

The Mental Load: Understanding Invisible Labor at Home and at the Office

Wexner Summer Institute 2018

Definitions:

- **The “second shift”:** A term that originates from Arlie Hochschild’s book of the same name, published in 1989. It refers to the work done outside of a 9-5 job. The term was originally used to describe the sociological paradigm in which women take on household responsibilities, aside from working her paid job, adding up to a second, unpaid shift of labor.
- **The “third shift”:** A term that has gained prominence over the past five years to describe additional forms of invisible labor, typically done by women, that are not fully encompassed by either a 9-5 job or the “second shift.” Examples of “third shift” labor could include: emotional caretaking, task management, and mental tracking for to-do lists
- **Mental Load:** a term popularized by a feminist cartoon by the French illustrator Emma in 2017. It refers to the invisible labor of thinking, tracking, and task management.
- **Emotional Labor:** A term first introduced in 1983 by Arlie Hochschild’s book *The Managed Heart*, referring to the ways in which workers are expected to manage their feelings and maintain social relationships in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines (ex: being pleasant, listening to others, comforting, etc.). When employers demand emotion work from their employees, it becomes a marketable service known as emotional labor. This form of labor is generally not part of job descriptions or the types of “measurables” that are rewarded with raises and promotions. The term has recently resurfaced in feminist discussions as a concept relevant in everyday relationships as well as at work.
- **Worry Work:** This concept was introduced in 1996 by the sociologist Susan Walzer in the research article, “Thinking about the Baby.” This concept refers to the reserves of intellectual and emotional energy required to do learning, information processing, worrying, organizing, and delegating.

Section I:

“I am the person...”: Conceptualizing the Invisible

Ellen Seidman, “Love That Max” blogger | May 5, 2016

“I am the person who notices we are running out of toilet paper, and I rock”

I am the only person in our household who ever notices that we need more t.p....

- I am the person who notices we are running low on clean silverware/ bowls/plates/favorite cups.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on coffee pods.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on clean underwear, unless you count the pairs with holes which some people do.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on toothpaste/dental floss/mouthwash/anti-cavity rinse in bubble gum flavor and NOT the one with SpongeBob on the bottle/soap/shower gel/shampoo/conditioner/that detangling spray that supposedly wards off lice [insert product critical to good hygiene].
- I am the person who notices we are running low on matching socks, unless you count the pairs with holes which some people do.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on eggs, milk, bread, yogurt, butter, cream cheese, chocolate ice-cream, that pasta shaped like little wheels, Cheerios and other food basics.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on granola bars, brownie bites, dried fruit, kale chips, cheese sticks, Pepperidge Farm Goldfish and other lifesaving snacks.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on ketchup, one heavy burden to bear.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on OJ, juice boxes, chocolate syrup and the organic strawberry lemonade our son has been drinking by the gallon.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on Bac-Os, although I keep meaning to look those up to see if they might kill us.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on creamy peanut butter and chunky peanut butter and Natural with Honey peanut butter and whipped peanut butter and I so wish our family had consensus on p.b.
- I am the person who notice we are running low on sprinkles, that essential food group.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on aluminum foil, plastic wrap and Ziploc bags. (As someone wise once said, "You can never be too rich or too thin or have too many Ziploc bags.")
- I am the person who notices we are running low on vitamins, aspirin, Tylenol and Midol, and while I am the only one to care about running out of Midol it would benefit other people to care about this too.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on tissues, Children's Tylenol, Benadryl, Band-Aids, Neosporin, bacitracin, Aquaphor, more Band-Aids [insert items critical to children's well-being].
- I am the person who notices we are running low on gift wrap, birthday cards and birthday candles.

- I am the person who notices we are running low on light bulbs.
- I am person who notices we are running low on dry-cleaned clothes to wear to work.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on AA batteries, AAA batteries, C batteries, D batteries, 9-volt batteries and ALL OF THE BATTERIES.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on crayons, markers, colored paper, tape, glue sticks, glitter, index cards, highlighters and, *sigh*, who was the last person to use the scissors?
- I am the person who notices we are running low on paper towels, sponges, laundry detergent, bleach, stain spray, dishwasher detergent, sponges, dish soap, refills for the scrubbing thingies, bathroom soap, hand sanitizer, bathroom cleaner, furniture polish, dust rags, floor cleaner, glass cleaner, all-purpose cleaner [insert products critical to household cleanliness].
- I am the person who notices we are running low on children's outerwear after most has gotten left at one activity or another.
- I am also the person who notices we are running low on children's clothing that actually fits them.
- Not to mention shoes that still fit them.
- And the hats.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on storage space for all the toys and games and race cars and fire trucks and crappy plastic thingies from birthday party goody bags.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on stamps/matches/paper clips/various crucial little things.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on family photos and that we'd better take some before the kids are in college.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on sunscreen, bug spray and Chapstick.
- I am the person who notices we are running low on writing utensils and where do all the pens go, anyway?

