

# The Ideal Job-Seeker Norm: Unemployment and Marital Privileges in the Professional Middle-Class

**Objective:** To understand how heterosexual US married parents interpret and respond to a spouse's unemployment and subsequent job-searching.

**Background:** The pervasiveness of employment uncertainty, and unemployment, may propel families to embrace gender egalitarian norms. Quantitative research finds that this possibility is not borne out. Qualitative research has sought to illuminate mechanisms as to how gender norms persist even during a time that is optimal for dismantling them, but these mechanisms remain unclear.

**Method:** Seventy-two in-depth interviews were conducted with a nonrandom sample of heterosexual, professional, dual-earner, married, unemployed women, men, and their spouses in the United States. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 35 participants. Intensive family observations were conducted with four families, two of unemployed men, and two of unemployed women.

**Results:** Unemployed women, men, and spouses acknowledge that a set of time-intensive activities are key for reemployment (the ideal job-seeker norm). Couples with unemployed men direct resources such as time, space, and even money to facilitate unemployed men's compliance with the ideal job-seeker norm. Couples downplay the importance of women's reemployment and do not direct similar resources to help unemployed women job-search.

**Conclusion:** Couples preserve a traditional gender status quo, often in defiance of material realities, by actively maintaining men's position at the helm of paid work and women's at unpaid work.

**Implications:** Linking unemployment and job-seeking with the institution of heterosexual marriage reveals novel insights into social and marital processes shaping job-seeking.

## INTRODUCTION

As layoffs and downsizing have become integral to business practices (Davis & Kim, 2015; Krippner, 2005), even privileged workers and families are now more susceptible to unemployment than in past decades (Nau & Soener, 2017; Sharone, 2013). Given a widespread context of economic uncertainty, heterosexual families may respond by adopting more gender egalitarian beliefs and behaviors, as income from both partners becomes important (Bianchi et al., 2012; Chesley, 2011; Demantas & Myers, 2015; Lane, 2011). Yet, material and structural shifts, such as wrought by men's unemployment, do not necessarily result in

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Department of Methodology, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC21 2AE, UK (a.h.rao@lse.ac.uk).

This article was edited by Sharon Sassler.

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*Key Words:* couples, employment, gender, housework, marriage, qualitative methodology.

gender equality at home, as measured by how couples divide housework (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010; Norris, 2016). Mechanisms explaining how gender inequality persists even when, economically, the time is ripe for catalyzing gender egalitarian behaviors and beliefs remain unclear. I develop the concept of the “ideal job-seeker” to explain how families organize themselves to provide unemployed men, but not unemployed women, with particular privileges at home which enable men, but less so women, to comply with this norm. Building upon the ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2003; Davies & Frink, 2014; Williams, 1999), the ideal job-seeker is devoted to finding a job by organizing their days around job-searching, networking, and building credentials. Receiving privileges at home to focus on job-searching protects men’s roles as professionals and earners.

I draw on interviews and family observations with unemployed men and women and their spouses to ask: How do couples interpret and respond to a spouse’s unemployment and subsequent job-searching? Respondents in this study are all heterosexual, college-educated, and married and have children. The majority are White. This study finds that couples emphasize the importance of unemployed men’s potential income, prioritizing men’s job-search and protecting their time from housework. Couples direct resources in the form of time, space, and money to facilitate men’s job-searching. Couples with an unemployed woman downplay the importance of women’s income, consequently minimizing the importance of women’s job-searching. Women do not receive similar resources as men to job-search. The absence of a spouse’s paid work is generative in organizing the home in acutely gendered ways, by actively maintaining men’s position at the helm of paid work and women’s at unpaid work.

This article makes three sociological contributions. First, this article links job-searching to the institution of the heterosexual family by developing the concept of the “ideal job-seeker norm.” Emerging from the data in this study, the ideal job-seeker norm illuminates how marital dynamics help shape workers’ approaches to job-searching. Unemployment serves to consolidate traditional gender roles rather than disrupt them for these families. Second, among these

married couples, unemployed men and women have different access to resources—especially time and space—which couples see as essential to reemployment. Finally, this study squarely places unemployed professionals within their family context.

It does so by bringing in the voices of spouses as well as family observations to center couples’ marital dynamics as crucial in facilitating or constraining job-searching.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Reconceptualizing Ideal Workers for a New Economy*

The “ideal worker” norm (Williams, 1999) emerged from expectations about men’s and women’s respective obligations to their families and to paid work. Ideal workers work full-time jobs, outside the home, usually for long hours, into the evenings and weekends, and travel for work. The reward for an ideal worker is a stable and secure job, with predictable progression up the career ladder. In the United States, given that organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990) and that hegemonic conceptions of masculinity remain tied to providing economically (Cooper, 2000; Townsend, 2002), being an ideal worker is an organizational requirement that usually men are best able to meet.

Implicit in the ideal worker norm is the assumption that workplaces are bureaucratic institutions that feature a hierarchical progression up a vertical career-ladder punctuated by predictable milestones, usually within one organization where there is mutual loyalty between worker and organization. Yet, these assumptions no longer capture organizational or career experiences for professionals in the United States. Defining the unemployed as “people who are jobless, actively seeking work, and available to take a job,” the US Bureau of Labor Statistics finds that approximately 90% of college-educated workers can expect to experience unemployment at least once in their lifetimes (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Criteria for career success has shifted as teamwork, building career maps, and networking have become key for professional success (Mickey, 2019; Williams et al., 2012). In the absence of loyalty from companies, workers too are responding by pursuing “portfolio” (Neely, 2020) careers by

moving from job to job in search of opportunities to develop their professional skills and keep themselves marketable in an uncertain economy (Gershon, 2017). Job-searching and ancillary activities have become key to thriving in the new economy (Smith, 2001), requiring emotional labor (Sharone, 2013; Smith, 2001), and material resources (Ehrenreich, 2005).

In the context of a changing economic landscape, mechanisms of gender inequality in the workplace are shifting. One important manifestation of this is which workers are seen as disposable in an economic context where job loss is pervasive (Kalev, 2014; Williams, 2019). In her study of scientists and engineers in an oil company, Williams (2019) found that participants used a discourse of the “deserving professional” wherein they conceived of native-born White men under the age of 50, and who are family breadwinners, as most deserving of keeping their jobs given their family roles. Drawing on a national sample of 327 downsized establishments between 1971 and 2002, Kalev’s (2014) findings corroborate this idea. Kalev found that formal rules prioritizing position and tenure at the company meant that women and/or minorities were disproportionately affected by layoffs. Although the ideal worker norm enshrined the upward career trajectory and promotions for a heterosexual, married man in an assumed context of relative economic stability, these recent studies indicate how the same archetype of man is able to retain a job in a context of tremendous uncertainty and acute labor market churning given employer’s explicit and implicit preferences. The idea of a deserving professional reflects and amplifies White male privilege in the workplace. The male-breadwinner norm is used to justify White men’s greater deservingness of professional employment, especially in comparison to women, but also to men of color.

