratio of 1.048 confirmed adequate control for overdispersion.

We report all parameter estimates as unstandardized log-scale coefficients (B) with standard errors, alongside incidence rate ratios ($\text{IRR} = \text{Exp}(B)$) with 95% Wald confidence intervals. The intercept ($B = 3.30$, $SE = 0.025$, $\text{IRR} = 27.04$, 95% CI [25.74, 28.41]) represents the estimated mean for the reference cell: incentivized women in the transparent condition, on average, folded 27 out of 50 towels. Contrary to our expectations, incentivized men contributed at a significantly higher rate than incentivized women, $B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, $\text{IRR} = 1.16$, 95% CI [1.05, 1.28], $Z = 2.94$, $p = .003$. We found no significant main effect of transparency, $B = -0.04$, $SE = 0.05$, $\text{IRR} = 0.96$, 95% CI [0.87, 1.06], $Z = -0.87$, $p = .382$. Crucially, the interaction between the two manipulations was significant, $B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.101$, $\text{IRR} = 1.22$, 95% CI [1.00, 1.49], $Z = 2.00$, $p = .046$, indicating that the gender gap was disproportionately concentrated in the non-transparent condition.

To decompose the interaction, we examined simple effects of gender separately within each communication condition. In the transparent condition, we found no significant gender difference in labor contribution ($B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.07$, $\text{IRR} = 1.05$, 95% CI [0.91, 1.20], $Z = 0.67$, $p = .502$): incentivized women and men folded a comparable number of towels ($M = 27.00$, $SD = 5.37$, and $M = 28.31$, $SD = 7.27$, respectively). In the non-transparent condition, by contrast, incentivized men folded significantly more towels than incentivized women ($B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $\text{IRR} = 1.28$, 95% CI [1.11, 1.48], $Z = 3.45$, $p < .001$): men contributed approximately 28% more labor than women ($M = 29.96$, $SD = 7.57$ vs. $M = 23.36$, $SD = 7.27$).

An alternative decomposition examined the simple effect of communication transparency within each gender. Among incentivized women, the non-transparent condition was associated with significantly lower contribution relative to the transparent condition, $B = -0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $\text{IRR} = 0.87$, 95% CI [0.75, 1.00], $z = -1.98$, $p = .048$, such that incentivized women folded 13.5% fewer towels when the incentive structure was concealed from their partner. Among incentivized men, communication transparency

had no significant effect on contribution, $B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.07$, $IRR = 1.06$, 95% CI [0.92, 1.21], $Z = 0.82$, $p = .414$).

Taken together, the results revealed no significant difference in contribution between incentivized women and incentivized men when partners could communicate openly, but a significant and substantial advantage for incentivized men under conditions of informational opacity. An alternative decomposition confirmed that this interaction was asymmetric: communication transparency significantly increased the contribution of incentivized women but had no effect on that of incentivized men. These findings support H2 – that communication transparency moderates the gender gap in labor contribution – while providing only partial support for H1. Contrary to our prediction, incentivized women did not contribute more than incentivized men; the observed gender difference ran in the opposite direction, and was confined to the non-transparent condition.

Discussion

We examined how communication transparency moderates the effect of gender on labor contribution under asymmetric financial incentives. The results provided only partial support for our pre-registered hypotheses. Against our prediction (H1), incentivized women did not contribute more labor than incentivized men: the direction of the gender effect was reversed, and significantly so in the non-transparent condition, where incentivized men folded approximately 28% more towels than incentivized women. In the transparent condition, the gender gap was smaller than in the non-transparent condition, consistent with our prediction that explicit communication would promote more balanced labor divisions (H2).

These findings replicate and extend the experimental literature on intra-household labor allocation (Cochard et al., 2018; Alem et al., 2023) by isolating information structure – rather than preferences or resources alone – as a key determinant of gendered contribution patterns.

