The Gendered Work Orientations of Working and Middle Class Cohabiting Couples

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Abstract

Cohabitors have fairly egalitarian household divisions of labor, but the gendered aspects of their work orientations remain unclear. I examine the couple-level work orientations of 61 working and middle class cohabiting couples to determine how they "do gender" through their work. I find that nearly equal shares enact conventional and unconventional patterns, with middle class couples behaving the most traditionally, contrary to expectations. Working and middle class couples are equally likely to engage in non-conventional arrangements, but do so in different ways: working class couples frequently have equally unclear occupational paths while middle class couples frequently have equally strong career expectations. Results indicate that work orientation is one possible way that these less institutionalized couples are able to create more egalitarian unions.

Keywords: cohabitation, work, gender, work-family balance

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Cohabitation is becoming an increasingly normative phenomenon in the United States with more than half of all newly married couples choosing to live together before marrying (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). The proliferation of alternative family forms, including cohabitation, led Cherlin (2004) to conclude that the American family is becoming deinstitutionalized, meaning that social norms about family roles and arrangements have weakened. This deinstitutionalization may provide an opportunity for a change in traditionally gendered structural constraints, allowing for more egalitarian relationships between men and women in these intimate unions.

Cohabitors who were examined in the late 1980s and early 1990s did in fact appear to be fairly egalitarian both in terms of attitudes and behaviors (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Denmark, Shaw, & Ciali, 1985; Kaufman, 2000; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). Those who lived together in informal unions were less likely than their married counterparts to value specialized gendered norms, in which men are expected to be the primary breadwinners and women are responsible for the home and family (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Clarkberg et al.,1995; Schoen & Weinick, 1993). Cohabitors also were more likely to evidence greater earning and employment similarity as well as to share household chores more equitable than did married couples (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003; Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994). In addition, cohabiting men had weaker work orientations and cohabiting women had stronger orientations toward work than their married peers (Clarkberg et al., 1995).

Despite their behavior and attitudinal differences, it must be noted that "more egalitarian" beliefs and behaviors are not the equivalent of "completely egalitarian" beliefs and behaviors. Even though cohabitors are purportedly less traditional than their married counterparts, past work found that cohabiting women still did more housework than do cohabiting men (Shelton &

John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994), and cohabiting women's higher earnings were destabilizing in a way that married women's higher incomes were not (Brines and Joyner, 1999). Despite the proliferation of literature that describes the ways that cohabiting couples "do gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987) through their household divisions of labor and financial arrangements (e.g., Elizabeth, 2001; Shelton & John, 1993; South & Spitze, 1994), we know little about the ways that they do (or undo) gender through their work orientations.

This paper relies on data from 31 middle-class and 30 working-class cohabiting couples to examine the differences in the ways that these couples "do gender" through work orientations -- the way they feel about their occupations, their desires to advance (or not) within their careers, and the ways that members of a couple treat their partners' jobs in relation to their own (West & Zimmerman, 1987). My work focuses on three primary research questions: 1. What types of work orientations are exhibited by working and middle class cohabiting couples? 2. How do couples do or undo conventionally gendered expectations through their orientations toward work? 3. How are their work orientations related to their household divisions of labor and financial arrangements? Examining the ways in which cohabiting couples are constructing gender through their orientations toward work, and how that varies by their social class positions, adds to our understanding of this rapidly growing union form.

Background

Though still most common among the economically disadvantaged and less educated, cohabitation has increased among all segments of the population, including among working and middle class individuals (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Approximately 40% cohabitors have at least some college experience (NSFG, 2002). The outcomes for these groups based upon their education levels are quite distinct (e.g., Goldscheider & Waite, 1986; Manning, 2001). Although

working and middle class share some similarities, the differences between those two classes are large enough to result in discrepant outcomes.

The extant research explores cohabiting couples' gendered behaviors in two primary areas: housework performance and financial arrangements. As a group, all cohabiting women are disadvantaged in that they do much of the work expected of wives, but receive few of the benefits that married women gain from their nuptials. Co-residential couples are less likely to pool their income, for example, which often results in women paying greater shares of their individual income in an attempt to ensure that each partner pays exactly 50% of the household expenses (Elizabeth, 2001; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003). Further, cohabiting women do not benefit from the enforceable trust deemed unique to marriage (Cherlin, 2000).

Working class cohabiting women may be especially disadvantaged because they are more likely than middle class cohabiting women to be supporting children within their co-residential unions, to have relatively low incomes, and also to be in partnerships where the most traditionally gendered household burdens fall primarily upon their shoulders (Manning, 2001; Rubin 1976; 1994). Working class individuals, especially working class men, also have more gender-traditional attitudes than middle class individuals (Rubin, 1976; 1994). This may be due in part to the "liberalizing" effect of higher education, one of the distinguishing features of the middle class (Myers & Booth, 2002; Petola, Milkie, & Presser, 2004).

