MODERN FAMILIES:
Same- and different-sex couples negotiating at home

by Kenneth Matos

Families and Work Institute
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Introduction

The *chore wars* aren’t new, but when hit prime-time TV shows present diverse families battling over cleaning up after meals, we know things are changing.

But changing how much and in what ways? Those are the questions that inspired this study.

Families and Work Institute (FWI) has been at the forefront of research on the intersection of personal, family and professional lives for more than 25 years through its *National Study of the Changing Workforce* (NSCW). A major part of that research has been looking at how family responsibilities (e.g., income, household maintenance, and caregiving) influence life on and off the job and how families, especially couples, manage these responsibilities.

Traditional images of couple relationships and marriage have been grounded in the archetype of a man who works for pay outside the home and a woman who takes overall responsibility for the home and child care. Even though by 2014 more than half of all different-sex,¹ married couples are bucking these gender norms with both partners (47.7%) or just the female partner (7.5%) working,² traditional gender roles have continued to influence the lives of different-sex couples. For example, according to data from the most recent NSCW conducted in 2008, 67% of employed women in couples reported taking primary responsibility for cooking and 71% reported primary responsibility for house cleaning.³

While a somewhat more egalitarian model of relationships has evolved, it is one where women continue to fulfill their traditional role while also absorbing the additional responsibility of being substantive contributors to household income. Meanwhile, there is a growing conversation about how men, especially fathers, want and should have a bigger role to play at home than just providing a paycheck. Currently, both men and women in different-sex couples are voicing dissatisfaction with how their roles are structured and how family and child care responsibilities are divided.

Simultaneously, growing social and legal recognition of same-sex relationships and marriage has created increasingly fertile ground for gay, lesbian and bi-sexual individuals to form families. Though they are no less exposed to traditional gender roles, same-sex couples cannot divide family responsibilities on the basis of each partner’s sex. Barred from sex-based role assignments, we are left to ask whether same-sex couples have a consistent principle for dividing

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*I don’t like to clean up. It’s smelly, it’s sticky, and after I eat, I’m tired, and I just want to lay down.*

– Cam, a gay, stay-at-home father declares to his lawyer husband, Mitchell, on the sitcom “Modern Family”
responsibilities and if so, what that principle might be. One theory is that same-sex couples show greater equality in their division of responsibilities with both partners sharing equally in the challenges and joys of work and family. A competing theory is that the division of responsibilities is essentially a division of power where the partner with the greatest independence and financial control does the least housework and child care. For different-sex couples, the power imbalance created by unequal access to employment is generally associated with imbalances in the division of home and child care. If this theory is correct then we would expect same-sex couples to also divide household and child care roles based on income and work hours.

The *Modern Families* study, designed by FWI with the generous sponsorship and insights of PwC, is an examination of how dual-earner, same-sex and different-sex couples divide family responsibilities, how they came to those arrangements and how that affects their satisfaction with the way they share their lives. It tackles questions like: Are different-sex couples still dividing responsibilities along traditional gender role lines? Are same-sex couples recreating heterosexual gender roles by dividing responsibilities on the basis of income and work hours? Is there a difference between same-sex and different-sex couples in how satisfied they are with their divisions of responsibilities?

**Main Takeaways**

- Among different-sex, dual-earner couples, gender, income and work hours are predictive of how responsibilities are divided:
  - Women, lower earners, and those with fewer work hours, take primary responsibility for stereotypically female chores.
  - Men, higher earners, and those with more work hours, take primary responsibility for stereotypically male chores.
- Same-sex, dual-earner couples do not consistently share responsibilities equally but relative income and work hours are not reliable predictors for how they do divide responsibilities.
- Satisfaction in the division of household responsibilities is driven more by whether couples have a conversation about how to divide responsibilities upon moving in together than how the tasks are divided or whether the couple is same-sex or different-sex.
- Satisfaction is lowest when individuals stay silent when they wanted to voice their wishes earlier in the relationship.
Summary of Findings

• A greater proportion of same-sex, dual-earner couples than different-sex couples indicate that they share laundry (44% versus 31%) and household repair (33% versus 15%) responsibilities.

• A greater proportion of same-sex, dual-earner couples than different-sex couples indicate that they share routine (74% versus 38%) and sick child care (62% versus 32%) responsibilities.

