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Men Without Sawmills: Masculinity, Rural Poverty, and Family Stability

Jennifer Sherman

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RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center
214 Middlebush Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia MO 65211-6200
PH 573 882-0316

RUPRI Rural Poverty Research Center
Oregon State University
213 Ballard Hall
Corvallis OR 97331-3601
PH 541 737-1442



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Jennifer Sherman

University of California, Berkeley

410 Barrows Hall

Berkeley, CA 94720

(510) 595-7776

jsherman@berkeley.edu

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Abstract

Using ethnographic and interview data, this paper explores the impacts of economic strain and job loss on the construction and experience of masculinity, as well as the effects of threats to masculine identity on family stability in a rural American community. It looks at these issues specifically with reference to the high correlation between poverty and single parenting, in order to better understand the causal mechanisms responsible for this link in a rural setting. It challenges the mainstream argument that it is women's marriage choices that are mainly responsible for this correlation. Building on and extending the work of previous researchers, the paper argues that men's experiences with masculinity in times of economic and labor market stress seriously undermine their abilities to sustain functioning relationships.

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Introduction

In 1996, the last of the sawmills in Golden Valley, California¹ shut down. The Northwest Timber mill was a final victim of changing environmental regulations and industrial downsizing that affected all aspects of Golden Valley's forest sector during the decade of the 1990s. The small, isolated community of less than 2,000 people was devastated. Mill work, along with the logging jobs that had mostly dried up in the early 1990s, were the mainstays of the community's economic and cultural life. Generations of Golden Valley's men had counted on work in the woods and mills as stable and steady sources of income. The money they earned in these jobs might not have been spectacular, but it was enough to afford a modest house and to support a family in Golden Valley. Without the mill, residents feared that, "this town is going to dry up and blow away" (Howard 1996). Golden Valley did not blow away, but it did change considerably in the years that followed. The changes included job loss among men, higher workforce participation by women, population loss, and family instability. Female-headed family households rose from 13 percent of all family households in 1990 to nearly 20 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 1990, 2000). As Golden Valley deteriorated visibly on the outside, businesses closed and buildings fell into disrepair, its families began to deteriorate invisibly from the inside. Academic research has long found evidence of a correlation between poverty and family structure (Bane 1986; Cancian and Reed 2000; Eggebeen and Lichter 1991; Lichter and McLaughlin 1995; McLanahan et al 2001; McLaughlin et al 1999; Testa et al 1989; Wilson 1987). Golden Valley residents have their own anecdotal evidence to link economic decline with family changes, and most believe that families have become less stable since the mill closed.

¹ All identifying details, including names of people and places, have been changed.

But neither they, nor the scholars, are able to fully understand or explain the causal mechanisms in rural places like Golden Valley, a place so different from the urban areas where most research on the subject has previously focused.

While both rural and urban America have experienced industrial decline and job loss, these processes have been more concentrated in rural areas that are often reliant on single industries, and are thus more vulnerable. The effects of industrial change in rural areas throughout the U.S. include high poverty rates and changing family structures, as well as male job loss and increasing workforce participation by women (Albrecht et al 2000). Similar processes have occurred in urban areas as well. Perhaps because the urban poor are more visible, the effects of urban poverty are more commonly acknowledged and studied, despite the fact that rural poverty rates have been higher than urban poverty rates since the 1960s (Albrecht et al 2000; Dehan and Deal 2001; Flora et al 2004; Struthers and Bokemeier 2000). Although the two settings have much in common, the longer cultural continuity, lack of ethnic and class diversity, and lack of anonymity in many small rural communities (Larson 1978; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004) make the experience of rural job loss and poverty unique.

This paper looks in depth at the processes by which rural context impacts the ways in which men, women, and families respond to structural and economic changes. It finds that while single parenting and family instability are associated with poverty in both urban and rural areas, the reasons for this instability may be quite different between the two contexts. While rural women are less likely to pursue independence through welfare programs than are urban women (Jensen and Eggebeen 1994; Lichter et al 2003), in Golden Valley they are simultaneously more likely to pursue marriage regardless of the economic and employment situations of the men with whom they are involved. On the other hand, men's experiences with the labor market and their

personal reactions to circumstances that contradict their cultural norms and gender expectations are likely to affect their marriage choices and relational abilities. Reaction to these challenges is critical to deciding the fate of the unions that they have created or potentially might have created.

Theoretical Background

This paper takes as its starting point the well-documented association between family structure and poverty, particularly the high tendency for single parent families to be poor (Bane 1986; Cancian and Reed 2000; Eggebeen and Lichter 1991; Lichter and McLaughlin 1995; McLanahan et al 2001; McLaughlin et al 1999; Testa et al 1989). Both rural and urban areas have experienced a rise in poverty among single parents, as well as a rise in the rates of single parent families in poor areas. Although there is little consensus as to the causal mechanism, there has historically been an assumption underlying many of the most influential discussions of the link between family structure and poverty that it is women who choose to marry or not to marry, regardless of the specific reasons attributed to that decision (Edin 2000; Goldscheider and Waite 1991; Waller 2002, p. 5). Men's reasons for not marrying, and the roles that they play in hindering marriage, have often been underplayed and ignored. Furthermore, it is often assumed that single parenting is the result of a (woman's) choice not to marry, rather than the breakdown of an existing marriage or relationship, as is more often the case in Golden Valley.

The focus on women is to a large degree understandable, if for no other reason than simply that there is more quantitative data available concerning single mothers than noncustodial fathers, who are much more difficult to identify and research. The theoretical focus on women's choices also has its roots in the welfare debates of the 1960s, which questioned whether welfare provided women with too much financial independence, thus allowing them to choose single parenting over marriage to poor men (Harrington 1962; Murray 1984). Much subsequent work,

particularly research that examines marriage declines among the African-American urban poor, has found evidence to suggest that in fact women in this setting do often choose not to marry what Wilson (1987) refers to as “unmarriageable” – i.e. unemployed – men (Edin 2000; McLanahan et al 2001; Testa et al 1989). The importance of economic factors for women’s marriage decisions has been explored in more depth by a number of researchers of both rural and urban poverty, with results that are sometimes contradictory and seldom able to fully explain the rise in single parenting among the poor (Blau 1999; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Lichter et al 2000). Yet the argument is still alive and well, and frequently cited as one of the most likely explanations for the high rates of single parenting among the poor (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004).

