

Man enough to let my wife support me:

How changing models of career and gender are reshaping the experience of unemployment

ABSTRACT

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among unemployed U.S. high-technology workers, I challenge the association of job loss and unemployment with a crisis of masculinity. I argue that, in the United States today, middle-class workers conceptualize their careers as a string of contract positions, thus mitigating the personal and professional consequences of job loss and unemployment. Changing gender roles and the rise of dual-earner marriages in the United States have also reshaped the experience of middle-class unemployment, alleviating some of the emasculating effects of unemployment for men but prompting new crises for unemployed women. [ethnography, middle class, unemployment, dual-earner couples, gender roles]

[The unemployed man] experiences a sense of deep frustration because in his own eyes he fails to fulfill what is the central duty of his life, the very touchstone of his manhood—the role of family provider.

—Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and His Family* (1940)

Downward mobility strikes at the heart of the “masculine ideal” for the American middle class. When the man of the house has failed at the task that most clearly defines his role, he suffers a loss of identity as a man. When this is coupled with the admirable efforts of a wife to salvage the situation by going out to work, the man’s response may be intensified feelings of impotence and rage culminating in abuse.

—Katherine Newman, *Falling from Grace* (1988)

Men’s prestige, their value to others, and their self-worth are measured by their identity as workers and their earnings from their work. Men who do not have jobs are frequently branded as unworthy, morally inferior, and failures as men.

—Nicholas Townsend, *The Package Deal* (2002)

I make a badass crème brulee. I made cookies this morning. I’ve been doing a lot of June Cleaver type things at home. The Mrs. likes it because, like, I made beef ribs last week. I seriously made cookies the other day. Chocolate chip with four kinds of chips that she took in to the office . . . [Being unemployed is] not the end of the world. I think Americans probably identify too much of their self-worth with what they do for a living. And that’s too bad.

—Interview with Craig Murray, unemployed U.S. technology worker (2002)

As the first three quotations above demonstrate, studies of unemployment throughout the last century have consistently equated job loss and unemployment with a crisis of masculinity that prompts depression, frustration, self-blame, and self-doubt in jobless men. More recent research confirms that the

expectation that men should succeed at work and support their families has by no means disappeared in the contemporary United States (see, e.g., Potuchek 1997; Townsend 2002). Yet the final quotation above, and similar accounts from other unemployed middle-class high-technology workers, complicates the framing of unemployment as inherently devastating and emasculating. As I demonstrate in this article, structural changes around work and cultural shifts in the meanings of career, manhood, and marriage have transformed the experience of job loss and unemployment for some middle-class U.S. workers, both men and women. Together, these shifts, and how they play out in the lives and minds of individual workers, necessitate a rethinking of the relationships between job loss, unemployment, and personal and professional crisis.

Over the last four decades, the social contract of employment has been dismantled, supplanted by a model in which flexibility, rather than security, serves as the benchmark for companies and their employees.¹ Meanwhile, state-sponsored social services and employer-provided benefits have been scaled back in the name of the free market, effectively transferring risk and accountability onto individual workers, who are encouraged to embrace personal responsibility and the opportunity to govern themselves.² Scholars have often asserted the sway of neoliberal ideas about individualism, competition, and the free market (see, e.g., Frank 2000; Kipnis 2008; Urciuoli 2008) but have paid less attention to documenting, in empirical detail, the lives of neoliberal subjects.³

In this article, I set out to fill in that gap. I consider a group of white-collar technology workers who espouse a decidedly neoliberal philosophy of work and career, one that outlines how and why individuals must assume responsibility for managing their own increasingly volatile careers. This ideology plays a central role in shaping how the workers experience and understand job loss and unemployment. Its impact is compounded by the material realities of tech workers' lives, including the social capital that derives from their educational level, professional status, and access to financial resources. The most significant material advantage most of these workers have over previous generations of laid-off professionals, however, is their place within dual-earner couples. Not only does a spouse's income cushion the financial implications of job loss but the ways job seekers talk about their marriages and responsibilities also reflect a decidedly new perspective on male and female gender roles within the family and labor force. Perhaps most surprisingly, those shifts seem to have very different implications for male and female job seekers, further destabilizing traditional models of how middle-class men and women respond to job loss and unemployment.

The findings outlined herein are the product of four years of ethnographic fieldwork among unemployed technology workers in Dallas, Texas, including open-ended in-

terviews and participant-observation.⁴ Most of the research took place between 2001 and 2004, when Dallas, like many other U.S. cities, was experiencing waves of layoffs centered in the high-technology fields of telecommunications, computing, and Internet-related businesses. I initially focused on how tech workers experienced the loss of a job and the process of searching for another full-time professional position (as opposed to the low-paid, low-status jobs, usually outside of high tech, that many job seekers obtained with relative ease but saw as temporary and not, in their words, "real" work). With time, I became equally interested in the cultural narratives of career, success, loss, and accountability that job seekers drew on when explaining their situation. As I spoke with out-of-work tech professionals, in their homes, at coffee shops, and at various networking events, I was surprised to hear them express a relatively upbeat and accepting attitude toward their layoffs and, for some, prolonged unemployment.

On the basis of previous studies of unemployment, I had expected to find an atmosphere of crisis among these job seekers, particularly as recent events—the bursting of the dot-com bubble, an imploding telecommunications industry, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and a subsequent recession and oxymoronic "jobless recovery"—made speedy reemployment in their chosen fields improbable. To be clear, the job seekers I spoke with were not happy about having lost their jobs; they worried about money, chafed at the insulting lack of response to their e-mailed resumes, and missed making use of their professional skills. Yet, in our discussions, these workers quickly made it clear that the loss of a job, frustrating as it might be, was not an unexpected or unprecedented event in their professional lives. Many had been laid off before, some multiple times, and most had come of professional age long after mass layoffs had become an expected if unwelcome feature of the U.S. labor market. Few had expected to spend the rest of their working lives with their former employers, and so job change was not so much an aberration in the careers they had imagined as an expected component of them. Indeed, for these workers, the very idea of pursuing job security and satisfaction through long-term employment at a single company, or even in a single industry, seemed outmoded and naive, not to mention tantamount to professional suicide.