Theoretical Contribution

The payment structure of the present study introduced a coordination problem with features of a public goods game: the total payment received by each couple was fixed and contingent on full completion of the assigned task, but the more a given individual contributed, the smaller their personal payout. Under this structure, the individually rational strategy is to under-perform and free-ride on the partner's effort. The volunteer's dilemma framework (Diekmann, 1985) maps onto this structure directly: who takes on the cost of contribution depends on each player's beliefs about the other's incentive type. When the structure of additional incentive is known – as in the transparent condition – the incentivized partner's motivation is mutually understood and negotiated coordination is possible. When it is unknown – the non-transparent condition – each partner must infer the other's motivation from behavior under conditions of elevated strategic uncertainty (Harsanyi, 2004; Lundberg & Pollak, 1994), making rational coordination more difficult. Against this background, incentivized women's lower contribution in the non-transparent condition can be read as the financially rational response: given that over-contributing reduces one's personal payout and that

the partner's motivation is unknown, conserving effort is the equilibrium strategy consistent with the overall payment structure. What requires explanation is not women's behavior but men's.

Men with additional, the non-transparent goal folded substantially more towels than the overall payment structure would warrant – a pattern that is financially irrational given that doing so reduced their personal share of joint earnings. We propose that this over-performance reflects a selective response to the individual goal component of the incentive structure rather than to the joint payment structure as a whole. Participants assigned the additional individual goal were instructed to complete their share of the task within 12 minutes and received an extra reward for doing so. For men, this goal appears to have functioned as a performance challenge that overrode attention to the broader financial logic – a pattern consistent with evidence that specific, concrete goals narrow attentional focus toward the goal metric and away from the broader decision context (Ordóñez et al., 2009). Gender differences in competitive and achievement motivation are well documented: men are more responsive to individual performance targets and competitive incentive structures, and more likely to treat a performance opportunity as a contest to be won, regardless of financial implications (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). The individual self-assigned goal may therefore have activated a performance schema in incentivized men that displaced the experimentally imposed payment logic, producing high contribution that was behaviorally conspicuous but financially counterproductive, at least on the individual level. One implication is that in the non-transparent condition, the non-incentivized partner could free-ride on the incentivized man's over-performance, a dynamic structurally identical to the volunteer's dilemma equilibrium in which one party volunteers and the other defects. If, in addition, men understood the aggregate payout to be a joint reward, they might have deliberately ignored the specifics of individuals payouts and instead made sure the maximum payout was achieved in aggregate (irrespective of women's underperformance).

The contrast with incentivized women is theoretically illuminating. Women's lower contribution in the non-transparent condition reflects a rational response to the experimentally imposed payment structure: they appear to have responded to the overall incentive architecture rather than to the individual goal in isolation, adjusting effort to the level that the payment structure actually rewards. This pattern connects to a broader real-world parallel. In everyday domestic life, household labor benefits the household as a collective good but imposes time and effort on the individual – a structure closely analogous to our communal payment design. Women's alignment with the communal payment structure mirrors their default orientation toward domestic labor in everyday life: contributing as part of shared household maintenance rather than in response to individual performance goals

(Bianchi et al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000), and therefore expecting men's contribution. Men's over-response to the individual performance goal mirrors the well-documented pattern that men engage in domestic tasks when assigned specific individual targets but do not contribute to the general communal labor pool in their absence (Coltrane, 2000; Daminger, 2019). The experiment may therefore have inadvertently reproduced – within a single laboratory session – the motivational asymmetry that sustains the gender gap in domestic labor in the real world: women contribute communally by default, men respond to individual performance goals.

One related explanation is that the monetary individual goal served as a **market mindset cue** – triggering an exchange-oriented cognitive schema that frames the task as individual performance to be maximized (Gasiorowska et al., 2012, 2016; Gasiorowska & Zaleskiewicz, 2021). For men, this activation is compatible with their existing performance orientation: treating the task as a transaction (effort → reward) reinforces the goal-directed schema and explains both the high contribution and its indifference to whether the goal was disclosed to the partner. The market mindset and the individual goal pulled in the same direction – toward individual achievement – and men followed. For women, the same market mindset activation encountered a conflicting default: domestic labor is embedded in communal, relational motivation, and activating exchange-oriented thinking in this context disrupts rather than energizes contribution, crowding out the motivation to act (Frey & Jegen, 2001). The result is a motivational divergence that is not about different amounts of effort capacity but about different cognitive frames through which the same monetary incentive is processed.