• In different-sex, dual-earner couples:
  – Women and lower earners typically take primary responsibility for stereotypically female chores, like cooking and cleaning.
  – Men and higher earners take primary responsibility for stereotypically male chores, like outdoor work and household repairs.
  – Those who take primary responsibility for stereotypically female chores tend to work fewer hours than those taking secondary responsibility.
  – Those who take primary responsibility for stereotypically male chores tend to work more hours than those taking secondary responsibility.

• In same-sex, dual-earner couples:
  – Lower earners typically take primary responsibility for cooking.
  – Higher earners typically take primary responsibility for budget management.
  – Higher earners typically take primary responsibility for investment management or the role is shared.
  – Those who take primary responsibility for cooking or laundry tend to work fewer hours than those who share the responsibility but not less than those taking secondary responsibility.
  – Those who take primary responsibility for investment management tend to work more hours than those who take secondary responsibility.

• Despite actual divisions in household work, there is no difference in satisfaction with the division of household responsibilities, relative income and child care responsibilities among same- and different-sex couples.

• Men in same-sex couples have significantly higher satisfaction with the division of household (4.18 out of 5 points) and child care (4.37 out of 5 points) responsibilities than women in different-sex couples (3.82 and 3.77 respectively). Men in different-sex couples (4.02 and 4.15) and women in same-sex couples (3.99 and 4.15) are not significantly different from any other group.

• Across men and women and couple types, those who had a conversation about household responsibilities upon moving in together have higher satisfaction with the division of household responsibilities than those who had wanted to have a discussion but did not do so.
Key Characteristics of Individuals and Couples in the Sample

The *Modern Families* study includes a sample of men and women in 225 *dual-earner* couples who have been married or living with a partner for at least one year. The sample includes both same-sex and different-sex couples with and without children. Participation required that both members of the couple complete the survey instrument.

**Income and Work Hours:** In the study, men working full time have higher mean earnings than women working full time. There are no significant differences within sex by type of couple. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Mean 2014 Income among Full-time Employees by Sex and Couple Type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men in different-sex couples</th>
<th>Men in same-sex couples</th>
<th>Women in different-sex couples</th>
<th>Women in same-sex couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$70,795</td>
<td>$64,405</td>
<td>$48,200</td>
<td>$45,817</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home*, Families and Work Institute
Notes: N=344 individuals; p < .01

Overall, women in different-sex couples work fewer hours than any other group. Women in different-sex couples who work full time, work fewer hours per week than men in different-sex couples and women in same-sex couples (Figure 2). Overall, most participants work full time (Figure 3).
Figure 2: Mean Work Hours per Week by Sex and Couple Type

![Bar chart showing mean work hours per week by sex and couple type.](image)

Source: Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home, Families and Work Institute

Notes: Overall N=450 individuals; p < .01; Full-time N=352 individuals; p < .05

Figure 3: Employment Levels by Sex and Couple Type

![Bar chart showing employment levels by sex and couple type.](image)

Source: Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home, Families and Work Institute

Notes: N=450 individuals; Percentages do not sum to 100% because those who indicated that they are best described as retired or stay at home partners despite regularly working for pay for any number of hours per week are not included in the chart.
Are Same-sex Couples More or Less Likely to Divide Their Financial, Household, and Child Care Responsibilities?

One way in which same-sex couples could divide responsibilities is by sharing them equally because gender stereotypes would not pressure them to divide their responsibilities and the lack of difference in sex-based privilege would create more equal footing for negotiating an even division of responsibilities.

In order to test this theory, we independently asked both members of the couple who in the household takes primary responsibility for a list of 16 household, financial management and child care responsibilities (listed to the right). The first five household tasks in the list are commonly considered stereotypical female tasks and the remaining two are commonly considered stereotypical male tasks. Though household task 5 was originally thought to be a stereotypically female task, the data shows that it is often shared in both types of couples.

It is important to note that household and financial responsibilities are very different from child care responsibilities in terms of the regularity with which they must be performed and the way they can conflict with one another, especially for people with multiple children (e.g., bed time for one can be homework time for another). Research has shown that primary responsibility for child care, especially of multiple children, is associated with negative effects on career advancement and wages for women.8

“In your household, who takes the greatest responsibility for...?”