Some evidence suggests that middle class individuals are more egalitarian in action as well (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). Women generally do a smaller share of the housework and/or outsource the household labor to lower class women when at least one member of the couple has a relatively high level of income or education (de Ruijter, Treas, & Cohen, 2005; Hochschild, 1989; Shelton & John, 1993). Still, gender does matter for middle and upper-middle

class couples (e.g., Tichenor, 1999; 2005). Tichenor (1999; 2005) found in her study of primarily middle class couples where the woman had higher incomes, occupational statuses, and/or education levels than their male partners that couples did their best to hide or minimize their status and income differences. Further, women often deferred to their husbands' domestic preferences, doing a greater share of housework as a way of maintaining the conventional gender order within the home (see also Brines, 1994). The ways in which couples' gendered work orientations differ among working and middle class cohabitors (if at all) remains to be seen.

Much of what we know about gender and work orientation has focused primarily on married or single individuals. Despite changing norms that allow women to participate in both the private and public realms (Sayer, Cohen, & Casper, 2004), gendered expectations for men remain deeply entrenched and intensely rigid (Taylor, Tucker, &Mitchell-Kernan, 1999). Women are able to choose to work, although women with children must not allow their work lives to supercede their role as "mothers" (Hays, 1996) and experience significantly more work-family conflict than do working men (Stone, 2008; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004). Although a few men elect to privilege their families or leisure time over employment (Gerson, 1993), men's options to stay at home with children or as househusbands are generally not socially supported (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). Being a "good provider" is a defining hallmark of manhood (Bernard, 1981; Martin, 2003; Townsand, 2002), especially among white men (Taylor et al., 1999). Although recent evidence suggests that the definition of "a good provider" has been modified to include providing emotional, as well as financial, support for the family and even welcoming their partners' financial contributions, these men are still expected to maintain a strong focus on work, and, consequently expect to receive the privileges of providership. These include having a wife who will manage most of the labor at home, having their own careers

privileged over their partners', and having greater access to discretionary monies (Hochschild, 1989; Orrange, 2002; Townsend, 2002; Wilkie, 1993). Masculine privileges, which persist regardless of which partner actually earns the bulk of the household income (Potuchek, 1994; 1997; Tichenor, 2005; Vogler & Pahl, 1994), led Schwartz (1994:111) to conclude that the provider role is, "…the lynchpin of marital inequality…"

Previous research on work orientation has frequently ignored the unique experiences of cohabiting couples, whose less-institutionalized unions may provide them with more opportunities to challenge conventional norms (Cherlin, 2004). Cohabitors are distinct from married couples in terms of work, in that they earn more similar shares of money than do married couples (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Sassler & McNally, 2003). In addition, cohabiting men tend to focus less on work and cohabiting women have stronger work orientations than their married peers (Clarkberg et al., 1995). Still, many cohabitors also appear to privilege the male partner's employment and income. In Miller and Sassler's (2006) study of working class cohabitors, the largest group of couples spoke of the male partner's employment as most central, despite the fact that some couples were earning nearly identical amounts. The female partners in these couples often felt obligated to take on additional chores around the home in order to "make up for" earning less money. It unclear, however, how middle class cohabiting couples discuss their orientations toward work and how these discussions are similar to or different from their working class counterparts.

Here, I examine the ways that gender is constructed among working and middle class cohabiting couples through their orientations toward work. Investigating their work orientations and the ways that their orientations relate to their household domestic and financial divisions will

add to our understanding of the ways that gender is done (or can be undone) in these less institutionalized relationships.

Method

Qualitative methods are uniquely suited to expose the processes through which cohabiting couples construct gender within their relationships (Altheide & Johnson, 1998; Berg, 1998; Charmaz, 1983). These 61 couples (122 individuals) were interviewed as part of a larger project on young adults' relationship development. This sample includes 30 working class couples and 31 middle class couples, all of whom were living in the greater Columbus metropolitan area. In addition to being asked about their experiences with paid work and future occupational/educational plans, couples were also asked about their future family desires, the history of their relationships, and experiences within their families of origin.

The couples were recruited in different ways based upon their desired social class characteristics. Working class couples were recruited primarily from fliers posted at a local community college. Despite this, less than half of these individuals are attending school and, of them, very few are attending full time and all but one is also working. Middle class couples were recruited primarily through fliers posted in gourmet grocery stores and coffee shops, and a posting on an online community bulletin board. Although online recruitment may result in a higher income, more educated sample (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006), in this instance (where middle class participants were the desired respondents) it was an effective way of reaching the target group. In order to be included in either sample, couples had to be in the prime family formation years of 18-35 and live together for at least three months to ensure that the least stable group of cohabitors is not included in the sample (Bracher & Santow, 1998).

