

Maintaining Men's Dominance: Negotiating Identity and Power When She Earns More

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This article examines the power dynamics in marriages where wives earn substantially more than their husbands based on in-depth interviews with husbands and wives in 30 couples. The results demonstrate how normative gender expectations constrain interactions between spouses and how spouses in these unconventional marriages struggle to construct appropriate gender identities that are more or less consistent with the conventional expectations that men should be breadwinners and women should be homemakers. These data represent an important counterpoint to the growing body of quantitative work that demonstrates that a woman's power diminishes as her income exceeds her husband's by illuminating *how* men's power is preserved within marriage, even in the absence of their traditional economic dominance.

KEY WORDS: gender; doing gender; gender identity; breadwinning; marital power.

Breadwinning has traditionally conferred substantial privileges on men within the family. Earning the money meant that men also earned the right to control it; they doled out funds to other family members and typically maintained a portion for their own use. This kind of control often extended to other areas of family life as well, as men claimed the authority to make household decisions, both large and small. Being the breadwinner has also been linked to other advantages within marriage; for example, men have commonly enjoyed ample leisure time as well as freedom from domestic responsibilities. In these fundamental ways, a man's income has guaranteed him greater power and privilege within marriage (Bernard, 1981; Ferree, 1990).

This equation of money with power has led millions of women to pursue education and employment as the keys to both personal empowerment and more egalitarian relationships with men. If men's power is rooted in their incomes, then women need access to independent wages in order to increase their power vis-à-vis their husbands. Indeed, this logic drove the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Popular writers and scholars

urged women to pursue higher education and prepare to enter the world of paid work on the same footing as men, so that women could both improve their sense of personal competence and increase their autonomy and power within their most intimate relationships. Women responded to these new opportunities outside the home and fueled one of the most dramatic social shifts of the twentieth century (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). Of course, many women also pursued paid employment during this time in order to meet the very real material needs of their families, and these needs continue to push women into the workforce. But whatever their motivations, the expectation remains that women can use their incomes to increase their power within their marriages.

However, as married women have moved into the labor force in large numbers over the last several decades, the evidence suggests that men's power and privileges within the home have been largely preserved. On the whole, women's employment has given them only a small increase in control over family finances and decision-making, and women still bear the disproportionate burden of domestic labor and childcare (Coltrane, 2000; Pyke, 1994). In other words, working *outside* the home has not done much to increase women's power *within* the home. Perhaps this is because women typically earn a smaller

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fraction of the family's total income. Most men still out-earn their wives (Raley, Mattingly, Bianchi, & Ikramullah, 2003), and they seem to retain substantial power based on their larger incomes.

If this is true, the question then becomes: What happens to the balance of power in marriages where gendered expectations about breadwinning are more seriously challenged? The purpose of this article is to explore the more profound case of "gender disruption" (Risman, 1998) in which wives earn substantially more and/or work in higher status occupations than their husbands (I call these "unconventional earners"). Based on Steven Lukes' (1974) conceptualization of "hidden power," I argue that gender ideology at the institutional level, specifically conventional conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, shapes the interactions and gender identity constructions of spouses in ways that subvert the cultural link between money and power *for women* and reproduces men's dominance within marriage. In brief, I found that men who earn substantially less than their wives continue to be defined as providers and to exercise a great deal of authority in their homes. They have the power to make decisions, exact both real and symbolic deference, and even define the terms of the marital contract—all of which reinforce men's traditional power within marriage. These results are congruent with recent quantitative research that shows that earning more than one's husband *diminishes* a woman's power (Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000). My results also extend this research to show *how* men's power is preserved in the absence of their traditional economic dominance.

Money, Gender, and Power in Marriage

The conventional marital contract defines husbands as breadwinners and wives as homemakers. Under this contract, men trade their income for the domestic labor and caring work provided by their wives. This "exchange of resources" (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) has been seen as largely equitable and reasonable because spouses are depicted as fulfilling complementary and equally necessary roles. In reality, earning money is a more highly valued activity than performing domestic labor, which means that this exchange of resources has significant power implications. Breadwinning not only accords men higher status, it also gives men greater power and privilege within marriage (Bernard, 1981; Ferree, 1990).

In the last several decades, the underpinnings of this marital contract have shifted substantially—materially as well as ideologically. The majority of wives (including mothers) are now employed outside the home and contribute significantly to the economic well-being of their families. Some of the research on marital power suggests that women's earnings have increased their control over money in the marital relationship (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Pahl, 1989; Whyte, 1990) and that some men have responded to their wives' employment by taking on a greater share of the domestic labor burden (Barnett & Baruch, 1988; Berk, 1985; Coltrane, 2000; Presser, 1994). However, the bulk of the literature on marital power suggests that women's employment has not significantly altered the balance of power in marriages, as men continue to exercise greater control over financial and other decisions, and women continue to carry the burden of domestic labor (Berk, 1985; Blumberg, 1984; Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Bittman et al., 2003; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1991; Brines, 1994; Fox & Murry, 2000; Greenstein, 2000; Gupta, 1999; Hartmann, 1981; Hochschild, 1989; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Pleck, 1985; Pyke, 1994; Wright, Shire, Hwang, Dolan, & Baxter, 1992; Zelizer, 1989). Even when women's earnings *exceed* those of their husbands, the balance of power seems largely unaltered (Atkinson & Boles, 1984; Bittman et al., 2003; Bolak, 1997; Brines, 1994; Greenstein, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; McRae, 1986).

Clearly, simply earning an income is no guarantee that women will be able to exercise greater power in their marriages. Blumberg and Coleman (1989) argued that in order to understand marital power dynamics, a more complex power equation is required, one that takes into consideration a woman's absolute earnings, the husband/wife earnings ratio, and the wife's independent control over her earnings (especially the surplus). Because men tend to out-earn their wives, this often limits the power women can derive from their incomes. But when a woman's earnings are substantial, especially relative to her husband's, she can be expected to exercise increased financial control. However, Blumberg and Coleman also recognized that men's and women's money have different meanings attached to them (see also Zelizer, 1989). In other words, gendered practices and ideology can act as "micro-level discount factors" that diminish the value of a wife's income vis-à-vis that of her husband and sharply curtail the amount of power she is able to derive from this resource (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989, p. 235). The

marital power equation must take both money and gender into account.