The reversal observed in the non-transparent condition was not corrected by transparency so much as prevented by it – and, as the alternative decomposition shows, this prevention operated specifically through an increase in women's contribution rather than any change in men's. We propose that this asymmetry reflects differential exposure to identity threat when the incentive structure is disclosed. For men, whether the individual goal is communicated to the partner is motivationally neutral: domestic labor is not a domain in which men's identity is at stake, so the partner's awareness of the goal carries no evaluative implications (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). For women, the transparent condition changes the evaluative meaning of the situation. The partner now knows that the woman has been assigned an explicit goal to complete the task within 12 minutes – and can observe whether she acts towards meeting it. In a domain culturally constructed as women's default responsibility (Bittman et al., 2003; Sullivan, 2018), this visibility might constitute an identity threat: a situation in which performance is directly relevant to how one is seen in a domain central to one's gender identity (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Steele, 1997). Being seen to under-perform on a domestic task, by a partner who knows one has been explicitly assigned to

perform it, carries reputational stakes absent in the non-transparent condition. Consistent with evidence that evaluation apprehension and image motivation increase effort under observation (Ariely et al., 2009), incentivized women responded to this identity threat by increasing their contribution, bringing it in line with men's and eliminating the gender gap.

Taken together, these mechanisms produce a coherent picture in which the same objective task elicits qualitatively different motivational responses depending on the gender of the incentivized partner and the informational context. In the non-transparent condition, men over-respond to the individual performance goal, apparently treating it as a competitive achievement target at the expense of broader financial rationality, while women respond to the communal payment structure in a way that is financially calibrated but appears, by comparison, as under-contribution. In the transparent condition, identity threat selectively raises women's contributions toward parity, while men's contributions – driven by individual goal salience rather than the relational meaning of transparency – remain unchanged. The informational architecture of domestic coordination, therefore, shapes gendered contribution not by directly changing preferences or effort capacity, but by interacting with the motivational structures each gender brings: individual performance salience for men, communal structure alignment, and identity investment for women. The market mindset asymmetry, activated equally by the monetary incentive in both partners, but compatible with men's performance orientation and disruptive of women's communal default, may be the unifying mechanism underlying all three effects we observed: men's irrational over-performance, women's rational under-performance, and women's recovery under identity threat.

The finding has a direct real-world implication. The persistent gender gap in domestic labor is typically attributed to stable preferences, entrenched norms, or resource imbalances. Our results suggest an additional, more tractable source: the motivational asymmetry between individual-goal responsiveness (men) and communal-structure alignment (women) creates a contribution gap that can be attenuated by changing the informational context. Making individual goals and incentive structures transparent to the partner does not require changing gender attitudes or redistributing resources, but it changes the evaluative meaning of contribution for the person for whom domestic identity is at stake.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations constrain the generalizability of these findings. The sample was drawn exclusively from the Warsaw metropolitan area and was politically skewed toward liberal and left-leaning participants. Because the identity-threat and individual-goal-salience mechanisms we propose are likely moderated by political ideology and gender-role traditionalism (Bittman et al., 2003; Flèche et al., 2020), our findings may underestimate effects in more conservative or rural populations where domestic identity investment is stronger and more asymmetrically distributed. The laboratory setting necessarily simplified real household dynamics: unlike actual domestic arrangements, our task was discrete, short-term, physically equivalent across participants, and stripped of the cognitive and emotional labor that constitutes much of the real-world burden of household management (Damingier, 2019; Walzer, 1996). The design, therefore, cannot speak to whether the informational transparency effect generalizes to the invisible, ongoing, and multiply-tasks character of real domestic labor.

The incentive structure – a communal payment pool with diminishing personal returns to individual effort, combined with a separate individual performance goal – confounded several potentially distinct mechanisms, and their contributions were not independently manipulated. We cannot determine whether men's overperformance was driven primarily by the individual goal, its monetary reward, or the competitive framing of the performance target. Future research could independently vary payment structure (communal vs. individual) and goal framing (performance target vs. no target) within the same design, allowing cleaner identification of which component drives men's overperformance and women's communal alignment. Incorporating individual-difference measures of exchange and communal orientation (Gasiñowska et al., 2025) would also permit direct tests of the heterogeneity we predict: the goal-salience effect should be strongest among men highest in exchange orientation, and the identity-threat effect strongest among women highest in communal domestic identity.

The market framing introduced by monetary incentives was not experimentally manipulated and its effects are interpreted post hoc. Our design cannot distinguish crowding-out of communal motivation from alternative accounts – such as performative effort under evaluation apprehension or performative

egalitarianism under observation (Ariely et al., 2009; Hoffman et al., 1994; Masclet et al., 2003) – that might produce the same behavioral pattern. Future research could orthogonally vary relational frame (market vs. communal) and communication transparency within the same design, allowing a cleaner causal test of the crowding-out mechanism.

