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What is This?
The Reproduction of Gender Norms Through Downsizing in Later Life Residential Relocation

Aislinn Addington¹ and David J. Ekerdt¹

Abstract
Using data collected from qualitative interviews in 36 households, this article examines people’s use of social relations based on gender to perform tasks associated with residential relocation in later life. Without prompting, our respondents addressed the social relations of gender in the meanings of things, in the persons of gift recipients, and in the persons of actors accomplishing the tasks. They matched gender-typed objects to same-sex recipients, reproducing circumstances of possession and passing on expectations for gender identity. The accounts of our respondents also depicted a gendered division of household labor between husbands and wives and a gendered division of care work by daughters and sons. These strategies economized a big task by shaping decisions about who should get what and who will do what. In turn, these practices affirmed the gendered nature of possession and care work into another generation.

Keywords
care work, gender roles, relocation, possessions

¹ University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

Corresponding Author:
Aislinn Addington, Gerontology Center and Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, 1000 Sunnyside Ave., Room 3090, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA.
Email: aaddingt@ku.edu
Gender, as one of the primary bases of social differentiation, introduces distinctions that can work to advantage or disadvantage the daily lives of individuals or the interests of social groups. This article examines the use of social relations based on gender in order to perform tasks associated with an important transition in later life—residential relocation. By economizing thought and behavior, gender is a resource and solution for task accomplishment. Its invocation, in turn, potentially affirms and perpetuates the socially constructed spheres of female and male.

The circumstances under study occur during community-based, residential moves in later life. (The severe constriction of possessions that accompanies entry into nursing homes is not a focus here.) Although moving is not frequent among elders (Sergeant, Ekerdt, & Chapin, 2008), it is a significant transition. One study of moves among older Americans in the national Health and Retirement Study showed that 14% of persons aged 68 and older made a community-based move between 2000 and 2002 and another 5% moved to nursing homes (Sergeant, Ekerdt, & Chapin, 2010). Most of these moves had been unexpected at the beginning of the 2-year period and, we can assume, so was the divestment that they entailed.

Moves in later life typically involve relocation from a larger to a smaller space and almost always require the downsizing of possessions. This is a complex undertaking because households and their environs enclose thousands of belongings. One research attempt to inventory just the visible contents of single sleeping rooms needed nearly 400 categories within which to code varieties of personal items (Gosling, Craik, Martin, & Pryor, 2005). The household’s convoy of material support (Smith & Ekerdt, 2011) will have accumulated over time and for various reasons, mainly for the utility of things and their symbolic properties. Some accumulation is unintentional, being the outcome of housekeeping practices that, in the interest of tidiness, continually put things “away” into the recesses of the place (Korosec-Serafaty, 1984). Moves in later life require a culling of this accumulation, reversing lifelong habits of acquisition.

Not only is there limited space at the destination residence, there is limited time for the downsizing once contractual obligations have been set in motion to exit one residence or occupy another. The modal spell for moving preparations is about 2 months, though the divestment work can begin earlier or remain unfinished until after the move (Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, & Bowen, 2004). Yet another limitation may be the well-being of the movers. Many moves in later life are motivated in reaction to or anticipation of functional or health problems (Calvo, Havertex, & Zhivan, 2009; Sergeant & Ekerdt, 2008). The physical, cognitive, and emotional demands of a household move
are the pretext for assistance from the mover’s family members and friends. Their rising stake in the safety and security of elders makes the move a social affair.

With relocation imminent, quantities of possessions must be evaluated for retention or disposal, and then actually disposed. There is a hierarchy of disposal strategies within which people attempt to give things away prior to selling or discarding them (Ekerdt et al., 2004). But to whom should objects be given? And in the wider business of disbanding a household, who is to do what?

Absent a move, dispositions can be more deliberative. Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000) describe how the placement of selected, cherished possessions is optimized by tactical decision making about who should receive the object, when, and how. The search for the right recipient and the right occasion can be set off by life transitions, by the feeling that life is growing shorter, and by special events (e.g., a wedding) that call for gift giving. Other studies of routine possession management reveal that households have divestment practices for target items that can nonetheless be laborious (Gregson, 2007; Gregson, Metcalfe, & Crewe, 2007; Hetherington, 2004).

