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Chapter Eight:

Housework: The Link to Sex

Noah James swears he never saw the grime. He had grown up “old-school traditional” in the 1980s, the second of five children in a Midwestern family that strolled en masse to the neighborhood Catholic church each Sunday morning. Noah’s parents, like so many of their contemporaries, had divided the household responsibilities between inside and out. His father, an accountant, earned the family’s income and kept the yard in shape; his mother cooked, cleaned, and tended the inside of the home. By the time Noah left this environment to get married, he was twenty-four years old – and he’d never seen a grown man dust.

Despite this, Noah expected to share in the housework with his new wife Anne. Both were employed full-time as teachers when they married. And Noah had always wanted an equal relationship. Still, even as the couple

settled into their first apartment after the wedding, they hadn't discussed who would be responsible for what around the house. Six years later, Noah told me in an interview: "I remember thinking at the time: When you get married, do you divide chores like you're little kids – one for you, one for me? Or do you do whatever needs to be done?"

At first, they tried "whatever needs to be done." As Noah recalls it, Anne took the lead, buying the groceries, washing the clothes and running the vacuum cleaner every few days. Anne also cooked meals because she was better at it. Apartment life meant no lawn to mow and few household items to repair. So Noah's main contribution to housework was taking out the garbage, clearing the table after meals, and handling the bills.

From Noah's perspective, all seemed well until about six months into the marriage. That's when Anne asked Noah a troubling question: Why, since she was doing most other chores, hadn't Noah picked up a rag and cleaned the dust and grime off the windowsills? Anne said she suspected that Noah simply expected her to do it all. Noah listened to the evidence and the charges. Then he issued what he contends was an honest defense: "I didn't even notice the dust."

Forty years ago, when it came to the division of household responsibility, both genders knew their roles. And as long as both partners accomplished their culturally assigned tasks, neither complained too much.

Today, the division of household work stands as a potent marital issue. In the VoiceMale Survey, household responsibilities ranked third on the list of topics most likely to cause marital discord (behind only money, and balancing work and family). In most new marriages, deciding who does what around the house requires intense negotiation. And how those negotiations turn out has implications that go far beyond mere grit and grime. According to my survey, those couples who work out a fair division of household duties have more frequent sex, are less likely to seek marriage counseling or consider a divorce, and are more happily married overall.

The good news is that in two-thirds of the marriages I studied, the division of household responsibilities is perceived as generally fair. Men acknowledge that they are more likely than their wives to be happy with the housework split: 88 percent of husbands reported that they felt the division of housework was fair to them, while only 67 percent said their wife would

say it was fair to her. Nonetheless, husbands say, through confrontation, conversation and compromise, most couples eventually settle on household-chore routines that they both can accept.

Here's what some men said about how they and their wives reached agreement on housework, which I defined as inside and outside responsibilities (not including paid work) that contribute to keeping up the home.

Fifty-year-old psychotherapist, married eighteen years: "It just kind of sorted itself out. She doesn't like to cook, so I cook. And we eat out a lot. I'm the shopper of the family, and she's the cleaner. I'm the vacuumer because she asked me. It probably helps that we don't have kids."

Forty-seven-year-old math teacher, married fourteen years: "Whatever needs to be done, we do it. I do the yard every week. I clean the cars every week. She doesn't allow me to do the washing, but I iron all the clothing. She's never complained that I don't do enough."

Forty-four-year-old computer technician, married twenty-one years: "I think we are about equally likely to dig in when it gets too messy and

equally likely to be slow getting to it. We do have different chores, though. I don't like cooking, so my wife does that. I typically do daily kitchen cleanup and I'm the one who most often takes care of the laundry. She does bathrooms, I do vacuuming.”

Sixty-six-year-old retired engineer, married forty-one years: “She badgered me for a lot of years. I wasn't very cooperative. Finally, we wrote down everything on a piece of paper and divvied it up. Now I've got my chores and she's got hers, and we don't bother each other about it.”

This husband, like so many others, has gradually taken on a larger housework load over the course of his marriage. Since 1965, according to one study, the average husband has increased his contribution to housework more than three-fold – from four to thirteen hours a week. That includes an increase in time spent cooking, cleaning, and doing other traditionally female tasks around the house.

