

# Crunch Time

HOW MARRIED COUPLES CONFRONT  
UNEMPLOYMENT

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# Introduction

A TALE OF TWO UNEMPLOYMENTS

## MEET THE BARONS

Todd Baron is a forty-five-year-old marketing manager who has, in the past, worked for candy and cosmetic companies. He is dressed casually in a gray T-shirt and loose black gym shorts. He stands about five feet, nine inches tall, with silver-brown hair, neatly parted on the right. Todd's shoulders stoop as he walks, and while a smile plays at the corners of his mouth, he rubs his index finger nervously against his thumb. His eyes dart around the room. He is friendly, but his rushed manner of speaking suggests a restlessness.

The past five months have been tough for Todd and his family. Todd lost a job he had held for a little over a year. This is the second job loss Todd has experienced in the past four years. His first round of unemployment lasted for ten months, and it dug deeply into the savings Todd and his wife, Kimmie, had amassed. Although Kimmie also works, Todd had been the primary breadwinner in his family, earning a comfortable six-figure salary.

Losing his job was difficult for Todd. There had been rumblings that the candy company was not doing well. Both Todd and Kimmie anticipated

that Todd might lose his job. But Kimmie was nevertheless very concerned for Todd when that day finally came. A petite brunette with a face free of makeup, with hazel eyes and long, wavy brown hair, Kimmie knitted her eyebrows as she recounted the telephone call Todd made to her on the day he lost his job, "He was crying. He was upset. I was talking him out of doing something, anything rash . . . ending his life or anything like that." Todd was upset, but not as much as Kimmie had initially feared. Still, the past five months have not been easy for them. Todd says, "It's tough sitting alone at home." Todd spends the majority of his time at home, trying to job search so that he can swing back into full employment and the breadwinner role he previously occupied in his family. But staying at home has been difficult, and Todd often feels lonely. He explains, "A good buddy of mine the last couple weeks said, 'Hey, you want to go to lunch?' And I just told him 'I'm tied up.' And I wasn't." Shaking his head, he adds, "I mean, I ate a little sandwich at home." Todd didn't meet his friend for lunch more out of shame than the expense of lunch. He feels that he should be working.

The longer Todd stayed at home, the antsy Kimmie became at his presence. For the first few months after losing his job, Todd weighed his options: he could look for another position, or he could become self-employed by opening up a franchise. He says, "We were looking into the franchise, and I think Kimmie saw that that was getting me a little bit excited." After two months, Kimmie expressed her unease with being in limbo regarding Todd's future earning prospects. Todd says, "I think she stuck with me for the first two months. But she kind of gave me that ultimatum on New Year's and said 'You've got to stop. We've lost two months. . . . Now we're not getting money.'" For her part, Kimmie is resolute that Todd should be entirely focused on his job search, with a deeper sense of urgency than she thinks he currently has. She says, "I'm always saying, 'You need to be looking, you need to be looking.' And he's kind of sit-on-his-hands and wait-for-the-other-shoe-to-drop." Kimmie purses her lips into a thin line before continuing, "I'm not a sit-on-my-hands kind of person."

In Kimmie's frustration is a rebuke to Todd: that he is not trying hard enough to find a job. Kimmie recognizes that unemployment is a given in the contemporary world of work; what gnaws at her is her perception of Todd's lackluster effort to find work. She is finding it hard to explain Todd's

enduring unemployment as a fact of the contemporary economy; she is beginning to see it as a moral flaw. Todd, according to Kimmie, is not *morally* unemployed, because he is not resolutely focused on job searching.

For Kimmie and Todd, while Todd's job loss was a blow, the more significant experience has been what Todd has done in the months since. From Kimmie's perspective, Todd's priority should be to find a job. Todd agrees with her, but he often finds it difficult to keep searching when he has experienced so many rejections. Sometimes, he does not feel cheerful enough to network—a key aspect of job searching in professional America. At other times, he feels dejected and loses hope that he will ever find a job. On those days, looking for work in the midst of despair seems an impossible task. Yet, for both Kimmie and Todd, the fact that Todd is staying at home is a problem that dominates their marriage and their family life. Todd is ashamed of his unemployment and unable to socialize as he would have previously; Kimmie is worried. For the Barons, Todd's unemployment is a grave problem that needs to be rectified.

#### MEET THE BROZEKS

Lisa Brozek is a cheerful, athletic fifty-two-year-old. She is so athletic that when we meet, her right arm is in a cast, broken from a martial arts class accident. Her face is scrubbed clean; her cheeks glow pink and her blond hair is tied up in a high ponytail. She smiles widely. She seems relaxed, at ease in the coffee shop where we are meeting, reclining casually on her chair, arm draped around the backrest. She is dressed in a fitted gray zip-up hoodie with a tank top underneath. Her black corduroys are tucked into tan Uggs. Her hands sparkle with jewelry: a large pear-cut diamond on her ring finger and a bracelet of black and white pearls set in silver.

Lisa had been the chief operating officer at a nonprofit. She had spent her entire career in this nonprofit. She started out as a secretary before she even finished college, and worked her way up the ladder, getting a bachelor's degree and eventually an MBA (paid for by the company).

But two years ago, a new CEO instituted dramatic changes that eventually culminated in Lisa losing her job three months ago. Lisa had applied

for the position of CEO when it had opened up, but she was passed over in favor of a male outsider. This had hurt Lisa enormously. She thinks that the lingering disappointment of being passed over for CEO in some ways softened the blow of losing her job. Being rejected from the CEO position meant that, as she says, “I’ve already been in that trench of depression and pain about not being welcome . . . and just getting kind of rejected.” Many women in this study, like Lisa, reported that they had felt unwelcome and unfairly treated at their workplaces even before job loss.