Downsizing for a relocation, however, involves the contents of the whole household and a concentrated effort. To aid and speed this effort, we would expect that gender assumptions are a resource, and for four reasons. First, objects encode gender (Kirkham, 1996). Products are designed specifically for the enactment of male and female identities, a process that commences at birth with the promotion of gender-appropriate clothing and items for body care. For example, the cohort of women now in their 70s (some of whom were studied here) was once encouraged to ideal femininity by advertisers of sterling silver flatware when this kind of merchandise became a major presence in Seventeen magazine in the years after World War II (Massoni, 2010). Even objects that are apparently unisex, such as televisions, can be prized with different meanings by men and women (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The taken-for-grantedness of things as male and female simplifies the list of potential recipients when it comes time to distribute possessions during a household downsizing.

Second, dispositions of belongings within families might also be likely to follow gendered, parent–offspring paths. Family members within generational lines (children, grandchildren) tend to have priority as recipients of possessions (Ekerdt, Luborsky, & Lysack, 2012), and intergenerational relations and cognition are known to follow same-sex descent. For example, older mothers strongly prefer adult daughters over sons as confidants (Suitor & Pillemer, in press). In the transmission of values, religious continuity is
greater within same-sex lineages due to greater congruence between older mothers and adult daughters but also between grandmothers and granddaughters (Copen & Silverstein, 2007). The gendered passing of items, and the values they hold, can likewise be the passing of expectations for gender identity. The items potentially instruct or assist a person in how to be a man or a woman—whatever that may mean for the family or social group involved. Taking the position that gender is an ongoing accomplishment achieved through social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), the gender-specific objects passed intergenerationally may serve as “props” for the task of “doing gender.”

Third, the gendered division of household labor is well documented in the social sciences. Starting with the concept of women’s “double day” in the 1970s (Gannage, 1986; Szalai, 1972), later made famous by Hochschild’s iconic The Second Shift (1989), and reinforced by contemporary research (England, 2010), the evidence demonstrates that women do the majority of housework and other “family labor.” Housework as a female responsibility is so taken for granted that an unbalanced division of labor at home seems appropriate to many married adults. In example, couples in Lennen and Rosenfield’s (1994) research reported that a “fair” division of household labor had the men performing approximately 36% and women accomplishing approximately 66%. What couples consider fair and appropriate according to cultural standards is not fair in the sense of being evenly distributed. Even household disruptions due to economic distress fail to shake this cultural standard. Legerski and Cornwall (2010) recently found that men do not increase participation in household responsibilities when they no longer work outside the home; too many social forces block profound “degendering of housework” (Mannino & Deutsch, 2007). Persistent gender-related expectations for household labor should also apply as older couples downsize.

A fourth circumstance where we see gender as a resource is the mobilization of family care work, specifically the differential assistance to downsizing provided by daughters and sons. This requires a view of elderly residential relocation as a period of care work for family members (Ekerdt & Sergeant, 2006). In terms of family help, the established order for elderly caregiving is first the spouse, then daughters (if available), and finally sons (Dwyer & Seccombe, 1991; Silverstein, Parrott, & Bengtson, 1995). Intergenerational affection motivates women to engage in acts of support and care for elderly parents, while it is feelings of filial obligation and sense of responsibility that motivate men (Silverstein et al., 1995). In addition to motivational differences in caring for aging parents and family members, the type
of care provided is often different depending on the gender of the care giver. Men are more likely to engage in instrumental care—including financial support and household maintenance—and women are much more likely to give emotional support and participate in day-to-day care activities (Dwyer & Seccombe, 1991; Houser, Berkman & Bardsley, 1985). Men tend to provide care that stays within the boundaries of traditionally male responsibilities: maintenance, managerial assistance, and advisory roles, leaving the personal care and emotional care work—both traditionally female oriented tasks—to women (Campbell & Martin-Matthews, 2003). One consequence of this division of labor based on gender role expectations is that women are much more likely to be involved in care work on a daily basis than are men (National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, 2009; Spitz & Logan, 1990). The traditionally male care expectations are intermittent and can often be accomplished remotely, whereas those considered traditionally female are not only day-to-day activities but frequently necessitate face-to-face interaction.

Similar patterns should be apparent during episodes of downsizing. Daughters, we expect, should figure more prominently as helpers, motivators, and sources of emotional support. Sons will not be absent from events, but their contributions will be more advisory and instrumental.

