



Who's Remembering to Buy the Eggs? The meaning, measurement, & implications of Invisible Family Load

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The “mental load” (Guardian, 2017)

The mental load means always having to remember.



*It's permanent and exhausting work.
And it's invisible.*

What do you mean what did I do? I did EVERYTHING, that's what I did!



The Invisible Load of Motherhood



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Mental load: The hidden burden of invisible work

by Kaiser Permanente | April 15, 2024

The effects of the mental load on women's health

Over time, the mental load can be physically and mentally draining for those subjected to it.

The ruminations it creates can lead to stress which is known to affect physical health. Over the long term, [stress can adversely affect bodily functions](#), including those of the heart, intestines and reproductive system.

Sometimes, the mental load is so intense that plans and organizational tasks for the family unit interfere with work life (e.g., phone call from the daycare because the little one has a fever, appointment at the pediatrician, grocery shopping at lunchtime, etc.).

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By [Hannah Van Sickle](#) Published on March 29, 2024

Fact checked by [Sarah Scott](#)



Gender & Family Work

- Most relevant scholarly work has conceptualized family work as task and time (Thompson, 1991)
- Women do more physical household tasks & more time
- More recently, scholars have argued that there is more to family work- the mental “tasks” of planning, organizing, and managing family demands (Daly, 2002; Offer, 2014; Walzer, 1996).
 - Various terms: mental labor” (Robertson et al., 2019), the “cognitive dimension of household labor” (Daminger, 2019), and “invisible household...mental and emotional labor” (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019), “mental load”
 - Prior Measures: lengthy, task-specific (planning dinner, scheduling medical appts), relative vs. absolute
- What do we call it? How do we define and measure it?
- Are there gender differences? What are its effects?





Study 1

What are nonvisible activities you do each week to care for, meet your family's needs, or as part of your family responsibilities?

Problem solve/ing
Anticipate/look forward/future
Decide/decisions
Worry
Think/ing
Strategize
Reminding
Delegating/dole
Ensure/ensuring/make sure
Figure out
Oversee
Schedule/scheduling
Monitor
Find/ing people (sitters, repair) or information
Track/keep track
Paying attention
Remember
Research
Checking
Manage
Managing conflict
Learn
Providing emotional support & development
Advising
Coordinate
Organize/ing
Communicate/conversation



Invisible Family Load

Involves the related yet distinct **managerial**, **cognitive**, and **emotional** load requirements needed to *address family needs, goals, activities, responsibilities, and/or well-being.*

- Managerial load - includes managerial activities such as planning, organizing, coordinating and scheduling
- Cognitive load - includes cognitive activities such as thinking about, remembering, making decisions, & problem solving
- Emotional load - includes worry or concern about family needs and responsibilities

What are some ways this invisible family load affects you, your family, or at work (positively or negatively)?





Study 2: Item Development & Content Validation

Used broad activities rather than specific tasks because nature changes across family stages; 44 items

- Emotional Load: **Feel apprehensive about** your family's needs, goals, activities, responsibilities, and/or well-being
- Cognitive Load: **Remember things needed** for your family's needs, goals, activities, responsibilities, and/or well-being
- Managerial Load: **Coordinate** your family's needs, goals, activities, responsibilities, and/or well-being



Study 3: Scale Refinement & Exploratory Factor Analyses

Rate extent to which you agree you did each in caring for your family in the PAST MONTH 1) Strongly Disagree to 5) Strongly Agree

- 209 Ps recruited from Prolific (73% married and 67% child at home)
- Rated 43 items
- 3 factors as expected, with high means (near 4/5) with low variance
- 22 items retained based on highest factor loadings



Study 4: Response Scale Examination

- We varied response scale (# days, percent time, word frequency, combination), 7 formats
- Used the 22 items from Study 3
- Included expected correlates (e.g., WFC, WFE, Health & Well-being)
- 1391 Ps randomly assigned to 1 of 7 conditions (approximately 200 each)
- Examined EFAs, descriptives, and nomological network across formats
 - These varied as a function of response scale
 - Implications for measurement of other nonwork constructs (e.g., work-family conflict and enrichment)
- Response scale: How often have you done each in the **PAST MONTH? 1) Never to 7) Always**
- 9 final items (3 items per dimension)



How does invisible family load affect people- their well-being, in their families, and at work?

