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Joanne W. Golann
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Joanne W. Golann

Princeton University

Joanne W. Golann, Department of Sociology, Princeton University, 107 Wallace Hall, Princeton, New Jersey 08544; email: jgolann@princeton.edu.

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Abstract

The household is a critical site for the production of gender, yet studies of housework have focused largely on the relative amounts of housework that men do rather than the meanings of housework and the varieties of strategies by which men negotiate housework. Using a relational approach (Zelizer, 2005), I show how unemployed men construct new matches between their household economic activities and their family relationships to find alternative ways to present themselves as providers. Drawing on 35 interviews with unemployed men, women, and their spouses, I find that unemployed men use three key strategies to reclaim their breadwinning status. First, they define themselves as potential breadwinners, considering housework disruptive to their primary work of finding a job. Second, they focus on “consumption work,” putting efforts into managing household budgets. Third, they renegotiate gifts with kin to sustain images of themselves as responsible fathers and husbands.

Key Words: gender, housework, relational work, unemployment, masculinity, breadwinning
Maintaining Breadwinning through Household Activity: A Relational Approach

Breadwinning is part of the “package deal” for men, a must-have of middle-class masculinity (Kimmel, 2006; Townsend, 2002). Since the mid-19th century, the cultural ideal of men as “good providers” has prevailed (Bernard, 1972; Gerson, 1993; Kimmel, 2006). Despite the surge in women’s labor force participation rates, the social fabric of the family remains structured around cultural expectations for men to be breadwinners and women to be caregivers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Ridgeway, 2009; Risman, 1998). In dual-earner households, men are still perceived as the primary breadwinners whereas women are held responsible for the “second shift” of domestic work (Hochschild, 1989; Potuchek, 1997). Men whose wives work outside the home maintain traditional gender boundaries through such strategies as deeming their wives’ earnings as “inessential” and assuming a “helper” role in the household (Coltrane, 1996; Gerson, 1993; Hertz, 1986; Potuchek, 1997).

Men’s breadwinning status is further threatened when their wives out-earn them, and the threat is greater still when they are unemployed. In a new economy in which stable and long-term employment opportunities are unraveling (Capelli et al., 1997; Osterman, 1996, 1999), the likelihood that men will experience spells of unemployment has increased. Prior studies have found that men who earn significantly less than their wives do not substitute a domestic role for their former breadwinning role, but on the contrary, decrease their housework hours (Atkinson and Boles, 1984; Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000). Through the avoidance of housework, men compensate for their gendered deviance in the workforce by displaying masculinity in an alternative sphere (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Hochschild, 1989).

The Great Recession of 2008, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, provides a unique opportunity to examine how unemployed, professional men renegotiate
household responsibilities when traditional patterns of economic activity are uprooted. During the Great Recession, male-dominated industries like manufacturing and construction suffered large-scale job losses and unemployment among professionals more than doubled (Hout et al., 2011). Drawing on 27 interviews with unemployed men and their spouses, I show how men not only resist housework but also appropriate and redefine housework. Using a relational approach (Zelizer, 2005, 2011), which recognizes how families use household economic activity to give meaning to their intimate relationships, I examine the various ways in which unemployed men use housework to maintain breadwinning roles. Through eight interviews with unemployed women, I also compare women’s and men’s responses to housework to further assess the gendered nature of men’s strategies. I argue that a relational perspective deepens our understanding of how men “do gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987)—and rework their relationships—in and through household activity.

Doing Gender by Avoiding Housework

In their seminal work on “doing gender,” West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is not something one is but something one does. Being a “boy” or “girl” is not only a consequence of early childhood socialization experiences, but a product of recurring, everyday social interactions. As West and Zimmerman (1987) observe, the household is a primary site in which gender is “accomplished.” Through the uneven distribution of routine housework tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for children, men and women accomplish both the production of the household and the production of gender (Berk, 1985). This twofold understanding of the role of housework has helped to explain the puzzling empirical finding around men’s and women’s earnings and their housework share (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994).
Much research attention has been devoted to the gendered distribution of housework, and its relationship to men’s and women’s earnings. The rational choice/resource bargaining perspective argues that women do more housework because they have more time or ability to do it (Becker, 1991; Coverman, 1985; England and Farkas, 1986) or less earning power to get out of doing it (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Lundberg and Pollak, 1996). While empirical studies have found support that men do more housework as their wives’ earnings increase, this relationship reverses when women outearn their husbands (Brines, 1994; Bittman et al., 2003; Evertsson and Nermo, 2004; Greenstein, 2000; Schneider, 2011; Thébaud, 2010). To explain this finding, the “gender display” (Brines, 1994) or “gender deviance neutralization” (Bittman et al., 2003) perspective argues that men who do not fulfill the masculine expectation of breadwinning compensate for this deviation by refusing to do housework, thereby performing their masculinity in another sphere. Likewise, women who out-earn their husbands also “do gender” by increasing their housework share. Although several recent studies have questioned the robustness of the empirical evidence in support of the gender display perspective, these studies still find that men at the tails of the distribution—those without jobs—engage in gender display by refusing to take on additional housework or by taking on less housework than women do when they become unemployed (Gupta, 1999, 2006, 2007; Gough and Killewald, 2011).