Purposive sampling (Berg, 2004) was employed in order to ensure that participating couples were members of the "working class" or "middle class." Social class can be difficult to define because it is rarely captured by a single measure. For this group of participants, most of whom are fairly young, income may not be the best way of measuring social class as many are just at the beginning their occupational trajectories. Therefore, while couples had to earn a minimum of $18,000 per year to be included in the sample, education level was the primary screening criteria. When both partners had less than a bachelor's level education couples were placed in the working class, while those couples in which both partners had at least a bachelor's degree were placed in the middle class sample. Among eight couples, one partner had a bachelor's degree while the other partner had some college education or less. These couples were classified as "working class" or "middle class" based upon occupation. Among the four couples placed among the working class, none of the degreed partners were working in occupations that required degrees; instead they were employed in fields such as telemarketing. Among the four couples placed in the middle class, non-degreed partners were working in occupations similar to their middle class peers (such as computer network design or as successful business owners). Participants were recruited and interviewed between the summers of 2004 and 2006.

Sample Information

Descriptive results of the sample are presented in Table 1. The modal level of education among the working class couples is some college for each partner (n=19) and among middle class couples is a bachelor's degree for each partner (n=14). Not surprisingly, income levels are quite a bit higher among the middle class sample, with an average couple-level income of $67,672 for the middle class versus $38,971 for the working class. Middle class couples were also slightly older than working class couples.

[Table 1 about Here]

Analytic Approach

Interviews with each individual lasted between one and three hours. Each partner was interviewed at the same time but in separate rooms. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. All names and identifying features have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. Transcripts were coded in ATLAS ti to facilitate data management, with coding schemes determined both from past research (deductively) and emerging from repeated readings of the transcripts (inductively). Burawoy's (1998) extended case method served as the model for the overall analysis. In Burawoy's method a particular theory (here, the gender perspective, which assumes that we create our gendered selves through our interactions with social institutions --such as the family and work-- and with one another (Ferree, 1990)) was used to frame the examination of the data. Following open coding to generate initial themes, segments of narratives were classified into sub-categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, ATLAS ti was used to facilitate axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Half of the 61 working and middle class couples in this sample are replicating conventionally gendered patterns through their work orientations. These couples privilege the man's employment over the woman's, he has a stronger work orientation than she does, or, among the middle class, couples support the female partner's career wholeheartedly but expect that she will reduce her work hours or discontinue work once the couple has children. However, half are also undoing traditional norms. Among some of these couples, both partners are uncertain of their future occupational paths or make work one of their lowest priorities. Other couples, especially among the middle class, place the female partners' careers in equal esteem

with their male partners'. Their working class counterparts rarely consist of couples in which both partners are following solid occupational paths or hoping to climb the career ladder; instead, when one working class partner prioritizes work more than the other, the more career-focused individual is just as likely to be the female partner as the male partner.

Conventional Work Orientations

Traditionally, men are expected to be the primary providers for their families (Bernard, 1981). Even when couples prefer that the female partners work for pay, conventional individuals privilege the man's employment, expect the female partner to make the bulk of the career sacrifices or to discontinue work once they have children, or, even if the man's career is not privileged by the couple, societal rules dictate that he should have a stronger orientation toward work than his female partner (Becker & Moen, 1999; Orrange, 2002; Potuchek, 1992, 1997). Such is the case among 34 of these cohabiting couples. Despite research that suggests that working class couples have more conventional ideas about work than their middle class counterparts (e.g., Rubin, 1976, 1994), the bulk of these couples are middle class.

Among a sizable proportion (n=12) of working and middle class Conventional couples, the theme of privileging the men's employment emerged repeatedly. Couples made future relationship plans around only the man's job, and in some instances, women ignored or downplayed their own achievements while highlighting the educational and career accomplishments of their partners. For the middle class women in particular, privileging the men's jobs often required a significant amount of sacrifice of their own occupational plans.

The stories of working class Anthony and Diana and middle class Kristina and Matthew illustrate this conventional trend. Twenty-one year old Anthony has been working as a dock unloader to help provide for his partner, Diana, and their two-year old daughter, while attending

college to become an architect. Anthony prides himself on the future he is building for his family. When asked where he saw them fitting in with his career plans, Anthony noted, "They're coming along for the ride." Diana and Anthony both view their work revolving around Anthony's career. When asked about her own occupational plans, Diana, who is a student and working two jobs to make ends meet, never detailed her own goals, but instead replied, "Well, I'm waiting for Anthony to graduate. (laughs) He's getting an architecture degree, so hopefully he wants to open up his own firm." Likewise, Kristina enjoys her job as an architect, but plans to support her partner, Matthew, in his dream by working from home to support his firm. "Matthew's thinking about doing his own thing someday, his own [architecture] firm and that's his goal in life for the career side of it so, you know, the fact that I could potentially sit at home and help him make money as long as I needed to [is] favorable to me." She, like many of her counterparts, views his job as more important than her own. Her decision to support Matthew's career will likely result in negative consequences for her own. For example, among married women, becoming a "trailing spouse" often results in a significant pay deduction (Shauman & Noonan, 2007). Of note is that nearly half of these men that currently receive provider benefits such as having their careers privileged have yet to actually become established in their occupations. Instead, three middle class and two working class men whose "careers" are privileged by the couple are students (though all are also employed at least part time) or have recently begun second careers. Rather than selecting into relationships in which the male partners are established providers, some of these couples are privileging men's work in anticipation of their future career successes.