Lisa and her husband, Sam, have been married for less than two years. It’s the second marriage for both. While Sam and Lisa were dating, and during their marriage, Lisa had been the primary breadwinner, earning a six-figure salary. She also paid for the couple’s wedding. Sam Brozek, who has light blond hair that spikes up, a goatee on his ruddy face, and an easy-going smile, is also in his early fifties. He is a self-employed health insurance salesman. In recent years, Sam has been doing well. His income has steadily increased each year, rising from \$60,000 the previous year to around \$80,000 this year. He anticipates making about \$100,000 next year, based on the number of clients whose health care coverage he manages. This is a tremendous change for Sam, who declared personal bankruptcy a decade ago. Nevertheless, at the time of our interview, his income was at about half of Lisa’s previous income. Together, the two also own a \$200,000 home. Lisa has a savings account with a balance of close to \$100,000.

Like any unemployed professional in America, Lisa focuses on networking as part of her job searching strategy. Sam, who dresses casually—usually wearing sweats in the winter and shorts in the summer, unless he has client meetings—explains: “She was trying to network and have coffee with people. Network and find out about jobs and everything. . . . So, that kept her more in the game than anything else. . . . Basically, until she figured out exactly what she wanted, she kept her game up.” By “kept her game up,” Sam means that Lisa has been diligent about networking. Lisa attributes this to having had lots of support from friends, “My friends have been pretty supportive. . . . We get together. We go to lunch. We go out for drinks.” She remains in touch with friends from her previous workplace. Lisa describes these work friends as being unhappy in the toxic environment there, saying: “They’re jealous that I don’t have to be there. . . . When

we go out, they're like, "How are you?" And I'm like, "I'm doing great! How are you guys?" And they're miserable. They're just really unhappy. I feel like the whole dynamic at the [nonprofit] has become a place where people are so unhappy. It's just awful." In contrast to Todd Baron's lonely experience of unemployment, Lisa and Sam both describe hers as being socially rich—she has friends and activities that she is involved in, and her schedule is filled with social and professional appointments. Job searching and networking are important aspects of her life, but neither Lisa nor Sam expect her life to be organized around her job search.

Indeed, Lisa's calendar is full in part because Sam has encouraged Lisa to see her unemployment as an opportunity to figure out how she wants to spend her working life. Sam says: "I've told her, 'If you don't take the time to explore right now, you're never going to have it again and it's going to come back and bite you in the ass. So you take this time . . . to explore . . . because we have money and we have time . . . because if not, you'll be looking back on it the rest of your life and regretting it.'" Lisa, too, explains that Sam's encouragement and support means that "I don't have to leap at anything. I don't have to feel like it's this panic to find a job. . . . And I'm really trying to be careful that I don't get sucked into something that's going to mean more of being unhappy." Lisa and Sam have more of a *laissez-faire* approach to Lisa's reemployment.

For Lisa and Sam, Lisa's unemployment is not a problem that needs to be rectified, as with the Barons, but rather an opportunity for Lisa to explore a more fulfilling career. Lisa and Sam do not describe Lisa's unemployment in terms that question Lisa's morality. For the Brozeks, that Lisa could opt out of paid work is a viable consideration. Lisa says, "Let's say I started my own . . . shelter for cats. . . . I'm not making any money for a while. . . . And I think Sam would support me in that. . . . We go back and forth about it. And sometimes I'm like, 'No, I have to make money.'" Lisa explains that it's often Sam who pushes her to focus on happiness rather than providing for their family, "Sam's more like, 'Lisa, you gotta do what makes you happy in what you want to be doing. And if that means you take a pay cut to do that . . . then figure that out. To me, it's OK. Whatever you need to do.'"

Sam's support for Lisa is also a way to reassert his masculinity and reclaim the role of the breadwinner. Sam has told Lisa, for example, that

“It’s not a big deal. I mean, I work. That’s what I do. I work and provide.” Sam frames his economic support of Lisa as his gendered responsibility, as the man of the house. Lisa echoes this, saying that Sam told her, “Listen, I’m going to start making more money, and every year my income’s going to be increased.’ It was just, ‘Now, *I’ll* support you.’” Lisa’s unemployment has become a time when Lisa and Sam reorganize the dynamics in their family to frame Sam as the primary earner. Her unemployment is not an ideal situation, but it is not nearly as fraught as Todd’s unemployment is for the Barons.

Why do Todd and Lisa—both the primary earners in their respective families—have such different experiences of unemployment? Why do Todd and Kimmie highlight that Todd feels nervous, anxious, lonely, and that finding a job quickly is paramount for them? In contrast, why do Lisa and Sam emphasize that Lisa is relaxed, relieved even, to be out of an unpleasant work situation? Why do the Brozeks explain that Sam supports and encourages Lisa to take the time to explore her options and her desires, even though it means a considerable cutback in their income?

These questions, all of which essentially ask how professional middle-class families understand and respond to unemployment, motivate this book. This book provides a window into the lesser understood, but increasingly prevalent, phenomenon of unemployment among professionals. What does unemployment look like when it is not mired in poverty? It is my hope that this book will illuminate the delicate negotiations, self-questioning, and emotional impacts that professionals experience as they contend with the uncertainties inherent in the current economic landscape in the United States. As employment insecurity increases, including for workers who used to be protected from it, and as the cradle-to-grave job dies its final, inevitable death, we need to understand how workers and their families contend with it across the economic spectrum. By focusing on the critical juncture of unemployment—an extreme end of the spectrum of economic precarity that characterizes labor and employment relations across the board—this account helps us understand how the status quo of gender inequality at home is reproduced rather than disrupted. The uncertain labor market does not function in isolation; rather, workers and their families respond to it. Families have gendered ideals of marriage and family life that tend to be informed by their racial

and social-class background. As they seek to comply with these ideals, families often afford privileges to unemployed men to facilitate men's participation in this revolving labor market, but not quite to unemployed women.