The social contract of employment in which corporate employers reward loyalty and hard work with job security, steady pay, and a shot at upward mobility was never a reality for the majority of U.S. workers. Yet, at one point in the postwar United States, elite, educated, white males expected to live out their professional lives ensconced in the security of long-term corporate employment. That era, today's tech workers insist, is long gone and unlikely to return, regardless of whether one celebrates or laments its demise. In place of long-term job security, they say, a

less predictable, more protean model of employment exists, in which employees themselves assume responsibility for managing their careers. According to this philosophy of work, which I refer to as “career management,” each individual must conceptualize him- or herself as an independent contractor, regardless of whether his or her current work situation is full-time, part-time, contract, consulting, volunteer, or no job at all. For “career managers,” as adherents to this philosophy are called, job change is not only expected but also necessary, and retraining, networking, and job seeking are permanent aspects of a well-managed career. For them, job security is born not of steady employment at a single company but of constant vigilance, flexibility, and employability. This philosophy, espoused by nearly every job seeker I spoke with, can take on a decidedly evangelical cast, with career managers quick to explain why every worker should, or even must, embrace this approach to work and career.

These ideas about work, however, were not the idiosyncratic invention of a grassroots movement of displaced tech workers, nor were they randomly plucked from the cultural ether. Instead, they represent a new chapter in a much longer intellectual history. The central tenets of career management—that the social contract of employment has changed and workers, not their employers, should be responsible for planning for their professional futures, whether within a single company or beyond it—were first outlined by management experts in the 1970s (see, e.g., Bolles 1972; Hall 1976; Sarason 1977). Corporate employers, captivated by the “lean and mean” management ethos, were quick to embrace a perspective that allowed them to frame insecure employment as a boon for worker and company alike. As one manager put it, “To give my employees job security would be to disempower them and relieve them of the responsibility that they need to feel for their own success” (Ross 2003:17). In the decades since, career management has escaped the confines of management theory and threaded its way into U.S. white-collar culture through career advice manuals, self-help books, business school curricula, employee training manuals, and even a best-selling parable about the search for peripatetic cheese.⁵

Critics have aptly noted the emotional labor required to maintain an image of oneself as a flexible, self-reliant entrepreneur, particularly in the face of a tight labor market and obvious power disparities between employer and employee (Kunda and Van Maanen 1999). It is also clear that workers who embrace insecure employment as a means of achieving autonomy are, in fact, doing exactly what corporations would prefer that they do, namely, take pride in their work while on the job and not make a fuss when their “contract” ends. In this sense, career managers epitomize the neoliberal “enterprising self,” convinced not only to assume responsibility for functions previously shouldered by their employers but also to conceptualize their choice to

do so as an empowering one (Miller and Rose 1995:455). It would be inaccurate and overly simplistic, though, to characterize career managers as unwitting dupes of the neoliberal state or corporate capitalism. Career managers are well aware that it was employers, not employees, who initially reneged on the promises of the social contract of employment, by engaging in frequent and widespread layoffs, even in times of high profits. Despite this, they still tend to frame career management as a means of retaliating against, or at least protecting oneself from, disloyal, self-interested employers.

Project manager Mike Barnard, for instance, lost his job when the telecommunications company at which he worked disbanded his entire department in late September 2001. Like many tech workers who lost their jobs soon before or after the terrorist attacks of September 11, that event loomed large in his explanation of both his layoff and the unwelcoming labor market he has encountered since. Yet, sitting across from me at a Starbucks in an upscale Dallas shopping center, Mike, who had just turned 50, was less interested in looking back at the events that prompted his layoff than in looking ahead to the kind of future he believed all workers will one day face.

We’re not going to go back to the sixties or seventies or whatever in terms of the job market, so I think people are going to have to start changing their view on their jobs. . . . You need to be able to look at your job now as temporary and evolving. . . . Look at yourself as an independent contractor, more as an independent contractor and less as an employee. Think of what it is that you can offer as opposed to [asking,] “What do you want me to do?” Be more proactive at what it is that you’re trying to do. [That] is really where the answers really lie. . . . Going out and looking for a job, it’s a sucker’s game. You’ll keep it as long as they want to let you have it. That’s easy to say. A lot of people are more than happy to go and do the nine-to-five gig and go home and not worry about it but they are liable to be a victim. They will be victimized because they allow themselves to be.⁶

For Mike and the many job seekers who echo his perspective, job change—voluntary or not—is an expected and even necessary part of professional development. When each job is simply one in a long string of temporary positions, rather than the foundation on which professional identity depends, losing a single job, although rarely easy, is not the personal or professional crisis it would be for an employee who expected to spend the rest of his or her career with one employer.

Career management goes beyond just cushioning the psychological blow of unemployment. Previous studies have conceptualized unemployment as a liminal space between culturally sanctioned employment-based identities, an aberration in the expected career path (Layne 2000:

492–519; Newman 1988:90–94). For career managers, who conceptualize each job as simply one in a long string of contract positions, however, professional identity is not based on a single position. This perspective is due in part to the normalization of job change over the last quarter century, a trend that has been particularly pronounced within the field of high tech. As a result, technology workers' professional identities tend to be linked much more strongly to the work they do than to the employers they do it for; they also belong to professional communities, made up of overlapping networks of former, current, and potential future coworkers, that extend well beyond the borders of a single workplace (Saxenian 1996; Zabusky and Barley 1996).⁷ Their sense of themselves as productive professionals is therefore no longer tied to retaining a single job or advancing within a specific company (or even industry, for that matter), and unemployed tech workers can refer to themselves as, for example, database managers, web designers, or consultants regardless of whether they are currently employed in those roles.