Research on egalitarian couples demonstrates how absolute earnings and earnings ratios can work in women's favor, as well as how conventional gender ideology might undermine a more complete move toward equality. This research suggests that when men and women are more equal in their earnings, whatever their economic level, they enjoy more equal power relationships, whether measured by the division of domestic labor or by power-sharing in decision-making (Baxter, 1993; Bittman et al., 2003; Brines, 1994; Coltrane, 1996; Greenstein, 1996, 2000; Hertz, 1989; Sexton & Perlman, 1989; Vannoy-Hiller & Philliber, 1989; Wright et al., 1992). However, even these results are complicated by conventional gender expectations. Women want to guard some part of the domestic domain as their own (Hertz, 1989), or want to feel like "I'm still the mom" (Coltrane, 1996), and men still think of providing as *their* responsibility (Wilkie, 1993), even though they share the task of earning an income with their wives. These results suggest that, even in circumstances where women are able to use their resources to enhance their power, spouses are more comfortable with a certain level of (conventional) gender asymmetry in their relationships. This is important because holding on to conventional expectations that men should be breadwinners and women should be homemakers can undercut women's power within marriage.

This seems particularly true when women earn more than their husbands. In these cases, gendered expectations for husbands to provide the family's income are more seriously disrupted. Brines (1994), Greenstein (2000), and Bittman et al. (2003) attempted to separate the effects of economic resources and gender on the division of domestic labor. Their results demonstrate that when a woman's income exceeds that of her husband, spouses use their participation in domestic labor as a way to neutralize their non-normative provider roles. That is, men avoid housework, and women take on housework, in order to compensate for disrupting the norms of men's breadwinning. Appropriate "gender display" overrides the logic of resource exchange; men enjoy the privileges of having domestic services performed for them even when they are no longer the sole or major breadwinners in their families. Similarly, women seem to accommodate their husbands in subtle ways that reinforce men's ability to exercise substantial control in money matters and decision-

making (Bolak, 1997; Fox & Murry, 2000; Johnson & Huston, 1998; Lundberg & Pollak, 1996).

Gender as Structure

The fact that men retain substantial privileges, even when women are the major earners in their families, provides the most striking evidence that gender is a significant factor in shaping the power dynamics between partners. This means that we can conceptualize gender as a separate "structure" (Risman, 1998) that exerts an independent influence on social life. As a structure, gender is linked to and derives power and legitimation from other structures, but also stands apart from these structures. In any given social setting, gender operates simultaneously on three levels: the institutional, interactional, and individual. At each of these levels, gender shapes the ongoing practices of other domains of social life. At the institutional level, gender exists as the distribution of material advantage, organizational practices, and ideology. At the interactional level, men and women attempt to behave in ways that are appropriate to the specific social context. At the individual level, gender constrains men and women as they attempt to construct meaningful identities. Institutional practices and ideologies shape micro-level behavior, but behavior on the interactional and individual levels also has an impact on gender at the institutional level, for it is through micro-level dynamics that the larger gender structure is either challenged or reproduced.

Although changes in gender constructions can and do occur, the gender structure usually organizes our lives in ways that support the status quo (Risman, 1998). This stability has important power implications because the gender structure is fundamentally a system of inequality that constructs women as the subordinates of men. It gives men social, political, and economic advantages over women, though the mechanisms for maintaining those advantages vary with the social context. Within marriage, men's power over women has been linked to and legitimated by their role as breadwinner, though it is clear that husbands' gender privilege persists within the family even when their wives also earn an income. What is not clear is exactly *how* this happens.

Doing Gender: Constructing Identities and Relationships

The literature suggests that gender display is an important component of marital power. This

conceptualization of power is rooted in the interactionist approach known as “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Men and women are called upon to demonstrate to others, and to themselves, that they are appropriately masculine or feminine within a given social context. In this way, doing gender is a fundamental dynamic both for social interaction and for individual identity construction (Acker, 1992).

Within the context of marriage, doing gender is also a team performance. If one spouse fails to engage his or her part appropriately, this may reflect negatively on the partner. Conventional gender expectations require husbands to assume the identity of breadwinner and wives to assume the identity of homemaker. Men derive the core of their identities by providing for their families and women by caring for other family members—particularly their children (Connell, 1987; Hays, 1995; Potuchek, 1997). Given these gender imperatives, a wife who makes substantially more money may represent a significant threat to her husband’s gender identity. Similarly, providing the large majority of the family’s income, particularly if the work requires long hours away from home, may threaten a woman’s sense of herself as a “good” wife and mother.

Maintaining these conventional gender identities has important implications for marital power dynamics. Certainly, the activities associated with these two identities are differentially valued, such that breadwinning generally confers more privileges than homemaking.² It would be important, then, if employed women are somehow *not* defined as breadwinners because they could lose access to these privileges. In other words, it is important to examine how maintaining gender difference may undercut the potential power in women’s greater earnings.

Lukes’ Three-Dimensional View of Power

Steven Lukes (1974) has conceptualized power in a way that can illuminate the subtle dynamics associated with doing gender and with identity construction, particularly among unconventional earners. He laid out a framework for assessing power on several levels, and advocated what he calls a “three-dimensional view” of power. He began by criticizing previous conceptualizations of power as being far too limiting to capture all the possibilities for

exercising power. For example, what he called the “one-dimensional view” of power focuses entirely on observable behavior and overt conflict. This approach conceptualizes power as the ability to prevail, even in the face of resistance, and relies on decision-making outcomes as the primary measure of power in a relationship. The “two-dimensional view” takes this manifest power into account, but also examines “non-decision making.” This approach includes successful suppression of conflict or resistance in the past, which might keep similar conflicts from reemerging (we can think of this as “latent power”).