Job-searching is an activity in its own right, now requiring an immense focus on: networking; working intensively with career coaches; one-on-one meetings; scouring job-boards; paying for jobs and skills-related training and certification; and crafting resumes. But prior research has tended to conceptualize job-seekers as individuals whose job-searching behavior is independent of their family and marital lives. Employment itself, however, is gendered along myriad important axes, crucial to which are people’s marital and parental obligations.

Employment is bound up with dominant conceptions of masculinity but often has an uneasy relationship with femininity, especially when it comes to motherhood (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hays, 1996; Killewald, 2016; Townsend, 2002). We need to consider how the family, and marriage, shape job-searching behaviors.

### *Gender and Cultural Models of Paid and Unpaid Work*

The organization of paid work and the heterosexual family have mutually reinforced each other in the United States. Williams (1999) asserts that the ideal worker has “privileges” at home which minimize his participation in the domestic arena. Men’s employment status, especially in the professional middle-class, is pivotal in mediating their participation in the institutions of marriage and parenthood (Killewald, 2016; Townsend, 2002). As Blair-Loy (2003) points out, men are socially expected to embrace a “cultural schema” of “work devotion.” Men’s paid work continues to be prioritized at home, for example, buying them out of housework and allowing for more time to rest (Maume et al., 2018).

There are alternative models of fatherhood which decouple men’s breadwinning from fatherhood. Kaufman (2013), Marsiglio and Roy (2012), and Dowd (2000) all find evidence for an emerging cultural model which emphasizes fathers’ care work for their children. These authors, however, acknowledge that “super dads” (Kaufman, 2013) who put caregiving ahead of earning are not a dominant group. The weight of the research on fatherhood indicates that cultural models of alternative fatherhood tend to be more available to lower-income men whose labor market position has eroded the most in recent decades.

For men in the professional middle-class, breadwinning is important and these fathers view hours worked and economic provision as key to their fatherhood (Cooper, 2000) even as they desire to be involved fathers. Data from young, unmarried, and childless men at an elite university shows that as these men imagine future fatherhood, they also anticipate a commensurate ramping up of their professional aspirations specifically in order to provide for their families (Bass, 2015). Although men from the professional class practice a “public fatherhood”

by being involved in public-facing aspects of their children's lives (such as attending athletic events), they do not participate to the same extent in the more private, and less visible, daily care of children. Working class men, in contrast, participate in both public and private fatherhood (Shows & Gerstel, 2009). Cultural models of fatherhood that do not center breadwinning have limited traction for men from the professional middle-class.

The responsibility for the domestic arena is relegated to the "marginalized caregiver" (Williams, 1999) usually the wife, who follows a cultural schema of "family devotion" (Blair-Loy, 2003). College-educated women are the most likely to both expect and experience continuous employment (Landivar, 2017) and more likely than other women to identify their professional success as a key part of their lives. Yet, when high-wage earning women experience motherhood, their professional pursuits are often unsupported by inflexible workplaces and limited social policies (Collins, 2020b; Stone, 2007). The norm of intensive motherhood, among White middle-class women, means that women are expected to devote time, emotion, and energy to the care of their children (Hays, 1996). In the absence of affordable childcare, mothers doing paid work may experience extensive "maternal guilt" (Collins, 2020a). The influence of intensive motherhood varies by race (Dean et al., 2013; Dow, 2016) and aspects of it are also rejected by middle-class mothers (Christopher, 2012).

Adhering to the work devotion schema is thus less common for married mothers than for married fathers. Blair-Loy (2003) divides the group of women she studies into "career committed" and "family committed," and argues that career committed women respond to the demands of work devotion by not having children and, in some cases, also not marrying. Family committed mothers, who typically pull back considerably from their highly demanding careers, accuse work devoted women of being selfish and careeristic. Attitudinal survey data shows that from the 1970s to the 2010s, the general trend has been toward supporting mothers working outside the home. Simultaneously, women are also expected to be primarily responsible for the domestic realm, especially childrearing (Pepin & Cotter, 2018). Social attitudes thus generally support women's labor force participation, but this does not necessarily

mean a strong support for women's—especially mothers'—work devotion.

But how do families organize themselves—and what motivates this organization—when career progression and the ideal worker wages implicit in the ideal worker norm are no longer prevalent? Given economic change, how are cultural schemas around work and family devotion decoupled from traditional gender norms? Studying the beliefs and behaviors of families during unemployment can shed light on this issue. Families could respond to a context of precarity where job tenures are shorter and unpredictable by favoring gender egalitarian norms. In such an uncertain context, prioritizing male-breadwinning may simply no longer be financially feasible for families (Chesley, 2011; Demantas & Myers, 2015).

#### *The Gendered Division of Housework during Unemployment*

Gender equality in marriages can be gauged through the division of paid and unpaid work. This division is shaped by myriad factors, including men's and women's absolute and relative earnings, occupation, the presence of children, and gender ideologies (Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Pfeffer, 2010; Raley et al., 2012; Schneider, 2012). The division of housework may also be shaped by factors like race, sexual orientation and social class (Deutsch & Saxon 1998; Moore, 2008; Orbach & Eyster, 1997). In comparison to White families, Black families tend to have more gender egalitarian ideologies and division of housework (Dean et al., 2013; Dow, 2016; Landry, 2002). These are rooted in the reality of Black men's relatively weaker labor market position and Black women's longer histories of participating in the labor force (Glenn, 2002).

Women tend to spend more time on unpaid work, including, some studies show, when they earn considerably more than husbands (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994). Unpaid work at home involves core tasks which need to be done frequently, cannot be put off, and are time-consuming. Examples include childcare, cooking, and grocery shopping. Core tasks are typically feminized and done largely by women. Peripheral tasks, in contrast, are done less regularly, can be put off to an extent, and are less time-consuming. Examples are mowing the lawn or taking out the trash. These tend

to be masculinized tasks, for which men are often responsible (Ridgeway, 2011). Unpaid work at home additionally involves activities which are often not recognized as work, such as anticipating needs (i.e., what groceries are needed) and organizing and coordinating activities (i.e., handling the family calendar). This kind of “cognitive” labor (Daminger, 2019) can be time-consuming, even if “invisible” (Daniels, 1987) and falls disproportionately on women. Men’s participation in unpaid work is often seen as a gift to their wives, whereas women’s is seen as an obligation, frequently resulting in an uneven “economy of gratitude” (Hochschild, 1989).

Unemployment is a conceptually useful time to examine how couples respond to the economic shifts they experience. Economic dependency on employed wives may propel unemployed men to participate more in housework (Chesley, 2011; Demantas & Myers, 2015; Lane, 2011). Other research, also drawing from unemployed men across the social classes, finds that men’s unemployment does not appear to upend gendered divisions of housework, and may in fact deepen them (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010; Norris, 2016). Even when men are economically dependent on wives, wives do more housework (Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994). Unemployed women do more housework than their male counterparts (Gough & Killewald, 2011; van der Lippe et al., 2018).

Women may be performing a traditional femininity through housework to compensate for the gender deviance of outearning husbands. Contesting the explanatory power of the “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) frame, others highlight that women’s absolute earnings can explain the division of housework—the more women earn in absolute terms, the less housework they do (Gupta, 2007). Women who earn more than husbands appear to behave similarly, vis-à-vis housework, to women who do not outearn husbands (Hook, 2017), indicating that there may not be any compensatory performance of gender. The relationship between individual earnings and the gendered organization of the heterosexual marriage can be further clarified.