PRECARIETY FOR ALL! PROFESSIONALS CONFRONTING  
A CHANGING WORKPLACE

Todd Baron and Lisa Brozek are among the millions of Americans who have lost their jobs, or can expect to lose one during the course of their life. Precarity used to be a condition limited to low-wage workers, but it has now become endemic to the organization of work and the American labor market. Of course, precarity looks and feels very different depending on where you are located in the socioeconomic hierarchy; people of different means respond to it through distinctive strategies.<sup>1</sup> For relatively affluent families, such as those in this study, the context of precarity—and the acute instance of unemployment—raises wrenching questions about maintaining their class advantages and, ideally, passing these on to their children. These families are usually not worried about deprivation, since they do not expect that a stint of unemployment will drive them into poverty or homelessness—outcomes that are real possibilities for low-wage workers. Instead, these families are more worried about *relative* deprivation; maintaining their class position and its material and cultural accompaniments as they wrestle with financial downsizing.<sup>2</sup> The responses of advantaged families to their precarity are vested in struggles to sustain their understandings of their own class positions, especially when that class position is threatened. These professionals experiencing unemployment invoke nostalgic ideals of male-breadwinner and female-homemaker families as a class-based response that deploys gendered strategies to affirm their class status. This is an aspirational quest to align themselves with images of familial success at a moment when that success is acutely threatened.

The threat these professionals feel is real: over 92 percent of college-educated men and women can expect to be unemployed at least once during the course of their life. The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the

unemployed as people who “do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior four weeks, and are currently available for work.”<sup>3</sup> College-educated Americans between the ages of eighteen and fifty experience an average of 4.1 instances of unemployment. But there is variation among groups: White college-educated men experience an average of 3.8 unemployment periods, while Black college-educated men experience an average of 4.9 periods of unemployment over the same lifespan. Both White and Black women experience unemployment more frequently, with an average of 4.2 and 5.7 periods between the ages of eighteen and fifty, respectively.<sup>4</sup> When it comes to deciding which workers to fire or which business units to shut down, management tends to cut job roles and units disproportionately filled with women and minorities.<sup>5</sup> As women and people of color enter certain occupations, those occupations often become devalued, making them more susceptible to layoffs.<sup>6</sup> Since this book draws from a largely White sample, this is a sample that fares somewhat better even under conditions where unemployment has simply become a matter of course for more privileged to more vulnerable groups.

Besides these subtle processes that increase the likelihood that minorities of any gender and women of any race will lose their jobs, bolder patterns of discrimination make it more difficult for these groups to get hired in the first place.<sup>7</sup> Whites continue to have a hiring advantage over Blacks or Latinos. In one field experiment, applicants were given equivalent resumes and then simultaneously sent to apply for hundreds of jobs. The researchers found that Black applicants were half as likely as White applicants to receive a callback or a job offer. Latino applicants with “clean” resumes fared the same as White applicants whose resumes indicated that they had just been released from prison.<sup>8</sup> Employers also discriminate against mothers, as well as potential workers who have stepped out of the workplace for caregiving responsibilities. In practice, this targets more women than men.<sup>9</sup> That being said, research has found that “opting out” for family obligations has starker effects for men than for women, suggesting that men continue to be held more strictly than women to expectations of commitment to work. More generally, employers’ hiring practices exclude parents with caregiving responsibilities from the labor force. This has profound ramifications for women’s careers, since women in the United States continue to have more family and caregiving responsibilities.

Unemployment has become a prevalent life experience in the United States, permeating the lives of even those workers who, in earlier decades, expected to be protected because of their educational qualifications. But unemployment itself is only the extreme end of labor-market churning, a phenomenon that has characterized the US economic landscape in recent decades. Between the ages of eighteen and fifty, college-educated men now hold an average of 11.4 jobs, while college-educated women hold 12.7 jobs.<sup>10</sup> The duration of jobs is also shrinking. Recent data show that one-third of workers in the middle of their career, those aged thirty-five to forty-four, spent less than a year in any given new job. Three-quarters of jobs end in less than five years.<sup>11</sup>

This form of extreme employment insecurity, even at the higher echelons of work and labor, reached its peak in October 2009. In the midst of the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, the US national unemployment rate peaked at about 10 percent—more than twice the percentage considered acceptable for a healthy economy.<sup>12</sup> It was the highest unemployment rate in the United States in over twenty-five years. The biggest losers in this recession, as in most recessions and depressions, were noncredentialed workers. Male-dominated industries, such as construction, were especially adversely impacted, leading the popular press to call the Great Recession a “Mancession.”<sup>13</sup> But while an increase in unemployment rates during recessions and depressions is nothing new, the Great Recession made clear that no one, not even college-educated workers, was safe.

The Great Recession showed that college-educated workers are now more likely than their counterparts in previous decades to lose jobs.<sup>14</sup> Since the 1970s, the unemployment rate for white-collar workers has increased at a sharper rate than that for less-skilled workers without a college education. When white-collar workers do lose jobs, they tend to be pushed into long-term unemployment, defined as lasting twenty-seven weeks or longer.<sup>15</sup> Some studies have also shown that these workers also face the steepest financial penalties, with most earning less after unemployment than they earned prior to it.<sup>16</sup> Once women lose a job, they experience greater earning losses than men.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of the Great Recession has been vast, solidifying trends in work, employment, and organizations that had been circulating in recent years. Employment practices have shifted decisively from a one life-one

career model to greater uncertainty: increases in downsizing, restructuring, outsourcing, and the growth of contract and temporary workers all point to a decline in employment stability.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, these practices have become part of organizations' business models, which have been prioritizing increasing shareholder value above other considerations. This consists of adopting a short-term outlook, including dissolving branches of the business that may be (temporarily) underperforming.<sup>19</sup> Political scientist Jacob Hacker (2006) has called this a "risk shift," where "economic risk has been offloaded by government and corporations onto the increasingly fragile balance sheets of workers and their families."<sup>20</sup> While in earlier decades employers frequently provided a social safety net, often in terms of lifelong careers and associated benefits, now individual workers must manage any risk that they encounter without much government or employer support.