Subsequent work in urban poverty has uncovered much evidence that suggests that women’s decisions are only part of the explanation for the decline in marriage among the urban poor, and that a more nuanced approach is necessary to fully understand family structure changes (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Wilson 1996). Elijah Anderson’s ethnographic research in *Streetwise* (1990) shows that in the absence of job opportunities, young men’s behaviors and values contribute heavily to the creation of unstable and single-parent families. Edin (2000), Furstenberg (2001), and Wilson (1996), contend that economic problems combine with other values to create a culture of gender distrust that is antithetical to marriage among poor urban African-Americans. Sullivan (1993) suggests that even in ethnic communities where marriage is still held in higher regard, a man’s lack of employment success will undermine his ability or interest in taking on or fulfilling the father role. Stier and Tienda (1993) and Jarrett et al (2002) argue that men are more likely to accept parental roles and be involved with their families when they are financially stable and stably employed.

While these studies have contributed substantially to a more complex understanding of marriage choices among the poor, they have not been empirically extended beyond minority populations in the inner-city. There thus remains a gap in our understanding of the interaction between poverty and family in other types of spatial, racial, and ethnic communities. While there are many similarities between urban and rural poverty, there are many differences as well. The greater community cohesiveness and cultural continuity of many rural areas (Albrecht and Albrecht 2004; Larson 1978; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004; Struthers and Bokemeier 2000) makes them very different environments from the inner-city. Despite the consistently higher rates of rural poverty and the widening income gap between rural and urban areas, the literature on the link between rural poverty and family structure has for the most part taken for granted that rural women's choices with regard to family structure are the same as those of urban women, and for the same economic-based reasons (Albrecht et al 2000; Lichter and McLaughlin 1995; McLaughlin et al 1999; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004). Such assumptions are problematic, particularly with regard to rural communities, where marriage still receives strong cultural support, and where welfare is less commonly utilized and carries a powerful social stigma.

The dearth of qualitative research on family formation choices in rural areas has undermined our understandings of these processes, as well as policymakers' abilities to address these issues effectively for the large sector of the U.S. population that does not reside in cities. It is likely that urban research, when applied without analysis to the rural experience, will misrepresent both women's and men's choices and decisions to some degree. Additionally, the literature on rural families and economic stress suggests that men's experiences with poverty and unemployment in rural communities produce very different outcomes than they do in the inner city (Conger and Elder 1994; Davis 1993; 2000; Marotz-Baden et al 1988; Mederer 1999;

Skaptadottir 2000; Smith et al 2003). In particular, the specific type of gender backlash and “protest masculinity” (Connell 1995) documented by urban poverty scholars such as Anderson (1990), Bourgois (1995), and Venkatesh (2000) appears to be largely missing from white, rural areas, where traditional gender roles remain dominant even in the wake of significant structural changes. The studies of rural families under economic stress referenced above provide sufficient evidence to suggest that the mechanisms that link rural poverty and family stability may be very different from those found in urban areas, although they do not investigate this link specifically.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature by looking at both men’s and women’s experiences with job loss, poverty, and family in a white, rural, culturally conservative community. It explores the ways in which industrial restructuring has posed a threat to existing gender norms within the community, and looks at how economic stress creates dissonance between ideals and realities, particularly for men in this setting. It illustrates that this conflict can undermine men’s emotional stability, as well as their personal relationships and interests in fulfilling the father role. The research suggests that although in this community marriage is still very much the cultural norm and ideal, it is becoming less common and more difficult to sustain, primarily due to men’s behaviors, rather than women’s retreat from marriage.

In Golden Valley, I found that most single-parent households were not the result of either partner refusing marriage, but rather what I refer to as “instability” – the breakdown of existing committed relationships and marriages². I argue that family instability in Golden Valley is

² Edin and Kefalas (2005) found similar, yet very different results in their study of poor inner-city single mothers. In their sample, most single mothers had specifically chosen not to marry their children’s fathers in the short term, while simultaneously hoping to sustain the relationships for long periods of time and eventually marry the men. However, the relationships tended to break down due to the multiple stresses of poverty and male unemployment, thus ending in single-parent families.

caused more by men's reactions to job loss than by women's preferences for employed men. Yet while men's reactions are a major cause of family instability, I also find that it is possible in this culturally conservative setting for masculinity, fatherhood, and family to be remade in ways that support functioning family life and male self-esteem. However, for those men and families who cling rigidly to traditional and outdated forms of masculinity and gender identity, the dissonance that economic crises cause can create serious problems for marital and family stability. The findings from Golden Valley suggest that the urban-based finding that women will not marry poor men (Lichter and McLaughlin 1995; McLaughlin et al 1999; Snyder and McLaughlin 2004; Snyder et al 2004) does not explain most family instability or single parenting in this rural case. While it is not unheard of for Golden Valley women to leave men who can't pull their weight financially, more often than not, unemployment and poverty are issues that trouble the men more than the women with regard to family formation and marriage.

The Research

Golden Valley

The research for this paper took place in the small, rural community of Golden Valley, located in Jefferson County, a forested mountain region of Northern California. The community has been dependent on the timber industry for nearly a century, and its economic and social life has been severely affected by job loss and restructuring in this industry. The spotted owl ruling³ meant that by the early 1990s the U.S. Forest Service banned new timber sales in the area,

³ The 1990 listing of the northern spotted owl as threatened under the Endangered Species Act led to Federally-enforced reductions of timber harvesting through much of the Pacific Northwest, in order to preserve the owl's habitat. Federal timber harvests in the region dropped by 80 percent between 1989 and 1994 as a result (Daniels and Brehm 2003).

adversely affecting local workers and the local economy. This impacted the community not only as a loss of logging jobs, but also as a loss of local timber to supply the area's sawmills. In 1996 the last of the community's sawmills, also the town's largest employer, was forced to close down. This left a large sector of the population with a choice between leaving the area in order to follow work in the industry, and staying put with little prospect for employment, particularly anything that paid comparably to the jobs lost. There was a large out-migration at that time, and the population has still not recovered fully. The community has experienced serious demographic and social change since the early 1990s, as the longstanding tie to the woods was for the most part severed. Nonetheless, Golden Valley remains a very isolated, very insular community with little ethnic or class diversity (85 percent white). It is thus very different from the urban areas in which most prior research on the poverty-family structure link has been done. Yet although it is undeniably unique in many ways, it does have much in common with many rural communities throughout the United States, be they formally dependent on logging, farming, or extractive industries.