Lukes’ “three-dimensional view” of power takes into account both overt and latent power, but also attempts to uncover power that is “hidden,” or embedded in existing social practices. He argued, for example, that the ability to keep particular issues from even *entering* the arena of conflict is a more thoroughgoing exercise of power than any overt struggle for dominance. The most effective exercise of power draws on prevailing ideological constructions, so that an individual’s or group’s domination seems beneficial, reasonable, or natural. In this way, the most adept uses of power are often “invisible.”

Power, then, can be exercised in a number of ways. If a husband and wife struggle over domestic labor, and the husband successfully resists the greater participation the wife seeks, he has exercised overt power. If his wife then accepts the situation and avoids raising the issue again out of fear of renewed conflict, he has exercised latent power. But even if this issue is never raised between the two spouses because the wife accepts it as her duty to bear the domestic labor burden, even when she is employed outside the home, Lukes would argue that the husband has benefited from the hidden power in prevailing gendered practices and ideology.

Aafke Komter (1989) adapted Lukes’ framework to her examination of the hidden power in Dutch marriages. She found that husbands benefit from the implicit hierarchy of cultural worth that values men over women and that couples rely on conventional gender expectations to explain inequities in their relationships. For example, men explained that their wives perform more housework because they were “better at it” or “enjoyed it more.” In short, “reality is perceived in such a way that it confirms and justifies gender identities and averts from consciousness information that threatens the stability of these identities” (p. 213). In this article, I build on Komter’s insights to show how the hidden power that preserves men’s dominance is tied to men’s and

²This dynamic is, of course, socially constructed, and is not true for all cultures. In matrilineal societies, for example, women often derive power from their role as mother.

women's commitments to the conventional gender identities of breadwinner and mother/homemaker—even among couples where wives earn substantially more than their husbands.

METHOD

Research Design

In order to explore the gendered effects of resources on marital power, I recruited two types of couples for in-depth, semi-structured interviews: 22 couples categorized as unconventional earners, in which wives earn substantially more and/or work in higher status occupations than their husbands, and eight comparison couples, in which husbands and wives are relatively equal on income and status, or husbands surpass their wives on these two variables. All couples in both groups are two-income couples with at least one child at home,³ and all wives were employed full-time. The comparison couples provide a way to separate out the effects of wives' *employment* from the effects of their earning substantially *more* than their husbands. The contrast between these couples is important because, if the balance of resources drives the marital power equation, we would expect unconventional-earning wives to have relatively more power than comparison wives.

Sampling Considerations

Defining Unconventional Earners

I defined a wife as higher on income when she earned at least 50% more per year than her husband (e.g., a woman who makes \$45,000 per year married to a man who makes \$30,000). Status differences were defined by a combination of factors: established occupational rankings, such as Duncan's Socioeconomic Index, education required for the job, and position in the bureaucratic hierarchy. In practice, I relied largely on the last two factors. For example, a mid-level bank manager was judged to be higher in status than a car salesperson. Five unconventional-earner husbands spent most of their time in the home

(they had earned, at most, \$3,000 per year) and were classified by their part-time occupations. In 15 cases (including the five men primarily at home), wives clearly surpassed their husbands on both income and occupational status. In four cases, wives earned 50% more, but there was no clear status difference between them (e.g., an attorney married to a physician). In three cases, wives made \$4,000–7,000 more than their husbands (which did not meet the 50% standard), but held jobs with substantially higher status (e.g., a research project manager married to a telephone repairperson). I included these couples to get a sense of whether income or occupational status seemed more important in driving the power dynamics of these couples. However, I eventually collapsed these categories into one (unconventional earners), as it became clear that, for this sample, dramatically surpassing one's husband on income or occupational status affects the power dynamics in the same way(s) as surpassing him on both.

Defining Comparison Couples

Husbands and wives in these couples are relatively equal in terms of income and status, or the husbands exceed their wives on these two variables. In only two cases do husbands earn a great deal more than their wives (more than twice as much). In two cases, husbands earn \$5,000–10,000 more than their wives. In three couples, the wives earn \$2,000–3,000 more than their husbands. One couple has identical salaries. In short, these wives contribute substantially to their families' economic well-being, but their accomplishments do not eclipse those of their husbands. This is the important contrast between unconventional earners and comparison couples.

Recruitment

The couples were living in a major metropolitan area in the Eastern United States. Couples were recruited primarily through advertisements placed in a local newspaper that was delivered free of charge to all households in the surrounding communities once a week. The advertisement asked for volunteers for a study on work, marriage, and family life, and stated that "especially needed are couples in which the wife's income and/or occupational status is higher than the husband's." This strategy yielded calls from couples in a variety of economic circumstances. I also received three referrals through acquaintances.

³The sample includes only married couples with children because couples without children are free from a substantial source of both work and conflict. Constructing an egalitarian relationship is more difficult with children (Deutsch, 1999; Hochschild, 1989); therefore, the results reported here may not apply to couples without children.

Recruitment efforts ceased after 30 couples had completed the entire data collection process.

Sample Demographics

The two groups were well matched on key demographic variables. On average husbands were only slightly older than their wives (37 years vs. 36 years for unconventional earners, 35 years vs. 34 years for comparison couples). Unconventional earners had been married for about 8 years, and had an average of 1.8 children. Comparison couples had been married for about 10 years and had an average of 2.0 children. There were no large discrepancies between the two groups in terms of class background, ethnicity, or religiosity.

However, as expected, the groups vary more widely on income and education. Unconventional-earner husbands made an average of \$22,000⁴ to their wives' \$47,000 in the year prior to the interviews. Comparison husbands made \$45,000 to their wives' \$33,000. Over one-third of the unconventional-earner wives had more education than their husbands, typically because the wife had a master's degree and her husband had a bachelor's degree. (In two cases, the education of the husband exceeded his wife's for the same reason.) Among the comparison couples, the husband's education was equal to or exceeded his wife's in all but one case. In short, unconventional earners are very similar to comparison couples on key variables, with the exception that unconventional-earner wives were more likely to possess more advanced degrees than their husbands and to out-earn them by a considerable margin.

