GENDER, INTIMACY, AND ECONOMY: AN INTERVIEW WITH VIVIANA ZELIZER

GÊNERO, INTIMIDADE E ECONOMIA: UMA ENTREVISTA COM VIVIANA ZELIZER

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ABSTRACT

Viviana Zelizer, originally from Argentina, moved to the United States where she has subsequently built her career her career as a sociologist. She currently holds a teaching position at Princeton University. In 2023, Zelizer was honored with the highest award from the American Sociological Association (ASA) in recognition of her significant impact and contributions to the field of Sociology. Beyond her foundational research in Economic, Cultural Sociology and Sociology of Money, Zelizer's writings have garnered widespread acclaim in gender studies. Her conceptual insights into intimacy, moralities, and family dynamics have been particularly influential. The interview delves into the impact of her work on gender studies, as well as her perspectives on care, family dynamics, and monetary transactions.

Keywords: Viviana Zelizer; intimacy; economy; care.

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RESUMO

Viviana Zelizer, socióloga argentina, estabeleceu sua carreira nos Estados Unidos e atualmente leciona na Universidade de Princeton. Em 2023, Zelizer recebeu o maior prêmio da *American Sociological Association* (ASA) pelo impacto e contribuição de sua obra para o campo da Sociologia. Além de seu fundamental aporte para a Sociologia Econômica, e do Dinheiro, as obras de Zelizer têm recebido um reconhecimento ímpar nos estudos de gênero, principalmente por seu enquadramento teórico-analítico a respeito de intimidade, moralidades e dinâmicas familiares. A entrevista explora o impacto de seu trabalho nos estudos de gênero, bem como suas perspectivas sobre cuidados, dinâmicas familiares e transações monetárias.

Palavras-chave: Viviana Zelizer; intimidade; economia; cuidado.

Viviana Zelizer is an Argentine sociologist who relocated to the United States and established her career there, currently teaching at Princeton University. In 2023, received the highest accolade from the American Sociological Association (ASA) for her significant impact and contributions to the field of Sociology. Zelizer's influence extends internationally and is notably prominent in Brazil, where many of her works, including *A negociação da Intimidade* (2011) and *O significado social do dinheiro: dinheiros especiais* (2003), have been translated into Portuguese. Additionally, an important interview discussing her research was published in the journal *Tempo Social* in 2017, conducted by Nadya Guimarães, André Vareta-Nohoum, Federico Neiburg, and Bianca Freire-Medeiros.

Beyond her widespread influence in Economic Sociology and Sociology of Money, Zelizer's work has also received distinct reception and recognition in gender studies. This is largely to her conceptual contributions on intimacy, moralities, and care, which are widely debated in the field.

Her ideas inspire generations of intellectuals, including ourselves. In September 2023, we had the opportunity to engage with Viviana Zelizer via video call to discuss her theoretical contributions, especially her thoughts on gender, markets, and intimacy. A series of questions were sent in advance via email, setting the stage for dynamic and enlightening conversation, during which Zelizer shared insights into her research journey and her areas of interest. The interview was transcribed by us and reviewed by Zelizer herself, with minor edits made to preserve the authenticity of the content.

We would like to start by asking you about the impact of your work on gender studies. In the introduction of your book Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy (Zelizer, 2011a), you present a fascinating empirical trajectory about life insurance, money, childhood, and the social meanings of money, leading to topics related to intimacy and care. You also discuss this trajectory in an interview conducted

in Brazil (zelizer et al., 2017a). There's no doubt that your work has paved new paths in Economic Sociology and Cultural Sociology, but it has also received significant attention in Gender Studies. How do you see the dialogue between your work and this field?

Let me divide my intellectual journey with the analysis of gender into three categories: first, my research; second, teaching; and third, my personal experience as a woman scholar. But first, let me note that until recently, most gender scholarship has approached gender as a dichotomous category of men/women. And it's actually been very exciting to see students now drawing from my work but exploring new territories. I taught a course last spring and two of the students developed innovative proposals for studying queering economies. So we are having these important advances, but most of the earlier work that I'm talking about is essentially based on the gender dichotomy of men/women.