For these middle class Conventional women, privileging the man's employment often involves a great deal of sacrifice of their own goals. Katherine, for example, noted that her job as a clinical research coordinator is so rewarding that she is working on publications and taking a

GRE prep course to be accepted to a PhD program in her field. She and her partner, Travis, plan to marry, but it is unclear what will become of her educational goals since Travis does not plan to leave his accounting job to move wherever Katherine gets into school, and she does not feel comfortable asking him to do so at this point.

Another group of couples who are "doing conventional gender" through their work orientations are those eight middle class and three working class couples that intend to have the female partners focus on work only until they have children. Two working class men hoped their partners would be stay at home parents, but since the women were not in agreement making the arrangement unlikely, those couples are not included in this group. Only eleven couples agree that they want the female partner stay at home at least part time while their children are young, but given the difficulties of balancing work and family, others may find themselves pushed from the workplace toward domesticity despite their preferences (Gerson, 1985; Stone, 2008).

Although they enjoy their careers, some women intend to leave their jobs or work from home once they have children. Juliana noted,

> Evan has a lot more earning potential than I do and we both realize that. So he's definitely going to be the breadwinner in the family and we both think it's important to have a mom at home. So at least for the first couple years of their lives, I will be at home, whether that's full time or part-time, depending on how the money goes. Until they're like in Kindergarten half the day or something like that. Then I would consider going back.

Likewise, Nathan explained that his partner, Andrea, planned to stay home with any children the two had in the future. Asked how he felt about her desire, he explained, "I don't have a problem with it. I mean, I have no problem I guess being the quote, unquote, breadwinner of family. That

really doesn't bother me 'cause taking care of kids and a home is a job in itself…that's a great thing if you can be home with your kids." Even if they plan to work part-time or flexible hours once they have children, it was clear that it was the women's careers, not the men's, would be most impacted by parenthood. Although a number of couples attempt to keep their divisions of labor as equal as possible while cohabiting, once they have kids, the gendered nature of many of their jobs combined with their personal preferences make it likely that the female partners will become the primary parents. Their desires for equality are outstripped by structural forces that still encourage men to be primary providers while women are responsible for domestic and childcare duties (Gerson, 2002; Orrange, 2002).

Having work orientations that mirrored those seen among conventional married couples (in which the male partner's employment was privileged and the female partner was expected to make work secondary to motherhood) was most common among the middle class. This may be because most of the middle class women who intend to stay at home with their children, at least part time, have jobs (such as "psychologist" or "athletic trainer") that lend themselves to more flexible, family-friendly schedules, and all have partners who earn enough money to become the primary provider given their current earnings. Neither is the case for the majority of working class women. Working class couples may (rightfully) feel that they cannot afford to be one-income families, despite their more traditional attitudes (Rubin, 1976, 1994). Interestingly, when some of the couples who intend for the male partners to be the primary providers entered into their unions, they, too, would not financially have been able to achieve their goals of having the women be stay at home parents. Martin, for example, noted that despite having an engineering degree and a master's degree in fine arts, he worked as a prep cook in a diner when he and Jessica first moved in together. He explained to her that he could not pay half the rent, saying,

"I'm broke. I have $50 in my bank account" adding, "I'm moving in and you have to trust me to figure out my shit." After living with Jessica for almost a year, Martin found a job uniquely suited to his educational qualifications and has been advancing within his field. They now feel certain that she will be able to stay at home at least part time with any future children.

Among most of the working class who have conventional work orientations, neither partner's occupational desires are given greater importance, but the men do express stronger career goals than their partners and have become more established in their careers. Following a long string of odd jobs, Jake, a working class man, obtained a position as a systems administrator, where he seems to have found his calling. He noted that he plans to pursue more education and certifications in the field and that "Eventually I would like to uh, to get into programming. I mean there's a million fields that you can get into in computers…I'm thinking maybe integrated web programming might be a good thing to do." His partner, Stephanie, completed a bachelor's degree in anthropology but works as a telemarketer. She is not as certain as Jake what path to pursue next, however, and explained that she is interested in being a novelist or a wedding planner or getting a PhD, though she is not sure what subject she would study. Similarly, Taylor has a degree in computer information systems and works as a network administrator. He explained that his job was very important to him, saying, "I like the problem solving aspect of it. There's always, I'm always learning something new…" His partner, Bree, has a steady job as a government auditor, but feels that she has yet to find her "calling." She explained, "I would kind of like a little more emotional fulfillment you know, which I don't really have at all from what I'm doing so right now I'm just kind of working as a means to an end." It is important to note, that when one partner had a stronger work orientation, the partner with the greatest focus on

work is nearly equally as likely to be the female partner as the male partner, which is one way cohabiting couples are "undoing gender."

