

Working to Love: Discourses of Expertise and Effort in Elites' Romantic Relationships

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Process:

I wrote my prospectus between January-April 2024, with two rounds of feedback from my adviser and one round of feedback from my full committee (my adviser and two other professors) before defending in May. (A note of context about the "defense": because my committee members provided significant feedback throughout the writing process, the defense was not an adversarial process; I went into the conversation expecting to advance to candidacy and engage in a generative dialogue with my committee about how to improve my plans for dissertation research.) In January, I read voraciously across literature related to work in romantic relationships. I had encountered some of this literature during my reading for my field exam the previous semester, but some of it was new. I started with a vague set of interests in gender inequality and romantic relationships; previously, I'd conducted pilot interviews with women in heterosexual relationships, but increasingly realized I was interested in a different (though certainly related) research question, one about how elites relate to the frame of "work" in their romantic relationships. This led me to read more literature about class and sociology of elites (folks I cite in the prospectus like Shamus Khan, Ana Ramos-Zayas, and others). I refined my research question and drafted my methodology section, which was by far the hardest part for me; I could read other people's research forever, but laying out a plan for how I would obtain qualitative data was relatively daunting! I finished my first rough draft for my adviser's review in late March and the version for the full committee in mid-April. Having a clear set of deadlines and milestones helped me, as did the discipline of a weekly GWL prospectus group.

Advice:

1. En route deadlines! To the extent you can, break up the expanse of time between the start of the semester and your prospectus defense/submission with clearly marked milestones or en route deadlines. If you have a supportive and communicative adviser, it could look like arranging preset dates with them to review your drafts and provide feedback. If their style of advising is less hands-on, you could find something similar by working with other members of your committee, peers in your department, scheduling GWL writing consultations to review portions of your prospectus (knowing that you have a consultation scheduled in two weeks to review the Methodology section you haven't yet started could be just what you need to get going!) or joining a GWL prospectus group.

2. Don't stress too much! I know this seems a little anodyne or way easier said than done but I think it helped me to have some perspective on the fact that this document is not, in the grand scheme of things, that make-or-break. I know people who wrote their prospectus about one topic and ended up writing a very different dissertation. One grad student from another institution once joked to me: "The prospectus is a document of lies." Of course you want to write a quality document that won't make your readers' eyes bleed, and it'd be great if you do accomplish the things you set out to do, but if you're having a tough time in the midst of it, just remember this is a grad school hoop you have to jump through! It doesn't have to be beautiful, and maybe you don't even need to make it come true (blasphemy, I know).

3. Make the prospectus work for you. Jumping through this hoop is an exercise that should, ideally, be useful to you: it gets you to ask yourself really important and helpful questions, such as "What is my research question?" and "How will I collect the evidence I need to make claims?" And you can use the language from your prospectus for presentations, dissertation chapters, and grant and fellowship applications down the road!

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INTRODUCTION

“Our investments in our relationship had paid off. There were a few rough spots, but for the most part we compromised, emoted, and empathized like couples therapy Olympic athletes. [...] It was a beautiful moment, one that cost us \$6,000 over the course of two weeks.”

— Angelina Chapin, “How Much Does It Cost to Save a Relationship?” (Chapin 2024)

“In coder lingo, relating and intimacy today, with our lack of effective education, is like skipping the staging environment and making that classic mistake of testing code directly in prod. [Relationship coaching helps clients] develop robust ‘relational code’ and then fully test it in staging before you roll it out to production.”

— Jessica Gold, as quoted in “Why hundreds of Bay Area men are hiring this ‘relationship coach’” (D’Onfro 2024)