- **Household Tasks**
  1. Cleaning
  2. Cooking
  3. Laundry
  4. Grocery shopping
  5. Running errands
  6. Outdoor work
  7. Household repairs

- **Financial Management**
  1. Home budget management
  2. Investment management

- **Child Care**
  1. Routine care of children
  2. Transporting children to/from school, child care, or other activities
  3. Getting children ready for the day in the morning
  4. Getting children ready for bed in the evening
  5. Assisting with homework
  6. Attending parent/teacher conferences and other school activities
  7. In-home care when your child is ill

- **Response Options**
  1. I do
  2. My spouse/partner does
  3. We share this responsibility
  4. A child, relative, ex-partner, in-law, or friend
  5. Someone hired to help
  6. No one
  7. Not applicable
Household and Financial Responsibilities:
We examine whether couples are more or less likely to indicate that one partner or the other takes primary responsibility, whether they share the responsibility, or whether someone is hired to help. The other options are very uncommon for most tasks and so couples endorsing those options are excluded from the analysis. We also limit the analysis to couples where both partners agree on how a specific task is divided.

In the end only two household responsibilities, laundry and household repairs, show significant difference between how same-sex and different-sex couples divide up the tasks (Figure 4 and Figure 5). In both cases, same-sex couples are more likely to indicate that they share the responsibility than different-sex couples.

For the remaining seven household and financial responsibilities, there are no statistical differences between same- and different-sex couples in how they divide the responsibilities. These findings do not support the idea that same-sex couples automatically engage in equal sharing of household and financial responsibilities more than different-sex couples.

Amberly, 30, and Lanelle, 32, live in Grand Rapids, MI

and have been together for 4½ years, entering a domestic partnership a year and a half ago. Amberly is in food service management, working more than 60 hours a week, while Lanelle works part time, and is sporadically unemployed.

After Amberly got promoted two years ago and ended up with little flexibility at work, Lanelle began to do most of the housework. But Amberly irons her own work shirts and takes out the trash.

Amberly’s and Lanelle’s experiences exemplify the fact that there are multiple considerations when dividing household responsibilities, such as workplace flexibility. Same- and different-sex couples must both manage these forces in order to find a division that works for them and the best divisions are not necessarily 50/50 or homemaker and breadwinner.

Their experience also highlights that any given household responsibility may consist of multiple parts, and couples may share by dividing up those parts. For example, Amberly and Lanelle show one way in which laundry may be more evenly divided (one person washes all the clothes but the other person irons her own work clothes).
**Child Care Responsibilities:** We also examine whether couples are more or less likely to indicate that one partner or the other takes primary responsibility or whether they share the responsibility of child care.

Two child care responsibilities—routine child care and sick child care—show significant differences between how same- and different-sex couples divide up the tasks (Figure 6 and Figure 7). In both cases, same-sex couples are more likely to indicate that they share the responsibility than different-sex couples. For the remaining five tasks, there is no statistical difference between same- and different-sex couples in how they divide child care responsibilities.

Though only two child care tasks show a difference in division of responsibilities, one represents a summation of all day-to-day tasks involved in child care and the other has a direct impact on a parent’s ability to work (e.g., taking a sick or vacation day to provide care could disrupt work projects). Sharing these tasks may therefore be more important for equity between partners than other household and child care tasks, where there are few differences.
Heather, 32, and George, 31, live in Cleveland, OH with their three children, a daughter, 6, and two sons, 9 and 11. George works for an online clothing company doing customer service in the shipping department and has lots of flexibility. Heather works for an insurance company, has inflexible hours, and earns more than he does. Due to his more flexible work schedule, George takes primary responsibility for many child care responsibilities such as sick child care.

How the household work and child care would be divided wasn’t something Heather and George talked about when they got married, though George notes that he had assumed she would “stay home and take care of our child, and I was going to work.” Even after their first son was born, Heather was supposed to be home for eight to 10 weeks, but at the sixth week she went back to work even though George “didn’t want our son in day care at that young age.” Ultimately the couple ended up getting his mother, who was retiring, to provide child care.

Heather’s and George’s experiences highlight how the pull of traditional gender roles can be subtle. Even though they discussed whether Heather would stay home or work, the idea that George would be a stay-at-home father was never considered. The way a conversation occurs can be as important as the conversation itself. For example, if one spouse’s/partner’s role is considered fixed (the man has to work but the woman can work) the other partner’s options may be more limited. Heather and George managed to resolve the issue by having a grandparent provide child care but other couples must find a way to satisfy both spouses’/partners’ interests without the advantage of additional support from family or hired help.
Are Same-sex Couples Recreating Gender Roles with Income and Work Hours?