I'm thinking back to when I came from Argentina when I was just barely 21 years old. I'm not going to tell you that whole story, but I had been in university in Buenos Aires and then I finished my undergraduate degree in the United States, at Rutgers University. I took a course there with a German sociologist, Susanne Schad-Somers. She was finishing her Ph.D. at Columbia University and introduced me to gender literature that I had not read in Argentina. We're talking about the late 1960s. This was a mostly political literature because there was little systematic research. And then that developed, but I was introduced in that earlier period. Then, when I got to graduate school at Columbia University, I was not studying issues of gender nor was there any course on the topic. There, I focused on what is better known of my work, which is cultural and historical sociology, specifically the intersection of morality and markets. My thesis turned out to be an analysis of the cultural response to the development of life insurance — not because I was interested in insurance, but because it became a very interesting site to understand the impact of culture and morality on an important economic institution that had not been studied before. But then, as I was doing this research, there were some gender paths that opened up. Something that I found to be fascinating was that one of the sources of opposition to life insurance, which was oriented to the middle-class population, was the wives. It was mostly men getting insured and their wives were being protected by life insurance, but as I examined the archival sources, I discovered that women were opposed to it. So why? Because they saw it as "death money", "blood money", or bad, "immoral" money. Even though it's protecting you, you're getting money out of your husband's death.

Gradually, I started getting into households and the particular features of gender roles, morality and money. Note that I am giving you a quick, cartoon-like version of my path. Before I started working on *The Social Meaning of Money* (Zelizer, 1994), the first paper that I wrote and presented at an American Sociological Association session was on household money as a case of "special monies". I was not sure yet that the paper would become part of a book. That's important to know because students assume, "Oh, I knew that I was writing books and I just wrote them". I didn't! I was just doing research on issues that were interesting, and then it developed. I don't remember all the steps, but clearly, that gender issue intrigued me. In fact, as I'm telling you now and that I had not remembered, some of that interest in gender already emerged in graduate school. And I recall now there was a visiting professor who taught a gender or family

course at Columbia University and for that class, I wrote a paper on what happens when women earn more than their husbands. This has since become a topic of investigation in the field, but I had already become interested in it in the early 1970s.

In any case, the issue of gender and specifically the different uses of money by women and men in the household and how that varied by social class became much more central in *The Social Meaning of Money*. I found similarities and differences between middle-class and upper--class women regarding the management of money. Of course, I centered on households as part of what turned out to be, again, a much bigger challenge than I had anticipated to the economic theory of fungibility. The whole effort was to show that it's not true that all monies are the same, and gender was the first door to do that. The book also talks about welfare monies and gift monies, but even within those topics, I was intrigued by gender differences. That's how gender entered my research. And as you've mentioned and I have observed as a great surprise, is how that particular research on household money has kind of gone international! And again, I didn't write it for an international audience. I was just doing my thing, you know, because it was so fascinating to me. I would have never imagined that we woud have the gift and the privilege to be talking now about this. You're there in Brazil, and there are groups in Argentina, Spain, Kenya, France, India, and other countries of people that have written to me and sent me articles about their research on gender and money. I see all these things as unexpected and welcomed gifts.

So as you can see, the gender puzzles that interest me were already part of *The Social Meaning of Money*. One of them is something that applies to a lot of research about social transfers in Brazil, which is the whole issue of how, when the money is given to the mother rather than the husband or the family, it's more likely to be spent on the children and households. And as you know, there are important microcredit programs in Brazil. Other intriguing puzzles about gender and household monies emerged during my research, including the extraordinary amount of cheating that goes on by partners hiding monies from each other. You know, of women hiding monies, men hiding monies from spouses or other partners. This happens even among people who love each other, not just in divorce cases.