Still, married women continue to spend about twice as much time as their husbands on household labor. A 2002 study found that wives do more than their husbands (on average) preparing the meals, washing the dishes,

cleaning the house, shopping for groceries, laundering the clothes, and writing out the bills. Husbands, meanwhile, spend more time than their wives in only two areas: caring for the yard and keeping the cars in working order. This housework gender-gap crosses all education levels, and is especially stark when couples have two children or more. In those cases, women spend an average of thirty-two hours a week on household chores compared to thirteen hours for men.

These hourly inequities do not present a problem for some wives, particularly those whose husbands work long hours at a paying job. Most of these women have an agreement with their husbands: The man does more work at an office or job-site; the woman makes up the difference at home.

Some wives also will cut their husbands slack on housework if he agrees to handle the dirty jobs – taking care of mowers, toilets, water heaters, cars, garbage, and spiders, for example. If there still remains a housework gap in terms of hours, wives will often overlook this if the husband is in an ongoing and fair-minded negotiation on the topic, if he's willing to give and take.

“Couples take turns,” says University of Virginia sociology professor Steven Nock, who has conducted groundbreaking research on housework fairness. “Couples exchange present responsibilities for future benefits, past sacrifices for contemporary advantages.” In other words, over the course of a marriage, what matters most is that each partner perceives the big picture to be fair.

Joseph Fields knows that if he wants to increase the odds for sex with his wife, he can bring her flowers or suggest a candle-lit dinner at their favorite restaurant. But if he wants to be sure of a romantic evening, he goes for the vacuum cleaner. “My wife has told me that she’s never more turned on to me than when I’m doing housework,” says Joseph, a thirty-nine-year-old guidance counselor. “And she’s proven it again and again.”

For years, American women have hinted that seeing their husbands doing housework – or at least seeing the results of that work – is an aphrodisiac. Marriage researchers also have noticed anecdotally that housework and sex seem to be linked. Now, for the first time, a survey of men affirms the connection. According to the VoiceMale Survey, the more

satisfied a wife is with the division of household duties, the more satisfied a man is with his marital sex life.

In addition to this rise in sexual satisfaction, the actual frequency of sex tends to be higher when a woman feels that the housework is fair, our survey showed. Among wives who were satisfied with the division of housework, two-thirds had sex with their husbands at least once a week, and only 11 percent had sex less than once a month, according to the husbands. When the wife was unsatisfied with the housework situation, the proportion having weekly sex dropped to 50 percent, and the proportion having sex less than once a month more than doubled to 24 percent.

Joseph Fields, mentioned above, told me that he recognized early in his thirteen-year-old marriage that his wife was turned on when he did housework. And at first, he resented it. “It seemed that she was holding sex hostage,” he told me, that she was punishing him for not doing housework. Eventually, he says, he realized that when he did housework, his wife felt loved and appreciated – and was subsequently more inspired to love and appreciate him.

In addition to its implications for a couple's sex life, the fairness of housework appears to have other powerful influences on marriages. I compared couples in which the husband reported that both partners felt the housework was split fairly ("fair couples") to couples in which at least one partner felt it was divided unfairly ("unfair couples"). Here are three of the most compelling results:

Unfair couples were more than twice as likely as fair couples to have considered separation or divorce. The husbands in unfair couples were more than twice as likely as those in fair couples to report that their wives had affairs. The husbands in unfair couples were more than ten times as likely as those in fair couples to say that their marriage was "not stable at all."

As indicated earlier, fairness in housework does not necessarily mean that each partner puts in the same amount of time on housework. When a husband, for example, works outside the home fifty hours a week while his wife holds an outside job for twenty hours a week, it will probably be deemed fair that she does most of the housework.

In some cases, fairness may actually involve less housework for both partners. When I mentioned the link between housework and marital quality to one husband of forty years, he told me: “It’s funny. I always thought one of the best investments I ever made in my marriage was when I hired a Molly Maid to do the housework.”

While the house-cleaning service cost this couple money on a weekly basis, it may have saved them cash in the long run. According to our survey, couples in which both partners feel the housework is fairly divided are half as likely to seek counseling as those in unfair homes. Thus, in some instances at least, couples can pay a house-cleaner now, or a marriage counselor down the road.

While wives are more likely than husbands to focus on housework, this dynamic is not universal. In almost a third of the marriages where housework was contentious, my survey showed, it was the husband who wished his wife would do more.

