

Relational Work in the Family: The Gendered Microfoundations of Parents' Economic Decisions

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After Grace lost her job, she and her husband cut back on several forms of discretionary spending on their children, including how they purchased clothes and toys. As Grace described it, “I did probably half my Christmas shopping for the kids at thrift stores. And the toys are just as good and appropriate; it’s just they’re gently used.” On the other hand, when Brian lost his job, he and his wife Emily had a different response, describing that they just “kept plugging away, doing what we do.” For Christmas holidays, for example, Brian’s family often goes on a skiing vacation, and a few months after Brian’s job loss, this was no different: “We take our boys snowboarding. That’s a big expense... We didn’t say ‘No we can’t do this.’”

Grace and Brian are both college-educated professionals in a heterosexual marriage with college-educated spouses who also participate in paid work. Grace and Brian each bring in at least half of their respective household’s annual income. But why do their families respond in such different ways to their job loss, and specifically the spending decisions they make when it comes to their children?

Rao (2022) explores this puzzling question through a study of unemployment which compared the unemployment experiences of men and women. The study focused on U.S. dual-earner, heterosexual families with dependent children and included interviews with unemployed men, unemployed women and with about half their spouses. Follow-up interviews were also done with approximately half the sample. To better understand how unemployment shapes the daily rhythm of family life, four families – two of unemployed men and two of unemployed women – were additionally observed for several weeks with anywhere from two to eight hours per visit. (For more details, see Rao, 2020).

The broader study was interested in how employment insecurity – as wrought by unemployment specifically in this case, but also by insecure work such as non-standard work, contract work, gig work more broadly – shapes the gendered organisation of family life. Scholars have sometimes suggested that employment insecurity may paradoxically hasten the move toward gender equality. For example, prevalent and recurrent unemployment may mean that an ideal of a breadwinning father and caregiving mother is no longer tenable as the jobs of both parents become critical for households. Fathers who lose their jobs may thus contribute more to caregiving, for instance. But, time and again, large-scale quantitative research finds that as women earn significantly more than their husbands, they actually do more housework (Bittman et al, 2003); women in masculine-typed jobs (for example, investment banking or policing) also do significantly more housework than their partners (Schneider, 2012); and that when men earn less, including when they are unemployed, the risk of divorce is much higher (Killewald, 2016). Thus, the idea that employment insecurity, adverse as it is, could have the unintended consequence of instigating a more egalitarian organisation of family life does not seem to be borne out empirically.

What processes and mechanisms in the family lead couples to behave in such gender traditional ways, even when the time seems ripe for them to embrace more gender egalitarian practices?

Rao (2022) looked at parental expenditures during unemployment to illuminate



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The loss of parental employment has very gendered impacts on expenditures on children. Loss of paternal income keeps status conferring expenditures going, while maternal income loss translates more readily into reductions in discretionary expenses.

one important way that this gendered organisation of the family persists. In families where fathers had lost their jobs, families viewed maintaining their normal expenditure on children as important; they saw any change in this expenditure as a threat to their social class status. Building on Viviana Zelizer's concept of "relational work," Rao (2022) terms this approach "relational preservation." In contrast, in families where mothers lose their jobs, families respond by seeing some changes to their expenditure on children as warranted and necessary. Making these cutbacks does not threaten their sense of social class status. While these families thus downplay the importance of mothers' income to their families, they emphasise the importance of fathers' continued employment and economic provision for their families. Rao (2022) terms this behavior "relational downscaling."

For both types of families, any reduction in children's educational expenses is a no-go. Yet, families where mothers have lost their job find it reasonable that, for a while at least, they ought to cut back on expenses like children's enrichment activities, leisure experiences, and consumer goods. Often these cutbacks are offset through a narrative of children getting more time with their mother; for example, rather than eating out at a favourite sushi restaurant, parents explain to children that "mommy will just cook more."

This research highlights just how entrenched gender norms can be. Some researchers often see affluent, professional families as best poised to dislodge breadwinner norms. It is the highly educated women in these families for example who have the greatest earning potential of women through high status and high paying jobs in the labour market. Yet, other researchers have pointed out that material necessity means that working class families tend to have a more gender egalitarian division of paid and unpaid work even though they often have more gender unequal ideologies (Hertz and Charlton, 1989). How the structural position of a family, by social class and race for example, shapes the gendered behaviours they view as possible remains a somewhat open question. From a policy perspective, it seems that a focus simply on women's labour force participation does not adequately capture these importance nuances of how gender inequality persists. Paying attention to what men's unemployment means for the gendered organisation of their families is key.

A second policy-relevant point is the importance of context. Rao (2022) focused on affluent and privileged families in a developed democracy. Study participants were highly educated, dual-earner, married, U.S citizens, and largely white – all attributes that conferred social and economic privilege. The findings from this study may thus be relevant in only a circumscribed manner to other contexts. For example, an important line of research from developing economies, especially in the global South, shows that it is women's income that is often used for core household expenses, becoming the backbone of a family's budget. This is often because men in these households tend to spend their income on themselves, for example on their individual leisure pursuits, rather than on household essentials such as children's education, food for the family, paying for housing and other bills, and so on. Given that employment insecurity is endemic in the contemporary world, it is important to keep be aware of how this broader context shapes household decisions, including with gendered repercussions.

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