Very early on this research trajectory, very strong interdisciplinary connections were formed — again, to my surprise — not just across countries but also with feminist economists who have done such important work. This included people like Nancy Folbre, a leader in the field, and Julie Nelson, another influential feminist economist. You asked me a very intriguing question about why I started thinking about care, and I'm not so sure, but I think that a lot of it was this earlier conversation with feminist economists because they were, like I was trying to do, showing how traditional economics and even the early stages of Economic sociology missed key areas of economic activity — mostly female economic activity. They missed households, they missed carework.

That was one group, the feminist economists, and there were also the feminist legal scholars. Very early on, even before *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Zelizer, 2005a) was published, I was invited to speak at various law school seminars, and even participate in a plenary session at a national meeting of legal scholars. But what was important in terms of research is that there was a substantive link with feminist economists and feminist legal scholars interested in seeing how

the disregard of gender had economic and legal consequences. There was a whole strand of literature and scholars – in law, and later in sociology – that were looking at how women's unpaid labor did not count in divorce cases, for example, or how surrogate mothers are paid little while the male doctors that are involved in the service get paid a lot.

So, starting slowly, the gender research part of my work developed in different directions. That's part of the short version of my gender journey.

And then, with teaching, my first job was at Rutgers University and I didn't teach gender – although I gave one lecture about gender and crime as a visitor at one of my colleague's courses. I was only there for two years, and I taught mostly Introduction to Sociology and Social Theory. But then I joined Barnard College and Columbia University in 1978, and they asked me to teach a course on the Sociology of Gender, even though I wasn't working in that area. I am not certain but I think it may have been the first course on the Sociology of Gender at Columbia University's Sociology Department. I recently read a brilliant interview of the sociologist Ann Swidler (2023), from the University of California, Berkeley, for a biographical essay published in the Annual Reviews of Sociology. Among many other topics, she mentions being asked early in her career to teach gender also, when she was not a specialist in the field. That raises an interesting question: who, in those early years, got asked to teach gender? Did you have to be a woman? So I did teach a course on the Sociology of Gender and I loved it. While I was not doing research in that area, I became very interested in that literature. I taught a large course with talented and engaged students and it was very exciting.

In 1988, when I moved to Princeton University, I taught some seminars on the Sociology of Gender as well, but not, during those early years, on Economic Sociology. It wasn't until seven or eight years later that I started teaching the field of Economic Sociology. And in those courses, while I didn't have separate sections on gender, I did what is called "mainstream gender", meaning that in everything I taught, there was a gender lens. Remarkably, that was not something that was happening in the field of Economic Sociology. People were conducting great research in Economic Sociology, but it was mostly about networks and organizations. There were few exceptions. For example, Robert Burt (1998), a superb sociologist, wrote about the gender of social capital. But that was exceptional.

So I was introducing gender to the field and then, in 2008, long before my *The Purchase of Intimacy*, the gender section of the American Sociological Association combined with the Economic Sociology section for the first time to co-sponsor a session called *Gendering Economic Sociology: Expanding the Field's Scope and Analytic Frameworks*. They asked me to write a paper there, which I published a short version of in the Wall Street Journal (Zelizer, 2011b). I adapted my conference paper although I never published the original paper. But at that point, I said, "I should teach a course on gender and economic transactions", which is what I did. I organized a seminar on gender and economic transactions, and several very talented, now well-known sociologists that participated in the class started working on issues of households. So the course did have some kind of influence. So that's how the teaching went. It wasn't like I was immediately teaching Gender and Economic Sociology. It was a very gradual path. Mostly, I have been teaching Economic Sociology seminars, but when I do, there's always an element of gender. As a

result, my syllabi became very distinct from what was then the mainstream Economic Sociology seminar, which focused on corporations and other economic structures but seldom on gender or other forms of inequality. Paula England and Nancy Folbre (2005) have an important essay on the issue of Gender and Economic Sociology in the first edition of *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*.

The field has now changed as well as the syllabi, as some of my former students and other younger scholars are incorporating gender and other forms of categorical inequality, such as race, into their Economic Sociology syllabi and writing about gender and the field — see, for instance, the brilliant paper by Nina Bandelj *Academic Familism, Spillover Prestige and Gender Segregation in Sociology Subfields: The Trajectory of Economic Sociology* (Bandelj, 2019).