Qualitative studies of dual-earner couples and unemployed men have identified multiple strategies by which non-breadwinning men avoid housework. These men justify their lack of household participation by minimizing women’s paid contributions, emphasizing women’s

1 Gupta (2006, 2007) argues that women’s absolute rather than relative earnings have a linear relationship with housework time. Moreover, in a replication of Brines’ (1994) and Greenstein’s (2000) studies, both Gupta (1999) and Bittman et al. (2003) showed that removing the extreme tails of male respondents—the jobless men—eliminated the curvilinear relationship between earnings and housework hours.
natural domestic abilities, limiting themselves to male-typed housework, avoiding responsibility for housework, and claiming incompetence (Berk, 1985; Blair-Loy, 2003; Coltrane, 1989; Hertz, 1986; Hochschild, 1989; Legerski and Cornwall, 2010; Nelson and Smith, 1999; Sherman, 2009). As diverse as these strategies are, they all aim to minimize the amount of housework that men do. Moreover, men who refuse to take on housework are described as having “rigid” or “traditional” gender identities, while those who embrace housework are described as having “flexible” or “egalitarian” gender identities (Nelson and Smith, 1999; Sherman, 2009). However, even when men increase their housework hours, they may still perform their masculinity by redefining housework in ways consistent with their masculinity. Men may do masculinity by doing housework.

In a study of couples where the wife was the primary breadwinner, Tichenor (1999, 2005) demonstrated how men were able to preserve their breadwinner identities by expanding their definition of a provider to include meeting the emotional needs of family members and managing family finances. My study extends upon this work by examining how unemployed, professional men “do gender” both by avoiding and by appropriating housework. I focus on unemployed men because unemployment is an extreme case of deviation from the breadwinning norm, and thus may require men to compensate by “doing gender” in housework. In addition, I focus on professional, white, middle-aged men because they are more likely to value breadwinning as part of hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 2005). Whereas a number of studies have examined working-class job loss and housework (Legerski and Cornwall, 2010; Linnenberg, 2007; Nelson and Smith, 1999; Sherman, 2009; Waller, 2002), only one recent study has focused on unemployed professionals and housework (Lane, 2009). This study discussed how unemployed
professional men redefined work—not housework—to sustain their image of themselves as breadwinners.

The key contribution of this study is to apply a relational approach (Zelizer, 2005, 2011) to show how men resist, appropriate, and redefine household activities to maintain their breadwinning status. A relational approach argues that people use economic activity—including household activities of production, consumption, and exchange—to define and differentiate their intimate relations. Negotiating household activity is not only a matter of bargaining over who does more or less, but it involves reworking relationships and ascribing new meanings to old tasks.

A Relational Approach

Economic sociologists have challenged individual, rational accounts of economic activity by attending to the structural and cultural contexts in which transactions are “embedded” (Granovetter, 1985). In urging for economic sociology to become even more “transgressive,” Zelizer (2011) argues that the discipline must go beyond “embeddedness” to a relational approach that views all economic transactions as social interactions. In contrast to the “separate spheres/hostile worlds” perspective (Boydston, 1990; Cott, 1977) that understands economic activity and intimate relations as necessarily corrupting each other, a relational approach argues that economic activities and intimate relations not only frequently coexist, but also constitute one another. In all economic activity, participants actively engage in “relational work” to create and differentiate their social ties from others with which they may become confused (Zelizer, 2005, 2011). To do so, they construct right “matches” between their economic activity and their social relations, choosing transactions (e.g., gift, payments, favors, loans) and media (e.g., money,
coupons, food stamps) that appropriately convey the meaning of their relations (Zelizer 2005, 2011).

Since the Industrial Revolution, the home has been constructed as the “haven in the heartless world,” a space of domesticity that is separate from the hard, rational world of work (Williams, 2000; Zelizer, 2005). From a “separate spheres” perspective, this separation prevents both work from corrupting household intimacy, and emotion and intimacy from disrupting rationalized work. Yet households are replete with economic activities of consumption, production, and exchange. Moreover, family members regularly engage in relational work to match their economic activities to their social relations. For example, Miller (1998) found that mothers enacted their love for their families through consumption activities, buying healthy foods that their families would enjoy. In contrast, the lonely took little pleasure in shopping because they lacked meaningful relationships. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) found that transnational mothers used their production activities to give meaning to their mothering. By regularly sending remittances home to their children, they distinguished themselves from what they defined as “bad mothers” who had abandoned their families. In a study of low-income, unmarried mothers, Edin and Lein (1997:155) found that mothers’ boyfriends who wanted to stay over were expected to contribute cash and in-kind gifts; men who “don’t pay, can’t stay.” These examples illustrate some of the many ways in which households use economic activities to give meaning to their intimate relationships and differentiate them from other types of relationships.