In some of these cases, husbands who worked more hours than their wives outside the home often expected – or even agreed specifically – that

their wives would maintain a clean and efficient house. “I make the money. I work all day,” one fifty-one-year-old steelworker told me. “I hate coming home to a mess.” But even though he and his wife had agreed that she would do the cleaning and other housework, she rarely did it, he said – at least not to his standards.

In other cases, husbands simply had higher standards of cleanliness than did their wives. Their complaints were similar to those of many traditional wives – that the spouse was inadequate and inattentive when it came to housework.

Cliff Graham was one of three men I interviewed who were stay-at-home dads. After the first of their three children was born in 1996, Cliff and his wife recognized that her earning potential – she was a scientist working at a chemical plant, he was a billing clerk with a health insurance company – was much higher than his. Thus, they agreed that Cliff would quit his job and stay home with the newborn.

Cliff told me that even before their daughter came along, he did most of the housework. “I’m a first-born and maybe because of that, I tend to be a

little anal about things – I want things a certain way,” he said. “I’m certainly much neater than my wife.... I don’t like clutter; she couldn’t care less.” As their family grew from one to three children through the late 1990s, Cliff said he accepted that his share of the housework would grow too. He doesn’t enjoy cleaning, he told me, but considers it part of his contribution to the family.

What does bother him is that even when his wife is not working, she rarely helps out. “When she has a day off, she wants to relax,” Cliff says. “But sometimes I find it frustrating that while I’m finishing up the load of laundry, or putting [clothes] away, she’s lounging on the couch, watching some movie or reading a book. So there certainly have been times that I resent the fact that I do so much of the cleaning.” Cliff added: “I’ve been doing the stay-at-home-dad thing since 1996 and I’ve had only a handful of days off. Being on call 24-7, even on vacation, really drains your energy.”

Cliff’s disagreements with his wife over housework have never threatened their fourteen-year-long marriage, but he acknowledged wishing that she would occasionally surprise him on the housework front. “I

appreciate all that she does to provide for the family,” he said. “I wish she’d appreciate what I’m doing too.”

Other husbands, even some who worked outside the home full-time while their wives stayed home, told me they also had trouble convincing their wives to share the housework load fairly. A thirty-nine-year-old corporate controller told me that he and his wife of eighteen years have at least one big argument a year over housework.

“I’m a high-energy person,” this husband said. “I’ll start by taking on half of the housework. But gradually, I’ll do a little more here or a little more there. I’ll see something that needs to be done and I’ll do it.” Over several months, this husband said, “the balance will tilt more and more to my side, and I’ll start bitching about it.” Finally, he’ll initiate a conversation with his wife on the topic, and “we’ll fight and claw our way back to a balance.”

While longer-married couples tend to disagree somewhat less often than shorter-married ones about housework, my survey found that the issue flaring up in all phases of marriage. Between 30 and 41 percent of husbands

in each of the four phases reported that at least one partner thinks things are unfair on the housework front.

In my in-depth interviews, I noticed that housework problems tend to spike particularly during transition times: when a couple moves in together for the first time; when the first child is born; when the last child moves out of the house; and when one or both partners retire. These are times when couple dynamics are in flux, and negotiations are ongoing (explicitly or not) over what each partner will contribute to the operations of the home.

My survey also showed, contrary to what I expected, that having a stay-at-home parent did not reduce the likelihood that one partner will think things are unfair. As the stay-at-home husband, Cliff Graham, indicated just above, even men and women who acknowledge that housework is primarily their responsibility often feel under-appreciated or abandoned by their spouses.

Cliff Graham's case notwithstanding, wives do tend to focus more than their husbands on housework. And this remains a mystery to many men. The husbands I spoke with particularly wanted to know: Why, even

when a woman is working full-time outside the home, would she spend the end of her day, or much of her weekend, vacuuming, mopping and scrubbing the tub?

Michael Gurian, the author of several books about gender differences, believes biology plays a role in housework. He cited studies showing that women typically have more acute senses of smell, sight and touch than do men, and thus notice details of their surroundings more readily. “Having just sat down on his couch,” Gurian asserts, “it is more likely that a man will not ... register the bit of paper, the dog hair, the children’s toy shoved into the couch.” Gurian emphasizes that this is not an excuse for men to refuse housework; rather, it explains in part why some men seem oblivious to the clutter or dust piling up around them.