The last part of this small gender tour of my life is about my personal experience. Again, when I started and I wrote my dissertation on life insurance, morals, and markets, I didn't even know that there was a field called Economic Sociology. It was just starting. And my work was very different from what was happening. Then, gradually, others integrated my work into the field of Economic Sociology. There were very few women in the field. It was mostly men who were the key figures, the stars of the field. Somehow, I did not notice that pattern much, which happens frequently to women. I mean, I could have. One example that I've written about elsewhere was between 1990 and 1991. There was a seminar on Economic Sociology at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York. I think we met once a month, and an excellent book came out of it. There were maybe ten people there and I was the only woman — or, at least, most of the time I was. But I wasn't really *thinking* about that, which is extraordinary. I did not focus clearly on *my* connection to this gender story until I started teaching. When I started teaching the Economic Sociology course, and I had to explain more of the field to my students, and clarify why I had prepared such a different syllabus than anybody else, that's when I started thinking about it. In 1999, I wrote a short essay about Gender and Economic Sociology for a section of the American Sociological Association (Zelizer, 2000) where I gathered evidence to map out the gendering of the field.

In 2019, when I received an honorary degree from Sciences PO University, I was asked to write a quasi-biographical statement about my research (Zelizer, 2020). And it made me think that, in a way, because in those early days I was a woman working in a male-dominated field, I had maybe a different perspective on economic activity. Because I was not central to the field, I had like a little side door. When I wrote this, I was reading the famous sociologist George Simmel (1950). He talks about how the stranger is freer. Both practically and theoretically, a stranger has more freedom. So I thought that maybe I noticed issues of households, care and gender because I was kind of a stranger in the field, who knows? But it's a hypothesis.

About my connection to the field of Gender Studies... I don't see myself as a gender theorist because I'm not really contributing to standard theories of gender. I'm just contributing to it via my Economic Sociology perspective and, most significantly, through the analysis of what I call relational work. I introduce the concept of relational work in *The Purchase of Intimacy* as a useful way of thinking about how social relations, including gendered relations, shape economic activity. And then again, to my surprise, that concept has spread and been applied to multiple domains (Bandelj, 2020).

In your research, you have documented how money enters the realm of personal and intimate relationships. Could you speak a bit about your analyses and how this connects to gender? In other words, how can the relationships we establish with money be gendered? In what ways can monetary transactions shape gender dynamics?

Essentially, and I'm trying to describe this in concise ways, network analysis was showing how structures of social ties shape individual economic action, right? The relational work approach, while recognizing the significance of structural analysis, set out to explore the *content* of social ties. Not just the structure, but what is going on within social ties. Rather than individuals, you start the analysis by examining relationships. That's the starting point. In that analysis of relational work, it mattered to introduce gender because, in this negotiation that I talked about, people are trying to match their relationships with certain kinds of economic transactions and media. Gender matters to that relational process. That's the dynamics of relational work. Consider our conversation. Right now, we are interacting as fellow researchers. We are not even talking about money because this is an academic interview. It would have probably been a little jolting if I had asked for a fee, especially a large fee but really any fee to do this. Or imagine if you sent me a tip afterwards, right? It would have been a bad, wrong match between the relationships. That is just to use us as an example of how important relationships are to shape which kinds of economic transactions are legitimate and which are actually absurd or insulting. Gender comes into that. When we are doing this negotiation of which are the right kinds of economic transactions, gender matters in that, right? Gender identity and gender relationships matter. This is very different from a gender-blind analysis, which assumes that all that matters in economic activity or transactions are interests or resources and that identities or relations are interesting, but background. By adding gender, you see, look at all that appears. This is part of the relational work that we're doing in a household. Husbands and wives, to take the traditional example, are not just negotiating money. They're negotiating what it means to be a husband or a wife. And again, there's this set of articles using relational work and introducing gender. Last year, there was a wonderful article that appeared in the *American Sociological Review* by Aliya Rao, from the London School of Economics and Political Science, *Relational Work in the Family: The Gendered Microfoundation of Parents' Economic Decisions* (Rao, 2022). She focuses on unemployed parents and how, depending on if you look at husbands or wives, their economic decisions vary in terms of expenditures for children. That's an example of how you don't add gender as just a politicized decision, but that, in fact, by systematically inserting gender in the economic analysis, it's consequential that you can explain what goes on in the world better.

