A Qualitative Analysis of Female Breadwinner Representations in the Media

by

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Abstract

Violating social norms often elicits a negative public response aimed at punishing norm violators and dissuading others from following their lead. One way to understand reactions to norm violations is through the moral panic framework. This framework identifies the reactions that an emergent norm-violating social group is likely to experience. These reactions are characterized as overexaggerated, often blaming the group for the consequences of their norm violation and suggesting that the public should fear the group. I hypothesized that social attitudes towards female breadwinner relationships (FBRs), which violate heteronormative gender norms, would reflect these, and other, moral panic characteristics. However, I expected that these characteristics would be less extreme, and thus I proposed that social reactions to FBRs would reflect a kind of moral anxiety. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of 94 magazine and newspaper articles concerning FBRs, and five themes emerged. First, the articles emphasized the social change that these relationships represent. Second, gender role expectations were often discussed, with many more articles reinforcing traditional gender role expectations than non-traditional gender role expectations. Third, most articles described costs of FBRs while only a minority described benefits, and most costs concerned the couple as a whole instead of either partner individually. Fourth, societal reactions to this change were often described, and most reactions were negative. And fifth, many articles offered tips for FBRs, often focused on overcoming the costs associated with such bonds. This pattern of reactions to FBRs ultimately demonstrated many of the characteristics of moral anxiety. Overall, these media articles portrayed FBRs as undesirable relationships involving stressed women and emasculated men: a stigmatizing portrayal that could dissuade others from pursuing such relationships.