For these four reasons, we hypothesize that the social relations of gender—in the meanings of things, in the person of recipients, and in the persons of the actors accomplishing the task—expedite downsizing activities. During this big task conducted in a limited period of time, gendered socialization offers solutions for the “to whom” of possession disposition and the “how” of task accomplishment.

**Method**

The data come from a qualitative investigation of the downsizing process among older adults who have changed residence. Between August 2008 and May 2010, we interviewed persons in 36 households in a Midwestern metropolitan area. In all of these households, older adults had undertaken a residential move 4 to 10 months prior to the interview. Volunteers were recruited within retirement communities, through health fairs, community newspapers, as well as word-of-mouth referrals. We screened volunteers to be over the age of 60, who had moved to a smaller household within the last year, who had not moved to a nursing home, and who had been functionally able to participate in the move.

The 36 households consisted of 10 married couples (interviewed together), 4 men only (1 married, 1 divorced, 2 widowed), and 22 women...
only (3 married, 5 divorced, 14 widowed). The 46 respondents ranged in age from 61 to 90 with a median age of 80. One respondent was Native American and the rest were White. Nearly half of the respondents had earned a college degree. Tenure in the previous residences ranged from 2 to 52 years, with 18 households having less than 10 years in their previous home and 18 having more than 10 years of previous tenure. All households had adult children. Excluding children living abroad, sons and daughters lived equidistantly from parents, an average of 387 miles for sons and 402 miles for daughters.

In all cases, the respondents said they had less space in the new place, and had been required to dispose of things. Our semistructured interviews focused on respondents’ recollection of activities from the period of time when they knew they would move until they did move. We asked how they came to make decisions about what they would and would not take to the new place; about methods of disposition; about the help they received; and about their feelings throughout. We asked directly about any giving, selling, donating, or discarding of things; about who helped with the various aspects of the moving process (i.e., the sorting, packing, moving, and unpacking); and we led informants through a list of over 20 categories of items (clothes, furniture, appliances, decorations) to prompt further disposition narratives. The interview guide did not directly ask respondents to comment on gender considerations in their process of disposing of possessions or the physical tasks involved in moving. In interviews with couples, we did ask how the work of downsizing was allocated between them, and about decision making for heirlooms from one partner’s side or the other. (Spouses often prompted or qualified one another’s replies; we cannot know whether one partner may have inhibited the replies of the other.) In all interviews, we did not specifically ask about help from female versus male kin. Interviews typically lasted about 1 or 2 hr.

In order to examine the gender dimensions of possession divestment and the tasks of relocation, we first read through each transcript in its entirety. Next, using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2002), we coded the transcripts broadly for relevant passages, followed by a second more specific coding in order to document themes and patterns. We met to discuss results and focus the analysis on instances where our respondents reported that gender relations had expedited their downsizing (a) by indicating likely recipients for objects and (b) by suggesting who would accomplish various tasks. In interpreting these results, we were alert to the possibility that not only may gender have structured decision making for downsizing, it may likewise have shaped recollection of the events. In the following sections, each quoted respondent was given a pseudonym and
details were altered where necessary to maintain confidentiality for the research participants.

**Routing Gendered Objects**

When recalling the disposition project, our respondents spoke of some objects in a gendered way. Certain things have an association with gender either because they are possessed by a man or a woman or because the items are intentionally created or adapted specifically for gendered practices. For a number of items, both circumstances are true precisely because the gendered nature of possession arises from the expectation of gendered practice enactment. For example, women spoke of *their* china and men of *their* tools. While men probably used the china and women used household tools, the items themselves carry a clear association with one gender that is reflected in their language of possession. These gendered tags—of possession, utility or both—were consistently upheld in accounts of disposition decisions.

When giving such things away, we found that people seek to reproduce objects’ circumstances of possession by passing items to the appropriate gender. We heard this most commonly when individuals reported passing jewelry to women and tools or hobby materials to men. Speaking of their disbandments, both Colleen Andrews and Sylvia Reynolds told how “the girls” (meaning daughters and granddaughters) came to go through items of jewelry. Like many of our respondents, Vera Samson was matter of fact about these transfers. When asked about her seasonal decorations she stated, “I gave a lot to my daughter”; to her son, “I gave my son his dad’s golf stuff.” Mrs. Samson distributed these gifts in expectation of her children’s interests, which *she* would use decorations and *he* would use golf equipment. The gendered association of these items helped direct their distribution. Likewise, Ruth Ann Barber described how items belonging to her late husband were allocated to her children during her downsizing move:

> I gave that [man’s diamond ring] to my son, and then any of [my husband’s] personal things. I had Jimmy come because I felt like he and his dad were so close and he should come before the girls. So he came and took anything he wanted of his [father’s]. . . . then each of the girls came and, you know, picked out stuff of their dad’s.