Working to create right ties between economic activity and social relations is an ongoing process. Individuals must “sustain, repair, and renegotiate those ties as new opportunities, threats, and problems arise” (Zelizer 2005:35). Unemployment is one such threat. By disrupting
established patterns of domestic and kin relational work, unemployment forces families to construct new matches between their intimate ties and economic transactions, and new vocabularies with which to understand these matches. A relational approach makes three key contributions to the study of unemployment, gender, and housework. First, it specifies the processes by which unemployed men “do gender” through household activity. Given that there is no straightforward male or female script by which to enact gender, a relational approach identifies the processes by which men create new “matches” between transactions, media, and relations in an effort to sustain and repair ties with family members. In contrast to an individualistic perspective in which housework is viewed as something to be avoided, either because it is unpleasant or because it is gendered as feminine work, a relational perspective demonstrates how household activity can create and sustain family relations. For unemployed men, managing household activity can be an alternative means to establish their position in the household and reclaim their breadwinning status. Second, a relational approach broadens the scope of household economic activity from traditional “housework” activities like cooking, cleaning, and child care to all household economic activities of production, consumption, and exchange. Scoping out bargains, deciding how much allowance to give a child, and borrowing money from relatives all fall under the purview of housework and must be negotiated. Finally, a relational approach gives attention to how other family members help or hinder the construction of new matches. Men do not display masculinity by themselves but must put efforts into matching their self-presentation with what is expected of them as fathers, husbands, and sons.

**Method**

From April to September 2010, I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with unemployed individuals (n = 27) and their spouses (n = 8). Participants were recruited from two
job seeker groups for unemployed professionals in New Jersey. Both groups held weekly meetings in which participants learned about job search strategies, discussed problems that they were encountering in their job search, and networked with one another. Although the meetings were public, I obtained permission from the groups’ organizers to attend the meetings and solicit interviews. I attended several meetings, participating in activities like giving a one-minute elevator pitch and rating participants’ responses to practice interview questions. During introductions, I passed out information on my project, following up with anyone who expressed interest in being interviewed. I also sent an email to the groups’ email listservs to solicit interviews. Interviews typically lasted 1-2 hours, and were conducted in-person or over the phone, depending on the participant’s preference. All interviews, except one in which careful notes were taken, were audio-recorded and transcribed. After completing the interview, I asked whether a spouse would be willing to participate.

Reflecting the composition of the job seeker groups, the majority of my unemployed respondents were male (n=20), White (n=23), married (n=25), and parents (n=26). Ten of my unemployed respondents were in their late 30s-40s, 16 were in their 50s, and 1 person was in his 60s. With the exception of one man, all my respondents came from dual-earner families. All were college-educated and had held professional jobs in various fields, such as human resources, sales, finance, and communications. Several had commanded six-figure salaries, working long hours and traveling. At the time of the interview, the majority of respondents (n=20) had been out of work for 1-2 years. Of the eight spouses I interviewed, seven were women and all were working except for one woman who had lost her job a month prior to the interview.

Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2002), I began my interviews with a broad interest in the effect of unemployment on families during the Great
Recession. In my initial interviews, I covered a wide range of topics, including the participant’s work history, job search activities, financial situation, and family relationships. Through early data analysis, I became interested in the tensions between couples around spending and housework. To further explore these dynamics, I reworked my interview questions to focus more on household activities. Given the large proportion of men in these job seeker groups, I also directed my attention to men’s strategies in negotiating housework, using the women I interviewed as points of comparison. When I completed my interviews, I used the Atlas TI qualitative analysis software to facilitate coding and development of theoretical concepts. Not until much later in the analysis did I connect the “doing gender” and relational perspectives through the case of housework.

Results

Unemployment forced men to reconstruct matches between their household activity and their relationships with spouses, children, and kin. I find that unemployed men both avoided and used household economic activity as an alternative means to establish their position in the household and assert their masculinity. To avoid housework, men tried to re-establish old matches by defining their job search as work and their housework as favors. However, in addition to avoiding housework, men also used household activity to reposition themselves as providers. By engaging in “consumption work” and renegotiating exchanges with children and kin, men used household economic activity to fulfill breadwinning ideals.

Potential Breadwinners

From a relational perspective, men who lose their jobs are obligated to repair relations with wives who may hold new expectations for their housework contributions. Instead of creating new matches between their household economic activity and their family relationships,
some men attempted to reconstruct old matches. One of the most popular strategies unemployed men used was to reframe their job search as work. Phil, 57, a former sales executive who had been out of work for 12 months, admitted that he had not taken up much additional housework since losing his job. Without my prompting, he justified his lack of housework by pointing to the long hours he put into his job search:

Looking for a job has really occupied an awful lot. I would say, you know, it’s easily 40 hours a week. Because it’s also a lot of, as you experienced the other night, you know going out to network meetings in the evening and it can be a lot more than 40 hours. One rule I try to make when I began this search process is that I wasn’t going to work 70 hours a week. … I don’t know if you’ve ever had to sell something. The selling process sometimes can be fun if you’re a salesperson. But when you’re—the pressure to, you know, for me, now, to make the sale, close the deal, means get a job. There’s a lot more at stake and it’s a lot more important now that it ever was no matter what I was selling or whoever I was selling it to. This is the biggest selling job I have.