Interestingly, however, poverty rates in Golden Valley have not changed since the closing of the mill (poverty rates were 27 percent in 1990, and 24 percent in 2000), in part due to out-migration of those most marginal people, and in part due to the entrance of women into the workforce. Golden Valley has been, and continues to be, a high-poverty community. The economic and structural changes have impacted employment and culture there, but poverty has remained a constant. Thus, Golden Valley was chosen as a field site in part because it is illustrative of the degree to which social and family instability may be linked not to poverty per se but to changing structural conditions that often go hand in hand with poverty.

I moved to Golden Valley in the summer of 2003, and lived there full-time for a year. The bulk of the research for this project consists of 55 tape-recorded, open-ended, in-depth interviews with native and longtime members of the community, as well as a year of ethnographic fieldwork done in Golden Valley and the surrounding communities of Deer Run and Riverbend. I interviewed about equal numbers of men and women (25 women and 30 men), singly and in couples, depending on the subjects' preferences. The subjects ranged in age from 23 to 60 years old, and the average age of the sample was about 39. Nearly 78 percent of the subjects were married, remarried, or cohabitating, and the remaining 22 percent were single, (including those who were widowed or divorced without remarriage). About 30 percent were not in the workforce, although this does not include a number of subjects whose jobs were seasonal or unstable, but who were employed at the time of the interview. Nearly 20 percent lived in households in which the male head received SSI (disability assistance). The original subjects were recruited through contacts in the community, including several people who work in organizations that focus on job creation and retraining, and a snowball sample was used to find subsequent interviewees. I further engaged in various kinds of volunteer and outreach work in the community, particularly related to the poor and the parents of small children, in order to meet and recruit subjects from as many different social networks as possible.

Ethnographic methods were also used in order to enhance and build upon the understanding gleaned through the interviews, and to identify inconsistencies and observe social practices in their natural environments. In addition to the interviews themselves, I learned much about the community by becoming an active member of it. I lived there through the cycle of a year, attending such events as the County Fair, school and bar dances, community meetings, sports events and school activities. I also took part in daily life in a number of ways, including

volunteering with several local organizations, teaching an adult education class, and frequenting public social spaces such as restaurants and bars. Basing my own life in the community provided me with a broader perspective on life there. Becoming a member of the community also meant being privy to the local gossip, which oftentimes permitted me to become aware of the differences between subjects' on-tape testimonies and their day-to-day actions, feelings, and experiences. At times I also discovered that much could be learned simply from chance encounters had while walking along back roads or hiking in the woods, where I often met people I would have never been able to reach, or perhaps even have known about otherwise. Frequently those people with whom I interacted on a non-professional basis imparted me with unique information and perspectives on the community. All of this information together helped me to gain a fuller understanding of Golden Valley and its unique set of norms, customs and concerns.

Those Who Remain

Moving to Golden Valley from a more urban area feels like going back in time at least a decade. There is no cell phone coverage in the valley, no beepers, and no high-speed internet service except via satellite. Similarly, there is no television reception there except with satellite dishes. The nearest hospital is 45 minutes away in the county seat of Miner's Gulch, and has limited services and a very uncertain future. There is no curbside garbage pick up (there are few actual curbs), and garbage has to be hauled to the dump and paid for by the bag. Eating out is limited to one diner, a pizza place open at irregular, limited hours, and a gas station and a convenience store that both have delis. The selection of products available in the few stores there is extremely limited and very pricey, causing most families to buy the bulk of their necessities in the small city of Hillview, entailing periodic four-hour round trips over the mountains.

Golden Valley's population is mostly white, and seems quite homogenous to the outsider. However, many of the long-established families there have Native American ancestries as well, and about 8 percent of residents self-identified as Native American in the 2000 Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Because of their long ties to the region, families of Native American descent are considered to be among the pillars of Golden Valley's population, and there are several very large local families who trace their roots there to Native ancestors. Most of the local Native Americans are members of unrecognized tribes without reservation land, and have thus lived as fully integrated members of the Golden Valley community for generations. There is a growing number of Hispanics in Golden Valley as well (nearly 5 percent in 2000), but this minority group, along with the rare African- or Asian-Americans who have settled there, are not well received in Golden Valley. The locals are an exclusionary, proud group who are fighting, despite what seem to be insurmountable odds, to keep their families together and their homes in Golden Valley. Although many of its employees relocated for work when the mill closed, over the years a number have returned, choosing to retire early or take their chances with retraining and scrambling to find other types of work in order to stay in the community. They for the most part cite family and lifestyle issues as their main reasons for returning and staying, although the main focus issues tend to differ by gender. Since remaining in Golden Valley requires making a number of compromises with regard to income and employment, as well as availability and price of retail products, most residents have deeply held reasons for choosing to be there rather than someplace more convenient.

Most of the loyal male residents of Golden Valley are strongly tied to the forest and river environments for their leisure activities, which generally include hunting, fishing and camping. The most common male responses to the question, "What do you like about living in Golden

Valley?” include such things as “the huntin’ and fishin’,” and “just being in the woods.” These leisure interests combine with attitudes shared by both women and men in Golden Valley, who tend to dislike the flat, mountainless landscape of California’s Central Valley and eschew the crowdedness of cities. As one male respondent put it: “If you can’t pee in your own backyard, then I don’t wanna live there.” For many male residents of Golden Valley, masculinity is directly and powerfully tied to the frontiersman mentality, which makes it very difficult for most of them to conceive of life outside of the region.

Women, on the other hand, tend more often to talk about the importance of community and family when discussing their reasons for staying in Golden Valley. They contrast the rural community with the city, where, as many have complained, you could live “for 20 years and not know your neighbors.” Most respondents who are parents – or who were teenagers in Golden Valley – have anecdotes to tell of parents being informed about their child’s wrongdoings by friends, family or neighbors before the child even returned home from the event. Stories also abound of the community raising money for its sick and needy members, most frequently to help the uninsured with hospital bills. These are the types of issues that women focus on when they talk about Golden Valley’s assets: “You know the whole town will stand behind you in a time of need. They’ve always done that, it’s just the way it is.” The strong sense of community ranks high among the benefits that female respondents cited as reasons to stay in Golden Valley despite its economic challenges.