Paths to Unconventional Earning

It is important to note that the majority of couples in this sample became unconventional earners by "accident." Only 6 of the 22 couples married knowing that wives would earn more and/or work in higher-status occupations, at least for the foreseeable future. For other couples, wives experienced unanticipated or rapid upward mobility, and/or their husbands floundered occupationally. This means that most couples found themselves unexpectedly in a situation where she earned more than he did. This

⁴The five unconventional-earning husbands who were primarily at home bring this average down considerably. Without them, the average earnings for unconventional-earner husbands are \$30,000, which make the income discrepancies between spouses in both groups comparable.

dynamic has potentially important implications for the analysis given later.

Limitations of the Sample

This sample is limited in several ways. First, there is little racial diversity among respondents. The sample includes only two Asian-Americans, two African-Americans, one Latino, and one émigré from the Middle East; all remaining respondents are European-American. In addition, the sample is highly educated. Over two-thirds of the respondents had bachelor's degrees, and most had at least some graduate training.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Marital Power

In order to ensure comparability with previous work on marital power, I examined standard indicators of marital power: the division of domestic labor and childcare, patterns of financial management, decision-making practices, and conflict resolution strategies. Therefore, I was concerned with such issues as who performed which household or childcare tasks and with what frequency, who paid the bills, who made decisions about major purchases, and who prevailed in both day-to-day conflicts and major decisions. These kinds of outcomes are the most basic indicators of each spouse's relative power within the relationship.

However, I sought to move beyond these conventional measures of marital power. In order to uncover hidden power dynamics, I also explored power processes in these relationships. For example, although one spouse may be making what appear to be important decisions, it is possible that these are merely tasks that have been delegated by the other partner. Paying the bills could put one spouse in a position of power, or this task may be dumped on a spouse by a partner who considers this job menial and stressful. Therefore, it is important to assess *how* couples come to these decisions. Finally, I looked for more subtle (or hidden) indications of power by exploring each partner's disappointments and desires for change across multiple dimensions of the relationship.

These kinds of measures tap into the hidden power dynamics in these relationships. Assessments of the history and process of decision-making on various issues reveal whose preferences are reflected in the current outcomes. Each partner's satisfaction with the status quo, as well as expressed desires

for change, also indicate which spouse has more power to structure the relationship according to his/her wishes. And finally, spouses' expressed acceptance of, and justification for, continued inequality in household chores, money management, and decision-making can demonstrate how this inequality comes to be seen as reasonable or "natural" in these relationships.

Data Collection and Analysis

Respondents were first sent individual but identical questionnaires. The questionnaires included fixed-choice items about household decision-making and the division of domestic labor and childcare (taken from Blood and Wolfe, 1960). The small size and nonrandom nature of the sample meant that I could not analyze these data using standard statistical techniques. However, the questionnaires did yield background information on the respondents, and they illuminated areas of disagreement between spouses. This information was helpful in conducting the interviews.

Once the questionnaires were returned, respondents were contacted to schedule face-to-face interviews. Spouses were interviewed individually, usually consecutively, in their homes; the interviews lasted from 1 to 4 hours. The interviews followed an interview schedule, but questions were open-ended in order to allow respondents to explore unanticipated issues. The interview topics included personal background (e.g., information about family of origin), current work and work history, the history of the couple's relationship, the division of domestic labor and childrearing, financial organization, decision-making practices, and conflict resolution strategies.

Interviews were conducted, taped, and transcribed by me. I used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and analytic induction as tools for analysis. Interviews were first coded using descriptive codes derived both from the interview questions and the issues that emerged in the interviews. Initial comparisons were made between spouses to look for discrepancies in perceptions and reports of behavior. Interviews were then coded by pattern or theme as part of the movement from data description to conceptual clarification and theorizing. Here, comparisons were made between wives and husbands as groups. Also at this stage, comparisons were made between unconventional earners and comparison couples. Husbands and wives then were matched again in an effort to explain why some

couples seemed to fit the pattern or theme under examination and others did not. The results presented here focus primarily on the dynamics among unconventional earners. Patterns among comparison couples are presented for contrast.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The greater resources of unconventional-earner wives "buy" them very little in their relationships. Instead of using their unconventional circumstances to alter the conventional balance of marital power, spouses work together to reproduce men's dominance in a variety of ways. First, husbands and wives engage in a team effort to construct appropriate gender identities; that is, they try to present both themselves and their spouses as conforming to the identities of homemaker and breadwinner. Second, unconventional earners reproduce men's dominance in decision-making, as men assert the right to make certain decisions, and women often defer in order to prove that they are not trying to dominate their husbands and are therefore "good" wives. And finally, couples disrupt the link between money and power *for wives*, yet maintain the possibility of such a link for husbands. These results demonstrate that it is not simply that women's substantial resources do not enhance their power, but that these resources actually become *liabilities* for women in their relationships, and it is through the interactional process of deferring to their husbands and supporting their authority that women are able to compensate for the potentially emasculating impact of their greater economic resources.