Even though Phil was not being paid for his work, he associated his job search with work by emphasizing how it required the same selling skills as his former job and occupied the same amount of time as a regular 40-hour work week. As job searches expanded to include a wide range of networking activities, from formal job seeker groups to a cup of coffee with a friend, the time spent looking for a job could multiply endlessly.

By portraying themselves as potential breadwinners, unemployed men were able to evade taking on much additional housework. When they did take on a few additional household tasks, men were careful to construct appropriate matches between their household transactions and
their relationships with their family members. Instead of defining housework as a “payment” to their family—their current primary economic contribution to the household—men labeled housework as “favors.” Allen, a 39-year-old writer who had been unemployed for 16 months, explained how he “helped” his wife with housework:

A lot of [the household division of labor] hasn’t changed since -- primarily because my job is to find another job right now. … [My wife] has always cooked, you know, things like that. I do help out more with the laundry now that I’m actually able to be helpful. Tidying up, that sort of thing, we generally share. Because it’s very hard to concentrate when someone’s cleaning around you so you might as well get off your duff and be helpful.

Maxwell, a 50-year-old HR specialist who had been unemployed for 16 months, expressed a similar sentiment:

I’m around all the time, you know, and sometimes I’m underfoot. Mostly I’m helpful but sometimes I’m underfoot. You know, I’m very lucky, I have an office in my house and space. But I could be on the phone and the noise spills into the – that kinda thing. And I mean, most of the time it’s been helpful. You know, I’ve taken the kids here and there and picked my daughter up from school. And you know you just—you fill in.

In responding to my question about housework, both men brought up the subject of market work. Housework was seen as disrupting their work (“it’s very hard to concentrate when someone’s cleaning around you”) or their work was seen as disrupting their wives’ housework (“I have an office in my house … and the noise spills”). Rather than embrace housework as an alternative to market work, both men positioned housework as secondary to their job search efforts and
supplementary to their wives’ primary responsibility in the home. Any additional housework they did was justified as a favor to their wives, not a task that was required of them.

In order for men to successfully reclaim their new roles as potential breadwinners, they had to win the support of their family members. When wives were not convinced that their husbands were putting sufficient effort into their job search, they expected them to contribute more to the household. Robert, 59, an IT consultant who had cycled through a number of temporary positions, tried to justify his neglect of household chores to his wife:

Sometimes it creates strain because, you know, my wife says, “Well, why didn’t you do this? You were here all day, why didn’t you do it?” And, you know, “Well, I was busy.” “Busy doing what?” “Answering e-mails, what do you think?” It’s amazing how long it takes to, you know, it’s all these recruiters. They can just burn up hours, and get nothing out of it, you know.

Maggie, 54, a director of a pre-school, was not persuaded. “I’m working so hard every day. Why can’t he make dinner or why can’t he—why does it seem like he’s not trying so hard?” she complained. “Sometimes I would get really frustrated and say, Are you gonna—do you really want a job?” If Robert had demonstrated that he had been working diligently at his job search, she may have accepted his lack of help in the household. For example, Eleanor, 55, a healthcare administrator, wished that her husband, Mike, 54, an auditor who had been unemployed for over a year, would do more around the house. He told me that he did less housework since becoming unemployed because he did not have enough time with his current job search. Although Eleanor admitted to being frustrated, she conceded that “his focus is to really be looking for a job.”
Moreover, she admired her husband’s dedication to his job search, and was adamant that he could not be doing anything more to find a job.

**Household Budgeters**

My respondents by and large had safety nets, such as savings, retirement plans, severance packages, and unemployment benefits to ameliorate the economic pressures brought on by unemployment. Nonetheless, former routines, such as eating out, buying name brand products, and taking expensive vacations, even if affordable, no longer matched household expectations for spending. While women traditionally have taken responsibility for making everyday household purchases (DeVault, 1991), some men reported taking a more active role in their family’s consumption after their job loss. The “consumption work” (Carrington, 1999; Weinbaum and Bridges, 1976) of searching for bargains, getting consensus over purchases, and matching spending with financial resources became an opportunity for men to reclaim a “provider” role in the household. In contrast to the “potential breadwinners,” these men attempted to maintain their breadwinner status by embracing rather than avoiding housework.

