**Co-Provider Marriages**

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**Abstract:**

Co‐provider marriages in which husbands and wives jointly provide shelter, food, and clothing for their families have existed for centuries. The extent to which both spouses' breadwinning efforts have been recognized, however, has varied over time. Currently, 65 percent of married couples in the United States are dual earners. Often overlooked are the meanings dual‐earner spouses ascribe to paid employment, and husbands often retain the psychological responsibility to provide. Dual‐earner couples in which both spouses assume responsibility for breadwinning have been termed “co‐providers.” In contrast to research that assumed similar attitudes between spouses, contemporary husbands and wives in dual‐earner marriages are likely to have discrepant provider role attitudes. The extent to which dual‐earner husbands and wives in the United States view wives' paid employment as essential varies among couples and often between spouses and has important implications for spouses' role‐related stress, division of housework, and marital satisfaction.

**Keywords:** marriages | co-providers | dual-earners

**Article:**

The term “provider” entered the English language in the sixteenth cenury and referred to an individual who provided shelter, food, and clothing for the family. Throughout much of human history both women and men have served as co‐providers for their families, with children's work often supplementing parents' provisions. Although laws typically recognized husbands as “heads of households,” placing legal responsibility for the care of families on men, historically most men were unable to fulfill these responsibilities without the assets, earnings, and work of their wives. Thus, although not legally recognized as providers, wives' provision for their families was assumed and necessary. The expectation that husbands should be the sole providers for their families first appeared in industrialized nations during the mid‐nineteenth century. From 1830 until the early 1980s, the husband as good provider and wife as homemaker ideal was paramount and became entrenched in many western narratives. Even so, it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that this ideal became attainable for those families outside the upper and upper‐middle classes. Therefore, the enactment of the provider role (i.e., who actually provided shelter, food, and clothing for the family) did not always coincide with the larger societal narrative that heralded men as good providers for their families during this time period.

As industrialization took hold, work was separated from home and structural supports for the specialized roles of good provider husbands and homemaker wives emerged. During the first several decades of the twenty‐first century, childhood came to be regarded as a protected developmental period, and social movements regarding children's rights galvanized in industrialized nations (i.e., compulsory education for children and child labor laws). It was during this period of time that the idea of a family wage became attractive to industrialists, and in the United States men's wages increased steadily until the Depression and then again from 1940 to 1970. Notably, real family income nearly doubled between 1947 and 1970, allowing increased proportions of working‐class families to achieve the husband‐as‐good‐provider ideal that previously was attainable only for upper‐ and upper‐middle‐class families. Indeed, economic growth during the middle of the twentieth century was unprecedented and reached heights that have not been realized since. As the 1970s unfolded, however, all but highly educated men experienced declines in income, creating a scenario in which wives' earnings were once again paramount for family provision. By 1980, the US Bureau of the Census clarified that husbands were no longer to be automatically designated as “heads of household,” and wives' co‐provision for their families was once again formally recognized.

From 1970 to 2001 in the United States, the percentage of single‐earner, husband‐as‐breadwinner/wife‐as‐homemaker families dropped from 56 percent to 25 percent, and dual‐earner families emerged as the most common family arrangement (Raley, Mattingly, and Bianchi 2006). As of the mid‐2010s, 65 percent of married couples are dual earners with both husbands and wives working for pay outside the home. Wives' earnings in dual‐earner families account for 40–47 percent of the family income, on average; 50 percent of wives in dual‐earner marriages earn the same as or more than their husbands (Payne and Gibbs 2013). Despite the normative nature of wives' co‐provision for their families, most contemporary dual‐earner wives do not define themselves as co‐providers or breadwinners, nor have their husbands relinquished the psychological responsibility to provide. Drawing a distinction between the act of working at a paid job and the psychological responsibility for providing or breadwinning, feminist scholars emphasized the meanings husbands and wives ascribe to paid work (Bernard 1981; Hood 1986). Several studies have demonstrated that, even in situations where wives enact the role of provider via full‐time employment, they do not necessarily define themselves – nor do their husbands define them – as providers or breadwinners for the family (see Helms et al. 2010 for a review).