Preserving the Woman's Identity as Mother

The substantial resources of unconventional-earner wives do not buy them much relief from domestic labor. With the exception of five wives whose husbands are primarily at home, these wives still perform the vast majority of domestic labor and childrearing tasks.⁵ For about one-half of unconventional earners this is (or has been) a point of contention in the relationship. That is, the wives want more help than their husbands are willing to give. Some of these wives are still struggling with resistant husbands; others have resigned themselves to doing

⁵A more complete discussion of these results is published elsewhere (Tichenor, 1999).

the bulk of the work on their own. (Only four employ paid help.⁶)

The other one-half of unconventional-earner wives, who are also performing the majority of the domestic labor, seem to embrace domestic labor as a way of presenting themselves as good wives. These women tend to downplay their financial contributions to their families, and they judge themselves by how much housework they perform, or how much time they are able to spend with their children. This tendency can be seen most clearly in two examples where the wives earn nearly all of the family's income. After listing all that her husband (who is primarily at home) does around the house, one nurse practitioner and mother of three cried, "What kind of mother *am* I? I do very little around here!" Another wife, a pediatrician married to a part-time high school sports coach, had similar difficulties evaluating her worth. When asked what she contributes to the family she says, "I have a paycheck, which is probably only incidental . . . I can't say I'm the strong point in the whole family, except for that paycheck, because I'm just not here often enough." That paycheck is more than "incidental" because the family would be destitute without it. However, she seems to believe that she is not doing enough to meet the needs of her family and that her paycheck does not compensate for this deficit of care. In the conventional marital contract, money is supposed to be exchanged for domestic and caring labor. This equation works when husbands bring the money to the table, but is problematic for these breadwinner wives.

Other unconventional-earner wives, who are already shouldering the majority of the household labor burden, think that they should be doing even more, though they are often hard-pressed to list what more they could be doing. For example, a family physician married to an attorney thinks she should be doing more at home, but when asked if there is anything *specific* that she thinks she should be doing, she replied: "No. Just, you know. I mean [long

pause]. Sometimes I think he ends up having to do more dishes, more than he probably should have to. That's something. But then usually I'm putting the kids to bed at that time." She does all the cooking and most of the cleaning and childcare, but believes it is unfair for her husband to do the dishes more than one-half of the time.

Other wives recognize that they are doing more than their share, and yet do not really complain about it. One such wife, a mid-level personnel manager married to a computer technician, said:

I don't know if I wish he did more, or if he would sometimes notice or acknowledge that there are things that I pick up that he could. 'Cause I don't feel like I'm doing too much, but I do see I'm doing more. I'm not necessarily sure I want him to take any of it, but I think it would make me happier sometimes if he would occasionally acknowledge that.

She wants greater credit for what she's doing. She seems more interested in being validated for doing a good job as a homemaker than in increasing her husband's participation in household chores.

Husbands in unconventional marriages support their wives in their attempts to emphasize mothering in their identity constructions by portraying them as "good mothers" despite the demands of their paid work. First, there is Rusty, who is primarily at home and is the primary caregiver to his and Donna's daughter, Emma: "Donna makes real good use of the time she does spend with Emma. And so that Emma doesn't just have my values. I think Donna has done a very good job of using the time that she has to really make an influence on Emma." Wayne spoke similarly about his wife: "Bonnie is extremely involved in [our son's] life, given her demands as a senior level lawyer in a big company. She is very focused on him, very loving. They have a very close relationship, despite being away 11–12 hours a day." These statements are short, simple—almost insistent. These successful, hard-working women are still good mothers.

Comparison wives also carry the bulk of the domestic labor load. In only two cases do the husbands contribute more than a token amount of labor. The remaining wives seem resigned to doing it themselves. In contrast to unconventional-earner wives, only one comparison wife thought she should be doing more around the house, and the circumstances here are a bit unusual. She is often ill, and both she and her husband report that he carries slightly more than one-half of the household burden. She wants to

⁶It is perhaps surprising that more of these couples do not employ paid help. Of the four who do, three (one a comparison couple) are among the most affluent in the sample, with combined incomes of over \$100,000. The fourth couple simply decided that the reduction in stress was worth the cost of a thorough house-cleaning twice a month. However, there are three other couples who make over \$100,000 who still perform all the domestic labor themselves. It is important to note that most of the couples in this sample, whatever their income level, live to the edge of their means, and hiring someone to lighten the (wives') domestic load does not seem to be worth the financial sacrifice to them.

take on more because she thinks she is not always doing her fair share.

It seems that for these unconventional-earner wives, it is important to be seen as a good wife and mother and that the income they earn can not make up for the care their family might be missing while they are away. Further, it seems that the cultural standard for being a good wife and mother is quite high—so high, in fact, that wives who are already carrying a great burden believe that they are not doing enough. Being a “good mother” means caring for one’s family, both emotionally and physically. It is by assuming these responsibilities that women achieve “a feminine identity as a loving, caring, responsible person” (McMahon, 1995, p. 130).

This standard of motherhood clearly works to men’s advantage in marriages with unconventional earners, even more so than for men in comparison marriages. Comparison wives do not see their domestic efforts as inadequate, and so do not try to take on even more work. Perhaps unconventional-earner wives think that they have something to prove (i.e., their femininity), and that motivates them to take on an even larger burden at home. Being the main provider may threaten their sense of themselves as wives and mothers, and they take on more domestic work to prove that, as they succeed as earners, they are not failing as women.

However, doing gender is a team performance in these relationships, and it is also possible that wives take on this load to preserve harmony in their relationships. Wives may think that their husbands expect a certain level of domestic service and that they will be held accountable for failing to meet these expectations. However, this explanation is not completely satisfactory. It would certainly explain why wives take on the majority of the household burden, but it does not explain why so many of these already overburdened wives think they should take on even more. Perhaps these wives emphasize their domestic contributions in order to de-emphasize their economic contributions and avoid embarrassing their husbands. In any case, cultural expectations of what it means to be a good wife shape the domestic negotiations of unconventional earners and produce arrangements that privilege husbands and further burden wives.

Preserving the Man's Identity as Breadwinner

Though unconventional-earner husbands do not meet the conventional definition of the term

“provider,”⁷ spouses in these couples work together to redefine what it means to be a provider in order to present husbands as fulfilling this masculine imperative. Couples expand the notion of providing to include things like meeting the emotional needs of family members or carefully managing the family finances. First there is June, a military officer married to an enlisted man. When asked if she saw either of them as the provider for the family, she replied:

I would say, for the family's *whole* well-being, for the *whole* family, no.

[VT: It sounds like in some ways you *do* see one of you as the provider.]