This shift in the employer-employee relationship is the result of a variety of factors, including neoliberal transformations, globalization, and technical change.<sup>21</sup> In her 1977 classic *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Harvard sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter describes organizations as operating on the staffing principle that "big is better," which meant greater security for workers, as organizations rarely cut jobs. But in her 1993 afterword to the book, Kanter explains that this principle gave way to the assumption that "smaller is beautiful." As Kanter explains, the shift to a business practice of lean organizations means that "such organizations rely on outsourcing and external suppliers for internal services, and impose overtime and overload on existing staff before adding others."<sup>22</sup>

The diminishing consideration of organizations for their workers means that expectations for worker-employer loyalty are no longer reciprocal. Sociologist Allison Pugh terms this a "one-way honor system."<sup>23</sup> One piece of evidence that workers are committed to their work is that the number of hours that Americans work has increased over the decades, with professionals in particular working exceptionally long hours.<sup>24</sup> But scholars are now questioning whether workers are responding to labor market precarity by shifting their loyalty from specific employers to their broader occupations and industries, perhaps heralding a more individualistic shift as a way of dealing with uncertainty in the economic landscape.<sup>25</sup>

Labor writer Steven Greenhouse explains that workers, including white-collar workers, often get short shrift from their employers under the contemporary organization of work. For instance, the switch from pensions to 401(k)s—which are a defined contribution owned by the worker and contingent on the stock market—represents more precarity for the worker, who is no longer guaranteed an income in retirement, as the more secure pensions had allowed.<sup>26</sup> Many Americans must continue to work beyond retirement to make ends meet.<sup>27</sup> Organizations are also asking workers to do tasks outside of their designated roles and making unpaid overtime work a requisite for maintaining a job (and this work may not even be compensated). For white-collar workers, this might mean a work culture in which workers are expected to be accessible all day, every day, through mobile phones, emails, and other devices; limited benefits packages with the cost of health coverage passed onto workers; and more work for lower wages.<sup>28</sup>

This is the background against which the unemployed men and women in my sample experience unemployment. They live and work in a time when losing a job is not as shocking an event as it once was; it is often expected, even if devastating.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes they have experienced it themselves before, or, at a minimum, seen a friend, spouse, or other family member experience it. They take employment instability as a given of US work culture, and they understand their own experience as being part of it. Yet, the wounds and fractures that unemployment exposes—about self-worth as a worker, about their capabilities as a spouse or a parent, about their role in their community—are raw.

#### HOW FAMILIES RESPOND TO PRECARITY

Unemployment has become a prevalent experience in American life during this period of late capitalism, something that the bulk of the college-educated population can expect to experience at least once, and usually multiple times. But sociological research continues to treat unemployment as an aberration, an anomalous event. Sociological research has documented the quick pace at which the organization of work is changing, with research spanning the rise of precarity, the gig economy, and the

growth of human–artificial intelligence (AI) interactions at work. But how these broad changes intersect with other aspects of social life and institutions, especially workers’ personal lives, is little understood.<sup>30</sup> Research on family, especially on more privileged families, has not kept pace with changes in the organization of work that inevitably impact families.

Some recent research has paved the way for conceptualizing how individuals and families, including college-educated workers, respond to the insecurity of work. Sociologist Marianne Cooper shows that in this context of risk, families develop “security projects” through which they seek to protect their families. This emotional management of risk is both classed and gendered. The “upper-class” families in Cooper’s study, who are most similar to the participants in this book, respond to economic uncertainty by “upscaling” their needs. As Cooper describes it, these affluent families ratchet up what they need to feel secure, worrying about perfecting their children, aiming only for the top Ivy League universities as acceptable college placements. Even the multimillionaire respondents in her study expressed an acute sense of insecurity. These families bolster their excessive focus on their children’s futures through a neo-traditional family organization in which highly educated wives drop out of the labor force (at least until the kids go off to college) to prioritize a close monitoring of their children’s education and social and extracurricular development. These families worry that their advantaged class status will be unattainable for their children, and they strive to ward off such a reality. As Cooper explains, risk takes an emotional toll, but rising income inequality and the dearth of social safety nets in the United States means that more privileged families can better manage these risks.

The ether of economic insecurity is especially salient for motherhood. Ana Villalobos argues that in an era of risk in which jobs and relationships dissolve frequently, intensive mothering—a style of parenting where the mother–child bond is culturally prized and expected to take up the mother’s emotional energy as well as her time—provides a route for *mothers* to feel secure through this intensive attachment.<sup>31</sup> In *The Tumbleweed Society*, Alison Pugh notes that insecurity at work means that people put extremely high demands on their marriages and personal relationships, erecting a “moral wall” that acquiesces to lower expectations of loyalty at work but amps them up at home.<sup>32</sup>

Taken together, this handful of important studies suggests that economic insecurity, with prevalent unemployment as an extreme manifestation, is a contemporary reality even for affluent American families. Individuals formulate selves that respond to market forces, and specifically to labor-market uncertainty. A variety of subjectivities have emerged in response to the profusion of neoliberal logics in increasing aspects of life; such as selves that are self-reliant, therapeutic, positive, passionate, consciously self-branded, entrepreneurial, and investing.<sup>33</sup> These subjectivities are bolstered, or not, through gendered, class-based strategies in marriages. What happens at home, and the specifics of how market logics reach beyond their ostensible bounds, is instructive for understanding the configuration of gender inequalities in these families. Families in this study, as I show, respond to economic insecurity in ways that sustain gender inequalities.

#### UNEMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY LIFE

Current understandings of how families respond to unemployment and economic precarity owe an enormous debt to such classic works as Mirra Komarovsky's study of men's unemployment during the Great Depression, the team-based study of the Austrian town of Marental, whose population experienced almost total unemployment due to a factory closure during the Great Depression, and Katherine Newman's study of downward mobility in the 1980s.<sup>34</sup> These studies illuminate unemployment as an often emotionally and financially devastating experience. While the unemployed grappled with a profound loss of sense of self, their families, too, evinced deep pain as they reckoned with upended lives and sought to reconstruct new ones. These works provide insights into the gendered meanings that families attribute to both paid and unpaid work—specifically, the power of the ideology of the male-breadwinner.

Several decades later, there is ample evidence that the male-breadwinner ideology continues to flourish. Women still do more of all types of housework than men.<sup>35</sup> In a classic article, Julie Brines finds that breadwinning wives do *more* housework. This finding has been replicated in subsequent studies.<sup>36</sup> Cultural explanations may offer more compelling

explanations of this finding than economic ones: The hegemony of the male-breadwinner ideology means that both men and women are flouting gendered expectations when women are the providers. Women do more housework, and men do less, as a way of resetting the gender balance in the home.

Several studies have taken an innovative approach to measuring the power of the male-breadwinner ideology by studying whether couples' division of housework is shaped by men's unemployment. One showed that during unemployment, men's contribution to housework increases by three hours per week, but unemployed women (who are already usually doing more housework than their husbands) do an additional six hours of housework per week.<sup>37</sup> The research on the housework division of labor in terms of race is mixed, with some studies finding a more gender-egalitarian division of labor and others disagreeing.<sup>38</sup> Race is key in shaping different ideologies of motherhood, but does not appear to as conclusively shape the division of labor at home, including during unemployment.

More recent qualitative studies paint a more optimistic picture of couples' attitudes toward paid and unpaid work, including how they cope with job loss. These studies suggest that men's access to new, progressive forms of masculinity means that men no longer experience unemployment as a deep wound to their selfhood. These studies suggest that more gender-egalitarian ideologies may be replacing the older notion of the male-breadwinner and female-homemaker. This is plausible, given that the number of stay-at-home dads has doubled from 1.1 million in 1989 to 2.2 million in 2012. (Although this appears to be explained more by involuntary factors—such as being too ill to work and losing a job rather than choosing to stay at home. In contrast 85 percent of married mothers who stay at home cite caring for the family as a primary reason).<sup>39</sup>

Decades after Komarovsky's and Newman's respective studies, research on how unemployment impacts family life continues to focus on men's unemployment. But given that most women in the United States, including those with young children, work outside the home and contribute an increasing share to the household income, we also need to consider what women's unemployment means for family life. In the United States in

2017, 71.3 percent of mothers with children under the age of eighteen were in the labor force, including 63.1 percent of women with children under three. Close to two million women, or 3.7 percent of the labor force, who were between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four experienced unemployment in the same year.<sup>40</sup> The impacts of women's unemployment on family life cannot simply be extrapolated from studies of unemployment and theories of economic and emotional stress that have historically centered men's experiences. Nor does existing research fully consider that unemployment now occurs in a risk economy, where it is not just a one-time hurdle to be transcended but is likely a repeated occurrence. These facets of unemployment merit deeper consideration in order to develop a more comprehensive understandings of how families respond to unemployment.

#### GENDERED IDEALS IN FAMILY LIFE

Sociological research on how families, especially married couples, experience unemployment is typically oriented within a larger body of research that examines work, family, and gender. An underlying theme in this research is how ideals of femininity, masculinity, and parenthood shape how individuals and couples view, and respond to, their unemployment. Culturally dominant ideas of masculinity in America posit economic provision as central to men's roles as husbands and fathers. For women, in contrast, work is often framed as being in conflict with their primary role of motherhood. Ideals of "intensive motherhood," combined with a lack of affordable childcare and workplace hostility to caregiving responsibilities, reinforce this message.<sup>41</sup>

Research also points out that much of existing sociological research on families primarily captures the experiences and values of affluent, White, men and women involved in heterosexual relationships. Several scholars explain how women of color in the United States have integrated their roles as workers with their roles as mothers. Dawn Dow argues that middle-class and upper-middle-class Black women in the United States are less influenced by the ideology of intensive motherhood.<sup>42</sup> They are far more likely to operate within what she calls the "integrated motherhood"

model, in which women combine participation in paid work with unpaid work, are financially independent, and expect to draw on kin and community support for caregiving. Given denigrating and controlling images of Black women, the women in Dow's study are extremely concerned about maintaining middle-class respectability through their employment. Paid work is key to, rather than in conflict with, their identity as both women and mothers.

In contrast, the idea that paid work is intertwined with masculinity appears to be consistent across race and class groups in the United States. Some research suggests that affluent, White men, who are especially likely to prize working extremely long hours, are particularly attached to this ideology.<sup>43</sup> The link may not be as strong for other groups of men, particularly those who have a long history of being discriminated against in the US labor market. In a study of Black and White low-income fathers, Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson explain that these fathers' fluctuating experiences in the labor market meant that they revised their understandings of providing for their children from economic signifiers to the ability to spend time with and care for them.<sup>44</sup> Other research on low-income families finds some support for these patterns across racial groups.