A more fundamental methodological tension deserves acknowledgment. Incentivized experimental designs are the default in behavioral economics because the induced-value method – tying payments to performance – is thought to elicit genuine rather than hypothetical preferences (Camerer & Hogarth, 1999; Smith, 1982). Yet household labor is, by its very nature, un-incentivized: people fold laundry, cook, and clean not in response to performance-contingent payment but out of communal obligation, care, and internalized role expectations (Bianchi et al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000). The communal payment structure of our design, in which personal over-performance is financially penalized while the pair's joint earnings increase, is closer to the logic of real domestic labor than a standard piecework incentive, but still fundamentally unlike it: real domestic labor carries no monetary return at all, individual or communal. Introducing market payment into a social-norm domain qualitatively transforms the psychological situation rather than merely scaling existing motivation (Frey & Jegen, 2001; Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000; Heyman & Ariely, 2004). It may be that experimental economics, precisely because it requires incentivization, is a structurally ill-suited tool for studying domains constituted by the absence of market logic – and that the crowding effects we theorize are not merely a feature of our results but an artifact of the method applied to this domain.

Several further extensions are warranted. Examining repeated interactions, where couples develop shared norms, histories of reciprocity, and stable allocation patterns, would test whether the transparency effect persists beyond one-shot settings or is attenuated by familiarity. Including same-sex couples would disentangle gender identity effects from dyadic dynamics that may operate differently when both partners share the same gender socialization. Varying the gender-typing of the task – from gender-neutral (as here) to stereotypically feminine or masculine domestic labor – would test whether men's goal-salience over-performance and the identity-threat effect in women depend on the absence of task-level gender cues or generalize across task types. Finally, extending the design to the cognitive dimension of household labor (Daminger, 2019) – who notices what needs to be done, who monitors completion, who carries the mental load – would address the substantial portion of domestic work that is invisible to task-based laboratory paradigms and that prior research suggests is even more asymmetrically distributed across gender than the physical labor we measured here.

References

- Akerlof, G.A., Kranton, R.E. (2000), *Economics and Identity*, “The Quarterly Journal of Economics”, 115(3), <https://doi.org/10.1162/003355300554881>.
- Akerlof, G.A., Kranton, R.E. (2005), *Identity and the Economics of Organizations*, “Journal of Economic Perspectives”, 19(1), <https://doi.org/10.1257/0895330053147930>.
- Alberts, J.K., Tracy, S.J., Trethewey, A. (2011), *An Integrative Theory of the Division of Domestic Labor: Threshold Level, Social Organizing and Sensemaking*, “Journal of Family Communication”, 11(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2011.534334>.
- Alem, Y., Hassen, S., Köhlin, G. (2023), *Decision-making within the household: The role of division of labor and differences in preferences*, “Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization”, 207, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2023.01.022>.
- Ariely, D., Bracha, A., Meier, S. (2009), *Doing Good or Doing Well? Image Motivation and Monetary Incentives in Behaving Prosocially*, “American Economic Review”, 99(1), <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.99.1.544>.
- Becker, G.S. (1981), *A Treatise on the Family*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc. <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:nbr:nberbk:beck81-1>.
- Becker, G.S. (1985), *Human Capital, Effort, and the Sexual Division of Labor*, “Journal of Labor Economics”, 3(1, Part 2), <https://doi.org/10.1086/298075>.
- Bianchi, S.M., Milkie, M.A., Sayer, L.C., Robinson, J.P. (2000), *Is Anyone Doing the Housework? Trends in the Gender Division of Household Labor*, “Social Forces”, 79(1), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2675569>.
- Bittman, M., England, P., Sayer, L., Folbre, N., Matheson, G. (2003), “When Does Gender Trump Money? Bargaining and Time in Household Work”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 109(1), <https://doi.org/10.1086/378341>.
- Brines, J. (1994), *Economic Dependency, Gender, and the Division of Labor at Home*, “American Journal of Sociology”, 100(3).
- Camerer, C.F., Hogarth, R.M. (1999), *The Effects of Financial Incentives in Experiments: A Review and Capital-Labor-Production Framework*, “Journal of Risk and Uncertainty”, 19(1), <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007850605129>.
- Carlson, D.L., Miller, A.J., Rudd, S. (2020), *Division of Housework, Communication, and Couples’ Relationship Satisfaction*, “Socius”, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120924805>.
- Cavalan, Q., De Gardelle, V., Vergnaud, J.-C. (2022), *I did most of the work! Three sources of bias in bargaining with joint production*, “Journal of Economic Psychology”, 93, 102566, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2022.102566>.