Given that same-sex couples are no less likely to divide responsibilities in twelve household, financial and child care responsibilities than different-sex couples, the next major question is how are those roles being divided? Do same-sex couples use relative income and work hours to recreate the power dynamics found in different-sex couples? This theory, which has been discussed in the academic literature and popular media, is based on the idea that women in different-sex couples do most of the housework because their relatively low investment in the workforce provides them less negotiating power. If the division of responsibilities is primarily a money and work hours issue, we would expect to see same-sex and different-sex couples divide responsibilities in ways that resemble traditional gender roles despite the differences in the sex composition of the couples.

Below we explore three options for determining who takes primary responsibility for household and financial responsibilities within same- and different-sex couples: sex, relative income and relative work hours.9

**Gender:** Among different-sex couples, a person’s sex is a powerful predictor of who takes primary responsibility for household responsibilities. More couples report that the female partner takes primary responsibility for stereotypically female chores, like cooking, cleaning, laundry, and groceries. More couples report that the male partner takes primary responsibility for stereotypically male chores, like outdoor work and household repairs. (Figure 8).

Though we initially assumed that running errands is a stereotypically female task, the data

Mike, 55, and Peter, 56, live in Wilmington, DE

with their 15-year-old son, Issac, and near their 19-year-old son, Avery, who lives in a group home for adults with disabilities. Mike works as a social worker; Peter as a scenic artist. Peter’s job is the least flexible, taking him away for long periods of time, and he also makes the most money. The married couple adopted their oldest son, who had fetal alcohol syndrome, when he was almost 3 years old, and quickly realized Mike’s plan to take FMLA and then get back to work within three months wasn’t going to work. “I usually handle everything,” Mike said about child care and household chores.

The couple met when they were 19 and 20 so discussions about divvying up the care of children or housework didn’t really come into the picture. “Honestly, before we had kids, Saturday morning we’d clean and it was done,” Mike says. Today, he says, there is definitely tension at home when it comes to who does what to keep the house running. In the end, Mike says, “You have to have realistic expectations of what marriage is and what love is over a period of time.” [Emphasis added]

The couple’s experiences help illustrate that arrangements that make sense at the start of a relationship won’t necessarily last throughout the relationship, especially after having children. Previous work among different-sex couples has shown that expectations and circumstances change when children enter the picture. The shift of Mike and Peter toward more division than sharing of responsibilities happened over time and in response to circumstances such as their son’s special needs and the relative flexibility of their jobs and earnings. As with Amberly and Lanelle, Mike and Peter may have set out with one vision of how they would divide responsibilities but needed to adapt as life and their careers unfolded.
show that it is actually a very commonly shared role with 59% of different-sex couples indicating that the responsibility is shared between both partners. This may be because responsibility for errands is based on convenience (e.g., proximity to the store after work) or the breadth of the category includes enough male and female-type tasks that the couples see the overall category as being shared.

The division of financial responsibilities is not significantly different between men and women.

**Figure 8: Percentage of Different-sex Couples Assigning Primary Responsibility for Household Chores to...**

![Chart showing percentage of different-sex couples assigning primary responsibility for household chores.](chart)

**Source:** Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home, Families and Work Institute

*** p < .001; 85-112 different-sex couples where they agree on who has primary responsibility for the specific task.

**Notes:** Not represented in the chart are the 3% of couples who assign primary responsibility for outdoor work to another family member. Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

**Relative Income:** Another theory that has been proposed for dividing household responsibilities, which is often aligned with a person’s sex and power, is relative income; where lower earners take primary responsibility for lower status tasks such as cleaning and laundry. Higher earners would be expected to control finances and more of the stereotypically males chores that tend to be intermittent or non-existent in urban settings and that our data show are among the most likely to be outsourced.

Relative income\(^{10}\) was a consistent predictor of who was responsible for particular tasks in different-sex couples. Higher earners are responsible for stereotypically male tasks and lower earners are responsible for stereotypically female tasks (Figure 9).

When reviewing the findings for relative income and work hours it is important to focus not on how any single responsibility is divided, but whether the pattern of divisions within each type of couple is the same.