Ideals of family life in the United States—including the role that each spouse plays in it—are shaped by the blend of aspects of identity, including gender, race, and class. These understandings are important for how couples and individuals respond to unemployment. But these family responses have been minimally understood, even as precarity becomes increasingly common, including in the highest-status occupations. How families' responses to unemployment vary depending on whether the unemployed individual is a husband or wife remains particularly understudied.

#### THE IDEAL JOB-SEEKER NORM: RESPONDING TO UNEMPLOYMENT IN AN ERA OF INSECURITY

I began this introduction with the Barons and the Brozeks, two families that have responded in distinct ways to the unemployment of one spouse. In this book, I show how professionally similar men and women have sharply divergent experiences of unemployment. The experiences of men

and women like Lisa and Todd cannot be explained away by how much the unemployed person earned either in absolute terms or relative to their spouse, by their age, the age of their children, or other such factors that are frequently used to account for gender inequalities at home. Instead, I argue, these different experiences arise from how couples understand who in the family bears the moral responsibility for providing the family's economic security. The income that men and women contribute in these families is not completely fungible; it is assigned different, and gendered, meanings.<sup>45</sup> The meanings assigned to a husband's or wife's income maps onto deeply classed, raced, and gendered expectations about who has the moral responsibility for providing economic security for the family. Couples' understanding of this moral responsibility shapes whether they emphasize or minimize the importance of reemployment for the unemployed spouse as well as whether, and how, couples direct resources to facilitating the unemployed spouse's job search.

The question of how families direct resources to the unemployed spouse is important because job-seeking in white-collar occupations in the United States has become an especially time-consuming and complex web of activities, skills, and personality traits that must be demonstrated to potential employers. Scholars detailing the contemporary world of white-collar job searching have explained that potential workers must demonstrate their devotion to finding a job by networking, working intensively with executive or career coaches (sometimes paying out-of-pocket, other times receiving this coaching as part of their severance package), scouring job boards, paying for job- and skill-related training and certification, and perfecting their résumés. Even basic job applications are time consuming because they require candidates to perform deep research into each job to better demonstrate a "chemistry" with each prospective employer.<sup>46</sup> Collectively, these expectations comprise what I term the *ideal job-seeker norm* (see table 1). The current context of changing work organization and shifting employer-worker relationships, where workers are expected to constantly be in the market for new opportunities, means that the ideal job-seeker norm may apply to many workers, including those who are employed. It is, of course, especially applicable to the unemployed. The ideal job-seeker norm is an expectation imposed primarily by the contemporary labor market.

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*Table 1* The Ideal Job-Seeker Norm
 

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|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Characteristics       | Devoted to finding work<br>Networks extensively<br>Works with executive and career coaches<br>Spends entire time job searching<br>Rebuilds skills/certification<br>Works largely from home (except for networking) |
| Employment conditions | Career trajectories are neither hierarchical nor stable<br>Horizontal career trajectories more common<br>Devotion to occupation/industry, not to a single employer   |
| Devotion demonstrated | At home, through interactions with spouse  |
| Rewards               |  |
| <i>Family</i>         | Resources (time, space, money, emotions) directed to job-seeker  |
| <i>Professionally</i> | Receiving an appropriate job   |

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Although seemingly gender neutral, the ideal job-seeker norm is gendered because men are encouraged, expected, and helped in complying with it, while women are not. Compliance with the norm is best possible when other family members also believe that finding a job is important, both financially and in terms of the unemployed family member's sense of self. As I show in this book, an unemployed person's ability to find a job is greatly facilitated by families who support, indeed expect, them to be ideal job-seekers. These families restructure their lives so that the unemployed person—usually a man—can comply with the extensive demands of job searching. Gendered expectations in the family mean that, while men are acknowledged as having a legitimate stake at being an ideal job-seeker, women are not. I argue that men are more able, and more encouraged by their spouse, than women to present themselves as “morally unemployed” persons and thus to access resources—such as time, money, space, and emotions—to facilitate their reemployment. In this study, men gain their moral standing by demonstrating to their wives that they are striving to be ideal job-seekers. Women, in contrast, are far less able to frame them-

selves as morally unemployed in order to gain similar resources. Instead, women continue to be expected to demonstrate their morality in the realm of domestic rather than paid work. Husbands do not unequivocally encourage their wives' attempts to fulfill the requirements of the ideal job-seekers.

Because this devotion to job searching is *demonstrated at home*, interactions among spouses are key to understanding how the ideal job-seeker norm functions. The ability to claim to be morally unemployed, and thus receive support as an ideal job-seeker, depends on mundane interactions among couples. These interactions are guided by well-understood cultural scripts about how each social actor in a situation should respond.<sup>47</sup> Scholars often refer to this approach as “doing gender.”<sup>48</sup> These cultural scripts, as I show, turn on raced and classed ideals that inform gendered expectations. Couples generally lack well-defined scripts for their interactions in uncertain circumstances, such as unemployment.<sup>49</sup> Although social actors—or couples, in this study—could create new scripts to account for their new economic realities, I find that they instead fall into modes of interacting that privilege traditional gender worldviews. These more traditional ideals of family appear to represent aspirational scripts for these couples, who are striving to hold on to their sense of what is symbolically appropriate for their social class, in a context where that social class position is threatened. Throughout this book, I emphasize that couples' interactions are not just the result of preordained beliefs about gender and marriage, but that interactions are crucial to sustaining beliefs and behaviors that end up being far more traditional than the material realities of their lives might otherwise predict.