Staying in Golden Valley presents a challenge to almost everyone there. Table 1 compares Golden Valley with the state of California on several basic quality of life measures. According to the 2000 Census, individual poverty rates in Golden Valley were 24 percent, family poverty was at 18 percent, and child poverty was at 31 percent. Unemployment was at 9 percent,

with only 45 percent of the population actively in the labor force. Sixteen percent of occupied residences in Golden Valley lacked telephones in 2000, only a slight improvement over 17 percent in 1990. In California as a whole the individual poverty rate was 14 percent in 2000, unemployment was at 4 percent with more than 60 percent labor force participation, and only 2 percent of occupied residences lacked telephones. Female-headed family households made up 18 percent of all family households in Golden Valley in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). This is the same as the average for California, however it is high for Golden Valley, which until the 1990s had generally averaged below the state as a whole on this measure. The 1990s, with the closure of the woods and of the last sawmill, were not easy years for Golden Valley’s families. Jobs are now more scarce than ever before, with the local schools and the few remaining retail establishments being the main sources of employment. This represents a large change not only in the number of jobs available, but also the type of available work, as jobs have shifted dramatically from the forest sector towards retail and educational services.

Table 1: Quality of Life Measures

	Golden Valley	California
individual poverty	24%	14%
family poverty	18%	11%
child poverty	31%	20%
unemployment	9%	4%
in workforce	45%	62%
lack telephones	16%	2%
female-headed households	18%	18%
disabled men (age 21-64)	38%	21%
disabled men without employment (age 21-64)	76%	40%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000)

Since the closing of the mill in Golden Valley, it has become easier for women to find work than for men, as many of the remaining jobs are considered “women’s work,” including child care, teaching and school support, in-home care, and retail. There are now only slightly

higher rates of male than female employment (49 percent of men ages 21-64 are employed, versus 44 percent of women in the age group), and women's workforce participation has nearly doubled between 1990 and 2000. While there seems to be a growing acceptance of women in the workforce and female breadwinners, there has been little change in men's attitude towards what have long been considered women's jobs. Men will stay at home with the children for much of the year, but they generally will not take on paid childcare jobs in the formal or informal sector. Nor do they tend to work in the schools except as janitors or teachers, mostly in the sciences and industrial arts. Thus Golden Valley's men compete with each other for an ever-shrinking set of logging, woodworking, and construction jobs in the area. Those who succeed are generally those who try the hardest to find work, are the most willing to take whatever is offered, and have garnered a reputation for being reliable, hard workers. For those men who are not the hardest workers or the most able, work is increasingly difficult to find. This especially includes the large number of men who have been seriously injured while working in the woods or mill, or other physically demanding jobs such as driving logging trucks. For many of these men, disability assistance (SSI) is the fallback, and their way of contributing to the family income without actually working. Nearly 40 percent of Golden Valley's men between ages 21 and 64 are disabled according to the 2000 Census, and of those who are disabled, 76 percent are not employed (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). A large percentage of men who are not in the workforce receive disability assistance, and it is uncommon for men older than their early twenties to be out of work without some sort of injury as an excuse.

Masculinity, Poverty and Family Life

Whom Women Won't Marry

In what ways have the economic challenges affected Golden Valley's families, and why have some survived while others failed? Only in one out of 25 cases did my results echo those

of previous researchers, who argue that women choose not to marry poor or unemployed men (Edin 2000; Furstenberg 2001; Jarrett et al 2002; Wilson 1987). Jeanie Mayer, a forty-five year old single mother of two who spent most of her life in Golden Valley, ended two separate relationships because the men did not have steady work and could not support themselves financially. While their unemployment and the resulting financial stresses were Jeanie's main complaints with regard to these relationships, she bitterly complained about one of the men's alcohol abuse, which she believed began "because of the stress we were having with everything else."

While Jeanie supports the contention that men's lack of "marriageability" in economic terms causes relationships to falter, she also brought up the core issue that most women mentioned as their main frustration with previous relationships: alcohol and substance abuse, along with physical and emotional abuse. Abuse issues arose much more often than did lack of employment or poverty in explaining from the women's perspectives the downfall of their past relationships. Poverty is something that many of Golden Valley's residents grew up with and can tolerate. Particularly when their male partners were injured and receiving SSI, most women were very tolerant of out-of-work and low income men. Very few of my respondents, particularly among the women, have ever aspired to much beyond simple economic survival and being able to meet their basic needs. Serious substance abuse and domestic violence, although also problems that many of them grew up with, are seen as much more serious issues, and not things that most women are willing to live with as adults.

Allison Butters is a 30-year old mother of two who survived a rough childhood that included foster care and abuse. She has two children with the man with whom she currently cohabitates, an out-of-work logger. She is also helping to raise his two children by another

woman. Allison was married once, to a Golden Valley logger in her early twenties, but the marriage was short-lived and they had no children together. She described her divorce simply: “There were drugs involved, and abuse, and I left.” Although she had used drugs for a time as well, she insists that she has been clean for years now, and does not want to return to that lifestyle. She is happy with her current partner, who is not a drug user, and has encouraged him to stay home with the children rather than to leave Golden Valley in order to find work.

Substance abuse was blamed more than anything else for relational troubles, while many women seemed more or less unconcerned about whether their husbands had jobs, as long as someone in the family was able to provide an income. Angelica Finch, a 38-year old married mother of three, is a woman whose marriage had barely survived its troubled past. She and her husband Jim had both been deeply entrenched in serious drug and alcohol problems for the first decade of their 20-year relationship. During this period they also endured poverty so intense that she described stealing electricity, coasting down Gold Mountain with the motor off to save gas, and living off of venison they shot in the yard. Jim has been out of work on disability since she met him 20 years earlier, and she has always worked as many low-paying jobs as she could piece together in order to help support the family. Although her husband never worked, and she was saddled with both breadwinning and the entire second shift at home (Hochschild 1989) for most of their life together, it was not his lack of employment, but rather his “partying”⁴ that finally caused her to leave him for nearly two years after a decade together, and move to Miner’s Gulch. She attended classes at a branch of Jefferson Community College there in order to get her AA

⁴ The term “partying” is often used by Golden Valley respondents to refer obliquely to a combination of drinking and drug use that is extremely common in the community among both teenagers and adults. It generally implies serious alcohol abuse, in addition to marijuana and methamphetamine use.

degree, an experience which seriously boosted her self-esteem as well as her earning potential.

