Breadwinner Mothers of School-Aged Children during COVID-19: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Working mothers have long faced myriad challenges to optimal work-life balance, with evidence of potential negative consequences to their physical and mental wellbeing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, working mothers of school-aged children reported unprecedented difficulties, however inquiry into breadwinner mothers’ experiences remained lacking. This research focused specifically on the lived experiences of breadwinner mothers of elementary school-aged children who navigated remote working and remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. A diverse sample of 12 breadwinner mothers across the United States completed semi-structured interviews focusing on the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives, as well as how they understood their experiences in light of dominant cultural norms regarding motherhood, work, breadwinning, and other areas of identity. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), intersectionality, and gender performance theories informed the research design and analytic methods. Data analyses yielded four overarching themes: (1) Intensification of an Already Non-Stop and Exhausting “Juggling Act” (2), Left to One’s Own Devices, Figuratively and Sometimes Literally (3), Merging of Work and Home Life as a Double-Edged Sword; and (4) Ambivalence about Breadwinner Status. Findings lend support to research indicating that breadwinning mothers commonly fulfill a role of outsized responsibility in caretaking and decision-making in ways that are often invisible, resulting in role strain, cognitive overload, and diminished focus to self-care. Discussion of findings consider study limitations, areas of further research, and implications for counseling practice and advocacy in order to support the needs of working and breadwinning mothers in the aftermath of the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords: breadwinner mothers; COVID-19 pandemic; work-life balance; intersectionality; counseling

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