Charles, a 56-year-old telecommunication sales manager, had experienced several job transitions over his career, partly as a result of the implosion of his industry. Once a successful salesperson—twice making the President’s Club—Charles lost his most recent job at a large telecommunications firm because he failed to meet a sales quota that he believed to be impossibly high. He explained how his customers were no longer willing to pay premiums for brand names when they could get voice services for a third of the price elsewhere:

*Do you drive a car? You got to have a car. Do you care where you buy your gas? You buy by brand anymore? That’s my point. It’s the same thing. If you’re gonna, you know, get voice or data, do you care? No. You want to save money. Voice*
keeps going down. Pretty soon they say voice is gonna be free … I mean, my daughter’s going to Thailand next month as part of her international study. You know, I put Skype on her computer, put Skype at home, and I loaded some money, she can call her home from Skype. I mean, come on, this is not rocket science. I just bundled my home phone in with my cable service to save money. I mean, it’s economics. I mean, why would I pay Verizon $60 for a phone that keeps going out because they got lousy copper in my neighborhood? I just roll it over and save myself $60 a month and drove my cable bill down. … I’m trying to cut back as much as I possibly can. And we don’t do a lot of frilly things that, you know, we just don’t … I try to buy the bulk items at Sam’s Club and stuff, and then we try to be more conscious of what we’re buying. Buy stuff on sale. Buy off-brand name stuff, which seemed just as good as the brand names anyway.

Ironically, Charles switched his phone service provider to save his family money even though it was this same focus on the bottom line—both from his company and his customers—that directly contributed to his job loss. The shift in Charles’ talk from explaining the reasons for his job loss to discussing how he had saved his household money marks a change in emphasis from production work to consumption work. While his clients’ use of non-brand name voice services cost him sales, his own purchase of generic brands helped to keep his household costs down. Thus, despite his inability to support his family by making sales, Charles demonstrated that he was able to provide for his family by rationalizing the household economy. Furthermore, by describing his consumption work as straight-forward, rational, and efficient (“this is not rocket science;” “it’s economics;” “we don’t do a lot of frilly things”), Charles categorized his budgeting work as similar to market work.
After working for the same Fortune 500 company for nearly 30 years, Don, a 54-year-old purchasing manager, lost his job when his company declared bankruptcy. Like Charles, Don also put new efforts into his family’s consumption work:

One of the things is I’ve negotiated, I called the cable TV company, talked to them about the internet. You know, we buy now, I mean, we probably buy 90% of our groceries from Wal-Mart. I mean, you know, just trying to save—I mean, it sounds silly, but like when we go to McDonald’s, if we go to McDonald’s, we order from the dollar menu. And then like the napkins, you know, how you get an extra napkin? Well, we take a couple extra napkins. You know, I mean, it sounds like we’re being chintzy and stealing, but, you know, if they give you a handful of napkins we keep ‘em. Printing, when I’m doing stuff on the computer and I’m printing. If I got paper and I used one side of it and if it’s nothing that’s important, I’ll use the back side of it. But, you know, paper towels, now we’ve been using like, we bought dish rags. So anything that we have to clean, like if you’re cleaning toilets or sinks or, you know, tables or stuff like that and use a paper towel, like a spill on the floor, we use towels and just wash ‘em. Now, I don’t know if it’s cheaper to wash ‘em or cheaper to buy paper towels. But, you know, bottled water, we only buy bottled—I mean grant it, you don’t have to buy bottled water, but, you know, we buy it when it’s like $3 a case.

From a financial standpoint, Don acknowledged that some of his efforts were futile, but from a relational perspective, his efforts to manage a tighter household budget provided him with a new provider role. Don further asserted his masculinity by contrasting his own thrift with what he
perceived as his wife’s and daughter’s wasteful spending. He described his frustrations with his wife’s unnecessary purchases:

Sometimes she goes out and buys a new pair of shoes or sneakers, or, you know, decides to go out with a girlfriend and they go out for dinner to, you know, a restaurant or something like that. I mean, grant it, it’s not a lot of money, you know, I mean, it might be 15 bucks, you know, she goes—I mean, to a diner, but it’s just that, you know, she doesn’t really need to do that.

Similarly, he complained about his daughter taking long showers and spending $30 each week to get her nails done: “And I’m trying to explain to her, you know, $30 would help daddy.” By distinguishing his efforts to budget from his wife’s and daughter’s spending on female-typed activities such as shopping and grooming, he was able to perform his masculinity even as he took on household responsibilities typically overseen by women. However, this came at the risk of alienating his wife and daughter for their spending. While the spending levels of Don’s wife and daughter did not derail Don’s efforts at budgeting, an uncooperative spouse could prevent men from constructing a new role for themselves as household managers. Maggie, a 54-year-old director of a day care center whose husband had been unable to find steady employment for several years, was one such spouse:

I have to be honest, it’s not like I was—I mean I would go out and buy clothes and buy clothes for my kids and stuff. I was not that cooperative and being frugal with money. I did not feel very compelled the whole time. I think it was indicative of our relationship. I did not cooperate very much because I was pretty mad at him most of the time because of—you know, I guess could tell he really didn’t want to be married, but I wasn’t brave enough to say, “Let’s just get divorced”
because I wanted—I knew he was a good father and I wanted my kids to have a family with a father.