Existing research tends to draw from men’s unemployment to show how families organize themselves differently (or not). Research on women’s unemployment is rarer, and typically

through the experiences of women who have been pushed out of paid work due to the masculinized demands of the ideal worker norm (Stone, 2007). Opting out and losing a job are distinct. Mothers who “opt out” become more gender traditional in their attitude than mothers who remain in the labor force (Zhou, 2017). Opting out of paid work to care for family has worse impacts in terms of subsequent reemployment than unemployment (Weisshaar, 2018). These two experiences should be examined as distinct from each other.

Damaske (2020), Lane (2011), and Norris (2016) have explored the experiences of women who have lost their jobs. Lane and Damaske both find that unemployed women were focused on reemployment, and Lane attributed this to women feeling a tremendous amount of shame. In contrast, Norris (2016) found that unemployed women highlighted their motherhood as a way to manage the stigmatized identity of unemployment. These studies signal two distinct social processes: in the former, women’s paid work is important for their sense of self; in the latter, women distance themselves from paid work in favor of the domestic. These differences in the findings may be explained by motherhood status, because Norris draws primarily from unemployed women who are mothers but Lane and Damaske draw from women who are mothers as well as those who are not.

There is thus room to better understand how, if at all, families organize themselves to respond to economic precarity, specifically unemployment. Although quantitative studies on unemployment and the division of housework have provided useful large-scale trends, the mechanisms underlying these trends have not been fully clarified. Building upon earlier research emphasizing the importance of collecting couple-level qualitative data (Bernard, 1972; Cooper, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Sassler & Miller, 2017), this study seeks to illuminate the motivations and beliefs underlying how, and even whether, couples negotiate the division of housework during one spouse’s unemployment and the implications of this for gender inequality at home and employment.

This article develops the concept of the ideal job-seeker norm to explain how unemployed men, but less so unemployed women, receive privileges at home to comply with the resource-intensive, ideal job-seeker norm.

I explain processes underpinning unequal outcomes regarding housework during unemployment, as observed in quantitative studies. Ultimately, this study suggests that economic precarity and pervasive unemployment do not appear to portend greater gender equality in marriages, for this privileged social class.

## METHODS

### *Inclusion Criteria, Sample Characteristics, and Recruitment Methods*

I draw on in-depth interviews with 25 unemployed men and 23 unemployed women. For 13 of these men, I also interviewed their wives, and for 11 of these women, I interviewed their husbands. I conducted follow-up interviews with 35 of these participants; and family observations with four families. This dataset includes a total of 107 in-depth interviews and over 200 hr of family observations (Table 1). I prioritized theoretical saturation and collecting qualitatively rich data to understand interactions and processes (Roy et al., 2015; Small, 2009).

Interview participants were currently unemployed or unemployed within the 3 months prior to the interview. I aimed to capture unemployment experiences among a privileged sample of dual-earner families in the professional middle-class. My sample included heterosexual, US citizens, with at least a bachelor-level degree, with children aged 22 or younger, and a spouse who works at least 20 hr per week. Dual-earner families are necessary to make a tenable comparison of gendered unemployment experiences. Studying unemployment and underemployment has been an important part of the sociological agenda, but typically the experiences of the working class and poor have been studied (Chen, 2015; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010; Sherman, 2009). We have a limited understanding of the unemployment experiences of professional families, even as these families become more likely to experience unemployment than they were in past decades.

The families of unemployed men and unemployed women in this study are comparable, including in terms of age of children, which can be particularly constraining for (women's) labor force participation. Ten out of 25 unemployed men and 10 out of the 23 unemployed women had at least one child who was not yet kindergarten-aged (see Table 3). Children of this

Table 1. *Sample*

	Interviews	Follow-up interviews	Family observations
Unemployed men	25	11	2
Wives of unemployed men	13	7	
Unemployed women	23	13	2
Husbands of unemployed women	11	4	
Total	72	35	

age are typically seen as requiring more child-care, and mothers with young children tend to have lower labor force participation rates than mothers with older children. These families are dual-earner, but as Table 2 shows, the number of unemployed women who had earned as much or more than their husbands is about the same as unemployed men. This study oversamples for female-breadwinners compared to overall US trends (Cohen, 2018).

A unique feature of my study involved connecting interview data to observations from ethnographic fieldwork. I conducted family observations with four families. I prioritized selecting families that varied along key dimensions (detailed below). Family observations can illuminate interactional dynamics around the experience of unemployment as they are lived. When linked to interview data, they can show how these dynamics are perceived by each party (see also Lareau, 2011; Lareau and Rao, 2021).

### *Data Collection*

*Interviews.* I recruited the participants in this nonrandom sample through workshops held by career coaches, job-search clubs, parent list-servers, and online and hard-copy fliers posted in neighborhoods in a metropolitan area in northeastern United States. Unemployed men and women in this study were professionals who had worked in occupations and positions such as marketing, project management, law, as IT analysts, engineers, and financial analysts. To maintain anonymity, at times I do not use participants' real profession, instead select a similar one. All names are pseudonyms.

The semistructured original interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015,

Table 2. Descriptive Data on Unemployed Men, Unemployed Women, and Their Families

	Unemployed men	Unemployed women
<i>N</i>	25	23 <sup>a</sup>
Educational attainment		
Graduate degree	12	19
Bachelor's degree	11	4
Some college <sup>b</sup>	2	0
Age of unemployed individual (years) at first interview		
Median	49	47
Range	37–58	31–61
Annual household income before unemployment (USD)		
Median	150,000	165,000
Range	80,000–500,000	70,000–350,000
Race/ethnicity of unemployed individual		
White	20	19
Black	2	1
Non-White immigrant citizens	3	3
Duration of unemployment at time of first interview (months)		
Median	6	8
Range	2–13	3 weeks – 24
Years married		
Median	17	16
Range	5–27	18 months – 40
Spouse's employment status		
Works full-time earns the same as unemployed individual prior to unemployment	7	6
Works full-time earns more than unemployed individual prior to unemployment	3	4
Works full-time earns less than unemployed individual prior to unemployment	10	9
Works part-time earns less than unemployed individual prior to unemployment	5	0
Unemployed and job-searching	0	3

<sup>a</sup>One unemployed woman declined to provide specific information on household finances, such that some of the figures will add up to 22 rather than 23 responses. <sup>b</sup>Two male participants had only some college. Their income and occupation when employed made them a part of the professional class this study aimed to capture.

averaged 2 hr, and most were conducted in person. The interview guide focus included: job-searching; financial and emotional repercussions of unemployment; and division of housework. I conducted interviews with spouses separately. Couple-level interviews allow scholars to explore the relationship dynamics from both perspectives (Bernard, 1972; Sassler & Miller, 2017). I attempted to conduct interviews with all spouses; about half participated. I usually conducted interviews in public spaces such as coffee shops and restaurants.