In a personal essay, *New York Magazine* writer Angelina Chapin narrated how she and her partner paid for expensive couples’ therapy, vacations, dinners, and entertainment experiences, all justified through the lens of preserving and improving the health of their relationship. In a

profile piece on people with unusual jobs, Bay Area relationship coach Jessica Gold described her career helping tech geniuses practice empathy. Gold's language of coding and production, and Chapin's language of cost, "investment," and "Olympic athletes" both exemplify how, for elites, achieving (or looking like you're trying to achieve) ideals of companionate, stable, emotionally intimate relationships can be a form of work. The desire to invest time and resources to optimize outcomes may have many roots, such as uneasiness about status and virtue and the dominance of neoliberal self-management and self-optimization as a framework for understanding oneself and one's aspirations. My research seeks to answer: How do elites relate to the frame of "work" in their intimate relationships? Along with this question, I seek to investigate how "work" itself comes to be a dominant paradigm in discourse about relationships, how it is experienced differently based on gender (but is also expected from others besides just women in heterosexual relationships), and what alternatives to "work" in intimate life might look like. I will use qualitative methods (content analysis and interviews) to collect data.

Certainly, the entwinement of work and intimate life is not new. The proverbial "world's oldest profession" is one instantiation; care work is another. The increased commodification of intimacy is a hallmark of modern capitalist life (Parreñas and Boris 2010). Economic sociologists have illuminated tensions and complicated legal relationships between "love and money" (Zelizer 2005). From exhortations to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" to "grind" or "hustle," work is celebrated as necessary and valuable in the U.S. Yet it is also often positioned in *opposition* to the things you do out of passion ("do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life"). Within intimate life, the distinction between love as the things you do for free and work as the things you do for pay has been criticized for both exploiting feminized labor within the home and stigmatizing or devaluing feminized labor for pay, such as sex work or domestic service.

It can be harder to measure how effort is expended in spaces that don't always look like drudgery, or aren't as easy to measure as cooking, cleaning, and care. In interviews I conducted with women in heterosexual relationships during Summer 2023, I asked open-ended questions to better understand their emotional experiences in their partnerships. I noticed comments that arose in all the interviews about "doing the work" in relationships — sometimes with, and sometimes without, their partners. "Doing the work" was a catch-all phrase the interviewees used to describe their choices to go to therapy, consume content about specific relationship skills, engage in normative communication practices, and develop emotional reflexivity.

Intimacy and labor

How do sociologists think about this question: What is the work, and who's doing it? *Emotion work* or *emotional labor* is one analytic to understand how a worker manages her own emotions in order to cultivate a particular emotional environment for others, as in the example of the flight attendant who smiles warmly at passengers on an airplane (Hochschild 2012). A rich body of literature extends emotional labor to romantic relationships (Curran et al. 2015; Fahs and Swank 2016; Wilcox and Nock 2006), particularly related to inequities in men and women's efforts. In these studies, emotion work is described as daily and interactional: sharing thoughts and feelings, listening closely to a partner, responding supportively, etc. The philosopher Ellie Anderson has

written about another form of gendered labor in heterosexual partnerships which she distinguishes from emotion work and terms *hermeneutic labor*; this describes how women are burdened with disproportionate interpretive work due to male partners' emotional reticence, inscrutability, or lack of skill or desire to describe their own emotions or others' (Anderson 2023). Sociologist Alison Daminger has analyzed *cognitive labor*, also termed cognitive load, entailing "anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress" (e.g., tracking the usage of dishwasher pods beneath the sink and setting up an Amazon order to arrive before the pods are depleted) as another area where women in relationships with men bear disproportionate burdens.

Another literature of work, gender, and family comes from materialist feminist and Marxist readings. *Reproductive labor* is a form of labor crucial to the continuation and maintenance of the capitalist family form neither legible as productive labor nor accurately described as unproductive labor (Vogel, Ferguson, and McNally 2013). Scholars have analyzed the divisions of reproductive labor both along racial and ethnic divisions (Glenn 1992) as well as nationality (Parreñas 2015). Jennifer Morgan's historical work on the centrality of enslaved women and reproduction to racial slavery historicizes white femininity as produced in a dialectic with stigmatized representations of Black femininity — as monstrous, immoral, and oversexed (Morgan 2004). Here, the production of certain dominant romantic, sexual, and affective norms relies on the bondage and degradation of enslaved women.