- Charbonneau, A., Lachance-Grzela, M., Bouchard, G. (2019), *Housework Allocation, Negotiation Strategies, and Relationship Satisfaction in Cohabiting Emerging Adult Heterosexual Couples*, *Sex Roles*, 81(5-6), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0998-1>.
- Cochard, F., Couprie, H., Hopfensitz, A. (2018), *What if women earned more than their spouses? An experimental investigation of work-division in couples*, "Experimental Economics", 21(1), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10683-017-9524-5>.
- Coltrane, S. (2000), *Research on Household Labor: Modeling and Measuring the Social Embeddedness of Routine Family Work*, "Journal of Marriage and Family", 62(4), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01208.x>.
- Croson, R., Gneezy, U. (2009), *Gender Differences in Preferences*, "Journal of Economic Literature", 47(2), 10.1257/jel.47.2.448.
- Daminger, A. (2019), *The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor*, "American Sociological Review", 84(4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007>.
- Daminger, A. (2020), *De-gendered Processes, Gendered Outcomes: How Egalitarian Couples Make Sense of Non-egalitarian Household Practices*, "American Sociological Review", 85(5), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122420950208>.
- Davis, S.N., Greenstein, T.N. (2020), *Why who cleans counts: What housework tells us about American family life*, Policy Press.
- Diekmann, A. (1985), *Volunteer's Dilemma*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution", 29(4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002785029004003>.
- Flèche, S., Lepinteur, A., Powdthavee, N. (2020), *Gender norms, fairness and relative working hours within households*, "Labour Economics", 65, 101866, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2020.101866>.
- Frey, B.S., Jegen, R. (2001), *Motivation Crowding Theory*, "Journal of Economic Surveys", 15(5), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6419.00150>.
- Garcia-Moran, E., & Kuehn, Z. (2023), *Till mess do us part: Married women's market hours, home production, and divorce*, "Munich Personal RePEc Archive", <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/id/eprint/119324>.
- Gasiorowska, A., Chaplin, L.N., Zaleskiewicz, T., Wygrab, S., Vohs, K.D. (2016), *Money Cues Increase Agency and Decrease Prosociality Among Children: Early Signs of Market-Mode Behaviors*, "Psychological Science", 27(3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615620378>.
- Gasiorowska, A., Kuzminska, A.O., Zaleskiewicz, T. (2025), *Exchange and Communal Orientations (ECO) scale: The construction and validation of a method to measure target-specific relational orientations*, "PLOS ONE", 20(6), e0325232, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0325232>.
- Gasiorowska, A., Zaleskiewicz, T. (2021), *Trading in search of structure: Market relationships as a compensatory control tool*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology", 120(2), <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000246>.
- Gasiorowska, A., Zaleskiewicz, T., Wygrab, S. (2012), *Would you do something for me? The effects of money activation on social preferences and social behavior in young children*, "Journal of Economic Psychology", 33(3), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2011.11.007>.