I also conducted follow-up interviews between 2014 and 2015 by reaching out to my original participants and conducting interviews with those who responded to my request,

approximately half the sample. I investigated how the experience of unemployment evolved over time. Follow-up interviews averaged an hour. Two thirds were conducted in person, and the rest over phone or Skype.

*Participant observations.* I conducted observations with four families—two each with families of unemployed women and unemployed men. These families were White, and had at least one dependent child. Children were included in the observations. When appropriate, I also chatted with children informally. Families were from the pool of participants where both partners had participated in the interviews. Over a 2-week period, I visited each family daily for 2 to 8 hr per visit, spending at least 50 hr with each

family. I hung out with them as they: prepared and ate meals, attended school events, trips to the library and zoo, and birthday parties. I traveled across the state with one family on a road trip. Through these observations, I was privy to some spousal interactions, including conversations about unemployment.

For observations, I prioritized reaching out to families that appeared to represent conceptual variations on the themes I was finding in the interviews, especially in terms of division of housework and approaches to job-searching (acutely focused or more relaxed). For example, in the case of unemployed men, the Janssons represented a less egalitarian division of housework than the Smiths, with Robert's job-search being more focused than William Smith's. For unemployed women, Darlene Bach's approach to job-searching was more focused than Rebecca Mason's. These variations are reflected in the findings. For more details on how families were recruited as well as the logistics and ethics of this type of methodology, please see Lareau and Rao (2021).

A limitation of this sample is that it is largely White. Race shapes approaches to paid and unpaid work (Barnes, 2016; Dow, 2019; Landry, 2002). Within this study, any divergences that appear to be shaped by race should be seen as preliminary. This is because the sample of non-White participants is both small and mixed. Although approximately 80% of this nonrandom sample is White, the remainder 20% includes Black participants, Indian Americans, Arab Americans, among others. Future research should examine how race matters in shaping families' responses to economic change.

#### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed. I wrote field notes within 24 hr of each visit. Field notes for each visit contained a half-page summary of the timeline of events, and then detailed key moments. I maintained memos on emerging themes, as well as on my role in the field. I coded transcripts and field notes by reading them several times and searching for disconfirming evidence, in a process of "flexible coding" (Deterding & Waters, 2018). I refined coding categories such that the broader code of "division of household labor" was divided into subcategories including "taking ownership of

chores" and "helping out with chores." I used the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to facilitate coding. Deploying axial coding, I paid attention to which themes cooccurred. For instance, did participants who viewed women's paid work as important also protect their time for job-searching? For succinctness, I draw on the experiences of the same participants where possible.

## FINDINGS

### *Ideal Job-Seekers*

Unemployed men, unemployed women, as well as their spouses thought that finding a job requires behaving like what I term the ideal job-seeker—an ideal type that I constructed from interview data from unemployed individuals and their spouses. The ideal job-seeker is someone who devotes considerable time to job-searching (usually from home), networking extensively, working with career coaches, reskilling themselves, and accumulating professional credentials. Participants in this study emphasized that job-searching was time-intensive, repeating a version of: "Searching for a job is a full-time job!" James Peterson, a White man, said, "I just find the burden and the rigors of search difficult." He referred to these umpteen activities that are widely understood as necessary for job-searching successfully. Darlene Bach, a White woman, expanded on these, "You need to get into...[a] solid rhythm to look for a job... You start planning out your day: ...get my binder together; my follow-up notes; figure out my networking; planning all my lunches and coffees with people." Participants saw networking as important in job-searching. Claire Frankel, a White woman, received the following advice which she tried to follow, "You need to network more...Go to these events where these people are going to be." In Claire's case, these "events" were professional conferences, which cost upward of \$800 solely in registration. Similarly educated men and women may be funneled into different occupations, and within similar occupations into different designations (England, 2010). But these participants subscribed to shared understandings of the behaviors successful job-searching required.

Although unemployed men and women demonstrated a shared understanding of the



ideal job-seeker norm, they received distinctive levels of support, or privileges, in complying with this norm. The rationale for the different levels of support provided to unemployed men and women at home was vested in how their potential jobs were understood to be fundamental, or not, to the financial well-being of the family. These rationales did not always align with the economic circumstances of families. As the remainder of the findings (summarized in Table 3) will show, gendered expectations vis-à-vis paid and unpaid work strongly shaped the ability to enact the ideal job-seeker norm.

*How Families Helped Men Comply with the Ideal Job-Seeker Norm Framing Men's Jobs as Integral to the Household*

Couples perceived men's unemployment and consequent decrease in household income as relative deprivation (Newman, 1999)—the loss of material and cultural goods that otherwise accompanied a social class status. A communications professional in his late 40s, Robert Jansson, a White man, had steadily earned a comfortable six-figure income. His wife, Laura who is also White, worked in media and earned similarly. Married for 5 years, they had a 4-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son. Both Laura and Robert shared the perception that Robert's unemployment had deprived them of living a life commensurate with their social class status. By his follow-up interview, after a year of unemployment, Robert was reemployed in a similar position as the one he had lost. He described his unemployment, "I think I felt a little bit like our life was on hold." In her follow-up interview, Laura too explained, "We can start living our lives...We're not waiting to see if Robert gets a job...We're not waiting for anything." Couples in this study felt that men's unemployment denied them the ability to live an appropriate lifestyle. That men should comply with the ideal job-seeker norm arose from couples' desires to maintain a specific, affluent, lifestyle, rather than fears of destitution.

Key to being an ideal job-seeker for men was to show their spouse that they were laser-focused on finding a job. John Huber, a White man who had lost his job in the pharmaceutical industry 3 months ago said, "My contribution is I'm just trying to gainfully get work. So that's my role:

is to demonstrate that I want to work and that I am doing everything possible to get work." For John, his wife was his main audience for demonstrating that he was complying with the ideal job-seeker norm. As Table 3 shows, when devotion to finding a new job was effectively demonstrated to spouses, and legitimated by the spouse, this focus on job-searching became the reason for affording the unemployed individual privileges—specifically time, space, and money—to facilitate job-searching.

For other men, the audience for demonstrating compliance with the ideal job-seeker norm included friends and extended family. Families of unemployed men worried about being stigmatized due to enduring unemployment. Sandy Clarke, a White paralegal married to Terry, a White engineer in his 50s who had lost his job 6 months ago, said, "I try to show people that he's really trying hard to find a job. 'Cause I don't want them to think that he's a slacker." Sandy described being able to ward off potential stigma because Terry shared his job-searching activities with her in daily debriefs. The understanding that men's income was necessary to the household—whether to minimize a sense of relative deprivation or social stigma—prevailed within couples. As later sections illuminate, this understanding discouraged more gender egalitarian responses and prevented extensive shifts in the internal organization of men's family around paid and unpaid work.

*Organizing Men's Time around Job-Searching and Protecting It from Housework*

The ideal job-seeker norm demanded complete time commitment to job-searching. The dominant experience for men in this study was to structure their days to maximize job-searching (see Table 3). Terry Clarke described job-searching as shaping his days, "It's fairly structured...it's important to mitigate the risk of wasting time. I spend at least Monday through Thursday searching several websites using predefined searches that I have." Wives of unemployed men expected their husbands to approximate Terry's laser-focus commitment, where job-searching itself became "like a job."