When Jim asked her to come home again she agreed only on one condition: that they stop partying and give up their addictions for good. She described the decision thus:

So um, when he wrote me that letter asking me to come home, I just told him I had choices at this point, I didn't have – he wasn't my only choice at that point. And so, if he wanted me back, this was the way it was going to be. And he agreed with that.

And we struggled with it, like I say, I would come back and then just prioritize my life. And it was school. It wasn't alcohol, it wasn't getting wasted, it wasn't staying up all night playing dice. That just was not a life. You know? And, so that's why when I came home that was all gonna change. It wasn't like – I didn't just go all holy roller on him or anything, I just didn't want to party. I just chose to have a life and raise our kids instead. And he obviously felt ready.

When asked what her life would be like if that transition hadn't occurred, Angelica replied: “We wouldn't be together, we wouldn't be together. I wouldn't be in Golden Valley.”

For Angelica, it was not her husband's lack of job or money that bothered her. Although she appreciated it greatly that he had learned over the years how to do a minimal amount of housework, she never once expressed dissatisfaction with his lack of employment, nor did she complain about having to work herself. She was just happy that her education had helped her to land a better paying, more rewarding job. In Angelica's case an unacknowledged feminist awareness born out of self-protection allowed her to rationalize, and even feel empowered by, being the main breadwinner as well as the main homemaker in her family:

I was never going to be dependent on a man. I watched my mom get beat up once a week because she didn't want to leave him. She didn't think she could support us, she didn't

think it was good for us not to have a father. She was wrong! Let me get my education, let me work. I have to work. If I won the lottery, I would still work, because that's how I get my self esteem. It's not, you know, I'm not the best housekeeper in the world, and my house isn't a pigsty or anything, but it's not something I love to do. You know, so I work, because that makes me feel good about myself. Cleaning my house doesn't. It's just something I have to do so I can go work. And you can only get so much self-esteem off of cooking a good meal, you know?

In Golden Valley it is still considered the norm and mark of financial success for a woman to stay at home while the man works. Yet the current economic reality makes this situation difficult, and the truth is that most women there work outside the home, and many enjoy the experience. It is quite common now to find functioning families in which the woman works and the man does not. It is not extraordinary on nice afternoons to see men in flannel shirts and hunting caps pushing baby carriages down the street, either alone or with buddies. Between the lack of acceptably masculine jobs and the high rate of serious injuries among men who have worked in the mill or the woods, it is becoming normal for men to be at home while the women go to work. Disabilities in particular are seen as valid reasons for men to not contribute much financially to a household, and women tend to be very accepting of and sympathetic to men who are not in the workforce due to debilitating injuries.

However, women are generally supportive and understanding even with men who are physically able but who cannot find work. For most of Golden Valley's wives and mothers the focus is on family survival, and they understand that circumstances there sometimes demand that whoever can find work take responsibility for supporting the entire family. Most women's main concerns are material survival and family stability, not gender roles. This sense of equal

responsibility for breadwinning was reflected again and again in women's testimonies, with only a few exceptions. For those women who are divorced or single, economic struggles were seldom the main factor leading to the dissolution of previous relationships, although certainly economic struggles remain a serious source of stress in many current relationships. But a working man, though an asset if you are lucky enough to find one, is perhaps too much to demand in a place like Golden Valley.

Few women consciously acknowledge feminism as an influence, yet many borrow its concepts in order to construct their family values around gender equality with regard to work and financial responsibility, as befits their situations. The women, more often than the men, tend to be extremely flexible with regard to gender expectations, and generally make whatever changes are necessary in their ideals in order to stay afloat and keep their families intact. For most women the importance of a happy marriage and family life far outweigh questions of how financial and other responsibilities are divided, and most seem perfectly willing to trade homemaking for breadwinning as their families' circumstances and their husbands' employment experiences require. I interviewed a number of women who said that they originally wanted to be stay-at-home wives, but ended up working either out of financial necessity or boredom, or some combination of the two. Some ended up enjoying working, while others wished that their circumstances would allow them to stay at home.

Similarly, some husbands openly acknowledged their wives' contributions as vital parts of the household budget, while others downplayed them as simply extra spending money. However, no woman openly criticized her husband for not being able to provide for the family on his own. For those women who did work either full or part time, it was accepted and understood that providing for a family was a responsibility that both men and women shared.

Far from being something that damaged their feminine identity, most enjoyed and took pride in their work. The fact that they for the most part worked in feminized occupations certainly contributed to their ease in accepting their roles as working wives and mothers, but even those who had worked in male environments expressed little internal conflict with regard to gender roles. It was for men that the changes in gender roles and expectations more commonly created emotional difficulties. While some were able to adapt to the changes, others were less flexible with regard to gender roles. For these more rigid men, Golden Valley's current labor market and economic realities created dangerous tensions within themselves, and within their relationships and families. These tensions contributed to marital instability for many of Golden Valley's most traditional men.

Rigid Masculinity and the Fight to Preserve Traditional Gender Roles

For men, the struggle with unemployment and poverty is often a cause of greater emotional anxiety than it is for women, particularly if they insist on being the sole provider. A number of Golden Valley's more stable poor families seem to have transcended breadwinner-focused masculinity to some degree, and have re-worked masculine ideals to focus more on family togetherness and active fathering, while accepting gender equality as a desirable goal. But for those men who still cling to previously dominant forms of masculinity, which dictate that the man should be the head of household and the main breadwinner, life is more of a struggle, and relationships are more troubled and less stable. For men who are unwilling to let go of it traditional masculine identity can carry a high price tag, and often creates a struggle for them personally, as well as for their wives, girlfriends, and families. In a situation where work that allows a man to be the main breadwinner is hard to come by, particularly for those who are not

healthy enough to do strenuous physical labor, breadwinner-type masculinity is an elusive and hard-won ideal whose pursuit often causes more tension than it relieves.

Many men in Golden Valley are still uncomfortable with the concept of working wives despite how common they have become there. About 35 percent of men in my sample hold tightly to traditional conceptions of fatherhood and masculinity, despite circumstances that challenge their abilities to achieve success according to these standards. Of these rigid men, about 30 percent are unmarried. Most of them (70 percent) are men who were raised in families with mothers who did not work outside the home, and they carried these expectations forward into their adult lives. Many families simply make do with less in order for the women to remain at home, while the men work seasonally in the woods or with the Forest Service, doing odd jobs or hunting while receiving unemployment insurance during the slow months. Often their work takes husbands far from home for extended periods of time, or in some cases entails a lengthy daily commute over the mountains.