It was important for Mrs. Barber to offer items to her son first, maintaining the gender and sentiment of possession for her late husband’s personal things.
The passing of these items while maintaining a gendered possession also opens opportunity for further gender role enactments. Vera Samson’s daughter, as keeper of the seasonal decorations, can properly embellish her home for holidays. When Thomas Stinson passed his collection of hunting gear to his son and grandson, not only was gender the key to appropriate recipients, the gift also helps the next generation of Stinson men fulfill their masculine roles. This kind of gender-practice training can start early. Vera Sampson’s 4-year-old grandson asked for his late grandfather’s bow ties because he likes to dress up in suits. Even at a young age, this boy is playing at being a man while assisted by the gift of his grandfather’s bow ties. These examples not only demonstrate how certain objects assist in the accomplishment of “doing” masculinity or femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), they also show how givers assume an idealized, heteronormative gender identity for the recipients of gender-typed items.

In situations of giving within families—which most of our respondents described—the strategy for disposition by gender was further layered by degrees of kinship. Assuming that there are gender-appropriate kin at hand, then there is strong favor for possessions passing to first-degree relatives, especially to sons and daughters. Lacking those recipients, people will still tend to attempt same-sex transfers, but to second-degree relatives or to in-laws. Going back to the interview with Ruth Ann Barber, she stated that her own jewelry went first to her daughters and then “later on” granddaughters were given the opportunity to select items. Several interviews produced stories of this comingling of gender and first-degree preference among female relatives. Belva Carter raised not only biological children but also nieces. Whereas there were a few family items that she felt her nieces would feel closer to than her biological children—things they had grown up with—this respondent nonetheless offered these items first to her biological daughters. Degree of relation was also apparent in the convention of letting daughters have first choice over daughters-in-law. Betty Mitchell could not take a dining table to her new, smaller residence. Her daughter-in-law had shown an interest in this particular piece of furniture, but before relinquishing it to a relative by marriage, Mrs. Mitchell first checked with her daughters to see whether they wanted it. In one instance when there was no adult–child recipient of appropriate gender, gender superseded kinship. Martin Pratt had only a daughter. When asked what decisions he made about downsizing tools and outdoor equipment, he reported, “My son-in-law took the tools and I have a nephew that took tools and various things.” It is possible that these items had been claimed by the male relatives (Ekerdt, Addington, & Hayter, 2011), but the disposition was, in the end, man to man.
In some cases, the items being disposed have symbolism or utility for the family as a group. The control or custody of these “family things” can also be gendered. Some items carry tradition or legacy (Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000), in which case family members pay particular attention to the possession circumstances of these pieces. When looking to distribute family keepsakes, older adults tend to perpetuate the tradition of women as the family kin keepers (Marcoux, 2001). Photos were the most common category of gifted items to be actively kept by women in the family. Mrs. Barber reported giving all the family albums to her daughter and granddaughter. It had been her responsibility to maintain these things and during the downsizing episode she passed that role onto the next generation. Mrs. Samson’s son and daughter both took household items during the moving period, but she described her daughter as the “clearing house” in the family, retaining whatever objects needed a home. Women are also charged with the job of holding onto items for the grandchildren of the respondents. On several occasions, we heard of situations like June Crawford’s: “A lot of my stuff is stored over at Kelli’s [daughter]. A lot of my grandchildren will say ‘I want this, I want that, I want the other.’ So Kelli is storing all that for them.” Kelli has custody in order to complete the transfers at an appropriate time.