In addition to biology, American culture reinforces women’s interest in housework. Most girls grow up with mothers who focus, more than their husbands do, on the colors of the walls, the fabrics on the living room furniture, the sparkle on the kitchen floor. Girls thus learn to connect their sense of self to the beauty and cleanliness of their homes. “We’re at the level of identity when we talk about ‘home,’” Gurian says. “That’s something that

men don't get. They think of housework as 'work.' They don't realize that it's the female identity at stake.”

Gurian believes that most wives probably are not conscious about withholding sex when their husbands are unfair about housework. Rather, wives feel the physical and emotional weight of the extra responsibility. “When her husband doesn't help, she feels a distance,” Gurian told me. “She feels awkward in her own home. She also feels like she has to become a mom and dominate him to get him to help her out. Why would she want to have sex with someone who makes her feel like that?”

Interestingly, several men attributed their lack of interest and competence in housework to the way their mothers raised them. Noah James, the man at the beginning of this chapter whose wife was frustrated because he never noticed the grime, told me that in his childhood, his mother rarely called upon him to clean. Neither did she show him how to cook a meal, wash a load of clothing, scour a toilet, or do other routine housework.

Noah recalled that early in his own marriage, his wife became ill and had to stay in bed for a couple of weeks. Noah's mother, who lived nearby,

visited almost daily to help with the housekeeping. On those visits, “my mother even cleaned the cupboards,” Noah recalled. “She dusted everywhere. She seems to thrive on cleaning.”

Another husband I interviewed, Jean-Luc Gaillard, also cited his mother when we discussed his marital problems over housework. Jean-Luc was the thirty-three-year-old Haitian-American (introduced in Chapter 4) whose two-year-long marriage was suffering because he and his African-American wife could not agree on how to balance their work and family time. Intertwined with that issue were their expectations of who should do the household chores.

In his childhood home, Jean-Luc told me, his Haitian-born mother “was responsible for everything within the walls” of the house. “Life was beautiful,” recalled Jean-Luc. He said that his mother “accepted her role with humility.” When Jean-Luc married his wife Victoria in 2001, he was hoping for the same kind of set-up. But Victoria was not cooperating. In fact, she wasn’t much interested in housework at all.

Jean-Luc tried to be open-minded, he says, and agreed to do a good portion of the housework. But the more pressure he put on Victoria to help out, the more resistant she became. Jean-Luc told me, resignedly: “She may never clean as much, or cook as much, as I’d want. But she could at least cook and clean some.”

While both Jean-Luc and Noah James noted their mothers’ roles in leaving them unprepared for housework in married life, their fathers’ influence should not go unmentioned. In both cases, the fathers neither asked their sons to do housework nor did it themselves. Thus, the sons had no model of a man performing day-to-day tasks in the home.

On the other hand, when a father made housework a personal priority, the son usually did the same. As a thirty-two-year-old construction worker, married eight years, explained: “My dad always pitched in. I learned that if you get up, you clean the plate. If there are dirty dishes, you just don’t leave them until the ‘little woman’ shows up. My parents had high expectations, and we have the same expectations of our children.”

So how can couples bring fairness to a home in which one partner isn't doing a fair share of the housework? Since women tend to do more housework, I asked husbands what their wives have done to try to encourage them to increase their share.

First, according to husbands, husbands cited strategies that don't work:

Nagging. Husbands told me overwhelming that they react negatively to nagging. When their wives made statements that began with such phrases as "I'm the only one who does anything around here...", and "I'm not your mother...", the husbands were particularly apt to resist doing housework.

Criticism. A forty-three-year-old advertising copywriter told me: "When she is overly critical of the quality of my housework – when she tells me that I don't meet her standards of cleanliness – I am less motivated to clean. I think she's critical because I work fast. She feels that because I get things done quickly, I must not be cleaning thoroughly." A thirty-three-year-old husband added that his wife sometimes ridicules his housework as "half-assed." This husband told me: "Comments that are negative do not motivate me. When she approaches me reasonably, I think I respond reasonably."

Accusations. One husband, married seven years, said that he made a variety of “housekeeping errors” in the first few months of their marriage. Once, for example, after loading and starting the dishwasher, he heard strange noises coming from the kitchen. He discovered suds pouring out of the dishwasher onto the floor; apparently, he’d used the wrong kind of detergent. He also shrank some of his wife’s clothes in the dryer. What bothered him – and made him more resistant to housework, he said – was that his wife accused him of trying to screw up so he wouldn’t have to do the work in the future. He denied that this was the case.