Labor involved in the production of specific affects is termed *affective labor* by Marxist scholars who study it within the frame of changing economic conditions and a long history of exploitation of gendered work. Hardt argues that affective labor and other forms of immaterial labor are increasingly valuable as jobs in major capitalist systems have migrated from industry to service (Hardt 1999). Yet because many forms of affective labor occur at home, in the so-called private sphere — unwaged and invisible to economists and policymakers — it can be exploited. The German theorist of capitalist patriarchy Maria Mies coined the term *housewifization* to refer to the historical process of normalizing women's performance of domestic labor and the extraction of products of women's physical and gestational work (Mies 1986). Political scientist Anna G. Jónasdóttir defines love as distinct from labor but, like Mies, applies a Marxist analysis to argue that contemporary patriarchies rely on the exploitation of women's *love power* by men, who provide less than they take (Jónasdóttir and Gunnarsson 2023).

In her research on surrogacy in India, Kalindi Vora illuminates the limitations of classical Marxist analysis, particularly how use value is realized in conception but fails to capture reproductive energies, which Vora incorporates into the concept of *transmission of vital energy* (Vora 2012). Similarly, the quality of a relationship along various affective axes does not have value in a Marxist sense; one's intimacy, attraction, and trust with one person cannot be traded or exchanged on a market, and yet that intimacy, attraction, and trust may produce the conditions of possibility for commodity production, labor power production, and the consolidation of assets.

“Relationship work”

Given the myriad frameworks available to think through expending effort in intimate life — emotion work, hermeneutic labor, cognitive labor, reproductive labor, affective labor, housewifization, love power, and transmission of vital energy — how should we think about the “Olympic athletes” of love, today’s elite couples who are investing heavily in their relationships? Following both the interactional approaches of sociologists focused on relationships and the materialist analysis of scholars of capitalism and domestic labor, my research attends to a concept which I term *relationship work*. Relationship work involves engaging with educational, therapeutic, and self-help content that is aimed at skill-building (e.g., Googling “how to have healthier conflicts with my partner”) for numerous objectives such as preparation, maintenance and improvement, and/or optimization of the relationship. Relationship work is different from emotion work in that it is anticipatory and involves studying resources rather than making snap judgments and responses in the moment. While doing relationship work certainly involves the transmission of vital energy, it is also (like beauty work, another disproportionately feminized exercise that blurs boundaries between leisure, consumption, and labor) a form of consumption and potential area of *distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), complicating a Marxist or dominance feminist reading that might frame relationship work as another example of the straightforward exploitation of women by men.

Women who are in relationships with men are disproportionately targeted by, and consumers of, relationship work content. Jane Ward critically termed this landscape the “heterosexual repair industry” (Ward 2020). But increasingly, books aimed at non-monogamous relationships are also entering the mainstream, such as *The Ethical Slut* (originally published in 1997 and since re-released in 2009 and 2017), *Polysecure* (published in 2020), and *Open* (2022).

Importantly, there are voices calling for heterosexual men to engage in relationship work as well, particularly in the context of decreasing rates of marriage and the common conception that there is a gender gap in relationship skills. The collective conversation about heterosexual men and their subpar emotional intelligence has at times overlapped with “crisis of masculinity” discourse, which references everything from men’s poor educational attainment compared to women to reactionary politics and deaths of despair. In both, there is a normative expectation of a particular form of sociality and health (dating and marriage, friendship, community, sobriety, etc.); data that it is not being met; hypothesizing on potential reasons that often includes mention of structural economic forces; and individual self-improvement discussed as a possible solution. As the decidedly pro-marriage sociologist Brad Wilcox said to the *New York Times* in an interview, proponents of marriage have to help “our young men become more marriageable” (Coaston 2024). Numerous studies in masculinities literature have argued that existing research on emotional inequalities in heterosexual intimate life risks essentializing men as stoic and unemotional while paying insufficient attention to the ways men in relationships with women can and do develop and exhibit emotional reflexivity, caring behaviors, and positive expressions of emotions (Holmes 2015; Oliffe et al. 2023). Because my research will engage men, it will make an important contribution to literature on masculinities and intimacy.

Changing demographics among U.S. elites

When C. Wright Mills described a “power elite” of military men, corporate leaders, and politicians (Mills 2000) and E. Digby Baltzell coined the phrase “WASP” (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) to describe upper-crust Americans (Baltzell 1966), it was still possible to identify who constituted an “elite” in the United States through highly codified forms such as the Social Register, a publication that indexed members of high society.