A number of families struggle in this vein in order to keep the wives at home with the children and the husbands securely in the head-of-household position. These men generally do not share housework or childcare, and often hold strict control over finances. Most of these young mothers, including several who actually do work part time themselves, have no access to money except the cash allowances that their husbands dole out to them for living expenses. They have neither credit cards nor checkbooks in their own names, and their salaries go straight into their husbands' bank accounts. Thus their husbands are able to achieve a traditional "breadwinner" form of masculinity even during the months when they are out of work. They generally do not spend those months off helping around the house, but rather are out in the woods with their friends, hunting, fishing and gathering wood until it is time to go back to work

again. These were generally the unhappiest homes that I entered, with often a lot of bickering and arguing, frustration and resentment expressed in front of me. When the women were interviewed separately, they were often more frank about the sources of these tensions. The following complaint came from Kim Clark, a stay-at-home mother of two, whose husband Al works seasonally in logging:

We don't have, um, like a bank account together. All finances are in his name. And um, we just pay bills as they come. When I need money, I get money, he provides. I don't know, I'd say he gives me whatever I want or need or – we don't really fight over that. Sometimes I buck up over it because it's just the damn principle of having a damn checking account! It's just the principle. I'm 32 years old and I'm not *allowed* to have a checking account?!

It was in households like Kim's that both the men and their wives cited financial responsibility as a father's main task, often regardless of whether the women expressed a desire to be working outside the home. In most of these families money was a major source of stress and tension, yet most did not seriously consider either moving away or having the women take on full-time jobs in order to ease the stress. But as the repeated complaints of Kim and of many women like her illustrated, these tensions frequently cause frustration and unhappiness among the women, and suggest that these marriages may ultimately be unstable.

Yet there are few other strategies available to men who desire a traditional form of masculinity in Golden Valley. Only the wealthiest men are able to sit securely in the breadwinner role without exerting some degree of pressure on their wives, and in Golden Valley there are few very wealthy families. Although I met an occasional man who admitted to engaging in illegal activities in order to afford to keep his wife at home, more commonly male

control was achieved through choosing poverty over a second earner, downplaying women's financial contributions when they did work, and/or controlling their access to money. They may end up struggling with power relations and finances, but these families were at least able to aim for their goal of a traditional family structure. With the difficulty in finding full-time, high-paying work, it is a struggle. Yet they are for the most part the lucky ones. It is those men who yearn for this lifestyle, but who are unable to find work altogether, who find life to be truly difficult.

Randy Taylor is a 35 year old, married father of two, who has a debilitating work-related back injury that keeps him from doing physical labor. He was already married with children when his accident occurred while working in the mill. His employers there lied to Randy regarding the extent of his injury, and as a result he did not receive proper treatment. After going untreated for nearly five years he could barely stand upright, and he subsequently had a series of surgeries over the next five year period just to retain minimal ability to stand and get around. His dedication to the masculine ideal of being the sole provider had kept him working for those first five years despite the pain.

Well, you know, when I was working I just, the way I dealt with it was, you know, I didn't have a choice because they said it was nothin' serious in the first place. And then when the mill shut down and whatnot, you know, it was like, at that time I was about ready to take care of it. But then when I went to logging I didn't have no insurance or nothin' like that, so it's, you know, just try to block it out the best I can and try to do what I have to, 'cause, you know, I gotta provide for my family.

Randy has been on disability since 1999, and this has been the sole source of income for his family of four for the entire period. He described the experience of being out of work as personally difficult.

It's been pretty frustrating. Especially at first, it's real hard to be – you know, you were workin' and now you're not workin', and you're not gettin' the money that you're used to and everything, all the responsibilities, you know, I believe it's the man's. I took 'em, you know. I told my wife I'd take care of her and whatnot, so it's pretty frustrating.

For Randy self-esteem and masculine identity are strongly tied to providing, even in the wake of his accident. He grew up in a two-parent family with a stay-at-home mother and a father whose philosophy boiled down to, “Men earn their things, and girls – everything is handed to ‘em.” Randy feels that his inability to work has been a major source of stress and frustration in his marriage, and that the lack of money is their most urgent problem. “The hardest challenge we face is making it from one payday to the next. You know, just to have enough food and enough kerosene to stay warm, enough food for our kids to eat, that's what our biggest challenge is.” Their main strategies for survival include caretaking a trailer for very low rent, borrowing money from relatives, and “eatin' fish and deer” that he kills himself, thus allowing him to still be the main provider for his family. His daily activities as he described them, center mostly around hunting, fishing and spending time with friends. He also sometimes takes care of his two-year old son Jared, although generally Jared is his wife's responsibility.

Although in his interview Randy asserted that their main sources of his marital stress were financial, his wife Christine told a different story. She was often frustrated and on the verge of tears at the Family Empowerment Alliance (FEA), a local support center where we both worked part-time as volunteers. Christine wanted to take on paid work, but Randy forbade it.

She complained repeatedly that he was controlling and oppressive, as well as depressed and angry. Four months after my interview with Randy, Christine left him and filed for divorce, plunging herself into the ranks of Golden Valley's poor single mothers. Randy said nothing to me that foreshadowed these problems however, and claimed to have a relatively happy marriage. He told me that he had always wanted a wife and family, and that he was very grateful to have one. He felt lucky to have started his family back when he still had a job, and said that he probably wouldn't have had the confidence to ask Christine to marry him if he had been out of work then: "I wouldn't have had nothin' to offer. Yeah, it would've been a lot harder." When asked if he thought he was a good husband, Randy replied, "Yeah. I'd be a lot better if I had a lot of money though." For Randy, being a husband and father meant being the provider and head of household, at whatever cost. Without that status, he was unsure whether he could have become either.

As these stories suggest, for men who cling to breadwinner ideas of masculinity but are unable to fully achieve them, the result is personal difficulty and internal conflict, and family units are often tense and unstable. For many of these traditional men, their struggle to retain their masculine identity without jobs or sufficient incomes creates internal and external tensions. As shown in the previous section, in this community of high male unemployment and a high frequency of work-related disabilities, women are less likely to expect or demand that a man have a job in order to be "marriageable." When male unemployment strains family life it is often the men, rather than the women, who have the bulk of the difficulty with the concept of out-of-work fathers. Allison Butters, who is the main breadwinner for her family, expressed her concern for her unemployed partner's self-esteem:

I um, I don't mind working. But I would hate to see him think he was less of a man because he wasn't.