It is for this reason, as some readers may already have noted, that I use the term *unemployed* even when referring to individuals who are working for pay. This use reflects tech workers' own language and self-perception, as they usually refer to themselves as "out of work" or "unemployed" despite having a paid job when that job is either completely outside the tech field (e.g., waiting tables, stocking shelves, delivering flowers) or has a pay or status level that, in their perception, does not match or even approach that of their former position. Most job seekers consider themselves reemployed only when they achieve a full-time, well-paid position in or close to their chosen profession, obscuring the downward mobility their current pay and position would suggest they are experiencing. By delinking their professional identity from the work for which they are actually paid (or the absence of any paid employment), job seekers are able to maintain a career narrative that presents them as successful professionals, sidestepping, at least to a degree, the association of joblessness with failure or inadequacy.

This narrative of the autonomous, flexible career manager who, in the words of one job seeker, "takes control of [his or her] own destiny" clearly taps into the U.S. origin myth of self-reliant pioneers fending for themselves in an uncharted, unpredictable environment. One online job board catering to contract workers actually claims to "reflect the 'spirit' of workforce pioneers who 'are leaving the corporate world to become independent professionals'" (Marschall 2001:121–122). This opposing of the frontierlike, self-sufficient career manager and the naive, dependent corporate victim provides jobless workers with a narrative that celebrates rather than stigmatizes their unsteady employment records. In addition, it associates job loss not with failure but with self-reliance and a willingness

to rise to the occasion, both traits that soften the allegedly emasculating effects of unemployment.

Job seekers tend to characterize embracing career management as a matter of attitude and personal choice. As Mike Barnard says, "People are going to have to start changing their view on their jobs." This framing of career management simply as a new perspective on employment fails to acknowledge the material conditions that this perspective presumes. Wrestling control of one's destiny and withstanding prolonged financial and professional uncertainty can be a pricey and precarious endeavor. All but one job seeker in my study had a bachelor's degree; some held advanced degrees in fields such as engineering, physics, computer science, and business administration. Their prelay-off annual incomes ranged from approximately \$40,000 to \$100,000, with a few high-end outliers among former executives. Solidly positioned in the middle and upper classes, these job seekers have access to financial and professional resources rarely available to people in less profitable fields.⁸ Most have enough savings to carry them through a few months of unemployment, and all have access to numerous lines of credit (although taking advantage of this option presents risks of its own).⁹ In addition, laid-off tech workers generally have a strong extended network of employed friends, former colleagues, and professional associates on whom they rely in their job search. Thus, although the generalizability of this study's findings are constrained by the demographic particulars of this relatively privileged group, that very privilege undergirds the logic and resilience of the ideology they espouse.

Although the class assumptions and material advantages bolstering career managers' flexibility and autonomy are rarely acknowledged by career managers themselves, many job seekers are quick to point to another resource on which they heavily rely—the working spouse or partner. Just over half of laid-off tech workers in the greater Dallas area had a working spouse at the time of their job loss, which corresponds closely to the nation as a whole, in which more than half of all married couples include two full-time earners (North Texas Technology Council [NTTC] 2003).¹⁰ The forces that have compelled the rise of dual-earner couples have been well documented if ardently debated. (Such couples are also commonly called "dual-career," though usually only when their members are middle or upper class.) Different accounts emphasize different parts of the equation, but the general consensus is that the rising cost of living has coincided with the dismantling of barriers against married middle-class women's workforce participation to create a situation in which most middle-class U.S. households either need or prefer to have two full-time incomes. Scholars and social pundits alike have faced off over whether families in which both husband and wife are employed are more or less stable, emotionally connected, and prepared to withstand financial and other crises than

families with a sole, usually male, earner (see, e.g., Barnett and Rivers 1996; Warren and Tyagi 2003). Yet the proliferation of dual-earner couples, like any cultural phenomenon, cannot be identified in any simple way as good or bad, beneficial or detrimental. Clearly, the introduction of the working spouse and the financial safety net she or he represents presents certain complications to the model of the self-reliant career manager. Yet determining exactly how belonging to a dual-earner couple reshapes the structure and experience of job loss and unemployment requires exploring both the lived experiences of job seekers themselves and how the support of their working spouses fits into the story they tell themselves—and others—about their unemployed status.

On a sunny fall day in 2004 I met Ed Donnelly for breakfast at a warehouselike used-book store just east of Dallas. Ed, 58 at the time of that interview, is a slight, intense man with piercing blue eyes and a quick laugh. I had interviewed Ed two years earlier after meeting him at an early-morning networking event for unemployed tech workers. In our first interview, he told me about being laid off from his job as a computer programmer at a major telecommunications company on the Thursday before September 11, 2001. A long-time gardener, Ed was happy to have found a part-time sales position at a gardening supply store. He enjoyed the job and saw it as a pleasant and paying way to pass the time as he retrained in a more in-demand field of programming, as his own specialty was becoming increasingly out of date. When we met again more than two years later, Ed was still in the midst of what he called his “personal remake,” accumulating certifications in new programming fields while working part-time in a home electronics store. He had struggled with depression since his job loss and was becoming increasingly concerned that when the upturn in high-tech employment happened, as he was certain it eventually would, he might be passed over in favor of younger people trained in more cutting-edge fields.