Through overt consumption, Maggie countered her husband’s efforts to manage the household budget, not allowing him to reclaim a provider role. Just as women had to be persuaded to let their husbands maintain their roles as potential breadwinners, so too were women and children involved in their husband’s redefinition of themselves as household budgeters.

Gift Negotiators

Unemployment also forced families to rework their household exchanges. Families could no longer afford to provide their children with the same gifts and allowances, and often had to turn to their kin for additional support. Unemployed men, threatened by the loss of authority and respect from children and kin, had to find new ways to rework their exchanges and relationships. While delicate, these exchanges also provided men an opportunity to preserve their masculinity as gift negotiators and financial managers.

Studies of the Great Depression have described how unemployed men lost control and authority over their children because they no longer were able to bribe them with gifts (Bakke, 1940; Komarovsky, 1940). In contrast, the men I spoke with were able to maintain their authority over their children by redefining gifts from material possessions to lessons in thrift and responsibility. This became particularly clear when men spoke about preparing their children, specifically their sons, for work in a new economy in which job security was uncertain. Anthony, 52, a former chief financial officer for several large corporations, explained how his teenage son had changed his thinking about work:

My son is thinking he may not want to work for a corporation. He’s saying, I’m gonna try and start my own business ‘cause he’s lost faith. He sees how they can
just use you, abuse you, and throw you to the side. So, he’s trying to learn how to do business. You know, kids tend to see the good and bad in their parents’ livelihood and they try to avoid what was bad. In my case, my father was a blue-collar construction work who didn’t have much money and I realized I needed an education to be more secure. All right, now, my kid is saying, okay, my father’s got an MBA, my mother’s a CPA, my father’s a CPA, we’re struggling, so what should I do to avoid this insecurity?

Anthony saw his own “bad” example as a good example for his son to understand the drawbacks of corporate work. Instead of commanding authority as a steady provider, Anthony gained respect from his son because he had experienced the instability of the new economy. Jeff, 49, a corporate trainer who spent several years in and out of contract work, firmly believed that his son had learned the importance of networking because of his own intermittent work:

Both my kids realized that whatever job they get is gonna be temporary and they need to keep their eyes open. My older boy absolutely has learned the lesson of networking. He is in college right now and in a fraternity and he is making connections with CEOs and CFOs of companies. Just for when he graduates, he wants to be able to pick up the phone and ask, “Hey do you have any positions?”

He learned that lesson which I kinda drilled into his head.

Jeff emphasized how he actively taught these career lessons to his son, preparing him for the job changes he should expect in his future. Had Jeff not lost his job, he would not have had the experiences to communicate this lesson to his son. By redefining what they provided to their children, unemployed men sought to maintain their authority as fathers not only through their unemployment but also because of their unemployment.
With children, unemployed men redefined what they gave; with kin, they redefined what they accepted. Men were careful to construct proper matches between the media (is it cash? dinner?), transactions (is it a loan? a gift?), and relationships (is he my father-in-law? my brother?). Men repeatedly told me that they would not accept help from their relatives, but they only meant certain types of help. They had no trouble accepting money in particular forms, such as being treated to dinner, taking a family vacation at their parents’ home, or accepting a laptop computer to help with the job search. These “gifts” and “treats” were viewed as appropriate to relationships between kin and not threatening to their breadwinning status. When Jeff had to accept a large sum of money from his father-in-law—he would not disclose the amount to me but said it was “enough to get by for a couple months”—he was careful to differentiate it as a gift rather than support:

It was not help per say. My father-in law did give us a fairly large Christmas gift one year but he had done that for both my wife’s brothers as well. He does everything very equally. And I don’t know if it was because of my situation. I never brought it to light in front of them, never said, “Oh we’re having trouble making ends meet,” but he knew that things weren’t ideal for us. … But I’m not the type of person who will ask for help. Quick example: I got a ticket once for running through a toll booth, this was when I was still in college and my mom got a hold of it and paid it for me. I got mad at her, I said, that was my responsibility, you shouldn’t pay for it … Now previous to that, probably 5-6 years before, I did take a loan from my father-in-law because we needed money, we were buying a house, and I needed money for the down payment so I did ask him for a loan but I did repay that.
In describing this gift, Jeff emphasized that it was not necessarily tied to his unemployment. Jeff’s father-in-law also helped to denote the money as a “gift” rather than as “help” or a “loan” by giving the money at Christmastime and distributing the same amount to all his children. By doing this, Jeff could accept the gift without feeling obligated to pay it back. This matches the relationship between the father-in-law and son-in-law, one in which the son-in-law is supposed to be responsible for the well-being of his family. In his explanation, Jeff also recounted an incident from long ago in which he refused to let his mother pay his toll ticket for him. This story showed how Jeff understood that the idea of being a responsible adult is intimately tied to paying one’s own bills. The final story—asking for a loan from his father-in-law to buy a house—also fit Jeff’s image as a responsible father and husband because buying a home is a symbol of family unity and commitment (Townsend, 2002). Even though Jeff’s wife was a professional, full-time worker, Jeff declared that he asked for the loan and repaid it, presenting himself as the head of his household.