Today, the makeup of U.S. elites is different than in the mid-20th century, in part due to historical shifts that have diversified participation in higher education and leadership in institutions. Women now outpace men in earning college degrees, and represent a majority of the college-educated workforce in the U.S. (Fry 2022). While the vast majority of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are still white and male, there have been increases in the representation of racial minorities and women (Dungan 2023). Two large drivers of accumulation of high net worth — financialization and the explosion of the technology sector — have changed what paths to elite status in the 21st century look like as well as the cultural hallmarks of elites.

It is particularly important to study dating and marriage with regard to elites in the U.S. because of how they factor into income inequality as Americans increasingly practice assortative mating (Greenwood et al. 2014), a trend that is inseparable from the phenomenon of increased education and workforce participation of women.

Relationship work as elite practice

There is no formal barrier to relationship work on the basis of class in the sense that many resources about relationships are widely disseminated for free, but relationship work remains inextricable from multiple forms of capital. American marriages have undergone massive historical transformations — from largely being transparently pragmatic arrangements (e.g., for food production and shelter) to companionate and self-expressive forms, norms that originated in the middle and upper classes (Coontz 2006). Relationships defined by affection, self-actualization, and growth are time-consuming and effortful.

Some have proposed marriage as a panacea for social and economic ills and suggested that poor people should simply get married more — as did the politician Marco Rubio, who declared marriage “the greatest tool to lift children and families from poverty” (Lowrey 2014).

Rubio and others of his get-thee-to-the-altar ilk are either cruel or ignorant of the lack of possibilities for many who they target with such rhetoric. It is not equally doable for everyone in the U.S. to make an economically sensible and emotionally fulfilling marriage. If you take the case of heterosexual Black women, who face discrimination and severely limited options in marriage markets (Clarke 2011; Curington, Lundquist, and Lin 2021). Scarcity is particularly severe if they are hoping to partner with Black men: the *New York Times* Upshot vertical terms this “1.5 Million Missing Black Men” and states “For every 100 black women not in jail, there are only 83 black men” due to incarceration and premature death (Wolfers, Leonhardt, and Quealy 2015). Previous literature has explored the question of why marriage and motherhood have become decoupled for poor women (Edin and Kefalas 2011) and how the U.S. government has supported pro-marriage programs, in some cases even requiring that welfare recipients

participate (Heath 2012). Material deprivation, not simply willpower or cultural factors, keep some people from being able to form rewarding romantic bonds. Neighborhood poverty is associated with increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (Bonomi et al. 2014; Cunradi et al. 2000). Politicians being pro-marriage without being anti-poverty keeps vulnerable people in violent relationships and crumbling homes they cannot afford to leave, in much the same way workers have to stay in exploitative labor conditions because of a lack of sufficient social welfare. (If conservatives who decry falling marriage rates as evidence of the decline of civilization cared about the quality of marriages and not just their quantity, they might consider ending mass incarceration, instituting a universal jobs guarantee, massively funding public education, and lifting communities out of poverty.) Telling people to get married so they will not be poor is, in many ways, putting the cart before the horse.

The prescription of marriage also ignores the way that a romantic relationship is not the same experience across race, class, geography, gender, or other identity markers. I pay special attention to class in this study. Sociologists have paid insufficient attention to the strategies utilized by *elites* to invest in their romantic relationships, instead focusing on poor and/or non-white Americans whose marriage and relationship behaviors are portrayed as damaged and deviant, though there are certainly important exceptions — such as those that engage a mix of class-differentiated subjects to interrogate unequal experiences (Armstrong and Hamilton 2015; Lareau 2011). One critique of a focus on poverty and deviance is that it is based in the ideology of “marriage fundamentalism,” presupposes the desirability of the nuclear family, operates from a deficit-based perspective, and pathologizes minoritized subjects, thus upholding white heteropatriarchal supremacy (Letiecq 2024). As Melinda Cooper deftly points out, neoliberal economists and legal theorists are invested in the (private) family, because they want it to provide an alternative to the welfare state — requiring it to be established as the primary source of economic security (Cooper 2017).

