CREATING THE DAILY BREAD: FOOD TASK STRATEGIES AND ORIENTATIONS OF SINGLE AND MARRIED WORKING MOTHERS AND THEIR OUTCOMES

A major part of the unpaid work performed in all households is the production of meals where women still retain primary responsibility in almost all households for the management and performance of related activities. The management and performance of food preparation roles has been found to be a significant stressor for women in all work-family situations. In particular, consumer researchers have taken the most interest in this area because of its direct relevance to consumption behaviors, particularly convenience food use. However, research on convenience foods, services and durables are quite consistent that wife’s employment status is not a good predictor. Despite the rising incidence of single-parent households, there has been a paucity of research on how women in this situation adjust household tasks.

This survey of 481 single and married working mothers expands the knowledge of food-related task accomplishment by examining strategies used by single and married mothers in food preparation and food shopping. It looks at the relationship of these strategies to food task orientations, to the use of convenience foods, and to demographic characteristics of the mothers and their households, the work patterns of the mothers, measures of work and family involvement, stress, strain, and life satisfaction.

There are many points of similarity in orientations and strategies of single and married mothers. Both groups include those for whom food preparation is enjoyable and who are likely to cook in quantity to time-shift the daily food preparation chores. Both also have their disengaged members who work away from home more hours and do fewer food tasks, keeping things simple without worrying about it. However, there are differences. The single mothers do not have a “Super-Mom” strategy seen among the married women. However, they do have their own high stressor strategies and orientations, including the “Cheap Gourmet” who wants great meals on a limited budget, and the “Harried Juggler” who works harder, sleeps less, and crunches time.

Some strategies were more likely to be associated with high scores on work interference, role overload, times strain and life satisfaction. Convenience food use was associated with orientations toward meal variety as a goal or to disengaging from food preparation tasks, suggesting possible positioning strategies for marketers. Among the most satisfied women were married women with husbands who liked to cook and took over this chore.