In the meantime, Ed explained, he and his family were managing pretty well financially. They had paid off their mortgage in 2002, which eased their financial responsibilities considerably, and had not had to cut too deeply into their savings. His wife, also a software programmer, had been laid off around the same time Ed was, but she quickly found a new position and they were getting by on her salary, supplemented by Ed’s part-time income from the electronics store. Ed told me, “[My wife] has gotten a pretty decent job, so she is basically the breadwinner in the family and I am struggling to pay my share of the expenses. And unlike a lot of guys I don’t have a problem with me having the lower income.”

At that moment it occurred to me that a lot of the men I had met and spoken with over the preceding few years had uttered similar statements. Many were in situations similar to Ed’s, and they too were quick to praise their spouses for

their support, both financial and emotional, and to reference the partnership ideal at the core of their marriages.¹¹

Will Ericsson, a technology executive laid off from the defense firm where he had worked for 22 years, mentioned numerous times how fortunate he was to have an employed spouse. A religious man who was considering leaving the tech industry to start a prison ministry, Will first expressed his appreciation for his wife’s emotional and spiritual support during his time out of work. He went on to emphasize that her substantial salary as an executive at his former employer made his job search much less stressful.

I’ve been fortunate that my physical needs have been taken care of [by my wife’s income and our savings]. I see that others tend to panic when they start to see that money running out. So people need to know that this is how long I’ve got and this is how long I need to take [to find a job]. . . . Mine can take as long as it needs to take. Not everybody has that luxury. And I recognize that as a luxury.¹²

Will’s friend Peter Dumond lost his job as a chief technology officer at a telecommunications startup in Deep Ellum, the downtown hub of Dallas’s Internet industry. Sitting once again in a Starbucks, this time in the Dallas suburb of Plano, I asked Peter, then 38, how his quality of life was affected by his layoff. He told me,

Financially, intellectually, I’d prepared for it so I had a big nest egg built up. I just stopped spending money on expensive things for the months ahead. And unemployment [benefits provided by the government are] enough. Between that and the fact that my wife is working, I haven’t been hurting. It’s not like some people I know that are living in \$2,000 a month apartments and you add food bills to that and car payments, unemployment is just a drop in the bucket. They had to be working within a month. There’s no way [they could get reemployed that quickly].

Although he had expected to be out of work only for four or five months, at seven months Peter was unconcerned. He was, he explained, still ahead of the “statistical average,” as, at that time, the average duration of unemployment for laid-off Dallas tech workers was 14 months (NTTC 2003). He was doing a bit of short-term contract work in the meantime to earn some money to get by, and, he said, “I relied a lot on my wife. There was not any way around it.”

Whereas Peter’s statement that “there was not any way around” relying financially on his wife suggests that, for him, the situation was less than ideal, 41-year-old website developer Craig Murray actually reveled in his (admittedly temporary) transformation into a stay-at-home spouse. With close-cropped, dyed blonde hair, stylish but casual clothing, and funky black-rimmed glasses, Craig, who I quoted at the start of this article, was something of

a poster boy for the irreverent high-tech style of the time. His job loss in the first weeks of 2002 came as no surprise to him, as his employer had already held multiple rounds of layoffs. It did surprise him, however, when his usually high blood pressure immediately dropped 15 points. Craig was not sure what sort of job he wanted to find, but he knew he wanted something less stressful and more fulfilling than his previous position. In the meantime—and perhaps for the long term—he was living up to the ideal of the career manager, pursuing various short-term freelance positions while his wife's steadier income as an accountant paid the majority of their bills. He was perfectly comfortable, even gleeful doing "June Cleaver type things at home." Clearly, Craig was not fixated on achieving the role of male breadwinner, or even equal coearner, and neither were Will and Peter, although they were somewhat less exuberant about it.

Craig and his wife did not have children, and neither did Will or Peter. Yet nearly two-thirds of the men I spoke with who were married or lived with female partners did have children, as did more than a third of female interviewees with husbands or live-in male partners. (Roughly one-quarter of male job seekers and over 40 percent of female job seekers were single at the time of the interviews.) It is therefore worth investigating whether parenthood, and fatherhood in particular, complicates male job seekers' ease in relinquishing the role of steady earner. A 1997 study of gender and breadwinning in dual-earner couples found that young, highly educated couples without children were far more likely than other couples to embrace the ideal of "co-breadwinning," in which neither spouse's job is seen as the primary source of income or the more important career (Potuchek 1997). This finding explains in part why the educated, middle-class tech workers in this study are more comfortable relying on spousal income than are other workers.¹³ It also begs the question of whether and how fatherhood, in particular, shapes job seekers' attitudes toward unemployment and relying on a wife's income.

I first met Alex Brodsky at a networking happy hour for high-tech executives in October 2001. At that event, a catered dinner, Alex kept our table captivated with stories of the comically awful demise of the Internet consulting firm from which he had been laid off and that was now being sued by numerous former employees (although Alex was not one of them). Alex's career was, even among high-tech workers, an untraditional one. He joined the army right after high school. After receiving an honorable discharge a few years later, he found work in advertising as a graphic designer. Despite not having gone to college, Alex did well in advertising, moving up through the ranks into a management position. Along the way, he met Hannah, now his wife, a high school teacher with a master's degree in English. About a decade ago, just before his 30th birthday, the ad agency laid Alex off. He was immediately offered a high-paying position at another ad firm, but before he accepted

it, Hannah offered him what she called a "one-time good deal": She would support them both while he went back to school for his bachelor's degree. Although ambivalent about losing the high salary he could likely earn in advertising, Alex took her up on the deal and worked part-time waiting tables to help with the bills. Four years later, with his business administration degree in hand, Alex was offered a position that, even at entry level, paid far more than the job for which he had once considered passing up a chance at college. As usual, he said, Hannah, his "red-headed Irish girl," had been proven right.