For example, if same-sex couples are dividing responsibilities in the same ways as different-sex couples then cleaning, cooking, laundry, and groceries should all be done by one spouse/partner and outdoor work and repairs should be done by the other spouse/partner.
It is worth noting that grocery shopping is one stereotypically female task where sharing was more common than primary responsibility by the lower earner, though high earners are rarely in charge of buying groceries. Investment management was controlled by either the higher earner or shared within the couple.

**Figure 9: Percentage of Different-sex Couples Assigning Primary Responsibility for Household Chores to the...**

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home*, Families and Work Institute

Notes: ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001; N=84-111 different-sex couples where they agree on who has primary responsibility for each task

Not represented in the chart are the 3% of couples who assign primary responsibility for outdoor work to a relative or friend and the 4% who assign primary responsibility for investment management to “no one.”

In same-sex couples, relative income is not a consistent predictor of how responsibilities are divided. Though higher earners are less likely to have primary responsibility for cooking the rest of the pattern of dividing work shown in Figures 8 and 9 are not present. In fact, there is no significant pattern present for any of the other gendered household responsibilities. Financial management is primarily in the charge of the higher earner or is shared equally (Figure 10).
**Figure 10: Percentage of Same-sex Couples Assigning Primary Responsibility for Household Chores to the...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Higher earner primary</th>
<th>Lower earner primary</th>
<th>Share the responsibility</th>
<th>Someone hired to help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooking*</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errands**</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget**</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investments***</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home*, Families and Work Institute
Notes: *= p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001; N=74-91 same-sex couples where they agree on who has primary responsibility for each task.

Not represented in the chart are the 7% who assign primary responsibility for investment management to “no one.”

**Relative Work Hours:** Another option for dividing responsibilities is the availability of time. In this theory, partners with fewer work hours take primary responsibility for household responsibilities. As with relative earnings, relative work hours is fairly predictive of the distribution of responsibilities in different-sex couples in a manner consistent with traditional gender roles (Table 1). Those who have fewer work hours (generally women) take primary responsibility for stereotypically female tasks, while those with more work hours (generally men) take primary responsibility for stereotypically male tasks.
Table 1: Mean Work Hours for Partners in Different-sex Couples who Take Primary, Secondary or Share Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Have primary responsibility</th>
<th>Have secondary responsibility</th>
<th>Share the responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooking***</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry*</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groceries**</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errands*</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor work**</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household repairs**</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home, Families and Work Institute*

Notes: * = p < .05, ** = p < .01, *** = p < .001; N=74-91 same-sex couples; analysis excludes couples that outsource the tasks to any other party; analysis includes participants whose spouse/partner does not agree with how responsibilities are divided. Not represented in the chart are the 7% who assign primary responsibility for investment management to “no one.”

Among same-sex couples, significant results are less common and less consistent with only a few tasks showing significant differences in work hours and the levels of responsibility (Table 2). In same-sex couples, those who take primary responsibility for cooking and laundry work fewer hours than those who share responsibility but not than those who take secondary responsibility.

In same-sex couples, those who take primary responsibility for investment management work more hours than those who take secondary responsibility.

Allison, 35, and Danielle, 30, live in Portland, OR with their 3-year-old son, Xander. Allison works 40 hours a week as an optician, and Danielle works from home, part time, prepping packages for marathons.

Since Allison works from 9:30 am to 6 pm, she gets her son up, feeds him breakfast and changes his diaper. “I also try to unload the dishwasher,” she says. But most of the running of the household and child care is left to Danielle.

They talked about the division of household chores before they got married, and both agreed Danielle would handle most of the load. The couple bases decisions about chores on time, not money. “I usually do the laundry and put our son to bed,” Allison says. Both try to talk to each other about what needs to get done, and that good communication is what they both agree helps keep arguments over household work at a minimum. For example, a recent rift over who would clean the litter box didn’t turn into a full-blown fight because they discussed issue.
Table 2: Mean Work Hours for Partners in Same-sex Couples who Take Primary, Secondary or Share Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Have primary responsibility</th>
<th>Have secondary responsibility</th>
<th>Share the responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooking*</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry*</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment management*</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home, Families and Work Institute*
Notes: * = p < .05; N=164-206 individuals; analysis excludes couples that outsource the tasks to any other party; analysis includes participants whose spouse/partner does not agree with how responsibilities are divided.