Why not follow Cooper’s lead and study policy history? While policy has powerful effects on relationships and families, the effects are not one-way. There is a deep need for studying and theorizing on the ground about affective investments and experiences in relationships, particularly among elites. For one, they may feel the “left hand of the state” (Bourdieu 1992) far less as a punitive wringing force around their neck (consider lower child removal rates for the rich, or the lack of surveillance that attends upon welfare recipients) that is obvious and observable; secondly, I argue that their intimate lives exist in intimate relation to norms and policy, forming the cultural mold in which the normative — that everyone from Brad Wilcox to Marco Rubio will then demand — is crafted. Myriad scholars have declared the value of “studying up” and making elite modes of social reproduction their research focus (Hoang 2022; Khan 2013; Ramos-Zayas 2020; Sherman 2017) due to the “dramatic role of elites in increasing inequality” (Khan 2012) and inequality’s moral and social consequences. The role of elites in establishing social norms and defining “legitimate culture” while the role of class in enabling or producing certain norms or expectations remains unmarked is a further reason to focus on elites for this project.

Like Hoang, Khan, Ramos-Zayas, and Sherman’s focus areas of parenting, schooling, and business, intimate life is a crucial social practice to study through the lens of elite reproduction. Relationship work is not exclusively an elite process. However, developing competences affords

social agents the ability to accrue capital, and social agents make reasonable choices about their investment strategies — the competences they will develop further — on the basis of what they believe is achievable in their social field (Bourdieu, Thompson, and Raymond 2003). Given this, elites may have greater incentives to participate in individual skill-building and the consumption of specific forms of education and media about relationships: their romantic partnerships are simultaneously crucial for maintaining economic positions *and* these partnerships’ affective and moral dimensions are tied to projects of self-actualization and identity formation. Contemporary “American marriages are widely understood to be based on equal partnership, economic solvency, and romantic love,” and historic shifts from marriage as a relationship of obedience to one of intimacy entail greater requirements for emotional fulfillment (Coontz 2006; Leonard 2018). But pressures on partnerships to be voluntarist, egalitarian, and loving — or at least look like it — are not felt equally by all elites, and I am also interested in understanding where disparities exist within this group along various divisions, such as gender and ethnicity. Is relationship work another form of affective labor being extracted primarily from women? (Following from the work of scholars like Nakano Glenn, I would also predict that ethnicity is another important component.) Is relationship work closer to consumption of a luxury good or a “labor of lifestyle” (Sherman 2017)? The Gramscian point that to understand power, we must understand less the exercise of violence than the production of consent is particularly salient in the study of this effort which is freely done.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Tracing relationship work as a discourse that intersects with class and social reproduction, I will collect data on how elites — those who possess disproportionately greater educational and cultural capital compared to most of their peers and are able to occupy dominant social positions (Khan 2012) — discuss and relate to relationship work, especially through concepts like healthy relationships and emotional skill-building. Following Elizabeth Bernstein’s “ethnography of a discourse” approach (Bernstein 2018), I will research the historical formation of relationship work and follow the discourse as it travels across multiple settings.

I will focus on qualitative data collection through interviews and subsequent extended meetings and observation. Based on the resources interviewees share (e.g., if numerous interviewees comment on following a particular psychologist on Instagram, reading a self-help book, listening to a podcast, etc.) I will also select some content for analysis.

Interviews

The first stage of my research study involves qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews to better understand what resources (books, social media accounts and content, influencers, therapy modalities, etc.) figure prominently in the relationship work landscape. For the purposes of this study I am defining elites much more broadly than simply high net worth individuals (see “Operationalizing ‘elite’” section).

My interviews will be open to people of all gender identities who are

- 1) currently in romantic partnerships they self-define as serious (this could include married, engaged, cohabiting, and long-distance);
- 2) have at least a Bachelor's degree;
- 3) do not currently have children; and
- 4) are between 21-40 years old.