Because wives' provider role enactment via paid employment does not necessarily translate into their own or their husbands' internalized views of themselves as co‐providers, contemporary scholars have advocated for approaches to the study of marriage that account for variations in the meanings husbands and wives ascribe to their employment (Perry‐Jenkins and Wadsworth 2013). Hood's (1983; 1986) seminal study on co‐provider marriage identified three distinct provider role couple types among a small group of dual‐earner married couples. In “co‐provider” marriages, both husbands and wives view themselves as sharing breadwinning responsibilities equally with their partners; both partners' employment and earnings were viewed as important and essential for family provision. “Main‐secondary‐provider” couples viewed wives as earners of supplemental income; wives' income helped the family, but husbands were seen as the primary providers. “Ambivalent co‐provider” husbands and wives described their dual‐earner arrangement in contradictory terms. Wives' employment was viewed as essential, and frequently husbands could not fully support the family on their own; yet wives' contributions were often simultaneously viewed as limited, temporary, and also undesirable.

Hood's marital distinctions (i.e., co‐provider, main‐secondary, and ambivalent co‐provider marriages) were based on spouses' provider role attitudes and underscored variation in the meaning of employment among dual‐earner couples. Hood's typology, however, was limited in that within‐couple consensus in spouses' attitudes about breadwinning was assumed. Although Hood did acknowledge that husbands and their wives may not ascribe to a shared meaning regarding their employment and economic co‐provision for the family, her theoretical writings focused primarily on couples in which spouses had similar attitudes about breadwinning. With one exception (Helms et al. 2010), subsequent research studies based on Hood's early work either have operated under the assumption of a shared meaning within dual‐earner couples regarding their breadwinning arrangement or have examined the provider role attitudes of husbands or wives in isolation of their partners' attitudes. To better represent the full range of dual‐earner marital relationships that do exist, Helms and her colleagues suggested that the potential for spouses to be mismatched in provider role attitudes should be examined in concert with Hood's original “matched” typology.

Arriving at prevalence rates for co‐provider marriages is difficult when the meanings ascribed to paid employment for both husbands and wives are considered. Whereas census data and findings from large, nationally representative studies indicate that co‐provision among husbands and wives with children under the age of 18 has reached normative status in the United States (60 percent), none of these studies have accounted for the meanings spouses assign to their economic provision for the family, including the extent to which spouses assume the psychological responsibility to provide. What we do know is that, among the 60 percent of dual‐earner married households in the United States, husbands and wives work an average of 42 and 31 hours per week, respectively, and a mere 23 percent of married mothers view full‐time employment for wives as ideal (Parker and Wang 2013). The literature that has focused on the meanings dual‐earner spouses ascribe to their paid work is limited to non representative samples of primarily white, working, and middle‐class samples of married individuals. Primarily characterized by studies in which dual‐earner husbands' or wives' provider role attitudes were examined separately, results from this literature showed that approximately 45 percent of spouses were co‐providers, 33 percent were ambivalent co‐providers, and 22 percent were classified as main‐secondary providers (Perry‐Jenkins and Crouter 1990; Perry‐Jenkins, Seery, and Crouter 1992; Loscocco and Spitz 2007). Only one study exists in which marriages were categorized based on the meanings ascribed to dual‐earner spouses' paid employment by both members of the marital dyad (Helms et al. 2010). This study identified 34 percent of couples as main‐secondary, 12 percent as co‐providers, 7 percent as ambivalent co‐providers, and 47 percent as mismatched. The largest subgroup of mismatched couples was composed of co‐provider wives married to either main‐secondary or ambivalent co‐provider husbands, suggesting that contemporary US dual‐earner wives' provider role attitudes may be more likely to align with their paid employment than is the case for their husbands, who may feel ambivalent about their wives' economic provision or prefer an arrangement in which the husband serves as the primary breadwinner. These results challenged prevalence rates reported in early studies of individual spouses; the characterization of nearly half of the dual‐earner couples as mismatched in attitudes about breadwinning was particularly noteworthy given historical assumptions regarding shared meaning within couples in attitudes toward breadwinning. Taken together, this body of work supports speculations that, in periods of widespread social change in gendered employment patterns, differential rates of change in attitudinal dimensions of breadwinning may result in divergent views of wives' involvement in paid employment within couples (Ferree 2010). Consistent with earlier work in which contemporary women were found to be much more likely to reject conventional notions of gendered behavior in families than were similar cohorts of men, these findings underscore the “predictably inconsistent” patterns of gendered relations within couples characterized by feminist scholars as a “stalled revolution” or “slow drip” of change (Sullivan 2004; Ferree 2010).