Robert, 59, an IT consultant, had also experienced unsteady work for several years. As a result, he had to accept “a lot of help from family, actually.” But he was quick to add, “And of course that’s – that's something that, you know, I'm committed to paying back. It's not – it's not really gifts.” In reality, as his wife explained, the various terms of exchange were more complex:

We borrowed $1,800 from my mom, and then [Robert] borrowed $12,000 from his brother. So, that’s what we borrowed, and then my dad sends me $400. Most of [the money from my mom] was to pay some tuition for our son. This college he really wanted to go to, we couldn’t do because it was just too expensive even with the financial aid and loans and things like that. I know my dad does not expect me to pay him back. He used to send me $250 a month and recently, he started the
$400 but, you know, I would love it if I could because part of me feels at this point I should be doing nice things for him, you know. He and his brother have a formal written agreement that they borrowed with the terms and everything. We don’t have a formal agreement with my mother but the understanding is we will be paying her the money back.

Distinctions such as these illustrate the importance of matching monetary exchanges with social relations. By writing a formal contract “with the terms and everything” instead of giving a verbal promise to his brother, it appears that Robert sought to denote the exchange as a business transaction rather than a favor. In contrast, the money borrowed from his mother-in-law was considered a gift, but it was earmarked for his son’s college education. The money from his father-in-law did not come to him in a check for several thousands of dollars, which he may have felt obligated to return, but rather in small increments to his wife. All these various forms of exchange illustrate the relational work required—both by men and by their kin—in negotiating and differentiating loans, gifts, and favors. Through this work, unemployed men found opportunities to maintain their masculinity in the face of potential threats.

Unemployed Women

To support the argument that men are displaying masculinity by constructing new matches as potential breadwinners, household budgeters, and gift negotiators, I found that unemployed women did not use the same strategies as men in negotiating new household arrangements. Like the unemployed men, Kate, 46, a human resources administrator who had been unemployed for seven months, spoke about how the job search could occupy long hours. She received on average 50-80 job emails a day, about a third to which she would apply. Each application took at least half an hour, adding up to a minimum of five hours of work each day
plus whatever else she had to do. Yet Kate did not use her job search as a strategy by which to avoid housework. Accustomed to balancing work and household responsibilities, Kate believed that she had much more time to do housework now that she was at home. In fact, this extra time made her less efficient in getting housework completed:

When you have a lot to do, you get a lot done. When you don’t have a lot to do, it takes longer to get those things done. And I have absolutely found that, so, you know, when I was working, I worked full time, took the kids to sports games and all that kind of stuff, practice, blah-blah-blah, still do the laundry, still get the house clean, etc, etc. Now, you know, it takes the same amount of time, there’s not that external pressure, if you will, that you have to get it done. You have to get that laundry done because the weekend’s coming and you need blah-blah-blah. No, because I can do it tomorrow because I’m home all day, you know, I’m going to be at my computer looking for a job for another eight hours.

In contrast to the men who spoke about housework as getting in the way of their job search activities, Cathy, 47, a computer programmer, found that she could do more housework when she started working remotely from home in the year before her job loss: “Because, once again, when you're on the phone, you can do the dishes, and so I kind of took on a lot of that.” Instead of prioritizing their job search over their housework, unemployed women mingled the two.

Although unemployed women also worked to reduce household costs, they did not contrast their thrift with their family’s excess. In contrast, they freely shared stories in which they spent money on their children. When I asked Kate about any disagreements she had had with her husband over finances, she recounted several incidents that related to spending on things she thought her daughter needed:
I come home with a bag from anywhere, Wal-Mart, Kohl’s, or anywhere, and he’s like, “You went shopping.” Like it wasn’t really shopping, you know, we bought school supplies because school’s coming, you know … Yesterday we had [an argument] regarding driving lessons. My daughter’s going to be 16 at the end of the month. She has to get her permit. They have to have six hours of driving lessons. “Well, how much is that going to cost?” “360 dollars.” “Oh, my God.” “I know, but it is what it is.” Do I do things that he doesn’t know about? Yeah. Will that create a problem when he finds out? Yeah. Am I willing to take that chance? Yes. … Again, SAT Prep. There’s talking to a tutor, whatever. You know, we have high aspirations, she’s got good grades, not the SAT scores, so she needs some prep. The prep thing was like 650 dollars. Did I tell him? Hell, no, not one word, not one word. When the box comes and he says, “What’s this and how much did this cost?” And I’m sure I’ll cut it by 50 percent … She went to prom this year. That was quite expensive. Yet at the same time, reasonable compared to others, you know, but when he saw the invoice for a $250 dress, he went over the edge.

Unlike the unemployed men, Kate did not need to portray herself as her household’s financial manager. Instead, she could fall back on her role as a mother, demonstrating her care for her daughter’s social and academic development through appropriate spending.