Undoing Gender through Work Orientation

Despite conventional norms, almost half of these couples (n=27) have set out to create households in which women's occupations are at least equally important to their male partners' (e.g., Risman, 1998; Schwartz, 1994). They do this in a number of ways. Two couples give the female partners' careers top priority, while a larger share (particularly among the middle class) view one another's jobs as equally important. Other couples are equally unclear on their occupational plans; although they work for pay, none are certain what paths they ultimately hope to pursue. Finally, among the working class, especially, when one partner has a more solid occupational path or clearer goals, it is almost as likely to be the female partner as the male partner. In contrast to their peers who are doing conventional gender through work orientation, very few of these couples have altered their orientations toward work throughout their relationships. Because the structure of work often affects the nature of family life (Gerson, 2002; Stone, 2008), it is possible that these couples' orientations toward their careers may lead to more equal behaviors in their domestic endeavors as well.

Despite the number of couples who are content to bend gender norms, only two couples have managed to turn convention on its head. In these couples, the female partners' jobs are privileged over the men's. Both women are in much more specialized occupations (retail management and a rare field of physics) than their male counterparts (a former barista and an architect). Because of this, the men plan on following their partners for their careers; one is currently a stay-at-home father and the other is considering stay at home with any future children. This complete reversal of tradition is rare, however, perhaps because overthrowing gendered

norms entirely is difficult to maintain (Brines & Joiner, 1999; Miller & Sassler, 2006), as workplaces are often organized to reinforce traditional gender roles and benefit men who have supporting female partners at home (Gerson, 2002; Martin, 2003; Presser, 1995; Schwartz, 1994).

More common than overturning established gender norms, a sizable number of couples (n=9) assign equal importance to each partner's job. For example, Lindsey, a professor, and Drew, a lawyer, both want to continue moving upwards in their careers and have managed to equally privilege one another's demanding jobs by taking turns moving for one another's careers. Both partners explained that Drew had promised to follow Lindsey until she got tenure because she had followed him to law school. Few of these couples both have "power careers" like Lindsey and Drew, however. More dual-earning couples have solid occupations but little desire to be "power couples" (Becker & Moen, 1999). Tara and Drew typify this situation. Drew has worked steadily in internet securities for six years, but would prefer to switch careers to that of his major, advertising. Still, he has never attempted to pursue a career that he sees as more favorable. Tara was made a computer programmer after beginning a job with a major corporation as a temporary administrative assistant. She enjoys the financial remunerations of her job, but has no desire to advance. When asked about her future occupation, she said, "I think something definitely operational-related. I don't see myself being some big supervisor person or somebody in a leadership role ….I don't know if I wanna do something with management at all."

Both partners having similar work orientations is a pattern that is most common among middle class couples. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon. Among some of these couples, both partners have a strong desire to advance their careers. Those who feel drawn toward those "power jobs" often must receive higher education in order to gain access to the upper echelons of those occupations, solidifying their middle class status. Not all of these middle

class couples who both focus equally on their work desire to advance through the ranks, however. For them, their ability to be steady workers, despite not wanting to advance, may again be a function of their educations. With their college degrees, they are qualified for positions (like networks administrator or teacher) that often provide a great deal of job security and offer enough benefits (like healthcare and retirement accounts) to encourage employees to be steady workers without requiring that they climb the corporate ladder. It is less likely that two partners who each have less than a college degree will be able to find similar positions that provide employees with sufficient fulfillment that they feel a sense of career loyalty (Rubin, 1976).

In contrast to those couples who both have equally solid work orientations (regardless of their desires for advancement), a similar number of couples (n=9) are both unclear on what occupational paths they want to pursue and/or make work one of their lowest priorities. Many dual-earner couples desire to work fewer hours (Reynolds, 2003). However, desired work hours do not necessarily speak to one's orientation toward work. Though individuals with low work orientations appear in some research (e.g., Gerson, 1993; 2002; Potuchek, 1992), couples in which neither partner has a strong work orientation are often missing from the literature, despite greater attempts to study the intersections of work and family the household level (e.g., Becker & Moen, 1999; Hochschild, 1989; Klute et al., 1999). Nonetheless, they are fairly common in this sample and seen among roughly equal numbers of working and middle class couples.