[She laughs.] I feel like I'm harping on the money thing. I mean, 'the provider'—some people would look at a provider and say, 'it's just the *money*,' but that's not the way that I look at it anyway, so [her voice trails off].

[VT: So being the provider is more than just bringing home the money?]

Oh absolutely, absolutely. I mean, without Adam, this wouldn't be a functional family, as we found out this last week when he was gone . . . [I had] more time constraints, more pressure. I was feeling more pressure because I had to take care of everything [our 2-year old] needed.

Unconventional earners are uncomfortable using money as the sole criterion of provider status because that would deny husbands a claim to it. Instead, they expand the notion of providing to include meeting the emotional and physical needs of family members. This allows couples to continue to present unconventional-earner husbands as breadwinners.

What is striking about these findings is that we see this consistent reconceptualization of providing—even in families where the income disparity between spouses is large. Bonnie is a corporate attorney who makes \$114,000, married to Wayne, a lawyer who quit his job to be home with their son several years ago, and brings home \$3,000 per year by working part-time. When asked if she saw herself as the provider, Bonnie said: “I guess so, but I don’t think of it in those terms. I don’t think about that at all. I sort of see our family as being ‘the cause,’ and Wayne and I are doing our parts to advance our family’s interests. So I guess we’re both

⁷ Although theorists of conventional gender identities distinguish between mothers and breadwinners (see, for example, Potuchek, 1997), I used the term “provider” when discussing issues of breadwinning in the interviews.

providers.” Her husband echoed her comments; as the financial manager of the household, he thinks that his careful attention to the family’s finances and purchase decisions are an important way for him to contribute financially to the family, in lieu of bringing home a large paycheck.

The continuing power and status of a man—even when engaged in conventionally feminine activities—is significant here. A stay-at-home wife is unlikely to be accorded “provider” status, as Wayne is. Her activities are certainly central to family life, and may be highly valued by both spouses, but she would not be labeled a “provider” in the way that these men are. By redefining what it means to be a provider, unconventional earners allow husbands to make a claim on this crucial component of masculine identity. Unconventional earners pointedly avoid labeling wives as the family provider, even though their activities fit the conventional definition of the term. This ideological sleight of hand robs women of the institutional power associated with being the provider, but allows spouses to construct identities consistent with normative gender expectations.

It is also important to remember that the majority of unconventional earners find themselves in this situation unexpectedly or do not anticipate that the wife will be the major earner indefinitely. This may explain their reluctance to accord the wife provider status. However, even those couples who married knowing that the wife would earn more do not view her as the family provider.

Redefining what it means to be the provider is unique to unconventional earners. Among comparison couples, if the husband makes more money, he is named as the provider; if the spouses earn roughly the same amount, they say “we both provide.” Spouses do not equate wives’ caregiving contributions with economic provision. For them, conventional identities correspond directly and meaningfully with the activities in which each spouse is engaged.

These results give us another window on the hidden power advantages enjoyed by men in these relationships. Because many of the benefits men have enjoyed within marriage are linked to being the provider, if men are able to make a claim on this status it is easier for them to retain the privileges associated with it. By reconstructing the notion of providing, unconventional earners can avoid reconstructing the conventional power dynamics in their relationships.

Power Performances in Decision-Making: Exerting Dominance and Demonstrating Deference

Decision-making practices among unconventional earners reflect a team effort on the part of spouses to maintain a sense that men are dominant in the home. Instead of using their substantial resources to make claims to power, wives often defer to their husbands in the decision-making process. Even if wives disagree with husbands, they often seem reluctant to resist their husbands’ wishes, or make their own opinions more clearly known. For example, Monica, a computer project manager, described how her husband Sam, a computer technician, told her what kind of car to buy:

He decided what kind of car I was gonna get. That kind of made me a little bit mad. I mean, I liked the Camry. I liked the Camry. I *did* like it. But he said, ‘you can either have a Honda Accord or Toyota Camry.’ And, I don’t know that I would’ve *disagreed*, but I would’ve liked to have been [her voice trails off] . . . [I]t was just kind of irritating that he would tell me what kind of car I was gonna buy . . . It’s not like I would do that to him.

Her husband tells a similar story. He reported that there are a couple of areas where “I put my foot down”: “Like when it came to cars. I told her she was either buyin’ a Camry or a Honda [he laughs]. She had no choice. [VT: How come?] ‘Cause they’re good cars, and [pause] I like to buy quality. It costs a little bit more, but I think it pays off in the end.” Despite the fact that she makes 50% more than he, and the car was for her use, she was unwilling, or unable, to challenge his right to make this purchase decision for her. The gender asymmetry here is clear; as Monica said, “It’s not like I would do that to him.” This kind of power belongs to men and not to women.

Other wives seemed to think that power posed a danger for them. June is the military officer quoted earlier; she makes twice what her enlisted husband, Adam, makes. I asked her whether she saw a link between money and power in her relationship: “Gosh, see, I’m afraid Adam’s gonna say, ‘yeah, yeah she’s got all the power ‘cause she’s got all the money’, and I don’t see it that way . . . I don’t see myself as being in control.” In fact, June seems very reluctant to exercise control in decision-making. June’s husband, Adam, sensed this reluctance as he described how they make decisions:

If it’s a thing we both agree upon that we wanna do, she’ll say, ‘OK, do it if you think it’s OK.’ And I’ll go ahead and do it. If it’s something that she agrees

on, that I'm just making the phone calls for, and I tell her what the phone call said, she goes, 'well, what do ya think?' 'I don't care, Honey, it's up to you.' 'Well, what do *you* wanna do?' [His tone is comical, as he imitates their bantering back and forth.] And finally I'll just say, 'OK, fine.' And we'll go for it. It's weird too, because I feel like I'm makin' all the decisions, even though I'm *not* making all the decisions, and she's the one that carries the wallet in the family.

That seems to be the point. Her strategy in decision-making allows him to "feel like I'm makin' all the decisions," even though she brings home substantially more money.