The reason for focusing on this group of the young, educated, and presently childless is how it enables more focused study of relationship work that is done for the sake of the dyad (or throuple, or polycule) as opposed to related phenomena such as intensive parenting. Educated people who are in their twenties and thirties are also members of the generations ostensibly most set up to benefit from cultural efforts made towards gender egalitarianism — seeing mothers who may have worked outside the home, playing sports in schools ruled by Title IX, watching videos about consent at college orientation, singing along to Beyoncé declaring “Who run the world? Girls,” and much more. Where it exists, inequality and dissatisfaction in young adults’ heterosexual relationships may speak to the phenomenological experience of an incomplete gender revolution. At the same time, this group also faces immense educational and economic pressures as a consequence of neoliberalization, financial crisis, and workforce casualization. These romantic relationships exemplify love in the pressure cooker of high expectations.

I would aim to interview several groups: members of monogamous heterosexual couples as the largest proportion of the total sample, followed by members of monogamous queer couples and members of non-monogamous relationships.

Interviewee type	Target percentage of main (elite) sample (n=50)	Target percentage of comparative (non-elite) sample (n=20)
Member of monogamous heterosexual relationship	70%	80%
Member of monogamous queer relationship	20%	20%
Member of polyamorous relationship	10%	<i>optional</i>

For my preliminary round of interviews, I will recruit post-undergraduate participants from academic institutions, particularly students in professional programs that lead to high-paying jobs post-graduation (e.g., Medicine, Law, and Management). I will recruit interviewees both through posting on social media and with physical advertising — flyering in campus locations such as buildings that host offices and classrooms — and through snowball sampling after an initial set of interviews. I hope to interview both members of at least some couples, in order to get a sense of internal stratification within relationships where applicable. In a subsequent round of

interviews, I will focus on recruiting from outside the university — looking instead to particular industries, such as law, technology, finance, and media.

I have already completed 16 interviews with women in heterosexual relationships. Because of the interview project with women in heterosexual relationships, I have already filed for and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for an exemption. I will submit an update to my existing exemption file to continue interviews with an expanded population.

For the interviews in this study, I will ask respondents to fill out a demographic survey form, included in the Appendix. Then I will meet with respondents either face-to-face or over Zoom and record interviews for transcription. The interviews will last between one hour to 90 minutes. If approved for research funding, I will compensate interviewees \$25 for their time. The goal of the research will be to understand how the respondents think about romantic relationships, what frames they use to describe their wants and needs (e.g., do they talk about goals, work, objectives, improvement, progress, and other professional crossover terms?), and how they relate to resources external to the romantic partners themselves (books, podcasts, etc). I have included a draft interview guide in my appendix, below the Works Cited.

Extended observation and case studies

After completing some interviews, I would select a few individuals, couples, or groups with whom to request follow-up meetings, ideally in a home setting.

These meetings would include a mix of interviewing and more open-ended observation. I would request that they carry out their usual activities, and I would act as a fly on the wall in the house or accompanying them outside (e.g., going to the laundromat, doing grocery shopping, etc.) for a set amount of time. This blending of ethnographic method with interviews draws inspiration from Annette Lareau's work in *Unequal Childhoods* (Lareau 2011), in which Lareau or her field workers spent significant amounts of time with families who they were observing.

However, the introduction of an outside researcher to shared physical space is likely to change the dynamic between romantic partners, no matter how unobtrusive the researcher may attempt to make themselves. As another way to collect data, I would ask that the partners respond to journaling prompts about their emotions and relationship. These responses could be brief, colloquial, and more or less real-time. I would send these prompts as a Google Forms link via text or email at times the partners have identified themselves as being available to respond. The comparatively impersonal nature of writing in a form versus talking to someone face-to-face might help reduce self-censorship or fears of researcher judgment; indeed, research shows that self-disclosure is heightened in text-based computer-mediated conversation (Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock 2013).

A second component of my observational research methodology would include attending relationship classes and workshops. Such events are advertised on the popular events website Eventbrite, as well as occasionally in physical media (flyers and brochures) posted around cafes

and community bulletin boards. I plan to attend workshops across multiple geographic sites, taking detailed field notes for later analysis.