Are Differences in Division of Responsibilities Associated with Differences in Satisfaction between Same-sex and Different-sex Couples?

Our results show that same-sex and different-sex couples do not have a lot in common when it comes to division of responsibilities. Among different-sex couples there is a fairly clear and consistent pattern of dividing responsibilities. In addition, the divisions of these tasks show that a person’s sex, relative income and work hours can often be predictive of which responsibilities he or she will end up doing.

Among same-sex couples there is no such consistency. Though a greater proportion of same-sex couples share laundry, household repairs, routine child care and sick child care responsibilities, the other responsibilities are not associated with a consistent pattern of sharing or dividing. In addition, a person’s relative income and work hours are not as broadly predictive of which responsibilities he or she will end up performing when they are divided.

Given these differences in how responsibilities are divided in same-sex and different-sex couples, we are left with perhaps the most important question: Do these differences in how responsibilities are divided predict differences in satisfaction with those divisions? In other words, are same-sex couples more, less, or similarly satisfied than different-sex couples with how they divide responsibilities?

We asked each participant:

- **How comfortable are you with how much you contribute to household finances relative to your spouse/partner?**
  - Very comfortable
  - Comfortable
  - Neutral
  - Uncomfortable
  - Very uncomfortable

- **How satisfied are you with the current division of household responsibilities in your home?**
  - Very satisfied
  - Satisfied
  - Neutral
  - Dissatisfied
  - Very dissatisfied

- **How satisfied are you with the current division of child care responsibilities in your household?**
  - Very satisfied
  - Satisfied
  - Neutral
  - Dissatisfied
  - Very dissatisfied
We found no significant differences between same-sex and different-sex couples in terms of how satisfied they are with the division of responsibilities (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Mean Couple Satisfaction with Division of Responsibilities by Couple Type**

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home*, Families and Work Institute
Notes: N=65-225 couples; p = not significant

However, we find significant differences between men in same-sex couples (4.18 out of 5) and women in different-sex couples (3.82) in terms of their satisfaction with household responsibilities. Similarly, men in same-sex couples (4.37 out of 5) are more satisfied with the division of child care responsibilities than women in different-sex couples (3.77). Men in different-sex couples (4.02 and 4.15) and women in same-sex couples (3.99 and 4.15) are not significantly different from any other group (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Mean Individual Satisfaction with Division of Responsibilities by Sex and Couple Type**

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home*, Families and Work Institute
Notes: N=141-450 individuals; * = p<.05
Discussions of the Division of Household and Financial Management Responsibilities: One possible reason for this variation in satisfaction between men in same-sex couples and women in different-sex couples may be differences in the likelihood of discussing how responsibilities would be divided early in the relationship, before norms are set for the couple, whether those norms are defined by traditional gender roles or not. Respondents of all sexes and couple types who had a conversation when they first moved in together are significantly more satisfied with the division of household responsibilities than respondents who did not have a conversation that they had wanted to have (Figure 13).

We asked participants:
- When you first moved in together, did you and your spouse/partner discuss how to divide household responsibilities?
  - Yes
  - No, but I would have liked to discuss it
  - No, and I did not want to discuss it
  - Not applicable; I never considered discussing it
  - I don’t recall

Weers of the other groups. For example, 20% of the women in different-sex couples answering the question reported that they did not have a conversation that they had wanted to have, whereas only 11% of men in same-sex or different-sex couples and 15% of women in same-sex couples said the same thing. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between those who did have a conversation and those who did not have a conversation because 1) they did not want to discuss it or 2) they had never considered discussing it.

If women in different-sex couples are more likely to hold back on conversations about divisions of Mark, 51, and Barbara, 50, live in Chicago, IL

and have been married for three years, the second marriage for each. Barbara does the cooking and cleaning, partly because she says Mark doesn’t do such things as laundry well. But, she says, “I think my husband purposely did a few things wrong so I wouldn’t have him do the laundry.”

Mark grew up in a single-parent home with a working mother so he and his siblings were all assigned household responsibilities. “I would own that responsibility in a marital relationship but since Barbara does a good job, why do it?”

As for carrying the heaviest load at home, Barbara wishes she had more time to do things outside of work and the home. “So far,” she says, “I’ve accepted my lot in life.”