Scott Mandel, a White man in his early 50s, mixed job-searching at home with frequently attending peer-led networking meetings of similarly unemployed professionals. Scott explained how these meetings structured his days:

Table 3. *Men's and Women's Experience of Unemployment<sup>d</sup>*

	Unemployed men (n = 25 men)	Unemployed women (n = 23 women)
Framing job loss and unemployment		
Men's job as important; problem that needs a solution	22 (88%)	8 (35%)
Economic significance of job is downplayed	3 (12%)	15 (65%)
Protecting time to job-search and from housework		
Days organized around job-searching; limited, if any, change in division of housework	19 (76%)	6 (26%)
Time is not as protected; unemployed person responsible for housework	6 (24%)	13 <sup>b</sup> (57%)
Rejecting both the ideal job-seeker norm <i>and</i> immersion into housework	0 (0%)	4 <sup>c</sup> (17%)
Childcare among families with children not yet in kindergarten		
Childcare is outsourced	7 (70%)	3 (30%)
Unemployed parent managing most of the childcare	3 (30%)	7 (70%)
Use of household space		
Specially demarcated space in home to facilitate job-search	14 (56%)	2 (9%)
No special space to job-search	11 (44%)	21 (91%)

<sup>a</sup>For an in-depth examination of how unemployment is experienced in several of these families, please see Rao (2020).

<sup>b</sup>Within this category, five women said that they were not searching for full-time jobs. For these women, "protecting" time for job-searching was moot. <sup>c</sup>Women in this category—all who had earned as much as or more than their husbands—use this time to methodically think about their professional trajectory, without the frenzy of complying with the ideal job-seeker norm or the obligation of contributing through housework.

[The meetings] are consciously structured for 9-11am so that you have a reason to shave, get dressed, even though you're just going to meet people for coffee...For me it's a reason to get dressed.

Organizing their days around job-searching, and in compliance with the ideal job-seeker norm, also protected men's time from housework. As Table 3 shows, for about three-fourths of these men, unemployment did not mean a significant increase in their housework. Unemployed men in this study deployed two main explanations, which were not mutually exclusive, for why they did not do more housework. They emphasized that their priority was job-searching and referenced their ostensible natural incapability to do housework. When I asked Terry about the division of housework, he shrugged it off saying, "I'm home to find a job. I'm not home to do that." Terry's wife Sandy said, "I feel in some ways that he should be contributing more to the support of the household because he's home." She elaborated that they have always had an uneven division, describing what this was like prior to Terry's job loss, "Oh I do more! He'll pick up or whatever around the house. You know he'll do the dishes, sometimes.

But there's lots of times, the sink is filled and I'm like 'What?!'" Sandy would often complete the chores for which Terry was responsible. She said "He'll try and do the laundry... He'll have the laundry washed and dried, but he won't have had it folded and put it away...So I end up doing that kind of thing." Given that Sandy is employed full-time and Terry is not, his unemployment could certainly have meant a shift in how the Clarkes divide chores. Yet, according to both Sandy and Terry this did not change significantly. Sandy said, "But he hasn't changed. It's still about the same."

The following example from the Radziks illuminates the second explanation of natural incapacity to do housework. Amelia was discontented that household chores, such as cooking or cleaning, remained her responsibility while Jim was unemployed. She said,

I leave the house at quarter-to-six [in the morning] every day. I get home generally around 6:30, 7 o'clock every night...Dinner's not cooked when I get home. So, it's like, really? Like, "You're home all day."

Jim said, "There are some things that I just would like to do a better job of embracing, but

I'm just not programmed that way." He added, "I walk by the kitchen twenty times a day and it doesn't cross my mind to take something out of the freezer. And it pisses my wife off." Prior studies, albeit focusing on working class and cohabiting couples (Miller & Carlson, 2016; Miller & Sassler, 2012), have also found a similar uneven "economy of gratitude." These relatively privileged, but unemployed, men in the present study too did not feel compelled contribute to their household by doing more housework. Rather they expected that their eventual reemployment was how they would contribute to the household.

An acute example of protecting unemployed men's time was childcare involving children younger than kindergarten-age who typically require more direct supervision and care than older children. Ten of the 25 men had at least one child who was not yet kindergarten-aged. Out of these 10, once men lost their jobs, only three families made extensive changes to childcare arrangements which directly relied on unemployed men. In the remaining seven families, unemployed men often took on more childcare responsibilities than they had before, for example more pickups and drop offs. Yet, the primary responsibility remained on their wives, who continued to be the point-person for planning and organizing children's activities and schedules. These families also tended to maintain their childcare arrangements. In one case, the father of an unemployed man provided \$900 a month to keep his youngest grandchild in day care so the unemployed man could focus on job-searching (for more on the financial and other support that kin provided, please see Rao, 2019).

About a quarter of the men in this study referenced alternative models of masculinity. These men saw it as incumbent on them to do more unpaid work while unemployed. Marcus Neals, a Black man in his 40s had two daughters. When employed, Marcus earned about the same as his wife Sylvia. For the past decade, however, Marcus's employment history had been unsteady, spotted with bouts of unemployment and insecure contract work (although highly paid). This is not unusual, as Black men continue to have higher unemployment rates in comparison to White men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Gender intersects with race to mute, or even reverse, some of the advantages of being a man in the labor force (Glauber, 2018;

Wingfield, 2009). Sylvia had been stably employed in a full-time role at one company for over two decades. Marcus felt that his unemployment meant he should do more unpaid work at home:

There's another guy in our [job-searching] group...and he was making a comment, "Oh well, you know, even though you have family, but you can't just completely ignore your job-search." But, you know, you do have to take care of your family duties.

Marcus' acquaintance was conjuring up the first explanation for why men dismissed housework—the demands of the ideal job-seeker norm. But, congruent with prior research which shows that Black families have a more gender egalitarian division of chores (Hill, 2011; Kamo & Cohen, 1998), Marcus did not fully agree with this. He explained how absolving himself of chores in order to focus on job-searching was simply not feasible, saying that his wife's "job is pretty demanding." Marcus fits within a broader pattern evident in Black families in which women, and their husbands, embrace women's labor force participation (Dean et al., 2013; Dow, 2019; Landry, 2002). Marcus saw it as unremarkable that he should contribute more to housework and childcare during his unemployment, "So I just take on that responsibility because I'm like, 'Oh, hell, I'm not providing any money to the household!' So, the least I could do is do that."

Sylvia agreed that Marcus was doing more unpaid work, especially when it came to their daughters. Speaking of driving their daughters to and from their school and extra-curricular activities, Sylvia said, "When he's working, whichever one of us is available would do it...but he does it now...Because he's home." The particularities of the Neals' experiences of unemployment illuminate how work-family ideologies are shaped by the intersection of race, class, and gender (Collins, 1990). In this study, the group of men who did more unpaid work when unemployed also included White men and men of other races. A shared characteristic in families of unemployed men who were more gender egalitarian was that these men had usually earned less than (or less steadily than) their wives. Additionally, these families described a more concerted effort even before men's job loss to share housework more evenly.

This understanding was renewed with men's unemployment.