Here are three approaches that husbands said did work in motivating them:

Creating a master plan. Many husbands told me that things worked most smoothly when they and their wives created an overall plan for work in and around the house. Several couples listed all of the household responsibilities and divided them based on who wanted to do what. Both partners usually ended up doing most of what they preferred doing, along with some chores they didn’t like at all. Every few months, the tasks could be divided again if one or the other partner was unhappy with the list.

Giving notice. One husband told me that he does housework at a different pace than his wife does. She likes to do all of her housework at once; he likes to distribute his over the course of the week. He said he's far more likely to accommodate his wife's housework desires when she recognizes this, accepts it, and, if she has specific cleaning wishes, makes them clear well in advance. This husband said: "When she says she wants it done now, it usually doesn't happen."

Changing expectations. Several husbands suggested that their wives put too much emphasis on cleaning. One man spoke of his wife's "vigilante attitude" about housework. He had to meet her expectations, he found, or suffer her wrath. This husband, and others, said they would be more interested in doing housework if their wives compromised on the thoroughness and frequency of the cleaning.

In a few cases among the men I interviewed, a husband said there was nothing his wife could do to enlist him in the housework. One fifty-two-year-old teacher told me: "Only when she is sick do I chip in, because I feel it is only fair. Other than that, the outside of the house is my responsibility; the dishes, laundry and inside routine cleanliness is her deal. She's tried

negotiating, pleading, begging, withholding sex – it doesn't make a real difference.”

In my own marriage, housework was a major issue for most of our first ten years together. Eventually, in an effort to work our way through this divisive issue, we were inspired to try an experiment in switching.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this book, I spent my earliest years in a traditional household, where cooking, cleaning and washing was women's work. I chose to marry a non-traditional woman, but I hadn't mastered the nuts and bolts of many household tasks. Thus, my wife and I quickly developed an unhealthy pattern: She initiated virtually all the housecleaning, assigning me various chores as if I were her offspring or handyman.

Not surprisingly, these housework dynamics created an atmosphere of resentment – in both directions – and they inspired many of our most intense arguments. Kelly often charged me with doing too little too late; I accused her of overestimating the value of cleanliness and underestimating my contribution.

After weary years of discord, we finally decided to embark on an experiment. Each of us made a list of all of the things we did around the house – and then we handed that list to the other person to carry out. For three months, I would do the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and Kelly's other duties; she would deal with the yard-care, car-care, bill-paying, and my other household-related tasks.

The experiment transformed us, and our relationship. Kelly realized that some of my tasks required attention on a level that she hadn't appreciated. For example, managing our family's finances was a job that required research, extended conversations (or waiting) on the phone, and ultimate responsibility for our solvency. Kelly found that she was averse to detailed numbers work, and noted that it seemed to take her twice as long to complete the job as it had taken me. Meanwhile, I saw that in terms of hours spent on the household, she had been out-distancing me by a couple of hours a week.

After three months, we traded our chores back – with some adjustments. To even out the time commitment, I took on one new,

significant task: the laundry. Of all the major tasks that Kelly originally did, laundry was the one that she disliked the most, and the one I found to be least offensive. During our experiment, I had found that doing the laundry involved a lot of sitting, sorting and folding, most of which I could do while watching sports on television.

Kelly had to compromise too. Specifically, she agreed to decrease from twice to once a month the frequency of our deep cleaning. And she agreed not to comment about how and when I did my tasks. She's a "burst-cleaner," someone who likes to dedicate all of a Saturday afternoon to a major overhaul of the house. I'm slow and steady. I'd much prefer to put in fifteen minutes each weeknight so I can lounge on the weekend. More than once since then, as I've read or watched TV on a Saturday afternoon, Kelly has vacuumed under my feet. And I haven't been obliged to feel guilty about it.

Since we completed this experiment, Kelly and I have had to continually adjust the balance of our household responsibilities. Moving to a bigger home, changing job schedules, and having a child all required significant alterations. But for us, the positive impact of our switching

experience can't be overstated. Looking back, both of us agree that the experiment coincided with the point in our marriage when we stopped doubting that it would last.