As Alex established a name for himself in the growing field of information architecture (IA), which involves website development, design, and management, the couple had a daughter, Ella. Both Alex and Hannah remained employed full-time, and Alex moved into a new position as senior information architect at an up-and-coming Internet consulting firm. The job involved long hours, but Alex enjoyed it until, following the dot-com crash, the firm started losing clients and, in his opinion, engaging in unethical business practices to stay afloat. Alex was neither surprised nor particularly disappointed by his layoff, as the office had become a miserable place in the months leading up to it, but it did leave the family in a difficult financial position. Just after his layoff, Alex was involved in a car wreck, and he suffered negative side effects, including severe depression, from his prescription pain medication. Ella, then two, fell unexpectedly ill. Bills for her three-day hospital stay, coupled with Alex's own medical expenses from the car wreck, ate up what little savings the couple had. Still in debt for Alex's college education, they filed for bankruptcy. Despite these financial and emotional difficulties, the family was, Alex said, stronger than ever.

The key to [handling the discouragement of prolonged unemployment] is my marriage. I've got a very, very strong marriage and a little kid who no matter what you do that day, no matter what's happened that day, you can't look at a little one like that and be pissed off. She doesn't care that you feel like a schmuck. She doesn't care that you've had a bad day. When she sees you at the end of the day she runs up to you and screams "Daddy" and you forget all the rest of it. I've been married ten years now as of March. This isn't my first time being unemployed. . . . And again that's put a big burden on her [i.e., Hannah]. She supported me through that. That's the key to it. She has taken on incredible burdens to help me to do the things that I need to do. Not to her complete detriment to the point that she completely loses [her] identity, but knowing that we're both working towards something. I'm doing my part, she's doing her part.

His part, he clarified, consisted primarily of caring for Ella and the household while Hannah worked, which had

significantly reduced the time he could spend on his job search:

Theoretically I'm free to interview and look for work . . . or meet with other people trying to find work. What it really kind of came down to or meant was that during the day I was doing laundry, running whatever errands needed to be done, paying the bills, taking care of all the domestic things that go into keeping a household running, because I was the only one available and that was a job that I was able to do. Usually cleaning up after the pink tornado has run all over the house the night before. So that was sort of the routine that we got into. So it became less about looking for work and more about cleaning the garage or doing whatever else. Keep the laundry from piling up.

Despite the reduced time available for job searching and the frustrations of waiting tables, a job that, on completing his B.S. Alex had sworn he would never do again, he and Hannah made a conscious decision that he would not accept the first full-time tech job that came along but would, instead, wait for a position that matched his skills and interests.¹⁴ Until then, they agreed, Hannah's teaching salary would continue to be the family's primary support, and Alex would retain his role as manager of the "second shift" of domestic work and child care (see Hochschild 1989).

Alex rejects the ideal that a man's primary contribution to his family must be in the form of a monthly paycheck. He believes that he does his part in supporting the family by caring for his daughter, keeping up with the laundry, and waiting tables part-time. He is therefore comfortable with his wife serving as the family's primary earner while he manages the house and Ella's care, an arrangement he sees as an effective division of labor for the time being. Within marriages conceived as egalitarian partnerships, then, the ideal of self-sufficiency can be reconceptualized as "couple self-sufficiency" (Townsend 2002:10), in which getting by as part of a couple, rather than as an individual breadwinner, is the yardstick by which one's success is measured.

As I explained at the start of this article, the experiences and attitudes of the men I describe represent a significant shift from the attitudes of unemployed men as documented in previous studies of white-collar unemployment. Yet even Townsend, quoted earlier on the centrality of employment to men's identities and self-worth, argues that U.S. men actually make sense of their lives through a "package deal" of four interconnected elements: fatherhood, marriage, employment, and home ownership. As Alex's experience illustrates, when one's identity as a man is no longer yoked so tightly to one of those elements, in this case, employment, it makes sense that a disruption like job loss might be experienced in a more complicated, less emasculating way.

The very notion of what it means to be a man is, of course, always in flux. As historian Gail Bederman argues, alleged crises of masculinity are often simply part of the "constant contradiction, change, and renegotiation" (1995:11) inherent in the ongoing ideological process through which gender is experienced and understood. Indeed, Katherine Newman declares that the masculine ideal was already in flux at the time of her study, a casualty of increasingly insecure employment, rising numbers of working women, and a feminist movement that privileged female independence, male sensitivity, and egalitarian households.¹⁵ To be clear, one model of masculinity—or femininity, for that matter—is never neatly switched out for another. The masculine ideal that associates manly success with steady paid employment and providing for one's family still has a strong influence on how the U.S. man sees himself and how he is seen by others. Yet, as steady employment has become increasingly elusive and masculinity has been redefined to include other, less employment-based standards for success, the primacy of that breadwinner ideal has lessened. Instead, my research indicates, middle-class men who have lost their jobs now have alternative standards of masculinity, and alternative models of professional success, toward which they can turn.

Career management's emphasis on flexibility and job change reframes unemployment as a necessary part of working life, one that in no way challenges the unemployed individual's professional identity or self-worth, at least not for quite a while. Job seekers in this study who have been looking for full-time tech work for as long as three years, like Ed Donnelly, still believe, or at least hope, that their setback is temporary, and they still think of themselves in terms of their former careers, regardless of whether or where they are currently employed. Just as career management reframes job loss within a different narrative of professional success, job seekers' conceptualization of marriage and self-sufficiency reframes the experience of relying on a spouse's income. Believing that marriage is a partnership and that men should respect and support their wives' professional achievements—along with the twin assumption that employed middle-class women should be comfortable assuming the role of primary breadwinner—allows unemployed men to reconceptualize relying on a partner's income, at least temporarily, as evidence of their masculinity, rather than a challenge to it. Thus, rather than seeing his dependence on his wife as evidence of his unmanliness, Ed Donnelly prides himself on being, "unlike a lot of guys"—presumably unenlightened, less secure guys—secure enough in his manhood to comfortably rely on his wife's income. Ed's beliefs about gender equality, marriage, and the inevitability of job loss combine to allow him to be simultaneously unemployed and a man.