While we heard many stories of women’s kin keeping of items, we also had stories of tradition and legacy passing down through the men in families. This occurred most frequently with hobby-related equipment and with collections, but military uniforms and service memorabilia also came in for mention. For the Curtis family, military service was a tradition several generations along. When Mrs. Curtis prepared for her move, she made sure that her son got his father’s military paraphernalia. Other items, like coin collections or tool collections, were also discussed in terms of a gendered custody. This was true for the Stinson family, mentioned earlier, where the respondent’s disbandment required that he pass on his extensive gun and decoy collection to his son and grandson. Mr. Stinson’s father had been a hunting enthusiast as well, beginning the collection long ago. At the time of the interview, this hobby and its corresponding collection of items had become a legacy for men in this family through four generations. The passing of the physical items occurred because of the downsizing move, but the attention to their history and heritage was similar to the kin-keeping practices cited by women. The foregoing examples of intergenerational transfer all follow a traditional gender role pattern: household and memory items for women and outdoor recreation for men (Blair & Lichter, 1991). Nevertheless, both men and women, in passing possessions, engaged in a kind of intergenerational transmission of values.
The importance of a gendered heritage for family things can also be appreciated in circumstances when it is frustrated. Gregson’s (2007) ethnography of English households and possessions included one woman who was the fourth-generation material keeper of furniture, paintings, and china. She was, however, anxious about the fate of these things because she had no children and her sister’s children (to whom the things would pass) were all sons. Seeing the end of the matrilineal tradition, this woman said, “It’s sad because really it is the breaking of the chain” (p. 114).

Who Does What

In addition to decision making and dispositions of objects, there are other tasks in downsizing for a residential move: sorting, packing, transporting, and unpacking. These, too, proceed with embedded gender role expectations and divisions of labor on the part of both the movers and their adult children. Both generations uphold traditional, even stereotypical, household responsibilities for men and women, and our interviews were informative about these patterns’ perpetuation.

Between Couples

In the 10 households where we interviewed older couples, there was a clear, gendered division of labor in the management of possessions. Consistent with a spatial separation of homes into male and female domains (Kinchin, 1996), husbands and wives addressed the downsizing within different areas of the place. Couples, when asked how they worked both together and independently, often explained that the husband packed his areas of the house—generally the garage, basement, and other workshop-type spaces—while the wife would pack her areas—usually the rest of the dwelling. In one example of separate spaces, Sylvia Reynolds completed the sorting and packing of the household herself while her husband performed maintenance work at their new residence. Gendered space here served as a way to easily establish who does what. While the distribution of work was unlikely to be equal—the garage versus the main house—couples rarely addressed the fairness of this arrangement.

Even more disparate, a few couples openly reported that the wife did all the sorting work for the household disbandment. As in the previous example, neither member of the couple objected to this entirely skewed division of labor, though they did in some instances openly make light of the husband’s lack of effort. A passage from the transcript of Joseph and Helen Black...
illustrates this situation. Mrs. Black described how taxing this period of disbandment was, as they rushed to vacate their previous residence.

Mrs. Black: We did not want to be paying two rents [for old and new residences] and the new apartment was to be ready in three weeks. So, we really—it was the most stressful occasion of my entire life.

Mr. Black: For her. She did all the work! It didn’t bother me a bit! (laughs)

Mrs. Black: (laughs) He didn’t do anything!

Later in the interview, the Blacks reveal that when Mr. Black was called upon to assist in the decision making he failed to accomplish the work efficiently. Reiterating his earlier contention, Mr. Black stated, “She did it all.” Mrs. Black further explained the problem: “I would say, ‘Please go through this box of your family’s letters.’ He would start reading them and that was it!”

In another case, William Connell impeded the process in a somewhat different way. He simply refused to sort through the items deemed “his” and brought them all instead. While his wife made decisions about many household possessions, downsizing in preparation for their new, smaller living space, Mr. Connell avoided the process. Consequently, as his wife Patricia recalled, the trunk of the car, post-move, was full of the tools and hobby materials that he had yet to sort. In a similar way, a 70-year-old widower also avoided the whole project as much as possible. Having no interest in what went into his new dwelling, Mr. Pratt instructed his daughter and a friend of his late wife to arrange his new household. He asked them to make “all of the arrangements,” adding: “I said, ‘you gals set it up; I’ll live in it.’” In the previous two examples, the men were in positions to ignore the necessary work involved in downsizing because in each situation there were women involved who could, and would, pick up the slack. For many of the older adults in our study, women had spent some part of their adult lives focused on family labor rather than working outside the home. Consequently, the household may have been seen by both partners as the woman’s domain. We do not know whether traditional gender ideology prevailed for these older adults (we did not ask). All the same, our data show that gendered practices among spouses helped partition the work of sorting and packing for a household move.