For example, Aliyah, a working class mother, hopes to eventually work in pharmaceutical sales, not because she feels a particular calling for it but primarily because, "I don't want to be stuck just in the office. I would like to go out as well. I don't want to wear like a uniform or anything. I would like to be able to dress up." She also hopes to open her own graphic design business or publish a book of poetry, but the ways in which these paths fit together is

unclear. Her partner, Terrell, is a part-time dock worker who has spent over a year debating whether to enroll in a two-week real estate course, noting that he wanted to be a realtor because,

> My dream job is to do nothing I mean that's why I feel like my heart is really saying go to realtor, real estate or realtor cause I feel you do 10 years of hard work and in 10 years you should accumulate enough money where you could start your own business or you could do your own thing

Asked what "his own thing" would be, he emphatically stated, "professional bowling." Similarly, Mason has a bachelor's degree in business, but has been working for the past several years as a bartender and construction worker. When asked what he planned to future, he replied, "God I don't know but not this…If I knew what I wanted to do I'd like to think I'd be doing it or at least be working towards it." Mason's partner, Kirsten, explained that she does not enjoy her job as a market research assistant, but, like Mason, has no idea what she wanted to do in the future. When asked about her future career plans, her reply was nearly identical to Mason's. She said, "Honestly I don't know. If I knew, I'd probably be doing it."

Another common scenario among these working and middle class cohabiting couples was for one partner to have a more clear work orientation than the other. Becker and Moen (1999) find in their study of married couples with children that when one partner has a "job" and the other has a "career", the man's work orientation is often stronger than his female partner's. However, among these cohabitors, especially the working class, male and female partners were nearly equally likely to be the ones with the strongest inclination toward work and the greatest desire to be in a particular field. Just as couples in which the male partner's work orientation is stronger than his female partner's do not privilege his job, among the eight couples in which the female partner views work as more central to her identity than her male partner does, neither

assumes that her job more important than his work. Jackie, for example, works in social services and has gone back to school in order to advance in her career. Having done numerous art projects with children while working in a group home, she is now pursuing an art therapy degree. In contrast, her partner, Chad, is still unclear about his career path. Chad currently works part time at a community college setting up phone systems and part time in a coffee shop. He notes that in the future he plans to do, "…either teaching or doing music or composing. Just trying to hack that and if I need to have something on the side, just whatever I can get on the side." Sherry also has a clearer career plan than her partner, Tyrone. Sherry is a college student who is a year away from completing her bachelor's degree in communications to become an anchorperson. Her partner, Tyrone, explained that a family member had gotten him a position as a postal worker, but that he does not see a future in the job. In these couples, the female partners feel a stronger desire to work in a specific field and have taken more concrete steps to accomplish their goals.

This pattern of one partner having a stronger work orientation than the other (regardless of sex) may be more common among the working class because a higher proportion of the working class individuals are working in "jobs" rather than "careers.", This may be because the upbringing of working class children encourages them to view work as a necessity, rather than a source of intrinsic satisfaction or an arena for achievement like middle class individuals do (Laureau, 2003). In addition, their lack of education impacts their occupational options and makes it unlikely that both partners will find fulfilling work that allows for much advancement.

Relationships between Work Orientation and Domestic/Financial Arrangements

During the course of their interviews, couples were asked to describe the ways that they divided their bills and arranged their household chores. Some couples shared financial and domestic obligations equally, but in a larger number of couples, the female partner took on most

of the household chores while the male partner paid the majority of the bills. These divisions of labor often placed a disproportionate amount of responsibility on the women (Miller & Sassler, 2006), but it is unclear how they are related to couples' work orientations.

Among couples who are replicating conventionally gendered patterns through their orientations toward work, the way that these couples share the bills differ by their social class. Working class men generally pay the majority of the bills, but the largest group of their middle class counterparts (50%) each pays an equal portion of the financial obligations. Very few female partners are paying the majority of the bills (and, when they do, the arrangement is generally considered to be temporary.)

Although a sizable proportion of couples who have conventional work orientations share their financial obligations in non-conventional ways, in terms of domestic labor, the most common pattern is for the female partner to bear the brunt of the household chores. Again, this differs by social class, though, as middle class couples are more likely to share the household chores equally -- when the female partner is not doing the lion's share – than their working class counterparts. Here, working class men appear to be asserting their more conventional attitudes especially through their refusal to do an equal share of the household division of labor (Miller & Sassler, 2006; Rubin, 1976; 1994). However, three working class men actually do most of the domestic labor, while none of the middle class men do. Nonetheless, two of the three men consider their situations temporary. Interestingly, those couples who have the most equal arrangements in terms of the way they divide both financial and domestic obligations are those who intend for the female partner to quit work or reduce her work hours in the future after having children. Despite having conventional work orientations because of the ways they are

planning their occupational futures, these couples' have otherwise strong focuses on equality in other aspects of their relationships at this time (Becker & Moen, 1999).