Operationalizing “elite”

There is no single definition of what constitutes an “elite,” and various schools of social scientific thought on the subject with advantages and disadvantages for research on relationships. Shamus Khan divides the schools into two: “Those who, following a kind of Weberian definition of class, generally think of elites relative to the power and resources they possess, and others who, following a more Marxist line of thought, think of elites as those who occupy a dominant position within social relations” (Khan 2012).

Erik Olin Wright has written extensively about contradictory class positions (e.g., the manager at a firm who neither owns the means of production nor works in the same way as the proletarian employee), and this frame is instructive for an expanded definition of elites; so too is the language of “professional-managerial class,” though my decision to use “elites” rather than PMC is because I am also interested in individuals whose elite status is not derived from their academic and professional credentials and positions and so fall outside of the PMC.

In this study I use elite in an expansive way because of an interest in people who are set on elite trajectories but not guaranteed elite outcomes, in order to ask how precariousness (or the perception of it) affects behavior. I am also interested in including those whose elite status is more conditioned on their occupation, education, or institution than their assets. To be an elite for the purposes of this study, I will evaluate how closely an interviewee can say they:

- a) Shape/argue for norms in a way that reaches people outside of their immediate social network? (e.g., a professor, a policy maker, someone who writes for a national publication, a doctor who gives advice to patients, a social media influencer, etc.)
- b) Have, or are en route to having, a degree that confers prestige?
- c) Participate in an institution that confers prestige?

In the demographic survey, I have also included a “ladder” exercise adapted from the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status in which respondents are asked to place themselves on a ladder that represents the social hierarchy of the United States. This is intended to capture respondents’ subjective social status, in order to better understand where disjunctures may exist between someone’s access to resources and their perception of their own status.

There is worthy criticism of non-material definitions of elite status; a term as slippery as “blue collar,” often used as a shorthand for anyone who does not have a college degree, could obscure the massive wealth of somebody who owns a car dealership or a thriving contracting business (Cooper 2023). But it is also important to take seriously educational and cultural capital, particularly in light of present political and cultural cleavages. Higher-education voters make up an increasing proportion of the American left (the “Brahmin left”), reflecting greater emphasis on the “sociocultural” axis of conflict (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

While revising this document outside of an East Rock eatery, I overheard two students in law and business discussing their career prospects and romantic relationships. One said he was on his “second high power couple relationship” and noted challenges like deciding where to move or when to have children when both partners have high expectations for their career advancement. When I was checking out books on relationships from the library, a young student worker said to me, “Are these for fun or work?” and, when I briefly summarized my research topic, proceeded to tell me, “I’m dating a girl who’s not a Yale affiliate, and it’s crazy how atypical that is. Everyone here dates other Yalies or other Ivy students. You stick to your social caste.” And when a British sociology professor I chatted with at a conference learned of my topic, he said “Ah, *the work*? Relationship management and all that?” adding, “Everyone’s talking about that these days, but I’ve been married for forty years and we don’t do ‘work.’ We don’t talk about that explicitly. There are some things you don’t say. Maybe that’s the work, the *not* talking. Then again, that’s just my male perspective, you should talk to my wife.”

These snippets and countless others reflect tensions within contemporary intimate life as partners seek to balance all manner of aspirations and normative commitments. Professional ambitions, familial commitments, egalitarianism and exogamy, homophily and class reproduction — all are relevant to the decisions and emotional investments made by elites.

Offering the frame of relationship work to evaluate how research subjects think about and experience work, labor, class, their desires and their obligations to loved ones will be an empirical contribution with relevance to several lines of inquiry within social science. These include the study of gender-based inequalities within labor, relationships, and households; emotions, men, and masculinities; and elite practices and norms.