I am not the person who notices we are running low on wine, gas/oil for the car, sriracha-flavored almonds, cloud storage, date nights, phone chargers and a bunch of other stuff but, back to me.

Because my seeing powers don't end with the above.

- I am the person who locates the missing stapler/keys/sunglasses/favorite t-shirt/favorite toy/book/homework folder/library card/lacrosse stick/lacrosse pinnie/lacrosse socks/lacrosse headband/TV remote/pool passes/whatever is making someone wail "Mommmy, I can't fiiiiiiiiiiiiind it!"
- I am the person who observes, right before bedtime, that various iDevices are lying around uncharged.
- I am the person who notices that veggies in the produce drawer and fruit in the basket are rotting.

- *OMG how can you people not notice the fruit flies?*
- I am the person who spots the squished raisins under the kitchen table, the dustballs under the dresser, the mound of lint in the dryer filter and the mystery substance on the sofa.
- I am the person who finds the bag of clothing on the floor of the car that was supposed to be returned to the store three weeks ago.
- I am the person who discovers that the basement light is still on.
- I am the person who foresees needing gifts for the birthday party, graduation party, anniversary party, every party.
- I am the person who notices the throw in the living room hasn't been washed in approximately eleven years. But at least I finally noticed.

All this is in addition to the vast amount of details and to-dos packed into my brain including—but not limited—to:

- My family's clothing and shoe sizes
- When library books are due
- School permission slips and forms that need signing
- Box tops that must be cut
- Payments that are due for sports teams, gymnastics, music lessons, dance class and the recital outfit (which never ever costs less than \$70 and is never ever to be worn again)
- The recipe for the best chocolate-chip banana bread in the history of chocolate-chip banana bread
- When the kids' various annual doctor and dentist and specialist appointments need to be booked
- The phone numbers for the doctor and dentist and specialists
- When prescriptions need to be refilled
- Which of the kids' friends has nut/sesame allergies
- The precise location of the stone pestle and mortar set to make guacamole, the frog boo-boo cold pack, the good picnic blanket and the Tom the Turkey stuffed mascot who graces our Thanksgiving table every year
- The memorized outfits of every teacher I've ever had, including the one during my semester abroad in Florence
- The phone numbers of my two best friends in fourth grade
- All the words to Jessie's Girl

I rarely get credit for my observational talents. I see, I do and I conquer, tirelessly and without complaint. Er, mostly without complaint. OK, I complain. But has our family ever had a t.p. crisis? Nope.

Lisa Wade, writing for Time Magazine | December 29, 2016
“The Invisible Workload That Drags Women Down”

“I am the person,” wrote Ellen Seidman, a wife and mother of three, “who notices we are running out of toilet paper.”

It was the beginning of a poem she wrote for her blog, [Love That Max](#), about a role she plays in her household – that of worrier, organizer, rememberer, and attention-payer. The poem was about the work she does involving thinking, a kind of mental labor that, she says, “enables our family to basically exist.”...

It starts with the toilet paper running out and it goes on... and on... and on. It’s exhausting to read.

Sociologist Susan Walzer published a research article in 1996, called “Thinking About the Baby,” pointing to this household gender gap. Scholars had already documented that women, even those who worked full time, were doing the majority of what came to be called the “second shift”: the work that greets us when we come home from work.

Walzer was interested in the invisible part of this work, the kind that occupied people’s minds.

Walzer found that women do more of the intellectual, mental, and emotional work of childcare and household maintenance. They do more of the learning and information processing (like researching pediatricians).

They do more worrying (like wondering if their child is hitting his developmental milestones). And they do more organizing and delegating (like deciding when the mattress needs to be flipped or what to cook for dinner).