The belief that job loss and unemployment provoke crises of masculinity in middle-class men is often paired

with the assumption that it does not provoke similar crises for working women (of any class), who are generally believed to ground their identity and sense of self-worth primarily in emotional connections that transpire outside the world of paid employment. One might expect, then, that as men ground their identity less fundamentally in paid employment, their reactions to job loss will start to more closely resemble women's experiences. Yet my own research found that, although the stigma and stress faced by unemployed middle-class men seem to be lessening, the opposite might be said for middle-class women.

In four years of fieldwork and more than 100 interviews, only two people cried while discussing their unemployment with me. Both were women, and neither cried about losing her job or about the challenges of finding work in a tight labor market. Instead, they cried about how unemployment was affecting their relationships with their male partners, and both blamed themselves for the difficulties they faced.

Natalie Lawson, a website manager in her early thirties, loved her job at a high-profile Internet consulting firm. Hers was a tight-knit office with a fun, lively culture despite the hard work and long hours. When the company announced its first layoffs, the entire office staff was "shocked," "upset," and soon on its way to get drunk over lunch in what Natalie calls a collective "defense mechanism." Natalie was rattled by the departure of close friends and colleagues but, retaining her faith in its future, hoped to stay with the company for at least a few more years. She lasted half a year and a half-dozen layoffs more, by which point survivor's guilt and an evaporating workload had her actually looking forward to leaving the company she once adored.

Natalie immediately found a contract position at the software company for which her boyfriend Daniel worked. (Daniel had initially worked for the same company from which Natalie was laid off, though in a different location. He was let go in the first round of layoffs, which ultimately worked in his favor, as he entered a job market just starting to tighten under the weight of many newly unemployed applicants. He soon found a good position at a solid but decidedly less sexy firm that provided software for health care companies.) Just before the first round of layoffs at her consulting firm, Natalie had purchased a new home that needed significant renovations. Between her severance pay and the contract job, she was able to make her mortgage payments, but when we met in April of 2002, the two-month contract position had ended and she was about to start dipping into her savings.

I've got a nice amount of savings, I just don't like going into it. So, movies stopped, going out to dinner stopped. Just little extras. I'm very good at spending nothing. It's not fun, necessarily, and I wasn't a huge spender anyway. I'm far more of a spender on tangi-

ble things, especially house stuff, and the theater, entertainment stuff. The thing that is bumming me out the most is [not being able to plant] stuff in my yard, since it's kind of that season. I'm cutting back with that. I'm paying more attention when I grocery shop to prices, I'm just getting the small basic stuff. I won't get lamb. [Laughs.] I think the biggest hit has been entertainment. My boyfriend loves to do all that stuff. It's kind of hard sometimes because he'll go, "Oh, let's go to the climbing gym." And it's just kind of an extra that I shouldn't be doing now. [So I say] "Let's go jogging." He also likes to go drinking here and there. We've actually been going to Barnes and Noble and just hanging out and reading, so we're kind of changing lifestyles a little bit. He takes me to the movies here and there, which is great, but I'm not really one to actually love someone paying for me all the time.

She described her boyfriend as incredibly supportive and encouraging of her job search efforts, but Natalie was concerned about the effect her unemployment was having on their relationship. Now that she had so much free time, she found herself relying on her boyfriend in ways that were new to them both:

I've probably become a little bit clingy with my boyfriend because I have so much time on my hands. [I'll say] "Oh, just take tomorrow off," "Come home for lunch, I'll cook for you." Which I would do normally but it's coming from a different place now. . . . I'm reading more [since losing her job]. I've gotten some good books. I'm doing all sorts of great things for my cat. I'm starting to feed her a raw food diet so I've been researching all kinds of remedies for my cat. I'm doing a lot of things for my boyfriend, which is nice. Actually I kind of enjoy doing things for him. We've had talks about me feeling at times that I don't offer as much because I'm kind of, and it's not money-wise, it's just that I don't feel like I'm extremely successful as a person right now. [Natalie begins to cry] I'm sure that affects my feelings of insecurity around him.

Relying more on a spouse or partner was, for some male job seekers, a badge of their forward-thinking attitudes to marriage and gender roles. For Natalie, despite her financial independence, relying more on Daniel made her feel uncomfortably needy. Even though she was doing more for Daniel in terms of caretaking than she had when she was employed, Natalie felt that she did not "offer as much" to him because, as someone who was not employed as a professional, she was, in her own eyes, not successful as a person.

Like Natalie's, Erica Roth's fears about how her job loss had affected her relationship provide an interesting contrast to accounts of male job seekers. Erica lost her job at an international tech company in the beginning of 2002, just two months before we met for our first interview. She had

been laid off once before, and although that layoff was more financially stressful—at the time, her husband was in graduate school and she provided the couple's entire income—this one was proving more emotionally stressful for Erica. Like the male job seekers described above, Erica was quick to express her good fortune at having a working spouse, but her comments reveal a more complicated mix of gratitude and guilt.

