



*Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research  
at the University of Florida*

# *News and Views*

*Celebrating 20 Years*

*Fall 1997*

*Volume 8 Issue 1*

## **The Social Constructions of Gender Among Elderly Couples Entering Retirement: The Problem of the Connection Between Gender, Power and Work**

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In the course of their relationship, married couples develop routines which consolidate tacit gender-specific rules of behavior. The aim of my qualitative empirical study is to expose and explore these secret rules of everyday life, and to inquire how gender-specific and hierarchical elements are involved therein and justified. How do couples establish gender relations interactively and discursively, and are these intertwined with the distribution of power?

My case study of double-income couples entering retirement uses empirical material to examine material interaction and to display different patterns exhibited in the construction of gender and power in retirement. The results of the study indicate that current theoretical conceptions regarding the relation of gender and power must be reconsidered.

There are several theoretical frameworks which I use in my research. Resource theory, developed by Blood and Wolf (1960) suggests that in modern industrial societies, patriarchal norms are no longer sufficient to explain and legitimate unequal power relationships in marriage. Positions in a marriage, according to this theory, are distributed according to the principles of efficiency, just as in working life. This approach takes a close look at the economic resources which men and women respectively bring into their relationship. Economic resources are measured via professional status, income and education.

Thomas Held from Switzerland (1978) expanded on this framework to argue that housework is also



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regarded as a resource for power. The jobs of both partners or, in the case of housewives, the man's job, is compared with the resource housework of the woman. In a feminist study by Myra Marx Ferree (1991), the importance of the economic resource approach for negotiation power is shown, whereas housework is explicitly treated as a negative resource. Thus the one having the higher income has more power in the relationship, and more negotiation power to delegate housework to the other "weaker" partner.

On the macro-sociological level, these approaches are apt to explain unequal power relations among couples in Germany (excluding lower class couples). Empirically, it is still a fact that men have, on the average, higher positions in working life, earn more money, and have a longer working life. Thus, resource theory suggests that in most heterosexual partnerships, men have the power advantage.

A different approach to gender and power relations stresses the importance of cultural norms. Resources will always be interpreted through the background of cultural

norms. So, for example, the man's advantage of power as legitimate is secured by gender norms. However, I think that the cultural gender norms of today are highly heterogeneous; at present, for example, there are at the same time the concept of partnership and the concept of the man as head of the family. Moreover, these concepts are too abstract to sufficiently determine behavior in relationships. Each couple is confronted with the task to agree, through a process of communication, on how gender shall be put into concrete forms and be lived in their partnership.

As Jean Claude Kaufmann (1994) has clearly shown, this is a subconscious process. In his empirical research on the process of pairing, he shows how, through the subconscious process of adapting, two individuals with different ideas and values become one couple with mainly the same set of values- a new common principle is constructed and enforced. This third approach emphasizes social interaction and social construction of relationships.

Which of these theoretical approaches is accurate? Does the status of occupational activities structure

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the power and work distribution within relationships? Is housework a negative or a positive power resource? What role do gender norms play? The aim of my research is to expose and explore how gender and hierarchical elements are constructed and justified in the everyday routines of a couple by analyzing the importance of occupational labor, housework, and gender norms.

My research consisted of "narrative" interviews with 16 working and middle class elderly couples in Germany. In all of the couples interviewed, the wives earn as much or more than their husbands. All of the men are retired, and half of the women are still employed. According to the resource theory, these women should have equal or greater power in their marriages. The women's opportunities for power are very strong; however, in terms of gender norms, the men don't fulfill the norm of the family breadwinner which is a very strong norm for German men.

The interviews were analyzed according to the "Structural Hermeneutics" method. The method is not interested in what people say, but in the structures that show how they say it and how they refer to each other. Interesting hypotheses can be derived, even with very small samples, by using this method.

A plurality of different patterns of relationships and constructions of gender in a marriage could be observed among the couples. I distinguished five types of gender constructions among the couples.

**Type One.** This type can be characterized by an unchanged image of manhood (manliness) and by reliance on conventional patterns. A man working in the household is regarded as "unmanly", and as incompatible with the construction of the male

identity. The women in these couples, most of whom work in jobs that are considered men's jobs, want to live a conventional marriage and try very hard to adjust the couple's behavior to gender norms. Although subordination of the wives is an important part of this gender construction, these women are not completely powerless, but rather are backed by traditional cultural legitimations.

**Type Two.** This type is also characterized by male dominance and gender conventionality. The inconsistency of gender norms, especially those questioned by the feminist movement (in this case the questioning of conventional exclusive female competencies in housework) offers the possibility for men to dominate even the female spheres. The husbands extend their demand for decision. These wives are described as housewives even for the time that they undertake occupational activity, and their housework is valued over their occupations.

**Type Three.** This type can be seen as a compromise between conventional and new patterns. The striking feature is that the women are unhappy with a traditional relationship and voice criticism and the desire to make changes in their relationship and the role distribution. Their husbands, however, feel entitled to the role of decision maker and to the conventional distribution of tasks. The women do not question the validity of gender norms in general. On one hand they want their husbands to do more housework; on the other hand some criticize their husbands's inability to fit male gender norms. And while the women place value on their occupational activities, the men place housework and family duties as the most important of the women's roles.

**Type Four.** This is the only type where husbands increase their

household activities when they enter retirement, while their wives are still working. For the husbands, housework can be a possibility to compensate for the lack of appreciation which has been caused by their retirement. The wife's competence in her occupational activities is appreciated by both partners. In these relationships the occupational activities of the partners are evaluated according to the same, namely the male, measurement. There are no more gender specific competencies. Thus there is a potential need to negotiate for common activities, and there is a high potential for conflict.

**Type Five.** For this type, a given gender-specific distribution of tasks is overruled. Here the contents of gender are freely negotiable. The husband's demands for power are strictly rejected by his wife. The wife still goes to work, and the husband does all of the housework, including the emotional care for his wife. The wife succeeds in having her way even against the resistance of her husband who mostly adapts himself to the activities and interests of his wife, just as the wives adapted themselves to their husband's interest in types one, two and three.

The most striking result of this research is that female occupational activities do not lead to a change of demands for power for every couple. In the relationships, rules are negotiated and expressed in ways which are supposed to serve as the basis of the relationship. These rules center around the question of how social gender, that is first manliness and then (partly complementary) also womanliness, are to be lived and practiced in a relationship. Only when we look at how couples interact, value economic resources, and deal with cultural norms, can we analyze the construction of the relationship. ●