Daughters

Early in each interview, we had asked respondents to list the gender, ages, and geographic proximity of their children. Knowing this family composition, we
can report that elders were much more likely to mention assistance from adult daughters even though daughters lived, on average, no closer than sons. This was particularly true for help with sorting and packing. And, nearness permitting, granddaughters also participated in the culling and decision making with grandparents. The elder movers declared relief and gratitude for this type of help. Ruth Ann Barber sums up what many expressed in talking about the regular support she received from her youngest daughter: “She helped me so much because she’d come out and help me go through stuff, and things like that.” Many female family members engaged in this kind of day-to-day help, facilitating the larger moving processes by assisting with the many small tasks involved in relocating an entire household.

Adult daughters also mobilized assistance by other family members. Several interview transcripts illustrated how daughters took on big roles and organized parts of the possession management process. In Mrs. Barber’s case, it was her daughter who called in the other adult children to help, coordinating a “packing day” for anyone who wanted to participate. In another example, a woman with four sons and one daughter had moved from Oklahoma to Missouri. Even though two of the sons lived nearby in Oklahoma, it was the daughter in Missouri who orchestrated the move. Another case was remarkable for the extensive cross-country travel by one daughter who took the lead among other adult children and made several trips to help her parents sort and pack their belongings. Participating in the sorting of household possessions involved not just physical labor but also the emotional aspects of narrowing the stock and store of belongings. From heirlooms and memory tokens to the pantry and medicine cabinet, this work had to be done in order to accomplish the move. Whether daughters were called on or volunteered, there seemed to be an understanding that they would help in these situations.

Paralleling the precedence of first-degree relatives as gift recipients, daughters-in-law performed tasks similar to but not quite as intimate as those of daughters. Elders reported some cases of daughters-in-law helping with sorting, but with far less frequency than biological daughters. Daughters-in-law were most often being tasked with setting up some aspects of the new residence rather than sorting through items before the move. Respondents often spoke of this contribution as very helpful, expressing gratitude for the efforts put forth.

**Sons**

Consistent with care work literature on contributions by sons, our respondents reported that sons engaged much more often in the physical tasks of the
move rather than more emotional or personal forms of assistance. Involvement by sons was common at the actual moving stage of the larger downsizing project. For the Thompsons’ move—where their daughter came from out of state to assist with possession management—the couple’s son who lived locally rented and drove the moving truck. Truck driving was a frequent contribution by sons, or else assistance in making arrangements for professional movers.

In two instances, sons were more peripheral, providing resources but not directly participating. In recalling these situations, elders supplied reasons for the physical absence of their sons. For Dorothy Sable, whose daughter had come to help, her son could not be there for the move as he was “tied up with business.” The son of Mr. and Mrs. Crawford had money but not time, they stated. He supported the downsizing process financially but was not present for any part of the project. This support from afar is consistent with the portrayal of men’s pattern of filial support in the care work literature. Rather than affective assistance, sons assist their parents in a distant but instrumental way.

Literature on gender and care work recounts how male relatives make decisions and take charge (Campbell & Martin-Matthews, 2000, 2003; Silverstein et al., 1995). We had some evidence of this. For instance, in two separate situations, sons were called upon to assist parents in making arrangements for an estate sale. In one case, the son picked the seller he thought best for his mother’s situation. In the other, the son spoke to the estate seller on his mother’s behalf when they began to have conflicts. One interview did describe a son pushing his mother forward in her downsizing progress. As Wilma Farrell stated, “I did not expect him to be here and so in charge!” This, however, was the only example of the 36 households where a mover recounted the experience of a son taking charge. In all other cases, the models of children organizing and orchestrating the downsizing project came from daughters not sons.

Discussion

There are many ways to regard relocation in later life—as a financial question, as a life event (Luborsky, Lysack, & Van Nuil, 2011), as a crossroads in life-span development (Wahl, Iwarsson, & Oswald, 2012), as a pursuit of comfort and mastery (Golant, 2011). Moves are also practical problems that entail the disposition of quantities of material goods. This article examined a set of strategies for the resolution of such tasks.