A similar number of couples are undoing conventionally gendered patterns through their work orientations. The ways that these couples divide their financial obligations are also often nonconventional, with middle class couples likely to either have the male partner pay the majority of the bills or to share them equally and working class couples most likely to have the female partner assume responsibility for most of the financial obligations. This arrangement makes sense given couples' work orientations. Since, among the working class couples who have nonconventional work orientations, the most common scenario is for the female partner to have the most solid career path, many of the women's orientations have led them to be the primary earners. Likewise, a greater proportion of middle class couples are those in which both partners have equally strong orientations toward work, explaining their desires and abilities to equally share the household bills.

Despite the fact that they're "undoing" gender in terms of work orientation and, in many cases, financial arrangements, these couples have domestic arrangements that are quite similar to their counterparts who have conventional ideas about work orientation. Overall, half of these couples, especially those who are working class, rely upon the female partner to do the majority of the domestic labor. However, 40% of these couples share their domestic obligations equally, primarily because most of the middle class couples split the household chores. Future research should focus on whether these couples are intentionally trying to create egalitarian unions or whether other factors are leading to their equal divisions.

A number of other factors differentiate the couples who are doing or undoing conventional work orientation. Among several couples who have a less conventional work

orientation, the female partner is four or more years older than her male partner. Roughly 30% of those couples who have conventional work orientations contain a male partner who is significantly older than his female partner. Partners who are older may have had time to more fully develop their occupational plans and build experience in their fields, leading to their clearer orientations toward work. Interestingly, when the male partner has more education than his female partner, the couple most often has a non-conventional orientation toward work. However, these are generally couples in which both partners are well educated. Their college experiences, rather than their relative educations, may lead to their less conventional behaviors (Myers & Booth, 2002). Finally, a greater proportion of those couples who are undoing gender include a partner (usually the female) who has been previously married. These women's experiences during their divorces (which generally have disproportionately negative economic consequences for women, (Kurtz, 1995)) may have led them to focus more on their careers in order to be able to support themselves and, in some cases, their children.

Discussion

Cohabiting couples engage in less institutionalized relationships, which offer the greatest possibility for family change (Cherlin, 2004). In fact, cohabitors themselves often desire such changes, expressing strong preferences for egalitarian unions (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Denmark et al., 1985). In terms of their orientations toward work, cohabitors differ from their married counterparts with both cohabiting men and women having less conventional orientations toward work (Clarkberg et al., 1995). However, an examination of cohabitors' work orientations at the couple-level has been absent from the literature. The results from this study suggest that work orientation is one arena in which cohabitors can "undo" conventionally gendered behaviors,

though couples who have non-conventional work orientations, particularly working class couples, do not necessarily behave non-conventionally in other arenas of their relationships.

Even within less institutionalized relationships, about half of these 61 couples (n=34) have conventional work orientations in which the male partner's career is privileged, he has a stronger work orientation, though the couple does not privilege it, or the couple intends for the female partner to focus on work only until they have children. These couples often engage in conventional behaviors in other arenas of their relationships, as well. Working class couples, in particular, rely upon the male partner to pay the majority of the household bills while the female partner completes the bulk of the domestic chores. Middle class couples engage in more equal exchanges with half of couples dividing the financial obligations equally and a substantial minority shares the housework as well.

A nearly equal number (n=27) of working and middle class cohabiting couples in this sample have non-conventional work orientations. These couples have equally strong (or equally unclear) orientations toward work or the female partner has a clearer work orientation than her male counterpart, with two couples even privileging the woman's job. Here, too, couples display social class differences in the ways they arrange their domestic and financial divisions of labor. In terms of financial divisions, working class couples are behaving in the most unconventional ways; over half of these working class women pay the majority of the household bills. Although past evidence shows that this arrangement is often destabilizing for cohabiting couples (cf. Brines & Joyner, 1999), this may be changing as the vast majority of these working class couples with non-traditional work orientations and financial arrangements have lived together for greater than two years. Fewer middle class couples who are undoing gender through their work orientations have followed suit in their financial arrangements; most still rely upon the male

partner to pay the majority of the household bills, though a substantial minority share them equally. Finally, most of these couples rely on the woman to do the bulk of the household labor, though, again, a sizable share of middle class couples divides the household labor equally.

Two additional surprising findings emerged from the data. First, although studies of gendered attitudes have consistently shown the working class to be more conventional than their middle class counterparts (cf. Myers & Booth, 2002; Rubin, 1976; 1994), the majority of those couples with conventional work orientations are middle class. This may be because the middle class individuals in this sample are often on track to have professional or executive-level careers. Although among some couples both partners have powerful careers, this arrangement is often difficult, especially if a couple intends to have children (Becker & Moen, 1999). Instead, in the face of uncertainty about how to create a new model for how to balance careers and family, these couples are defaulting to the hegemonic norm of the male breadwinner/female homemaker (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). As the cost of living continues to rise, often making two incomes necessary to support a family, the conventional nuclear family is becoming an increasingly exclusive purview of those in higher socioeconomic strata.