Jill is a mid-level bank manager married to a car salesperson. She also defers to her husband in much of their decision-making. She described a disagreement with her husband over the convertible he recently purchased:

I could have more influence if I exercised it . . . Like when it comes to the car. If I would've said, 'we're not buying that car,' he wouldn't have . . . It's like he's saying to me, 'well if you really don't want to, we won't do it,' but I won't exercise that option, because I'm afraid. [VT: Of what?] I'm afraid of being, um afterward, being accused of being a bitch, or trying to control my husband, you know, not letting him do this or that. Or hearing about how his fellow employees think that I am controlling him. That kind of thing. So I hesitate to say, 'no, you can't do that,' and stay firm.

These women seem to have the potential to exercise power in their relationships; both they and their husbands recognize this, yet using this power appears to be too threatening. Jill is afraid of being labeled a "bitch" because a bitch is not a "wife"—she is domineering, uncaring, and unlovable. For these wives, then, exercising power in decision-making can be a fundamental threat to their gender identities. Instead, wives seem to defer or submit to their husbands in order to construct and sustain appropriate gender identities. To attempt to exercise direct control over their husbands is to call into question the gender order, something these wives seemed unwilling to do.

Let me be very clear here: although these results show that wives defer to their husbands in these relationships, and often in very self-conscious ways, I am *not* arguing that these wives *prefer* to be dominated. Rather, these women are afraid that their tremendous resources will *make them look powerful*, or that their husbands will experience their resource disadvantage as domination—or worse, as emasculation. Therefore, these wives defer to their husbands in or-

der to prove that they are not trying to dominate them, and are therefore "real" women and "good" wives.

Comparison husbands also exercise a great deal of control in decision making. These husbands report making unilateral decisions, often without discussing them with their wives. For example, there is Jake:

Some things, like with the VCR we have downstairs, I just went out and bought it. [He laughs.] 'What are you doing?!' [he imitates his wife and demonstrates her displeasure at this purchase]. Fifteen minutes later we're watching a movie. [VT: So she wasn't happy, but she got over it quick?] Yeah, she got over it quick.

The difference here is that there was no act of deference on the part of his wife. He just felt free to act on his own, and she seemed to believe that there was little point in protesting after the fact.

We see how normative expectations for men's dominance can shape the interactions of both unconventional earners and comparison couples, though this pattern is clearly more pronounced in the former. Even where opportunities to assert their preferences exist, these wives often back away from them. This is done partly to maintain their husbands' sense of being in control. But such displays are important to women as well because deferring to their husbands helps these women to demonstrate that they are not making claims to power over their husbands, and are therefore "good wives" (Connell, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

As these women back away from whatever power they might be able to exercise, they cede authority to their husbands in both real and symbolic terms. Practically speaking, it seems to be more important if women are giving up real control in their relationships because they are relinquishing the potential power in their larger incomes. However, symbolic displays of deference are important as well. First, these displays may preclude women from using their substantial resources to try to negotiate directly for more equal footing in their marriages. But more importantly, these symbolic displays of deference serve to reinforce the norm of men's dominance in marriage, and allow husbands to continue to see such dominance as their right.

The Gendered Link between Money and Power

These unconventional-earner wives are not able to use their substantial resources to "buy" greater

(or more equal) control in their relationships, which suggests that these couples have managed to disrupt the link between money and power in their relationships. More precisely, couples in this sample subvert the link between money and power for wives, yet maintain at least the possibility of such a link for husbands. This means that, although wives make no greater claim to power based on their income, the door is still open for their husbands to do so (Pahl, 1989; Zelizer, 1989).

When asked directly about a potential link between money and power in their relationships, most spouses are unwilling to acknowledge any imbalance of power. Typical is this wife's response: "There's not a *strong* one, like this one's in charge, and this one says, 'yes, OK, fine.' There's always a[n] equality . . . I definitely bring home almost twice what he does, but that doesn't make me the right one or the one that makes the rules. There's no rules." However, it seems that there *are* rules—that is, there is an underlying sense that husbands could still exchange money for power.

One couple, Don and Cindy, have lived in a variety of circumstances in their 10-year marriage. Each has supported the other through some schooling (she received her master's degree, he received his associate's degree), each has worked part-time at some point, and now both work full-time. Don, a welding technician, reflected on the link between money and power in his marriage:

I think, as a general rule, it's been very mutual, although there's been times, where I've been earning more money, I've *felt* like I should have more say. Whether I actually did, or actually *demand*ed that I did, there were times that I felt like, 'I earn all the money. I should be able to decide what to do with it'.

By contrast, his wife, Cindy, "hopes" they made a conscious effort to view assets as "our money" regardless of who earned it. She now earns more than Don, and she described a fight they had less than a year ago:

[H]e just got all upset and flew off the handle. I was gonna go out and buy the kids some new school clothes, right before school begins. And he said we couldn't afford it. I said, 'I'll charge it. I don't want our kids going to school in old clothes.' It wasn't like I was going to go out and buy hundreds of dollars worth. And he just blew off the handle and threw something, just screamed and yelled . . . [A]t that point I said to him, 'you know, I make more money than you. If I wanna spend money, I will!' Oooooooo! He had a fit!

Bringing in more money means a legitimate claim (in his mind) to more control for him, but not for her. In fact, her attempts to assert a right to spend money based on her greater income precipitated what she describes as one of their worst fights, and she has not tried to make any similar claims since then.

Bonnie, the corporate attorney married to the stay-at-home lawyer/dad, does recognize that money seems to translate into power, but only for her husband:

I think there *is* a link [between money and power], but only the other way. If Wayne were making all the money, I'd be resentful because I'd feel less, I'd feel as if I had less of a say in how it was spent, regardless of what he thought. But if I'm the only one making the money, we've tried all along to make sure that all the money and assets that we have are clearly joint, regardless of where it all came from. [VT: So you don't think he feels the way you think you would feel?] Correct. I mean, he's out there buying all these toys, these treadmills and [thousand dollar] vacuum cleaners, whereas I think if I were, if the situation were reversed, and I was at home, I mean, I'd be even more of a penny pincher.