Even when their male partners “helped out” by doing their fair share of chores and errands, it was the women who noticed what needed to be done. She described, in other words, exactly the kind of work that Seidman’s poem captures so well.

Seidman isn’t complaining. Her poem is funny and sweet and clearly driven by a love for her family, husband included. And, to be fair, while women who are married to or cohabiting with men do more domestic work than their partners, husbands spend proportionally more time on paid work. Today the amount of sheer hours that men and women spend in combined paid and unpaid work is pretty close to equal.

But that doesn’t count the thinking.

Husbands may do more housework and childcare than before, but women still delegate... Like much of the feminized work done more often by women than men, thinking, worrying, paying attention, and delegating is work that is largely invisible, gets almost no recognition, and involves no pay or benefits.

Seidman suggested she had a “seeing superpower” that her husband and children did not. But she doesn’t, of course. It’s just that her willingness to do it allows everyone else the freedom not to. If she were gone, you bet her husband would start noticing when the fridge went empty and the diapers disappeared. Thinking isn’t a superpower; it’s work. And it all too often seems only natural that women do the hard work of running a household.

We have come a long way toward giving women the freedom to build a life outside the home, but the last step may be an invisible one, happening mostly in our heads.

It’s about housework, yes, but it extends to having to consider what neckline, hemline, height of heel, and lipstick shade is appropriate for that job interview, afternoon wedding, or somber funeral, instead of relying on an all-purpose suit; it’s about thinking carefully about how to ask for a raise in a way that sounds both assertive and nice; it’s about worrying whether it’s safe at night and how to get home; for some of us, it involves feeling compelled to learn feminist theory so as to understand our own lives and, then, to spend mental energy explaining to others that the revolution is unfinished.

To truly be free, we need to free women’s minds. Of course, someone will always have to remember to buy toilet paper, but if that work were shared, women’s extra burdens would be lifted. Only then will women have as much lightness of mind as men.

And when they do, I expect to be inspired by what they put their minds to.

Questions:

- What do these texts illuminate about invisible labor?
- In what ways is invisible labor recognized? In what ways is it left unrecognized?
- What might be the impact of doing large amounts of invisible labor?

Continued Learning:

- Gemma Hartley in Harper’s Bizarre, “Women Aren’t Nags: We’re Just Fed Up,” <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a12063822/emotional-labor-gender-equality/>
- Elissa Strauss in The Forward, “Why Jewish Women are Extra Tired this Week,” <https://forward.com/opinion/spirituality/322344/why-jewish-women-are-extra-tired-this-week/?attribution=author-article-listing-8-headline>
- Emma (a French Cartoonist), “You Should’ve Asked,” <https://english.emmaclit.com/2017/05/20/you-shouldve-asked/>

Section II: Workplace Impact

Emilie Friedlander, writing for The Outline | November 27, 2017

“The Emotional Labor of Women in the Workplace”

The idea of emotional labor seems to be having something of a moment - as an umbrella term for the various forms of people-work women perform... These discussions revolve mostly around emotional labor in the personal sphere, though I'd argue that women perform just as much of it in the actual workplace. Many millennial women spend the majority of their waking hours working anyway. And though they're technically getting paid for their time, they're shouldering an invisible workload that is seldom reflected in their job description, and even more rarely in their paycheck...

Of course, women have come a long way in the professional world since the '70s, even if the wage gap is still very real, especially for women of color. ... Still, for many professional women in America, the modern workplace can feel less like a respite from the nurturer-caregiver role than a continuation of it...

According to Rebecca J. Erickson, a sociology professor at the University of Akron, there's research to support the theory that women and men operate under different “emotion rules” in the workplace. From her work studying the connection between emotional labor and gender, she said she's observed that women in the corporate world tend to be rewarded for expressing “positively valenced” affects like happiness, kindness, and supportiveness, and punished for displays of fear and anger — fear, she said, “because it's perceived as weakness,” and anger “because women are trying to avoid being labeled a bitch.”

Men, by contrast, tend to receive what sociology calls a “status bonus” when they express anger, assertiveness, and other emotions associated with power. And where women are restricted to a very narrow range of emotions on the job, men can be rewarded for displaying any emotion at all. According to Erickson, research suggests that when men express emotions like caring, concern, sadness, and fear, it can have a humanizing effect on them. If you've ever gone to the hospital and remarked that a male doctor has a surprisingly caring bedside manner, you'll understand what she means.