*Organizing Household Space to Regulate Interactions around Men's Job-Searching*

As part of prioritizing men's job-search and directing resources to facilitate this, a section of the house was often demarcated as out-of-bounds and saved for the primary use of the unemployed man as he job-searched. The Janssons, a White couple, told their 4-year-old daughter that "daddy goes to work" in the basement, so she would not disturb Robert during his "working," or job-searching, hours, 8.30 a.m.–4 p.m.

This spatial separation also regulated interactions that unemployed men had with wives. Doug Easton had been unemployed for almost 2 years, and the Eastons, a White couple in their 40s, demarcated a space for his job-search. Doug's wife, Alice, who worked from home, said, "It can put a strain on the relationship: because I was able to see what he was or wasn't doing and that can be frustrating at times." Wives would otherwise have been too closely privy to husband's job-searching activity—or inactivity. Couples strategically minimized their interactions by adjusting men's spatial relationship to their home. This facilitated men's job-searching and protected wives from anxiety entailed by husband's deviations from the ideal job-seeker norm.

*How Women Did Not Receive Support to Comply with the Ideal Job-Seeker Norm Downplaying the Significance of Women's Jobs*

The dominant response in couples with an unemployed woman was to emphasize that their families could manage well on the husband's income. Grace Blum, a White woman, who had worked in the public sector, was in her early 40s and married to Finn, a White public-sector lawyer. They had two elementary-school aged daughters. Before she lost her job, Grace and Finn had each brought in \$70,000 annually. However, neither emphasized that Grace needed a job to enable their prior lifestyle. Grace said, "We live very modestly...we always thought it important that we could keep our house on one income." Now, that one income is Finn's. Grace explained how her staying at home while unemployed saved them money, "The plus side

of me being home is that we don't have to pay for after-care, which is \$300 per month. And we didn't have to pay for [summer] camp. Which could be \$2,000-\$5,000 per kid." She quickly added, "Not that it evens out by any means." Instead of thinking in terms of relative deprivation—not being able to afford the trappings of their social class, such as summer camp for their daughters—these couples framed the loss of women's incomes in pared-down needs, not relative deprivation. These mothers viewed activities like summer camps as enabling mothers—not mothers *and* fathers—to manage childcare when they were employed. For example, unemployed Indian American woman, Padma Swaminathan described her sons' summer camps as a way to "outsource" childcare which had facilitated her own participation in paid work.

Because the importance of women's income was downplayed in their households, complying with the ideal job-seeker norm became less of a concern. The domestic realm, particularly childcare, competed for unemployed women's time and energy. But the reaction to Grace's unemployment was vested in the particularities of her as a White woman from the professional middle-class, for whom ideologies of intensive motherhood tend to be particularly powerful. Although non-White women and their husbands in this study also emphasized the domestic as an obvious alternative for women, they did not as starkly downplay the importance of women's employment. Gina Forrester was a Black woman in her late 40s, whose husband, Mark, reminded her that "we're a two-income family." Mark's assertion echoed Landry's (2002) finding that men and women in Black families tend to see themselves as "co-breadwinners," with "work-family integration" more accurately capturing work and family ideologies in Black middle-class families (Dean et al., 2013).

In the majority of these couples with an unemployed woman, talk of unemployment and job-searching between wives and husbands was tangential, when it occurred at all. Darlene and Larry Bach, a White couple in their 50s, had been married for over 20 years and had a 15-year-old son, Parker. Darlene had usually earned three times Larry's \$50,000 annual salary. Like many of the other unemployed women I spoke with, Darlene explained that she and Larry did not frequently discuss her

job-search. Darlene said, “Sometimes I will talk to Larry...but on the other hand, I feel like I have to be the rock.” Because I observed the Bachs, I repeatedly recorded the lack of discussion around Darlene’s job-search:

Darlene and Larry discuss Larry’s day in detail. He elaborates on the lunch options he had, and what he decided to eventually eat; he recounts a phone conversation he had with his brother-in-law; he tells Darlene that his sister, who is moving, needs his help; they discuss whether Darlene should make a casserole to take for his other sister who has been ill. Larry doesn’t inquire about Darlene’s job-searching activities. Although Darlene had a job interview this morning and met with a recruiter, she and Larry did not discuss this. I have not seen them have detailed discussions about her job-search.

Husbands were often distanced from wives’ job-search efforts. Wives tend to initiate and maintain conversations, especially around sensitive issues such as physical illness (Thomeer et al., 2015) and mental ill health (Thomeer et al., 2013). Husbands’ lack of curiosity about their wives’ job-search may have been part of this broader gendered phenomenon. During women’s unemployment, it manifested as husbands expressing less concern about wives’ job-search efforts.

Although the dominant response among couples in unemployed women’s families was downplaying the need for women to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm, this fell along a spectrum. The Frankels, a White couple in their 40s, who had two middle-school aged sons deviated from these normative interactions where women’s paid work was downplayed. Eliot Frankel, a lawyer married to Claire, earned half his unemployed wife’s \$200,000 annual income. Eliot described discussions about Claire’s job-search, “We talk a lot about her interviews before and after... I hear everything...She sends me her thank you notes [after job interviews] and I edit them...It’s a pretty strong partnership in that sense.” Claire too added, “He’s very supportive...He’s like ‘You’ll get something, you always do’.” As I will show later, even in couples who did not downplay the importance of women’s employment that did not necessarily translate into women’s time being protected from housework and for job-searching. As Table 3 shows, the experiences of families of unemployed women

had a greater range concerning how women’s unemployment was framed and their time-use.

The domestic realm exerted varying levels of pull on women. For women with younger children who were not yet in kindergarten, unpaid work became even more salient than for women with older children. Rebecca Mason, a White woman in her mid-30s, had been job-searching for several months, but found it difficult to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm. She explained, “You have to [job search] while [my daughter] is sleeping... Sometimes they can take a while, online applications. So, I would start it, and then if she woke up, if I wasn’t done, get her, do whatever, nap again. Go back to it. So, it was very segmented.” Ideologies of intensive motherhood, combined with the lack of institutional infrastructure to support childcare, meant that complying with the ideal job-seeker norm, for example, by networking extensively, was not perceived by many of the women in this study to be viable. For women with younger children in this study, childcare was a pressing concern that appeared to diminish the importance of job-searching.

Grace Blum, Claire Frankel, and Padma Swaminathan were all women in their 40s with children above kindergarten age. Their experiences varied considerably, with Claire focusing on job-searching, whereas Grace had immersed herself in the domestic realm. Children and childcare were still an importance concern for these women, but given the age of their children it was a less urgent issue. Women with older children were thus the ones who fell along a spectrum of complying with the ideal job-seeker norm, because they appeared to encounter several viable pathways for reconciling childcare and paid work.

#### *Women Squeezed in Their Job-Search Around Other Obligations, Especially Housework*

Couples with unemployed wives did not organize women’s time to prioritize job-searching.