I'll mention one example. One of my students just defended a thesis on a totally different topic. She's studying wealth transmission in the United States, and part of what she did was focused on inheritance patterns and wealth transmission in Dallas, Texas (O'Brien, 2023). She shows how, by looking at fathers and sons and ignoring women, wives and daughters, most studies on inheritance are missing significant features of the story. That's to show the importance of introducing gender. Even though I cannot claim to be a gender theorist, my work contributes to our understanding of gender in the economic domain via Economic Sociology.

I think that is great. We're fascinated by your answers.

I'm glad to participate in this conversation.

Thank you very much. When you were talking about the first course on gender that you were asked to do — maybe because you are a woman, not because you studied gender —, I was curious about something. What authors did you teach and why did you teach those?

That's a great question. I'm so curious now. I do have what I taught in the first seminar at Princeton University, but that's already very later on. I think I started in 2009. I will look for and send you the original syllabus for the University of Columbia course.

Thank you. We mentioned that your article, The economy of care (Zelizer, 2012), was translated to Portuguese in the journal and also in Cuidado e cuidadoras: as várias faces do trabalho do care (2012), a book by Nadya Guimarães and Helena Hirata. Do you mind talking a little more about how you entered the field of care?

Absolutely. Good question! I am not exactly sure how I got into the field of care. As I try to remember, it's not as clear as my exploration of households. I'm asking myself, "When did I first talk about care?". It's before *The Purchase of Intimacy*, where I have a whole chapter on care and from where I then built on. I know I have been inspired by French scholars in the field with whom I've had a very close connection. That started through the renowned Florence Weber. She's written such important work. Very early on, I also developed a close friendship with the wonderful Nadya Guimarães, who has done important research on care. These are all the extraordinary connections and wonderful parts of academic life that scholars seldom write about.

In any case, in reflecting on when I began paying attention to care, I remembered that I wrote a review of three books on care in 2002 (Zelizer, 2002). One book was by Nancy Folbre (2001), who we mentioned before. By 2002, I was already working on *The Purchase of Intimacy*. I have a feeling, and I can't tell you exactly because I don't remember, but I think that the connection is in these conversations that I had early on with the feminist economists and legal theorists that were very concerned about the care economy — and that's also why they became interested in my household and money research. In terms of what I call the hostile worlds perspective (Zelizer, 2005a; 2005b; 2009), the "worlds" refer to this framework that defines economic transactions as the antonym or the opposite side of intimate connections and therefore theorizes that any contact between the two spheres will lead to the corruption of intimacy and sentimental connections. Here, paid care is like a nightmare for hostile world theorists because you seem to be corrupting the ultimate, most precious of sentimental connections: taking care of someone else. And that also led to resistance, especially in the United States, less so in Europe, to paid family caregivers. That is now changing. Nadya Guimarães (2020; 2021) has written extensively on the two different categories of paid caregivers and unpaid caregivers. Both categories carry the cloud of receiving any kind of compensation for what should be done as a gift. When it comes to paid caregivers, that has frequently meant that they are paid less because their labor is not defined as "real work" — as if less pay certified "authentic" care.

That's why the subject of care emerged for me as a forceful example of how theories of hostile worlds can have practical, negative and damaging consequences for caregivers.