Mark’s and Barbara’s experiences highlight the importance of sharing one’s expectations and wishes. Though she has “accepted her lot in life,” it seems as though Mark is willing and able to be a substantive participant in household responsibilities. It also demonstrates the importance of both partners assuming responsibility for checking in with each other. That way the less satisfied partner is not burdened with the sole responsibility of creating a situation that is satisfactory to both spouses/partners.
family responsibilities, more effort should go into public campaigns to support people in general, but specifically women in different-sex couples, to voice their desires early in the relationship. Such support should consist of encouragement for the silent spouse/partner to speak up and for the other spouse/partner to voice his/her openness to such conversations even if they do not have a specific opinion to share.

**Figure 13: Mean Individual Satisfaction with Division of Household Responsibility by Sex, Couple Type, and Discussions of Household Responsibility upon Moving in Together**

![Bar chart](chart.png)

Source: *Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home*, Families and Work Institute

Notes: N=379 individuals who reported whether they had a conversation about the distribution of household responsibilities whether or not their partner agreed that the conversation took place. ** = p < .01; *** = p < .001
Conclusion

Common wisdom around the "chore wars" is that those in different-sex couples, especially women, experience dissatisfaction with the division of responsibilities because they feel trapped by restrictive gender roles. On the other hand, same-sex couples, unable to easily enact such gender roles are thought to have an advantage in the chore wars, because they are more likely to share these responsibilities. The Modern Families study would suggest otherwise.

First, same-sex couples did not have an overabundance of shared responsibilities that would suggest that equal divisions are a consistent norm for them. Second, there is no significant difference in satisfaction with divisions of household, financial management and child care responsibilities between same-sex and different-sex couples despite the different ways in which they divide those responsibilities.

Third, women in different-sex couples have the lowest levels of satisfaction with household and child care responsibilities, significantly lower than men in same-sex couples. The lower level of satisfaction in household responsibilities seems to be driven by the group of women who did not have a conversation that they wanted to have about division of household responsibilities upon moving in with their spouse/partner. Not speaking one's mind early in a relationship was associated with lower satisfaction for all four groups but may be more common among or have additional impact for women in different-sex couples.

These results show that the chore wars are about more than just traditional gender roles and who does what. Satisfaction was shaped not by the division of gender roles per se (as shown by the lack of significant differences between same-sex and different-sex couples) but by whether individuals had spoken their minds early about how they would like to divide responsibilities within the couple.

Specifically, efforts to end the highly publicized "chore wars" in different-sex couples should focus less on establishing an equal split of responsibilities as an ideal, and more on making a deliberate decision regarding the best division of responsibilities within that couple. Interventions directed at helping everyone voice their expectations and wishes before and after a couple settles into a difficult-to-change routine, especially after having children, may be a more effective method to achieving an end to the "chore wars." In the final analysis, the defining feature of satisfaction with family responsibilities may not be who does what, but who says what they want to do.
ENDNOTES

1 Throughout this paper you will see the terms “same-sex” and “different-sex” couples. A same-sex couple is made up of two people who identify as having the same sex (in this study two men or two women). A different-sex couple is made up of two people who identify as having different sexes (in this study one man and one woman).

Though other terms, such as gay or opposite-sex couples, are more familiar, they do not properly represent the diversity of the sample or the underlying population of couples. For example, the term “gay couple” is inappropriate both because it assumes a particular orientation for the members of the couple (ignoring the existence of bi-sexual individuals) or because terms like “gay” and “lesbian” are not fully gender inclusive (primarily representing men or women respectively). Similarly the term “opposite sex” assumes that gender is a binary with men and women generally including an assumption that men and women possess unique and opposed traits. The idea that men and women are opposites both ignores the existence of transgender individuals and provides subtle but powerful reinforcement of traditional gender roles based on men and women’s “inherent differences.”


4 The Modern Families Study (NSE) surveyed both members of a sample of 225 male (46), female (57) and male/female (122) couples (450 individuals). Eligibility for the study was restricted to dual-earner couples where both members indicated that they are both “regularly working for pay for any number of hours per week” who had lived together for at least one year, including any time before a formal marriage, civil union or domestic partnership. Efforts were made to ensure that couples with and without children would be included as well as comparable numbers of each type of couple.