This expectation for women to be their children’s caregivers extended to gift exchanges. Even if their finances were tight, women continued giving their children small gifts and allowances to demonstrate their affection. Jan, a 51-year-old manager who had been unemployed for 13 months, could not pay for her college-aged son’s spring break trip but indicated that “of
course, I buy him little things.” Caitlin, 54, a human resources specialist who had been unemployed for six months, recounted an incident in which she gave extra money to her 16-year-old daughter:

I gave [my daughter] some money the other day … and I said, take a little bit extra ‘cause it may be—she was going to stay over a friend’s house and they were going to go to breakfast, they usually go to a bagel place. She said, although it might be a nicer restaurant. I said, okay I’m going to give you extra because this is what—and she said, mom you really shouldn’t just be giving me money—I think she worries that I’m not thinking more, taking on more responsibility and she’s probably seen the pattern. Mom, you need to think more about money for yourself.

In negotiating exchanges with her children, it appears that Caitlin did not need to demonstrate that she still held authority in the family but rather that she cared about their everyday matters. Unlike the unemployed men who recounted how they prepared their children for an unstable workforce, Caitlin openly admitted that her daughter reversed their roles, trying to teach her about being responsible with money.

Discussion

In this paper, I argue that a relational approach (Zelizer, 2005, 2011) provides a more nuanced understanding of how couples renegotiate housework during “unsettled” times (Swidler, 1986). A relational approach reveals how household activities of production, consumption, and exchange can be an alternative arena in which men can rework their economic roles and repair relations with family members. Through interviews with unemployed men and their spouses, I identified three strategies by which men sought to reclaim their positions as providers. First, men
presented themselves as potential breadwinners who “worked” at finding a job and “helped” with household tasks. Second, men replaced production work with consumption work, putting efforts into managing household budgets. Third, men negotiated terms of exchange with children and kin to present themselves as responsible providers rather than needy dependents. In constructing these new matches between their household economic activities and their family relationships, men found alternative ways to present themselves as “breadwinners.”

This paper extends on the large body of literature on housework by specifying the processes by which men “do gender.” Building on previous studies that have found that men neutralize gender deviance in the workplace by performing gender in the household (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994), this paper shows how unemployed men displayed masculinity not only by avoiding housework but also by differentiating and redefining housework. Relational work involves not only the reallocation of household tasks but also the proper matching between transactions, media, and relations (Zelizer, 2005). By defining housework as “help” rather than “payment,” or accepting a laptop computer but refusing a cash gift, men constructed matches that portrayed themselves as certain types of fathers, husbands, and son-in-laws. Constructing new matches required careful work and the cooperation of other family members.

The aim of this paper is to show how a relational approach can help us understand the strategies that men use to maintain breadwinning roles by avoiding and by appropriating housework. The small and selective nature of the sample does not permit generalization about which strategies are most common or most useful, nor does it exhaust the types of strategies that men use to differentiate and redefine household activities. However, previous studies have described similar strategies that men use to avoid housework, such as defining themselves as “helpers” (Coltrane 1989; Hertz 1986; Hochschild 1989; Legerski and Cornwall, 2010).
Although these studies do not detail the relational work involved in creating new matches, these similarities add confidence that my findings are not unique to my sample of respondents. Future research on couples from different class and racial backgrounds may elicit different strategies by which men construct matches between their housework and their family relations.

Relational work involves multiple parties, and having different perspectives helps elucidate the ways in which other parties support or hinder men’s attempts to “do gender” and repair relationships. Although this paper provides some examples of these dynamics, it is limited by the small number of spouses who consented to be interviewed. Furthermore, children, grandparents, and other kin were not interviewed because of resource and time constraints. Questions about how kin decide how to support unemployed men or what they do when conditions for exchange are not met, for example, would provide a richer picture of the relational work involved in negotiating gift exchanges.

A relational approach raises new questions for analysis. First, by calling attention to the matches that people construct between their economic activity and intimate relations, a relational approach sensitizes us to the disruptions of these ties and the work required to reconstruct them. Beyond unemployment, we can consider how other disruptions, such as bankruptcy, migration, and divorce, affect the distribution of household labor between spouses and children. We can also consider how variations within categories of work, such as underemployment or contingent work, impact negotiations over household labor. Second, a relational approach pays close attention to types of transactions and media and the different meanings these take on. Numerous questions follow from these distinctions. Do families use money from unemployment insurance differently than money taken from savings, retirement, severance packages, or home equity? Are laid off employees more satisfied with severance packages that include “gifts” such as an
outplacement service? Does parental unemployment change children’s use of money? Finally, a relational perspective can also apply to the extensive amount of relational work that occurs outside of households. Examining how the unemployed rework relationships with employers, unemployment offices, debt collectors, former co-workers, and friends can deepen our understanding of the intersection of economic activity and personal relations, and of the broader consequences of unemployment.
References


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