Power, Fairness, and Shared Responsibility · About 4 minutes

The Work That Happens Before the Task

Noticing responsibility that is easy to leave out of the count

Eli is making dinner. By the time the pan goes on the stove, Noor has already done a good deal of the work that made dinner possible.

This fictional household contains two real kinds of work. The cooking takes effort. So does keeping track of everything required before cooking can begin.

A task division can look fair when described briefly and feel quite different to the people living it. “Eli handles dinner” may mean he prepares the food. It may mean he takes responsibility for the meal from beginning to end. Those arrangements are not interchangeable.

Sociologist Allison Daminger's interview research distinguishes anticipating needs, identifying options, deciding and monitoring results as aspects of household cognitive labor.[1] The categories help us see work that can otherwise go unnamed.

For dinner, anticipation includes noticing that food is running low. Options include finding something the family can eat safely. Decisions concern what to make and what to buy. Monitoring might mean checking that ingredients arrived and that tomorrow's lunch is covered. None of these activities disappears because another person turns on the oven.

Try expanding the sentence “Eli makes Tuesday's meal.” Who knows what is needed? Who chooses? Who notices when the plan fails? There may be a good reason for dividing those steps. Noor might prefer to shop because the store is on her route, while Eli takes responsibility for planning and cooking. The point is to know what each has actually agreed to carry.

Their son's allergy remains a care requirement, not an inconvenience to omit from the accounting. A transfer of responsibility needs the knowledge required to carry it safely.

Fairness takes circumstances seriously

Equal standing does not require identical contributions. Illness, disability, paid work, money and other caring responsibilities affect capacity. A person may willingly carry more for a time. An arrangement that once worked can also become unsustainable.

Attention to power matters here. Feminist family-therapy writing has challenged accounts that overlook the social conditions under which household responsibilities are assigned.[2] Earning more does not confer a greater right to decide whose time counts. Nor should a discussion about mental load erase physical work another person does.

Eli may carry responsibilities outside this one example. Noor may need less total work rather than more appreciation for doing it. Sometimes neither person has enough capacity, and outside support or reduced demands become necessary.

A fuller description gives the couple something concrete to negotiate. “Help more” is hard to act on. “Take responsibility for two meals, including learning the allergy requirements and checking the ingredients” is more specific, if it fits their circumstances.

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Dinner brings into view the work that has to be counted before anyone can answer.

Tomorrow there will be another dinner. Who will notice what's in the cupboards and decide what to do with it?

Companion reading · A Fair Relationship With Room for Both of Us

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Power, Fairness, and Shared Responsibility (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Daminger, A. (2019). The cognitive dimension of household labor. American Sociological Review, 84(4), 609–633. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007 Source.

[2] Goldner, V. (1985). Feminism and family therapy. Family Process, 24(1), 31–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1985.00031.x Source.

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