The concept of the ideal job-seeker as I discuss it here builds upon the related concept of the “ideal worker norm,” which has been powerful in explaining how the organization of work is gendered. The ideal worker norm explains that securing stable, well-paying jobs—whether in white-collar work or in blue-collar work—requires workers to demonstrate their commitment to working long hours, working weekends, being able to relocate for paid work, working outside the home, and demonstrating a “devotion” to paid work. As scholar Joan Williams explains, these expectations mean that the implicit ideal worker is understood to be a man who has a wife at home who can free the (male) ideal worker from the brunt of

domestic and care work. Couples justify the support that wives provide to the ideal male worker on grounds of the income the worker then earns. In contrast to the ideal job-seeker, who must demonstrate dedication *at home*, the ideal worker shows devotion to work primarily *at paid work*, to superiors and colleagues.<sup>50</sup> The conceptualization of the ideal job-seeker norm illuminates how neoliberal logics, shaped by changes in organizational functioning, permeate the intimate realm of marriage.

A main distinction between the ideal job-seeker norm and the ideal worker norm is the emphasis that the former places on intimate interactions. In the ideal worker norm, institutions of paid work are the key contributors to gender inequalities. The ideal job-seeker norm, in contrast, highlights the role of spousal interactions as a significant driving force in the persistence of gender inequality.<sup>51</sup> The ideal job-seeker norm illuminates how, even in the absence of paid work, the home and family life are structured to comply with the demands of job searching. The intimate realm becomes commodified as a response to the labor market that its members encounter. Men, as I show in this book, are more able than women to adhere to the expectation that they should organize their days around job searching, and more able to protect their time from other tasks. Even when women had been the primary earners before their unemployment, families downplay the importance of women's income and employment.

While some of the men and women profiled in this book often claim to embrace progressive attitudes toward gender and family, in practice, they find it challenging to struggle against traditional expectations of a male-breadwinner. Unemployment is a time of flux. In these dual-earner families, couples with unemployed husbands at home could rewrite gender scripts by embracing stay-at-home fatherhood. Likewise, couples with unemployed women who had been breadwinners could encourage the wife to reenter paid employment. I do not find this. Instead, I find that, in this moment of economic uncertainty, couples do not break out of traditional gender norms. The dominant response is to dig in their heels, recreating gender norms, frequently in defiance of the material realities of their lives. Cultural ideals of the male-breadwinner model prove to be alluring for many of these families, with couples seeing this ideal as the key to maintaining their social status at a time when their social position

Table 2 Sample

|                                 | <i>Interviews</i> | <i>Follow-up<br/>Interviews</i> | <i>Family<br/>Observations</i> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Unemployed men                  | 25                | 11                              | 2                              |
| Wives of unemployed men         | 13                | 7                               |                                |
| Unemployed women                | 23                | 13                              | 2                              |
| Husbands of unemployed<br>women | 11                | 4                               |                                |
| TOTAL                           | 72                | 35                              | 4                              |

is threatened. Through shared understandings and daily interactions, couples preserve the gender status quo, actively maintaining men's position at the helm of paid work and women's in unpaid work.

#### THE STUDY

The above argument draws from a deep and unique data set. I conducted in-depth interviews with heterosexual, married, college-educated, unemployed, American men and women who have children (see table 2).<sup>52</sup> About 80 percent of the families in this study are White, with the remaining coming from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. I also conducted interviews with many spouses of these unemployed men and women. I talked with over seventy people from forty-eight families. Because I talked with many people several times, this book draws from over 110 in-depth interviews. The families were almost evenly split between those of unemployed men and unemployed women. Table 3 contains demographic details, including the age of participants, the length of their marriage, duration of unemployment, household income, and so on.

I focus on this elite sample—as defined by their social class, family structure, and often race—for several reasons. First, while sociological research has been deeply concerned with unemployment and its consequences, the focus has usually been on how unemployment impacts the poor or working classes. This focus made sense in an economy in which

*Table 3* Descriptive Data on Unemployed Men, Unemployed Women, and Their Families

|  | <i>Unemployed Men</i> | <i>Unemployed Women</i> |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| N =  | 25                    | 23*                     |
| Educational attainment                                       |                       |                         |
| Graduate degree  | 12                    | 19                      |
| Bachelor's degree  | 11                    | 4                       |
| Some college   | 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 and earns the same as unemployed individual prior to unemployment | 7    | 6            |
| Works full-time and earns more than unemployed individual prior to unemployment   | 3    | 4            |
| Works full-time and earns less than unemployed individual prior to unemployment   | 10   | 9            |
| Works part-time and earns less than unemployed individual prior to unemployment   | 5    | 0            |
| Unemployed and job searching  | 0    | 3            |

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\* One unemployed woman declined to provide specific information on household finances, such that some of the figures will add up to twenty-two rather than twenty-three responses.

the middle-classes enjoyed employment stability and economic security, as they did in the United States in the period following World War II. But given the changing economic landscape, in which even the professional classes have started feeling the consequences of economic insecurity, we need to understand how unemployment impacts even those better equipped to cushion the blow. This social class is also significant because higher education and skill levels have traditionally represented the final bulwarks against employment insecurity—but now even this group is feeling the effects of precarity. As people who are generally doing well in American society, these families are also the ones setting social and cultural norms, despite being an empirical minority. They are, as sociologist Pamela Stone (2007) puts it, the “cultural arbiters” who are setting hegemonic parameters for acceptable, perhaps even lauded, ways of organizing family life in the new economy.

Second, there is a dearth of research on unemployed women. I focused on dual-earner families precisely so that I could compare the families of unemployed men and unemployed women, without running into cases that cannot be appropriately compared to each other—for example, how unemployment is experienced in a male-breadwinner home versus in a home led by a single mother. A comparison such as that would not be particularly illuminating for understanding gender norms in marriages.