At first, [my husband] was very, very good because unfortunately it was really challenging for us that it was totally unexpected for me to lose my job. My husband was in a position where he works for a hospital, and the hospital that he was working for, their company bought out another hospital. So the two are going to merge and . . . he inherited [responsibility for] the other hospital, which was three times the size of his operation. Basically he didn't get much of an increase, just a cost of living increase for managing something three times the size. And he's working 12 to 14 hour days. If I hadn't lost my job, he would have had the flexibility of taking a severance package and it would have been very easy for him to find another job being in the field that he is. But since I lost my job, he didn't feel he had the leverage. So he's in a very stressful situation. . . . And I think he thought that based on my contacts and everything else I'd be able to land a job really quick and it hasn't been that way. And so I think it's starting to dawn on him that it's going to be a much rougher road than he originally thought. And then the stress of his own job. So it's starting to be very challenging.

When asked how she and her husband had been handling that stress, Erica began to cry. Still crying, she said, "I try not to overreact to what he says, because he has every right to react that way. And I did put him in a bad situation." Wiping away her tears, Erica repeated, "It could be a lot worse. I'm lucky. I'm in a better position than a lot of people." Yet Erica felt guilty that her job loss created a situation in which her husband no longer felt he had the option to leave a stressful and unsatisfying job. Rather than framing the couple's current situation as a simple reversal of the time when her husband was in school and she was the sole earner, Erica instead saw her current failure to contribute financially as placing an unfair burden on her husband. She blamed herself for "put[ting] him in a bad situation," even though she had no control over her layoff, the tight job market, or the recent changes in her husband's job satisfaction. The emotional cushion that couple self-sufficiency offers to job-seeking men like Alex was absent for Erica. Instead, she saw her obligation to contribute financially as independent of her husband's employment status.

Natalie's and Erica's feelings of dwindling self-worth and insecurity mirror, in many respects, those of the male managers in Newman's 1988 study, far more so than did the comments of their male peers. Whereas the ground-

ing of masculinity in secure employment has weakened for middle-class men in recent decades, for women like Natalie and Erica, professional identity and self-worth appear to have become more closely intertwined, at least with regard to their role in personal relationships. In the past, researchers have presumed that women are less disturbed by job loss because they place such value on their personal relationships. Yet for Erica and Natalie, it is exactly because their relationships matter so much to them that they are so distraught about being unemployed. Women are not simply inheriting the identity-crisis model of unemployment now that men have shed it; job loss is, indeed, a crisis for these women, but it is a crisis with decidedly nuanced and gender-specific roots and implications.

It is not surprising that job loss is discomfiting for women who came of age in a world in which paid labor is expected of educated, middle-class women (at least until childbirth). Indeed, for many middle-class women, it is the decision not to work for pay that has become the culturally fraught one and that is deployed as evidence in broader cultural debates over feminism and the family.¹⁶ For a man to accept a wife's support suggests an open-minded, non-sexist attitude toward changing gender roles and women's professional achievements. Craig Murray can pride himself on the homemade cookies he sends to work with his wife, and Ed Donnelly can pronounce himself more enlightened than "those other guys" who might balk at living off a wife's income. For Natalie, however, the opposite is true. Gardening, cat caretaking, and cooking for her partner during her now-ample spare time actually undermine her sense of self-worth, making her feel less accomplished, less progressive, and, potentially, less attractive.

That Natalie and Erica had no children at the time of this study likely plays a significant role in their response to job loss. (Natalie and Daniel have since married and have two children.) As I note above, young couples without children are the most likely to see themselves as co-breadwinners; couples with children tend to frame the issue of whether to work as a choice for the woman but not for the man. In this study, only three female interviewees were part of dual-earner couples with children. Of these, one white woman in her midthirties with two school-aged children expressed feelings of guilt and discomfort similar to those of Natalie and Erica. Another, a white physicist in her late forties, was significantly less anguished than the two younger women over her job loss. She explained that, for her, unemployment felt uncannily akin to the time she stayed home to raise her children while they were young. A third woman, a 37-year-old African American web designer with four young children, shared financial responsibility for the family with her husband even after her layoff. While she worked to get her own freelance web design business off the ground, she did the bookkeeping and administrative work for her husband's small business but insisted that she be

paid for doing so. “He’s not supposed to get everything free,” she said. “Business is business.” It would be presumptuous to draw conclusions from these few examples, but they suggest that motherhood is, indeed, a factor in how women in dual-earner couples experience unemployment and financial dependence on a spouse.

Shifting narratives of career, gender, and marriage have apparently had a more buoyant effect on married men’s experience of unemployment than on married women’s. The situation is not so simple that one can proclaim men the winners and women the losers in these newly negotiated models of work and family. Neither dual-earner couples nor career management have entirely paved over the pitfalls and pressures of job loss for middle- and upper-class U.S. men, but they have certainly shifted the landscape—cultural, professional, and economic—in which men face those challenges. It is clear, for instance, that the financial pressures of unemployment are lessened for both men and women by the presence of a working spouse, despite dramatic gender differences in how they respond to that support.

Yet the implications of the cultural shifts under discussion here extend far beyond the lives of individual workers and professional communities. Those same second incomes that ease the financial and emotional hardships of unemployment also soften any backlash that might be directed against the labor system and market economy that created these hardships in the first place. The sustaining income of a working spouse obscures, for instance, the extent to which public and private programs intended to protect unemployed workers have failed to do so. Absent a working spouse, the inadequacy of the current systems of unemployment benefits, workers’ rights legislation, government-funded job training and employment programs, affordable child care, severance and pension payments, and an employment-based health care system would be far more visible and perhaps more likely to garner national attention. Instead, the burdens of a volatile and increasingly global labor market, an ailing economy, and the disappearance of corporate welfare have been quietly transferred onto the shoulders of the dual-earner family.