And finally, there is Jill, the wife who defers to her husband to avoid being labeled "a bitch":

I've brought in more money, and I don't feel like I had more power . . . I try not to mention the fact that I make more money, because that's just a taboo thing. It would send him through the roof. If I'm even anywhere *close* to that subject, it's dangerous [she laughs]. I think in *his* mind, money is power, and he thinks he'll be a much better husband the more money he makes.

Money, then, is still linked to power, but only for husbands. That is, though men may automatically derive power from their incomes, wives are very careful not to make power claims based on their greater resources. What is most striking about this finding is that wives speak of this asymmetry in a matter-of-fact way. They do not complain that their income advantage does not translate into other advantages in the relationship. On the contrary, they seem to accept it—even, as in the case with Bonnie, where they know an income disparity in their husbands' favor would give the men an automatic power advantage. Of course, it is entirely possible that these wives would prefer to exercise greater power in their marriages, but recognize that asserting such a claim would be troubling to their husbands and problematic for their relationships, and they therefore "choose" to reinforce their husbands'

dominance as the least objectionable of the available alternatives.⁸

These results indicate that substantial economic resources become liabilities for the women in these marriages. However, such resources are not liabilities for *all* wives. We have ample evidence that egalitarian relationships exist and that women can be treated as true partners within marriage (Coltrane, 1996; Deutsch, 1999; Risman, 1998; Schwartz, 1994). Given the load that these unconventional-earner wives carry, we might ask why these women do not leave their husbands for partners who would more highly value their economic contributions.⁹ This would seem to be a reasonable solution to the extraordinary burden these women carry, but we have to recognize that if these women go looking for men who are willing to share power more equitably with them, such a search would come at a great cost. Divorce is always an expensive endeavor, both emotionally and economically—even for women with such tremendous resources at their disposal. These families rely on both incomes to maintain their standards of living, so divorce would mean a significant financial drop for these women and their children.

In addition, advising wives to increase their power by seeking divorce is built on an assumption that gives us another window into the hidden power advantages enjoyed by husbands: Men have more power to define the terms of their marital relationships. If these wives look for replacements for their husbands, presumably they will also be men, which means that women will confront the same gendered power relations. In other words, if women's best recourse in these relationships is to find other partners, this underscores the fact that women's relative power depends on men's willingness to share theirs. Many spouses seem to be well aware of this dynamic. One husband put it this way:

I've never felt it's really important for me to exert my power as the husband because the fact of the matter is that we are fairly equal in terms of our

earnings and in terms of our responsibilities, in our own way, and I like that. I think [my wife] is, in every sense of the word, a partner in this relationship.

Although this wife may indeed enjoy a more egalitarian relationship with her husband, it is because he makes a point of *not* asserting his dominance in the relationship. He clearly recognizes that there is some power out there that is available to him strictly because he is a man. And the fact that he can choose whether or not to access this power underscores the greater ability of men to define the terms of the marital contract.

Because divorce is such a costly and risky option for women, preserving these marriages and maximizing their quality may take on great importance. In this light, wives' decisions to bolster their husbands' power make sense. In the absence of attractive alternatives, wives may need to find ways to feel good about themselves (as women), their husbands (as men), and their relationships. Constructing more egalitarian marriages seems unworkable, or undesirable, for these couples. Therefore, they focus their efforts on making their unusual marriages look and feel more conventional.

Remember, too, that these couples do not see themselves as remaining unconventional earners indefinitely. They have not made a specific decision to privilege the wife's career over the husband's, which may make it less likely that spouses will dramatically alter their expectations of each other in their relationships. They may see this time period as an aberration in their marriage, which makes it easier to hold on to conventional gendered expectations and identities. Still, these couples feel a great deal of tension between their commitments to these conventional identities and the reality that wives are the major earners in their families. In fact, the results presented here may *underestimate* the dissatisfaction and difficulties that exist in the larger population of unconventional earners. Remember that these couples volunteered to participate in this research. Couples who experience the most strain and distress would likely be reluctant to examine these issues in the context of in-depth interviews with a stranger.

CONCLUSION

For the couples presented here,¹⁰ the gendered expectation of men's dominance overrides the

⁸Gallagher and Smith (1999) report similar findings on the gender and power dynamics among evangelical couples. Though these are not unconventional earners, they are similarly caught between traditional gender ideals and economic circumstances that very often require two earners. And like the couples presented here, they choose to reinforce the husband's authority in order to create more comfortable relationships.

⁹There is disagreement in the literature over whether unconventional earners experience greater dissatisfaction and instability in their marriages than more conventional couples. See White and Rogers (2000) for a review of the recent literature on this issue.

¹⁰Remember that this sample is predominantly European-American, middle- to upper-middle class, and highly educated,

potential economic power in being the major breadwinner. These data allow us to see exactly how this happens at the interactional and individual levels. Lukes' conceptualization of power opens a window on the hidden ways in which the link between money and power is undermined for women, whereas men's dominance is maintained, within these marriages. Spouses work together to support the institutional-level expectation of men's dominance in order to preserve marital harmony, and gendered expectations, such as men's imperative to provide and women's imperative to care, are re-worked at the interactional and individual levels to allow each spouse to construct a comfortable, conventional identity. These results support an expanded conceptualization of power, and give us a way to capture more fully the complex dynamics between spouses.

Finally, these findings are of practical value as well for those interested in promoting greater movement toward gender equality. A more complete understanding of the hidden ways in which both men and women work to maintain men's dominance is an important step toward dismantling gender privilege within marriage. It is often difficult to see the subtle ways in which existing power structures are reproduced, but such knowledge is vital. Men and women need to be aware of their own investments in conventional gender arrangements in order to disrupt them. Only then can they resist the considerable pressure to reproduce the status quo.

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which means these results may not apply to other couples. Further research should aim for greater racial and ethnic diversity and include a larger number of working class couples.

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