

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 antsier 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.¹ 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.² 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.”³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ As women and people of color enter certain occupations, those occupations often become devalued, making them more susceptible to layoffs.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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.”¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Once women lose a job, they experience greater earning losses than men.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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.²¹ 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."²²

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."²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ Many Americans must continue to work beyond retirement to make ends meet.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³²

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.³³ 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 Mariantal, 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ In a classic article, Julie Brines finds that breadwinning wives do *more* housework. This finding has been replicated in subsequent studies.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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).³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴² They are far more likely to operate within what she calls the "integrated motherhood"