Yet, rather than conceptualizing those responsibilities as a burden, most tech workers draw on the self-empowering philosophy of career management to frame them, instead, as evidence of their own autonomy and self-reliance. That philosophy is itself a product of labor market realities, namely, the demise of the social contract of employment, and it addresses the victimhood and depression experienced by previous generations of unemployed men. Lack of anger at “the system”—the corporations, government policies, and labor market that shape tech workers’ experiences of work and the lack thereof—is not a side effect of the philosophy of career management. It is, instead, both a symptom of and a remedy, albeit a partial and imper-

fect one, for the failure of that system to protect and provide for individuals and their families.

Notes

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1. The extent to which neoliberal ideology and modes of governing have reshaped the structure and nature of contemporary work has been well chronicled. For broader histories of neoliberal thought and policy, see Harvey 1989, 2005; on the rise of flexible and contingent work arrangements, particularly in the high-tech industry, see Benner 2002, Osterman 1996, and Uchitelle 2006.

2. On neoliberal governmentality, or the processes by which governments attempt to produce ideal self-regulating citizens, see Foucault 1991; Miller and Rose 1995; and Rose 1990, 1999.

3. Xiang 2007 and the essays in Collins et al. 2008 offer noteworthy exceptions to the general lack of ethnographic research on neoliberal subjects.

4. I engaged in participant-observation at events intended for unemployed professionals, including job fairs, job search training events, professional meetings, and happy hours; I also attended organized networking groups for the unemployed, some on a weekly basis for more than six months. In addition to meeting and speaking with more than 400 job seekers at these venues, I conducted open-ended interviews with 75 unemployed tech workers, many of whom I met with repeatedly over a four-year period. Interviews ranged from one to four hours each. Approximately 70 percent of interviewees were male; more than 80 percent were white. All quotations attributed to job seekers in this article are excerpted from transcripts of those interviews. I also interviewed a small number of recruiters, career counselors, professional and networking event leaders, and spouses or partners of job seekers.

5. *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson 1998), which spent more than five years on the *New York Times* business bestseller list, features mice who are forced to rethink their attitude to change and entitlement when their cheese disappears and who ultimately embrace the opportunities insecurity brings.

6. This insistence that all employment is now effectively contract or freelance work is found in other recent studies of high-tech workers, including Marschall 2001:106 and Ross 2003:152–158.

7. See Chet 2005 on the central role these networks play in maintaining tech workers’ professional identities and their commitment to the ideology of career management in the midst of prolonged unemployment.

8. The benefits of class status extend well beyond the financial. Many job seekers noted that they maintained their positive attitude through regular exercise, volunteering (often in positions they hoped might eventually become paid), and medical treatment for depression, including therapy and prescription antidepressants, opportunities and services not equally available to all Americans.

9. Career managers believe every household should maintain a savings “cushion” of at least six months’ income in case of job loss or financial emergency. Although three months’ income used to be considered adequate, some suggest the new standard should be closer to a full year’s income.

10. Nationally, in 83 percent of married-couple families in which one spouse lost his or her job, the other spouse remained employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008:1). Dual-earner couples account for 62 percent of married-couple families with children under 18 and 52 percent of married-couple families without children under 18. Only 30 percent of married couples with children (themselves a minority among U.S. households today) now match the increasingly mistitled “traditional” model in which the father is employed and the mother is not (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008:2). For couples without children, or whose children are all over 18, the figure drops to 52 percent. For statistics on the percentage of dual-worker families in the United States since 1940, see Hayghe 1990:16–17. The statistics cited above refer specifically to legally married couples. In this article, I also consider the experiences of unmarried couples in long-term partnerships. These partnerships are all heterosexual; none of my 75 interviewees were in a long-term homosexual relationship at the time of their job loss. Whether the experiences of partnered homosexuals differ significantly from those of the unemployed men and women described herein would be a worthy subject for future research, as would the experiences of single men and women, for whom relying on spousal income is not an option.

11. Unlike husbands in Potuchek 1997:119, job seekers in this study did not minimize the financial or professional significance of their wives’ labor-force participation.

12. Will ultimately searched for 13 months before he landed an executive position at another Dallas-area defense company.

13. Nicholas Townsend (2002), for instance, conducted his research entirely among working-class and lower-middle-class men, which might explain why his study, undertaken between 1989 and 1992, found a much more traditional model of male breadwinning than I have found among middle- and upper-class men.

14. One year later, Alex did land a full-time position in IA at a major online retailer that he describes as a “perfect fit.” He was still working there in 2009. The couple has returned to a more equal division of child care and domestic work in the evenings when both are at home (Ella is now in day care). With their combined incomes, they purchased a home conveniently located between their two workplaces.

15. Newman (1988:117–119) notes that many children of downsized fathers adopted more “progressive” stances toward appropriate male and female roles. In their own families, these grown children often saw supporting the family in a crisis as the responsibility of both parents. Grown daughters of unemployed men were particularly likely to reject the idea of female dependence and to seek professional and financial security of their own. Historians disagree over the causes and time line for the demise of the ideal of the male breadwinner, but most concur that this is no longer the dominant ideal for U.S. men. According to Barbara Ehrenreich (1983), the “breadwinner ethic” came loose from its moorings in the 1970s as a result of men’s self-interested abdication of the breadwinner role. Michael Kimmel (1996:261–290), in contrast, dates the shift later, arguing that the success of the feminist movement provided a political model for “male liberationists” who sought to free men from the fetters of traditional masculinity.

16. Consider, for example, the furor that erupted over Lisa Belkin’s (2003) article about Ivy League-educated women leaving the workforce to care for their homes and children full-time.

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- accepted April 22, 2009*
final version submitted May 11, 2009
- Carrie M. Lane
Assistant Professor, Department of American Studies
California State University, Fullerton
800 N. State College, UH 313
Fullerton, CA 92834
657-278-7359
clane@fullerton.edu