Do you think that's what's happening?

No. Well, I think that's what he thinks sometimes.

Flexible Masculinity and Family Stability

Not all the men in my sample struggle so intensely with their self-images and their relationships with masculinity. As Ray (2000) found among male domestic servants in Calcutta, and Waller (2002) found among poor urban males in the U.S., I also discovered in Golden Valley that many men who can not achieve a traditional form of masculinity are reconstructing the masculine ideal in order to make it more attainable for themselves. About 65 percent of my male respondents have a somewhat more flexible understanding of the masculine ideal. While they may still have some issues with resolving their parents' values with those of their current households and families, these men have for the most part allowed themselves to let go of those ideals which are unattainable to them now. Most commonly, this flexibility takes the form of re-writing the expectations of fatherhood in a way that allows them to focus on their strengths and abilities. Since men in Golden Valley often have large amounts of free time but only limited amounts of money to contribute to the family, their strength lies in being active parts of their children's lives and imparting to them masculine skills and values. Very commonly my respondents focused on involved parenting as the most important part of a father's job, and downplayed the importance of financial support. They discussed how they enjoyed it when their own fathers had spent time with them, or how they felt deprived because their fathers had not been involved with their lives. Thus by their own standards they are good fathers, because they help with homework, attend sports matches, and teach their children to hunt, fish, and camp.

This remaking of the masculine ideal was something I encountered particularly amongst the older men who had remained married through the mill's closing, but I found it among a number of younger men and their families as well. These were men who often were working to some degree, but frequently struggled to find or keep jobs, and were not always happy with the work they did. Several of the older men had taken early retirement in order to remain in Golden Valley after the mill left, while a number of the younger men were seasonally unemployed. For the most part they openly acknowledged that their families could not survive without their wives' paychecks and health benefits, and showed little shame in admitting this. They also tended to claim that the household work was divided up equally, although the women's testimonies and my own observations suggested that housework still tended to be divided along the inside/outside line (Hochschild 1989). About 60 percent of these men grew up with mothers who worked, which perhaps contributed to their greater acceptance of working wives. Ideologically at least, these men did not focus on being the head of household in either economic or power terms. Instead, they found self-esteem through masculine parenting and through being what they considered to be good fathers. Among this group, good fathering was almost always conceived of in non-economic terms. The following comments, expressed in answer to the question "*What is most important about being a good father?*" illustrate this focus on supportive, involved parenting and discipline, rather than economic support:

Support. I just have to say support. You know, just making sure you set a good example, support everything they want to do. If he wants to go play football, then I want to make sure I get him there. Whether it's to play a real game, or whether it's just to come down and play with some of the kids. Just supporting them in everything they do, you know?

A pat on the back and a ‘hey, you’re doing great.’ You know? ‘I like the way you do that.’

-Andy Richards, 40-year old married father of two, small-scale mill worker

For me it would be to give your kids lots of love. Give them love more than anything. Because to me there’s no greater thing in the world than love. I instill it by being able to spend more time with them, and I know that if I were in the city, they’d be alone. I’d be working more, and being in that rat race you’re not able to spend that quality time with them.

It’s neat to raise the boys to where they’re becoming responsible enough to set goals and [buy things for themselves]. I would love to buy them for them, but I can’t. So I say, ‘If you want it, you have to buy it yourselves.’ And that’s just the way it is.

- Bill Prader, 45-year old married father of two, sporadically employed as a carpenter

For many of the families who have successfully survived the mill’s closing, this focus on family togetherness and involvement allows men to feel fulfilled and proud of their lives. Their functional morphing of masculine ideals draws heavily on the doctrines of equality and involved fathering that were first introduced by the feminist movement, but yet is strongly rooted in local cultural images of masculinity, such as hunting, fishing, and sports. As Waller (2002, p. 40) contends, this new model of fatherhood has become more mainstream since the feminist movement of the 1970s, which encouraged fathers to make emotional connections with their children and share in the work of caring for them. While neither the men nor their wives appeared to be aware of this influence, the ideas that they had borrowed from the larger U.S. culture permitted them to sustain functioning, healthy family lives and households despite living

in a community in which traditional notions of breadwinning and fatherhood are still quite prevalent. While many grew up in households that did not adhere to the dominant ideal, most nonetheless grew up believing that they would be breadwinner fathers and heads of their households.

Jake Robbins, a 52-year old, married father of two, is an example of a man who adjusted his gender ideals in order to accommodate his changing circumstances. Jake had not expected to have anything less than a traditional family when he got married. Both his mother and his wife Barbara's mother had been full-time homemakers. Jake and Barbara met in high school and got married at age 20. He went first to work in the woods like his own father, and later switched to working in the sawmill, where he made enough money to support the family. Barbara stayed home with their young children, going to work at the local preschool only once both kids were in school. Both Jake and Barbara described her original decision to work as one made out of boredom, not out of financial necessity. She described the job at first as one that was consistent with full childrearing responsibilities:

My kids were old enough that I got tired of staring at the wall. And you can only do so much cleaning, so that was a job that I would be home when they were. You know, and I had their vacations, and everything worked out great.

For Jake, it was not easy to see his wife go to work: "Well, I didn't want her to work. But then she finally told me, 'I'm bored, I gotta go get a job.'"

As Jake's work life became less stable, however, he came to appreciate having a working wife, and to recognize the importance of her work to the family's financial survival. When the mill left Golden Valley Jake moved with it to Adams, a suburb of Sacramento more than five hours away. Barbara and the children stayed behind in Golden Valley, where the Robbins

owned their home, and their son and daughter were in high school. They described the separation as “stressful” and “miserable.” After several years apart, Jake gave up the well-paid job that he found challenging and interesting, in order to return to his wife’s side in Golden Valley. It took him nearly a year to find another job, at greatly reduced pay and no benefits, and with no stability. The money he makes now in a struggling small-diameter sawmill is about equal to what his wife makes, and they rely on her job’s health benefits. He easily acknowledged, “Yeah, I wouldn’t have been able to do what I’ve done had it not been for her.” Unlike couples in which the men struggled to hold power over the women, Jake and Barbara both described their current state as a partnership. Jake added jokingly, “It’s a partnership? What are you talking about? I get the same allowance now as I ever got” – in reference to the fact that it is Barbara, not him, who handles their finances.