- Gneezy, U., & Rustichini, A. (2000), *A fine is a price*, "The Journal of Legal Studies", 29(1), <https://doi.org/10.1086/468061>.
- Grunow, D., Schulz, F., Blossfeld, H.-P. (2012), *What determines change in the division of housework over the course of marriage?*, "International Sociology", 27(3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580911423056>.
- Gupta, S. (2007), *Autonomy, Dependence, or Display? The Relationship Between Married Women's Earnings and Housework*, "Journal of Marriage and Family", 69(2), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00373.x>.
- Harsanyi, J. C. (2004), "Games with Incomplete Information Played by "Bayesian" Players, I-III: Part I. The Basic Model", *Management Science*, 50(12), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30046151>.
- Heyman, J., Ariely, D. (2004), *Effort for payment: A tale of two markets*, "Psychological Science", 15(11), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40064046>.
- Hoffman, E., McCabe, K., Shachat, K., Smith, V. (1994), *Preferences, Property Rights, and Anonymity in Bargaining Games*, "Games and Economic Behavior", 7(3), <https://doi.org/10.1006/game.1994.1056>.
- Horne, R.M., Johnson, M.D., Galambos, N.L., Krahn, H.J. (2018), *Time, Money, or Gender? Predictors of the Division of Household Labour Across Life Stages*, "Sex Roles", 78(11–12), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0832-1>.
- Kan, M.Y. (2008), Measuring Housework Participation: The Gap between "Stylised" Questionnaire Estimates and Diary-based Estimates, *Social Indicators Research*, 86(3), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-007-9184-5>.
- Kazak, A.E. (2018), *Editorial: Journal article reporting standards*, "American Psychologist", 73(1), <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000263>.
- Komter, A. (1989), *Hidden Power in Marriage*, "Gender & Society", 3(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124389003002003>.
- Lachance-Grzela, M., Bouchard, G. (2010), *Why Do Women Do the Lion's Share of Housework? A Decade of Research*, "Sex Roles", 63(11), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9797-z>.
- Lundberg, S., Pollak, R.A. (1994), *Noncooperative Bargaining Models of Marriage*, "The American Economic Review", 84(2), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2117816>.
- Magda, I., Cukrowska-Torzewska, E., Palczyńska, M. (2024), *What if She Earns More? Gender Norms, Income Inequality, and the Division of Housework*, "Journal of Family and Economic Issues", 45(1), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-023-09893-0>.
- Major, B., O'Brien, L.T. (2005), *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, "Annual Review of Psychology", 56, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070137>.
- Manser, M., Brown, M. (1980), "Marriage and Household Decision-Making: A Bargaining Analysis", *International Economic Review*, 21(1), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2526238>.
- Masclet, D., Noussair, C., Tucker, S., Villeval, M.-C. (2003), "Monetary and Nonmonetary Punishment in the Voluntary Contributions Mechanism", *American Economic Review*, 93(1), <https://doi.org/10.1257/000282803321455359>.

- McElroy, M.B., Horney, M.J. (1981), *Nash-Bargained Household Decisions: Toward a Generalization of the Theory of Demand*, "International Economic Review", 22(2), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2526280>.
- Niederle, M., Vesterlund, L. (2007), *Do women shy away from competition? Do men compete too much?*, "The Quarterly Journal of Economics", 122(3), <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.122.3.1067>.
- Nisic, N., Trübner, M. (2024), *Doing Housework in Context: Dyadic Analyses of the Division of Domestic Labor in Contemporary Couples*, "Journal of Family Issues", 45(6), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X231172285>.
- Ordóñez, L.D., Schweitzer, M.E., Galinsky, A.D., Bazerman, M.H. (2009), *Goals Gone Wild: The Systematic Side Effects of Overprescribing Goal Setting*, "Academy of Management Perspectives", 23(1), <https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2009.37007999>.
- Procher, V., Ritter, N., Vance, C. (2018), *Housework Allocation in Germany: The Role of Income and Gender Identity*, "Social Science Quarterly", 99(1), <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12390>.
- Shelton, B.A., John, D. (1996), *The Division of Household Labor*, "Annual Review of Sociology", 22, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.299>.
- Smith, V.L. (1982), *Microeconomic Systems as an Experimental Science*, "The American Economic Review", 72(5), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1812014>.
- Steele, C.M. (1997), *A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance*, "American Psychologist", 52(6), <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.52.6.613>.
- Sullivan, O. (2018), *The Gendered Division of Household Labor*, In: Risman, B.J., Froyum, C.M. & Scarborough, W.J. (Eds.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*, Springer International Publishing, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0_27.
- Vierling-Claassen, A. (2013), *Division of labor in child care: A game-theoretic approach*, "Rationality and Society", 25(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463112473795>.
- Voicu, M., Voicu, B., Strapcova, K. (2009), *Housework and Gender Inequality in European Countries*, "European Sociological Review", 25(3), <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcn054>.
- Walzer, S. (1996), *Thinking about the Baby: Gender and Divisions of Infant Care*, "Social Problems", 43(2), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096999>.
- West, C., Zimmerman, D.H. (1987), *Doing gender*, "Gender & Society", 1(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>.

The Polish Economic Institute

The Polish Economic Institute is a public economic think tank with a history dating back to 1928. The Institute produces reports, analyses and recommendations on key areas of the economy and social life in Poland, taking into account the international situation. Its research areas primarily include macroeconomics, energy, the global economy, the digital economy, behavioural economics and social processes.