In examining variation that exists within marriages in which both spouses are employed, scholars have asked whether the meanings spouses ascribe to their paid work is linked with their human capital investments (i.e., work hours, educational attainment, and earnings). From the limited research that currently exists, the answer to this question appears to be “yes.” In main‐secondary marriages, wives tend to be less educated than their husbands, are employed fewer hours per week, and have significantly lower incomes than their husbands. In contrast, husbands and wives in co‐provider marriages earn more similar incomes than other dual‐earner couples, have similar levels of education, and work about the same number of hours per week. Couples in ambivalent co‐provider marriages evidence discrepancies in human capital characteristics. For example, one study showed that ambivalent co‐provider couples, who were more educated than their main‐secondary counterparts and no different from co‐provider couples in education, were characterized by wives who were more educated than their husbands but made significantly less money than them (Helms et al. 2010)

The extent to which contemporary dual‐earner husbands and wives view women's paid employment as essential varies among couples and sometimes between spouses. These variations, in turn, have important implications for spouses' role‐related stress and marital relationships. In dual‐earner marriages, husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction is consistently better over time when both spouses view their union as a co‐provider marriage – a marriage in which both partners acknowledge the contributions of wives' employment to family breadwinning and define themselves as co‐providers for their family. One reason why marital satisfaction among these couples is comparatively better may be because co‐provider couples are more likely than other dual‐earner couples to divide housework equitably. Results from several studies suggest that equality in the home is most likely to be realized for dual‐earner couples in which shared breadwinning is embraced ideologically by both husbands and wives (Deutsch 1999). In contrast, spouses who are ambivalent about their co‐provider marital arrangement have been shown to be remarkably conventional in their division of housework, with dual‐earner wives completing 80 percent of daily household chores – a division of labor identical to main‐secondary dual‐earner couples, who were ideologically more traditional (Helms et al. 2010). Additional results from this same study suggest that wives' attitudes toward breadwinning may be particularly important for the division of housework for couples in which spouses are ideologically mismatched (i.e., 47 percent of the couples in the sample). Co‐provider wives married to men who were either ambivalent about wives' employment or preferred a main‐secondary arrangement completed 72 percent of the housework and appeared to have somewhat of an advantage over other wives in mismatched provider marriages in their divisions of housework with their husbands. As others have suggested, it may be that co‐provider wives feel entitled to equality and thus demand greater involvement from their husbands who, in turn, may change their housework behavior regardless of their more conventional ideological preferences (Sullivan 2004; Ferree 2010).

The literature regarding the links between co‐provider marriages and role‐related stress is rife with inconsistent findings, in part due to the design of the studies that included either husbands or wives only. Results from large national data sets of married individuals suggest that approximately 50 percent of husbands and wives in dual‐earner marriages report difficulties in balancing the demands of paid employment and family life. While a majority of spouses do not report high levels of stress related to the often competing demands of work and family, 40 percent of employed mothers and 34 percent of employed fathers do report that they always feel rushed (Parker and Wang 2013). The limited research that exists in which both members of the marital dyad were interviewed about their family and work experiences suggests that stress related to the demands of juggling work and family may be experienced most acutely among wives (but not their husbands) in ambivalent co‐provider marriages. More specifically, in marital contexts in which both spouses exhibit ambivalence about wives' paid employment, wives may feel significantly more burdened and overwhelmed than their husbands, and the extent of this burden has been shown to be greater than that experienced by employed wives in co‐provider or main‐secondary marriages. It may be that, for these couples, both spouses' ambivalence regarding the necessity of two incomes results in wives' greater responsibility for housework by default, leaving wives overburdened with the demands of full‐time, paid work and family care to an extent not experienced by their husbands.

Co‐provider marriages in which husbands and wives jointly provide shelter, food, and clothing for their families have existed for centuries. The extent to which both husbands' and wives' breadwinning efforts have been culturally sanctioned and structurally supported has varied over time. With the exception of one brief historical period in the mid‐twentieth century, families have relied on both members of the marital dyad for sustenance. Despite the necessity of both husbands' and wives' economic provision, many spouses in dual‐earner marriages do not define themselves as co‐providers. Research with contemporary families suggests that the meaning that husbands and wives ascribe to their paid employment is related to spouses' human capital investments and has implications for spouses' marital satisfaction, role‐related stress, and division of housework.

SEE ALSO:Breadwinner Role; Child Care in the United States; Dual-Earner Couples in theUnited States; Fathers as Caregivers; Genderand Household Labor; Parental Employment in the United States; Two-Person Career; Workand Families in the United States

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