

Managing children's exposure to environmental chemicals

May 8 2014, by Ken Branson



Keeping harmful chemicals away from children has become, quietly but definitely, one more thing for mothers to do.

Women, who do most of a family's shopping and day-to-day management, have quietly and uncomplainingly taken on yet another task: managing their children's exposure to potentially harmful environmental chemicals. Norah MacKendrick, assistant professor of sociology in Rutgers' School of Arts and Sciences, examines this trend in a new study published recently in the journal *Gender and Society*.

She's also coined a term for this task: precautionary consumption – which means, she says, the deployment of precaution to avoid chemicals in foods and commodities through a better-safe-than-sorry logic.

As precautionary consumers, women read articles and blogs about the effects of [environmental chemicals](#), parenting and pregnancy, and lots and lots of labels.

"Even before women get pregnant, they're receiving messages about what's in their bodies and how it can affect their children's health," she says. "They're told not to drink and not to smoke. Increasingly they're told to eat organic food. And now, they're wondering about what else might be in their bodies, like pesticides, lead, mercury, all sorts of chemicals."

MacKendrick based her study on in-depth interviews with 25 women she recruited while pursuing her doctorate at the University of Toronto. "I was looking at Canadian news coverage of chemicals in the environment, and it occurred to me that 20 years ago, they weren't talking about shopping our way out of this problem," MacKendrick says. "They were talking about environmental regulation."



Norah MacKendrick, assistant professor of sociology

Sensing a trend, MacKendrick went about recruiting her subjects – low-income, middle- and working-class women with children, married or with a male partner, aged from their early 20s to early 40s. She was not surprised to learn that women were very concerned about the effects of environmental chemicals on their children, or that they were interested in doing something about it. But two features of this particular issue were unique: First, this additional burden of labor deals with a ubiquitous risk, since environmental chemicals affect everyone, not just mothers and children. Second, accountability for the production and distribution of environmental chemicals lies outside women's individual bodies.

What also surprised her was that only one of the 25 women she interviewed considered this burden to be . . . well, a burden. "The process of learning all this stuff (about chemicals and their effects) is stressful," MacKendrick said. "I expected these women to say, 'This is such a hassle.' But only one woman said that. The others said that they just worked this into their routines."

Initially, MacKendrick had planned to include more men in her study, and she actually interviewed three fathers. Very few fathers who share in the household grocery shopping responded to her efforts to recruit more men in her study. So her paper focuses on her interviews with women.

As for the men she interviewed, they generally supported what the women were doing. "When I asked, 'Well, what do you do about this issue, they all said, 'My wife handles that. I don't think about it much.'"

Two of the 25 [women](#) reported being challenged by partners about their precautionary consumption, mainly about the cost. She also found that middle-class respondents were able to practice a more complex kind of precautionary consumption compared to the low-income respondents. "Eating [organic food](#) and buying nontoxic products is expensive, and that was a real issue for people with limited incomes."

MacKendrick was expecting her first child as she worked on this project. She now has two [children](#) and is a precautionary consumer. "My husband is totally on board with it," she says. "But mostly, he leaves it up to me." Still, she is not completely satisfied with precautionary consumption as a solution to environmental toxins. "Ultimately it's up to government to regulate these substances. They're in our air, water and soil. There is only so much we can do as consumers."

Provided by Rutgers University

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