

Study finds shifting domestic roles for men who lost jobs in current recession

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The acute economic downturn that began in 2008 sometimes is called the "mancession" to reflect its harsher impact on men than women. As recently as last November, 10.4 percent of adult men were unemployed as compared to 8 percent of adult women.

But how do unemployed men cope with their shifting domestic roles, especially when they become financially dependent on a wife or female partner?

One University of Kansas researcher has investigated the impact of joblessness on masculinity and the "breadwinner ideology" within the context of traditional families.

"It changes how men think of themselves," said Ilana Demantas, doctoral student in sociology, who has interviewed 20 recently unemployed men. "Usually men see themselves as supporters of the family, and since a lot of them are no longer able to do that alone on their income, they have to construct their identity in a new way to allow them to still think positively of themselves."

Demantas will present her findings at the 106th Annual Meeting of the [American Sociological Association](#).

Working with Kristen Myers, an associate professor of sociology at Northern Illinois University, Demantas found that out-of-work men use an array of strategies to deal with their situations. While some suffer

from depression, the KU researcher found among the men she studied that most proudly embrace domestic chores such as childcare and [housework](#).

"Before unemployment, while they very much valued 'women's work,' men still constructed their identity in a way that allowed them to remain in charge," Demantas said. "Working was a way to sort of say, 'I'm the man.' But now managing the family is a way to see themselves as men. So they've actually used 'women's work' to see themselves as contributing to the family. This seems to be a silver lining in a very bleak recession."

Demantas also found that men who were out of work in the recession highly valued the employed women in their families who were still able to bring in a vital income stream.

"They very much felt grateful that women were employed," said Demantas. "One subject said, 'I'm so lucky that my wife is still working, and she has a great insurance policy.' Another said, 'If she weren't working, I'd be sleeping in a car or something.' And some of our subjects take up more household work. One of the subjects said he woke up early and made coffee for his wife because it was the one nice thing he could do for her since he wasn't contributing economically."

Although the disparity in unemployment statistics between [men](#) and [women](#) has eased somewhat as the U.S. [recession](#) has worn on, Demantas believes that [masculinity](#) nonetheless has arrived at a crossroads due to economic pressures.

"Men's identities have changed," Demantas said. "They're proud to contribute to the household, to make up for the [work](#) their wives are doing. Yet, they still maintain household authority, holding onto their identities as 'men' any way they can."

More information: The paper, "'It's a Blessing That My Wife Still Works:' Balancing Masculinity and Economic Dependence on Women During Unsettled Times," will be presented on Tuesday, Aug. 23, in Caesars Palace Las Vegas, at the American Sociological Association's 106th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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