Even outside traditional helping professions, there seems to be a gender discrepancy when it comes to performing this sort of proxy-parenting work on the job. One friend of mine who used to manage a team of young writers at a pop-culture website said helping her employees work through personal and professional upsets was more than something she was implicitly tasked with by her male bosses — and that it was a crucial part of maintaining the business' bottom line.

According to Erickson, the sociology professor, one of the hidden injuries of emotional labor is the way it siphons away energy that could be otherwise spent hitting the sort of

work milestones might actually be recognized in a boardroom — and rewarded with a promotion or raise.

Monetizing emotional labor may not be the answer, but there's real power in calling it for what it is, whether you're talking a friend through a breakup or helping a coworker organize his or her time better: arduous, skilled work.

Questions:

- Most employers/organizations do not consciously establish different “emotion rules” for men and women. What are strategies for identifying where and how these different rules come into play?
- The author notes that emotional labor is not typically the type of work that is “rewarded with a promotion or raise.” What are ways that emotional labor could be recognized, and thereby rewarded, in the workplace?
- How does naming emotional labor as “arduous, skilled work” benefit employees? How does it benefit organizations?

Section III: Sharing the Mental Load – Food for Thought

How to Share the “Mental Load” of Chores With Your Partner

Nick Douglas | May 30, 2017

<https://lifehacker.com/how-to-share-the-mental-load-of-chores-with-your-part-1795657878>

My wife and I try to divide our household chores equally: She cooks, I do the dishes. She buys groceries, I do the laundry. My easiest chore is setting the table. It takes about one minute and she has to remind me every time.

The problem isn't the task itself; it's keeping it in mind. If she doesn't remind me ahead of time, I'll only notice at the last minute and get in her way, squeezing by her to grab the silverware while she plates the food.

French comic artist Emma describes and addresses this problem in “The Gender Wars of Household Chores”: Among straight couples, even when men do equal work carrying out household chores, women still disproportionately bear the “mental load” of keeping track of those chores. This creates a kind of continuous partial attention that takes up energy and raises stress. It also creates an invisible hierarchy where men feel like employees running afoul of the boss.

Men often fail to appreciate or share this invisible management job. If you can help carry the load, you can relieve your partner's stress and feel less like an underling.

Strategies for helping to share the mental load:

Anticipate needs

- Examine when your tasks usually need to be done, and plan ahead for them.

Write it down

- I have a short attention span and a bad memory. Thankfully, I also have a smartphone. Writing down the most minuscule chore is still better than forgetting, and it's the first step to learning how to simply remember.

Automate it

- Turn your phone into your manager and eliminate the mental load altogether. Add alarms to those calendar events. Set location-based notifications that remind you, when you're passing the drugstore, to stop in.

Outsource it

- A wave of apps has made it even easier to outsource chores like laundry and dog-walking. Depending on your budget, consider a housecleaner—but pay attention to who's responsible for hiring, managing, and paying them.

Learn the skills

- Some chores end up in one person's domain according to ability or interest. My wife loves to cook, so I never learned. Usually this works, but when she's sick or busy, the system breaks down. On those nights I take over and handle the Seamless order, but to really reach some kind of equity, I have to learn to cook. Next time your partner handles their chore, ask them to teach you.

Transfer the resources

- A lot of chores rely on access to specific resources, especially logins or files. Just because one of you provides the health insurance doesn't mean the other can't manage it. Sit down with your partner and exchange logins for everything that affects your household, like shared bank accounts, insurance, doctor portals, your children's school portals, or shared mobile plans. Most popular password managers provide shared vaults for all this data.

Hold a family meeting

- A lot of mental loads stay invisible until the responsible partner speaks up. Unfortunately, that often happens during a fight. Fend off conflict by regularly discussing upcoming responsibilities in a friendly, info-sharing context. Even when the conversation doesn't lead to any specific action, it builds your awareness of each other's mental loads.

Prepare for major changes

- The most crucial application of all these techniques is during a major life change: a job loss (or gain), an injury, or having a kid. This is when unrecognized mental loads, which take more time to transfer or outsource than physical chores, blow up. The more flexible you are with your partner, and the more chores you both feel comfortable swapping, the more you can handle in a crisis.