The current situation does not appear to cause Jake much stress or anxiety, and he described their most difficult times as all in the past. These included their years apart while he worked in Adams, and missed being involved with his son’s life, as well as their early years of marriage during which he drank heavily. Jake eventually gave up drinking regularly; “I realized that I had a really good thing and that I didn’t want to lose it. So I tamed it down.” Although it had not been easy, the Robbins had consistently made decisions that prioritized the family and thus ensured its survival. They expressed gratitude for their current lifestyle and their ability to remain in Golden Valley, where they had both grown up, and their elderly parents remain. Although their current financial situation is tight, Jake does not regret his decision to return to Golden Valley, and maintains that he is much happier now despite the pay cut.

For many of the couples in which gender roles were defined less rigidly, there had been a slow transition from a more traditional idea of marriage and family, as well as often the cessation

of heavy drinking on the part of one or both partners. When interviewed together, these were couples who commonly held much less tension between them, whether they were older couples who had weathered difficult pasts or young couples who had only recently taken on grown-up roles and responsibilities. Most are still haunted by financial struggles, but generally they remain confident that they will survive well enough by relying on both partners' salaries and benefits, as well as whatever help family and community provide. The wives of these men generally take pride in their own jobs, and accept their roles as co-supporters of the households whether or not they had originally aspired to be working versus at home. For those men who are able to let go of the breadwinning-centered ideologies of their youths, there seems to be considerably less internal turmoil, and a strong sense of satisfaction with their marriages, their roles as fathers, and themselves as men. Because of their abilities to adapt to Golden Valley's changing circumstances, these men's families appear to have a much better chance of long-term stability than do their more traditional and less flexible counterparts'.

Conclusion: Family Stability and the Masculine Ideal

The struggle with unemployment, underemployment, and poverty is not easy for most people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or geographic setting. Despite the fact that poverty has long been a problem and a part of life in Golden Valley, it is not easy there either. Many of the stories presented above reflect themes found throughout the literature on both urban and rural poverty and unemployment, including the tendency for job loss and poverty to be correlated with physical abuse, substance abuse, depression, and marital and family tensions (Conger and Elder 1994; Cottle 2001; Larson et al 1994; Liem and Liem 1990; Robertson et al 1991). The interview and ethnographic data, although limited in scope and location, begin to shed some light on the processes that link these problems together in a rural community like Golden Valley. In

particular, the Golden Valley subjects commonly brought up gender roles and expectations as a source of tension and conflict that exacerbated economic and job-related stresses.

For men, job loss affects marriage choices and marital stability in several important ways in Golden Valley. Both unemployment and its common outcome of poverty have been linked to substance abuse (Cottle 2001; Davis 1993; Elder et al 1994; McLanahan et al 2001; Rubin 1976), which was cited most frequently by women as their main reason for ending relationships with their previous partners. Additionally, for those poor, unemployed men who cling to traditional masculine ideals, these economic and labor market struggles create an intense dissonance between their goals and their realities. For those who marry anyway, or whose work and financial struggles begin after marriage, it frequently creates tense situations in which they feel the need to compensate for their perceived lack by exerting control over their wives, as well as struggling with long commutes, seasonal work, or severe poverty – all of which take their toll on marriages.

Yet the results from Golden Valley suggest that there is more flexibility possible in rural gender roles than found by previous researchers, such as Nelson and Smith (1998). Many men and families have managed to remake masculinity in a way that focuses more heavily on realistic goals, such as active fathering. These families seem to be able to navigate employment and economic struggles with fewer tensions, and with less need for men to exert control over women. In Golden Valley two-parent families are still the majority, as both the Census figures and my findings suggest, and many of them have successfully refocused masculine identity around engaging with their children in such activities as hunting, fishing, and team sports, while wives contribute substantially to the family finances. For these families, selective borrowing of

feminist concepts helps men to retain self-esteem and masculine identity despite their nontraditional gender roles.

Goldscheider and Waite (1991) argue that changes in family structure, including lower marriage rates and higher divorce rates, are due to more than economic conditions, and in particular reflect the working out of the “sex-role revolution” that resulted from women’s greater workforce participation. Golden Valley is not entirely cut off from the larger United States. Thus newer ideas about masculinity and fatherhood, such as those introduced by the feminist movement (Hochschild 1989; Waller 2002) have become part of the larger cultural “toolkit” (Swidler 1986) that Golden Valley residents have at their disposal. As Waller (2002, p. 55) found in the urban setting, in Golden Valley as well a new model of fatherhood has begun to emerge as the breadwinning model has rapidly become less attainable. For those men and women who are flexible with regard to their cultural ideals, adopting this more appropriate model appears to help them navigate economic and structural changes with less personal and interpersonal anxiety.

Although it has rarely been linked back to the question of the poverty/family structure association, the importance of flexible gender ideologies has been noted by other researchers who examine rural economic change. In diverse rural settings, scholars have found that the degree to which a family is able to survive economic transitions intact depends on role flexibility within the family (Mederer 1999; Norem and Blundall 1988). My findings support these contentions, while further exploring the relationship of gender ideologies to family structure and stability. The interview and ethnographic data support the argument that flexibility is vital to family stability, and further suggest that women are more likely to be flexible than men in their gender ideologies. Golden Valley’s women are for the most part willing to change their

expectations as necessary, regardless of their own personal histories. Women had a much easier time taking on breadwinning roles than men did in accepting homemaker roles. Because they are less likely to adapt easily to their new circumstances and resulting gender roles, it is the men in Golden Valley whose reactions are most often injurious to family relations.

This study suggests that setting plays an important role in shaping adaptations to structural change. Although many of the same economic processes have occurred in both rural and urban areas, the reactions to them can be quite different. Despite the many similarities between the divergent settings, including many of the same detrimental effects associated with poverty and unemployment, Golden Valley is nonetheless unique in many of its responses. It is culturally and ethnically more homogenous than most urban settings, and socially more controlling and cohesive. Also unlike the urban setting, in such an isolated location with a long history of dangerous and injurious work, there is less expectation that men can and should find jobs, particularly since the closures of the woods and sawmills. Together, these unique conditions combine to create a distinctive set of responses to poverty and unemployment, which must be understood separately from those that relate to urban environments, in order to be addressed effectively.

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