Eileen Boyle, a White woman who had lost her job after 27 years with one company, said, “Now I get up, take [the kids] to school because neither of them like the bus in the morning, and that’s just something we fell into doing.” Eileen continued, “There are times I’ll just bring my laptop and hang out in the café [where her 16-year old daughter works after school] and do job searches, send out resumes, applications,

that sort of thing.” Eileen had been the primary earner in her family, making \$100,000 a year in comparison to her husband’s \$30,000 a year. Although her job mattered economically to her family, it was fragmented.

Unemployed women’s time—whether they were the primary earners in their family or not—was not perceived as needing to be protected from housework. Husbands often made it clear that unemployed wives should take over housework. Cheryl Stanley, a White woman who lost her job a year ago, and had earned similarly to her husband, was resentful as she described how she felt pushed into the role of, in her terms, “Hanna Homemaker:”

[My husband] would take more turns doing things. He would help with the dinner, meals, or cleaning. Now that I’m not working, it’s not even the realm of even anything he’s thinking about. He doesn’t think about, well, maybe he could help clean the bathrooms, or he could run the vacuum, or he could do some shopping.

Women’s unemployment marked a focal point where husbands expected that all housework would be women’s responsibility. Grace Blum for instance described the division of housework in her home before she lost her job in the following way, “I think when I was working, I probably did 75% of the household chores to begin with.” This 75% were primarily “core” tasks (Ridgeway, 2011). While unemployed, Grace described doing almost all of these core tasks, “Like whoever cooked, the other person would do the dishes. So I always cooked, but now I always do the dishes too.” Her husband agreed, saying that when Grace was employed, the division of housework was “shared more so.”

Unemployed women described spending more time on chores as a way of contributing to their families. Shira Koffman, a White unemployed lawyer whose husband was the primary earner, said: “I do a little bit more now...because...I feel like I should.” She added, “But sometimes I’ll ask favors if I need to. If I don’t need to, then I want to save them up for when I need those favors.” For Shira, getting any help from her husband or two teenage sons when she was unemployed was a favor because the understanding in her family was, as she put it, “I do have more time now.” Unemployed women felt that the economy of gratitude required them to take over housework, illuminating how reciprocity

for housework is both uneven and gendered (Miller & Sassler, 2012). These processes align with outcomes reported in quantitative studies that unemployed women spend more hours in housework than unemployed men (Gough & Killewald, 2011; van der Lippe et al., 2018).

Some women resisted the notion that all housework should be their responsibility because they were unemployed. Gina Forrester, a Black woman who had a teenager in high school and an older daughter who recently graduated from college, was one such example. Gina said that she did not want “to be defined by those things,” and she described herself as “rail[ing] against, this idea that I’m home and so I’m responsible for the management of the household.” Prior research on middle-class Black women and mothers has noted that “work-family integration” (Dean et al., 2013) and “integrated motherhood” (Dow, 2016) better describe their experiences of femininity and motherhood than intensive motherhood. When Black women embrace domesticity, this is often accompanied by rationales that vary considerably from White women, as Black women may seek to reclaim a specific notion of racialized respectability (Barnes, 2016; Lacy, 2007). This does not capture Gina’s experience. As we saw earlier, even though Gina’s husband wanted her to prioritize job-searching, he did not see that as absolving her from housework. Gina explained that her husband “doesn’t kind of acknowledge if I’m doing something [like job-searching].” Instead, she added, “he’ll say, ‘OK, well, can you take care of that [chore]?’” Gina described herself as responding firmly by pointedly saying, “Well, I’m actually doing something.” Gina claimed a broader set of roles for herself as a woman than White women in the middle-class may be able to access. In the limited sample of this study, the economic contribution of non-White women, like Gina, to their household was not as starkly downplayed. Consequently, these women may have felt more comfortable explicitly resisting the notion that housework was their responsibility.

Couples also expected that women would be available for childcare for young children. Ten of the 23 unemployed women in this sample had children who were not yet kindergarten-aged. Seven women made extensive changes to childcare arrangements once they lost their jobs which included withdrawing children from day care, aftercare, or summer camps, and taking

full responsibility for childcare. Out of these 10 women, only 3 had not made significant changes to their childcare arrangements.

There were, however, exceptions to the finding that women do not expect themselves to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm. Caroline Anderson, a White woman, had worked in the healthcare industry until she lost her job 9 months ago. She used to bring in about half of her household's \$150,000 annual income. Caroline's husband, Ben, a White man in his 40s, was annoyed by Caroline's devotion to job-searching. Mimicking Caroline, Ben hunched his back, staring at a spot on the table in front of him and mimed furiously typing on a keyboard. He stopped and explained, "She's on her computer morning, noon, and night...She's kind of obsessed. Obsessed is a strong word, but I don't know how else to say it other than if you can be strongly determined – she's like ten blocks beyond that!" Ben was one of the few husbands who leaned toward acknowledging Caroline's job as being important for the household and said "we need [her income] if we want to have a nice, comfortable living." Yet, for him, this did not translate into amore gender egalitarian understanding that Caroline ought to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm. Caroline agreed with Ben about her intense focus on job-searching and described her days:

Usually I'm at the computer. I contacted this person. I spoke to this person on the phone. Really trying to "work my network," because I saw a job here or there. So, I feel like I was working a full day. It was all job-search related.

Caroline blamed herself for not immersing herself into housework, and said, "It's not my focus...I guess I get so enthralled in other things that I don't make spending an hour on dinner a priority." Unlike unemployed men, Caroline felt guilty, adding, "And I should." Caroline's compliance with the ideal job-seeker norm did not net her encouragement or the redirection of resources; instead, it was seen as excessive and inappropriate. Outliers can function as exceptions that prove the rule. Caroline's example buttresses the dominant norm for couples in this study: that job-searching need not be an urgent priority for women. There are consequences to the couple for this deviation; resentment in Ben and guilt in Caroline.

### *No Room of Their Own for Unemployed Women*

Rather than demarcating a sacrosanct space for job-searching, unemployed women job-searched whenever and wherever they could. Darlene Bach, for example, frequently applied to jobs as she waited for her son Parker at his extra-curricular events. Because I observed Darlene's family, on one such occasion my field notes noted:

Darlene sits down on the white mini-bleachers right by Parker's squash court. She keeps an eye on him, looking up every now and then. But she has also brought along her laptop. She has a small internet hotspot device. She places this next to her and opens her laptop to resume work on an incomplete online job application. She intermittently glances up at the glassed-in court where Parker is sullenly practicing with his coach.

Couples did not typically create a special space to facilitate women's job-searching. During an observational visit to the Bach family, Darlene's son Parker told me:

My mom's home all the time now and she doesn't bother getting her own desk. She just, like, comes into my room and just takes all this stuff off of my desk and just shoves it somewhere and then just uses it as her work desk.

Because job-searching was not paramount for couples with an unemployed woman, they did not need to regulate their interactions around it. A spatial manifestation of how couples did not emphasize women's compliance to the ideal job-seeker norm was the lack of a specific home office. Women's job-searching and efforts to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm were in the background of family life and were primarily an individual effort.

