

What's eating the breadwinners?

November 18 2009

Control, independence, ambition, pressure, worry, guilt and resentment are all experienced by female breadwinners, according to Dr. Rebecca Meisenbach from the University of Missouri in Columbia, USA. Dr. Meisenbach explored the experiences of American female breadwinners to get an insight into how these women experience the phenomenon of being the provider. Her paper was just published online in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

There are more and more female breadwinners in industrialized societies and they challenge the traditional Western gender norms. In many countries, the male as breadwinner model is the 'ideal', and it influences the creation of public policies. The breadwinner ideal has also been linked to issues of masculine identity, such that a husband's un- or under-employment threatens his perceived [masculinity](#).

In her study, Dr. Meisenbach asks [women](#) to talk about and describe how they experience being the breadwinner. She hypothesizes that [gender stereotypes](#) and breadwinning may generate more tensions for women than for men, partially because women still face the cultural expectation of taking care of children, even when they are working.

Dr. Meisenbach conducted in-depth interviews with 15 women aged between 26 and 63 years old, recruited via electronic message boards and personal contacts. She asked them about their personal history and work-life expectations; how they became a breadwinner; their experiences as the breadwinner; and to describe the transition to a new situation, if they no longer were the primary breadwinner.

The women's experiences highlighted six common themes - the 'essence' of being a female breadwinner in the midwestern and eastern US:

- Opportunities for control: though not all women wanted it, many female breadwinners enjoyed having this power
- Independence, which all women valued as part of their identities
- Pressure and worry - the downside of being the breadwinner
- Valuing, or being expected to value, their partner's contributions to the family as a way of helping him maintain his gender identity
- Guilt and resentment - women struggling with societal and personal expectations of themselves and their partners
- Ambition, manifested by goal-setting and a strong drive to achieve.

Dr. Meisenbach's paper also discusses some practical implications of her findings. On an individual level, knowing these essential experiences of female breadwinners may help women create and manage their own identities. Couples and families struggling with the implications of the female breadwinner model may find this description of the essence of the female's experience helpful in managing the way they communicate. Organizations need to implement policies that recognize that both male and female employees may be the primary source of income for their households. In Dr. Meisenbach's view, the challenges that breadwinner motherhood offers to existing family leave policies has not been addressed in corporate America.

She sums up: "The female breadwinner is an increasingly important and common role in contemporary society, one that impacts family relationships, individual identities, and organizational policies."

More information: Meisenbach RJ (2009). The female breadwinner: phenomenological experience and gendered identity in work-family spaces. [Sex Roles](#) 10.1007/s11199-009-9714-5

Source: Springer

Citation: What's eating the breadwinners? (2009, November 18) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-11-breadwinners.html>

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