Finally, the affluence of my sample often shields its members from the worst material impacts of unemployment. These families are primarily concerned with maintaining their social-class status and their privilege, rather than survival, in the wake of economic threats. The symbolic work that connotes their class status is important. Understanding how these families respond to unemployment provides insights into the ramifications of economic precarity at the top of the income distribution. Indeed, their responses to unemployment may contribute to sustaining high income inequality, even in a context of precarity for all.

I spent hours talking with each participant, individually, about their experiences with unemployment. I inquired about their education and career history, about how the process of losing their most recent job unfolded, how they felt about it, how it shaped their relationship with their spouse, children, and extended family and friends. I led our conversations, often held over cups of coffee or over lunch or dinner, into prob-

ing how these unemployed individuals spent their time, including how activities such as housework or job searching featured in their daily schedule. In short, my aim was to get a deep sense of what it felt like to be unemployed.

I conducted interviews with spouses separately, because I aimed to get the most transparent replies. For this sensitive topic of unemployment, this was the correct choice. As I note in the methodological appendix, this does not mean that I always got transparent responses—participants were performing for me, as a social actor with whom they interacted. In my interviews with spouses, I asked what their husband's or wife's unemployment had been like for them. I was trying to get a multifaceted picture of how one partner's unemployment is experienced in the family, keeping in mind that different family members might have significantly different experiences.<sup>53</sup> I also spoke with a few of the children of my participants to gain their perspective.

Six months to a year after the first interview with participants, I went back and interviewed them again. Unemployment is a particularly time-sensitive experience, and there can be significant differences between how unemployment feels in the first month and how it feels many months later. In these follow-up interviews, I sought to understand how family members' perspectives and feelings about their experience with unemployment had evolved.

Finally, I conducted "intensive family observations" with four of these families.<sup>54</sup> In two families the women were unemployed—these were the families of Darlene and Larry Bach and Rebecca and Chuck Mason. In the other two, men were unemployed. These were the families of William and Shannon Smith and Robert and Laura Jansson. In keeping with sociological practice, all names of participants in this book are pseudonyms. I hung out with each family for two weeks (in one case, three weeks), usually visiting them daily for an average of four hours per visit. I completed at least fifty hours of observations with each of the four families over the course of these weeks. I ate lunches and dinners with them, attended birthday parties and went on trips to the zoo, library, and grocery stores, helped paint a house, and went on an in-state road-trip with one family. Hanging out with families gave me greater insight into how a spouse's unemployment shaped the daily rhythm of family life, the conversations that couples had

with each other, and how they discussed unemployment with their children, friends, and other family members.

This book draws on these interviews and observations that I collected over the course of three years. As I detail in the methodological appendix, because I encountered a range of experiences—with some couples coping far better than others—I can be reasonably certain that this study was not biased toward capturing only those couples who were weathering unemployment well or poorly. While the book is based on this larger sample, in presenting my findings, I purposefully zoom in on one family that is illustrative of broader patterns or, where appropriate, represents an exceptional case in this study. This is so that the reader does not get lost in the detail of who is who, and who said what when. It is also my hope that presenting the data in this way will give the reader a deep sense of what life is like for these unemployed individuals and their families. My hope is that this book adds to our understanding of what unemployment looks and feels like on a daily basis, for this social class.

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

I start this book by meeting unemployed men and women when they are weeks, months, and sometimes even years, into their unemployment. But often, worries about losing a job had started well before the job loss itself. In part 1 of the book, I examine how the space of the home becomes a gendered site of contention for unemployed men, but a haven for unemployed women. In chapter 1, I delve into the cases of two families of unemployed men to show how wives play a crucial part in encouraging husbands to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm, with men's being at home becoming a source of tension for some couples but not others. In chapter 2, I delve into the cases of unemployed women to show how spousal interactions nudge women away from the ideal job-seeker norm. This is the dominant experience that unemployed women in my sample faced. But I also examine a case of a woman who feels uneasy at home. I thus explain the variation that women, but not men, experience in terms of staying at home.

In part 2 of the book, I look at the gendered organization of time around job searching. In chapter 3, I explain how daily interactions among unem-

ployed men and their wives shape the tenor of their relationship. For some couples, men's unemployment becomes a time where they become closer and more bound together. In these cases, husbands and wives work together to enable husbands to comply with the ideal job-seeker norm. Others struggle more, and the ideal job-seeker norm looms unpleasantly over their interactions. Interactions are crucial in consolidating gender-normative responses, which privilege men's employment above all else. In chapter 4, I look at unemployed women. In contrast to the situation with unemployed men, the husbands in these marriages mostly dismiss the idea that women's time needs to be protected for job searching. For the most part, wives do not insist that their time should be protected either. I then delve into two variations: one of a woman who behaves like an ideal job-seeker and another of a woman who does not, but whose husband wishes she would.

In part 3 of the book, I focus on the division of housework. In chapter 5, I consider a question that continues to hover over researchers studying paid and unpaid work among couples: why don't unemployed men do more housework? I present two case studies of families, through which I show how the ideal job-seeker norm protects men's time from housework. Interactions among spouses convey to men that they are not responsible for housework, despite being unemployed. But I also show how and when men are more likely to do more housework. In chapter 6, I assess unemployed women's approach to housework, asking why women, who already do the majority of the housework, take on even more during unemployment. I also consider cases of women who do not take on more housework. These cases, like those of unemployed men who do more housework than the norm, illuminate more gender-egalitarian possibilities when it comes to sharing equally in parenting and providing. The conclusion ends by considering some of the implications of the ideal job-seeker norm for broader inequalities.