## DISCUSSION

Job-searching is a ubiquitous activity in an economic context where career shifts are often horizontal, not vertical, and where shedding employees is built into organizational practices (Krippner, 2005; Williams et al., 2012). The ideal job-seeker norm illuminates how dual-earner, heterosexual families with children who are in the professional middle-class confer marital privileges in gendered ways to facilitate job-searching for men but less so for women. For men, receiving these privileges, or resources,

also puts pressure to find reemployment quickly. Unemployed women in this study are neither expected nor encouraged to adhere to this norm. Rather than receiving resources to job-search, women's unemployment is often seen as saving the family money, for example, in terms of childcare. By demonstrating the privileges that unemployed men in these heterosexual marriages receive at home, this study builds upon research showing the protective considerations that White men receive in the workplace (Kalev, 2014; Williams, 2019). Taken together, these processes at home and in the workplace illuminate the gendered mechanisms that enable White men in particular to maintain and potentially regain jobs in a context of omnipresent unemployment and labor market precarity.

Although these unemployed women may have less pressure to job-search, this portends to financial inequalities in the long-term. Being out of the workforce for 2 to 3 years at a time can mean a 30% decrease in lifetime earnings (Rose & Hartmann, 2004). Being unemployed itself has a scarring effect (Gangl, 2006) such that the longer one is unemployed, the longer it takes to find reemployment. Whereas unemployed women in this study may stave off the stigma of unemployment by framing themselves, with their husbands' help, akin to stay-at-home moms, this framing is likely detrimental to their careers. Job-seekers who indicate being out of the workforce for caregiving reasons fare worse in terms of being hired than unemployed applicants (Weisshaar, 2018).

These women's experiences of squeezing their job-search in between domestic activities may partly explain why women typically take a few weeks longer than men to find jobs (Farber, 2015). The gap in time to next job is perhaps not even higher because job-searching may not require full-time commitment. Job-searching may be frantic and time-consuming in earlier months, when the unemployed individual is wading into the world of networking, applying for jobs, and consulting with career coaches. In subsequent months, surplus time on such activities may not be especially beneficial. Earlier on, the unemployed person may encounter a plethora of jobs to which they can apply. The glut of jobs that unemployed individuals may encounter initially too likely diminishes over time.

There is a greater variation in the experiences of unemployed women than unemployed

men. Unemployed women range from focusing resolutely on job-searching to women whose job-searching takes a backseat to domestic concerns. In terms of childcare, the age of children (especially when not yet in kindergarten) seems to matter for unemployed women who describe their childcare responsibilities as preventing them from focusing on job-searching. This is not, however, the dominant experience for unemployed men with younger children. Additionally, the few Black families in this study especially appeared to acknowledge women's paid work as important. In these families, women's paid work was not as starkly downplayed and women often resisted taking on the full obligation of unpaid work. Intensive motherhood exerts a less powerful influence on Black mothers from the professional middle-class. Instead, in Black families the expectations for women emphasize economic self-sufficiency as well as the importance of integrating paid work with domestic, mothering obligations (Dean et al., 2013; Dow, 2016; Landry, 2002). The gendered processes around job-searching described in this study may be particularly pronounced among elite White households with an unemployed spouse. However, given the small sample and its racial homogeneity, this is merely suggestive.

For unemployed men, experiences are concentrated around compliance with the ideal job-seeker norm. This concurs with findings that masculinity is more strictly policed than femininity (Mize & Manago, 2018; Pascoe, 2011). Women have more social roles that they can occupy, but breadwinning continues to be critical for upholding masculinity, especially among the professional middle-class. In families of unemployed men, the variations in the division of housework during unemployment appear to be vested in men's relative share of household income and steadiness of employment history. The men in this study who did much more unpaid work while unemployed were all men who earned less than, or less steadily, than their wives. Yet, as we saw with the Radziks, not all men who had earned less or less steadily than their wives necessarily took on more unpaid work while unemployed.

Alternative explanations for why men but not women in this study are encouraged to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm may be because of gendered interactional styles (Thomeer et al., 2013, 2015), the duration of



the spouse's unemployment, relative earnings of each spouse, and different understandings of a passion for work. As my findings indicate, none of these factors fully explain these gendered approaches to job-searching. Men and women may have gendered interactional styles which could explain why men are more distanced from wives' job-search. Yet, this would not explain why husbands of unemployed women minimize wives' income or encourage their wives to have a more relaxed approach to job-searching, as Ben Anderson did for instance. Because the sample contained men and women who been unemployed for comparable amounts of time, the duration of unemployment too seems a weak explanatory factor. Relative earnings were also not powerful in explaining whose unemployment is prioritized, particularly because this study oversampled for households where unemployed women had earned as much or more than their spouses. Finally, men and women had a shared understanding of the work ethic which they deemed necessary for successfully job-searching.

These patterns appear to be driven by a sense that men's unemployment disrupts the social order of the home in an unacceptable manner. Women's unemployment is more congruent with gendered expectations both inside and outside of the home. Given the increasing importance of women's income in dual-earner families and the empirical decline of the male-breadwinner family, the paramountcy of these gendered norms indicates a cultural lag between empirical trends and gender norms. Women's labor force participation and contribution to household income continue to be framed as expendable, and couples' everyday interactions sustain this framing. These findings highlight the persistence of traditional gender norms even when these norms clash with monetary incentives.

Tracing how these marital processes unfold across the duration of unemployment, necessitated years of data collection. I also triangulated across different methods—observations and interviews—with family members at multiple points in time. These are imperative to map patterns. But investing time in in-depth data collection also entails tradeoffs (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). These data have limitations. Even when unemployed, these are privileged families and do not represent the bulk of US families experiencing unemployment. The privileges at home that ideal workers in prior

research receive are deeply linked to raced, gendered, and classed family structures which idealize the male-breadwinner/female-caregiver family structure (Cheng, 2016; Davies & Frink, 2014; Dow, 2019; Orbach & Eyster, 1997). Unemployed men striving to be ideal job-seekers too receive privileges vested in these specific ideals of family life. Although I strove for racial diversity in my sample, I cannot make claims about how privileges afforded at home may be shaped by race and ethnicity. My findings also do not speak to the experiences of unemployed individuals across social classes, sexual orientations, and family structures.

The ideal job-seeker norm is important in explaining how gendered privileges (based in this particular context) at home manifest in the contemporary context. This study focuses on unemployment, a period when job-searching is particularly salient. But job-searching now is a professional activity in its own right (Gershon, 2017; Sharone, 2013), usually maintained even when workers are employed. Findings from this study can inform how shifts in career trajectories shape the organization of families. Uncertainty in the labor market could have meant that couples move away from a specialization model where men's paid work and women's unpaid work is emphasized. Yet, the findings from this study indicate that these couples' economic organization of their households, in highlighting the importance of men's reemployment, but not women's, becomes acutely gendered.

#### NOTE

I thank Annette Lareau, Shelley Correll, David Pedulla, Patricia Tevington, Betsie Garner, Rachel Ellis, Junhow Wei, Dinsha Mistree, Natalia Forrat, Dan Mattingly, Kharis Templeman, Priya Fielding-Singh, and Kristine Kilanski for providing feedback on earlier versions of this paper. My thanks also to everyone at the Clayman Institute for Gender Research. The research presented in this article was supported by the NSF DDRIG Award Number 1538951.

#### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix S1.** Supporting Information

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