

Being the primary breadwinner is bad for men's psychological well-being and health

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Gendered expectations in marriage are not just bad for women, they are also bad for men, according to a new study by University of Connecticut (UConn) sociologists.

The study, "Relative Income, Psychological Well-Being, and Health: Is Breadwinning Hazardous or Protective?" by Christin Munsch, an assistant professor of sociology at UConn, and graduate students Matthew Rogers and Jessica Yorks, will be presented at the 111th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

Using data on the same nationally representative group of married men and women over 15 years, the authors examined the relationship between men's and women's relative income contributions and found that, in general, as men took on more financial responsibility in their marriages, their psychological well-being and [health](#) declined. Men's psychological well-being and health were at their worst during years when they were their families' sole breadwinner. In these years, they had psychological well-being scores that were 5 percent lower and health scores that were 3.5 percent lower, on average, than in years when their partners contributed equally.

"A lot of what we know about how gender plays out in marriage focuses on the ways in which women are disadvantaged," says Munsch. "For example, women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence, and they still perform the lion's share of housework. Our study contributes to a growing body of research that demonstrates the ways in which

gendered expectations are harmful for men too. Men are expected to be breadwinners, yet providing for one's family with little or no help has negative repercussions."

Breadwinning has the opposite effect for women when it comes to psychological well-being. Women's psychological well-being improved as they made greater economic contributions. Conversely, as they contributed less relative to their spouses, their psychological well-being declined. Relative income was unrelated to women's health.

Munsch attributes these psychological well-being differences to cultural expectations for men and women. "Men who make a lot more money than their partners may approach breadwinning with a sense of obligation and worry about maintaining breadwinner status," says Munsch. "Women, on the other hand, may approach breadwinning as an opportunity or choice. Breadwinning women may feel a sense of pride, without worrying what others will say if they can't or don't maintain it."

According to Munsch, her findings are good news given that both husbands and wives usually work. "Our study finds that decoupling breadwinning from masculinity has concrete benefits for both men and women," says Munsch. "Whereas [men](#)'s psychological well-being and health tend to increase as their wives take on more economic responsibility, [women](#)'s psychological well-being also improves as they take on more economic responsibility."

The study uses data from the 1997 through 2011 waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the effects of household income dynamics on psychological well-being and health in a nationally representative sample of married people between the ages of 18 and 32. The researchers considered a number of alternative explanations for their findings, including age, education, absolute income, and number of hours worked per week. However, these variables did not account for

their findings.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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