The study’s interview process will also offer a potential contribution to debates within social theory about the relevance of habitus amid an environment of imperative reflexivity (Archer 2010), as the interviews will illuminate the extent to which actors are thoughtful about the internalization and reproduction of their social conditions in the sphere of intimate life. Additionally, this work will engage with materialist feminist analysis of love and family through interrogating how class and social status are imbricated with intimate life, particularly salient to queer theory critiques of romantic life as antithetical to broader forms of solidarity and calls to “abolish the family” (Lewis 2022; O’Brien 2023). At the same time, “Working to Love” will heed the call to take individuals’ hedonic lives seriously (West 2000), and to reject binary conceptions of love versus labor, resistance versus accommodation, solidarity versus false consciousness, or exploitation versus freedom within intimate life. I hope my findings will be useful to anyone desirous of lifeworlds that are both loving and just.

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APPENDIX

Draft demographic survey

What is your age?

- ☐ 21-25
- ☐ 26-30
- ☐ 31-35
- ☐ 36-40

How would you describe your gender identity?

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Non-binary or Gender-fluid
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Heterosexual/straight
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Pansexual
- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

What is the highest level of education attained by a parent/guardian?

- ☐ Less than high school education
- ☐ Some high school education
- ☐ High school diploma/GED

- ☐ Some college education
- ☐ Associate's degree
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Professional degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctoral degree
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

To your knowledge, what was the income level of the household in which you grew up, in US dollars?

- ☐ Less than \$25,000
- ☐ \$25,000 - \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 - \$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 - \$249,999
- ☐ \$250,000 or greater
- ☐ I do not know
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

What is your best estimate of your annual income, in US dollars?

- ☐ Less than \$25,000
- ☐ \$25,000 - \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 - \$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 - \$249,999
- ☐ \$250,000 or greater
- ☐ I do not know
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Imagine a ladder. Think of this as representing where people stand in the United States. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off – those who have the least money, least education, the least respected jobs, or no job. The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom. Where would you place yourself on this ladder?

- ☐ Topmost rung (10)
- ☐ 9

- o 8
- o 7
- o 6
- o 5
- o 4
- o 3
- o 2
- o 1 (lowermost rung)

Draft of 1:1 interview guide

I appreciate you responding to my call for interviewees.

Can you tell me the story of your current relationship — how did it begin?

Length of your relationship?

Can you tell me about your day-to-day experience of this relationship?

Do you live together?

Do you go on dates? (If yes) How do those get planned?

Do you socialize together (e.g., hosting friends at your home, attending parties and events)? (If yes) Can you tell me more about how that happens?

How would you describe your feelings about being in this relationship? In general, and on a day-to-day basis? [can offer a list of emotion words and/or emotion wheel]

What are some of the factors that affect your feelings about the relationship?

How do you deal with conflict in your relationship?

Have you had previous relationships?

How did that relationship/those relationships compare to your current one?

Besides the two of you in this relationship, are there other people or factors you would point to as affecting your relationship? For instance, who might you turn to if you would like relationship advice?

Who do you give advice to?

Sources of information?

Family / role models? / parents?

How do you feel about your relationship compared to those of your friends and family?

Do you know anyone whose relationship you think is particularly excellent, or anyone whose relationship seems especially troubled?

Are your parents married?

Can you tell me about your relationship with your parents, specifically if they help out with any expenses (such as a phone bill, rent, or a down payment)?

When you think about your future, what do you see as the role of this relationship?

Now I'll ask some more general questions.

What do you think a good relationship looks like? What are the qualities it has?

There are a lot of different narratives about love and romance. For instance, some people talk about soulmates and say that if a relationship is meant to be, it's meant to be. Others would say that serious relationships are difficult. Where does your perspective fall?

Do you consume any kind of self-help content? Defining this broadly here: could include advice columns, LinkedIn posts, a Reddit thread about weightlifting... etc.

If so what kind?

When do you look up self-help content (is it when something goes wrong, is it proactive)?

Do you look up self-help content about relationships?

Can you take a look at this quote from an essay and let me know what you think?

“Our investments in our relationship had paid off. There were a few rough spots, but for the most part we compromised, emoted, and empathized like couples therapy Olympic athletes. [...] It was a beautiful moment, one that cost us \$6,000 over the course of two weeks.”

— Angelina Chapin, “How Much Does It Cost to Save a Relationship?”

Thinking back on all we’ve talked about in terms of relationships, is there anything I’m not asking about that you think is important for me to know?