The sample was recruited from Nielson’s Harris Poll online panel (HPOL). Because of the challenge in trying to locate a highly targeted sample (i.e., same-sex couples where both members are employed), the initial sample was supplemented with additional sample from SSI, a trusted sample partner.

In accordance with AAPOR standards, no response rate was calculated for this study. Both probability-based panels and non-probability Internet panels, such as the ones used in this study, consist of several steps. A key difference is that the first step, recruitment into the panel, is not based on a known sampling frame with known probabilities of selection. The population thus cannot be clearly defined. Although the number of people who join the panel is usually known, the number of people who were exposed to the invitation, and the number of invitations to which they were exposed, are not known.

Though the number of panel members invited to a particular survey, and the number who respond to the invitation and complete the survey, are known this “participation rate” is only a piece of the information required to calculate a response rate as used in probability-based samples. The participation rate should not be considered equivalent to a response rate and is not a meaningful indicator of possible nonresponse error. (see AAPOR Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys, page 40).
An important note about sampling for this study is that it is a sample of couples, not individuals. No weighting was used in this study because couple level weights would require reliable, but unavailable, descriptions of the population of couples by the relevant demographics. To avoid confusion between weighted analyses of individuals and unweighted analyses of couples, no weights are applied to any analysis, as is common in academic studies of these populations.

Though the sample is limited to couples where at least one member had previously volunteered to participate in these panels, membership in these marketing panels is not associated with particular opinions about the substance of the study, as might be the case in a study of members of an advocacy organization such as the Human Rights Campaign or participants in support services offered by various community centers.

Invitations were sent via e-mail to complete the online survey developed by Families and Work Institute with support from PwC. Data were collected March 26 - April 24, 2015. Respondents averaged 10 minutes to complete the study and were compensated for their participation with points that could be redeemed for gifts (no cash incentives were paid).

To guard against survey fraud, the responses from partners’ spouses were reviewed. Items reviewed included: whether either survey had been completed in 5 minutes or less; inconsistent or illogical answers between surveys; inconsistent or identical answers between the surveys at the open-ended questions. There was also a standard Harris Poll Online anti-fraud question that respondents had to read carefully in order to answer correctly (in order to further eliminate respondents who “sped” through the survey). If one member of the couple failed one or more of these anti-fraud measures, both were removed from the dataset.

5 The choice to exclude transgender and other gender identities from the study was a difficult one. Despite FWI’s and PwC’s strong desire to include transgender individuals in the study, there was no option available at the time of the study to find enough transgender individuals in dual-earner couples for at least one year to reliably analyze their experiences. We welcome any partnership opportunities that would allow us to expand the scope of this research to include a reliable sample of transgender individuals.

6 Sample members reported living with their current spouse/partner for a median of 8 years. Responses ranged from one year (the minimum for participation in the study) to 50 years. This time is inclusive of any years spent cohabitating whether or not they were married or in some other legally recognized status for any amount of that time.

7 An essential advantage of this method is that it allows an examination of whether both members of the couple agree on who takes primary responsibility for each task. This addresses a critique of surveying a single member of the couple who might have a very different interpretation of the division of responsibilities than his or her spouse/partner. The breakdown of couples is presented below.

Overall, agreement on division of responsibilities was very high in our sample with between 69% and 92% of couples agreeing on how each specific responsibility was divided. Overall, agreement about having had a discussion about responsibilities was more varied with between 23% and 28% of couples agreeing on whether they had a discussion about the division of child care responsibilities upon starting to parent together. Between 74% and 92% of couples agree on whether they had a discussion about the division of household and financial responsibilities upon moving in together.
Counts of Couple Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female couples with children</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male couples with children</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female couples with children</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female couples without children</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Modern Families: Same- and Different-Sex Couples Negotiating at Home, Families and Work Institute


9 Despite efforts to recruit a large sample of male and female, dual-earner couples with children it was not possible to gather a large enough sample of these couples to explore the distribution of child care responsibilities within couple types.

10 Relative income, and high versus low earner was defined by which partner reported the higher response to the following question: “How much did you personally contribute to your household finances in 2014 (e.g., salary or wages before taxes, individually owned investments, social security, etc.)? Do not include any income contributed by your spouse/partner or any income from jointly owned properties or investments.”

11 Similar questions regarding child care responsibilities were asked but the sample of couples with children was too small for this fine an analysis.