Our findings confirm that elders drew on gender assumptions to distribute possessions to sons and daughters and they also reproduced the gendered
division of labor in the actual act of downsizing. Without prompting, our respondents offered accounts of having used gender-based strategies for accomplishing the household downsizing entailed by relocation in later life. These strategies economized a big task by shaping decisions about who should get what and who will do what. Specifically, our respondents deployed gender to match objects to recipients and so potentially pass on expectations for gender identity. The accounts of our respondents also depicted a gendered division of household labor between husbands and wives and a gendered division of care work by daughters and sons. Previous studies of possession disposition during relocation by older adults have referred to gendered items (e.g., Ekerdt et al., 2004; Kroger & Adair, 2008; Marcoux, 2001; Marx, Solomon & Miller, 2004), but this study offered a deeper look at the way that gender relations facilitate processes of divestment.

In distributing possessions, our respondents sought literally to reproduce the possession circumstances of certain objects. When objects to be released were gendered by design (i.e., created for enactment of identities), or gendered by association with a male or female owner, or both, the list of all possible recipients could be narrowed on that basis. The favor for retaining family ownership by first-degree relatives of appropriate gender also narrowed the range of recipients. This was likewise true of “family things” that should preferably “go down” in a female or male line. Our interviews did contain accounts of gender-crossing and family-slipping dispositions (see Ekerdt et al., 2012), but the practice of reproducing gender and family circumstances of possession is so pervasive that we think it is worth naming. We would call this practice “homoctesis,” from Greek roots meaning “sameness of possession.” Homoctesis generalizes to any attempt, including sales, to achieve congruity between the once and future owners of an item, collection, or heirloom (Albinsson & Perera, 2009; Lastovica & Fernandez, 2005; Price et al., 2000). In our examples of homoctesis to conserve gender and family possession, it functions as a heuristic for downsizing. Heuristics are the ways that minds deal with an uncertain world, “how real minds make decisions under constraints of limited time and knowledge” (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999, p. 5; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2000). In the face of large amounts of information and many possible consequences of action, heuristics simplify and economize search processes, recognition tasks, decision making, and judgments. Mental rules such as these are a practical way to proceed when knowledge and time are limited (Simon, 1990). In the case of residential downsizing by older adults, homoctesis, as facsimiled ownership, was a cognitive pragmatic for the “to whom” of dispositions.
Responsibility for the tasks of downsizing (sorting, packing, etc.) was likewise drawn from a gendered social order and, in turn, upheld it. Among married couples, the typical household division of labor (England, 2010; Lennen & Rosenfield, 1994) saw men and women dealing with their own areas of the house, but the majority of tasks were assumed by women. We did not hear objections to this imbalance, though such comments may have emerged if we had interviewed spouses separately.

Involvement by adult children followed patterns that have been documented in other literature on intergenerational care work, that is, heavier involvement and more domestic work by daughters. Whereas most of the scholarship on care work looks to examples of long-term or ongoing care situations (Knight & Losada, 2011), the comparatively short episodes of downsizing reported by our respondents included much of the same types of emotional and physical labor. Just as other situations of care work demonstrate, women and men approach and accomplish the work differently. The downsizing period may not be typical of other elder care circumstances, but it deserves a place as an example of gendered care work practices. Before leaving this point, we should acknowledge the possibility that gender shaped the telling of the downsizing story in foregrounding the role of daughters. We do not actually know how much sons helped—and they may have been very helpful—but what these elders told us and are probably adding to the “family story” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990) is a lesson about the constancy of daughters.

All of the downsizing households in our study had adult children involved to some degree, even if they did not live nearby. It would be interesting to learn how robust these gendered strategies are when elders do not have children. In such cases, are gendered dispositions and divisions of labor also enacted among available second- or third-degree relatives or among friends and neighbors?

Moving one’s household is not such a common life event that people become practiced at it. Nor is downsizing one’s possessions by a substantial amount a routine experience. Facing or anticipating a narrower life world, this reversal of material accumulation by older adults is a novel undertaking. Confronting a large, complex task in a short period of time, laboring perhaps with physical limitations, people fall back on accustomed forms and practices to speed the work. For this circumstance, the social relations of gender offer solutions for possession distribution and downsizing labor. Between male and female, who does what and who gets what may not be equitable, but the reliance on gender at least expedites the work. At the same time, these episodes affirm the gendered nature of possession and care work into another generation.
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**Author Biographies**

**Aislinn Addington** is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include gender, religion, and the life course. Her dissertation is a qualitative study of identity and boundaries among groups with oppositional ideologies.

**David J. Ekerdt**, PhD, is professor of sociology and director of the Gerontology Center at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. He studies the transitions of later life, in particular the phases of the retirement process and the experience of residential relocation.