Also of note is that among a number of couples (n=10), neither partner has a strong orientation toward work. Although it is not unusual for one partner to have a weak work orientation (e.g., Gerson, 1993; 2002; Potuchek, 1992), missing from the literature are those working and middle class couples where neither partner feels drawn toward a particular occupation. Since quite a few of these individuals are still fairly young (their average age is 25.1 for men and 21.2 for women), perhaps they have yet to determine which occupational paths they will pursue. Nonetheless, they are an important group that should be studied longitudinally since their current gendered behaviors could have implications for the future of their relationships.

Of course, as with most qualitative studies, this sample is not representative of the population of all working and middle class cohabiting couples. These couples were living in Columbus, Ohio, during the early 2000s when service, industry, and professional jobs were plentiful. Opportunities to pursue more education were aided by the presence of numerous community and 4-year colleges in the immediate vicinity. Nonetheless, the results indicate that working class cohabitors are more likely to have nontraditional orientations toward work, even if their household divisions of labor are still fairly conventional. The middle class is quite the opposite; although they are more likely to have fairly conventional orientations toward work at the couple-level, they often engage in more egalitarian exchanges at home. As a wider swath of the population chooses to live together before marriage, a greater array of gendered arrangements will likely be represented. The inclusion of work orientation in the study of gendered arrangements has been measured at the couple-level in the past among marrieds (e.g., Becker & Moen, 1999; Hochschild, 1989; Klute et al., 2002). However, future studies should examine cohabiting couples' gendered work orientations in order to add to our knowledge of the changing American family and further examine the opportunities that these "less institutionalized" couples have for doing (and undoing) gender.

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Table 1: Working and Middle Class Cohabiting Couples

Variables	Measures	Overall Sample	Working Class	Middle Class
Number		n = 61	n = 30	n = 31
Age	Mean Age: Men	27.3 years	26.4 years	28.3 years
	Mean Age: Women	24.8 years	24.4 years	25.2 years
Relative Age	Man > 4 years older	27.9%	13.3%	35.5%
	Woman > 4 years older	6.6%	6.7%	3.2%
	Both within 4 years	65.6%	80.0%	61.3%
Educational Attainment	Both high school or less	1.6%	3.3%	0.0%
	1 ≤ HS, 1 some college	8.2%	20.0%	0.0%
	Both some college/associate's	32.8%	63.3%	0.0%
	1HS, 1 BA	1.6%	3.3%	0.0%
	One Some college, one BA	13.1%	10.0%	12.9%
	Both BA	23.0%	0.0%	45.2%
	One BA, one MA	16.4%	0.0%	32.3%
	Both MA+	4.9%	0.0%	9.7%
Relative Schooling	Man has more education	14.8%	23.3%	19.4%
	Woman has more education	26.2%	26.7%	25.8%
	Equal levels of schooling	59.0%	50.0%	54.8%
Race	Both White, non Hispanic	60.7%	43.3%	77.4%
	Both Hispanic	3.3%	3.3%	3.2%
	Both Black, non-Hispanic	9.8%	13.3%	6.5%
	Mixed-race couple	26.2%	40.0%	12.9%
Couple-Level Income	Mean couple income	$53,557	$38,971	$67,672
	Earnings Ratio: Female/Male	57.0%	79.1%	70%
	$18,000-$24,999	13.1%	26.7%	0.0%
	$25,000-$49,999	42.6%	50.0%	35.5%
	$50,000 - $74,999	26.2%	20.0%	32.3%
	$75,000 - $99,999	9.8%	3.3%	16.1%
	$100,000 or more	8.2%	0.0%	16.1%
Relative Earnings	Man earns more	44.3%	43.3%	45.2%
	Woman earns more	14.8%	20.0%	9.7%
	Each partner earns within 40-60% of the income	41.0%	36.7%	45.2%
Marital Status	Both never married	82.0%	80.0%	83.9%
	One NM, one previously married	18.0%	20.0%	16.1%
Parental Status	Both no children	70.5%	53.3%	87.1%
	Both share children[a]	11.5%	16.7%	6.5%
	Man has children (not woman)	13.1%	20.0%	6.5%
	Woman has children (not man)	3.3%	6.7%	0.0%
	Each has a child from a previous relationship	1.6%	3.3%	0.0%
Duration of Cohabitation	3 – 6 months	31.1%	26.7%	38.7%
	7 – 11 months	6.6%	6.7%	3.2%
	12 – 23 months	27.9%	16.7%	38.7%
	24 – 35 months	18.0%	23.3%	12.9%
	3 years or more	16.4%	26.7%	6.5%

a In two working class couples the partners share a child and the male partner also has a child from a previous relationship