I now also recall that the issue of the care economy intrigued me as it provided a link between my work and social policy by showing that misguided hostile worlds theories lead to

bad policies, such as underpaying the vital contributions of careworkers, health aides, nannies, nurses and more. The underpayment of health care workers became very visible with covid-19, in the United States and elsewhere. I remember that at one point, when I was writing about the economy of children, I got very interested in children as caregivers. There's a lot of children all over the world, including the United States, that are caring for siblings, parents or grandparents, and that are sometimes even responsible for minor medical procedures. I became interested because I knew that there were programs in England that compensate children as careworkers. At that time, I remember calling some government division in the United States asking about compensation arrangements for children careworkers and the response was, "No, no, we don't pay children". The option did not exist. This same discomfort has applied to family caregivers more broadly. However, there's a change in this. During covid-19 in the United States, it has been reported that the most frequent calls that the national care organizations were receiving were from family members asking if they could get paid as caregivers. So new programs for paid family care do exist . I have a paper on that topic (Zelizer, 2010) where I review older European programs of paid family care.

What is also very important to note is the concern of some feminist scholars about systems of paid family care, which typically subsidize women, such as daughters and wives.

What is the worry? That by subsidizing the care obligations of women by paying them, let's say, to be family caregivers, we further ghettoize women into domestic roles. Rather than offering broader social support, you're providing economic support for women to stay in their role as family caregivers, but the worry is, doesn't that just confine them?

As another example of the urgency to develop better care support policies, a recent article in The New York Times (Cottle, 2023) shows that the lack of social support has led to an increasing crisis for adults caring for their parents. They often have to quit their jobs for that reason. Note that for most older Americans – and this is a figure that I found in an article that just came out a few weeks ago –, care will come from unpaid family members or friends. It is estimated that such free labor contributed about $600 billion dollars to the economy in 2021. For those that provide the labor, as the article notes, that care is not free, as they often draw on their own retirement funds. Most of the caregivers, not surprisingly, are women.

So, that's the long answer about my research on the care economy.

I also wrote an op-ed in The Guardian (Zelizer, 2005c) where I connected care with the 9/11 events, the settlements that were given in times of tragedy. Here, the question about legal compensation for unpaid caring labor emerged.

What about my personal involvement with care? For a long time, I had no personal connection to the topic. But then, after writing *The Purchase of Intimacy,* I lived the issue of paid care with my own mother's care in my hometown of Buenos Aires. My brother, who is a physician, had taken over my mother's care when she became ill. Only later we engaged a paid aide. I then personally experienced the limitations of a hostile worlds view, as this well-paid caretaker not only provided wonderful care for my mother but also developed intimate bonds with her and my family. So I lived the sort of issues that I had been writing about for so long.

Some of the students who took my courses and read my work, as they had their own children, reported to me their lived experience of participating in paid care with those that they hired for their children's care. They began living the negotiation of money and intimate relationships in a very personal way. What kind of relationship is it? Is it intimate, if you have the power to fire the worker? But at the same time, you are dependent on the caregiver. How do you express affection? What kind of gifts do you exchange?

We would now like to delve a bit deeper into the connection between economics and intimacy. In your work, you emphasize the crucial role of trust in social relationships. How do you think technology could transform or interfere with this logic? Are we thinking of "new" phenomena such as dating apps, apps for hiring domestic workers, and even robots designed to 'engage' and entertain the elderly? And how might this change – if so – our understanding of intimacy?

In terms of the impact of technology, I remember discussing Venmo in earlier interviews (Zelizer *et al.*, 2017a; 2023). Obviously, there's an interaction between all of these factors: technology, new forms of digital moneys, and our intimate relations. Plus, there's always been fears that technology would undermine personal relations.

When it comes to money, notice another paradox: at the beginning of the 20th century, the great fear was that money would homogenize and thus undermine personal relations for the sake of profit. Now, in the 21st century we have seen a multiplication of different kinds of moneys, not just international currencies such as the euro but many digital moneys, bitcoin and more.

The world of monies is therefore diversifying and becoming more personalized. But the fears of those new monies' impact on relations has not disappeared. And yet, social relations, although they may change in form and content, will continue to shape the uses and meanings of money.

If you're interested, I have an essay in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* from a few years ago (Zelizer, 2017b) that refers to some of these transformations.

Thank you so much!

I hope the conversation continues!

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