- Are there gender differences?
- Does personality matter?
- Are the effects uniformly negative?
- Does this new measure predict “outcomes” above and beyond extant measures?

Study 5



- H1: Women report greater Invisible Family Load than do men.
- H2: The 3 dimensions of invisible family load correlate with, but are distinct from, existing measures of this construct.
- H3: The 3 dimensions are related to but distinct from personality (conscientiousness, coping by planning, neuroticism).
- H4: Emotional and cognitive load are hindrance stressors associated with greater FWC and poorer health and well-being and role performance (above and beyond prior measures, personality).
- H5: Managerial load is a challenge stressor associated with greater FWE and better health and well-being and role performance (above and beyond prior measures, personality).



How does invisible family load affect people- their well-being, in their families, and at work?

- 448 respondents, 41.3% were female, 76.3% were Caucasian, 54.7% had children, their average age was 37.68 years, and worked an average of 41.00 hours per week. A variety of industries were represented
- Administered IFL scale and established measures of:
 - Spillover: Family-work conflict & enrichment
 - Attitudes: Job, Family, & Life Satisfaction
 - Well-being: Job & Family Exhaustion, Sleep, Stress & Depression
 - Performance: Self-reported job and family performance & organizational citizenship behaviors

How does invisible family load affect us?



-
- Women report significantly more invisible family load than do men
 - Emotional: $3.52 > 3.15$; Cognitive: $6.08 > 5.70$; Managerial: $5.66 > 5.11$
 - Personality (conscientiousness & neuroticism) matters
 - After controlling for personality tendencies to plan & worry and other measures of “mental load”:
 - **Emotional load** predicts
 - \uparrow FWC, sleep problems, stress & depression, job and family exhaustion
 - \downarrow FWE, job, family & life satisfaction
- But...
- **Managerial load** predicts \uparrow FWE
 - **Cognitive load** predicts \uparrow Family Satisfaction & Job performance, job satisfaction, & OCBs

Summary



- Findings suggest that there are meaningful (moderately large) gender differences in the extent to which individuals experience managerial, cognitive, and emotional family load.
 - These findings are consistent with theory (e.g., Social Role Theory; Eagly & Wood, 2016) as well as the popular press notion that women tend to be the “project managers” of their families.
 - The response format we use may affect conclusions about gender differences
- Experience of IFL is related to personality but it has unique effects on outcomes not explained by traits
- The consequences of emotional load are particularly negative but cognitive load has some benefits

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Is There a Plus Side to Mental Labor?

Women shoulder most of the work in managing a family and tell us it's exhausting, but some also say it has benefits

BY [JULIE HOLLIDAY WAYNE](#)

THE MATERNAL STRESS PROJECT

balance, physical, mental, and emotional fatigue, family and life satisfaction⁵. While the emotional family load component aligned with exactly what I might expect – e.g. significant positive association with fatigue, negative association with satisfaction – the other components had neutral results or even an opposite response.

These results suggest that **not every element of mental load is negative, and not all mental load is stressful.**

As they point out, elements of cognitive and managerial family load represent “challenge stressors”⁶ – the outcomes of each task allow for positive feelings of accomplishment – that have beneficial effects on health and wellbeing. This may align with the Petts and Carlson discussion on how **men and women internalize the outcomes of cognitive tasks differently.**

This research adds a new kink into my line of questions – **are there aspects of mental load that serve a stress buffer⁷?**



Future Research & Further Discussion

- Comparison of relative and absolute invisible family load
 - Relation of each to various outcomes
 - Factors that predict each
- Accurate estimation of family demands? Differ by gender?
 - Researchers could be more mindful of how the measures, time frames, and methods they use may impact such conclusions.
- Intersectionality- examine the nuances of how and in what circumstances each dimension is most likely to differ by gender & consider intersectionality (race, social class). Use of non-WEIRD samples.
 - The recent pandemic shone light on the disproportionate home and childcare load borne by mothers in particular, an inequity consistently highlighted in lay media (e.g., Bennett, 2020) as well as confirmed empirically by scholars (e.g., Shockley et al., 2021). Combined with the racial reckoning of 2020, the mental load may have been more pronounced for African American mothers.
- Use of within-Ss designs such as Experience Sampling Methodology



Q&A

GO



Thank you

Questions? Comments?
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